

LIVING A CULTURAL LIFE

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I have been writing about culture, cultures, and a cultural age for so long that people are starting to ask me what it would be like to “live a cultural life.” Would it be possible to give them some thoughts and ideas on this subject that might be helpful to them in planning and living their lives?

As I was wrestling with this problem, my mind was cast back to the time I came across a phrase by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the great German scholar and playwright, in a book called *The Meaning of Culture* by John Cowper Powys. The phrase was: “*Live in the whole, in the good, in the beautiful.*” This phrase hit me like a ton of bricks the moment I saw it. It seemed to sum up in a few simple words what I thought living a cultural life was all about. I recall thinking at the time that I would likely have to write about this evocative phrase at some point in my life. Now, almost thirty years later, I have decided to do this, largely because I think it says so much about living a cultural life and all the happiness and benefits that can be derived from this.

I have decided to tackle this problem by breaking Goethe’s captivating phrase down into its three principal components — live in the whole; in the good; in the beautiful — and writing about each of these components separately. It is my hope that this approach will prove helpful to other people who may be wrestling with similar problems in their own lives and might find my experiences in this area helpful.

For some curious reason that I have never been able to understand, I have always thought that living a cultural life is tied up with becoming a *whole person* in some way. I don’t know where this idea came from, but it has always been there. Perhaps it is because I think a whole person is someone who is able to blend all the different parts of their lives together to form an integrated and harmonious whole.

The problem is that life does not come to us this way. It comes to us in parts, not as a whole. As a result, we grow up knowing little about *the whole* and how it is possible to blend all the various parts of our lives together to form a whole.

When I went to elementary and secondary school, I learned very quickly that the focus of attention was on the parts, not the whole. Whether it was physics, geography, chemistry, algebra, geometry, or any other subject I was studying, everything was divided up into parts in order to study those parts in detail. There was never a subject that dealt with how all the parts are combined together to form a whole, regardless of whether this was in the personal sense or any other sense.

This problem was compounded when I went to university. I was told that I would have to specialize in a single subject if I wanted to succeed in life. So I chose economics. It seemed to be the sensible thing to do, and the thing my parents and teachers wanted me to do.

The farther I went in university, the more I was encouraged to specialize. It was no longer sufficient to specialize in a single subject. It was necessary to specialize in a specific branch of that subject and get to know it as well as possible. This was the key to getting a good job, earning a decent living, and realizing one's basic goals and objectives in life. So I chose the history of economic thought because I was fascinated with the historical development of economics as a discipline and how economics had become the most powerful and dominant force in the world.

It wasn't until I was in my early thirties that I realized what was going on here. I was moving farther and farther away from the whole and becoming a whole person rather than closer and closer to this. Not only was I encouraged to specialize in a specific part of the whole — albeit an extremely important part — but also I was encouraged to specialize in the development of one of my faculties only, namely my intellect. While I wanted to understand the whole in a more profound and fundamental way, and to position myself as a “whole within the whole” so to speak, I was encouraged to close off to the whole and develop one of my faculties only.

I decided then and there that I would pursue a different course of action. I would endeavour to learn as much as I could about the whole in the most elementary sense, as well as to become a whole person, regardless of how difficult this was and what personal and professional obstacles stood in the way.

I got a terrific start in the right direction when I read a book by Mathew Arnold called *Culture and Anarchy*. In this book, Arnold talked about the need to attend to the harmonious development of all the powers that comprise human nature. Here, at last, was something I could hold on to and press into the forefront of my consciousness. Not only did Arnold recognize the need to develop all our faculties and not just one faculty — our bodies, minds, hearts, souls, spirits, emotions, and feelings, as well as our intellects — but he also recognized the need to achieve balance and harmony between and among these faculties.

Since Arnold was a cultural scholar much like Goethe, I began to wonder if culture contained some clues with respect to what is necessary to become a whole person and to understand the whole in a broader, deeper, and more fundamental sense. I was encouraged to do this even more when I discovered that Arnold had something else to say that had a direct bearing on this matter. It was the need to see culture in proactive, altruistic, and external — and not just reactive, internal, and egocentric — terms.

In Arnold's view, it was not sufficient to observe and learn from the world without giving something back in return. It was equally necessary to ensure that the best knowledge, wisdom, and understanding prevailed, in the sense that they were made available to future generations and people living in all parts of the world and at all levels of society. In one of the most telling passages in Arnold's book, he states:

The great men [and women] of culture are those who have had a passion for diffusing, for making prevail, for carrying from one end of society to the other, the best knowledge, the best ideas of their time; who have laboured to divest knowledge of all that was harsh, uncouth, difficult, abstract, professional,

exclusive; to humanize it, to make it efficient outside the clique of the cultivated and learned, yet still remaining the best knowledge and thought of the time, and a true source, therefore, of sweetness and light.

For Arnold, “sweetness and light” were “the arts and education.” These activities have a crucial role to play in realizing the harmonious development of all aspects of the human personality, as well as diffusing the best knowledge, ideas, and wisdom throughout the world. This is because they go far beyond oneself and one’s own life, and embrace other people and their lives as well. In doing so, they make it possible for people to concern themselves with “the other” and not just “the self.” This is essential if people want to become whole people, live in the whole, and live a cultural life.

If Arnold’s thoughts on this matter got me moving in the right direction, Thomas Carlyle’s great *Law of Culture* strengthened my belief that I was on the right track. His advice to become everything we are capable of being and show ourselves in our own shape, substance, and stature hardened my resolve to become a whole person and “a person in my own right.” It also gave me the confidence I needed to pursue the idea of culture with much more vim, vigour, and vitality than I had up to that point in my life. I knew that I was on to something profound and powerful here with respect to “living in the whole” and living a cultural life when I read Arnold’s and Carlyle’s thoughts on these matters.

I received an even stronger boost in this direction when I came across the writings of Sir Edward Burnett Tylor. Tylor defined culture in the first page of his book *The Origins of Culture* as “that complex whole that includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”

Here was definitely something I could build on with respect to broadening and deepening my knowledge and understanding of culture and the whole. What Tylor’s definition did was break with the long tradition of defining culture in terms of the parts — a tradition that can be traced back to classical and medieval times and the intimate connection between

culture, the arts, and humanities — and started defining culture in terms of the whole.

Taylor's definition of culture as "*the complex whole*" had a profound effect on me the instant I read it. I was desperately searching for a way of looking at the world that was consistent with reality, and Taylor's definition of culture provided it. For despite our penchant for dividing things up into parts in order to study those parts in detail, the fact remains that the world and most things in the world are wholes made up of many parts, not smorgasbords of disconnected and unrelated pieces.

This is true not only for culture, but also for people, institutions, communities, cities, countries, cultures, the world, the world system, and virtually everything else. Each of these entities, and countless others, are complex wholes made up of countless parts. While I appreciated the need to break these wholes up into parts, as well as the numerous benefits that can and are derived from this, I was deeply concerned about the fact that humanity had lost sight of the whole in the individual, institutional, community, national, international, environmental, and historical sense. I felt that culture in general — and Taylor's holistic understanding of it in particular — was the key that was needed to overcome this problem and set things right.

Armed with this holistic way of seeing, I began to realize the incredible potential culture possesses for broadening and deepening knowledge, understanding, and awareness of the whole in the most profound and quintessential sense. While culture is not the only discipline or activity that is capable of doing this, since this is also possible through disciplines and activities such as philosophy, religion, science, and others, it made me far more aware of the whole within myself, as well as in the world. This was particularly true for my family, friends, neighbourhood, community, country, and culture. Each of these wholes was constantly evolving and mutating as changes took place in their diverse parts and the way these parts are woven together to form a whole. While it is not necessary to know all of the parts that make up these wholes, it is necessary to be conscious of them and how they are combined to form wholes.

To “live in the whole” in this sense is to allow the whole to penetrate into the interiors of our being and our consciousness, regardless of what type of whole it might be. As a result, whenever I step out my front door today, I am instantly aware of the whole that exists all around me. When I walk in the neighbourhood — which is so often that kids in the neighbourhood call me “the walking man” because I am always out walking when they see me — I am aware of it as a whole. Not only do I soak it up as a whole, but also I cherish it as a whole. This gives me an incredible sense of exhilaration because I am connecting with my neighbourhood in all its complexity, diversity, and vastness. Exactly the same holds true for my community — Markham — and my country and culture — Canada and Canadian culture. Each of these complex entities is a whole made up of many parts. I want to learn as much as I can about them, as well as about how all their diverse parts are combined together to create a whole.

To live in the whole in this sense is to embrace the whole at every opportunity and in every possible way. In the process of doing this, it is possible to understand what Goethe meant when he said “live in the whole.” To do so is to be conscious of the whole — and wholes — at all times and in all places.

Unfortunately, this is not the way we are taught to see and understand the world. Rather than opening up to the whole and embracing it at every opportunity, we close off to the whole, and “wholes within the whole,” and tend to ignore them. This is because we have been trained — as I was trained — to identify with the parts and not the whole, especially parts that have some particular significance or value for us. Nevertheless, to live in the whole — *really live in it* — is to make a concerted effort to expand our knowledge, understanding, and awareness of the whole — and the wholes within it — whenever and wherever possible.

There is an incredible sense of awe, oneness, and unity that comes from this, regardless of whether it is in the narrow, individual sense or in the broad, collective and environmental sense. For every whole possesses a unity that comes from the way all the parts are woven together. With this comes the realization that all things are linked, and everything is connected

to everything else. This realization is of crucial importance as a result of the disconnected and fragmented nature of reality and the division of most things in the world into parts. This sense of oneness and unity could go a long way towards counteracting the fragmentation, disconnection, and isolation so apparent in the world today.

As I began to live in the whole within myself as well as in the world, I began to understand why Goethe thought this was so essential. For in the process of living in the whole, I began to realize that I was not only identifying with the whole whenever and wherever possible, but also I wanted “*the best for the whole*” regardless of what kind of whole this happened to be.

I found this intriguing because Goethe also said that “*who wills the highest must will the whole.*” I interpreted this to mean that it is not only necessary to live in the whole, but also to “will the whole” if we want to realize the highest state of goodness within ourselves as well as in the world. This requires “getting out of our own skin” and wanting the best for everyone and everything. To do so is not only to live in the whole, but also to live in the good, the second component in Goethe’s fascinating phrase.

My parents gave me an excellent introduction to this when I was very young by taking me to church on a regular basis and enrolling me in a choir at Grace Church-on-the-Hill. It was part and parcel of the commitment they made to ensuring that I had a solid upbringing in religion as well as in the arts.

In retrospect, I realize how much this has affected my entire life and made it possible for me to want to live in the good and not just in the whole, despite the fact that I still have a great deal to achieve in this area. While I am not a religious person today in the formal sense, I have a keen interest in all the different religions of the world and what they have to say about life and living in an ethical sense. Like living in the whole and wanting the best for the whole, I feel the religious training I had in my youth has made me a better person in many ways.

This is particularly true with respect to realizing a harmonious balance between the material and non-material dimensions of life. When too much emphasis is placed on the material dimension, gratification of our material desires and development of the egotistic side of our personalities tend to get out of hand. This is why all the different religions of the world advocate some form of abstinence from *excessive* consumption and preoccupation with the material dimension of life, as well as the need to put more emphasis on the non-material dimension and cultivate the altruistic, aesthetic, and spiritual sides of our personalities and our lives. As Pablo Picasso said, “the meaning of life is to find your gift; the purpose of life is to give it away,” This reminds us of the ancient Chinese proverb, “if you always give, you will always have.”

We don't need to be a member of a specific religion, institution, or group to achieve this. While being rooted in a specific religion, religious institution, and group has its advantages, all we have to do is open our minds, hearts, and souls to all the diverse religions of the world and what they are able to teach us and provide in life.

As important as religion is, it is by no means the only way to live in the good as Goethe proposed. This can be achieved in many other ways, such as making donations and contributions of one kind or another or doing volunteer work. This may include giving money to a worthwhile cause, helping at a local school, hospital, or seniors' home, assisting an arts organization, or organizing a social event or community celebration. All these things, and many others, enable people to devote a significant amount of their time and energy to helping others and people in need.

Over the course of my life, I have tried to maintain a judicious balance between my career responsibilities and voluntary activities. When I was in my thirties and forties, for instance, I had several “foster children” in different parts of the world at one time or another and sat on the board of Foster Parents Plan of Canada for several years. Since I was engaged in the arts later in life, I did voluntary work for a number of arts organizations and served as a board member and president of one of these organizations for many years.

As the years have gone by, I have tried to learn how to contribute to the welfare and well-being of other people in other ways. Strange as it may sound, I have discovered that one of the best ways to do this is to “be myself” and “true to myself” as much as possible. I have endeavoured to do this by enabling the things that are most essential in my life — commitment to the arts, culture, and the cultural cause; holism; becoming a whole person; life-long learning, promotion and perpetuation of the cultural heritage of humankind; living in the whole, the good, and the beautiful; and manifesting goodness, kindness, and compassion in life — to radiate outwards and affect other people. While this doesn’t involve helping other people with a specific need or problem, except when they ask me to do so, it does involve giving to people in other ways, especially when it is combined with making a real effort to be friendly, happy, and set a good example for others.

Lately, I have been trying to do other things that are related to living in the good. When I read somewhere that Gandhi said “be the change you want in the world,” it struck a responsive chord in me. For it meant instituting the changes I wanted to see in the world in my own life, first and foremost. Since I believe less pollution is imperative in the world, for example, I have been trying to make changes in my life that are consistent with this, especially in terms of engaging in activities that make fewer demands on nature and pollute the environment less. Since I also believe there is a need for more understanding and compassion in the world, I am trying to be more understanding and compassionate with other people, and make this a fundamental part of my personality, behaviour, and life.

If living in the whole and the good are essential, so is living in the beautiful. This third element in Goethe’s sage phrase is important because there are many things in the world that are incredibly beautiful and are meant to be enjoyed and savoured because they bring so much happiness and fulfillment in life. In so doing, they make the world a better place — a place filled with more joy and contentment than misery and discontent. This is probably what Dostoyevsky had in mind when he said in one of his novels that “beauty will save the world.”

Beauty manifests itself in the world in many ways. For some, it manifests itself in an exquisite sunrise, sunset, gesture, deed, picture, or musical work. For others, it manifests itself in a splendid park, garden, poem, story, or bonding with their favourite pet. And for still others, it manifests itself in a unique play, discovery, insight, or idea. It all depends on how people see and experience beauty — thereby confirming the old adage that beauty is in the eyes of the beholder — as well as what lingers on in the mind and memory after these experiences have taken place.

While beauty manifests itself in different ways for different people, it manifests itself for me much more in the arts and nature than in anything else. This is probably because the arts and nature lift me to incredible heights — heights that often border on the sublime and occasionally the divine. This is especially true of the arts. I had a musical experience one night, for example, that had a profound effect on my life. Here is how it came about.

For many years, I have been in the habit of setting my radio to a particular station before falling asleep. The station plays soft and soothing music to help people end their day on a pleasant and peaceful note.

One night, I set my radio to the usual station and fell fast asleep. I don't know how long I was sleeping, but I slowly became aware that I was hearing one of the most exquisite pieces of music I have ever heard in my life. As I lay there in a semi-conscious state — stupor might be a better word — I remember thinking I had died and gone to heaven. The music was just that beautiful! Then I heard an announcer say, "You have been listening to 'Grant Us Peace' by Felix Mendelssohn. It was sung by the Corydon Singers." As soon as I hear the announcer's voice, I knew that I had not actually died and gone to heaven.

This piece of music has a beautiful melody, as many of Mendelssohn's pieces do. This melody is sung by one section of the choir first, then another section joins in, and finally the melody is sung by the entire choir. I have often thought this piece of music should be adopted as humanity's "universal anthem." Not only is it incredibly beautiful, but also it would

serve a very useful purpose at this time. With all the violence, terrorism, conflict, and confrontation going on in the world, its plea to “grant us peace” is very valuable and most timely.

This is not the only piece of music I find exceedingly beautiful. While every person has his or her favourites and personal preferences, I can't resist mentioning some of the pieces that rank high on my list. Included here are Handel's *Lascia ch'io pianga* and *Zadok the Priest*; Bizet's duet *Au Fond du Temple Saint* from *The Pearlfishers*; Caesar Frank's *Panis Angelicas*; and Glazinov's *Autumn Adagio* from his ballet *The Seasons*. Also included on this list are Rachmaninoff's *Second Piano Concerto*; Brahms' and Beethoven's violin concertos; the last movement from Saint-Saëns *Organ Concerto*, Arthur Sullivan's *The Lost Chord*, Puccini's *Vissi d'arte* from *Tosca*; Giordani's *Cara Mio Ben*, Fauré's *Cantique de Jean Racine*, and Johann Sebastian Bach's *Prelude No. 1 in C Major*.

I hope I don't leave the impression it is only classical music that ranks high on my list of favourites, since this is not the case. I also find many songs in musicals extremely beautiful, especially songs by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II. This is also true for certain pieces of film music, such as Ennio Morricone's *Gabriel's Oboe* from *The Mission* and *Dinner* from his *Lady Caliph Suite*, as well as many popular songs.

What makes the aforementioned pieces so beautiful is the fact that they transport me into an ethereal state and place whenever I hear them. So does Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*. It evokes such strong feelings and emotions in me that I have the impression that Beethoven was “walking with the gods” when he wrote it, and I am “walking with the gods” when I listen to it. It is undoubtedly one of the most beautiful pieces of music ever written, and *the* most beautiful piece in the minds of many.

Of course, music is not the only art form that brings a great deal of beauty into my life. The visual arts do this too, especially artistic masterpieces that have some association with nature. This is especially true for many of the paintings of Vincent van Gogh, Claude Monet, Canada's Group of Seven and Emily Carr, and Chinese brush painters. Interestingly, music

figures prominently in this area as well. Think, for example, of Smetana's *Moldau*, Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*, Dvorak's *Ode to the Moon*, and Debussy's *Le Mer* and *L'après-midi d'un faune* — all of which are extremely beautiful and remind us of the incredible beauty of nature. As Marc Chagall said, "Art is the unceasing effort to compete with the beauty of flowers — and never succeeding."

What is true for music and paintings is equally true for other art forms. Literature is filled with many beautiful works — works that run the gamut from short stories and poems to novels and epics. This is also true for theatre, film, dance, opera, the crafts, architecture, and so forth, as plays by Shakespeare and Molière, films like *Doctor Zhivago* and *Gandhi*, dances like those from *The Rite of Spring* and *Swan Lake*, operas like *La Bohème* and *La Trivata*, architecture like the Taj Mahal and the great Gothic cathedrals of France and Great Britain, constantly remind us.

And what is true for the arts is also true for nature. Nature is also filled with many beautiful things. I discovered this many years ago when I was having some health problems. I first went to doctors to seek solutions to these problems, much as many people do. When this didn't work, I turned to my family and friends, and read numerous books and articles on the specific health problems I was experiencing. While this helped a little, it didn't provide the lasting solution I was looking for. Finally, in a fit of desperation, I turned to nature. I began taking long walks in the country near our home. There seemed to be nothing quite like "getting out in nature" and enjoying everything nature has to offer that helped me with these problems. Slowly but surely my health returned to normal, thereby confirming the old adage that "nature is one of the world's best healers." Somehow, enjoying all the beautiful trees, flowers, streams, meadows, lakes, rivers, sunrises, and sunsets provided the lasting solution I needed and was searching for.

All of these experiences, and many others, have made it possible for me to live in the beautiful and not just in the whole and in the good. They have also made me aware of how important it is to surround ourselves with beautiful things and make beauty a fundamental part of our lives if we

want to live happy, healthy, and contented lives. For beauty, and beautiful things, play a key role in making us feel enthusiastic and excited about life, rather than despondent and depressed.

As time wore on, I began to realize why Goethe's insightful phrase — live in the whole, in the good, in the beautiful — had become the driving force and principal preoccupation of my life. There was little that I had come across that compared with it. It became the centrepiece of my life, it is as simple as that.

Nevertheless, Goethe's phrase was not the only one that has had a profound effect on me and my quest to live a cultural life. This is also true of Joseph Campbell's advice to "*follow our bliss.*" Much like Goethe's phrase, it is short, simple, and to the point. I first heard this phrase when I was watching a television program on Campbell (another well-known cultural scholar) and his ideas about myths, myth-making, culture, and cultures. It was during an interview with Bill Moyers, where Campbell was talking about the need for people to follow their bliss if they want to do what they were intended to do with their lives. What made Campbell's phrase so valuable was the fact that I was going through a period of intense struggle within myself at the time I heard it to determine who I was as a person and what I was intended to do with my life.

This is also a concern of many religions, since it is associated with the idea of a "calling," and therefore the belief that every person is put in the world for a specific purpose. The challenge in life is to discover what that purpose is and then to realize it to the best of our ability. This belief is prominent in many Christian religions and sects, particularly Calvinism, although I suspect it is prominent in many other religions and religious sects as well.

In order to come to grips with this challenge, it was necessary for me to descend deep into myself. This was required to draw from myself what I felt was most imperative to actualize in my life. As a result, I was constantly asking myself such questions as: What is the ultimate purpose of my life? What capabilities and qualities do I possess that were meant to be realized

in some way? And perhaps most importantly, who am I at the core of my being and in my fundamental essence? As this introspective process evolved, I began to understand that I was intended to participate in the quest to broaden and deepen knowledge and understanding of culture and cultures and the central role they are capable of playing in the world, as well as to make the case that humanity should pass out of the present economic age and into a future cultural age.

In Campbell's view, following our bliss is the key to living a full, fulfilling, meaningful, and purposeful life. Once we discover what our bliss really is, according to Campbell we need only pursue it on a sustained and systematic basis to live in a permanent state of bliss. We "walk with the gods" and "soar with the eagles," so to speak, because we have made the effort to determine what we were intended to do with our lives and then worked diligently and relentlessly to achieve this end. It may be something large or small, simple or profound, admired by few or admired by many, but it is the thing that is right for us. While this process can be painful and extremely difficult at times, it also brings a great deal of happiness and countless rewards when it is achieved.

With insights as valuable and timely as the ones provided by Goethe and Campbell uppermost in my mind, I began to realize that my life was becoming "*all of a piece*" in a way it never was before. I began to refer to this as "*living a cultural life*" because everything seemed to fit together nicely to form a harmonious and integrated whole and culture had played such a crucial role in this.

In recent years, these benefits have been enhanced by participating in a number of very specific activities. Here, as well, most of these activities have to do with the arts and nature in some way, something that is not surprising in view of the fact that the arts and nature have played a phenomenal role in my life ever since I was seven or eight.

Many of the artistic activities began shortly after the twenty-first century began and I had a bit more free time on my hands. Included here were Chinese brush-painting classes at the Pacific Mall in Markham for a

number of years, singing in a seniors' choir at the Markham Community Centre for several years, assisting the Chinese Opera Group of Toronto with its financial difficulties and administrative problems, and, more recently, practicing the piano for an hour or so each day.

Although I have not been able to do some of these activities especially well, I have tried to do them to the best of my ability and to become actively engaged in them. I have learned over the years that there is a big difference between being involved in artistic activities as a spectator or audience member compared to being involved in these activities as a participant. While these are different experiences and produce different results for different people, there is a tremendous amount of satisfaction that comes from being able to sit down at the piano and play a piece of music, pick up a brush and paint a picture, or sing in a choir or musical group.

While I really enjoyed the Chinese brush-painting classes and singing in the seniors' choir, practicing the piano has brought me the greatest happiness and fulfillment in recent years. This is because it provides a marvellous opportunity to express my feelings and emotions. There are so many beautiful pieces of music that can be played on the piano that it is impossible to run out of options. Not only is this true for pieces that have been written expressly for the piano, but also it is true for pieces that have been transcribed for the piano.

I must confess that I am deriving immense satisfaction from playing some of the simpler pieces of Bach, Brahms, Beethoven, Chopin, and other composers. I have also discovered that Schumann wrote many beautiful pieces of piano music — such as *About Strange Lands and People*, *The Poet Speaks*, *Dreaming (Träumerei)*, *Little Study*, and songs like *The Nut Tree* — that are relatively easy to learn even if they are difficult to play well, and that some of Handel's most beautiful pieces, such as the *Minuet* from *Berenice*, *Lascia ch'io pianga*, *Ombra mai fù*, and others are available in piano versions.

These are not the only benefits I have derived from becoming actively involved in a variety of artistic activities late in life. I seem to be much

more energetic, relaxed, lively, and creative when I am engaged in these activities. Not only do they provide the outlets and vehicles I need to express my feelings and emotions — I have never been very good at this — but also they are making it possible for me to respond to life's challenges and opportunities in more imaginative, resourceful, and creative ways.

Over the last few years, these activities have been accompanied by making a systematic search for beauty and beautiful things a fundamental part of my life. Collecting information on exquisite pieces of music, paintings, plays, poems, literature, architecture, gardens, historical sites, and so forth is enhancing my life in myriad ways, as well as making it possible for me to live a richer, fuller, and more meaningful life than would have been the case otherwise. I also feel that I am keeping a part of the natural and cultural heritage of humankind alive when I am engaged in activities of this type.

What participation in artistic activities and collecting information on beautiful things is doing to enhance my life in aesthetic and sensorial ways, participation in physical activities like tai chi and qi gong is doing to enhance my life in physical, mental, and metaphysical ways.

It all started seven or eight years ago when I had the good fortune to come across a group of people doing *Yuanji Dances* at the Markville Mall, close to where we live. These are dances based on a number of tai chi and qi gong movements that are related to nature and set to the most exquisite music imaginable. They go on for an hour each morning five days a week, and are followed by massaging all parts of the body and a number of fan dances. They have literally changed my life, since they have proved to be not just physical in nature but mental, spiritual, and metaphysical as well. As a result, I am feeling better than I have felt in years, with much more energy, vitality, and creativity.

I have complemented these activities by walking for an hour or so each day. Most of this walking occurs in our neighbourhood, as indicated earlier. However, some of it takes place at the Milne Conservation Area close to our home, as well as around Toogood Pond in Unionville, not far away. I never

do this, however, without thinking of Henry David Thoreau — a great walker in his own right, as his famous article on walking reveals — and what it must have been like for him to turn his back on urban life in order to experience the fullness, richness, freshness, and diversity of the countryside.

Over the last few years, I have also been taking long walks in the forests of York and Durham Region, a few kilometers north and east of us. What a wonderful find these forests have been! I love walking in them any time of the year — spring, summer, fall, and winter — but particularly in the spring and fall when they are at their most magnificent. In the spring, the leaves are myriad shades of yellow and green that give the forests a delicate appearance and silky and shimmering quality. However, it is in the fall that they are at their best. With a vast array of hardwoods, softwoods, and evergreens — maples, elms, birches, oaks, hemlocks, and so forth — the profusion of reds, yellows, oranges, browns, golds, and greens at this time of year is breath-taking and a sight for sore eyes. The aromas are equally enticing, including the pungent smell of pine cones and the intoxicating scent of decomposing leaves. What never ceases to amaze me is how few people use this remarkable resource, especially when there is nothing quite like a good walk in the forest to renew, revitalize, and invigorate us. The forest soothes us in times of trouble and rejuvenates us in times of anguish.

I have also begun to understand how valuable it is to be in tune with nature and bond with nature as much as possible through these and other activities. This has led me to examine nature's rhythms, cycles, patterns, themes, and elements very carefully. Not only is nature full of all sorts of ingredients that have been immortalized for their medicinal qualities and soothing and healing properties, but also it dances to the tune of its own drummer and has a life and character all its own.

As my understanding of all this has evolved, I have found myself applying what I have learned from nature to my own life. I have discovered that my life is much more fluid, flexible, and relaxed when I am in tune with nature and create rhythms, patterns, and cycles in my own life that correspond to those of nature. Not only have I discovered that for

everything there is a season, but also I have come to realize *why* there is a season for everything. This is especially true for Canada. Since I live in a country where all seasons are dominated by one season — winter — I have begun to understand why it is so sensible to conduct certain activities in the spring, others in the summer or fall, and still others in the winter. It is simply a matter of getting in tune with nature and paying close attention to its various moods, methods, melodies, and mysteries. So much is revealed when we study nature, examine its elements, understand how it cleans, cleanses, renews, and heals itself, as well as how it sings, dances, and has voices and music all its own.

All these activities, and many others, are part and parcel of what I have required to live a cultural life. While learning to live such a life has not been without its challenges and problems, it has also produced countless benefits, opportunities, and rewards.

Looking back, I can see that living a cultural life has broadened, deepened, and enriched my life in countless ways, just as getting to know the many diverse secrets of culture has. It has brought me an enormous amount of satisfaction in life, made me much more aware of other people and their problems and needs, increased my sensitivity, patience, and compassion for others, especially those who are experiencing major difficulties in life, suffering from certain types of illnesses, or are less fortunate than myself, and helped me to become comfortable in my own skin and more at ease with others. It has also expanded my respect and tolerance for people from different cultures, as well as for worldviews, values, customs, traditions, beliefs, and ways of life that are different than my own. I have also become far more conscious of how much I have learned from other cultures, not only in terms of coming to grips with my own problems and possibilities but also in terms of enriching my entire life. This has made my life expansive rather than contractive, as well as filled with a great deal of joy and curiosity in life.

And this is not all. I have also come to realize that culture is not only the key to understanding the world and what is required to change and improve it, it is also the key to experiencing much more spirituality in life.

This is true not only for “specific moments of spirituality,” but, more importantly, for achieving a “permanent state of spirituality.”

This is as it should be. For culture possesses everything that is required to produce a great deal of happiness in life, as well as to make the world a better, safer, and more secure place for all the diverse people and countries of the world. It also possesses everything that is required to live a full, active, and fulfilling cultural life.