

## Leunig: An Appreciation

Ian M. Johnstone

ABSTRACT: Michael Leunig (b.1945) has long been Australia's best known and most pondered on cartoonist, his rueful thought and reflective wisdom always coming from the heart. He has been well described as cynical and witty, but this image omits the sensitivity, and the love of simple things. Now having produced for us a myriad of his style of drawings, always presented with a faltering line, with a fuller ink wash, he is deservedly recognised for a delightful whimsy, concern for the little, the defenceless and the innocent, but more and more for a satirical probing of Americanisation, the money economy, and the emptiness of all political promises. The sheer mass of his insightful work is amazing, and he is surely to be deemed the finest cartoonist Australia has produced, restoring to the profession the lost, shrewd wisdom, once the core of all graffiti, pavement chalkings, and private doodlings. This is one sane spirit in a world of madmen.

Michael Leunig's world is larger than ours. He has expanded his with his unique free-range imaginings, decorated it with inspired visions of a life in harmony with nature and his best self, and built it over a basement of disturbing absurdities. It is a world both more comfortable and less comfortable than our mundane habitat, walled in as it is by conventional ways of experiencing. Its elevation provides him with vistas of our comically blinkered and pusillanimous ways, a view accompanied by a bleakness near to despair that the masses will ever attain enlightenment. He is at once inspired and exasperated. He toggles between being uplifted and being shocked. These two states are reconciled and transcended in sharply insightful and satirical cartoons.

He is clear-eyed about both possibilities and realities; how things could be and how, sadly, they really are. His visions take him both higher and lower than our flatland.

He has cultivated his fancy, and his use of symbols to sketch the fanciful, as he has strengthened his moral awareness, intensified his alertness to absurd contrasts between the ideal and the real, and learnt to breathe a purer air laced with a little laughing gas. He habitually detects the ludicrous contrasts between how we live and how we ought, at our best, to live.

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Behind his image of being a slightly strange whimsical cartoonist lies a highly originating, and sometimes profound and visionary integrated intellect and imagination, conscientiously concerned about how we live, and mostly under-live, our lives. The fuller image is of a sort of larrikin combination of William Blake and Edward Lear. He sets us an example of how we could all enlarge our worlds by responding to our modicum of talents and circumstances, cramped as they all are by the necessities of earning and obliging, with uninhibited energy, intuition, imagination, initiative and un-imitative originality.

He has pronounced instincts for whimsy and for essences. He turns his insights, not into homilies or cynicisms, but into amusing drawings. He goes to the essential, basic realities of issues, crystallizing current and lasting issues—wars, politics, and everyday matters from excessive watching of TV, to delegating childcare. He is especially keen on pointing out our frantic absorption in trivial, ephemeral distractions, while we neglect our intuitions, promptings of conscience and sources of genuine contentment. He goes to the heart of things and condenses his ideas in inimitably funny and intriguingly thoughtful cartoons. He has become so loved and familiar that we now owe him more than we know, or can know, for giving us over and over the big picture, in little figures of people with big noses.

As well as these two instincts he has an unusually enlarged conscience and a rare ability to find and use symbols. He turns abstractions into familiar objects, like ducks, goats, moons, tears, a single hair curl etc. In Shakespeare's words about imagination, he 'gives to airy nothings a local habitation and a name'. This skill in creating visual (eidetic) images is close to the rhetorical device of personification. (Eidetic derives from the Greek for form, and is unrelated to eiderdown from ducks!). Instead of turning abstractions into people, as the Greeks and Romans used to do in having gods of love and so on, he uses everyday objects to do the work of vitally important ideas like innocence and creativity. He adds to all these skills an artistic flair, making him a uniquely entertaining, persuasive and deeply serious commentator.

Surely it is time we took Leunig's whimsical cartoons seriously. They spring from a genuine concern for our future and how we live now compared with how we could and should live. They are never directly didactic, but most have a serious message for us which we must not ignore. I say must, as his moral messages are invariably worthy, and his social criticisms powerful, especially those opposed to war and violence.

There is no doubting his seriousness and concern. He expresses this, for example, in a prayer:

We give thanks for places of simplicity and peace. Let us find such a place within ourselves. We give thanks for places of refuge and beauty. Let us find such a place within ourselves. We give thanks for places of nature's truth and freedom, of joy, inspiration and renewal, places where all creatures may find acceptance and belonging. Let us search for these places: in the world, in ourselves and in others. Let us restore them. Let us strengthen and protect them and let us create them. May we mend this outer world according to the truth of our inner life and may our souls be shaped and nourished by nature's eternal wisdom. (*A Common Prayer*, 1998).

His values answer G.K. Chesterton's memorable question, 'How can we contrive to be at once astonished at the world and yet at home in it?' (*Orthodoxy*, Introduction, 1908).

Leunig is a literary comet. If Halley's comet could be seen once a week, like a Leunig cartoon in Saturday's *Sydney Morning Herald*, we would be almost indifferent to its appearance. Only when he retires or dies will we become sharply aware of him as a striking, moral phenomenon worthy of our highest respect and appreciation.

### *His Personal Story*

Michael Leunig was born on 2 June 1945 in East Melbourne and now lives in central Victoria. He is a fifth generation Australian. He has traced his family back to the Hartz Mountains in 16th century Germany. He has four children: Gus and Sunny from his first marriage to Pamela, and Minna and Felix from his second marriage to Helga. He was twenty six when he married Pamela, his childhood sweetheart, aged twenty one. Their marriage lasted for about twenty years. He was forty three when he first met Helga and she was twenty eight. He is deaf in one ear. He discovered this when he went for a preliminary medical for service in the Vietnam war. His partial deafness meant he was exempt and did not need to register as a Conscientious Objector as he had planned. (Interview with Gina Lennox, p. 24).<sup>1</sup>

He has published at least 25 books of his quirky, often poignant cartoons, some verses, and some prayers, as well as this latest book of his prose pieces in *The Age*. Currently his cartoons appear in *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*. He warmly acknowledges the good influence of both his parents and especially his mother.

I was fortunate because my parents encouraged my individuality, my mother in particular... (My mother) had this hugely creative intelligent streak in her... she had an understanding that to be true to yourself was

<sup>1</sup> Leunig's lengthy interview in 1996 with Gina Lennox is recorded in her book *In Search of Heroes: Stories of Seven Remarkable Men*, (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998), Chapter 1.

to be encouraged. Sometimes she might not tolerate me being true to myself in relation to her, but that was just a normal human frailty and part of the stress and frustration of a woman who has five children to raise. She encouraged artistic expression whereas my father had a more neutral attitude towards creativity—what he cultivated was a sense of personal ethic. He'd been brought up a Catholic and like many lapsed Catholics in the fifties he became a communist... He believed in a certain code of honour and standing up for what is right. (Interview with Gina Lennox, pp. 7-8).

His sole reference to any encouragement to be creative, apart from his parents, is to a woman English teacher. He mentions her in two places.

A glorious, vibrant Englishwoman, showed beyond a shadow of doubt that creativity, literature, theatre and humour were all rightfully and joyfully mine. (*The Lot: In Words*, 2008, p. 267).

An English teacher from England brought a love of Shakespeare and Chaucer and the poets with her. She was great with language and we loved it and this was a miracle to her. (Interview with Gina Lennox, p. 18).

It is interesting that he and Helga have home schooled their two children, Minna and Felix. (*Sydney Morning Herald*, Monday 22 June 2009, p. 15) He also says:

We want to bring Minna and Felix up in the country, with nature and space and less of this frenetic pace and over-stimulation of the city. (Interview with Gina Lennox, p. 63).

and: I am not proud of the world that I must show my children. Human greed is institutionalized and there is a sadness at hand—the grief of all the dying off of the planet and of community and other human structures that hold and sustain us. (Interview with Gina Lennox, p. 65).

### *His Cartoons*

To enjoy a Leunig cartoon is to step into his innocent whimsical world of ideas and somehow to be cleansed for a moment of the impurities of mundane things; of clichés, of complacency and of conventional seeing; it is to be lifted out of the everyday into a rarer atmosphere, with a dash of laughing gas to induce the euphoria of having a brief clear vision of basic realities. It is to be carried above mere pragmatism, the serious, the scientific and the literal, above greed and dullness. It is to ride in a hot air balloon of novelty, not knowing quite where you will end up landing.



Leunig cartoon, courtesy of The Age.

We long to grasp the mystery at the heart of things. Leunig is surely there already, waiting for us to catch up and to catch on. He knows the fabulous is stored in unspoilt nature, in ducks and flowers. It lies in our minds too but is somehow buried at the bottom of a pile of experiences we'd rather forget, and needs to be pulled out and dusted off so we too can come at life freshly again.

Leunig sees with consistent clarity contrasts about our predicament both in our Australian society and the human condition. How does he do it? That's what we must ask ourselves. What attitudes, beliefs, ideas, visions, loves and knowledge of basic facts go to producing his piercing insights which provide us with such pleasure and amusement? Everything he knows is readily available to the rest of us. His raw materials are exactly the same as those available to the rest of us. Of course, even if we get to understand his philosophy we could not rival his ability to express it so succinctly and effectively. And he wants us not only to see his point of view, but to adopt it as our own.

### *The Way We Live*

My favourite example has six captioned sketches under a heading 'She's Cracking Up': His cartoons mix wistfulness and whimsy often giving us fresh and amusing insights into the way we live.

He was eating a hamburger.

He was eating a hamburger and listening to the radio.

He was eating a hamburger and listening to the radio and talking to a friend.

He was eating a hamburger and listening to the radio and talking to a friend and doing a right turn when the car phone rang.

It was his wife. 'I can't stand it any more', she said, 'this mad, crazy life. I can't cope. Come home and help!'

'Hell!' he thought as he put down the phone and sped through a red light with the radio blaring saying with a mouthful of hamburger to his friend and lighting a cigarette, 'It's the woman ... she's cracking up!'

(*Sydney Morning Herald*, Saturday 19 October 1996)

Absurdities and blind spots help him make his social commentary. He uses absurdities to didactic advantage. His cartoon mirror distorts the mundane enough for us to become aware, in recognizing his twists and exaggerations, of how we really are, much as jokes are somehow reality shock therapy. He writes:

The best cartoons are also philosophical and poetic by nature, rather than slick and expert; they are sublimely ambiguous, disorderly and vague, and their purpose is not to nail things down but to open things up. They must express what is repressed—both personally and culturally—and that can be messy and daggy. (*The Lot: In Words*, 2008, p. 90)

He has no vanity; wears no clothes of self-pride or readiness to take offence. His is a simple, unadorned, unprotected spontaneity and intuition. He doesn't suffer as we do from inhibitions, doubts and self-limiting and responses—'this is as I see it and this cartoon is my best self's most direct and exuberant way of expressing it'.

Leunig remarkably makes some use of almost everything he hears, reads and sees. His world is made into a mirror to give him back the stimulants needed for his critical energies and whimsical genius. He has a facility for eidetic imagery. He transforms abstract ideas like innocence into three dimensional images of reality; ducks, flowers, the sun and so on.

### *His Other Selves*

Mr Curly is an odd man out, as is Leunig himself. He is not straight and dull. He has curves as most of nature's creatures do. He is intriguingly different and a free thinker. He stays at home, in contrast to

Vasco Pyjama who is a restless explorer. For him absurdity is a man with a dog's tail chasing it in the moonlight. He turns vague abstractions into visible parts of our familiar surroundings. For example, secondary derivative experience is a TV set. He famously drew someone gazing at a screen picture of the sun with the real sun shining in a window.

*His Insights Into Our Unexpressed Longings*

Leunig understands our instinctive need for a model of innocent virtuousness. For him the duck is the epitome of authenticity. It is incapable of malice, guile, cunning or deceit.

When you think about it we all have a longing to connect with what is totally and unquestionably natural and pure. It is as if we were set a quest for the essence of the most real, as Jason sought the Golden Fleece. It is not perfection which satisfies us so much as naturalness and purity. We want lasting reality in preference to ephemeral perfection. Faults become assets in someone we deeply admire. We can perhaps be like that person, even with our flaws.

For some this reality is best found in unspoiled nature. We seek someone who never shams or pretends, is humble, has no egotistical pretensions, is honest, and incapable of real wickedness. In such a person you can confide completely and without inhibitions. They are originals. One's mother or father is sometimes such a person. We also love children for their innocent directness. Some love folk wisdom, folklore, myths and legends because they are seen as basic and lasting.

Leunig sees past superficialities to realities. He wants us to be more natural and less contriving, and not to have the negative emotions of envy, rage and pretence which flaw our characters. As he says:

A man kneels before a duck in a sincere attempt to talk with it. The duck in the picture symbolizes one thing and many things: nature, instinct, feeling, beauty, innocence, the primal, the non-rational and the mysterious unsayable; qualities we can easily attribute to a duck and qualities which, coincidentally and remarkably, we can easily attribute to the inner life of the kneeling man, to his spirit or his soul. The duck then, in this picture, can be seen as a symbol of the human spirit, and in wanting connection with his spirit it is a symbolic picture of a man searching for his soul.

The person cannot actually see this 'soul' as he sees the duck but he can feel its enormous impact on his life. Its outward manifestations can be disturbing and dramatic and its inner presence is often wild and rebellious or elusive and difficult to grasp: but the person knows that from this inner dimension, with all its turmoil, comes his love and his fear, his creative spark, his music, his art and his very will to live. He also feels that a strong relationship with this inner world seems to lead

to a good relationship with the world around him and a better life. Conversely, he feels that alienation from these qualities, or loss of spirit, seems to cause great misery and loneliness.

*(When I Talk to You: A Cartoonist Talks to God, 2004, Introduction).*

Over the years other symbols have emerged – roosters and angels, more recently goats and devils. Roosters are cocky, loud and pompous, but they run for cover at the slightest provocation, whereas goats represent robust life, a bit of good, healthy aggression in the face of difficulty. Ecstasy basically. As for devils, they are there to be reckoned with, from mild imps to really major ones, but I draw the little cheeky ones. I understand in retrospect. It's like I'm drawing playfully, creating something that doesn't exist, a little fairy garden, drawing with the love of what I'm doing, lost in it, allowing the unconscious to come to life, not being tricked by the intellect. Then maybe ten years later I look at the drawing and understand, 'of course, this curl is a yearning, a symbol of his oddity, of what he feels is almost embarrassingly silly about him and, lo and behold, he finds a whole world of oddity'. What makes you feel so alone and strange is in fact normal. There's a lot of curliness in life and you can have a homecoming – there is a place for you and for that aloneness, that eccentricity and there's a fulfillment of it eventually, it's no longer the cause of your outcastness. So that's the curl. It's the curious, unique self and, if you find that, you find the connection to the whole world because the world is curious and unique and authentic at its best level. (Interview with Gina Lennox, pp. 37-38).

In gaining an appreciation of the unsayable I found a love of language. In the early days I made very silent pictures hopefully to be interpreted anywhere, but as I've got older I have become more respectful of the resonance of words and words as symbols, as pictures, as magic things, as sounds too. Words are sensuous. I love juxtaposing symbols—a duck, a clock, a moon. Just by putting them in relationship to each other a mood can be fostered, and similarly with words. Words are so ancient, sounds and hieroglyphs evolving over thousands of years, they can be very narrowly explicit or full of life and mystery. So I've gone back to words as hieroglyphs because a lot of my work is hieroglyphic—recurring symbols, repeating chorus, verse, chorus, verse. I make no apology for the amount of repetition in my work, I love repetition. It consoles, it confirms, it grounds.

(Interview with Gina Lennox, p. 49).

Leunig's inner world is as large as his outer one. He is as strongly in touch with his utopia of innocence as he is with the current activities of society; the decadence of drugs, the wickedness of invading Iraq, of the culture of consuming and satisfying market created wants rather than the real needs of our inner self to feel at home in the world. He brings to bear on society's flawed exaggerations insights from his inner world, making humour from the contrast. He tickles our fancy over and over by



contrasting the absurd misfit of things as they are and things as they could be and should be.

It is as if he has strayed into our sophisticated, adult, cynical, blasé world from his world of childlike wonder and shocked disbelief in examples of malice and stupidity. He is an ardent ambassador for another place where we can go and live better more fulfilling lives not based on greed and self-seeking, needless rivalry and excessive consuming and exploitation of nature. He has deliberately trapped part of his outlook in the healthiest of childlike qualities of naivety and clear bold expression of the obvious. He reminds us of what it is like to be both sophisticated and naïve. The resulting insights electrify us with gentle, amusing shocks and jolt us into fresh and fruitful ways of seeing and accepting what is really going on. It is our fault we have lost our naivete. We were all children once. We could see things as clearly, spontaneously and directly as children do, if only we could conjure up and use that quality of apprehension which Leunig has carefully retained. His lens filters out lesser virtues and sharpens his focus on what really matters.

He has a huge output of cartoons but they are all unmistakable Leunig. Few other cartoonists are so consistently elevating in tone and arrow-accurate in pinning down their victim. He has preserved a healthy indignation and scepticism. He doubts the sincerity of politicians, and the wisdom of majorities, and is indignant at the misguided self-servingness of both. His cartoons compress and concentrate social criticism from the noblest point of view.

Leunig makes me feel momentarily part of his world, as if I could see and feel as he does. Sometimes his insight is so accurate it changes my long-term convictions and habits. To achieve this he makes use of the comic which is a universal language. Even the perverse and the disenchanting can be ennobled by a Leunig cartoon when nothing else will do it. When I enter Leunig's world I have to shed my vanity and sophistications. I drop my reservations and judgments and am left with innocent acceptance. Humans can be as pure as natural things. They can be in their humanness as a sheep is in its simple-minded sheepness and the fox in its incorrigible cunning. We can at least experience and accept 'the dearest freshness deep down things', as G.M. Hopkins put it in his poem, 'God's Grandeur'. I can enter a purer world than the grubby suspicious conventional one. I can leave behind the pusillanimous and ugly, self-obsessed meanness. My imagination can rinse others clean and pure.

### *His Method*

To gather his insights he has perfected using a state of imaginative reverie in which he contemplates the mundane from a purer perspective.

He has acquired by long practice an agile and flexible way of letting his mind rove through current events and his store of ideas as if it were a lively sniffer-dog with a venturesome spirit. This requires both an easy vigour and a relaxed humility to boundary ride the limits of the expressible. Occasionally he produces a cartoon that is so quizzical it is abstruse and oracular. These tease us into pondering possible meanings which are just out of reach of our immediate understanding.

He has the knack and habit of letting his mind wander freely over current events and the state of things, before pouncing on an absurdity, a comparison with how things could and should be if only we lived more truly and authentically. Once having pounced he finds a suitable image to illustrate the ludicrous contrast, and then he lightens it with understated unsavage whimsy. Each step in the process is an acquired habit of thought. It is not a fixed mechanical production line, but relies on the way the mind works if it is allowed to. It has first to be relieved of distractions which abound in cities, and in watching TV. (Leunig lives in the country and has no TV). Your daydreams and vague thoughts and feelings have to be treasured and sifted from this mental mist-net for any gems or germs of ideas. It is as haphazard and unpredictable as catching insects in a net or steering a canoe down rapids. It takes practice and courage to trust your intuition to come up with fresh ideas. Then he applies the diluted acid of bemusement to lampoon our unconscious lunacies. Leunig's consistent ability to do this is remarkable. He describes how he does it with characteristic whimsy:

Suddenly you get an idea for a new cartoon so you draw it, but it doesn't really work on paper. The deadline looms. You throw down a glass of wine and draw a man with a dog's tail and he is chasing it in the moonlight. You have captured the meaning of life! For this you receive an honorary doctorate and are tortured to within an inch of your life. Success follows success—praise pours in and before long you are getting bashed up wherever you go. Somebody tells you that you can't draw. Fiction writers cross the street when you approach. A greeting card arrives from someone who says they are praying for you. (*The Lot: In Words*, 2008, p. 11).

He uses his humorously drawn figures, the archetypal ordinary person with a big nose, the freethinking Mr Curly, or the adventurer Vasco Pyjama, to great advantage in making his point. His prose has a similar novelty. He understands how to vary the conventional forms and appearances of things to reveal some ignored aspect. Like all good cartoonists he caricatures people, exaggerating their face and bodily features, to expose their true character or simply so they harmonise with something absurd they have said.

His art is partly an exercise in surprise and novelty and partly one of arousing empathy; expanding our appreciation of the inherent newness in things if only we can cast off our almost concreted conventional relationships with our surroundings and gradually enlarge our capacity to take a broader, grander, more elevated attitude to being alive. Familiarity can atrophy and shrink-wrap our best faculties of appreciation, elation and inspiration.

### *His Poems*

His poems reflect his variety of styles. For example there is the gently pedagogical:

There are only two feelings. Love and fear.  
 There are only two languages. Love and fear.  
 There are only two activities. Love and fear.  
 There are only two motives, two procedures,  
 two frameworks, two results. Love and fear.  
 Love and fear.

*(Short Notes from the Long History of Happiness, 1996,  
 unpaginated, second last page).*

And the perceptive miracle:

Let it go,  
 Let it out,  
 Let it all unravel;  
 Let it free  
 And it will be  
 A path on which to travel.  
*(Poems, p. 9).*

And the distinctively cynical:

Robin Hood, Robin Hood,  
 You'd be napalmed in the wood,  
 I am very sad to say,  
 If you were alive today.  
*(Poems, p. 57).*

There is a missile, so I've heard,  
 Which locks on to the smallest bird,  
 Finely tuned to seek and kill  
 A tiny chirp or gentle trill.  
 It's modern warfare's answer to  
 An ancient wisdom tried and true;  
 When fighting wars you first destroy  
 All songs of innocence and joy.  
*(Poems, p. 81).*

And the intriguingly mystical:

A child is a grub,  
A man's a cocoon,  
Music's a butterfly...  
Sing me a tune.  
(*Poems*, p. 68).

And the typically whimsical:

'He's lost the plot,' they say,  
But it simply isn't true;  
You cannot lose the plot,  
It's stuck to you!  
But you can soak the plot  
And loosen it with tears  
And slowly peel it back.  
It could take years.  
(*Poems*, p. 70).

And the purely lyrical:  
Mushrooms are amazing folk,  
Up into the world they poke;  
Clean and tender, bold and pert,  
Magic from the autumn dirt.  
(*Poems*, p. 106).

They are all indelibly and inimitably Leunig.

### *His Prayers*

His prayers are even more accurately directed to our better self than his poems, and are again best illustrated by a few examples

The following three come from his book *When I Talk to You: A Cartoonist Talks to God* (2004).

In order to be truthful  
We must do more than speak the truth.  
We must also hear truth.  
We must also receive truth.  
We must also act upon truth.  
We must also search for truth.  
The difficult truth.  
Within us and around us.  
We must devote ourselves to truth.  
Otherwise we are dishonest  
And our lives are mistaken.  
God grant us the strength and the courage  
To be truthful.

God be amongst us and within us. Earth is our mother and nature's law  
is our father, our protector. Thus we pray.

Father do not forgive them for they know precisely what they do. Those destroyers of earth's beauty and goodness, those killers of nature, do not forgive them.

Those betrayers of nature's love. Those exploiters of nature's innocence. Those poisoners. Do not forgive them.

Those greedy, pompous people. That greed and pomposity within us all. The sum total of that petty greed and pomposity within us all. We now know precisely what these things are doing to this earth. So Father, do not forgive us for we now understand what it is that we do.

Amen.

We pray for the fragile ecology of the heart and the mind. The sense of meaning. So finely assembled and balanced and so easily overturned. The careful, ongoing construction of love. As painful and exhausting as the struggle for truth and as easily abandoned.

Hard fought and won are the shifting sands of this sacred ground, this ecology. Easy to desecrate and difficult to defend, this vulnerable joy, this exposed faith, this precious order. This sanity.

We shall be careful. With others and with ourselves.

Amen.

### *His Transcendental Ideas.*

It is both convenient and enlightening to profile Leunig's basic values by comparing them with those of another famous ideology of idealism. He clearly has a unified comprehensive, inspired and inspiring personal philosophy. His ideas approximate closely with those of the American Transcendentalists, who included R.W. Emerson, H.D. Thoreau and William James. In his *A Common Prayer* (1998) Leunig quotes Emerson;

Love is the brightest foreigner, the foreign self.

A brief explanation of Transcendentalism is necessary in order to make the comparison understandable. A definition is helpful as a start;

A philosophy based on the idea that divinity pervades all nature and humanity, asserting the existence of an ideal spiritual reality that transcends the empirical and scientific and is knowable through intuition.

Another definition is 'A belief in the mystical unity of Nature'.

Transcendentalism is an inspiring and motivating cluster of ideas centred on energetic, ethical idealism. It seeks to satisfy both our emotions and our intellect. It is both warmth for our feelings, and light for our reasoning. We feel with our whole being that it is right and healthy. They kept closely intimate with their best self, and cared about

nature as we follow the doings of our children, as if they had a responsibility for its welfare. They were self-reliant in Emerson's sense of trusting to their intuition, and were self-motivated.

The Transcendentalists wanted what we all deep-down want, and sought some of our basic wants with unusual zest and deliberation. For example, here are some of the things we want:

- \* To see things as they really are, unhindered by prejudices and assumptions handed down to us as dogmas, traditions and conventions.
- \* To live naturally, in harmony with our surroundings, healthily at home in the natural world as it is.
- \* Sufficient security to retain our physical wholeness, and sufficient freedom to take risks and live out our individually chosen destinies.
- \* To get to the end of our lives and not to be disappointed that we have failed to use our abilities and willingness to their best advantage, doing worthwhile things. We want to have lived rather than just prepared to live.
- \* A philosophy which gives us stability and confidence without becoming complacent and smug; stoical ideas, like stabilising outriggers on a canoe, which keep us from sinking into dismay or grief, but which are open to improvement.

Thoreau's main ideas are very close to Leunig's. Roderick MacIver has recently distilled Thoreau's *Precepts and Principles*:<sup>2</sup>

- \* Everything worthwhile in life requires love, faith, and imagination. Friendship, love, imagination, a spiritual life, a close connection to the natural world – all are mysterious and difficult to put into words.
- \* Art emerges out of our inner life.
- \* Society is a contrived reality.
- \* Elements of a quality life: live simply, do quality work that is not rushed, avoid waste, live below your means, and keep a reserve. Set aside a substantial portion of your time for leisure.
- \* A close relationship with nature contributes joy and peace to a human life.
- \* Simple living enhances our awareness of, and openness to, the beauty of the natural world.
- \* A spiritual life is a life of calmness, of openness to mystery, beauty, and infinity.

<sup>2</sup> *Thoreau and the Art of Life: Precepts and Principles* (Heron Dance Press USA, 2006), p. 7.

- \* Wisdom and simplicity are closely related.
- \* The path of joy is one of knowing who you are and living it. It requires befriending yourself.
- \* Make time for silence. Adopt a thoughtful rhythm to your work and life.

Leunig's exhortation about conscience could have been written by a Transcendentalist:

The recultivation of conscience is our most important civic and personal work. Conscience needs to be reimagined in order to appreciate its ordinary practical value and its sheer, benign brilliance. A broader vision might describe conscience as our deepest, most valuable and secure knowing; the font of personal authenticity, reality, creativity and moral life; the indelible and reliable sense of one's unique natural goodness; the alert, overriding and underlying clairvoyance that navigates and locates us most rightly and felicitously in the visible and invisible world. Such a vivacious conscience cannot be instilled. It exists as an innate potential in the newly born and awaits intelligent, sensitive recognition and devoted nurturing. It is apprehended and set in developmental motion through an imaginative, compassionate, sustained maternal presence. The intensity of such care seems possible only through the unique nature of maternal love, supported and protected by the family and the wider community—but it is possible! (*The Bulletin*, 31 December 1996).

### *His Challenge To Us*

If you like cartoons that mix insightful social and political criticism with innocence, then seek out Leunig. If you like your ideals illustrated in whimsy, Leunig is for you. If you yearn for a soul-mate with a larrikin streak, Leunig will satisfy you. If you long for a fresh slant on current affairs with a serrated cutting edge of satire, Leunig will provide it for you. If you want a reminder of basic inescapable facts, popular culture's unworthy aims, to give you a wry smile, you will love Leunig as many people do.

Leunig has become part of our national psyche. His indelibly Australian, uplifting and gently teasing humour is so familiar that we feel somehow it is our very own and that he is part of us. We will never know how he has lifted sales of *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*, in both of which he regularly appears, as well as in the annual calendar supplement of his cartoons which arrives with the paper around Christmas time. His output of cartoons is astonishing. He has published at least 25 books of them.

The Australian religious broadcaster and author, Caroline Jones, has summarized Leunig's achievements well:

Leunig is a crucial prophet of our time... He identifies our plight... Leunig's genius is to leapfrog over the carping protests of the narrow rational mind by using images that speak directly to the soul, the spirit, the psyche, and the heart—all those wider capacities of knowing that we have been taught to distrust and are missing like homesick children. He has co-opted the language of dreams, using cartoon images and puns that sidestep our scientific scepticism to spring straight into the unconscious.

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*Bibliography (Chronological)*

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- The Second Leunig* (1979)
- The Bedtime Leunig* (1981)
- A Bag of Roosters* (1983)
- Ramming the Shears* (1985)
- The Travelling Leunig* (1990)
- The Prayer Tree* (1990)
- Introspective* (1991)
- A Common Philosophy* (1992)
- Everyday Devils and Angels* (1992)
- A Bunch of Posey* (1992)
- You and Me* (1995)
- Short Notes from the Long History of Happiness* (1996)
- Why Dogs Sniff Each Other's Tails* (1998)
- A Common Prayer* (1998)
- Goatperson and Other Tales* (1999)
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- The Stick and Other Tales of our Times* (2002)
- Poems* (2003)
- Kicking Behinds* (2003)
- Strange Creature* (2003)
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- When I Talk to You: A Cartoonist Talks to God* (2004)
- A New Penguin Leunig* (2005)
- Hot and Bothered* (2007)
- The Lot: In Words* (2008).

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