

Out of what is lost grows something stronger Launch of the Cropper Foundation

Norman Girvan

I want to begin by reading some lines from a piece written by one whom, were he still among us, might now have been regarded as an emerging Caribbean writer.

The passage starts with an imaginary conversation between two fishermen. They are not in Toco or in Grand Riviere but in Ancient Greece. The fishermen are lamenting the death of Icarus, son of Daedalus.

According to the Greek legend, Icarus died while flying on wings constructed by his father as they both attempted to escape from the Labyrinth. Icarus defied his father's instructions by flying higher and higher: he wanted to get as close as possible to the Gods. But the heat of the sun melted the wax that glued his wings together, causing Icarus to fall into the sea.

As the passage opens, the two fishermen are arguing. The first is mourning the death of Icarus, *first and only son of his illustrious father; Icarus in whom that great man's majesty of intellect was fine -set, gilded by youth and beauty, Bold and daring* .

The second, however, insists that they should mourn for Daedalus, the father, who lives, because *Was his invention killed his son. Was his fierce daring, inculcated in his son, made Icarus - flight failing - refuse to turn back.*

As the two fishermen argue, Daedalus himself approaches. He looks old and bent, an appearance which both attribute to his recent loss. But Daedalus confounds both fishermen by declaring that he does not grieve, and explaining why.

*D: My friends, you do not understand. My heart is full of happiness and pride - my son dared to live... He is dead but not dead alive. How many of us are walking corpses? How many of us turn fear the chance of life? **We all have passions and desires. This is what makes us men. We do not fulfill them. This is what stops us being gods.***

My son wanted to soar. To fly beyond the birds. He wanted to be lighter, more rarefied, than air.... he was on fire with desire. He did not cower back in fear - I am proud. He did not remain lumpen, earthbound, half -alive - I am happy. No, friends, do not mourn for me.

Daedalus speaks like a man old enough and mature enough to have experienced life and to have reflected on its meaning. But the words spoken by Daedalus are put there by an author barely 20 years old, Devavand Cropper. The passage is taken from a piece that Dev shared with his parents only a few months before his sudden passing in 1998.

I can think of no more fitting a way to launch the Cropper Foundation than on the wings of Dev's unpublished passage on the death of Icarus. For Dev Cropper was, in many ways, a kind of Icarus himself. The first and only child of his parents; gilded by youth, intelligence, and above all by a sense of his own place in the planet and in the universal human condition. One who dared to be alive, but whose life was "untimely aborted", to use the words of Roderick Rainford.

One who would have loved to hear Peter Minshall read about "Callaloo and the Crab".

By age 20 Dev had registered a dazzling series of academic accomplishments. His parents are reluctant to speak of them because of their enduring modesty, modesty that Dev himself inherited. They know that he himself would have detested anything that smacked of the status of celebrity.

I hope they will forgive me for mentioning just a few highlights. Dev crowned his early secondary schooling, which was spent between Trinidad, Guyana, Barbados and England, with 10 GSCE passes, all at Distinction, winning the prize for the best examination candidate in his school district in England; and with 4 A levels, 3 at distinction, which won him the Governors' prize for most outstanding student at his A level graduation.

His parents prefer to talk about the fact that his decision to study social sciences at the London School of Economics sprung from his emerging interest in equity, poverty and social justice. They note that, without any prompting from them, he became active in the Student Union and in student politics. He wrote for the student newspaper. He raised money for projects aimed at alleviating hunger in Africa. He even founded a David Rudder fan club, while maintaining his encyclopaedic knowledge of cricket.

Here was a young man who could have had a choice among any number of professional careers, but who cared nothing for material success. To his parents he had confided that his greatest passion was writing. Not, he insisted, that he wanted to "become a writer". But that writing would be his vocation. And the creative writers here tonight will, I am sure, understand the distinction that Dev made.

So I hope that John and Angela will understand that, in beginning with Dev, I seek to share with the special fraternity of the friends, supporters and well-wishers gathered here tonight an understanding of the many-sided significance of this occasion.

I say many-sided, because the Cropper Foundation is about more than the preservation of the memory of a very special person, and support for creative writing.

Its genesis goes back to the 1980s, when Angela was in charge of cultural matters at the CARICOM Secretariat, and she had foreseen the need for a regional institute aimed at supporting indigenous artistic and cultural expression. With characteristic energy, determination, and networking, she engineered the establishment of the CARICOM

Foundation for Arts and Culture. It helped that she was in now way interested in getting the personal credit.

By the time she left the CARICOM Secretariat in 1990, she and John believed that would need to undertake a private initiative of their own. By this means they would be free from the constraints of an official structure, reach beyond the arts to other issues of public policy, and utilize their growing network of regional and international relationships. I remember Angela talking to me about this as long as ten years ago.

The project continued to germinate throughout the 1990s, as John continued his consulting work in agricultural education and Angela took up several high-level international posts related to the environment. The plan was to work full-time on the Foundation after their return to Trinidad in 1997.

There is a personal dimension to this story, which must be told. It is The story of a young man from England who came to the West Indies to do his Diploma in Tropical Agriculture, and who fell in love, with the region, and with a talented and beautiful daughter of Trinidad, and married both, and stayed to make his home here; and who wishes to give back to the region that has given him so much.

And it is the story of a girl, the 6th in a family of 12 sisters and brothers, who grew up in an environment that was difficult economically, but rich in caring, sharing and mutual support. Her mother, 82 years old and three times a widow, travelled all the way from Canada to be here tonight. We are honoured to have her with us.

That young woman went on to do two degrees, one in economics and the other in law, both at the University of the West Indies and therefore at taxpayer's expense, and acknowledges a debt to the Caribbean people which this Foundation will help her to repay.

There is an example here to the rest of us who have been educated at public expense and who owe so much to the people of the region. And it shows that much can be accomplished by private and personal initiative that doesn't wait for governments to do what needs to be done.

We all have passions and desires. This is what makes us men. We do not fulfill them. This is what stops us being gods.

Another thing that this initiative teaches us is that you don't have to be rich for your giving to make a difference.

The financial resources of the Cropper Foundation are modest. They do not come from business wealth, inherited or acquired; they are a result of personal savings accumulated over the years. This, if you like, is the seed money. Additional leverage comes from the time and effort put in by the Croppers. All together, these act as a catalyst for the mobilization of resources from other sources.

Take for example the Workshop for emerging Caribbean writers that has just been completed at Grand Riviere. The participants themselves paid their own way to Trinidad. The owners of Mont Plaisir hotel at Grand Riviere kicked in with a heavily discounted rate. Caribbean Contemporary Arts acted as a facilitator. BP Amoco and NIHERST helped with computers. Danny Lyndersay of the UWI Centre for Creative Arts gave voluntary service. Merle Hodge, the chief tutor, gave her time for a nominal fee.

Next year's workshop is already being planned and the British publishing house of McMillan has just confirmed its support.

But, reflecting the broader interests of John and Angela, the Foundation will also be catalysing support for projects in public policy, particularly equity; in environmental awareness and natural resource management; and in the development of enlightened leadership.

It has secured co-sponsorship from a global foundation for an international conference on public policy and equity to be held next year, and several international organisations have confirmed their participation.

A project for the establishment of a major Centre for Environmental Education in Trinidad and Tobago now has a Steering Committee, and a part of the resources have already been identified.

And leadership: Lloyd Best once wrote to Angela: "the first responsibility of leadership is to produce new leaders". These words are still ringing in her ears.

That is why they are particularly happy that the young man who is the first recipient of the Dev Cropper Memorial Award at the London School of Economics went on to be elected Chair of the UK Student Labour Party Clubs.

I believe myself that the public policy aspect of the Foundation's work is particularly timely. This, because we live in a time when powerful international forces and their agencies are arrogating to themselves the right to think for us.

I do not mean just to diagnose our economic illnesses and to prescribe the appropriate medicine. I mean the very usurpation of our right to interpret own reality.

Let me give you just one recent example. Not 3 months ago in Washington, high officials of the English speaking Caribbean attended a Conference at which a vision of the region in the year 2020 was delivered to them by a powerful and prestigious international agency.

It hardly matters that the principal author of the Report in question was himself of Caribbean origin and that he travelled the region interviewing lots of people. At the end of the day the Report was written in Washington, given the slant considered acceptable

by the agency in question and presented to the senior policy makers of the region with its imprimatur.

We produced the raw material; they transformed it into the finished product and “sold” it back to us. Does this sound familiar?

It is no exaggeration to say that the right to interpret our own reality—to think for ourselves—is one that is the subject of continuous contention and daily struggle in this region.

We hear a lot these days about globalisation. Allow me to suggest that when globalisation means the practice of equitable global interaction and the assumption of collective responsibility for the global commons, it is to be welcomed. But when it becomes a front for our recolonisation, intellectual and economic, it is to be resisted with all the energy at our command.

Initiatives such as the Cropper Foundation provide a vehicle for such resistance. They enlarge the space for indigenous dialogue and problem solving and provide for constructive interaction between like-minded local and international actors.

And the response has already been overwhelming—the phone at the Cropper home has been ringing off the hook. Clearly, the time is ripe.

So what is being launched tonight is more than a Foundation, it is an Initiative, personal and collective. And it is not about the provision of money for philanthropic purposes. It is about catalysing resources from the wider community for the creation of space.

The support the Foundation is giving to emerging creative writers of the Caribbean is another aspect of the creation of space.

Years ago a great Caribbean man, CLR James, had this to say about the artist in the Caribbean in a lecture on the subject:

...if the threads of a tradition can be discovered among us and made into a whole, if we are to be shocked into a recognition of what we are, and what we are not, with the power that this will bring, it is the great artist who will do it...

I was privileged, as first-year student on the Mona Campus of the UWI, to have James’s lecture. It was an experience that left itself forever imprinted on the mind and memory. And the context in which James spoke made it clear that he was speaking as much about the creative writer as about any other kind of artist.

There is no numerical measure, no monetary value that can be put on the contribution of creative writers to our understanding of our society and of ourselves, of who and what we are, to our very sense of self.

In the Caribbean this is even more important, because our sense of self was, historically, under systematic and daily assault by the very terms on which we were brought into this region and the conditions under which we lived.

The creative impulses of a people are one of the principal ways in which they lay claim to their humanity, both that aspect of their humanity that is universal and that aspect that is peculiar to their own condition and unique experience.

In the Caribbean, creation is inextricably linked with survival. For us, to survive is to create.

That may be one reason why this region has been the source of a creative outpouring in music, art and culture that is out of all proportion to the modest population of the islands and related mainland.

The United Nations Human Development Index, as useful and innovative as it is, does not capture the creative dimension of a people's existence. Canada leads the world in human development. But who in all honesty could claim that the literary, the musical, the artistic and the cultural output of that country is richer than that of the English-speaking Caribbean, or even comparable to it?

St Lucia, an island of barely 150,000 souls, has produced two Nobel Laureates. For Canada to equal this record, in relation to its population, it would have to have produced 419 Nobels. In the case of the United States, the number of Nobel Laureates would have to be 3, 753.

But numbers are not the point, nor are Nobel awards.

How do you measure the contribution to the region of a Lamming? A Naipaul? A Walcott? A Martin Carter? A Lovelace? A McBurnie or a Nettleford? A Louise Bennett? A Bob Marley? A Rudder? A Jamaica Kinkaid? A Pat Bishop? A Rachel Manley or a Merle Hodge?

In preparing for this I read a little book by Merle Hodge called "For the Life of Laeticia". It is fascinating: sad, funny, and ultimately uplifting.

Laeticia—Lacy—lives in a household that statisticians would probably classify as "below the poverty line". But Lacy never thinks of herself as "poor", because she relies on a network of supportive relationships with her extended family in the household.

Lacy is sent to live with her father in order to take up her government scholarship. In her father's house there is always food on the table, and money to buy her books, clothes, and lunch. There is only one problem: there is no love there, no heart, no soul, no fun.

Which creates a dilemma for Lacy. How this dilemma is resolved by this feisty little 11 year old--in Jamaica we say "she lickle but she tallawah"--is the subject of the book.

It is relationships of the kind that Merle describes in her book that have played a vital part in the survival and resilience of Caribbean people. Her simple story takes us beyond the one-sided perspective of economics and statistics, illustrating some elemental truths about the human condition, not just in the Caribbean but everywhere.

At Grand Riviere, where the writers' workshop has just wound up, there is a ritual in which locals and visitors alike partake.

The turtle hatchlings, sprung from eggs laid three months before, are carefully collected and placed into the sea. The idea is to better the odds on survival of the eggs into adult turtles, which currently stand at two in every hundred.

Those who partake in the ritual have the unique satisfaction of knowing that they are helping to save not only individual hatchlings—the little creatures that barely fit in the palm of your hand--but also an entire species, currently endangered.

My family and I were fortunate to partake in that ritual at Grand Riviere last Saturday night. As did we so, another ritual was taking place. Around the table where we all sat a few yards from the emerging hatchlings; the workshop participants were giving thanks to John and Angela, rendered in the form of readings from their own work, under the skilful encouragement of Merle Hodge.

The two rituals mingled and became one. For John, Angela, Merle, Danny and their other collaborators were in their own way helping to preserve, protect and nurture the young writers of the Caribbean; helping to preserve the species of creative writer; a species that may be endangered by the combined effects of societal neglect and continuous bombardment from imported images and sounds.

And as the participants, one after another, read their sad, funny, and illuminating pieces, it was if they too, like the hatchlings, felt the security of having arrived in a habitat in which they were comfortable, could survive and grow.

One of the participants told me that the most important thing about the workshop for her was that she felt she had developed the capacity to evaluate her own work. That is a significant accomplishment indeed.

And writers, as you develop, your responsibility will be to protect, preserve, and to nurture the soul of the Caribbean people.

So friends, tonight, we will not mourn for Icarus. Nor indeed for Daedalus. That is not what Dev Cropper would have wanted.

Tonight we celebrate: the memory of Devanand, yes. But much more than that.

We celebrate with John and Angela and with their families, their own renewal, personal and collective, through this act of giving.

We celebrate the renewal of the wellspring of creative writing in the Caribbean.

We celebrate the potential of personal and private initiative, here in the newly opened building of Caribbean Contemporary Arts, itself the result of a personal and private initiative; itself a work in progress.

We celebrate the possibilities of independent thought and Caribbean civilization.

We celebrate the launch of the Cropper Foundation; or even the Cropper Initiative.

I leave you with the timeless words of Derek Walcott:

*..out of what is lost grows something stronger
That has the rational radiance of stone
enduring moonlight, further than despair,
strong as the wind, that though dividing cares
brings those we love before us, as they were,
with faults and all, not nobler, just there*

On behalf of all of us, thank you, John, and thank you Angela.