The Robert E. Gard Reader

To Change the Face of America

From writings by Robert E. Gard

Preface by Marc Lefebvre

Foreword by LaMoine MacLaughlin


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As I am writing this, it is the 100th anniversary of my father’s birth, my spiritual father’s birth. Robert E. Gard—the man who taught me what matters most. I am sure that he celebrated both his birthday and Independence Day sitting with his own father on the front porch of their farmhouse in Iola, Kansas—the fields defining heaven as they listened to the wind in the corn. Bob knew, as he would often say, that “Where tillage begins, art follows.”

I was 21 when we met. I was a student looking for summer work. I found him standing in a long box car of an office in historic Ag Hall on the University of Wisconsin campus. He looked like Abraham Lincoln. The job that I was seeking had already been filled, but he asked me to sit and tell him something of my story. Yes, I grew up in the oldest town in Wisconsin, De Pere. The parish of my boyhood was founded by the Jesuits in 1671. I loved to wander through the village listening to people’s stories. I guess Bob saw in me a younger, kindred spirit. He hired me, then and there, to be his assistant and we began what would be more than twenty years of adventures. Roles would change, but our work remained the same.

Bob Gard could find the intimate space in anyone’s heart. We traveled the back roads of Wisconsin doing research for the many books we worked on together. We also taught workshops—how to make art from the experiences of day-to-day living. Bob taught me about indigenous art, grassroots art. He awakened more hearts than anyone I know. I remember vividly a winter night in a small town, a gathering of folks in a church basement—a woman had been waiting a lifetime to be encouraged to tell her story. She did so simply, plainly, powerfully. The walls disappeared.

Write, draw, paint, act, sing, dance—change the face of America! Tell a story—your story.

Before you is Robert E. Gard in his own words. Oh, the experience you
will have! He was our 20th Century Whitman. He knew what matters most in life—the commonplace given meaning in its telling. Bob had his voice as you have yours. His legacy is rooted in you giving voice to yours.

Mark Lefebvre
Madison, Wisconsin
July 2010
Growing up in Wisconsin during the 1950s, I remember (what still remains in my memory as a kind of mantra) that every other program on Wisconsin Public Radio during that time seemed to conclude with the words, “this has been a production of the Wisconsin Idea Theater, Robert E. Gard, Director.” This concluding statement always completed an enchanting program about Wisconsin’s history, stories which completely enthralled my imagination.

Wisconsin has a long history of arts development at the local level. At the very beginning of the Twentieth Century, Progressive Party Governor Robert LaFollette and University of Wisconsin President Charles Van Hise developed “The Wisconsin Idea” which carried forward the concept, revolutionary at that time, that all of the elements of state government, including the University of Wisconsin, belong to all of the residents of the state. The implication was that, rather than requiring all residents to avail themselves of services centered in the State Capitol in Madison, it was the responsibility of state government and the University to go out into the state to those places where people lived. And this concept was practiced in reality. Thomas Dickinson started community theaters in Madison and Milwaukee. Franz Rickaby and Helene Stratmann. Thomas traveled to rural corners of the state gathering Wisconsin folk-music. John Steuart Curry, the first artist-in-residence of any major university, helped rural residents develop their drawing and painting talents as part of the Wisconsin Rural Artists Program. Then, from the 1940s to the 1980s, Robert E. Gard and his staff traveled to every corner of Wisconsin teaching theater and writing as part of various programs, including the Wisconsin Idea Theater, developing community theaters throughout Wisconsin, and the Wisconsin Rural (now Regional) Writers Association. I had the opportunity to meet Gard in 1992 shortly before he died. He visited us during an organizational meeting of a statewide arts service organization which eventually developed into Arts Wisconsin.
was a quiet, unassuming man, but an inspiration to all of us. To be quite honest, when we developed the Northern Lakes Center for the Arts, our arts center in Amery, Wisconsin, we did not do so to intentionally follow in the footsteps of those who had gone before us, but we had grown up with Wisconsin Public Radio and the Wisconsin Idea Theater and all of that was part of an inbred culture directed at developing the creative talents and the artistic imagination of local residents. When we started working, the commitment to growing the abilities of local people seemed only appropriate and logical.

It was only after his death that I began reading everything I could get my hands on by Robert E. Gard. I found Grassroots Theater and Prairie Visions especially inspirational. Although strictly not autobiography, they are certainly autobiographical. The books describe Gard’s growth as a community arts developer: his educational years in Kansas, his early work in New York and Alberta, and his culminating achievement in Wisconsin. Early in Prairie Visions Gard tells the story of Mrs. Settles and her windmill. Mrs. Settles, a large Kansas farmer, had hired Gard to work for her during his summer away from the University. Her husband had built a large windmill which fascinated Gard. “If God was going to destroy Mrs. Settles, he would probably take the windmill first; it was what she really believed in, that windmill/temple her husband had made to have something to set against the wind and small-thinking folks.” The image of the windmill becomes a symbol in Gard’s writing. In Wisconsin Sketches Gard indicates, “For me windmills are life. The silent blades turn on in memory against the wind: an entire rotation of man and of earth.”

Gard saw a need for images and symbols to help us push on forward in the work we all do. At the end of Grassroots Theater, Gard says, “It seems to me that a part of the problem facing community arts development is the lack of community symbols of art. I do not mean that we want more museums—places of defunct art—but rather that we need community arts centers in the small communities as well as in the larger cities where art may be witnessed and participated in. Community symbols are important, but so is leadership. Ways must be found to train more leaders, more voices.” Perhaps those future leaders will fuel local community arts centers which will function as the artistic and cultural windmills of our time.

“A windmill on a far farm hill
Will turn and turn against the force
That nature provides
In place of electricity
To those who have vision
To erect a windmill on a hill,
And take advantage of the way the wind comes
Across the valley, lifting up the slope,
To strike the blades in air...” (Wisconsin Sketches)

LaMoine MacLaughlin
Amery, Wisconsin
July 2010