

## Through the Crucible of L'Arche into Life

by  
Tom Webb



As I discerned the possibilities of coming to L'Arche as an assistant over a year ago, I did so mindful of the temptation to romanticize life among people living with developmental disabilities. Life among persons living with disabilities - despite various welcome correctives in the past fifty years at least in western societies - remains life with other human beings, brothers and sisters all. At L'Arche I have discovered a wide, wide range of challenges mixed with shards of hope and light.

Living in community with people with developmental disabilities requires changes of many sorts. The swift-paced world of the American work-day world is foreign to L'Arche. Agendas known and unknown quickly become subjected to the scrutiny of a world where the smallest among us dictates how fast I moved or how quickly we could travel from point A to point B. Slowness not speed is what make the moment count.

The world of 21st century communication with all its variants, speeds and efficiencies are turned upside down when I encounter those whose speech is impaired by disability. Words spoken quickly, e-mailed, texted, tweeted and so forth are of little value when living with those who cannot speak and who must find other means of communicating whether by broken-language, gesture, subtleties of body language or picture. Learning to listen, observe and speak in new ways is imperative if one is truly to be understood.

My own greater alienation from popular American culture with its value for spectacle, the tawdry, superficial and simplistic has also been challenged. How to respond to core members drawn into the miasma and emptiness of popular imagery, stereotypes of manhood and womanhood? Yet, at times I found to my great surprise the genuine excitement and joy among core members when together we witnessed something real like the miraculous rescue of the thirty-three Chilean miners that took place during summer 2010!

Daily hugs, warm embraces, simple gestures and quiet expressions of care and concern genuinely communicate a type of affection that may in the end be of greater consolation than even the best of romantic or marital relationships.

Despite the many, many advances in knowledge, understanding and societal attitudes towards people living with disabilities has not necessarily meant former attitudes have disappeared. So the quandary of how to respond to a core member who is quite articulate and advanced in many ways when a scheduled interview to discuss some sort of opportunity for employment dissipates like smoke because the person with whom we were to meet was too busy, confounded or frankly disinterested in talking with someone whom he believed could be of little value to him or his organization? Here confirming

the contributions he makes as an elementary school volunteer tutoring young children in the difficult task of reading and the patience demanded by such an endeavor ease the pain of rejection.

The innate human desire for love and to be loved also becomes an arena of confusion, doubt and sadness. When all around them core members witness romance, passion and married love, how does one affirm their uniqueness and value when the ultimate end of conjugal love is really not an option? Daily hugs, warm embraces, simple gestures and quiet expressions of care and concern genuinely communicate a type of affection that may in the end be of greater consolation than even the best of romantic or marital relationships.

In an environment where weariness, emotional intensity and confusion are omnipresent crashing through the order of the day creating misunderstanding, hurt feelings and dejection, reconciliation is central to L'Arche. Forgiving seventy times seven becomes very concrete when one takes it upon his or herself to apologize for words spoken harshly in moments of anger and frustration or to listen to a fellow assistant or core member who has been hurt by harsh language are essential for the comparative peacefulness of day-to-day living

While L'Arche is welcoming to persons of all spiritual persuasions or in fact none, its origins are rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Communicating the subtleties of the gospel requires adjustment. Exhortations must take a different form when ordinary means of communicating do not suffice. Thus, the darkness of a room to convey experiences of blindness, anguish, confusion, ignorance and despair may become a far more powerful means of expression than even the best crafted sermons or reflections. And the beauty of light as manifested in room full of hand-held candles quietly lit one-by-one communicate hope in ways far more profound than the best of spoken reflections.

Forgiving seventy  
times seven... are  
essential for the  
comparative  
peacefulness of  
day-to-day living.

L'Arche, as its founder Jean Vanier and the experiences of many assistants past and present can attest, offers a different kind of life. Despite the daily challenges and disappointments the possibility for renewal and new life bears gently upon the horizons of each moment. True, they must be sought and sometimes in very difficult situations for this is not the work of the timid, faint of heart or well-intentioned do-gooder. Yet in seeking them the challenges of the cross borne by people living with developmental disabilities and accompanied by assistants of all ages, genders, ethnicities, socio-economic backgrounds and nationalities gives way to a simple sort of resurrection life, joy and hope.