

# REFLECTING ON PRACTICE IN L'ARCHE

## *Encountering the Grieving Other*

CATHERINE ANDERSON

**J**EAN VANIER was the son of the 19th Governor General of Canada, Georges Philias Vanier and was endearingly known as 'Jock' at a young age and as a Dartmouth-trained naval officer. Jean left the navy and his life journey held many personal formative experiences. In 1962 Jean defended his Doctoral thesis, 'Happiness as Principle and End of Aristotelian Ethics.' He was unanimously pronounced Doctor of Philosophy '*maxima cum laude*.'

In Kathryn Spink's second biography of Jean it is noted in the text that at important times in his life journey a resounding 'echo' in Jean's being was his yearning, 'To follow Jesus.'

Jean is recorded as saying he had heard the 'primal cry of people with disabilities.' Jean understood this cry from persons as a need for friendship. On the 5 August 1964 Jean responded to this cry of persons with an intellectual disability. Jean welcomed three persons, Raphael, Philippe and Dany into a small house in a village to the north of Paris.

Unbeknown to Jean this would be the first of more than 140 L'Arche communities scattered across the continents. While Jean essentially founded L'Arche it is vital to note how he credits his 'Spiritual Father,' Père Thomas Philippe, as the person whom he was 'moulded by.'

What is L'Arche today? As in the first home or *foyer* L'Arche is about living with each other and together creating home. It is doing the very ordinary tasks together, preparing meals, washing clothes, sharing celebrations, and praying together at the end of the day around a lighted candle.

Assistants come to a L'Arche community to support persons with an intellectual disability. Persons with an intellectual disability are at the heart of a L'Arche community and are named

the core members of the community.

Each community has a unique history and story. A community may be of one particular faith *eg.* of the Anglican faith, or it may be an ecumenical community or an inter-faith community.

Membership of a L'Arche community is confirmed by the Community Council. Persons who are members come from many different 'walks' of life and may be a core member, an assistant, spiritual member (person living in another state but wishing to pray for the community), long term member together with other forms of membership. Often persons who want to get to know the community come to one of the homes for dinner and build friendships. It is the continual nurturing of relationships that 'grows' persons in membership.

Again I draw from Kathryn Spink who notes '...those whose bodies were broken, minds were disabled and hearts were open had the gift of revelation and the capacity to lead others into the communion that is the life of God.'

Again and again persons as members of a L'Arche community are witness to Spink's words. As the relationship with the other is deepened one is sometimes part of an encounter where the person with an intellectual disability can reveal a deep inner reality of one's heart. We are reminded by Jean, that this is the 'Role of the suffering poor person.'

In the following encounter two women meet through an intentional faith community (L'Arche) and as we shall see the heart of this encounter in this instance is a place of blessing.

### *The Reflection*

The encounter to be presented has been recorded in the text, *Walking on a Rolling Deck: Life on the Ark*. This text describes life in a L'Arche com-

munity through the eyes of Kathleen Berken. It is a wonderful selection of narratives introducing the reader to different aspects of Berken's encounters with members of the L'Arche community who have an intellectual disability (core members).

The narrative I have selected is an encounter between two women and is set in L'Arche Clinton, Iowa. The two women concerned are Marilyn and Kathleen.

Kathleen, a journalist, came to live in L'Arche as an assistant, an assistant being a person who supports a person who has a disability. Kathleen understood when coming to L'Arche she would, '...live entirely for God with all these people who obviously needed her.'<sup>1</sup>

Kathleen continues, reflecting on how she was blessed to have persons with a disability given to her as gift at this time in her life. She remembers a Sunday Mass the community were invited to. At the moment of consecration Kathleen reflects, 'I felt grateful and blessed that God gave them (the core members) to me in this way, as broken bodies'.

These memories recorded by Kathleen help to illustrate how Kathleen quite unknowingly carried a certain degree of a collective societal understanding of persons with an intellectual disability.

However, 'life dished out' a new reality for Kathleen. Exactly one year later Kathleen was again attending Mass. Two weeks prior she had undergone surgery for breast cancer. Kathleen remembers she was 'still bandaged up and had drainage tubes and bottles hanging from her (my) side.' A year later she heard the words of consecration differently.

Kathleen was living a totally different reality. Her body was 'broken' and 'blood was being poured out' not for herself 'but for them.'

'They would be caring for me for a while now, and the line was blurred between who was broken and why. We were broken for each other. This was community this was the gift of L'Arche.'

Kathleen refers to her grief, during the first six months of her cancer treatment. 'I could go from hysterical laughter to hellish despair in five seconds' and 'from raging anger to angelic peace



*Catherine Anderson is a Masters of Philosophy student at the Canberra campus of the Australian Catholic University and is a member of L'Arche Genesaret in Canberra.*

in two.'

We turn now to the other woman in this encounter. Marilyn is a core member (person with an intellectual disability) of L'Arche Iowa and had recently been welcomed to one of the L'Arche Iowa homes. A year prior to this Marilyn's mother had undergone chemotherapy and had lost her hair to this therapy. Marilyn's mother had since died.

Kathleen was assisting Marilyn with her bath attending to Marilyn's particular need at this time.

During the winter months because of her chemotherapy treatment Kathleen generally wore a hat. However, at this particular time it was very steamy in the bathroom when Kathleen was assisting Marilyn to take her bath.

Spontaneously Kathleen removed her hat and tossed it to the corner of the room.

At that same moment Marilyn from the bath looked up at Kathleen and, 'very gently reached up with her wet, soapy hand and patted Kathleen's bald head and smiled.'

Perhaps Kathleen's bared head reminded Marilyn of her mother when she was undergoing chemotherapy. In any case Marilyn reached out; with an innate authority, when she seems to dimly reflect an aspect of the kenotic character of the crucified Christ who offered self for humanity from the 'centre of (her) self' devoid of ego.

This encounter is unique for Kathleen. Kathleen writes, 'It was the first time in my life I had ever been anointed with soap and water.'

Kathleen was still grieving, 'A bald woman, forty pounds overweight with one breast, a red face, and mottled chemo skin.....' She was plunged into the reality of her human life at this time. The moment seems to be suspended in time

as Marilyn smiled, offering an apparent deep reassurance and peace, revealing to Kathleen her uniqueness in spite of her grief.

Kathleen recorded in the text, 'I did not want to wipe it (the anointing) off'.

It is important to now reflect on the shift in Kathleen's initial attitude when she came to L'Arche in comparison to her present situation. Kathleen had believed she was to be available for all these people who obviously needed her. This belief seems like it was Kathleen who would be delivering care to the many persons who needed this. This belief did not allow for the other to contribute to the encounter as has been evidenced in the encounter cited. The line now becomes blurred; two women meet through their brokenness. Through this and other recorded encounters in the text we note a shift from Kathleen's initial attitude when coming to L'Arche. Kathleen has experienced a major trauma in her life, her body has changed forever, and it would seem her heart has changed. She meets Marilyn differently.

At the point of the 'anointing' is a moment of silence realising a place of deep connectedness. Both women's bodies are broken and it is at this place of brokenness the 'heart' of the encounter occurs. This scenario reveals a face of L'Arche when we consider, L'Arche is not about delivering a package of care but allowing the other to participate in the encounter. In this way there is room for each other and the possibility of mutual relationships. The gift of the encounter was that both women were broken for each other. In this way they met.

Berken has presented a 'living text(s)' that is a 'witness to (the) encounter(s)'. In this the writer has graced the reader with a doorway into the often unfamiliar territory of the human journey.

This is supported by Spink in her second biography of Jean Vanier. Spink in reference to Vanier notes, 'Those whose bodies were broken, minds were disabled and hearts were open had the gift of revelation'. Berken has captured well, and is witness to these words, that have become incarnate in this encounter. Further to this Berken has introduced the reader to a specific aspect of

the practice of L'Arche. Kathleen received this gift of revelation offered by Marilyn through this encounter.

Marilyn offers further insight. In a gospel narrative of long ago Jesus the Master storyteller like Kathleen was anointed (Jn 12:3-4) at the point of suffering. Rather than costly perfume, Kathleen was anointed with soap and water, the 'stuff' of our daily lives. Jesus the carrier of the 'mess' of our story broke through this moment.

Both women held in their body a deep suffering and grief. However, it was Marilyn who was instrumental in blessing a certain place in Kathleen. Jesus the anointed one honoured this encounter dancing Kathleen to a place of surprise beyond grief. The most naked and vulnerable part of Kathleen's self, was held as sacred and she was danced home to a place of deep contentment. Kathleen was adamant the anointing was permanent (she never wanted to wipe it off).

When Mary anointed Jesus the room held the perfume. In this encounter it was the very ordinariness of daily life that was the 'bread' of the encounter. This bread was blessed and broken offering a sweet perfume to the God of surprises.

#### NOTE

1 Pamela Cushing in her dissertation, *Shaping the Moral Imagination of Caregivers: Disability, Difference and Inequality in L'Arche* refers to Kathleen's initial attitude. Cushing who researched L'Arche in Canada notes how persons without a disability coming to L'Arche 'carry with them some degree of the socially pervasive perceptions about the weaknesses of people with intellectual disabilities.'

#### REFERENCES

- Graham Elaine, Heather W. and Frances Ward., *Theological Reflection: Sources* (London: SCM Press, 2007) 52.
- Spink Kathryn, *The Miracle The Message The Story: Jean Vanier and L'Arche* (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 2006) 4.
- Berken Kathleen C., *Walking on a Rolling Deck: Life on the Ark* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2008) 71-72.
- Richard Lucien O.M.I. *Christ the Self-Emptying of God* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997) 172.