

ARTFULLY DONE: Two weekends of brokenness and beauty

by Bob Kloos

My summer was blessed with two weekend retreats, both with a very remarkable clientele. Most of Beacon Street's one hundred contracted programs last year were in church basements and school auditoriums with grade school or junior high students sitting in the chairs. My June and July blessings were in retreat houses, both by lakes. "Faith and Sharing" and "Faith and Light" are two names for essentially the same retreat experience: days set aside for persons with disabilities, their caregivers, and other supportive members of the community.

Jean Vanier founded L'Arche in 1964 when he invited two adults with mental disabilities to live with him in a small home in France. Four years later he "preached" his first "Faith and Sharing" retreat near Toronto, Ontario. It was originally planned as a retreat for clergy, but Jean asked that it be opened to all so diversity would reign. There was no turning back after that initial experience. Fr. Jim O'Donnell from the Diocese of Cleveland was in attendance and "Faith and Sharing" has been an annual experience here ever since.

In 1971, Jean Vanier co-founded the "Faith and Light" movement with Marie-Hélène Mathieu as a support for people and family around the world as they cared for persons with disabilities. Both retreats were attended by about eighty people, about a third of whom were persons with disabilities. The others (care-givers, L'Arche assistants, family and friends) joined in for respite, reflection, and general repairs for the weary soul."

The "Faith and Sharing" retreat took place at the Saint Joseph Christian Life Center, due to close next month. I have been part of the planning team for this annual experience for the past several years, each one a rewarding experience for all involved. Joy is in the air whether at meals, during a conference, or simply when everyone is moving from one scheduled event to the next. The "Faith and Light" experience took place in Akron at the Jesuit retreat house, Loyola of the Lakes. Many of the participants at this experience meet monthly in mutual support and to celebrate the little miracles of life, and the big ones, too.

If it were not for L'Arche and the saintly personality of Jean Vanier, there would have been no retreats. One hundred and thirty-three L'Arche communities dot the globe in thirty countries. There are four homes that make up L'Arche Cleveland. The disabled are called "core" members because they are the reason for L'Arche. Jean sought to provide a loving alternative, a community of brokenness and beauty, to the large institutions where previously these "whole" people had lived. The move was transformative, not just for the disabled, but for those who lived with them and cared for them as well.

A newcomer to one of these retreat experiences would no doubt hear shouts of joy and spontaneous laughter echoing down what are typically quiet hallways. Because the days are planned around the needs of persons with disabilities, they "come as they are" and they set the tone. Don't look to them for stage whispers or waiting for appropriate times to speak up. When the Spirit moves them, they speak! They sing out! And you don't have to ask them twice if they want to dance. Even those confined to wheelchairs put the rest of us to shame when it comes to dancing.

During the "Faith and Sharing" weekend in June, I helped coordinate morning and evening prayer. One of my cohorts shared a powerful chapter from Edwina Gateley's book Soul Sisters: Women in Scripture Speak to Women Today. (I strongly recommend the book.) Edwina offered a reflection on Luke 13,11-13, the story of the infirm woman. She spoke of infirmity and the unsightliness of it. As a result, Edwina suggested that the woman probably had to shuffle along "like a crab," out of sight of those of us who are "pre-occupied with the business of the healthy." She even referred to the woman who probably had to deal with the spurn and rejection of others as "doubly-disabled."

To bring a little levity to this otherwise overwhelming reading, I fabricated a crab costume out of a cardboard box and two shoe boxes, all painted bright orange. The crab "claws" opened and shut as I sprang to life and moved among the

retreatants. I thought the holes I had drilled would enable me to make my way safely down the aisles until I found myself in the lap of Carol Oden strapped securely in her custom wheelchair. I have known Carol for more than thirty years. I have never heard her use words, but she and her family speak volumes, never missing a retreat, always wide-eyed and glad to see me. She loved it, and you can hardly see the scar on her forehead anymore.

A significant part of the “Faith and Light” experience was the session with the caregivers. While volunteers craftily engaged the retreatants with special needs, I had an hour with parents and other family members. They needed time with their peers. They needed to be heard without being judged, supported without being pitied, encouraged to continue to do what they can and to expect no more of themselves. Because they walked with their sons and daughters and siblings every day, they too knew what it felt like to be a crab.

But while they were more accustomed to sacrifice, more familiar with the stares of others, more isolated than I would ever care to be, they spoke mostly of how blessed they were to witness firsthand the wonder of God in their child, their brother, their sister. Their sons, daughters, and siblings were absolute gifts from God. They declared that outright. And there were loads of tears.

“I guess you had to be there” are words that come to mind right now. But there may be an opportunity for all you readers to get an idea of what has become a highlight in my summer. A few weeks back, I was listening to WKSU FM at 7am on a Sunday morning. The scheduled program “Speaking of Faith” was all about L'Arche. I nearly spilled my coffee when I heard Jean Vanier's voice. The hour flew by, but not before I heard recorded voices from L'Arche gatherings in France, and a small L'Arche community in Clinton, Iowa.

Their regional coordinator was talking about language and how various words have been used over the years to identify those with special needs. “When we see the word 'retard' in musical notation,” she said, “we know the composer wants us to hear a richness in the melody” so there is a slackening in the tempo. “I think that's how it is with many of our core members.”

The most telling part of the program was

when some of the live-in assistants spoke of how clearly they saw themselves reflected in their day-to-day living with the core members. They saw the good and the bad. When daily life is all about cooking and cleaning and celebrating the little things, there are no places to hide. You get to know yourself very well.

Henri Nouwen (pronounced Now-wen), still regarded as one of the leading spiritual writers of the 20th century, spent the last twelve years of his life living in a L'Arche community in Toronto, Canada, called L'Arche Daybreak. One of the books he wrote while he lived there, Adam: God's Beloved, was about a man with profound learning disabilities. In spite of his handicaps, Henri called Adam a “gentle teacher,” “fully human because he [was] all heart.”

I'm going to conclude with a short paragraph from Nouwen's book that was read on the radio program. It certainly demonstrates how Adam captured the soul of a holy man, but it also offers a poetic glimpse into wonder and grace of my two summer retreats.

“Because of Adam there is always someone home. Because of Adam there is a quiet rhythm in the house. Because of Adam there are always moments of silence. Because of Adam there are words of affection and tenderness. Because of Adam there is patience and endurance. Because of Adam there are smiles and tears visible to all. Because of Adam there is always time and space for forgiveness and healing. Yes, because of Adam there is peace among us.”

*“From compulsion to compassion,
from compassion to wonderment.”*

Mother Theresa



To hear the radio program for yourself, you can hear it on RealPlayer or download it from: [<http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/larche/index.shtml>] Speaking of Faith, August 2. “L'Arche: A community of brokenness and beauty”