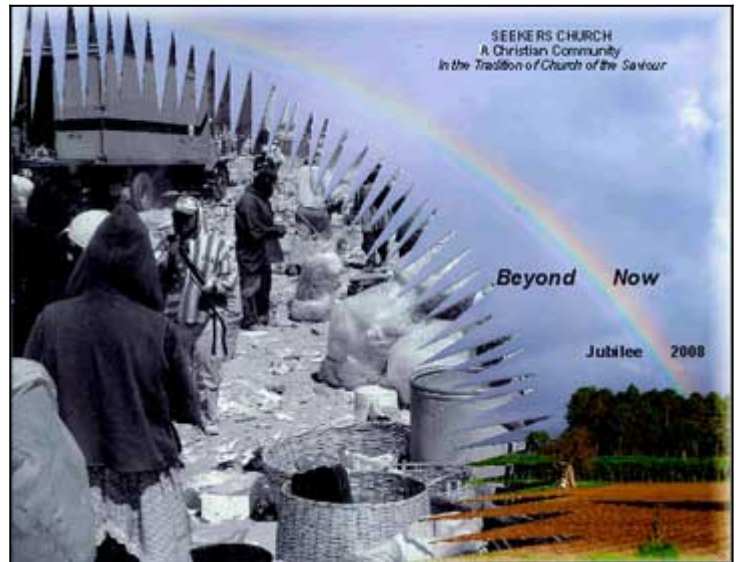


"L'Arche" by Emmy Lu Daly

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October 26, 2008



"Holy Spirit, make my eyes to see..."

This is a favorite song in the L'Arche Community and it is sung at the opening of prayer night every other Tuesday evening. Many people who are not directly involved in L'Arche join us because it is always inspiring. Seekers Church has been a generous support of L'Arche for many years and I want to thank the community for that faithful support.

I preached a sermon on L'Arche in January 2004 and I titled it The Gift of Brokenness. The theme was about how I came to be part of L'Arche, my 7½ years working as an assistant and head of house in one of the homes in D.C., and what a life changing experience that was for me. I retired in 2003. I'm only tangentially involved now, but it continues to be a part of who I am, particularly since my son Fritz now lives in the Arlington L'Arche home. I'll go back to that story.

First, a little history about this amazing worldwide organization that truly is a Sign of Hope in the world, not only for the mentally challenged people who are at the heart of L'Arche but also all those who share their lives with them and, indeed, those who are inspired by the palpable love in the homes. L'Arche was founded in 1964 in France when Jean Vanier, together with a priest, Père Tomas, in answer to a call of God, became aware of the plight of developmentally challenged people housed in large institutions. They invited two men from a nearby institution to come and share their lives with them in their home. They named the home L'Arche which is French for "the ark." Vanier then envisioned places where mentally challenged people would live in homes where they would be valued as God's beloved, where they would be respected, encouraged, cared for and loved. And Vanier's life and writings sparked an international movement that has grown to become the International Federation of L'Arche Communities, a worldwide interfaith organization of more than 120 independent communities on six continents, including more than 14 in the United States. In a divided world, L'Arche seeks to be a sign of hope. Its communities are founded on covenant relationships between people of differing intellectual capacities, social origins, sexual orientations, religions and cultures, and seek to be a sign of unity, faithfulness and reconciliation. Enough of history.

So, now to the story in my earlier sermon, which actually was based on an article I wrote for Faith at Work in the fall of 2003. I re-titled that article, from "The Gift of Brokenness" to "The Gift of Belovedness" because by living in L'Arche and sharing my life with Gene, Mo, Melanie and Glen as well as the assistants who accompanied them (all much younger than I at age 72), I was able to see and accept my own brokenness. With mentally challenged people, there's no place for pretensions, no masks and I had plenty of each. But I was welcomed, and more than that, I was loved, in many different ways. This is not to say there are never any conflicts, no sorrows, no

sufferings – many of the core members had some physical challenges as well. And the core members, who thrived on the energy and enthusiasm and creativity of the younger assistants, all too frequently had and have to deal with these young people moving on. But new people come and they are welcomed and soon become beloved as well.

But let me go back and talk about my son, Fritz, whom many of you know. Fritz, who is 47 now, has Down's Syndrome. In 1982, Fritz was living in southern Virginia with foster parents and their younger son who also had Down's. He had been with them for nearly 8 years. I was living in a group home with 6 other members of the Potter's House Church in D.C.. I would visit Fritz about once a month and I could see that tensions were building in that family and Fritz was becoming withdrawn and quiet. One day in February, I got a call from the wife of the family and was told that Fritz had to leave. It seems that Fritz did not come when called and when she went after him, he hit her. It was the only time Fritz ever lost control but there was no forgiveness. Suddenly, I had to get him and bring him to D.C.. He was welcomed in Fools Gold (the name of our home) but it was not good for him to be alone in the house all day while we all worked. He was confused and missing his home. I had heard of L'Arche and the plans for opening a home in D.C. but I couldn't wait so I went to Northern Virginia where he was officially a resident and, in an amazingly short time, he was in a group home and in special classes at Yorktown High School. The quality of his life in the group homes varied a great deal, with shortages and quality of staff. And because Fritz was and is easy going, he often was by-passed when more difficult "clients" (yes, that's what they are called in Virginia) needed attention. I worried a lot, felt guilty that I wasn't doing enough for him. The L'Arche home opened in 1983. Too late.

Then, in 1995, L'Arche came into my life again. I was living in a room in a friend's house in Arlington. It was not an

ideal situation. I had little money, my insurance job was down to 3 days a week, I had left the Potter's House Church. I was no longer involved in Potter's House Players where I had been so creative. I was living in quiet desperation. My friend, Dottie Bockstiegel who works at L'Arche, said there was an opening for an assistant at one of the houses in D.C. and urged me to apply. I was offered room and board and a small stipend and I accepted it. No high spiritual call to serve here; a place for room and board and a small stipend.

Little did I know. I thought I could maintain my independence and my mask of "having it all together." These folks, who are called the "core members" of the community, wouldn't see my brokenness, would they? Oh, how I resisted intimacy of daily life with 7 other people – any letting down and revealing my own brokenness wasn't part of the job. So I thought. To quote Dick Wesley: "What keeps me from being open enough to learn the lessons of community? It is the unwillingness to appear flawed and broken in the eyes of others. We are present only in the ways that allow no one into our real self, and we remain content to present to the world only a public persona, a mask that hides the contradictions and brokenness we experience in our centers. We think we're the only ones who experience such things."

As I began to see the inner beauty in these "broken people," how open they are and willing to accept and trust others, especially those who share their lives and help them with their special needs, I began to understand that I didn't need my mask anymore. I discovered the freedom and enjoyment there is in sharing the simplest things, like making supper with Mo the accomplished salad chef, or going to [a local fast food place] (me? [a fast food place]?) for Friday night coffee or taking Gene's cat, Joseph, to the vet, or playing pool with Glen (he always won) or consoling Melanie who couldn't go to see her mother again. There is genuine love, compassion, celebration and consolation in every L'Arche community,

wherever you go. Truly a Sign of Hope for the world.

Fritz has been in the Arlington home since it opened 2 years ago – he is happy, healthy (he's lost 30 pounds). He is helpful around the house and he likes his housemates. He enjoys playing his electronic keyboard. He's been washing police cars and busses at the Arlington Yard for 12 years and he's well paid. He won a silver medal for track at the state Special Olympics in Richmond in May. He goes on frequent trips with the community and often with me. He loves going to Falls Church every Sunday and was confirmed there last spring.

Before closing, I just have to tell you about a recent event. Two weeks ago, the D.C./VA L'Arche celebrated its 25th anniversary. About 180 people, many from the other 5 communities in our eastern region, as well as former assistants and community leaders and our own folks, came to town for two days of celebration. One former assistant came all the way from Hawaii, another from Germany and she brought her 3-year-old son. It was a high old time, beginning with a picnic in Rock Creek Park. There was much re-unioning, hugging, singing, with hot dogs and music. Then the out-of-towners headed off to the Open Houses at the Adams Morgan homes. That evening there was a sumptuous banquet at the Blessed Sacrament Church in Chevy Chase with everybody dressed for the occasion. Again, much music, sharing of memories, speeches, awards. My friend Dottie got an award – she's been with L'Arche since the beginning 25 years ago. And then the tables were cleared, the d.j. started the music and the dancing erupted. My, the place was jumpin'.

On Sunday morning, Highland House in Arlington served breakfast and we all moved on to Marymount University for the closing worship service. The local folk enacted the parable of the great banquet while I narrated it. The whole community ended up on stage, waving scarves and carrying on enthusiastically. Deborah, one of the core members who knows practically every show tune written, joined me in singing,

"It's a Wonderful World." After the following reception, people piled into their vans and headed home. Isn't this a wonderful example of Jesus' instruction in today's gospel – "love your neighbor as yourself,"

So I am doubly blessed – my son is where I longed for him to be so many years ago – and from my own experience of L'Arche I have learned more about being beloved and loving than I ever thought possible.

Will you join me in one verse of a L'Arche favorite song, "This Little Light of Mine"? And these "little lights" surely do shine.