

by

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It is seven years since I left Worth and during that time I have lived in various forms of community: a year in France in a L'Arche community where people with severe learning disabilities and assistants live together sharing a common life; a year helping to run a home for "men of the road" in Kilburn, London; two years helping to run the Catholic Chaplaincy in Bristol University; a year with my family, and two and a half years at the Christian Meditation Centre in Kensington, London. The whole experience is something of a paradox because as a person I tend to love being on my own. At the moment I work as a gardener on an estate in Lancashire and, although I stay in contact with many people, I live what many would consider quite a solitary life. Maybe it is not such a paradox. However alone I might be, I never, or at least very rarely, suffer from loneliness. My experience of community life over the years has enabled me to understand that as a human person one is continually in relation, never an isolated individual - no man is an island, instead at the roots of our own solitude, there is communion with the whole world. In this way I have come to understand Community as a preparation for finding our own unique self which is alone in that it is always unique.

L'Arche was founded by Jean Vanier as an attempt to bring people with severe learning disabilities out of institutional hospitals into home-like environments where they would live alongside assistants in a common life. Jean's vision was that assistants would be able to help these people and be helped by them to live a less competitive, more heart orientated life. People with learning disabilities are often able to appreciate friendship and affection in a way that we, under the pressure of a competitive society, may fail to do. My experience of living with people who are outside of mainstream culture has helped me to realize my own conditioning. The homeless, and those ill-adapted to the world for whatever reason, can gradually become for us sacraments of our own vulnerability and fragility. Our relation to them can open the door to parts of us that we usually keep suppressed in a success-orientated culture. In our education system we often praise self-sufficiency but it often becomes a block to recognizing the deep need and longing for communion within each of us. Our very

conception of ourselves is challenged when we are open to a relationship with the poor and dependent. This is at the heart of the vision of L'Arche - we come to realize that, despite all our education, at some level of the psyche we are in the same boat as the poor. My discovery at L'Arche was that I was not such a together person as my A levels, my BA and MA made me think I was. I learnt I was needy, vulnerable, broken, and in a way helpless, certainly not self-sufficient. This was the hardest bump to the ego.

The ego generally gets bumped in community life of whatever form. This is why marriages break down and students sharing flats often find it so difficult. The great and difficult realization is that people are different from me, and see things in different ways, and act differently and this, for the ego which claims that it is the centre of the world, is very annoying. Everyone else must be wrong, I must be in the right, it says. The challenge of any form of community is that the world doesn't just swing around me but other personalities are real as well, and I learn gradually, with difficulty, to love another person. That means learning to feel them as real, learning to see through their eyes, learning to be centred for a while not in myself but in them, and therefore recognizing the relativity of my personality. When we come close to people with different backgrounds, temperaments and outlooks we gradually realize the non-universality of our own outlook and the conditionings that go into making much of our self-identity.

My particular interest in meditation over the years has developed as a response to this. In meditation we learn to sit still, become present to ourselves physically, our sensations of well being or discomfort. Then we become present to our minds, the flux of our own personal thoughts and feelings, and by the repetition of a sacred phrase or a mantra we detach from our little self of private thought and feeling and open to the "other". That "other" can be understood as God or, as I tend to understand it, as Christ, who is the common ground of all being, "through whom all things were created" This experience lived out practically, simply, day by day, leads to a growing ability to resonate with people not at the level of personality, where we are all different, but in our common humanity. This may sound like theology but the lived experience in community is that people of varied personalities are one at the deepest level of being. Our "oneness" as human beings, realized at an existential level, makes us capable of compassion and resonance with the very varied forms of human experience we encounter in others. Although we have not individually lived through much of the world's pain and its joy we are, as St Paul says, "able to cry with those who

cry and laugh with those who laugh and be all things to all people". We become, in other words, capable of community.

Real community, in my experience, should lead to a gradual awakening to a deeper self than the ego. By the ego I mean the 'me' who is identified with purely personal thoughts and feelings. Any real living together with people makes us soon realize that at the level of ego we can never be one, we are always separate and distinct and normally in competition. The ego always compares itself with other people so it can say, "At least I am not like him!" or "If only I had what she has got" (That is why it so easily gets annoyed with other people). The deep self couldn't care less. It is not measured by exam results and other peoples opinions about who we are. It is secure and free in its own essential and unique being. In this way it is continually "in solitude" because free from comparison. But the paradox is that at this level we are not alone. The deeper we go into the mystery of the 'me' that awakens in us, the more we naturally relate to others also at that level, at the deepest and most unique level of their being. Our own self and that of our neighbour no longer remain mutually exclusive entities. As we learn to love ourselves we learn to love our neighbour and as we learn to love another we are learning to love ourselves. I feel more and more that when Jesus said "Love your neighbour as yourself", he was not issuing a commandment but stating a fact - this, he says, is how it works.

That is why the early Christian monks regarded the greatest sin as that of judging another person for that involves putting the mystery of existence under the measure of our own personal opinions. The more we judge other people the more we are trapped in the ego as the centre of the world, the more we are in conflict with other people. Another clear fact that emerges from community life is that "the judgments you give are the judgments you get, and the standard you use will be the standard used for you". Other people don't like being criticized and if you spend your life moaning about other people they will moan about you. A person's behaviour might need reproof but they must still feel that their being is held in reverence. Actions are in the realm of outward persona and can be judged good or bad but the person him or herself must be unconditionally loved. I have found that community must be based on an acceptance of the goodness of myself and of others, that, despite everything, each one of us is precious. The end is love, love of self and other, love of both as one, love that reveals between two people a common origin, a common ground in the experience of love itself.