

“The Invitation of L'Arche”

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Reading Luke 14:15-24

Song: The Wedding Banquet

Song: Lord of the Dance

When I was younger, I learned to dance.

To be more specific, when I was 6 years old I took up Highland dancing, and it was a big part of my life for a number of years. I took lessons in the sunroom of an old house tucked into the side of Pine Hill in Ottawa. I have many fond memories of dancing as the bagpipe music from an old turntable swirled throughout the room.

I learned the steps and techniques that had been passed on through the generations by my ancestors in Scotland, and then in Nova Scotia; The Sword Dance, The Highland Fling, The Seann Triubhas. Highland Dancing is a solo dance form and very much about learning patterns, mastering steps, perfecting finger positions, jumping higher and smiling just so.

Sooner than later, my teacher told me that I was ready to enter competitions. I can't remember if the combination of the words "dancing" and "competition" seemed odd to an 8-year-old me, but I quickly understood this too was part of the pattern for me to follow.

Over a hundred young dancers, all proudly wearing our family tartans, gathered in the high school gym, anxiously awaiting our turn to compete. There were about 20 of us in the 8-and-Under category, each of us with our competitor number pinned to our kilts. A panel of judges critiqued and scored our every step - and turn - and smile, and then, they handed out ribbons.

First place. Third place. First place again. "We are just so proud dear." "That was great Janet, I would like you to join the advanced class starting next week." These words felt good and I wanted more. More of this dance I was learning. And for much of my life I have followed the steps I learned as a young dancer. Strive, Compete. Succeed. Enjoy. Advance. Repeat. And it has worked pretty well for me. And I didn't wonder too much about it.

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Five years ago I began working at L'Arche and I learned about a very different kind of dance. It is inspired and led by people with intellectual disability and the assistants who share their lives and homes and accompany them on life's journey in L'Arche communities. This dance, has no prescribed steps, or competitions, or judging, or first place ribbons.

Let me tell you about 2 experiences I had at L'Arche which will help to explain what I learned.

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Shortly after I began my consulting work with L'Arche I attend a Federation meeting in Atlanta. There, hundreds of people from L'Arche communities around the world gathered. Almost a third of the attendees had intellectual disability, the others were assistants.

I was pretty apprehensive as I only really knew one other person who was attending, I had very little experience with people with intellectual disability. I wasn't sure how to relate to the assistants who had made a more generous life choice than I had considered. I was also a bit intimidated by the daily worship listed in the program.

So I took a plane, and a subway, and walked the last few blocks, wheeling my suitcase to the leafy college campus that was home to L'Arche for the week with a sense of trepidation mixed with a desire to learn. Surely these days would help me understand the needs and struggles of those with intellectual disability. I would learn more about how I could support the assistants who did so much for them.

And over those days I discovered a number of things:

- I found it surprisingly easy to meet and get to know and enjoy several of the men and women with intellectual disability. Their warm and unconditional welcome drew me in quickly.
- The assistants I met were grounded in a sense of mission that was beyond themselves and they didn't think they were anything special.
- I was impressed by how the communities of L'Arche listened to the voices of people with disability in decision making both before and during the meeting.
- There were indeed needs and struggles that were evident, but these took a backseat to celebration and joy. These people were having a lot of fun!
- The assistants weren't so much doing things FOR those with intellectual disability, they were doing things WITH them and being WITH them. This distinction in the spirit with which one chooses to help another had a profound impact on the nature of the relationships I was noticing.
- And the church services - yes there was one at a church of a different denomination each day, they were the most open, joy filled celebrations and reflections of life I have experienced in a place of worship. There was a trust that through God there was a path towards a greater truth. It was multi-faith and interdenominational and an open invitation to explore.
- Rather than just supporting people with intellectual disabilities there was something more happening. It was a radical acceptance and celebration which put the people with disabilities in the centre as teachers and leaders.

This week will count as one of the most meaningful and joy-filled experiences of my life.

I remember a particular moment on the afternoon of day four, celebrating and singing in the meeting hall along with hundreds of others. Wheelchairs and walkers were visible signs of the many

weaknesses and struggles shared by all of the people in that room. But that was not the focus. There was such joy and such certainty of our beautiful, shared, vulnerable, humanity that I found myself with tears streaming down my face as I watched this dance unfold before me and was drawn into participating. There were costumes and colours and music and streamers and people were actually dancing. The stage was crowded and everyone wanted to be up there, and everyone was welcome up there, and everyone was up there. What I had read about in the books about L'Arche was coming to life before my eyes. People were helping one another out and showing each other the way. The women and men with intellectual disabilities were leading the dance and were inviting everyone else to follow.

I reflected that if Jesus was to come back to this world and look around for his kingdom, he might just be pleased with the goings on in that room. It was as if I was an accidental guest at the great banquet that the poor had said yes to, and everyone else was too busy to attend, and I discovered a feast and celebration beyond my imagining.

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Some months later I witnessed another important aspect of L'Arche that had not been so visible in the large gathering in Atlanta. This time I was in a more intimate gathering listening to the story of Virginia and Tamaki who live in the L'Arche Lethbridge community tell the story of their friendship.

But first, a word about friendships...

At L'Arche, mutual friendships between people with disability and the assistants who share life with them are at the heart of community life. People with disability tend to have a strong desire for genuine, trust-based relationships and for love. They issue a very open and welcoming invitation to friendship and will meet you as you are and really couldn't care less what you have accomplished or what your challenges and vulnerabilities are.

Assistants, in turn, want to be WITH their friend with disability, and to be with, you need to meet as friends in an equal place, not with one taking care of the other, or with one being stronger than the other. Assistants see through the disability to know the person, their story, their beauty, their gifts, their potential for growth and to make a difference in this world.

I had read about these relationships, but being with Virginia and Tamaki as they described and were living out their friendship was a very powerful moment for me.

Virginia told her story of arriving in L'Arche after a life of moving from one placement to another without a sense of home. Tamaki shared her story of recent arrival from Japan with minimal English language skills trying to find her place as a new assistant. Both were hesitant and uncertain of how to relate. Someone suggested they take art classes. From this time spent together, learning alongside one another, and with both women developing a passion as an artist, a friendship based on trust and mutual growth was born. They learned from one another and were changed by one another. It wasn't Virginia's story supported by Tamaki any more than Tamaki's story supported by Virginia.

I know that sharing this story with you doesn't do it justice. You had to be there. However to really understand L'Arche is to understand these relationships, based on mutual vulnerability, that are lived by the thousands of people in communities around the world.

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I am moved by what I have seen and learned at L'Arche and I wonder what it means for my own life?

Like everyone here, I struggle to understand what it is to live well and live fully.

L'Arche challenges me to reflect on the patterns that I, naturally and unknowingly, have fallen into in my life. These are the patterns I was introduced to through the highland dancing of my youth. I often go about my life accomplishing, judging, admiring those who succeed, valuing my journey as an individual more than as part of a community and living through my strengths rather than my weakness.

What I have learned from L'Arche has changed my idea about how I want to dance. The highland dancing I learned when I was younger was a wonderful and important part of my life. The dance that I am learning about from L'Arche is something more profound. It feels closer to the heart of our reality as human beings. It is one that young children live quite naturally and one that is often valued with more clarity when people are nearing the end of their lives.

This dance calls me to be welcoming before judging, to value relationship before accomplishment, to appreciate people for their authenticity before their strength, to do things with others rather than doing things for others, to value community along with independence and to live more fully through embracing my own vulnerability and weakness.