

L'Arche

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Not long ago, I was invited to a weekend-long birthday party in the south of France that I'll be sorry to miss. My invitation reads, "Soon the community of the Moulin de l'Auro will celebrate its twentieth birthday!" Just holding the letter with its French postmark takes me back to the summer my life changed for good. When I worked at the Moulin de l'Auro in 1979, the community was brand new. After my stay there, I was brand new, as well.

In June of 1979, I was twenty-eight - single, a bit lost, and temporarily without work. Since I'd never taken a post-college tour through Europe, I decided to do so now: I would go to Europe and find myself. After Greece and Italy, however, I remained unfound. Then I stopped in the south of France to visit my old roommate, Lynn. Years before, when we were working together in Toronto, Lynn had gone to hear the Canadian visionary Jean Vanier speak about his life's mission, the founding of communities where people who are mentally and physically disabled, and people who are not, would live and work together. After listening to this eloquent and passionately spiritual man, Lynn had immediately volunteered to spend a year working at L'Arche (which means 'the Ark'), the first of Vanier's communities in a village north of Paris.

By the time of my visit with her, L'Arche communities had sprung up around the world, and Lynn was the mother of 3 1/2 French children. Her husband Denis, who'd done his military service as a conscientious objector at L'Arche, had recently founded a new community, Le Moulin de l'Auro, an ancient mill and rambling stone house in the spectacular Provencal village of Gordes. I dropped in to spend a few days with Lynn and Denis and their children, and left the village nearly six months later, transformed.

When I heard that the men and assistants of the Moulin were unable to go away on vacation for want of a driver, I suddenly realized - here was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Rescheduling my affairs long-distance, I offered my services and moved into the community. My new circumstances were a shock, at first. I'd never known anyone with a great and obvious deformity, and the men I now lived with had deformities which were great and obvious indeed: Patrick, whose boxer's face was covered with cuts and swellings, the result of falls during his frequent epileptic seizures; Jean-Luc, with a small powerful body and a child's mind, subject to uncontrollable rages; Yannick, a huge man who rarely spoke; jerky Hughes, scowling Francois, handsome, psychotic Michel.

Within days, however, I began to understand the first truth of L'Arche: some disabilities are immediately visible, and some only become apparent in time. We assistants, I found, were just as handicapped - Vanier would say, "as wounded" - as Patrick and the others. We didn't have epilepsy or Down's Syndrome, but we were closed and unloving, or selfish, or greedy, or lazy, or frightened, or small.

I then learned the second lesson of L'Arche: the soul cannot help but grow in community. We ate together, worked, played and rested together. This odd group became my family, with all that a family entails: one moment a desperate desire never to see these people again;

the next, a need to help or be helped, to hear or be heard, to be with the others, in community.

After July at the Moulin, working every day with the men assembling door handles, learning to cook for twenty, learning that washing up for twenty can be a quick and pleasant chore with a cheerful group, I drove a number of us in the minibus to our August vacation, just like every other French family. The parents of one of the assistants had lent us an empty farmhouse in the middle of a sheep field. And there we lived for a month: four assistants and twelve disabled men, in a sea of sheep.

I have many indelible memories, but one stands out. During our last week there we pitched a tent in a nearby field, to give the men a chance to sleep outside. I went to camp with volatile little Jean-Luc and Yannick the silent giant. During the night a violent storm broke; lightning cracked the sky, and rain battered our shelter. Yannick snored serenely, but Jean-Luc was terrified. To calm him - perhaps to calm myself too - I held him in my arms until he fell asleep. The next day, beaming in the pale morning sun, he announced to the others in his halting speech that we were now married.

He followed me constantly, cooing, calling "ma copine" - my special friend. I tried to explain, the others tried, but he was firm: we had hugged at night, and he knew from movies that's what married people did. Though I turned away from him again and again, he kept reappearing by my side, hopeful, bewildered. We would move to the city, he told me, and he would drive a truck. I swore that I would never again be careless with loving gestures, or with love itself.

Back in Gordes we resumed the daily routine of the Moulin: door handles, cleaning, cooking, sitting together at a long table to eat and argue, talk and sing. We invited the village to a party at the Moulin, and produced a play in which Yannick starred as a very tall, talking princess; Jean-Luc provided his own kind of music on a stringless guitar. As the season grew colder, my heart grew bigger. When I left in November, I was overwhelmed with love for these men, who had taught me so much and were so beautiful.

A few years later, I heard that Jean-Luc had become dangerous to himself and others, and had had to be sent back to the hospital for a change in medication. My friend's husband then had an inspiration. When Jean-Luc returned to the community, everyone called him by another name: Tom. His rages stopped. Jean-Luc may have been angry, but Tom wasn't. He was Tom for awhile, and then he became Jean-Luc again, sunny as a child. When I came to visit after many years, he knew me right away. "Ma copine!" he called, with a huge smile.

Happy Birthday, Moulin de l'Auro. To all of you, I wish a joyous weekend celebrating the power and the glory, for better and for worse, of community. Now that I am so firmly found, I can't easily leave family and work to travel, so I won't be there, with you. But on that weekend, as for the past nineteen years, you will all be here, with me.