Intentional Community: Revaluing People Living With Disabilities

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Section 1: Introduction

Countless minority movements for self realization and independence took place in the 20th century. Women took to the political stage, black Americans demanded civil liberties on par with their Caucasian counterparts, racial minorities challenged segregation in South Africa, and colonized indigenous populations across the globe began the long walk to independence from their imperialist oppressors. However, not all movements achieved such dramatic levels of visibility. The movement for the rights and recognition of persons living with disabilities (PLWDs) took place behind the scenes of these grand struggles for civil rights, pushing forward in its own unique way for society to acknowledge their role as citizens and human beings.

This paper will discuss the societal attitudes towards PLWDs, with a particular emphasis on individuals with developmental disabilities. It will further discuss the role of community in reframing the way society perceives the value and contribution of PLWDs and in providing an environment within which such individuals can receive care that encourages them to achieve their potential. The disability movement faces unique challenges in their struggle for fair treatment. Much as other minorities needed to derail the prejudices of society at large – that women are meant for domestic work or that blacks are an inferior race - in order to claim their rights, people with developmental handicaps must overcome the popular perception that they are mentally incompetent and as such are a drain on society. In addition to this, they are constrained by their own abilities. Many may struggle to communicate or have limited mobility, restrictions that play a role in limiting the scope of the movement for independence and recognition. Difficulty with communication is especially relevant, as communication is key in upsetting

society's prevailing prejudices and paving the way for a new understanding of the role PLWDs play in contributing to the world.

It is these challenges that make community such an invaluable player in the disability rights movement. Community, defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as "a group of people with a common characteristic or interest living together within a larger society," creates an environment where individuals are recognized as valuable on a human rather than economic basis. In community it is often the intangible aspects of self such as humour, generosity, compassion and joy that are appreciated and noticed by others. For PLWDs, this provides an opportunity to be known beyond their disability. Rather than being treated as a problem in need of a cure, they are given recognition for their value and contribution as a human being. This not only improves the lives and well being of such individuals, but challenges the underlying North American principles of value based on economic contribution. In this paper I will argue that community is a counter-cultural response to the marginalization of some of the world's most vulnerable people, with the ability to empower PLWDs and break down negative societal perceptions surrounding disability.

Jean Vanier, a Canadian philosopher living in France, established an intentional community to serve people with developmental disabilities called L'Arche in 1964 after becoming aware of the conditions of isolation and segregation people with disabilities experienced in the state-run institutions. Vanier, who had already been seeking communities concerned with living the gospel of Christ in a spirit of poverty, bought a house in Trosly, France in August of 1964 and invited two young, handicapped men named Raphael and Philippe to live

there with him.[1] From this point he was joined by volunteers and a growing number of PLWDs in need of an alternative to the degrading institutional system. Vanier named his community L'Arche, after the ark in the biblical story of Noah in the Ark wherein an eclectic mix of the world's species found refuge and sanctuary from a flood that threatened to wipe out their existence. The theme of sanctuary and compassion remains integral to L'Arche communities around the globe. Today over one hundred and thirty L'Arche communities have been established in over thirty-six countries across six continents.[2] L'Arche will be used in this paper as a case study to illustrate the manner in which intentional community is able to challenge the status quo of PLWDs and reassign value to their lives through the creation of family.

Section 2: History of Developmental Disability

2.1 The Enlightenment

In the 18th and early 19th centuries, the Enlightenment movement swept through the Western world, advocating for the idea that all people are capable of reason if given the opportunity to develop their intellect.[3] This, combined with the growing emphasis on science and education, opened opportunities for special education aimed at those with intellectual disabilities. The early efforts at education were usually enacted through private tutors and as such were limited to families with the resources to afford those services. Several scientists undertook a

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[1] Bill Clarke, *Enough Room for Joy* (New York: Paulist Press, 1974), 31-33.
[2] "What is L'Arche," L'Arche Canada, accessed November 12, 2012, http://www.larche.ca/en/larche/what_is_larche.
[3] UCSF Department of Family and Community Medicine, Office of Developmental Primary Care, "A Brief History of Developmental Disabilities in the United States," San Francisco, 2010.

number of scientific attempts to find effective methods of educating "idiot" children, and special schools were opened to facilitate such efforts. [4]

There are many examples of these efforts, especially in Europe in the early 19th century. In 1820, a German teacher at the school for the poor in Zeitz called Johann Traugott Weise forced his colleagues to remain after school without pay to help slower students, developed a systematic plan for special education and advocated for teachers working with intellectually impaired students to receive special training. In France in the early 1800s, Jean Itard worked with Victor, the "wild boy of Aveyron" at the Deaf and Dumb Institute of Paris. He attempted to teach Victor how to read and speak and became known for the principles of sense training and stimulation in developing children's cognitive abilities.[5] It was on these principles, developed further by a number of his students, that the foundation of special education was formed and several special education schools were established later in the 1800s. The efforts towards special education included the inherent belief that all children are capable of progress and can be educated, if given proper attention and technique.[6]

2.2 The Eugenics Movement

These attempts were eclipsed in the late 19th century as a new ideological movement swept through the Western world. The eugenics movement formed under the concept of hereditary strengths and weaknesses, which propagated that defects in particular races and groups of people could be passed on through their bloodlines and potentially weaken the genetic make-up of "superior" races. Eugenics, taken from a Greek word meaning "well-born," spread

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[4] Gary Woodill and Dominique Velche, "From Charity and Exclusion to Emerging Independence: An Introduction to the History of Disabilities," in *Journal on Developmental Disabilities* (Spring 2006), 23.

[5] Woodill and Velche, 21.

[6] Daniel Hallahan and Kristin Sayeski, "Special Education," accessed December 8, 2012, http://www.education.com/reference/article/special-education1/.

widely through the western world and instigated the institutionalization and sterilization of persons with developmental disabilities. Women's suffrage groups engaged passionately in this movement, led by famous, outspoken Canadian women's rights activists such as Emily Murphy, Nellie McClung and Irene Parlby. These high profile women, involved in obtaining women the vote, raised alarms on the propagation of the "mentally deficient" and advocated for the use of sterilization in response.[7]

This change in ideology brought about profound alteration of the public perspective on developmentally challenged individuals. Where before they had been given the opportunity to learn and were expected to be able to achieve some level upon which they could contribute to their homes and communities, PLWDs now found themselves in the same societal class as criminals, prostitutes and paupers. In 1981, the United States amended their Immigration Act to exclude "all idiots, insane persons, paupers or persons likely to become a public charge, persons suffering from a loathsome or dangerous contagious disease, persons who have been convicted of a felony or other infamous crime or misdemeanor involving moral turpitude, polygamists…"[8] This amendment indicates the level of society and class of people with whom PLWDs were now associated.

Governments facilitated the building of state schools and institutions segregate PLWDs from the rest of society as a result of the eugenics movement. In these schools the primary approach to residents was of a medical nature that focused on custodial care rather than schooling or education. The Great Depression in the 1930s deepened this segregation as families came to see children with disabilities as an unnecessary financial burden and were increasingly

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[7] The Canadian Encyclopedia, "Eugenics: Keeping Canada Sane," Accessed November 16, 2012, http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/featured/eugenics-keeping-canada-sane.
[8] Woodill and Velche, 23-24.

driven to leave their infants with developmental challenges for state-run institutions to care for.

In some states the institutionalization of people with intellectual impairments became

compulsory, justifying the enlargement of residential institutions and turning them into "human

warehouses."[9] The schools faced large-scale overcrowding leading to the degeneration of

conditions within the institutions and the life expectancy of residents dropped to age eighteen. [10]

By 1931, thirty seven states and two Canadian provinces (Alberta and British Columbia)

had passed sterilization laws as a method of protecting society from people with developmental

disabilities alongside anyone showing evidence of having mental illness or epilepsy. These laws

also extended to the sterilization of alcoholics and prostitutes. In Alberta, this law remained in

effect until the mid 1970s. The eugenics ideology culminated in its most horrific form in Nazi

Germany during the holocaust of WWII, when millions were euthanized in pursuit of racial

superiority, including approximately 90 000 people with disabilities.[11]

2.3 Moving Towards Liberty

Despite the eugenics movement, a number of groups began to form in the twentieth

century in the interest of protecting the rights and education of people with disabilities. Elizabeth

Farrell, a special education teacher from New York, advocated for the establishment of special

classes for children with disabilities and in 1922 founded the Council for Exceptional Children.

This council remains the major professional network for special educators in the United States to

this day. These efforts fostered the beginnings of integrating special education into the school

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[9] Aldred H. Neufeldt, "Disability in Canada: An Historical Perspective," in *In Pursuit of Equal Participation,* ed. Henry Enns and Aldred Neufeldt, 30.
[10] Brief History.
[11] Neufeldt, 31.

systems.[12] The period after World War II saw the beginnings of parent groups and organizations advocating on behalf of their children for viable alternatives to the residential institutions and demanding that their children be allowed to interact with society.

Parent groups such as British Columbia's Association for the Advancement of Retarded Children, created in 1952 and now known as the Developmental Disabilities Association (DDA), emerged as parents united to seek better opportunities for their children and support one another through the frustrations of raising their children in a society that immediately discounted them from making any sort of productive contribution as a citizen. In 1964, Jean Vanier formed the first L'Arche community which was quickly followed by a number of others across the globe. By 1973, L'Arche communities existed in France, Canada, India, the United States, England and Denmark[13] offering inclusion and compassion to a group of vulnerable people who had repeatedly rejected by society.

Organizations like l'Arche and parent groups progressed towards better inclusion of PLWDs in society, especially as the conditions found in state run institutions were publicized and exposed to the general population in the 1970s. The closing of these institutions in the following years, alongside the work of disability rights activists, paved the way towards the integration of persons with developmental disabilities to regular society. In 1973, the United States passed section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act to address discrimination against people with disabilities. This was quickly followed in 1975 with the Education for All Handicapped Children

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[12] Hallahan and Sayeski, "Special Education."
[13] Clarke, 47.

Act, which guaranteed the right of children with disabilities to be educated in the public system alongside their peers.[14]

However, this process of deinstitutionalization and integration was not without challenges. Deinstitutionalized patients in these residential asylums had a propensity to be discharged without sufficient preparations, leaving them without alternatives for care and housing. It has been argued that deinstitutionalization increased numbers of developmentally disabled and mentally ill patients facing homelessness or prison when discharged. Another argument states that despite the multiple support systems for PLWDs both through community groups and the government, a certain level of segregation remains. People with developmental challenges remain poorly understood and undervalued in North American society. They are often unemployed after the completion of their schooling and live in sheltered environments that continue to segregate them from the world.[15] Remnants of the mindset created by the eugenics movement resulted in a current political ideology which fails to provide a space in which the skills of people who have developmental challenges are considered worthwhile. Understanding this paradigm is an important part of making further progress in the movement to include people from all walks of life, including those with disabilities, in our diverse society.

2.4 Current Concept of the Value of Human Beings

Western, and particularly North American, society places great worth on productivity and efficiency, giving the highest value to people who contribute the most to society in tangible ways. Individuals incapable of adding to the economy are perceived as a burden, both to society

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[14] Brief History.

[15] Walid Fakhoury and Stefan Priebe, "Deinstitutionalization and reinstitutionalization: major changes in the provision of mental health care," in *Psychiatry* 8 (2007): 314, accessed Dec 9, 2012, http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1476179307001085#.

and to their families. The effect of this is evident in the attitudes towards abortion of unborn children discovered to have developmental handicaps. Jean Vanier predicts that in the next few years, there will no longer be children born in France with Down's syndrome because they will all have been aborted. In the United States, the abortion rate for Down's syndrome is approximately 85% and is lower for other conditions deemed less severe.[16] Conceptually, this decision to abort children with handicaps is presented as a decision to mitigate suffering. However, the question must be asked, "Whose suffering?" Are such children the beneficiaries of this decision, or is it the suffering of society and the productive, average family members that is mitigated by avoiding the burden of caring for a person that would not necessarily achieve independence and productivity?[17]

Section 3: Intentional Community

3.1 Defining Intentional Community

Intentional community can be defined as a community designed and planned around a social ideal or collective values and interests, often involving shared resources and responsibilities.[18] The precise purpose of such communities may differ between groups, but often intentional communities are formed with some level of concern for justice and/or the creation of a lifestyle that challenges societal norms. The scope of social justice work is vast, and as a result there are countless types of intentional communities. Examples of these communities include ecovillages concerned with environmental issues, homes for recovering addicts to lend support,

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[16] Nancy Press, "Genetic Testing and Screening," The Hastings Center, accessed December 10, 2012, http://www.thehastingscenter.org/publications/briefingbook/detail.aspx?id=2176.

[17] John Swinton, introduction *Living Gently in a Violent World,* by Stanley Hauerwas and Jean Vanier *(*Downer's Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2008), 12.

[18] "Intentional Community," accessed November 12, 2012, http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/intentional+community.

or for former criminals to assist with reintegration. Some intentional communities are formed by religious groups, such as Christians attempting to return to the ways of the early church.

Many intentional communities serve vulnerable sectors of society. They are able to provide residents with a support system of people who understand one another and in many cases become a type of surrogate family for individuals who have been cast aside by society or disconnected from their biological family. Intentional communities are uniquely situated to encourage personal growth through a model of compassion and interdependence. Furthermore, communities are uniquely equipped to facilitate the empowerment of others. Empowerment can be defined as "a group based, participatory, developmental process through which marginalized or oppressed individuals and groups gain greater control over their lives and environment, acquire valued resources and rights, and achieve important life goals and reduced social marginalization."[19] This is an area of need for people with developmental disabilities, who continue to be misunderstood and rejected from society and are often left without meaningful control over their lives and circumstances.

3.2 Empowerment through Community

Community-clinical psychologist Kenneth Maton proposes that communities have the ability to empower both the individual and the surrounding society. In his work "Empowering Community Settings: Agents of Individual Development, Community Betterment, and Positive Social Change" he outlines how individual empowerment occurs through six different aspects of the community. First, communities foster a group based belief system which consists of the community ideology and values. This belief system outlines expected patterns of behaviour

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[19] Kenneth I. Maton, "Empowering Community Settings: Agents of Individual Development, Community Betterment, and Positive Social Change" in *American Journal of Community Psychology* 41 (2008): 5.

which produce desired outcomes and encompasses a view of the member's needs and potential, as well as how they can work to achieve both their own goals and the goals of the community. It also holds that each member has the ability to achieve these goals and encourages the members to share the vision and larger purpose of the group. This affirms members of the community, sending a message of belonging and faith in the ability of each individual, as well as inviting them to become a part of a larger purpose.[20]

The second organizational characteristic of empowering communities is the core activities facilitated by these communities. In order to be empowering, activities must have an engaging nature, involve an active learning process, and be of high quality. It is through productive involvement in activities that members are empowered over time. When activities are meaningful, relevant to context, offer opportunity for feedback and reflection, and open opportunities for improved quality of relationship between community members, everyone taking part is able to benefit and be empowered.[21]

The third aspect of empowering community is the relational environment. This encompasses the quality and nature of interpersonal and intergroup relations in the community. A high quality relational environment includes a support system, caring relationships and a sense of connection with others both within the community, but also in external settings. [22] The fourth aspect of empowering community is an opportunity role structure. This means having a variety of roles available on multiple levels which create meaningful opportunities for members to participate. These roles also allow opportunity for members to learn and develop new skills and

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[20] Maton, 8.
[21] Maton, 10.
[22] Maton, 11.

encourage them to exercise use of their own voice and influence as they gain confidence in themselves and their abilities.[23]

The fifth aspect, leadership, has to do with the influence of leaders on community members. Leaders in community have the ability to inspire and motivate members through vision for the community and status as role models. Leadership in this context is often a role shared by many and is always open to expansion and addition as others step into the position. Leaders are committed and empowered, giving them the ability to share their experience and resources with others.[24] The sixth and final aspect to be discussed here is maintenance and change. This refers to the organizational mechanisms for helping the community to adapt to both internal and external change and challenges. This aspect is essential to the ability of the community to function effectively and contributes to its sustainability and survival. Maintenance and change includes being responsive and adaptive to environmental changes, utilizing bridging mechanisms in the event of internal conflict or intergroup/interpersonal challenges, and creating and maintaining connections to external resources and partners who can help the community achieve its mission.[25]

3.3 External Impact of Empowering Communities

Intentional communities must have an extensive degree of influence over members as a natural outcome of their intentional, engaging and interactive nature. However, it is simultaneously important that intentional community is able to exert influence over its external environment. Though it is admirable to mitigate the oppression and marginalization of a group within the sphere of the community, the societal circumstances resulting in marginalization will

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[23] Maton, 11-12.
[24] Maton 12-13.
[25] Maton, 13.

not be changed unless the community is also able to have an external impact. There is scarce research on this topic, but the existing research suggests some explanations of how communities are able to have an external impact.

One way in which community fosters external impact is through increased numbers of empowered citizens. Communities enhance the individual wellbeing, resilience and life quality of its members. This may appear at first to be an internal impact due to its focus on the community member, but the empowerment of these individuals has a ripple effect as they demonstrate improved levels of political efficacy, civic skills, leadership and community engagement.[26] The ongoing work of communities results in ever increasing numbers of empowered and active individuals adding value to the very fabric of society. Additionally, these individuals radiate influence to their family and social networks, institutional attitudes and program development in organizations and even on state and national policy. This happens through modeling and interpersonal influence, as the changed attitude and actions of the community member changes the expectations and behaviour of the individuals and institutions they come into contact with.[27] When a community member comes to believe in themselves and their own abilities and gifts, they radiate this attitude and their belief will begin to encourage others to also believe in them and recognize their abilities and gifts. Influence on this level has impact on a very basic level as it encourages members of society to rethink their former perceptions and encourages a new perspective on the value of the community member they have come into contact with.

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[26] Maton, 14.
[27] Maton, 14.

External community activities are another essential source for affecting paradigm shifts in the mindset of society. These external activities may include member recruitment, public education, community actions, community services, resource mobilization, policy advocacy, public meetings, organizing committees, and developing relationships with public officials and leaders in the wider community.[28] Every one of these activities is a chance to interact with society and provides an opportunity to engage those outside of the community with its mission, vision and purpose.

Section 4: L'Arche as an Empowering Intentional Community

L'Arche remains one of the most famous examples of intentional community serving PLWDs today, though other communities such as Camphill Village also open their doors specifically to people with disabilities and special needs. Through the philosophy and writings of Jean Vanier, L'Arche is well known and received throughout the world. As one of the most high profile, well established organizations of its kind in the world, L'Arche is therefore an ideal example of how community can empower its members as well as have an external impact on society as a whole. The subsequent sections will assess L'Arche as an empowering community to PLWDs through Maton's six aspects of community. Additionally, these sections will demonstrate how L'Arche draws out a new understanding of the value of human life and reframes disability as essential to promoting the quality of life, rather than a burden.

4.1 The L'Arche Belief System

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[28] Maton, 15.

Initially, Vanier began L'Arche with the simple intention of extending compassion and mercy to individuals left on the margins of society. He explains that "in receiving them [Raphael and Philippe] from an asylum I felt good, a sort of 'savior'…They were in some way under my power and they should fit into my project."[29] However, shortly after creating l'Arche he began to revisit this purpose and consider L'Arche not just as a charitable endeavor, but also as a bridge through which people with developmental challenges could teach the people who joined with them in community as volunteers and staff about the beauty of life. He "had to learn that L'Arche was not just my project, but also Raphael's and many others…I had to learn about human growth and suffering, about sharing, and about the ways of God."[30]

As a result, the mission of L'Arche recognizes that the needs of people with disabilities will not be met through simple charity that identifies them as pitiable and in need of the compassion of superiors. In fact, the reality is quite opposite from this first conceptualization of the needs PLWDs. L'Arche now seeks to recognize and celebrate the unique value of each person regardless of their ability or disability and also equalizes the situation of PLWDs by asserting that all people have handicaps, though some may be more visible than others.[31] The mission and philosophy that lies at the core of L'Arche's belief systems can be summarized in three points: the recognition of each person's value, living relationships of mutuality and reciprocity, and to be a sign of hope in the world and bring about transformation one heart at a time.[32]

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[29] Jean Vanier, *The Challenge of L'Arche* (Ottawa: Novalis, 1981), 6.
[30] Vanier, 6.
[31] Anne Escrader, "A Marginal Pedagogy: L'Arche and the Education of the Heart" (PHD diss., University of Western Ontario, 2007), 19.
[32] Escrader, 20.

This belief system helps to shape the structure of L'Arche and provides L'Arche communities with a base on which they can build norms and practices to fulfill their mission. Rather than adopting a model of medical care where homes would have staff to provide for the basic living needs of residents with disabilities, L'Arche chooses to embrace a family model wherein residents with disabilities are simply part of a family alongside those without visible disabilities. In this framework, all members of the community must develop and change together in solidarity as they seek the common goal of achieving the potential of every individual, without limitations on PLWDs. This belief system is a fulfillment of Maton's assessment that an empowering community must hold that each community member has the capacity to achieve the goals of the group and is a resource in that process.

4.2 Core Activities

Life at L'Arche is full of the usual activities that characterize life in that society. For example, a L'Arche home in Canada or the United States would follow the usual routines of Western life, with members getting up in the morning, preparing for the day, departing to their programs and work outside the home and returning in the evening for relaxation time with family.[33] However, normal and average as these routines may seem on the surface, they have an extra layer of meaning to the lives of PLWDs in L'Arche. Inclusion in an everyday family routine is not always a reality for individuals with disabilities. The act of living in community rather than as a patient at an institution is, in fact, an activity that over time will contribute to the empowerment of PLWDs as they begin to realize their own inclusion in society.

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[33] Escrader, 97.

One core activity of many L'Arche homes that engages members of the community and offers an opportunity for feedback and reflection is the tradition of "passing the candle." This tradition takes place at milestone events in the lives of the members, such as when a member celebrates an anniversary of their time at L'Arche or when the time comes for an assistant to leave the community. These kinds of events are received as an opportunity to celebrate the time shared by the community and the role of the member being recognized. For the passing of the candle, all the community members gather together in a circle and take turns holding the candle while saying something meaningful about the person being celebrated. Jean Vanier explains that in L'Arche "We really spend a lot of our time celebrating. And when we celebrate, we don't just give gifts. We say to one another, 'You are a gift. You're a gift to this community.'"[34] This tradition creates space in which the value of each human being is deliberately acknowledged by every person in the community and uplifting, positive, strength-building feedback and reflection is given.

4.3 Relational Environment

Without doubt, life at L'Arche is grounded in relationship. "At L'Arche, persons with and without disabilities live and work together as 'family and friends' not as 'clients and staff.' The intention of L'Arche is explicitly to work from the basis of friendship rather than that of service although service is a necessary aspect of the life."[35] As previously outlined, current Western society places greater value on people capable of productivity and efficiency. Intentional community challenges this notion of value with a distinctly counter-cultural approach. Rather than simply attempting to fit people with developmental challenges into

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[34] Hauerwas and Vanier, 38.
[35] Escrader, 23.

society's model of value, they value one another based on their intrinsic human beauty and personality. The environment of community is especially well suited to this because it fosters relationships, which often allows individuals to go beyond labels and preconceptions to a deeper understanding of one another.

In relationship, efficiency and productivity matter very little. Perhaps this is why people with developmental challenges are so adept at forming connections with those around them, given the chance. One of the most extraordinary aspects of life at l'Arche is the quality and depth of relationships.[36] In today's Western society, we are often caught up in the ideology of consumerism and false needs, which obscures the truer and more basic human needs of connection and belonging. It is the simplicity of the developmentally challenged that frees them from an unhealthy obsession with productivity and material wealth and anchors them in the need for acceptance, love and meaning.[37] L'Arche provides a space for them to have those needs answered and then teach others the vitality that comes with their way of life. In fact, many volunteers who spent time at L'Arche find themselves at odds with society after spending time with one of those communities, because the fulfillment found in their experience of the simplicity and love of these communities sensitizes them to the many dehumanizing characteristics of the outside world.[38] It is through the relationships built at L'Arche that PLWDs are able to achieve control over their lives and environment, and that members without disability learn a more meaningful way of life through their disabled counterparts.

4.4 Opportunity Role Structure

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[36] Clarke, 83.
[37] Clarke, 136.
[38] Clarke, 134.

While there is no graduated hierarchy of roles as recognized by Maton's assessment of the aspects of effective empowering communities, L'Arche satisfies his model in its own way. The purpose of an opportunity role structure in Maton's model is to offer community members opportunities to expand their skills and responsibilities as well as to exercise their own voice and influence in the organization of the community.[39] L'Arche ensures that all community members are given responsibility and tasks that contribute to the household unit which expand their skills. Furthermore, assistants are expected to recognize the uniqueness of each person in their dealings with PLWDs and to understand that they too have their own ways of reacting to different situations. Though assistants do provide some direction when necessary, the underlying tone of such interactions is one of invitation. This allows PLWDs to take charge of their own lives and come to the next activity in their own time. In this way, they are able to voice their desires and exert influence over their own decisions rather than having their lives controlled and mandated by others.

4.5 Leadership

In L'Arche, it is not only persons without disabilities who are considered effective leaders, but also persons with disabilities through their ability to teach and lead others into a new ways of thinking. Often, people with developmental disabilities exist outside the frames of time and place adhered to by the average person. Bill Clarke, in his book on his experiences with L'Arche, says "There is this stress upon the present moment, enjoying it without being too preoccupied about the future, and so gaining a deeper appreciation for what the moment holds…So there is this greater appreciation not just of people but also of nature…"[40] One of the

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[39] Maton, 12.
[40] Clarke, 42.

gifts people with developmental disabilities are blessed with is the ability to take notice of the

small, beautiful aspects of life that the average person in North America is too busy to recognize,

whether it is seeing something special in another person or in the world around them.

People with developmental disabilities inherently possess qualities which are sadly

foreign to many in Western culture. L'Arche provides them with the opportunity to foster those

qualities and channel them into their surroundings and relationships. Vanier sums this up when

he says:

> "When we let go of our usual categories and the productivity-oriented measuring systems
> so common in our culture, we can be surprised by the abilities that people with
> developmental disabilities often reveal - their keen sensitivity to interpersonal situations,
> the depth of their empathy, their willingness to overlook and to forgive, their faithfulness,
> their acceptance of difference, their originality, their capacity to be present and to cut
> through pretense, their resilience, the creativity of what they produce, and their gift for
> celebration." [41]

The sharing of these gifts is a kind of leadership on the part of PLWDs. Through the

uniqueness of their simplicity, disabled members of L'Arche inspire and motivate those around

them. Their singularly exceptional perspective and capacity for love and compassion make them

role models to all.

4.6 Maintenance and Change

This section encompasses the ability of L'Arche to both external and internal challenges,

an ability that is critical in the sustainability and survival of any community. The longevity and

widespread establishment of L'Arche speaks to its ability to overcome these challenges. Over the

course of nearly five decades L'Arche has established over one hundred and thirty communities

across the globe, overcoming barriers of culture, language and religion. The basic principles of

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[41] L'Arche Canada, "Our Vision," accessed November 12, 2013, http://www.larche.ca/en/larche/our_vision.

love, belonging, and acceptance upon which L'Arche is founded are universal, translated across all walks of life. Jean Vanier himself admits that when the first L'Arche community in Bangladesh was established in the late 1960s and opened its doors not just to Catholics but also to Hindus and Muslims, he knew nothing about interreligious cooperation. An understanding of what it meant to operate within the context of these different religions and cultures and levels of social class could only be discovered little by little over time and experience.[42] And yet, today, L'Arche communities continue to thrive, celebrating these differences and the gifts that each new community and setting offers to the whole network.

Section 5: L'Arche's External Impact on Society

5.1 Networking with the Local Community

L'Arche communities are comprised of a mix of people with developmental disabilities and people who come to assist and share in their daily lives. Interaction with their neighbourhoods and wider local communities is one of the focuses of L'Arche.[43] L'Arche's mission here is twofold; while they aim both to provide a safe and welcoming community for PLWDs who have so often been met with rejection and distaste, it is also important to invite society into an enlightened understanding of their disabled neighbours. Vanier affirms this need, saying, "It isn't any use creating a beautiful home unless there is some sort of free relationship with the neighbours. This implies that the handicapped person must adjust but also that neighbours must sense his gifts and uniqueness."[44] The gifts of PLWDs are shared with the community through endeavors such as regular art shows exhibiting the creative works of

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[42] Hauerwas and Vanier, 24.
[43] L'Arche Canada, "What is L'Arche."
[44] Vanier, 8.

members of the L'Arche community.[45] Additionally, L'Arche offers programs for schools, professional development and the general public that contribute to the public conversation about social values, promote mutuality in relationships across difference and teach skills and attitudes that are essential in forming networks of belonging.[46] Collaborative efforts of this sort promote a better understanding and acceptance of the residents of L'Arche, allowing them to form healthy relationships with those outside of the walls of the sanctuary they find in L'Arche and challenging societal perceptions of people with developmental challenges

5.2 Interreligious Dialogue and International Cooperation

Finally, l'Arche communities have provided a fascinating connection between people of different religious traditions across the world. Disability exists universally, and those with disabilities suffer from rejection and isolation in nearly every culture. In recognition of this fact, l'Arche communities were eventually established in many different countries with varying religious practices. Though the first l'Arche community was built as a Catholic community, there are now Protestant, Muslim and Hindu communities that exist in relationship with the original Catholic practice. This interfaith approach does not come without challenges. At one point authorities in Rome would not work with l'Arche because they had opened their doors to non-Catholics[47] and Vanier himself admits that before l'Arche he had regarded non-Catholics simply as people to be converted, rather than as brothers and sisters.[48]

Despite the globalization and communication the world is now capable of, there remains difficulty in maintaining open conversation amongst different religions and cultures. It is too

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[45] Beth Porter, "The Art of L'Arche Members," *A Human Future: A Thought Sheet for Canadians,* L'Arche Canada, http://www.larche.ca/a_human_future/ahf_v11_n1_jacquie_boughner_spring_2012.pdf.
[46] L'Arche Canada, "Our Vision."
[47] Hauerwas and Vanier, 28.
[48] Vanier, 9.

easy to fixate on the details of difference and refuse to cooperate with one another. Disability breaks down these barriers through simplicity. To a person with a developmental challenge, the question lies not in the differences between beliefs, but in the similarities of humanity. L'Arche provides a vehicle for this paradigm, as the community seeks to address the challenges of people with disabilities across the globe. In order to make progress on this count, l'Arche has found the common ground necessary to reach a place of respectful dialogue between different groups. Through this international work, people are coming to understand PLWDs better throughout the world and, equally importantly, are able to learn from their ability to overcome difference through simplicity.

Conclusion

Despite extensive improvement in the integration of people with developmental disabilities to society, there remains a deep chasm dividing those with disabilities from those without. Whether this gap is caused by the difficulty of communication, irrational fear or historically embedded conceptions of the disabled as a drain on society, people with developmental disabilities will only receive true acceptance when the world is able to recognize their value as deeply compassionate, loving and generous human beings. Unfortunately, today's Western society operates through a framework where each person is valued according to their ability to be productive and efficient, not by their intrinsic humanity. Characteristics such as joy, simplicity, love and generosity are intangible and immeasurable, which often means that they go unacknowledged as significant contributions to society. Furthermore, this economic value system creates a mindset where PLWDs are perceived as a burden rather than a gift.

Intentional community is an effective venue through which these qualities can be fostered and directed to engage the world so a paradigm shift of true value can occur. Through its belief system, activities, relational environment, opportunity role structure, leadership and ability to adapt and change, community is able to empower its members and create a situation in which the marginalized, oppressed and vulnerable can challenge the status quo. L'Arche is an ideal example of how intentional community recognizes the value of each of its members, regardless of ability. Furthermore, it engages with society to bring about a new understanding of the true meaning and value in the life of each and every person that extends beyond economics into the heart of the human soul.

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