

The Mission of the Twelve

As we began the season of Pentecost, with its focus on the disciples being sent into the world in the power of the Spirit, I invited several members of Benedictus to share something of their work and ministries, with a particular focus on how these have been affected by COVID-19.

I

I remember walking into the room at work sometime in early March. My colleagues were in the midst of an animated discussion about the advancing tide of the virus and how it might mean we would have to work from home. I immediately went on the offensive: "It's a media beat up!" I fumed. "It's just another 'flu! Why is this one different from all the rest?" And so I went on for a while, and was surprised to see my fellow workers regarding me with uncertain smiles that looked like pity. Clearly, they weren't convinced...

I think my early reactions were a mixture of a longstanding scepticism towards authority (which I think is more often useful than not) and early stage grief reactions: the ones of denial and disbelief. It took a while to own this grief and to allow it to have its inevitable way with me. But somewhere in the quiet of what had become my work-from-home days, I was forced to finally accept it – that this was the new normal.

That phrase quickly became general common parlance, but I wonder about it. As I said to my therapist supervisor the other week, I seemed to be mourning for something that I always claimed not to enjoy anyway. Why should the new normal be so unsettling when I didn't much like the old one?

Psychologists have been all over the media helping to explain many of the common reactions to the pandemic. The sheer number of changes, especially in those early days, suddenly forced upon us with appeals to personal and family survival, the common good and the threat of legal repercussions (all of these different appeals being in themselves causing the mind to tie itself in knots) were hugely destabilising. Apparently, the limitations of our working memory faculty – that part of us that allows us to do a number of targeted things at once – have been shown up. We have actually been forced to process more things than we are comfortably able to do. Hence my own feelings of having all this time suddenly on my hands but not actually having the energy to do much, or even to start knowing where to start.

Of course, the extra time has allowed for much more of my favourite preoccupation: reflection. I've been reflecting many hours of every day, and through the night too in what have become a fascinating series of dreams. Never has my interior life been quite as vivid. And mostly this has been a bonus, allowing me to access and sort through psychic material in a positive way.

One of the bonuses in sorting through inner material is that you begin to be able to focus outside yourself better, and this has helped me to gain more compassion and fellow feeling for others. This surely feels like one of the unexpected positive outcomes of this pandemic. When we were marching against the government's climate change policies in that other era back in February, we were warning that the world would have to change, and damn soon. And then it suddenly did! And amazingly, a conservative government suddenly started handing out money and other benefits to many of the lower paid and the homeless, and global emissions shrunk and there was a hedgehog comeback in England. I am guardedly optimistic that this is the opportunity we were calling for, and it has been made even clearer in the recent rise of anti-racism sentiment.

So I DO feel hopeful, overall. Of course, I miss simple things like handshakes and hugs. I am concerned for young people who have been taught at formative times

of life to fear touch and the presence of the unknown. I am sad at any loss of innocence. But at the same time, I am aware that the calm that has steadily taken the place of the disbelief and dismay is a contemplative calm that knows the truth that we were never in control anyway. I found the following from Richard Rohr's contemplative reflection yesterday – 'As unlikely as it may seem', he said, 'the contemplative moment can be found at the very center of ... ontological crisis.' That was a paraphrase of writer Barbara Holmes talking about the spiritual learnings of the black church's integration of slavery experiences. I find that really helpful – that in the middle of a crisis of Being (capital B) itself, we are provided with the means to overcome the unhelpful and unskilful divisions we have put in place between us and the divine. That actually feels better than the old normal.

Richard Wigley, Counsellor

II – Living the Pandemic with L'Arche

I'd like to start by reiterating that L'Arche is an international federation of 154 communities across 38 countries, with our origins in France. And so, a global pandemic with an epicentre in Europe, has focused our attention on our founding communities to the north of Paris, where sadly, five members with intellectual disability have already died due to Covid-19. Our communities in North America of course have been profoundly impacted, and now, as the pandemic sweeps across Africa and South America, our concerns turn to our communities in these much poorer countries who do not have access to government funding or stable medical systems.

In view of this international experience of L'Arche, here in Canberra, we feel extraordinarily fortunate and yet we too have been drawn into the sudden challenges the pandemic has unleashed upon us all. What I'm about to share are my observations and I surely can't speak on behalf of 60 other individuals, some of whom are with us tonight! ... So, when we went into lockdown, naturally our primary

concern was for our most vulnerable members, many of whom have complex and compromised health issues that render them highly susceptible to the worst possibilities of this virus. We were also very concerned for the mental health of our Core Members, with the bewildering loss of familiar routines and social connections, even with their own families. Some of our more social, extraverted members have really struggled. Early on, some colleagues scrambled to suddenly roster more support hours, find hand sanitiser, and also track down masks, gloves and gowns in case we suddenly needed to support people in self-isolation. Together we worked on new daily support schedules to provide as much structure, routine and continuity as possible and our Core Members & Assistants have been outstanding in their creativity and adaptability.

Like so many others, we transferred our meetings and regular gatherings into Zoom, and created even more weekly social Zooms, and this has been a learning journey for us all. We've discovered that Zoom has enabled us to connect socially with other L'Arche communities around Australia and NZ and we hope to foster more of this "after-COVID". But for those who are not interested in screens, who don't use words to communicate, you can imagine how irrelevant Zoom might be. It's these members who most powerfully remind us of what we all yearn for in human communication ... proximity, touch and all the nuances of body language that convey our affection and friendship. Screens just don't quite cut it, do they?

Recently, I've been very moved by photographs from our seven homes ... what's revealed is how much we've turned to nature, outdoor exercise and tactile, hands-on creativity of different kinds, even a plastics recycling project. There's a sense of ease, a slower pace, domestic simplicity and a quality of relationship. Already we can see that coming out of lockdown will be more complicated & that it will be some time yet before we can gather as we usually do. We're a demonstrative bunch in L'Arche and hugs are usually shared very readily. Photographs usually show people in close proximity, with friendly arms draped around each other. While we're yet to fully appreciate what this time of social and physical "abstinence" has taught

us, I sense there's a deeper awareness of simply how much we need each and belong to one another, and how the impulse to gather and share as a community cannot be suppressed. As Noel Davis says in one of his poems, "love finds a way". It's also been another profound opportunity to recognise our Core Members in their capacity to teach and lead us further into the ways of the heart ... being honest about reality, just as it is ... the centrality of relationship, presence and our common humanity ... and how closely fragility and resilience sit together in each and every one of us.

For me personally, after three very painful years in L'Arche, this experience has helped me return more deeply to a place of gratitude ... gratitude simply to have on-going employment when so many have lost their jobs ... gratitude to still go to an office and be with others in our small team of valued colleagues ... gratitude that 12 years of experience in L'Arche is still finding a place within the whole ... and most surely, gratitude that the work of L'Arche is still doing its transformational job on me ... it's a Leonard Cohen kind of halleluiah.

Annie Patterson
Community Life Co-ordinator
L'Arche Genesaret, Canberra

III

One of my pet hates, since I entered the teaching profession, is attending professional development sessions where the presenter predicts future scenarios. These inevitably involve predictions about technology providing us with all sorts of comforts and the idea that in the future, educators will be delivering lessons online. Our current roles where we teach and interact with students in classrooms of human beings, will be no more.

It is at this point that the disembodied voice from the earlier 20th century, with its prediction that 'in the future', which is now, comes to mind. 'We will have more leisure time'. How nice this must be if only that prediction had actually happened.

Then, all of a sudden the Coronavirus came along and myself and my colleagues are sitting in empty classrooms or at home alone, talking to computer screens. This is the classroom 'of the future' suddenly in our lives. There is no choice, and it is happening to me right now.

The lessons begin with pinging and humming noises as my students log on. The students' faces, or their avatars, start appearing in boxes on the screen. There is a nice sense of relief in re-establishing contact with the students that I have got to know who are still out there somewhere, in all the mayhem. There is a feeling that we have resumed a different form of the pre-existing relationships of the classroom.

As they arrive I welcome them. Because of my concern for their welfare in these times of stress, I particularly need to ask them how they are travelling. Teaching, to a large extent, is about caring for the whole person. Or at least we try. Some students respond to my questions and others are hesitant and need to be individually teased out. Considerable time is spent waiting for their arrival and apologies for technology not working or misunderstandings about new schedules. Some have to type responses due to microphone issues and this takes longer. Theoretically things should work, but as the process involves technology, and young human beings, they don't necessarily. It is all about the shoulds versus the reality.

To a large extent we are all making it up as we go along. We have had training, and plans have been put in place, but everything is being tested and constantly reassessed. It is a first and hopefully a last time we have to do this.

With this technology things feel distant and the students are harder to access. Part of it is the dynamic of dealing with teenagers and the need to maintain their attention. Many students switch on their avatars after initial greetings. Some students feel too self-conscious so you never see their faces. With the use of avatars, I cannot read the individual and group's body language in order to know their levels of engagement and state of mind. Some of my colleagues expressed concern at having been confronted by images of students still under doonas, emerging in pyjamas or drinking mugs of Milo.

Communication proceeds on a binary level with me talking and then students in turn responding, on a one by one basis. In normal conditions, I have found that students learn best when we have animated discussions. It is a form of ordered mayhem. We thrash out ideas and build a collective understanding of the texts that we are studying.

Teaching is akin to throwing a ball in the air, and whilst it is hovering, beating a basin of eggs before catching the ball and repeating the process. In this new scenario the students cannot rush at the questions, communicate physically their enthusiasm and indicate with hand waving their desire to be heard. We are held back from the order imposed by the technology. It is a much slower process. I cannot, as I usually do, scan the room, acknowledge to others that I will get back to them and quickly badger along those disengaged or lacking in confidence. It is just not the same or as effective with working online.

Because of the shortened class time, where there is not time to repeat things, and this binary style of communication, I have to be more explicit with what I want the students to learn. Usually, I like them to draw their own conclusions, but in this new scenario I have to get to a point quickly and try and make sure that ideas have been communicated, so no one is left behind. The beauty of working, with the class dynamic with 25 or so minds that are applied to the task, is that what results is a much more expansive understanding of the texts than I alone can supply. This way students build confidence as they have a sense of empowerment through their contributions and creation of something pretty impressive. Unfortunately, this style of education is not available online.

I think that what we all missed the most, was the sense of warmth and comradery that was no longer available. We usually build relationships as the year progresses. The individual personalities emerge and hopefully everyone has a sense of being an integral part of the learning. With our disembodied online voices, this was lacking. On our return to school, finally after 7 weeks in isolation, my favourite

class let out a loud cheer on our reunion. Oh my goodness, it was like something out of a Hollywood movie.

There is that wonderful quotation that someone, somewhere once said, 'we read to know that we are not alone'. Literature is about humanity, how we deal with life and the challenges it throws at us. As with the great texts, there is a yearning to be in close proximity to others and to see how we each deal with things. What is life affirming is that there are others on the same journey. We are social creatures, as are the people in the books, poetry, short stories, movies and poems. Ultimately, most students, and teachers, do not want to feel alone and isolated. We want to be near to one another and share experiences. We want the opportunity to discuss the issues of the people in the texts, that we study, together.

I like to think I keep an open mind about things. I like to go with change, as it can be quite refreshing. Computers are wonderful tools for quickly accessing information and messaging each other when needed. However, after the school lockdown, I am convinced that the online classroom experience does not compare with the real thing.

MW, Teacher