

REFINDING SIGNIFICANT OTHERS

Redefinitions and Support Groups

By EILEEN GLASS

Introduction

THE RELATIONSHIP WITH A SIGNIFICANT OTHER is not always sustainable. Many people live destructive or dysfunctional relationships with the most significant people in their lives. Others experience abandonment or betrayal in the relationship and have to find the means to rebuild their lives and identity. For many, the path to healing is through membership of a group which provides a place of belonging and which offers the necessary combination of support and challenge to enable growth.

The stories in this article illustrate the possibilities for healing and rediscovery of self-worth in the context of communities or supportive networks. They explore the experience of people from different backgrounds and life situations.

Pain in relationships

In every significant relationship there dwells a shadow, carrying seeds of loss, of fear and of destructiveness. We have all trodden the path which leads through the places of struggle, where frailty meets frailty, where darkness seems overwhelming and where we want, or need, to renegotiate our choices. In this place we are often confronted with patterns of behaviour and ways of relating which are anything but life-giving. Sometimes people can live in painful and destructive relationships for years, bound by patterns of dependency and fear. Finding the courage to step outside such relationships can be difficult, even when abuse or infidelity are part of the picture. The thought of the loss which separation or divorce will bring can seem more dreadful than the situation itself.

For some, the experience of death of a spouse, a parent, or an intimate friend can lead to similar experiences of being somehow dislocated from life as it was. How do we go forward when all the significant points of reference which anchored our lives have shifted? Even our experience of God can be radically altered. We can feel as if

we are in the void, our cries being dispersed by the wind. The only thing which is sure is that the loss is irreplaceable. It is often impossible to imagine our eventual healing because we know the path will be long. It seems too daunting and we wonder who could possibly be there for us through it all.

The group as a place of healing

Such a healing process can demand emotional, psychological and spiritual resources which are beyond the capacity of any one relationship. Increasingly, people are discovering that it is often the support of a group which provides the space and time for change to take place. The past several decades have seen the growth of a diversity of therapeutic groups. Some have a strong psychological orientation, others are founded from a particular spiritual or philosophical inspiration. Some groups constitute supportive networks which may bring their members together at regular times. Others form intentional communities where people live or work together in an environment which is structured to respond to particular needs. In more informal ways most of us have networks of friendship which we turn to in times of grief or loneliness. Such networks can offer a place where our pain can be heard, held and, over time, transformed.

The experience of the group as a place of change and growth, offering the possibility for new understandings of past relationships, for discovery of deeper levels of truth as a place of renewal, is one which has become familiar to me in the past twenty-three years of my belonging in L'Arche.¹ I came to L'Arche at a time of personal brokenness, following the severing of a significant relationship. At the time I was travelling abroad, so was far from family, friends and the familiar security offered by my own places of belonging. It seemed, from the pit of my pain, that in choosing to live in community with men and women with an intellectual disability I was finding a place where I could be reassured that I still had *something* to give *someone*. I was not aware that I was in fact choosing the place of my own healing and conversion.

The community which welcomed me was less than a year old, so in a sense we were all strangers to each other. More than half of our number had lived for many years in a large institution. We came from different religious traditions and from different cultures. I arrived bringing my competence, my education, my training and experience as a teacher and all I had learned on my travels. I expected I would be of considerable assistance to people who needed help in many of the tasks

of daily life, but I did not care to reveal immediately my personal brokenness or my spiritual poverty. I had come expecting to respond to people in need – and I did not count myself in their category. However, my two years in that community marked a significant transition in my own life, one which charted my course for the next twenty years.

One of the challenging and healing mysteries of relationship is the way we are asked to forgo many assumptions about ourselves and others. My healing began the day I recognized that in front of a person with an intellectual disability, I do not have to *know* everything. Our kinship can be forged in the shared experience of 'not knowing'. Likewise as I chose to respect the spiritual traditions which were being built in the community (daily shared prayer, Sunday eucharist, encouragement to personal prayer), I discovered places where I could begin to acknowledge the truth of my own inner brokenness. I was not yet able to pray (or so I thought) but I could at least *long* to pray. At the same time I was gifted with the friendship of others whose love and faith became both shelter and beacon for me as I engaged in the quest for my own meeting with Jesus.

A great treasure found in the communities of L'Arche is the trusting, faith-filled hearts of many people with an intellectual disability. Often, people with limited intellectual capacity are gifted with open hearts, with deep compassion and spontaneous joy. In many ways, the more the intelligence is limited, the more the heart is unmasked. I do not want to generalize too strongly, but is it not often true that by using our intelligence we learn to conceal our true selves from one another? There is a wisdom of the heart which is given when we are content with simplicity, being vulnerable in relationship and unafraid of the earthiness of human experience. Such wisdom I glimpsed in the company of my brothers and sisters in that first community.

Over time I was able to allow my personal vulnerability to surface. I recognized my neediness and discovered it was not a matter for shame. In the rough-edged reality of daily life in community I learned about the nature of forgiveness: my own need for it and the power within me to exercise it. I met Jesus in a deeply personal way and knew that for the rest of my life that relationship would be fundamental.

After two years I left to return to my own country. I returned to family and friends who welcomed me and were interested to hear of my life abroad. However, they did not share the experiences which had begun to transform my life, their lives were moving on and our paths were somewhat divergent. Despite the vast distances, I maintained a sense of belonging with my original community and with others in

L'Arche around the world. I was held in a network of relationships which supported me and which led me to work with others towards the foundation of L'Arche in Australia.

The challenge of authentic growth in the group

In some ways I dreamed of recreating the experiences of the previous years in Canada and I lived painfully the disillusionment that must be traversed if authenticity is to be discovered. One cannot recreate, in any one group or relationship, the experience one has lived in another. Every group, every community, takes its identity as much from the character and diversity of its members as from its inspirational base or its mission. Accordingly, as membership of a group changes, so too does the life of the group. One can never quite grasp it and say 'Yes, this is it and this is how it will be from now on'. All one can know is 'this is how it is now and there will be change'. I had begun then to know the other side of a tension I had experienced years before with the Church, seeing that we tend either to institutionalize and stifle life, or we risk to be led by life and find ourselves in uncharted places where fears and insecurities can loom large. But life and possibilities for growth are found there too, intertwined with the fear.

Over the years I have struggled with the feelings of grief and loss which arise when individuals leave my community. Today, after nineteen years, there are five others from the first couple of years who remain. Four of them are people with an intellectual disability. We have weathered many storms together. We have shared daily life, the joys of welcoming others into that life, the sadness of having to let go when their time came to move on. We have witnessed each other's struggle to grow and our resistance to growth, sometimes over long years. We have delighted in the moments of grace which have called us further than we ever imagined we could go. We have mourned difficult deaths and dreamed for the future. Today we recognize that we are written into each other's lives. I cannot tell my story without telling the story of those others. We have spent almost half our lives together and in each other's company we are now growing older. If we came together in the beginning because we needed a place of life and healing, we are also discovering, in a more conscious way, our call to provide that place for those who come today. We do not speak of it too much, but there is a covenant lived between us.

Refinding identity takes time

The passage of time, often over years, is key to the healing process for many of us. The story of one of my friends illustrates this. He

suffered lack of oxygen during a difficult birth and consequently has an intellectual disability. He is a person whose heart is truly unmasked. He cannot help but be drawn towards relationships with others and particularly with children. When he was twelve years old, his mother needed surgery. She had no one to care for him, so the doctor arranged for him to be admitted to an institution and, in fact, it was to be twelve years before he came out. Two years after he entered the institution his father died. His mother says that when they gave him the news, he did not cry, but he got up and began running around the room. Thus began a pattern of constant movement which seems to have become his way of managing his anguish. He could no longer be still. In the institution his 'difficult behaviour' had to be managed by medication. He lived in a ward with some thirty others, where the needs and difficulties of each one were so great that normal ways of relating were practically impossible. When I ask him now about his memories of those years he says it was 'not good'.

I first met him twenty years ago when I used to attend Sunday mass in that institution. A small group of us used to go each week to lead the singing and visit people. At that time, my friend used to work his way around every church service available. Unable to keep still, he would be wandering around during the service, giving instructions to all and sundry and in many ways acting the clown. It was a way to be noticed, a defence against unsatisfied longing for meaningful relationship. It was natural then for me to want to welcome him to L'Arche when our community began.

It is always a huge transition for a person to leave an institutional setting after many years, especially when they have been the years of childhood and adolescence. With a heart so open to others and without opportunities to develop relationships which anchored him securely within acceptable social boundaries, he now ranged far and wide. It seemed we spent hours running after him as he moved around parks, shopping centres, the neighbourhood, anywhere people congregated. It is always interesting to observe how typically people respond to the unexpected approach from a stranger: 'What's your name? Do you like dogs?' To the parish he brought his familiar pattern of behaviour in church. Together as a parish and as a community we accompanied him as he found his place of belonging.

It is thirteen years now since he came to L'Arche. Along the way he has built significant relationships with many people in our community. He is someone who calls us to unity. When we gather as a community he has to ensure that everyone is included, that everyone has a chance

to speak, that everyone joins in the singing. Because he has found a home for his heart, he is able to welcome others. Each week he invites me to dinner in his home, even if I am able to accept only once in three or four times. He is able to sit still at table, at prayer, in church on Sunday. He has found a place for his heart. He is proud and happy to be an uncle and longs for a deeper belonging with his own family. His family relationships are marked by the long absence experienced on both sides during the years when he was in the institution.

Today this man has, in some measure, integrated the wounds of his early life. In the process, he has had to live some painful passages. One which was particularly significant related to his understanding of holidays. After he had been with us for a few years we noticed that every year, when we went on holidays, he became quite ill and would have to be admitted to hospital. Eventually his doctor told us there was no physical cause for his illness and we needed to look elsewhere. Thus began the search that ended when we realized that when he was sent to the institution at twelve years of age he had been told he was going on a holiday. He had to discover a new meaning for that word. Time and time again we had to assure him that he would come home from holidays and that we would not abandon him. Equally important was the task of helping him recall his experience of his father's death, taking him to the grave, planting a bush and allowing him to say goodbye in a way that he never had. In short, it was to allow him the dignity of being a person who could face the reality of his life. His heart cannot bear deception, but it has grown in its capacity to bear his own pain.

Linked to this has been his journey in faith. The outward signs of that journey are manifested in his being more focused in times of prayer, in his ability to remain silent and in the heartfelt conviction with which he expresses his prayers for his family, his friends, and dogs, the creatures the most dear to him. Deeper than that I see that in his openness to relationships, in his compassionate presence to others in their moments of struggle and suffering, he is incarnating a spirituality. He lacks the words to expound it but I see a man who has learned how to live with his wounded heart. He has grown to maturity in the knowledge of who he is and does not need to flee what is painful in his past. He teaches me about the sacrament of the present moment.

Different needs are met in different groups

I have written much about L'Arche because it is the place where my own life has been transformed. It is, however, only one of the many

such places which offer support for people to work towards healing of broken relationships. It is also clear that, for those within L'Arche, there is often the need for a specific place of support outside the community, as there are times when an individual needs the support of more than one group. The story of another friend illustrates this.

She discovered L'Arche while she was in university, having met people with disabilities as part of her course of studies. In her own words she had been 'turned upside down by the encounter'. She was working in a sheltered workshop and requested a training placement in a L'Arche community. Early in the experience, she realized L'Arche would be a place of healing for the dysfunctional family situation from which she had come. As the eldest child, she had become over-responsible and unaware of her personal level of dysfunction. She recalls that in her family, meal times were to be endured: one ate quickly and left. In L'Arche she discovered the graceful and healing liturgy of the meal: time taken to prepare the food and the table, the traditions of community life which centred on meals, the time taken simply to be at table with one another, to share life in this daily rhythm.

After a year in the community, her parents separated and she entered therapy as a way of addressing the issues around family. She maintains it was the formation in L'Arche, the language and spirituality of the daily life where recognition of personal brokenness is understood as offering a way towards growth, which enabled her to take that step. Three years later she took a year off to care for her family and during that year, hit bottom on an emotional and physical level. The year following her return to the community, she was called to leadership and soon found her life a perpetual whirlwind, characterized by a raging need for control and overeating. She survived for two years and had to stop, recognizing that by now she had hit bottom on a spiritual level as well. After a few months she moved to another community of L'Arche, where she hoped the presence of a priest and a spiritual centre would enable her to live an integration of spirituality.

At this time she recognized her overeating for the compulsion it was and joined a twelve-step programme called Overeaters Anonymous. She says that in the first meeting she recognized what her life struggle had been, and the deep level of healing began the day she named her addiction. Her early years in L'Arche had given some external structure to her life, showing her a new way to live family. However, in Overeaters Anonymous she saw things within herself which she needed to relearn. The addiction to food had helped her survive the trauma of her childhood, and it took two and a half years for her to put

down sugar. She began to name her desperate need for control, seeing that her parents had never been there for her and she had never let God be God in her life. She recognized her underlying assumption had been that if your parents are not there for you, how can God be there for you? In naming her need for control, she touched her pride, her inability to ask for help, and recognized how she had hurt others through her need for control.

The third step in Overeaters Anonymous is a decision to turn one's will and life to God. This implies, for her, letting God be God, food be food, and life be life. She says that after two and a half years, the prayer of abandonment of Charles de Foucauld began to pray itself in her. She was learning to sit quietly and be guided, to co-operate with the flow of life and to respect the dignity of each person. The twelve-step structure gave her a way to live each day, not expecting that she be perfect, but that she be human.

In becoming abstinent from sugar, she began to recognize her fear of intimate relationships; that unconsciously her fear was that she would destroy the other, a fear which reflected her experience in her family. Having given up sugar, she says a space was created in her where she recognized she might be able to love someone. Until this point she had been naming celibacy as her way and recounts that no exclusive relationship had ever lasted more than a couple of months. Three years ago and a year after coming off sugar, she entered into a relationship which continues to transform her life. She says the freedom she has discovered in the twelve-step programme and the intimate relationship call her into a new understanding of her spirituality. At this point in her journey she is recognizing a need to redefine her way of belonging in her church, and is discovering that the process of integrating spirituality often demands that we relinquish established ways of relating as church.

The wheel has come full circle as she now renegotiates her belonging in L'Arche. She is a different person from the one who arrived sixteen years ago. Currently, she and her partner are associate members of their local L'Arche community. The challenge in their relationship with the community is whether they are willing to be involved in L'Arche community life other than when it is comfortable or convenient for them to do so.

Conclusion

The stories recounted here illustrate some of the possibilities for healing and refinding identity which are possible in the context of a

community or supportive network. To provide a dynamic place of human growth, the members of a group or community must be continually choosing to engage in the processes of their own growth. The change which healing brings means that we become, quite literally, new people. That in itself means change for the group as individual members are called to allow such changes to affect their lives. It is also true that the passage of different individuals into and out of membership of the group denotes significant change, a change which is not always easily borne by those who stay. The group then depends on adherence to stated values and principles, and to observance of established traditions to ensure continuity.

It is within the context of such change and continuity that healing of broken relationships is situated. The group itself provides the earth from which new understandings of self and of one's previous relationships can emerge. It provides a supportive environment where one's vulnerability can surface and be respected. It provides a place of challenge where the individual can be helped to name the liberating truths which lead to interior freedom and growth. In such a context, the group can be the 'significant other' for many people in their journey to refine their identity and build fundamental relationships.

NOTE

¹ L'Arche is an international federation of communities where people with an intellectual disability and others share a common life. It was founded by Jean Vanier in France in 1964.