

Unexpected Communion: Purpose, Vocation, and Developmental Disability

Kevin S. Reimer



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L'Arche is an international federation of Christian communities for the developmentally disabled founded by Jean Vanier. This communication briefly explores the purpose and vocation found in these communities, including association with the development of compassionate persistence. In a remarkable inversion, purpose and vocation are sharpened to the extent that we are able to embrace hidden disability and brokenness.

I am seated at a long table with a developmentally disabled individual named David. We are in the dining room of his home in the American West. The day is blistering hot and the room is without air conditioning. David is doing a puzzle. It is a ghastly affair with thousands of microscopic pieces all roughly the same color. I detest puzzles. But this is a kind of nirvana for David. He murmurs to himself, making soft grunts of approval. He carefully arranges similar pieces in the center of the table. Unlike other puzzle masters, he makes no attempt to outline the work with edge pieces first. He does not consult the picture on the cardboard cover of the puzzle box. I ask him how things are going. He looks up and smiles a twisted leer that might frighten a small child but entirely lacks malice. He rocks back and forth in his seat, holding himself with short wheezing noises that are pure happiness. I look up and notice that the "paintings" on the dining room walls are actually completed puzzles of intricate design. David, who cannot dress himself, is a puzzle prodigy.

Sherry is a young caregiver assistant from Cornwall in England. She comes in the front door and joins us at the table. It turns out that Sherry and David are close friends. She tells me about David's history and his remarkable penchant for puzzle art. The conversation turns to his disabilities which result from traumatic brain injury in childhood. David was accidentally dropped on his head as an infant. Sherry acknowledges the tragedy but then tells a story that again reveals the great secret of compassionate love in L'Arche communities for the developmentally disabled:

There was a day when I was running around like crazy and all that stuff. Like I told you before, David would stop to make me sit down to give me a gift or give me a blessing or whatever. This was when I was brand new to L'Arche, so I hadn't really experienced it before. He sat me down, and I think that I was pretty emotional and flustered. He gave me this blessing, I have had so many since then but this was the first, and his favorite song was "How Great Thou Art." So he sings this, but it was a medley of "How Great Thou Art" mixed with his own songs and then he would come back to the final refrain of "How Great Thou Art." He sings this song and he was saying,

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“thank you God for this, thank you God for that, thank you God for Sherry that she’s back from the store.” I was floored by the whole thing. I could *feel* God in the room. Then at the end of it, he put the sign of the cross on my forehead. [eyes filled with tears] I was completely stunned because that was something my dad always would do before we went to bed at night growing up. But it was like, how did you know what that would do for me? I am home even though I am not. I belong here. I am home. I am beloved.

Sherry turns her attention to David, tenderly conversing in a muted whisper. Their easy love and familiarity are elements of an unexpected communion. In the economy of the moment they are my teachers. At the puzzle table, there are no requirements for vocational achievement. The opinions of others do not matter. Possessions are irrelevant. The communion sacrament is the free gift of compassionate love found in broken fragments miraculously reconstituted through the intuition and generosity of the poor.¹

L'Arche, French for *the Ark*, is an international federation of Christian communities for the developmentally disabled established by renowned humanitarian Jean Vanier. Located in some thirty-five countries worldwide, L'Arche defies convention for compassion, love, and vocation. In L'Arche, caregiver assistant and disabled core member live together in community. Many form relationships characterized by deep and profound respect. Vanier writes about this unexpected communion, where the poor (disabled) become teachers, mirroring elemental humanity and modeling deep, authentic faith in Christ.² Cognitive and developmental asymmetries are incidental, Vanier notes, to Jesus's essential concern for the downtrodden, marginalized, and wounded. This is nowhere more evident than in the fourth chapter of John's gospel, where Jesus risks the public credibility of his ministry for the sake of a financially and relationally impoverished Samaritan woman.³ In a similar manner, relationships like the one shared between Sherry and David consolidate purpose and vocation in discovery of God's unfolding Kingdom marked by the reconciliation and healing of persons.

L'Arche is a place of erudite theological implication. It is also a flashpoint in behavioral research and psychology. Caregiver assistants like Sherry work for nearly nothing. Retirement benefits are nonexistent. Hours are long and emotional demands taxing. Quite a number of caregivers persist in L'Arche for years and decades, sometimes leaving six-figure incomes to live with people like David. L'Arche caregivers are considered by some contemporary behavioral researchers to be living altruists.

An equal number would offer a spirited refutation, making L'Arche a lightning rod for debate. Scientific controversy notwithstanding, L'Arche provides an astonishing context for the study of moral action—a movement of compassionate exemplarity in the tradition of Mother Teresa. Sherry and David participate in an unexpected communion framed by the redemptive potential of the cross. But they are hardly saints. L'Arche communities are populated with everyday individuals who get head colds and hurt feelings. These are ordinary homes that struggle with earthy concerns. What animates compassionate love when conflict abounds and emotions are charged? What biological, developmental, and ecosystemic variables are implicated in the persistence of compassionate love? How might we create a rigorous scientific program to study compassion in L'Arche without “reducing” it away?

These questions frame the past decade of research on L'Arche. Four grants have made the work possible. The Fetzer Institute supported initial studies (2001–2003). As L'Arche was a newcomer to the scientific community, the work focused on qualitative interview data eliciting baseline motivations for caregiver compassion. Of interest were *novice* (less than one year of service) and *expert* (greater than three years of service) caregiver assistants. Relative to novices, experts constructed sophisticated goal frameworks, suggesting a capacity for mature self-reflection along with the application of Christian commitment in the difficult circumstances routinely experienced as part of community life.⁴ The work continued with analysis of the interview response narrative using a computational knowledge repre-

sentation model known as *latent semantic analysis* (LSA). This afforded opportunity to probe implicit semantic associations in narrative with respect to moral action (i.e., justice, bravery, caring). Expert narratives made implicit associations with regard to caring trait vocabularies. This was particularly evident in expert construction of future-oriented simulations involving compassionate and caring behavior. Experts were better able to envision themselves sticking with compassionate goals despite the turbulence of everyday community life.⁵ These and other findings were compiled in a book entitled *Living L'Arche* (2009).

The Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences generously funded second and third L'Arche project installments (2007–2011).⁶ These studies responded to critique that exemplarity in L'Arche is idiosyncratic – unfit for generalization regarding the biological, developmental, and ecosystemic underpinnings of compassionate love. To address this concern, we used economic games (i.e., public goods) to identify compassionately charitable exemplars in the laboratory setting. These *behavioral paradigm exemplars* (BPEs) were subsequently administered the same interview used with both novice and expert L'Arche caregivers. Without giving away findings still in stages of dissemination, we found noteworthy similarities between BPE and L'Arche caregiver narratives. Emboldened, we designed a novel economic game to simulate the perils confronted by Holocaust rescuers – individuals in Nazi-occupied Europe who compassionately sheltered Jews in their homes at tremendous personal risk. BPEs played this *rescuer paradigm* game while undergoing functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) of the brain. Future work will involve scanning L'Arche caregivers playing the same rescuer paradigm game, in order to establish a durable association between laboratory and real world exemplarity. We expect the work to confer an improved understanding of neurological recruitment associated with compassionate love.

The fourth project installment recently garnered support from the John Templeton Foundation (2013–2015).⁷ In addition to fMRI scans linking BPEs to real world exemplars, the current work will consider the persistence of compassionate love in expert L'Arche caregiver assistants. The protocol is mostly experimental, whereby caregivers will participate in economic games (i.e., public goods, rescuer

paradigm) while undergoing electroencephalography (EEG) and measurement of skin conductance. Taking a cue from recent studies of empathy in social neuroscience, caregivers will participate in an eye-tracking paradigm. Visual fixation will be measured while L'Arche caregivers perceive scenes involving people or contingencies evoking compassionate care. Sampling will be conducted in late 2013 and early 2014. The work is capstone for an enduring partnership with L'Arche USA, which has warmly and enthusiastically embraced the project. For the sake of community members such as Sherry and David, L'Arche is cautious about providing access to behavioral scientists with admittedly strange equipment, questions, and concerns. We are deeply indebted to these extraordinary communities for their good faith and humor.

L'Arche is more than a convenience sample. It is an example of divine grace in my research career. Some years ago, the famed developmental theorist John Bowlby argued for primacy of trust in developmental trajectories characterized by attributes such as compassion. Trusting children who enjoy secure attachment relationships with caregivers will explore more confidently, share more readily, and love more profoundly.⁸ They are able to empathize with others, taking on different perspectives and celebrating the contributions of community. Trust comes with security; security comes with love. Many arrive in L'Arche with wounds and developmental gaps associated with insecure attachments – myself included. We struggle to authentically give and receive love. We discover ourselves to harbor unrecognized impairments. Not coincidentally, this recognition traces growing relationships with people like David. In a startling paradox, we learn that all are disabled and yet worthy of unqualified respect. We differ from the core members of L'Arche only in terms of practiced capacity to hide our disabilities from public view.

God uses L'Arche to redeem difficult hope. Attachment insecurities can be healed. Trust can be reclaimed. Love can flow freely in relationships characterized by mutuality, respect, and genuine affirmation. Sherry and David celebrate an unexpected communion, making space for what Bowlby called a *goal-corrected partnership*.⁹ Goals are fixed at the center of identity, purpose, and vocation. Relationship permits these goals to be shared and

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discovered in a secure, safe environment. The benefits of this exchange are hardly limited to immediate partners in the relationship dyad. The great secret of L'Arche is readily transferable, even to incipient developmental scientists such as myself. Sherry, David, and many others in L'Arche reveal my deepest inadequacies and potentialities. Over and over again, they show me grace in God's purposes for my work. Happily eroding the dogma of objectivity conferred through scientific training, they have become my friends. Because of their compassionate example, I am empowered to study, with scientific integrity, research questions that might otherwise have been relegated to academic backwaters. Because of their compassionate example, I am afforded the privilege of announcing to a broken world the immanent and agentic work of God. ○

Notes

¹Kevin S. Reimer, *Living L'Arche: Stories of Compassion, Love, and Disability* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), 76–7.

²Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1999).

³Jean Vanier, personal communication, March 7, 2013.

⁴Lawrence J. Walker and Kevin S. Reimer, "The Relationship between Moral and Spiritual Development," in P. Benson,

P. King, L. Wagener, and E. Roehlkepartain, *The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 2005), 265–301.

⁵Kevin S. Reimer, Christina Young, Brandon Birath, Michael L. Spezio, Gregory Peterson, James Van Slyke, and Warren S. Brown, "Maturity Is Explicit: Self-Importance of Traits in Humanitarian Moral Identity," *Journal of Positive Psychology* 7 (2012): 36–44.

⁶Project co-investigators included Warren S. Brown (Graduate School of Psychology, Fuller Theological Seminary), Gregory Peterson (South Dakota State University), Michael L. Spezio (California Institute of Technology and Scripps College), and James Van Slyke (Fresno Pacific University). We are grateful for Science and Transcendence Advanced Research Series (STARS) awards from CTNS.

⁷Project co-investigators include Warren S. Brown (Graduate School of Psychology, Fuller Theological Seminary), Steven R. Quartz (California Institute of Technology), and Michael L. Spezio (California Institute of Technology and Scripps College). We are grateful to the John Templeton Foundation for generous project support.

⁸John Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*, vol. 1, *Attachment* (New York: Basic, 1969). Also, L. Alan Sroufe, Byron Egeland, Elizabeth A. Carlson, and W. Andrew Collins, *The Development of the Person: The Minnesota Study of Risk and Adaptation from Birth to Adulthood* (New York: Guilford, 2010).

⁹Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*, vol. 1, *Attachment*.

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Who are we?

We are a new affiliate group of the American Scientific Affiliation (ASA), formed to encourage Christian women to consider careers in science, technology, engineering, and math, and to support them in those careers.

What are we doing?

We are in the process of forming a CWIS Board to provide direction to the group and to organize volunteers to lead the initial activities. The first-year activities will include these projects:

- ◆ Setting up a web-based system for bringing potential mentors and mentees together
- ◆ Developing and posting personal stories of Christian women leaders in science to provide role models
- ◆ Using a blog and forum to discuss questions and to offer insights
- ◆ Organizing women-centered activities at the 2014 ASA/CSCA/CiS Annual Meeting

How do I join?

If you are an ASA member, sign in. Click on Chapters and Groups → Affiliates → CWIS, and then click on "Join Group" to make yourself a member of the CWIS affiliate.

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What can I do now?

Share this link via your own email lists and organizations, and encourage women to get involved. We will be adding more content soon.

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