

## The cult of normalcy and finding genuine wholeness in Sri Lanka

*"We do not discover who we are, we do not reach true humanness, in a solitary state; we discover it through mutual dependency, in weakness, in learning through belonging."*

*(Jean Vanier, founder of L'Arche, French for Noah's Ark) a network of communities for people with intellectual disabilities)*



I've been reading a book called Searching for Dignity: Conversations on human dignity, theology and disability. The chapter I've just finished was by a man called Thomas Reynolds. In it, he talks about the way disability can unsettle us, how it can be viewed as the way some people are seen to be "lacking something basic to what is understood as human", how it can be seen as something which has gone wrong. His proposal is to change the way disability is thought about – to completely shift the conversation.

He describes 'the cult of normalcy', where we take certain experiences of being human and ascribe commonality to them, making them become a set of standards that are applied to everyone. This leads us to set up a divide between able and disabled, or us vs them. In actual fact there is no one model of a 'natural', able bodied person. This is encouraging because it means there is also the possibility of deconstructing the binaries that exist between what we define as 'ability' and 'disability'.

Reynolds suggests, quite beautifully I think, that rather than think about what we believe counts for ability – the capacity to think rationally, for example – we should start from human vulnerability and discover what we actually share amongst all our differences. He argues that "genuine wholeness is found not through bodily completeness or ability but through an acknowledgement of vulnerability that is made concrete in relations of mutual giving to and receiving from others".

In other words, we need each other.

I was reflecting on this idea during my recent visit to Sri Lanka. I was there to discuss with our partner there, the Methodist Church, a new project which works with people with disabilities in the areas of education and vocational training. We were able to travel up to the Northern and Eastern provinces and meet with some of the people who will be participating in this project, along with their carers.

On the last afternoon we arrived at dusk at a church in a small town. Towns in this area of the Northern Province were quite significantly and recently impacted by the war. Many people have only returned to their homes in the last few years. About twenty people came to meet with us – people with disabilities as well as the carers of people and children with disabilities. A few people's stories stuck with me.

One elderly woman talked about how people from that area used to be full of dignity and proud people because they were farmers and they were good at farming and producing food. But early on in the war, 21 years ago, her nine year old daughter was hit with shrapnel from a bomb and completely paralysed. Eventually they had to flee their homes and she had to carry her daughter across hundreds of kilometres, having to move on constantly until 2009 at the end of the war when she was finally able to return to her home. But now she can't really work, she's older and is the full time carer to her daughter, there are very few services to assist her in caring for her daughter.

I met another man who had seen most of his family die during the war. He had lost the use of his legs, and was now in a wheelchair. He had been married but his wife had left him to care for their two year

old daughter on his own. He needs to earn an income, but every day is a challenge for him. Banks won't give him loans as they don't believe he has the capacity to pay them back. At the moment he's trying to raise chickens to earn a living but without a bank loan it's fairly slow progress.

These stories weren't unique. They were common to all those people in the room that afternoon and to hundreds of other people with disabilities and their carers in Sri Lanka.

As I listened to these stories I found myself quite confronted by the disparity in our lives. I struggled to reconcile in my mind how I could exist in the same world as these people but have such a different experience of it due to my supposed 'normalcy' and the place where I live. I certainly don't have answers to those questions and I wouldn't want to ever stop asking them. But I've really appreciated and found some peace in thinking about these questions through the lens of shared human vulnerability and our need for each other and for community, regardless of our ability or disability.

As people of faith I believe we are called to community and to really thinking about what that means. We are called to acknowledge our humanness and our shared vulnerability in order to more fully participate in the community of God and be able to welcome others into that also. When we start from our shared vulnerability, "lack of ability isn't a flaw detracting from some idea of a pure and complete human nature. Rather, it is testimony to the fact that we – all human beings – receive our existence from each other".

Hannah Ireland UnitingWorld 12-2013

<http://unitingworld.org.au/blogs/the-cult-of-normalcy-and-finding-genuine-wholeness-in-sri-lanka/>

**Photo caption:** A student from an Inclusive Education Unit set up by the Methodist Church of Sri Lanka's Deaf Link



[http://www.larche.org/en/discover\\_larche/key\\_people\\_of\\_the\\_federation/jean\\_vanier\\_founder\\_of\\_larche](http://www.larche.org/en/discover_larche/key_people_of_the_federation/jean_vanier_founder_of_larche)  
<http://carleio.com/2014/03/25/larche-links/>