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EVIDENCE OF LIFE IN THESE TIMES

THIS WEEK'S CHICAGOAN

LUCA BADETTI

L'ARCHE CHICAGO COMMUNITY COORDINATOR

L'Arche is a French word for "the ark," and L'Arche communities are communities of faith in which people with and without intellectual disabilities share life together. The members with disabilities are called "core members," from *cor*, the Latin word for heart, because they are the heart of the community.

We cook together, eat together, pray together. The focus is sharing time—just being together. But of course there are practical things too, like checking medication or taking core members to appointments.

Sometimes people have a lot of stereotypes of people with disabilities. There are two I see often. They're either considered like animals: "Look how they eat!" Or the opposite: "Sweet little angels, they're happy all the time." But no, they're neither angels nor animals. They're just people. In L'Arche, after a while, the question of who has disabilities and who doesn't, it kind of takes a backseat.

I think people with disabilities should be at the center of society. It's good to live among people who are different from us. If we just stick with people who are what some might call "able-bodied" or "able-minded," we're missing a chance to open our hearts. People with disabilities need support, but we need them too. There is an invitation there to go slower, to live at the level of the heart, to realize how interdependent we are.

When I lived in the L'Arche community close to Boston, I was away on vacation for some time, and I got back to the house, and Jimmy, one of the core members with Down syndrome, comes up to me and asks, "Did you miss me while you were gone?" Now, most of us easily say, "I missed you," but we don't always have the courage to say, "Am I important to you?" There was love and friendship in that question. There was courage; there was vulnerability.

There is an invitation in L'Arche to focus on being rather than doing. It's OK not to go fast. It's OK to slow down. Recognize our mutual need. Accept that it's OK, that we don't have it all together. It's through coming together that we grow together, not by leaving people out or trying to do it on our own. I'm thinking of people who have very profound disabilities, who might not be able to do a lot, but their presence is what's important. When you're with them, there can be a quality of listening or being present or even just being quiet together.

The culture in the U.S. is often focused on work. I find it interesting in restaurants when they say, "Are you still working on that?" as if food is a job. Or we talk about "spending" time or "investing" in relationships. Those are all marketplace terms.

Some people think that the people with disabilities are my clients or patients, and they're not. It can be hard to explain it in words unless you come experience it yourself. —AS TOLD TO ANNE FORD

"People with disabilities need support, but we need them too."



ROSARIO ZAVALA