

# Living at the Level of Your Heart

*by Therese Vanier (1923-2014)*

As a young medical student in 1950, my 'will' seemed to be all-important in living out my faith in the Roman Catholic tradition.

The primacy of the 'will' suited my temperament with its need to control – but I was to find myself very much out of control and faced with a sense of powerlessness verging on panic when faced with injured and suffering individuals. With help I coped with my fears. I remember certain important challenges such as a teaching session on a children's ward when I was told in no uncertain terms to 'Get down on your knees, woman! That's the place from which to examine a child's abdomen!'. The full implications continue to resonate fifty years on.

Over many years working as a doctor in a number of different contexts my spirituality centred on the eucharistic presence of Jesus. As in my medical work the 'body' was the focus; in this case the emphasis in prayer was upon the body of Jesus 'given for you'.

In 1971 I participated in the Faith and Light pilgrimage to Lourdes with people with learning difficulties and their families. As a doctor, I spent much time with Billy who lived in a mental handicap hospital, and with his very elderly mother. Each had a severe chronic illness, and it was clear that Billy's prayer was "not to go back to hospital" and his mother's prayer was "Please don't let me die before Billy or he won't have anyone ..."

In caring for these two distressed and vulnerable people, the body was once again to the fore. As I cared for their bodies, I could not but listen to their hearts. Again, I had a sense of powerlessness, faced with my inability to help them in their deepest needs. On arrival back home, both their prayers were answered. Billy died in his mother's house before being taken back to hospital.

The experience of caring for Billy and his mother made me question my conventional medical career. By now I was a consultant and, although aware of my competence, I was also aware of the need to care better for patients who were dying. To this end I often visited St Christopher's Hospice. I also knew the community of L'Arche in France, which had begun in 1964 when my brother Jean invited two men with learning difficulties to live with him. By 1972 I found myself working part time both in L'Arche and at St Christopher's.

The experience of working as a member of community centred upon people who were dying and, in another context, living among people with learning difficulties, drew me closer to those who live at the level of their hearts. Such people are dependent upon others and thus vulnerable and often powerless, revealing deep human needs and longings which are in fact common to us all: the longing for relationships of love, the longing to 'belong' and thus to experience harmony and unity within our surroundings. Here I discovered meaning in my life and a practical living out of the gospel message.

I found myself among Christians of different traditions, those of other faiths and people who do not acknowledge a religious affiliation, united in seeking to meet the deep needs within others. This is a painful process as our own needs resonate with the needs of those for whom we care. Thus we become conscious of our own fears, our potential for violence, our vulnerability and our longings. We discover also an unexpected rekindling of our capacity for joy and for love: unexpected because while it is hard to put into words, it is an experience of the intimate relationship between joy and suffering, between the Cross and Resurrection.

We discover the urgent need for unity among ourselves if we are to meet the needs of those for whom we care. Thus, for me, such communities as L'Arche and St Christopher's are fertile seedbeds for the growth of a spirituality that opens wide the door to ecumenism.

Within our interdenominational L'Arche communities we find ourselves divided when we celebrate the eucharist. The eucharist which had previously been a focus of unity and central to my own spirituality has therefore become a source of painful division over the past twenty-five years. I doubt whether I could live with the pain except that I have come to understand ever more deeply that eucharistic division reflects and finds its source within all other human divisions: our fragmented human condition requires us to live in a spirit of vulnerability and healing.

During his last meal with his disciples Jesus gave them his body as bread to eat; he also washed their feet. Within our communities we celebrate a liturgy in context of the thirteenth chapter of St John: here we touch the body of Christ in one another, here we express our wish to be united and to love tenderly, holding the feet (or the hands) of our neighbour, gently washing them and anointing them with sweet-smelling oils.

Not long before the Passover meal Jesus experienced the gentle ministration of sweet-smelling oil on his feet in a house in Bethany. Criticism of that action – “Why was this ointment not sold and the money given to the poor?” – led Jesus to respond that “the poor you have always with you ...” (John 12). Did he mean “the poor” as receptacles for our charity – or that the poor were there to remind us of our common humanity which Jesus shared with us?

Shortly after my retirement from medical work in 1988, a depression brought about the disintegration of much of my “system of belief” leaving me with a sense of inner chaos and total loss of control. At this time, I read books on cosmology and quantum physics. I found within them the revelation of a spirituality of the infinite – both infinitely small and infinitely great. In some ways my own inner and outer world had a place in all this and my horizons broadened immeasurably.

Through the experience of depression and of life alongside people living at the level of their hearts ‘mystery’ has become the central focus of the spirit in which I try to live. Figuratively – and at times literally – kneeling before the body and mind of another human being is “bowing down” before the mystery of a person and the mystery of that which transcends our humanity, whether or not we use the name of God. For throughout the ages humanity has used different names and different ways to express the inexpressible.

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