

# Who is Handicapped?

by Thérèse Vanier

**M**Y ACQUAINTANCE with Jane goes back now many years. She has Down's syndrome and she also suffers from congenital heart disease. So if you put her into a category she is called mentally handicapped. She is also physically disabled; she becomes breathless easily if she tries to go up too many stairs or climbs a hill. When she was seventeen she asked her mother, "Mum, am I handicapped?" her mother said, "Yes, Jane you are." And Jane cried and cried. She was inconsolable for several days. Finally she stopped crying, and she never mentioned being handicapped again. She was one of the first people to come live in our L'Arche community near Canterbury in the south of England.

And so it was that I came to know Jane quite well, because I was also in that community for a couple of years. At one time Jane and I were talking about what she would like to do. She said she wanted to be a nurse. It is true that Jane has a lot of the qualities of a good nurse. She is straightforward, she is thoughtful, and she doesn't stand any nonsense. She would have made a very good nurse in many ways, but there was no way she would have the grades to start nurse's training or the physical stamina. And so Jane had to learn that she would never be a nurse in the ordinary sense of the word. But what Jane has done over the last few years is go to a school for multi-disabled children once a week and to work there helping the children. To her this is vitally important. I suspect that it is also vitally important to the children that she helps. And so Jane is nursing.

A few years ago when I was visiting the community again, I had the opportunity to talk to Jane. I remember asking her one day, "What do you find the hardest about living with a lot of people in the community?" Jane thought a long time and then said very slowly, because she speaks slowly and in a deep voice, "I find it very difficult to love every body. So I said, "Well Jane, that is what I also find very difficult. So what can we do about it?" Jane again thought for a long time and then said, "You just go on trying, don't you." And I had to agree that you just go on trying. Later, at a big meeting in Liverpool of our L'Arche communities in England and northern Europe, I saw Jane again, and as we chatted I said to her, "You know Jane, I've never forgotten what you said some years ago about the hardest thing being to know how to love everybody. I'm still trying." Jane looked straight at me and said, "Well, that's good." I sometimes think Jane would make a

very good spiritual director. So that's the first part of what I wish to say.

The second concerns a man whom I don't know; I have only read about him. There was a conference somewhere about mentally handicapped people, and part of the conference was restricted to helpers as opposed to the mentally handicapped people themselves. It so happened that a mentally handicapped man slipped in and heard the lecture that was not intended for the likes of him. It was all about the prevention of mental handicap and how disabilities could be detected before birth and prevented. When he got back to his group home that night, someone said to him, "Well, what was the conference like?" He was silent at first and then said, "They want to get rid of us." He had understood completely what was going on.

Where does the word "handicap" come from? I hadn't really thought much about it, but it refers, of course, to the additional burden placed on the outstanding competitor. We still use the word in that sense that was talking about horse racing or golf. And how do we use it when we refer to people as handicapped? A burden? Yes, but do we see these people as outstanding competitors? Those of us who have normal bodies and minds—and perhaps we do—what do we think of them when we talk about handicapped people? We think about people who can't be independent, who can't cope, who need help, who may not understand what's going on around them, whom we cannot always understand because they cannot speak clearly, who cannot see, who have difficulty hearing. In short, we don't think of the person, we think of the handicap. And so, who is really handicapped? It is Jane who had congenital heart disease and Down's syndrome and who cannot be independent, but who know that the fundamental question in life is, "Can you love others?" Or is it myself, who can be extremely busy and half the time don't think about whether I am loving people or not, and who will have great difficulty sharing any disabilities that I have, in accepting them, and in accepting help from them. So which of us is the more handicapped?

Let me take as another example a friend of mine called Elizabeth. She has difficulty making herself understood, and she can barely manage to get around. If she wants take the subway to London she cannot use the escalator by herself because she would fall. So she waits by the side, trying to catch people as they flow by: "Please, will you help me to get on?" She may spend fifteen or twenty minutes waiting for someone to help her. Who is the more handicapped? Elizabeth or the people who go by and seem not to notice? And in the hospital where I work, who is the more handicapped? An old man dying peacefully, or his son who cannot bear to be with him? Jacques who cannot sleep at night without a small respirator, or the people in the same railway carriage who suggest that perhaps he should not be travelling at all.

Now I don't want it to seem as though I'm playing with words. I'm not saying it is to be welcomed that, for instance, children are born deformed or mentally handicapped, or that they develop a handicap following something like encephalitis, or that people have to go around in wheel chairs rather than on their feet, or that parents have to care for a multi-handicapped child, or that people have to be ill or suffer mental illness. What I am saying is simple that this is the reality of our world. Are, then, the people who are disabled merely to be pitied, rehabilitated, rendered as "normal" as possible; or is there actually some aspect of their lives which is the intrinsic importance and which needs to be shared? Of course, rehabilitation is vital and, of course, health care must improve so that fewer children are disabled. I'm certainly saying that we should give thanks if we have normal bodies and normal minds; but I'm also saying, "Look around and see what there is to be learned today from people whose bodies and minds may not be functioning well."

Where shall we find an answer to the question, "who is handicapped?" Our answer will depend on what we think life is ultimately about. If we regard it mainly as a matter of achieving maximum independence and maximum productivity, of our reason always prevailing over the heart, of acquiring more and more possessions, more power, more pleasure—if that is what we think life is about, clearly a mind and body functioning well are more important than a heart that loves well. But if we value other things such as relationships, interdependence, communication, acceptance, tolerance, concern, celebration, and love—if we think these aspects of life are the more important, then we have to think seriously about people whose minds and bodies don't work too well but who do actually live their dependence on other people, who cannot live without relationships, and whose capacity to love and be loved is undamaged.

As Christians, we don't have to look far in the Gospel to hear Jesus ask, "What does it profit a man if he gain the whole world and suffer the loss of his soul?" or, in another translation, "suffer the loss of his own life?" Or consider the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the poor; blessed are those who are hungry; blessed are the meek." And what about Saint Paul's "when I am weak, then I am strong" and "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise and what is weak in the world to shame the strong"? One could go on quoting, couldn't one? The Gospel doesn't seem to have much room for independent people of great productivity who don't have any time to discover who they are.

But what can we learn from people who may have no interest in the Gospel? What is their answer to, "Who is handicapped?" In our western

world today there is a new awareness of interdependence. An example that springs to mind is ecology. Man is realizing that he needs the earth on which he lives; there is a new respect for nature and conservation, a growing understanding that men and women need each other. One consequence is a proliferation of little communities of people who have come together for whatever reason. I know a community in England who come together to bake bread. Not all these communities will have a Christian basis, but there is something drawing people together in small groups now.

Modern science, too, had its insights into interdependence. Recently I read *The Turning Point* by a physicist called Fritjof Capra. Here is what he has to say about the new physics:

Quantum theory has shown that subatomic particles are not isolated grains of matter but are probability patterns, interconnections in an inseparable cosmic web that includes the human observer and his consciousness. Relativity theory has made the cosmic web come alive, so to speak, by revealing its intrinsically dynamic character, by showing that its activity is the very essence of its being. In modern physics the image of the universe as a machine has been transcended by a view of its one indivisible, dynamic whole whose parts are essentially interrelated and can be understood only as patterns of a cosmic process. At the subatomic level the interrelation and interactions between the parts of the whole are more fundamental than the parts themselves.

Again:

Atoms consist of particles, and these particles are not made of any material stuff. When we observe them, we never see any substance. What we observe are dynamic patterns continually changing into one another, the continuous dance of energy.

I was struck by the words of “the dance of energy” because “energy” is a word which springs to my mind when I think of the resurrection of Christ and the spiritual energy that was then let loose in the world. To me the dance of energy has a connotation of freedom and liberation. We seem to be discovering that our whole universe is built on interconnectedness, relationships, interdependence, and that it is these phenomena that result in a continuous dance of energy.

Now I'd like to take a quantum leap from the subatomic to the human

being and to the question that I have been asking myself and you, “Who is handicapped?” I think we should leave abstraction and go back to the people. I’ll tell you about Paul, a mentally handicapped man I know who is in our L’Arche community in London. Paul can be great fun, but I don’t find him very easy to be with most of the time. A few years ago I was with Paul and see others in Westminster Cathedral. Afterwards, as we were coming down the steps of the Cathedral, our attention was caught by one of the gentlemen who can often be found outside Westminster Cathedral rather the worse for drink. My inclination when I meet a drunken man is to go the other way. Paul’s inclination, however, was different. He went straight up to the man, saw that he was having difficulty, put aside his own dislike of stairs, took the man’s arms, and helped him down the two or three remaining stairs and then sat down with him—because by this time the man was pretty incapable of standing. So Paul sat down with him on the steps of the Cathedral, and it was clear that Paul might stay there for the rest of the evening. My concern, needless to say, was to get back home, and so I said, “Come on Paul; we’ve got to catch the bus.” Whereupon Paul turned to his companion and said, “Well, goodbye, he’s in a hurry, I’ve got to go.” (Paul mixes up his genders.) I suppose I’m now no more likely to help drunken men down steps that I was before; but I might at least recall the incident when meeting people I’m afraid of becoming involved with. Paul probably wouldn’t understand the meaning of the phrase, “afraid of becoming involved,” and he certainly wouldn’t understand it in practice. But he taught me something by turning to that man very naturally and saying “Goodbye.”

It does seem that our world is going to have to make a choice between confrontation—which is what is going on now—and interdependence. And who is going to make it? How can it be made? How can we be involved in making it? It requires a leap, quite a leap, but a leap that Christians must make; it is a leap into foolishness, of actually believing that when we are weak we are strong, that people who have been labelled “weak” have in fact a strength that we have yet to acquire. ❧