

**Message – Cincinnati Friends Meeting
October 10, 2010**

Blessed are the Weak ...

By Donne Hayden

A couple of weeks ago, I was standing in the checkout line at a grocery store. Just past the bagging area stood two middle-aged men, both wearing bright yellow t-shirts with some sort of child's drawing on them. The man with Down syndrome was very short; the other quite tall. They stood close together, and the taller man was very protective. Each time the short man seemed about to move away, the other man grabbed his hand and pulled him back close. Once the short man hugged the tall man, an affectionate, back-patting embrace, and then as they parted, he reached up and playfully pulled the other man's nose. The two men hovered just past the bagging area, waiting until the woman in front of me finished and paid, and then, holding each other's hands, they followed her out of the store. Their interaction was remarkable in its unexpected sweetness; unconcerned with what people thought, they were gentle and loving with each other. When I went out to the car where my grandson waited for me, I told him about them. "I saw them, too," he said. They had come out of the store holding hands, and did so all the way to their car. He too was touched by their simple un-self-consciousness affection for each other, and a little of their sweetness entered our brief conversation about them.

All this brings to mind the year I taught high school English (grades 9-12, one class at each grade level) in Monte Vista, Colorado. The small high school was without a principal that year, and the pervasive atmosphere was antagonistic and unpleasant. A

dominant group of kids across grade levels taunted anyone who made an attempt to learn. To avoid their sarcastic remarks—made in class to anyone who raised a hand or tried to participate in any way—kids who wanted to learn, kept quiet and said nothing. It wasn't only other students who were the targets; the sophomore class took pride in having "run off" several teachers in its progression as a group through the school system. And I was never clear on what happened to the previous principal and why the school district was unable to replace him that year. It was a sad and difficult place to be, both as a student and as a teacher. Cruelty was the order of the day at Monte Vista High School. All except in one room.

All the kids with physical, emotional, and mental challenges, ranging from cerebral palsy to Down syndrome to autism, were in one classroom together—in that time and place, they called it the "Handicapped Classroom." Once, for some reason, I had to go to the "Handicapped Classroom." As I watched their interaction, I was struck by the difference in the way they treated each other and the way my so-called "normal" students treated each other. I saw in that room full of kids with enormous challenges the same gentle sweetness and un-self-conscious affection that I saw in the two men at the grocery store. Through the rest of the year, I noticed the contrast in their behavior and that of the "normal" students. When the "handicapped" kids were out in the regular part of the school—walking in lines to the lunchroom, or going to the art room—they didn't pay much attention to the "normal" kids, who certainly paid no attention to them, unless it was to hurl a hateful remark. Instead the "handicapped" kids focused on helping each other maneuver the crowded hallways, smiling and greeting teachers they

recognized. There was a sort of buffer around them—perhaps it was love; perhaps it was the Light; perhaps it was God.

Someone with a unique understanding of the contribution of people with disabilities is Xavier Le Pichon, a deeply spiritual man, who also happens to be a geophysicist and pioneer in the field of plate tectonics. In an example of “letting one’s life speak,” Le Pichon lived for almost 30 years at the original L’Arche community in France, a community “centered around people with mental disabilities” where he and his wife raised their six children. In 2003, the family moved to an intentional community they helped found to provide a “retreat for families caring for a loved one with mental illness.”¹ In his essay *Ecce Homo* (“Behold Humanity”), Le Pichon asserts that caring for the weak and suffering members of our society is an evolutionary step toward “full humanity.”

Le Pichon cites as an example a Neanderthal skeleton discovered in a cave in Iraq. The skeleton revealed the following injuries: “a crushing blow to the left side of the head” that fractured the eye socket, effectively putting his eye out, literally; “a massive blow to the right side of the body” that severely damaged his right arm so that it became “withered and useless”; the lower right arm and hand are missing; the right foot and lower right leg were also damaged and showed signs of “advanced degenerative disease”; and the right knee and parts of the left leg “show signs of pathological damage.” Experts can tell that the man lived almost forty years after sustaining these injuries, though he could not have done so without “care and

¹ Xavier Le Pichon, Interview with Krista Tippett. “Fragility and the Evolution of Our Humanity,” *Being*. American Public Radio, Oct. 7, 2010.

sustenance . . . a one-armed, partially blind, crippled man could have made no pretense of hunting and gathering his own food. That he survived for years after his trauma was a testament to Neanderthal compassion and humanity.”² Even more touching is that when he finally did die, his community buried him under a blanket of flowers.

Le Pichon writes:

In order to be able to continue to live for many years (as the healed bones show) it would have been necessary for him to be entirely taken care of by his community. What was this community? It would have consisted of perhaps twenty or thirty people living by hunting and gathering, without a permanent camp. Every day the community would have moved on in search of new resources. We can only imagine the considerable effort, which this group had to make for many years in order to transport this person from camp to camp, in order to feed him and in order to simply allow him to live. Why did a small group of nomads, having each day to look for their food through hunting and plant gathering decide to radically reorganize their life so that a severely handicapped man would become the center of their efforts and attention?

How they must have loved him! I imagine the Neanderthal man as gentle, sweet, loving, funny—the sort of person who could elicit compassion from the strong and able-bodied, enabling them to grow toward being more fully human. The “experience of welcoming the suffering of our neighbor,” Le Pichon says, “is at the very heart of our identity of humans.” Through compassion, we are led to discover our own higher humanity, and are perhaps as close as ever we can be to God.

² Ralph Solecki, *Shanidar, The First Flower People*, quoted by Le Pichon in *Ecce Homo*.