



Humanum

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The Wound in the Depths of Every Heart

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I remember a meeting at l'Arche to discuss a man who had been severely rejected by his family and who was quite disturbed. Dr. Franko, the psychiatrist of our community at that time, said of him: 'He feels guilty for existing.' So many of the men and women we welcome into l'Arche have been considered to be difficult and unbearable by their families (and often they have been). They have been treated only in negative terms, as 'deficient', 'handicapped'. It is not surprising they feel guilty, responsible for the tears and anguish of their parents. It is not surprising that they have cut themselves off from their hearts; they have suffered too much. They cannot bear the pain any more.

This deep wound of the heart is the source of their bizarre behaviour, whether aggressive or depressive. Not having been recognised as true human beings, capable of growth, they can have difficulty forming a true relationship with another. Some have always been considered by others as an object and so will consider others as objects; they cannot imagine that they are capable of giving life and happiness to another. In order to live they must make the transition from a negative self-image to a positive image, from a feeling of being without value to a feeling of being valued. Who will help them make this transition?

This inner fragmentation is not restricted to people who have an intellectual disability. It can be found in all hurt and unwanted children, children who feel they are a burden. These, too, must protect themselves from unbearable pain. I remember a prisoner, condemned for kidnapping a child, telling me that his mother had told him when he was eight years old: 'If the contraceptives had worked, you would not be here today.'

Symptoms of depression are often found, not only in such children, but also in people who are scorned because of their race, their poverty, or their inabilities.

It becomes clearer and clearer to me each day, however, that these same wounds are found, though to a lesser degree, in the hearts of *all* children. Every child, at one time or another, has felt more or less let down by their parents, unloved, unappreciated and even rejected. Parents go through periods of depression; they are taken up by their own problems and needs and do not give adequate attention to caring for their child. The heart of a child is so vulnerable and sensitive! Often these wounds remain in the unconscious, producing difficulties in future relationships and even in the use of one's sexuality.

Most children have the inner strength and outer competencies to react to feelings of rejection; they have the strength and ability to separate themselves from their parents. Persons with disabilities, on the other hand, who may have certain strengths or other outward competences, may feel very lost in the face of rejection and tend to withdraw into a form of 'non-life' or profound despair. Their barriers are less developed than in other children whose defence mechanisms are more solid, strengthened by their inner power. That is why many with disabilities let down their barriers more quickly when they are offered an authentic relationship.

It seems evident, however, to anyone who is in contact with different kinds of families, united or divided, with whatever kind of parents, over-protective or unloving or very present and loving—that a wounded heart is not produced in a child only by their parents' attitudes. Even the most marvellous parents can never fulfil every hope and need in the child. They are able to love their child, but they are not able to ensure that the child's heart will itself be loving. Certainly in children, there is great innocence and beauty but, regardless of all the qualities of their parents, there are also all kinds of fear, fragility and egotism. In the heart of every child is a void which can be filled only by an infinite love. This is the glory and the tragedy of humankind. St Augustine's words, 'My heart is restless until it rests in God', apply to each and every human being. The wounded heart of every child, with its fears and selfishness, comes from an awareness—more or less conscious—of this emptiness deep within our being which we desperately try to fill, but which we find nothing can totally satisfy. This void is a source of inner anguish but, if the child has even a minimum of confidence, this anguish can become a driving force towards a search for commitment to others and truth.

Christian doctrine on the wounded heart, or original sin, appears to me the one reality which is easily verified. It would be an error to believe that if there were not oppressive parents, if there was no oppressive society, then we would have only beautiful, loving, happy children integrated within themselves. No, in the heart of each of us there are divisions, fears and fragility; there is a defence system which protects our vulnerability, there is flight from pain and there is darkness. However, children who live in a loving relationship which helps and truly gives them support, will find hope and trust more easily to go forward in the search for true fulfilment.

Jean Vanier is a philosopher, writer, religious and moral leader and the founder of two major international community-based organizations for people with intellectual disabilities, L'Arche and Faith & Light.

