

Foreword

I first heard of Sheila Cassidy when I read her book *Audacity to Believe* telling the story of her life in Chile where she had gone to work as a doctor. She tells of her work amongst the very poor. One day friends asked her to treat a man with a bullet wound, a wounded revolutionary in hiding from the secret police. This was an unforgiveable act in the eyes of the military and for that reason she was imprisoned and tortured. I was deeply touched as I read of her faith and courage, in the face of terrible fears and pain.

When I put the book down, renewed in inner peace, I knew that one day I would meet the woman who had written it.

We corresponded, and then one day we did meet: she came to spend a few days here in the community of L'Arche in Trosly, not far from Compiègne, in France. There I did not read her, but I listened to her. It was clear that since the end of *Audacity to Believe*, she had evolved and grown.

In 1978, Sheila abandoned medicine to enter a contemplative monastery. After the prison, it seemed necessary for her to enter another prison, opened now to prayer and to the heavens. But that was not her final path. Jesus is an incredible teacher. He has led her to greater earthiness, ordinariness and littleness. She then became the Medical Director responsible for a ten-bed hospice for the terminally ill in Plymouth, England.

This book is the story of her journey in the hospice. It is about people who are dying; it is about caring and love. It is also about her own personal journey; the way God is leading her through her own brokenness.

As I listen to Sheila when she comes to L'Arche, and as I read this book, I sense a deep link between her brokenness and the brokenness of the dying people she cares for; just as

there is a link between the brokenness of people with a mental handicap and that of the assistants in L'Arche.

That may seem to be a strange remark, possibly a bit impertinent or out of place. Don't you have to be very holy, wise and wholesome in order to be close to dying people or to people with a mental handicap? Don't you have to be very special and wonderful to be able to be close to dirty, 'useless' and smelly people? I suppose that is the way most people would see assistants in L'Arche or the staff in the hospices for the dying. Strangely enough, it is not like that. To be close to people with handicaps, to live with them and enjoy their company, you have to be in contact with your own handicaps, learning to live with them and, I even dare to say, to enjoy their company. So it is for Sheila as she listens to people in pain, who are dying; she has to be able to listen to all that is painful, and to all that is dying within her own being. Can we truly be compassionate to others if we do not know how to be compassionate to ourselves?

What we are living in our L'Arche communities is similar in so many ways to what Sheila and others are living in the Hospice Movement. I suppose that is why I feel deeply in communion with her and with her vision of love and caring.

I find this book very beautiful because it is about people in their utter poverty, littleness and vulnerability; not about those who pretend to be big and strong, who are successful and winning prizes, but who are also hiding their fears and vulnerability behind masks. This book is about people who are very earthy and very vulnerable; people who no longer wear masks because they do not even have the energy to maintain them. It is also about the people who truly care about those who have become vulnerable and who are dying. These carers are experiencing their own deepest fears. They themselves have become very vulnerable. They too no longer hide behind masks, masks of medical technique or of well-set formulas. So often they feel empty-handed and powerless. They let themselves be touched and their hearts be opened. Not only are they competent, which all doctors and nurses must be, but they are also compassionate.

Clearly, Sheila is walking with Jesus. From the prison he led her to the monastery; from the monastery, he led her to those who are dying. Her journey is a simple, beautiful one; it is the journey in and to the beatitudes. Sheila finds her

strength in the good news of the gospels. But she reveals herself through this book not as someone very, very special, but rather as someone quite ordinary, but knowing she is loved by her God. Isn't that the ultimate secret of the gospels?, that we are all ordinary, born in littleness and called to die in littleness. But we are loved and have a mission to love. To pour that spikenard ointment, so precious and so costly, upon the feet of Jesus soon to die, is the same as pouring oneself out upon those who will die tomorrow and who today are apparently useless.

Perhaps the secret Sheila is revealing to us, the secret she has learnt through her daily life and her life of prayer, is that the poor and the weak are not just objects of charity and love, even less are they useless and to be discarded or seen as a problem and a burden; but rather they are called to be a source of life for us all. If we come close to them, in some mysterious way they bring us to what is essential; they call us to truth, to competence, to compassion and to centredness.

This is truly a precious book, important not just for people in the Hospice Movement or in L'Arche, but for all those who are in the caring profession, and for all of us who are called to care for one another.

Jean Vanier
July 1988
L'Arche

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S.C.

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Introduction

In Search of a Spirituality

This book, like many children born to impulsive, disorganised women, was conceived by accident and reared amid chaos. The first seeds were sown in 1985 when I was invited to speak on the rather ambiguous subject of 'The Spirituality of the Carer'. It took me a long time to work out what the title meant but I decided eventually that it must mean the *spiritual stance* of the carer and I set out to work out just what that stance should be. The first idea that came to me was the image of the carer as midwife: assisting at the birth of a dying person into a new life. Another line of thought was that it should be a paschal spirituality, a vision which encompassed both death and resurrection. Eventually, however, I fell back on my favourite quotation from the prophet Micah:

This is what Yahweh asks of you,
only this:
That you act justly,
love tenderly and walk humbly
with your God.

Mic. 6:8

The 'act justly' I saw as an obligation to be professionally competent, the 'love tenderly' a call to compassion, and the 'walk humbly' a bowing down before God and the mystery of suffering. Thus equipped with a framework, I developed my theme and the lecture was duly delivered.

There is however a quantum leap from preparing a lecture to writing a book, a fact of literary life which I was to learn the hard way over the coming year. I say this by way of explanation, for the circumstances in which the book was written have had a major influence upon its shape and character. The greatest problem turned out to be that of continuity, for working full time as I do, all my writing has

to be done in trains or at weekends. That which is unfinished by Sunday night must lie fallow until the next free weekend, with the result that both the flow of ideas and the mood in which they were written are difficult to recapture.

Another problem was that the book took a quite unexpected change of direction half-way through: what had started life as an exploration of the spirituality of the care of the dying, broadened to encompass all those involved in professions or ministries of caring – perhaps even all Christians. The change happened at Easter which I spent at L'Arche community at Trosly Breuil outside Paris. It was there, as an outsider to the community, that I saw more clearly than ever before the prophetic nature of caring for those who are, in economic terms, useless. It is a lavishing of precious resources, our precious ointment on the handicapped, the insane, the rejected and the dying that most clearly reveals the love of Christ in our times. It is this gratuitous caring, this unilateral declaration of love which proclaims the gospel more powerfully than bishops and theologians. It is an ongoing re-enactment of the drama at the house at Bethany, when Mary took the alabaster box of ointment, of 'Spikenard very precious', and poured it over Jesus' head. I wonder sometimes if either Mary or Jesus was aware of the full significance of this outrageous public gesture of love. Perhaps, like today's carers, they acted instinctively from their true centres, recognising a need and moving out to meet it, whatever the price, whatever the consequences.

This book then is about the meaning and the cost of caring. It does not pretend to be either scholarly or exhaustive, but is rather an exploration, a series of reflections from the inside, from the eye of the storm. Because my own experience is with the sick and the dying, most of the illustrations are from this field, but I believe the ideas generated and the lessons learned may be of relevance to a much wider audience, indeed to all those who find themselves drawn, for whatever reason, to accompany those in pain.

The title *Sharing the Darkness* comes from the widow of Anglican writer J. B. Phillips, who, in telling of her husband's severe depression, wrote 'Jack found himself sharing the darkness with Michael Hollings', and 'in the dark experience of his pain he could only repeat Michael's words: "there is no way out only a way forward"'.
 Michael
 2/17

What then is the essence of this book; for whom is it written? If I am truthful I suppose it was written for myself, because there were things that I wanted to say, ideas I wanted to explore. More than anything it arises from a deep conviction that we are all called to be holy, to love the Lord our God with heart, mind and spirit and our neighbours as ourselves. For most of us, this call to holiness must be lived out right where we are, inserted in the midst of twentieth-century society. This is not a book for those who feel called to flee from a world they perceive to be wicked but for those of us whose vocation it is to discover the innate goodness in ordinary people, the face of Christ in all men. I believe that those who work with the handicapped, the dispossessed and the dying have very expensive ringside seats at the fight: we have a close up view of players who are stripped of sophistication and pretence, of the comforting outer garments with which men cover their nakedness, their vulnerability and their shame. Surely then, we have a duty to report back the truth of what we see: that the facts are friendly; that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor – that the kingdom of God is among us, and that herein lies our hope.

And if it should happen that you who pick up this book are sick or even dying, I hope you will find yourself at peace with what I write, for it comes not from book learning but from my own experience of caring and being cared for. More than anything I have discovered that the world is not divided into the sick and those who care for them, but that we are all wounded and that we all contain within our hearts that love which is for the healing of the nations. What we lack is the courage to start giving it away.

Cut from the Loom

*I said: In the noon of my life
I have to depart
for the gates of Sheol,
I am deprived of the rest of my years . . .
My tent is pulled up, and thrown away
like the tent of a shepherd;
like a weaver you roll up my life
to cut it from the loom.*

from the canticle of Hezekiah
Isa. 38:10,12

In a search for a spirituality for those who care for the dying, the first questions that must be asked are 'Who are the people cared for? What are they like? What characterises them, marks them out from their fellows?' The dying, and here I include anyone with an incurable illness, are essentially people on a journey. They are an uprooted people, dispossessed, marginalised, travelling fearfully into the unknown. The conditions and speed of the journey may vary – sometimes the movement is barely perceptible, like the moving floors at Heathrow – but sometimes the trucks hurtle through the night, throwing their bewildered occupants from side to side with all the terror of the line to Auschwitz. Above all, the dying are alone and they are afraid.

Paradoxically these fears are rarely articulated, so strong is the cult of the stiff upper lip or the desire to protect those closest to them. The poems of the sixteen year old Indian girl Gitangali, found after her death from cancer, give us a glimpse into this lonely hidden world of the dying:

Tonight, as on other nights
I'm walking alone

Through the valley of fear.
O God, I pray
that you will hear me
for only you alone know
what is in my heart.
Lift me out of this valley of despair
and set my soul free.

Gitangali
from *I'm Walking Alone*

What they want more than anything is that this thing should not be happening to them, that it should turn out to be a bad dream, that they should be rescued, cured, kissed better, made whole. But since this cannot be they want someone to comfort them, to hold their hand, to face the unknown with them. They need a companion, a friend.

So the spirituality of those who care for the dying must be the spirituality of the companion, of the friend who walks alongside, helping, sharing and sometimes just sitting, empty-handed, when he would rather run away. It is a spirituality of *presence*, of being alongside, watchful, available; of being *there*.

It is interesting in this context to explore the meaning of the word *companion*, for it gives us a deeper insight, not only into the role but also the experience of the carer. The companion is one who shares bread: and the dying complain like the psalmist:

The bread I eat is ashes
My drink is mingled with tears.

Ps. 101:9 Grail

He who would be a companion to the dying, therefore, must enter into their darkness, go with them at least part way along their lonely and frightening road. This is the meaning of *compassion*: to enter *into* the suffering of another, to share in some small way in their pain, confusion and desolation.

Put like this, the care for the dying seems an impossibly daunting task. Who but a fool or a saint would deliberately expose themselves, day after day, to intolerable pain and sadness? And yet of course people do. Why? Who knows. I suppose the obvious answer is that it is a calling, what in religious jargon is called a vocation. Some people are attracted