

Reflections on Camphill & l'Arche¹

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Assisting people to live with dignity and meaning is the ultimate purpose of social care. To serve this purpose, the experiences of Camphill and l'Arche can make important contributions to a critical question for policy and practice: how to assist and safeguard people without inhibiting them from living a real and meaningful life. Making the best of these two communities evolving responses to this question requires humility enough among policy makers and commissioners to recognize the limits of the whole social care field's current answers.

I have not chosen life as a member of either of these small but deeply important social movements for myself, and I know many people with learning disabilities and families who would not make the choice either, but I am deeply grateful to those who have. They intentionally strive to live together in a way that embodies values that deserve to thrive in an open society.

Camphill and l'Arche are each founded on a different, distinctive understanding of human development, a thoughtfully developed sense of the significant contribution that people with learning disabilities can make to society, and the central importance of mutual relationships founded on respect for the dignity of the person as the foundation for realizing that contribution. Not everyone will agree with these ways of understanding, often because they draw explicitly from spiritual traditions and encourage spiritual development, but I know of no legitimate reason for rejecting them.

Both traditions are founded on shared-life households and both place great value on hospitality. Their boundaries may be distinct, but, at their best, they are open and each has proud traditions of welcome for strangers and engagement with neighbors. Those who offer assistance and those who receive it strive for a relationship more personal than that of staff member and client. The importance of mutuality influences the economics of the household: offering assistance is not understood as a typical job for pay.

Each tradition faces the question of adapting with integrity to a changing environment. Increasing awareness of the importance of people's own voice and choices and raises productive questions as does the challenge of keeping communities' animating spirit alive as the interests of potential life-sharers change. Like any human endeavor, it is possible for people to fail to live what they value, so safeguarding each household's expression of the tradition is a real and relevant question that each movement must take seriously.

Living the particular gifts of l'Arche and Camphill brings the sort of healthy diversity that enriches the possibilities for assisting people to live meaningful lives. The social care field as a whole would be impoverished without the choice of life-sharing in these two deeply rooted intentional communities.

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