



SIEBENQUELL

Reflection

An Unfinished Story



SOURCE: PRTABLE NETWORK GRAPHICS

As a Narrative theologian I have, over the years, had to get used to the fact, that many people do not take stories seriously (neither the tales of the biblical storytellers nor the tales of their own lives). Some laugh at them, many ignore them and a great many devalue them as childish, unsophisticated and naive. Occasionally they even become hurtful and ridicule the low intellectual level of a person who deals »merely« with the stories of God and the stories of faith. This poses the question how a storyteller deals with this. Now, there is surely more than one possibility of dealing with this, but I prefer to tell an unfinished story.

Many years ago I was in a hall with several hundred people in order to listen to a great countryman of mine. Jean Vanier was the guest speaker at this conference. He is the founder of L'Arche, a community for people with physical and mental disabilities in which the caregivers live together with the residents in order to enrich and deepen the lives of all.

Jean Vanier is himself a gifted storyteller. The great, white-haired man sat in a large chair all by himself and began to tell stories about the people he had encountered in the houses and communities over the years.

Then he told us about a visit to a L'Arche community which was small and rather unknown. It so happened, that on the same day as his visit, a state official also had come for a visit. He wanted to get a picture of the work that was being done here and of the people who were being helped. Naturally, he also wanted to see whether state monies which flowed into the house were being well invested.

After several hours the official was very impressed with the professionalism of the staff as well as the care and accompaniment of the people who were limited in so many ways.

At the end of the visit a Mass took place, to which the state official was also invited. The entire community, the residents and their caregivers, the guests and the visiting family members gathered in the small house chapel. As John Shea so fittingly described it, they gathered the folks, told the stories and broke the bread.

After the Mass, the official thanked the community for the guided tour. He promised further support and cooperation and spoke of his appreciation for the good work of the house. But then he did add one objection. »The Mass was certainly very beautiful, but these people certainly did not get anything out of those stories. That was certainly a waste of time.« Vanier was swift to respond. »How would you know? You spoke with none of these brothers and sisters, asked no questions and did not wait for any answers.« Then he took the man back into the house chapel. There sat a woman, approximately 60 years old with a mild but noticeable learning disability. She had the intellectual capacity of a 14 year old.

Vanier sat down next to the woman, who looked at him, but not at the official. Vanier asked her gently: »Mirielle, what did you understand of the stories told at Mass?« She glanced at him with a shy and nervous look before she gave her answer. »I did not understand a lot. But I like the stories. They remind me that there are orphans and widows and poor people in the world. Sometimes I forget that!«

Until this day I do not know what the state official said to this or how he reacted. I do not know how the story ends. I do not know for the simple reason, that Jean Vanier could not tell the story to the end. He sat on the stage and wept.

I love this story, an unfinished story. Therein lies its charm and its attraction. It is finished in the listener, or not. I tell it a lot. Occasionally I cannot tell it to the end, because my voice chokes with tears. Then I think of Mirielle and say a prayer for her. I share her joy in and her gratitude for the stories of God. They remind me that there are people like Mirielle in the world. Sometimes I forget that!

And that is why I never tire of telling the stories of God and the stories of faith.

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