

**Jean Vanier**

# Man and Woman God Made Them



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## INTRODUCTION

The first edition of this book was written twenty-five years ago, at a time when people with a learning disability were, in a certain sense, coming out of hiding. Throughout the centuries in our Western society, they had most often remained hidden in their families or behind the walls of institutions. People tended to believe that they were, at best, like children or, at worst, were in some way 'sub human', an 'error of nature'.

These ideas still exist in many places in our world today. There has been, however, a constantly growing movement towards welcoming people with a learning disability into our society and our churches. Many are being helped to develop the skills necessary for independent living and working. They are being opened up to the world. The progress is excellent. Increasingly, society is recognising that people with learning disabilities are *above all persons*; they have the right to find their place and to live as full a life as possible.

There is a danger though that in the process of finding their place in society, they will also experience rejection, loneliness and isolation if not properly accompanied and assisted. In many instances, once they have their job and a place to live, they are expected to be 'just like everybody else' in the sense that they need to 'make it on their own', just like everyone else. But they are not like everyone else. People can forget that in some ways they are different. Their physical and intellectual difficulties can be a real source of anxiety or fear in people who do not know them. This makes it difficult for people with a learning disability to meet others. They are not invited over for a cup of coffee like other new neighbours. To really take their place in society they need help and

## INTRODUCTION

support, especially to meet others and to make friends. Like all of us they have vulnerable hearts, but do not have the same defence mechanisms and capacities to make choices as others. They can be easily rejected, hurt and manipulated.

Over these last twenty-five years, the media and internet have developed a great number of films and DVDs which portray sexuality in a superficial and sometimes pornographic way. Sexuality has not been portrayed as a gift that grows out of a permanent relationship and strengthens and deepens that relationship. People with a learning disability can be confused by these films. They can be seduced into sexual relationships without an awareness of the consequences or the capacity to assume responsibility for a partner.

After coming out of 'hiding', and now finding themselves in mixed residences and workshops, or in outside employment, they can be attracted to all forms of sexual relationships and easily seduced and abused. From being considered 'like children' to becoming 'like any other adult', they can be put into complex and confusing situations. I believe that more than ever that people with a learning disability need to find places of belonging and community, where on the one hand there is the support that is needed as well as a feeling of friendship and togetherness, and on the other where they have a place of privacy and the freedom to grow humanly and spiritually.

Although in richer countries much progress has been made in helping people with a learning disability to have access to education, housing and work, much still has to be done. Parents who discover during pregnancy that their child has a severe disability will seek an abortion. For many to have a child with a disability is too great a burden. People with a learning disability are still put aside; they have few friends and are not well accepted and integrated into the local area. Many people are still frightened of them.

*Man and Woman God Made Them* is about the importance of relationships and community as the place where people with a learning disability can grow and develop both humanly and

spiritually, where they can grow in a faithful love. Community is a school of love. Relationships, however, are never easy. Each one of us has been hurt more or less during our early childhood and so we in turn have a tendency to hurt other people. Relationships need to be deepened and transformed so that they can be celebrated in fidelity.

This book was written from a Christian perspective because I believe, as St Paul tells us, that God has chosen the weak and the 'foolish' according to the world in order to confound the strong and so-called wise (cf. 1 Corinthians 1). Since they live close to the heart, people with learning disabilities can be open to the message of Jesus which is essentially a message for the heart. That is why the message of Jesus gives ultimate meaning of the lives of people with disabilities.

Readers might find the order of the chapters a bit strange. When I began living with men and women with a learning disability, I discovered quickly their brokenness: hearts crying out for healing and for an authentic love. So, that is how I began this book, writing one chapter at a time as I lived it. The book ends in a song of celebration, together in community, where each one has grown in inner freedom and maturity.

This book is about relationships between men and women. I have chosen not to go into questions around people with a homosexual orientation. We all share the same humanity. We are all brothers and sisters in front of God, but the questions concerning homosexual orientation are different and need to be respected in their difference. Many suffer immensely today from discrimination; their pain and anger are understandable. Integration of sexuality into a mature relationship is a long and sometimes difficult journey for all of us.

Finally a word about language: I use the politically correct phrase 'people with a learning disability'. Different expressions can be used in different countries. What is essential is that people with learning disabilities are people. They are important human beings who must be allowed and helped to grow to greater fulfilment with all their abilities as well as their disabilities.





## *Chapter One*

# THE WOUNDED HEART

### *The Disillusionment of Parents*

So many couples hope and yearn for a baby, to give life to another human being, a person who is like a seal on their union. The immense joy for a woman of being pregnant. The dream of having a beautiful baby boy or girl. The preparations: choosing a name, preparing the bedroom with a cot, the baby clothes ... The body of the mother begins to change and at one moment she feels the little one beginning to move within her. Then one day the couple is told that the baby may be disabled. The shock! Their disbelief: it is not possible; it must be a mistake. Then later the doctor tells them, sometimes quite brutally: 'Your child has a severe disability. We can do nothing. Put the baby away and plan to have another as soon as possible.' In an instant, their hearts are crushed, their hopes shattered; and grief rises up and the questions: 'Why has this happened to us? What have we done to deserve this?' Then, because it is necessary to blame someone, comes the terrible question: 'Whose fault is this?' In the Gospel (John 9:2) the apostles ask the question about the man born blind: 'Master, who has sinned, this man or his parents?' They are asking: 'Who is guilty?' Is the child with a disability a punishment from God? And if so, how can the fault be expiated?

I am touched more and more by the pain and difficulties of parents. We in l'Arche have our days off, our holidays, our times of renewal and spiritual refreshment. We have chosen to live with such vulnerable people. Parents have no days off, little support and

no chance to refresh their spirits. They did not choose their child to be 'like that'. For them, it is a tragedy, a personal humiliation, and constant suffering. We in l'Arche are often admired for our 'dedication'; parents, on the other hand, are often pitied or looked down upon. A whole school of thought even blames them, especially if the child is psychotic. Many heroic parents live long days and often nights with terribly disturbed children. Sometimes there are no schools, centres or special workshops near their homes. They do not have competent or understanding psychologists and doctors to encourage and support them. Often shunned or pitied by neighbours, friends, and even family and church, they find themselves utterly alone. Some believe they have been punished by God and they close in on themselves in isolation and anguish.

### *The Suffering of the Child*

All these sufferings deeply affect the child. It is a terrible thing for children to feel that they have let their parents down and are the cause of their pain and their tears. The wounded hearts of parents wound the heart of the child. Children can sense whether or not they are a source of joy, the centre of delighted attention, one whom everyone wants to touch, to hug and to hold. They sense their parent's pride and joy as each new skill is gradually developed and acquired. Between the baby and the parents, there is a life-giving dialogue which stimulates, calls forth, encourages and supports. Even the tiniest babies sense whether or not they are truly precious for their parents, loved by them in a unique way. Children with a severe disability can sense that they are a cause of pain.

Sometimes I am asked: 'Is a child or an adult who has a severe intellectual disability aware of his or her condition? Do they suffer from this?' For the most part, I don't know. But this I do know: the tiniest of infants sense whether or not they are loved and wanted. Similarly, persons with disabilities, even severe ones, sense immediately whether or not they are loved and valued by the tone

of the voice and by the way they are touched and looked at and welcomed.

Newborn children are extremely fragile and vulnerable. Unable to do anything alone, they need to be fed, washed and held. There is only one recourse, which is to cry. If the baby feels responded to, loved and valued, there is a feeling of security and safety; the baby is able to live, to be at ease and, to enter with confidence into relationships with others and with the reality of the world. However, when infants do not feel responded to, loved and valued, they have a sense of being in danger; people and the surroundings become threatening. They enter into the world of fear and insecurity, where they instinctively harden themselves for protection and survival. Isolated in their inner world, they suffer terribly and live in anguish.

Children can also live in anguish and experience a form of interior pain if their mother is too possessive and has invested herself too exclusively in them. Somehow she communicates that the only safe and loving place in the world is with her, instilling a fear of separation and smothering life. All children sooner or later are called to leave their parents. Therefore, they must learn early in life to cope with separation and frustration. This is as necessary for their growth as it is to be loved and valued. True love does not imprison; it liberates. A mother cannot be occupied totally with her child; she has a husband also, and she has her own needs. Children must learn the frustrations and longings of separation in order to discover the joys of reunion with parents and to put their confidence in the bonds which unite them all together.

Few people seem to understand the depth of the anguish of a tiny child who is not loved or who is 'badly' loved. Fortunately, scientific research, focusing on the newborn infant, is discovering today what mothers have always known: that the relationship between the mother and child is profoundly sacred and precious, a source of life for them both. The same is true, of course, for the father, but in a different manner.

Today, human science has ascertained, in part, that a newborn infant can not only see and hear (though in a very limited way),

but can even recognise the smell of its mother. We know that an intense dialogue, harmony, relationship already exist between the baby and the mother – even before the child is born. If that relationship is defective, if the little one does not sense its mother's love – which not only rejoices in her baby's beauty and uniqueness, but also in its potential for growth, for autonomy and eventual separation from her – then the baby feels lost and enters into anguish. It experiences either an inner emptiness or an inner suffocation.

### *Anguish*

Anguish is a terrible reality, one of the greatest of human sufferings. This is why it is used in torture. When victims of torture suffer total anguish, there is a sense of terrible confusion, of being utterly lost. Their inner will is completely broken and eventually they can be unable to keep any secret.

Anguish first reveals itself in the region of the solar plexus, the physical seat of the emotions, and then spreads throughout the whole body. Inner balance is broken, and the person becomes agitated, confused, unable to reason or to judge. The normal digestive and sleep cycles are destroyed, with a tendency to eat and sleep too much or not at all.

This state of anguish is so painful that it cannot be tolerated for long. In order to survive and escape the pain, children protect themselves by creating defences and hiding in a world of dreams. There is a cutting off from the heart because the heart searches continuously for contact with love, and not finding it, this constant, unfulfilled desire to be loved becomes unbearable. When the heart of a person is solidly barricaded in this way, there is a form of psychosis. If the barriers are less solid, there can be instability, sometimes depression, agitation, apathy or aggression.

In the case of adolescents or adults, the defences may take on different forms. Some escape into hyperactivity, a desire to succeed, to win, to dominate in school, in sports, in work, etc.; others search for compensation in alcohol, drugs, sexual encounters and

a continual search for distraction and pleasure. Still others can sink into deep depression, mental illnesses or delinquency.

When I see Evelyn banging her head against the floor, when I hear Robert in the middle of the night begging someone to cut off his genitals, when I see Luke aimlessly running round and round, when I see the closed, tense face of George, I know in each there is a profound agony and an unbearable interior restlessness.

Little children who have learning disabilities and who know they are not wanted will harden their hearts and body to protect themselves and to withdraw from reality. They live a sort of inner death: life no longer evolves. Agitation can prevent development. Certain aspects of the psychic being can become blocked. The brain, language and even physical development can be affected. Thus begins the fragmentation of their being.

I remember Mark seated next to me in the chapel, whispering over and over: 'I have the devil in me. I have evil in me.' His story is a story of rejection. Born in a psychiatric hospital, abandoned by his mother, he was adopted, but this did not work out. He then went from one foster family to another. After a time, he was placed in a small institution and then sent to a psychiatric hospital because he had shown signs of violence. At the age of twenty-seven, he came to l'Arche. Never in his life had he had a lasting and unique relationship with an adult. Having been moved from one place to another as a child, he had never heard anyone say to him, 'You are my beloved son and you are my joy. Between us is an indestructible bond. No matter what you do, you will always be my child.' Mark was without any roots.

If one has never been loved, how can one believe oneself to be lovable? And if one is not lovable, then it must be because one is no good. The logic of love is relentless. Because no one ever had confidence in him, because no one had ever formed a bond with him, Mark was unable to have confidence in himself. He had a negative image of himself. Perhaps he is an extreme example, but many people with disabilities suffer from the image they have been given of themselves. The way we look at others has a profound effect on their self-image. There is always a message transmitted

with our eyes: it can be approval, affection, indifference, scorn, distaste, etc. When we constantly avoid looking at certain persons, they immediately sense rejection or repulsion. Over time they will have the feeling of being worthless, even to themselves. Eventually, they too will avoid looking at themselves. This is often the story for those excluded from our society because of a disability or others reasons.

Carol was welcomed into one of our communities. She had been considered a crazy idiot since her early childhood and is imprisoned in that image and continually tries to live up to it.

I remember Michael who, when he won a gold medal in the Special Olympics, wept and cried out: 'Do you think that now my mother will believe I am good for something?'

There was Gertrude who, when asked if she would like to be married some day, replied: 'I will never marry because my mother told me that if I married I might have a child like me.'

I am always struck by the way each is the reflection of how he or she is seen by others. Gloria, who lives in a l'Arche community in a Latin-American slum, acts so differently now compared to the time when she was with her family who scorned her. At home, family and neighbours looked on her as the 'village idiot'. In our home, where she is treated with hope, respect and understanding, she is adjusting more and more; her personality is becoming more structured despite her crises. Girls like her lie in wait to see if others look at them in fear, judgement, scorn, and superiority, or with understanding, kindness and joy in her presence. The eyes of another reveal to us who we are. 'Who am I for you?' Gloria is so much who we see her to be. And she is capable of interpreting the tiniest nuance: 'You love me because I gave you a gift? You love me because I am making progress? You love me because through me you found a meaning to your life?' Or, rather, 'You love me for me, because my life means something?'

These are only a few examples. I could give hundreds of others, showing the deep pain of people with intellectual disabilities and how the negative, broken image they have of themselves comes from the image others have of them. Dr Dolto, a child

psychiatrist, at a session for special educators in France, once explained how the psychotic child identifies him/herself with human excrement. Always feeling rejection, always perceiving themselves as bad, identifying themselves with what is rejected as waste and smells bad.

I am always impressed by the love people with intellectual disabilities have for their parents, even when they may have been mistreated and abandoned. They always hope for the happy and loving reunion with their parents, even when their waiting and their hope are so often disappointed and dashed to the ground. I have never heard one of them criticise or judge his or her parents. The tragedy is that as a coping mechanism, they may condemn themselves as if they deserved their parents' rejection. They feel and develop a profound sense of guilt because they feel it is they who are bad. To be rejected by the parent, the trusted adults in whom the child relies for sustenance, shelter and meaning, is profoundly destabilising. The child's whole world falls apart. It is better then for the child to believe that 'I deserve this rejection', giving him/her some pittance of control over the emotional chagrin. 'If I accept the fault, then I can also hold onto the hope that by trying harder things may improve.' This hope is obviously doomed to fail and reinforces the agony and isolation of rejection.

Let me tell you about Betty. She had lived with an impossible mother. She had endured so much that now she is unable to live with any woman assistant without persecuting her, without avenging herself. But, is it truly revenge? Is it not rather a cry: 'You see, you will never be able to love me; I am too bad.' Thus, she relives the conflict with her mother.

One of the difficulties of the child, which can also be found between engaged couples or husband and wife, is to idealise the parent (or the other) and to turn them into idols. They become like gods who ought to fulfil every need. When this doesn't happen, then the child either feels it is their own fault or else they reject the one who has not lived up to expectations. It is so difficult in any relationship to accept the loved one as a fallible person

who also has needs, and to avoid projecting one's own needs on to the other.

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 there 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