



Nehalem News

A Place To Call Home

Guided by Vulnerability

Bennett Comerford,
Former Assistant and Current Substitute Caregiver

"L'Arche communities seek to be guided by God and by their weakest members, through whom God's presence is revealed." from the L'Arche Charter

The Charter of the communities of L'Arche states that we, as members of a L'Arche community, seek to be guided by our weakest members. But who among us are the weakest? Are the live-in assistants the weakest, many of whom are new to L'Arche and have difficulty adjusting to community life? Are the long-term supporting members the weakest as they struggle with the community's continual changes and challenges? Or are the core members the weakest with their obvious handicaps and profound vulnerability?



Bennett Comerford (l) and
Adam Richards

My time at L'Arche has taught me that all and none of these members are the weakest. (While at Nehalem I have also learned that the best answers are often paradoxical.) Community life at L'Arche presents many challenges. As an assistant I often struggled with the early morning routines, remembering to sign out medications, and staying present to others while getting my own needs met. Living in close quarters, sharing a bathroom, and keeping the kitchen clean weren't so easy for me either. While these daily challenges revealed some of my weaknesses, living at L'Arche also helped me to discover some strengths: welcoming visitors to Neahkahnne house, gardening, and having conversations about "fuzzies" (Nehalemese for animals...fuzzy ones).

My time at Nehalem provided the space for even deeper soul searching and growth. I found that deep wounds and weaknesses were revealed in some of my relationships with community members. I was often afraid to acknowledge these weaknesses in myself

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Longtime L'Arche supporters (from left) Matt Weisensee, Rob Hoisington, Susan Mitchell, and Eileen O'Reilly-Hoisington

Congratulations Susan, We Love You!

Our Community Leader,
Susan Mitchell, snjm,
just celebrated
20 years

of sharing life at L'Arche
Nehalem! We are so
grateful for her and for
the gifts she brings to our
community.

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*So often, we believe
we are important because
we do "great"
and admirable things.
Our God of compassion
loves us at a much
deeper level, in our
weaknesses,
our vulnerability and
our smallness.
Our God welcomes
us and says:
"I love you as you are".
God raises us up to be
instruments of justice,
peace, and love.*

**-L'Arche founder
Jean Vanier**

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Core Member Ben Miller Talks with Alison Hilkieh

Ben and Alison lived together at Neahkahnie House from 1998-2001. Alison is currently Community Life Coordinator.

When I told Ben that we'd been asked to write an article for this newsletter together, he willingly agreed. But when I told him the topic was "Vulnerability," carefully enunciating all six syllables, his jaw dropped. He rolled his head back, scrunched his eyes closed, then blinked and asked, "What's that?!" We both laughed. I said, "It's a big word, hard to understand."

We decided to have lunch together and discuss it.

Alison: "Would you like to use your own spoon, or would you like me to help by feeding you?"

Ben: "You, please."

Ben needs help with many tasks every day, like getting out of bed, putting clothes on, taking a shower, getting to work, and using money. His dependence is one kind of vulnerability.

At lunch, as we worked to understand together what this big word means, I brought up the vulnerability of having emotions. Ben and I both experience strong emotions, and are vulnerable to feeling ignored or misunderstood.

Sometimes we fear that our needs won't be met.

Alison: "Do you ever feel scared or sad?"

Ben: "Yeah."

Alison: "Me too!"

Ben: "Whoa."

Sometimes we choose vulnerability—for example, when we take the risk to love another person.

Alison: "Is it easy or hard for you to welcome new people into your life?"

Ben: "Hard."

Alison: "What about saying good-bye when someone leaves?"

Ben answered that one with a pained facial expression, then: "Wait, wait, wait for them to come back."

Alison: "I can relate. It's hard to allow my self to be known by new people, and hard to let someone go after making myself vulnerable in a relationship."

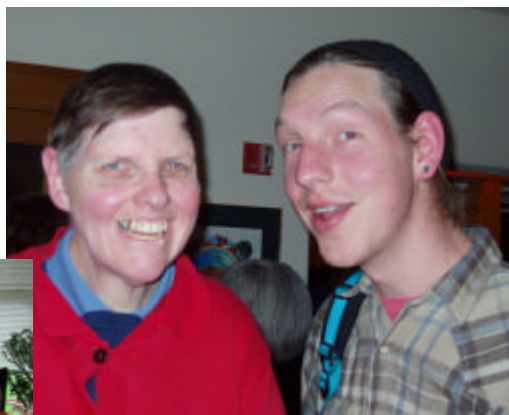
Ben brought up the feeling of poverty: "Don't know where to get more money. Need other work. Don't know where." Many people are economically vulnerable. Not having enough money to do the things we want to do, and not being able to find a job or change jobs, is a kind of vulnerability beyond our control.

Fortunately, Ben and I can help each other. As we left the restaurant, Ben said, "Hey! Paper." Sure enough, I had left my notes from our conversation on the table. It's a good thing I can rely on Ben for support when I'm vulnerable.



Ben Miller and Alison Hilkieh

Below: Cindy Leonard, Amy Barcia, Dan Barcia and Rodney Gabriel at a Core Member Retreat in Federal Way, WA. February 2010



Above: Joni Smith (l) and Bernie Herberholt celebrate Susan's 20th Anniversary (see p. 1). January 2010

Below: Robyn Dowell shows off her Christmas gifts (and her halo) at the annual Christmas Party. December 2009



L'Arche: Guided by Vulnerability

Development/Communications Coordinator Tamara Yates on A Year In Transition

“Weakness and vulnerability in a person, far from being an obstacle to union with God, can foster it.” —from the L'Arche Charter

After two years as live-in caregiver (assistant) at Nehalem House, I felt incredibly vulnerable last January when I prayerfully discerned that it was time to leave that role. The economy was in terrible shape, and— even worse—I had no idea what I was looking for in terms of employment. I told myself and my friends at L'Arche that I wasn't going to launch into a job search, but was trusting that the right work would find me. Over the months that followed, that trust was tested repeatedly. I had learned from two years of living with the core members at L'Arche to share my vulnerability instead of defending or protecting it. So when things got scary, I reached out to friends. I spoke openly about my fears, of the pressure I felt within myself to take *any* job in order to survive, and of my intention to trust that my vocational needs were important to God. I also talked about my dreams and my hunches about what my gifts were and where they might be leading me. There were many signs along the way that I was on the right path, as well as moments where I felt lost.



Tamara Yates (l) with Marilyn Petruzzelli

On Christmas Eve day, our Community Leader called and asked me to consider becoming the Development/ Communications Coordinator for L'Arche Nehalem. In the days that followed, I listened to my heart and heard a clear **yes!** The vocation I was looking for had finally found me. So did that mean I could say goodbye to weakness? Hardly! After a month in this position, I see that even as it gives me opportunities to develop and exercise my strengths, it also leads me into new experiences of my vulnerability. I still need to reach out for support and guidance, offering my weakness along with my strength, and trusting that I will be welcomed with both. I am so grateful to represent and announce the mission of a community that recognizes and affirms vulnerability as a gift to be shared!



Above: Meredith Zuber, Akea Rose, and Erin Wheeler at the Supporter Appreciation Party. February 2010

Ways You Can Help Announce the Mission and Values of L'Arche Nehalem

- Invite us to your faith community or civic group to give a presentation on L'Arche
- Share your creativity by helping dream up and implement a new, signature Annual Fundraising Event
- Tell five friends about what L'Arche means to you and why you support us

L'Arche Nehalem is a community of faith in which adults with developmental disabilities share life, play, work, and prayer with assistants who live with them in relationships of mutuality. We have two homes in Southeast Portland in each of which live four core members and three assistants. L'Arche Nehalem is part of a worldwide network of such communities which now number over 130 in more than 30 countries around the world. By providing a safe and nurturing home with long-term relationships, L'Arche Nehalem seeks to reveal the unique value and vocation of each person, and to change society by choosing to live in community as a sign of hope and love. L'Arche Nehalem, Inc. is an IRS 501(c)(3) tax-exempt non-profit organization incorporated in Oregon. Our tax ID # is 93-0885766. More information is available on our web site: www.larche-portland.org

Our core members who lived at Fairview have each been a profound witness to the lifelong capacity of the human heart to heal.



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L'Arche: Guided By Vulnerability

The Anniversary of the Closing of Fairview

By Amy Barcia, Spiritual Life Coordinator



Just a couple generations ago, you might not have run into a person with a developmental disability at church or in the grocery store. In Oregon and in our country less than a hundred years ago, a majority of people with developmental disabilities lived in large institutions, and were not able to share their gifts by being integrated into their local community. Loving families were strongly advised by medical professionals, clergy, and others that the best thing they could do for a loved one with a developmental disability was to send them to an institution. In Oregon, Fairview (which had several different names during its 90+ years in operation) housed at times up to 2000 residents with developmental disabilities in dormitory style cottages where one-on-one support and advocacy were probably very rare given the ratios of staffing and residents.

Two of our core members, and several extended friends in our community spent many years of their lives at Fairview. Their life histories and sacred stories, including their memories of Fairview, are to be approached with great reverence and tenderness. Whatever its virtues or injustices, it is clear that living in a large institution was not always optimal for the blossoming of the unique gifts and character of a human heart and spirit. Both of our core members who lived at Fairview joined the community of L'Arche Nehalem in their 60's. Nevertheless, they have each been a profound witness to the lifelong capacity of the human heart to heal. Given an environment where it is safe to express honestly the pain carried from the past, and to discover and share more of their unique and beautiful spirit, they have learned to open their hearts.



As we celebrate the 10-year anniversary of the closure of Fairview, I encourage you to give thanks for the ways our society has grown in honoring and respecting the contributions of people with developmental disabilities. Give thanks that most young people today have experienced people with developmental disabilities being integrated into our neighborhoods, schools, and churches. Recommit to help open the hearts and eyes of all to the gifts and wisdom they have to share with us.

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Who Are the Weakest?

and to confront them in others. The challenge and beauty of community life was that I had no choice. This is what I had signed on for. I had made a commitment to grow in love, to walk with others in their pain, and to face and acknowledge my own wounds. At times this felt like an impossible challenge. Yet now, after almost two years as an assistant and several months as a substitute caregiver, I am filled with gratitude for the opportunity I have had to explore my own disabilities at L'Arche. I am utterly convinced that doing so has made me immeasurably stronger.

We at Nehalem are all the weakest members of the community, and we are all, thereby, the strongest. The core members are our teachers in this school of love. They show us that acknowledging our disabilities and embracing our vulnerability lays a foundation of strength in community (as paradoxical as it may seem). It is on this foundation that we form our relationships. It is on this foundation that we grow in understanding of one another despite our many weaknesses. It is on this foundation that we learn to love. United in the celebration of our strengths and weaknesses we are a sign of hope to the world.