

From David Stevens – April 29 2010 Members News

Paying Attention

'To see a landscape as it is when I am not there.' (Simone Weil)

Coming near Ballycastle there comes a moment when Fair Head rears up ahead. Sharp, in clear, stripped down light, its beauty does not require me. But my attention is compelled.

I have received a lot of letters and e-mails, sometimes out of my poems. One particular e-mail from David Quinney-Mee resonated with me. He writes about a young woman who was a physiotherapist to his daughter, Lucia. The young woman had been a small child in the Girls Brigade in a church where David had been minister. He says, 'How much more attention would I have given her if I had glimpsed how one day our particular paths would cross.'

I have been thinking about how we make the effort to pay attention. Particularly to children, the vulnerable and the afflicted. Paying attention, how we give a loving gaze is critical to how we give care. It is important that we are not giving sentimental attention – the sugar gaze. Children shout 'me, me, me!' The afflicted and the vulnerable are often profoundly not nice. There is the pain and hard slog of paying attention. And this is particular attention to a person in their circumstances, this is not to the whole of humanity.

Some of what l'Arche has to tell about is the vulnerability of the 'normal'. The presence of people from l'Arche decentres the 'normal'. In the sense the 'normal' are being spiritually stripped, if they can only receive it – they lose their 'normality'.

We are in a form of exchange, of mutual giving between the one who attends and the one who is attended to. Finally creative attention is a form of prayer. And it is important not to be too pious here. Usually this is unuttered prayer, beyond petition and intercession. And often very secular people know more about this form of prayer because they have a clear view beyond the nonsense of pious religion.

And a poem.

But What If?

'Go and open the door,
Even if, there's only the darkness
ticking',
even if there is nothing there.
But what if?
What if it is the Pentecostal stranger softly knocking,
Seeking to make relationship, to bring an
affirming flame?

David