I Believe in You

Wisdom from community with persons with disabilities on believing in ourselves and the other

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Foreword by
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Preface

Our lives are enshrined in mystery, light and shadows. As we grow through the years we seek to make sense of this and find a meaning to life that resonates as true within us. Philosophies have suggested various meanings to life: happiness, pleasure, knowledge, and ethical living. Religions have opened the search to a broader horizon, seeing love of God, communion with people, detachment from materialism, and respect for creation as spiritual components without which the human person suffocates. The sciences have developed sophisticated healing practices, whether physical or psychological.

Amid all of this, who or what do we believe in? There are many paths, contrasting values and attractive options that could be followed. This book does not propose a comprehensive answer to this question but presents ways by which we can deepen our belief in ourselves and one another. Although belief is often associated with God or a set of concepts, we have neglected how primary and essential belief in ourselves and in each other can be. We can search in high places for big answers, often failing to see what is right next to us and within us. We may wait for big revelations while neglecting the richness we can find in all the little stories that make up our lives and our relationships.

To believe means to trust. This is true etymologically, but most essentially it is a reality that can be experienced. Do we believe, or trust, in ourselves? Do we believe, or trust, in others? What does this mean in the first place and how to do so?

We might take for granted that we know who we are until we start questioning it. Some identify with family and social status, professional roles, geographic location and other markers that give them a sense of who they are, only to feel

alienated from their identity once these are threatened (the end of a relationship, the loss of a job, a move to another country and so forth).

Our sense of belonging might be dispersed across different cultures, social groups, and virtual platforms, making us feel stretched in different directions. We might have had experiences when we felt valued and cherished, but also some that tarnished our self-esteem, thus holding contrasting histories in our very being. In our world or in our neighborhoods—and potentially our very homes—we hear of people in survival mode just trying to pull through and, via the images we see in the media, we become aware of inaudible violence in different parts of our globe. How can we believe in ourselves and in other human beings?

The reflections presented in this book do not come primarily from my readings of heady philosophers, important theologians, or interesting psychologists, but from my community experience with people that have intellectual disabilities. In my years living and working in L'Arche, international faith communities in which people with and without disabilities live together in an inclusive spirit of friendship and belonging, I have experienced how persons with disabilities can witness to something quite special. Their example, stories, and insights can lead us on the way to become more human and consequently transform society.

To some it might seem novel that people with intellectual disabilities can lead us on the path of believing in ourselves and in each other. Throughout history, in fact, society has generally not believed in them in the first place: they have been consistently pushed aside, their voices silenced and their wisdom stifled. They have often been treated as not fully human. In becoming friends and living in community with them, however, I have realized that their place should be not at the margins of society but at the center, alongside people without intellectual disabilities.

Life often presents its meaning in unexpected places. It is not always found in grand narratives, in experts' opinions, or

in ideological assents, but is often quietly whispered through the "littleness" that people easily forget, overlook, or bypass, busying themselves with loftier thoughts, bigger plans, and quicker answers.

Francis of Assisi found meaning by stripping himself of riches and finding value in the sun, the moon, the rain, and other elements of creation; Mother Teresa found God among lepers and others discarded by society; Gandhi responded to the noisy arrogance of war by proposing the simple humanness of nonviolent encounters; Nelson Mandela lived a fulfilling life while enduring many years confined in a prison cell because of his belief in the diverse unity of the human family.

In the 1960s Jean Vanier, a philosopher of sharp mind in search of direction, visited an asylum for people with intellectual disabilities in a small village north of Paris, Trosly-Breuil. He did not realize this would change his life. Jean was touched by the need for friendship that the people in that institution had. Cut away from society they cried out for love, a human need we all share. Jean invited two of them, Raphael and Philippe, to live with him and transform a nearby dilapidated house into a home they named "L'Arche" (French for "the ark"). The three started living together in a spirit of Christian community, sharing meals, prayer, play, and work. Jean was being led from intellectual prowess and control to a gentle and receptive way of the heart. The scriptural image of God choosing the "foolish of the world" to confound those deemed "wise" (1 Cor. 1:27, NRSV) and the exhortation to become friends with the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind (Lk 14:13) was being incarnated day in and day out in the small Trosly home and eventually beyond, as visitors interested in this new way of life brought L'Arche to different countries.

Today, in L'Arche homes across the world, people with and without intellectual disabilities, from different religions, cultures, and backgrounds share a dwelling together as housemates or work-mates and live out a spirituality of unity and togetherness. Together they do very human things: they cook, eat, pray, play, clean, go on outings, rest, watch TV, and live the