Dialectic

Faith, Science and Disability*

Burton Blatt, EdD, Associate Editor

Among the first practitioners in mental retardation and other areas of the disabled were individuals whose Bibles, instead of professional textbooks, informed them of their purposes and activities. Even the many among them who were physicians or educators were driven to the work and sustained in it by the word of God at least as much as by the wisdom of science. It was Pestalozzi, the great 19th century educator who said, "Even in the deepest depravity of our nature, the light of God which is ever lasting, is never extinguished in the human soul" (1951, p. 52). It was he who also said, "We must help the poor man not to lose heart, to try with all his might to get back on his feet; the gifts that make him negligent and lazy, that let him rot in his own filth, as it were, not only is no charity, but actually debars him from regaining his strength" (1951, p. 54). As with so many of the 18th, 19th and early 20th century leaders in this field, Froebel's work was also deeply rooted in religious faith (Smith, et al. 1969). It remains for me a stunning and uplifting revelation to read works about and by such people as Ontessori, Pestalozzi, Froebel, and Seguin. Embedded not only in their Sunday demeanor but also in their every waking act, was an abiding faith in the ultimate reward for Man, in the idea that there *is* a Grand Design—and that the design for each of us holds nothing but good. Froebel begins this book on *The Education of Man* with this simple sentence: "In all things there lives and reigns an eternal law" (1887, p.1). And of course, that law is God—an all-powerful, all-wise and pervasive God who rules heaven and earth, and who insures eternal justice for all people.

Rudolf Steiner had a dream for disabled children that is reminiscent of those earlier pioneers. The dream led in 1919 to the creation of the Waldorf School (Edmunds, 1975). The Waldorf School mission spread; and through the efforts of such people as the late Dr. Karl Koenig, Carlo Pitzner, Aase Collins and others, there is today a world-wide Camphill movement. Camphill is not a school and, for sure, is not an institution—or a string of them. It represents what might be envisioned as intentional communities, places which have been deliberately developed by people to serve human needs and aspirations. These environments may be characterized in the following ways: Non-handicapped people chose to live there, typically committing their entire lives to the community; those who live there are members and not employees or clients; they are often part of a larger movement; they consider themselves to be no more segregated than people living in any other village or town. One of the more hopeful reflections of our times has been the fact that society has allowed the creation of such communities (Blatt, Ozolins & McNally, 1979). What may be forgotten is the common beliefs Camphill leaders shared with the earliest pioneers of the field. As then, it remains the modern workers' strength. As then it is a great hope for a better future for disabled people. The irony is that more people than not consider the strength to be a weakness and think of the future as clouded rather than clarified by it. Of course, I am referring to the religious underpinnings of our work.

I dwell on these connections between an all-powerful deity and the fragile person—connections which characterized the 18th and 19th centuries—possibly the first third of this century—because there are virtually no such connections in today's secular world. Modern responses to problems of the disabled have been for the most part, technical. The question, "What do we do about mental retardation or learning disabilities?" has today been answered by the field in terms of the organizations of special education programs, the nature of the disabled child, the advantages of early diagnosis and prognosis, intensive specialized learning techniques, specialized equipment and materials, special methods, clinical approaches to teaching, the need for small class size, adequate parent education, and systematic instruction in the context of different developmental curricula. These well known conditions for "bonafide" special education represent an amalgam of Kirk's, Cruickshank's, Hungerford's, Ingrahm's and Baker's precepts as well as the views of many other mid-20th century special educators. The point here is to illustrate the glaring difference between what was once regarded as a necessary faith in God and what is now regarded as a necessary faith in science and technology. Indeed, that difference appears to be more marked today than ever before.

Of course, scientific progress is vital. There have been many drug, surgical, and psychotherapeutic procedures tried in order to either prevent, reverse or ameliorate the effects of disability. For the most part, they have been no more or less successful than pedagogical-psychological efforts to "cure", for example, psychotherapy (ranging from traditional psychoanalytic approaches to behavior modification), and the various educational and other human service treatments and therapies have yet to provide effective ways to cure or significantly ameliorate mental retardation and a number of other disabilities. Today, a major effort appears to be in prevention. That may well be a more promising strategy, especially as we become more concerned with generations yet to be born. (*Unfortunately, however, to some people "prevention" is justification for encouraging abortion or ter-

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