

Chapel Words (October 21, 2010)

"Being Present" — Jim Holland

If you walk into the Ritz on certain Monday afternoons you may witness an unusual scene. You may see a group of Shawnigan students playing ping pong, shooting pool, maybe looking at YouTube videos, eating chocolate chip cookies, drinking juice, that sort of thing.

That's not exactly unusual, you say. But if you look closer you will see among the familiar faces, 8 or 10 special visitors; teenagers just like you, except that they all have mental disabilities, some rather severe. Some of them also have physical disabilities. These are students from the Clements Centre in Duncan, an after school program for disabled teenagers.

A group of us go to Clements every second week, the other week they come to us. This is part of the work of the Shawnigan Service fine art. I tell you about this not because I want to set these students apart for praise. They already know how much pride we have for the work they do, and they will be the first to tell you that the reason they do service is not for recognition but because they enjoy it.

But I wanted to talk for a few minutes about my experience last Monday afternoon standing in the Ritz with Devon, the director of the Clements program. We stood there watching the interaction, and Devon said, "You know these kids have always had their favourite things to do: swimming, bowling, video games. But since you guys started coming to visit there is one and only one favourite thing anymore—hanging out with the Shawnigan students. He told me that driving down on that day the excitement in the van was palpable. "The kids wouldn't shut up," he said. "They talked my ear off the whole drive down."

Then he said, "You know, these guys don't ever get to hang around with the other kids in their own schools, it just doesn't happen. This is really the best time of their week." And it was obvious. The look on the faces of the Clement kids was the very definition of joy.

One of the things that has taken me a long time to learn, and I think I learned it again on Monday afternoon, is that sometimes the best way to serve is to do nothing; it is to simply hang around with people. This is especially true for people who are lonely or disenfranchised, (that means people who don't ever get to be part of the crowd). Because what happens when you just hang around is that it stops being about one person serving another person and becomes about being in relationship, and that is really all that most of us want, isn't it?

Just being there with someone is often what people need the most, especially when they are frustrated, or grieving, or sick, or down, or lonely. But there is being there and then there is BEING THERE. You know the difference. You know what its like to be talking to someone and all the time they are looking over your shoulder as if they are waiting for someone more interesting or more important to come by. It's awkward. It's not very much fun to be on the receiving end of that.

Really being present to another person is a fine art in itself. It is the fine art of attending, of listening, of giving the person in front of you your full attention, of not making them feel like you are about to bolt off to do something much more important than talking with them. This ability to really be present is the mark of a refined person, and you will find this quality in all variety of people, because you don't have to be wealthy or educated or attractive to develop this art. You just have to be interested in people, to cultivate a sense of curiosity about others, to learn how to forget about yourself at least for a few moments at a time. If you think about it, you will

realize that Shawnigan has an inordinate number of people who exhibit this quality. (That means there are a lot of them).

When I was growing up outside of Washington DC, back in the dark ages, most adults didn't pay a whole lot of attention to us kids. There were exceptions, but for the most part there wasn't a lot of real interaction between kids and adults.

One Sunday when I was about 10 years old we went to the local church and sitting across from us was Robert Kennedy and his family. At the time I didn't know who Robert Kennedy was. If you don't know, he was a very important figure in the United States in the 1960s. His brother John Kennedy had been president, and Robert was Attorney General in his brother's cabinet, and later a senator. He ran for president himself, but was assassinated, like his brother John, during his campaign. He was, for some people, a hero. To my mother Robert Kennedy was something of a living saint. So after church she dragged me over and said, "Jimmy say hello to the Senator." So what did I do? I don't remember, but I probably stood there wondering who this person was and what I was supposed to say to him.

But I remember as if it were yesterday, what happened next. Robert Kennedy, who had 11 children of his own, bent down and looked me straight in the eye and he was **THERE**. I don't remember exactly what he said, he probably asked me about school, but I do remember the feeling of having a grown up pay attention to me as if I were the most important person in the world in that moment. I didn't know then that Bobby Kennedy had a lot on his mind. He was trying to find a way to stop the war in Viet Nam, he was thinking about running for the presidency of the United States, he was working on civil rights legislation, and on making the United Nations more effective as a peace keeping organization. He had a few things going on. But for a moment I was the sole focus of his attention.

Funny, eh, that I would have such a vivid memory of that experience? And I don't think I have dramatized the story over time because it was Bobby Kennedy. I think that it is a wonderful thing to have someone give you their full attention. I know that if I could change anything about myself it would be to become more of *that* kind of individual; the kind of individual who always makes the person they are with feel important and welcome.

We are busy people at Shawnigan, and sometimes I hear people wonder if we are too busy. And there is a line between busy and too busy. Too busy is when we don't have time for one another, too busy is when the list of things we have to do becomes more important than the people around us. Too busy is when we forget who we are and what life is all about. Too busy is when we stop contributing to one another's well-being.

Being present to others in this way is not about the amount of time we spend with a person, but about the quality of our presence. I appreciate the students in the service group for continually reminding me of this.

So if you are ever free even for a few minutes on the 2nd or 4th Monday of the month. Come by the Ritz and say hi to the kids from Clements. In the few minutes it takes to say hello, you will make their day.