

Please do not dehumanize

by A. Ridley

"Nihil humani a me alienum puto"

[I count nothing human as alien to me]

People in general are not very generous nowadays in the way they define humanity. Sadly, almost anyone with a handicap of any kind may be admitted to the definition in words, and yet excluded from it in fact. What we believe about things (or people) as individuals, as a nation, as a culture, is strongly reflected in our behaviour toward our fellow man - and as a group of "normal" people, our treatment (or lack of it) if people with special needs leaves a great deal to be desired.

Three out of every one hundred people in Canada are classed as mentally retarded. Of this three per cent, only two per cent so severely handicapped that they will live blank, institutional lives under close custodial supervision. These are the "basket cases", the people with gross physical deformities and very limited cerebral function. For them, the outlook is surely bleak.

The majority of retarded individuals, however, have a good deal more to look forward to. The largest percentage, who are classified as "mildly retarded" can complete a certain level of education, live independently in the community, hold jobs, raise families and lead, for want of a better word, "normal" lives. (Throughout this article, I am enclosing the word "normal" in quotations marks, for what are probably obvious reasons. I question strongly the "normality" of a lot of people.)

The smaller yet very significant percentage who are "moderately retarded" are also capable of doing a great deal. With special education to suit their special needs, with training in social, personal and work skills, many of these people could live quite independently and could earn a living - if the laws and the opportunities to learn the necessary skills were different, by which I mean adequate.

Mental retardation is not a disease, it is a condition that cannot be cured. Its causes are myriad and often undefinable; some common ones, however, are rubella suffered in pregnancy, inhalation of toxic fumes, being hit by a car, the RH factor, if not caught soon enough. Down's Syndrome or Mongolism occurs when one chromosome splits oddly and gives the newborn a total of 47 chromosomes instead of the usual forty-six. This occurs commonly when the mother is either very young or very old (by which means well past the childbearing years). There is, therefore, a sound genetic argument for bearing children when one is young.

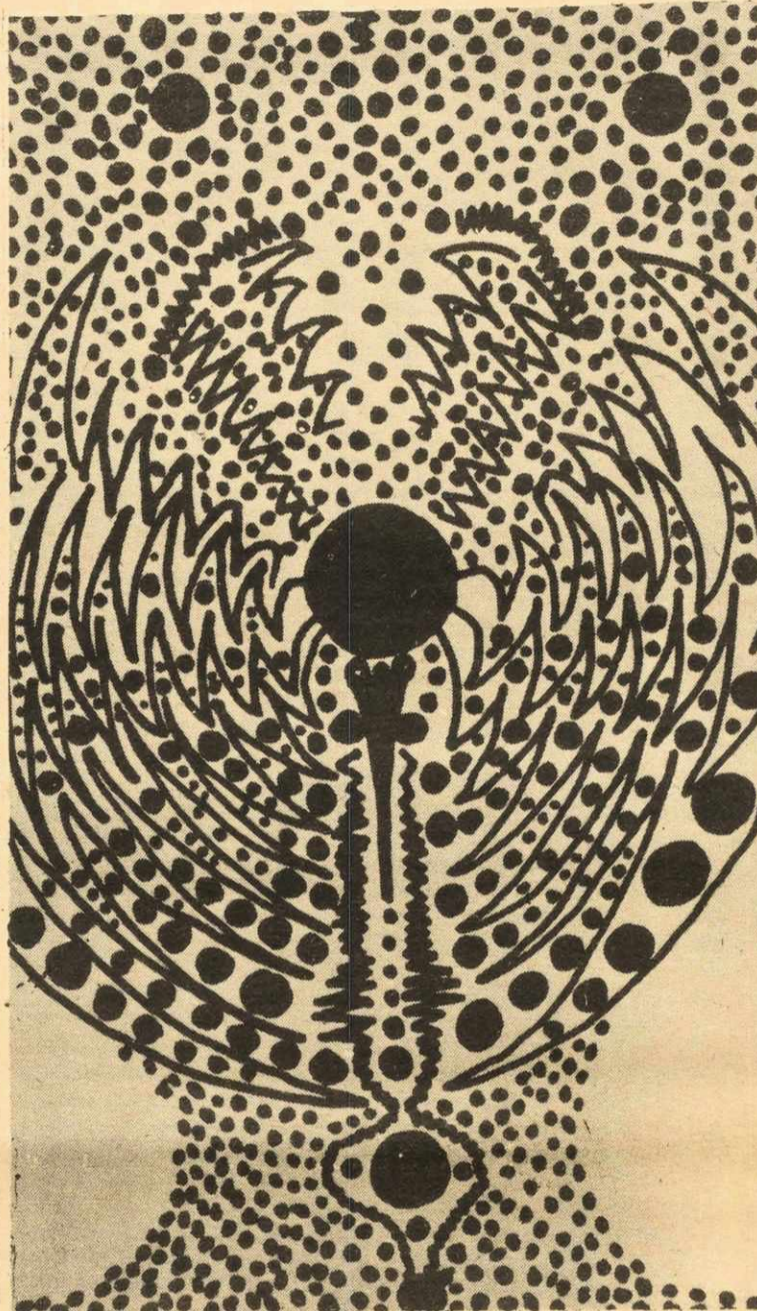
The birth of one retarded child in a family does not necessarily signal the birth

of others. Often retardation occurs for reasons that are never discovered. People who do have some reason to suspect or wonder at the possibility of producing a retarded child, do well to seek genetic counselling. There is also a process called "amniocentesis" whereby fluid is extracted from the womb during the early months of pregnancy and tested. Any defects or abnormalities are detected in this way, and gives the parents the option of discontinuing the pregnancy.

But what happens when the retarded child has already been born? Where can his/her parents turn? What kind of future can he/she expect to have? Until the Canadian Association for the Mentally Retarded came into being, the answers to those questions were pretty glum. For many, despite the existence of the Association this is still the case. Retardation is still perceived by most people as a tragic dilemma for which there is little hope.

All across Canada, in a chain of command from national to provincial to local, the CAMR has been trying valiantly to "see" a philosophy called "normalization"; it is an outlook, an attitude, a functioning ideology that could greatly enhance the quality and kind of life to which the handicapped could look forward. Normalization says, in very basic terms, that if we deal with retarded individuals in the same way that we deal with "normal" individuals, using "culturally normative" means and accommodating to the handicap only when and where necessary - if we do all of this, then retarded individuals will become as much like everyone else as they are capable of becoming. The philosophical base of this concept extends to include some operative rules: for example, that mentally handicapped people should be helped (taught, encouraged) to dress stylishly, to speak and eat properly, to function as independently as possible, and to exhibit courage, integrity and all the other positive human qualities that are common to all of us. Adults should be treated as adults and encouraged to work and recreate in age appropriate ways. (i.e. It should not be assumed of the retarded that they are "Eternal Children". The place of residence and the place of employment should be separate, as they are for most of us. And so on.

The marvellous thing about Normalization is that it works. By adopting this attitude and by adjusting favourably the way retarded individuals are perceived and assisted in developing their potential, it has been proven conclusively, joyfully, lovingly, miraculously that the mentally handicapped are capable of achieving a great deal more than ever imagined. They are capable of doing wonderful things.



The problem with Normalization, is that nobody wants to practise it. It's a lot of work to be sure, to train an individual to be independent, but its no more difficult or time consuming than constant custodial care. The hitch seems to be that parents, teachers, etc who make it possible for the retarded to function with greater autonomy, lose all the glory of martyrdom which comes from stoically lugging a cross. It has been said that charity in any form is the greatest obstacle in the path of the mentally retarded today because as long as the needed services, equipment and care are provided as an act of charity, they will never be acknowledged as rights. And that is the essential point that is difficult for society to confront, be it from the governmental or the personal stance: does not every individual have the unalienable right to the best kind and quality of life that this country can offer? Does not a retarded child have the same right to the same education as a "normal" child does? Does not a retarded man have the same right to work and support himself with dignity as any "normal man" has? In the province of Nova Scotia for example the mentally handicapped receive a disability allowance of less than \$140 per month. In the event that an individual is able to earn more than \$50.00 per month, this allowance is arbitrarily cut off. The government is

adamant in its refusal to subsidize the difference, thereby making it vitually impossible for a person to take pride in his achievement or to have the satisfaction of being as self sufficient as possible. He is forced by an unreasonable law to limit his wages to a minimum and to accept charity. Activity Centers and Sheltered workshops which employ the handicapped, because they pay so little for what is often tedious labour, and not regarded any more seriously as employment facilities than are the individual who work in them. The adult services centre on Oxford St. is run by the local branch of the C.A.M.R. on a cost sharing basis with the provincial government. Because the center cannot function unless the association can provide its fair 50%, they are forced to bang on doors and ask for money - some more charity for the poor retarded. Is it not time that that government recognized its responsibility to provide the kind of work facility (funded without charity and seriously considered) to which the handicapped have the right?

Proper facilities cost money, but so do institutions. To maintain a retarded individual in a large multipurpose complex in which he/she would live, work, worship and recreate, costs between \$18-\$25 per day, in a modest estimate made last year. (These costs do vary but they are always higher). To maintain the same in-

dividual in a group home costs in the vicinity of \$7.50. A group home is a regular house on a regular street in a regular neighbourhood, shared by 6-8 persons and a staff member. In this house life goes on as it does in your house or mine. With help from the staff member the person can learn to self help and domestic skills that enable him/her to take care of him/her self to as great a degree as possible. Progress is slow, it must be admitted, and often the individual is not capable of total autonomy: but in an institution where his/her meals are served on trays and where his/her needs are tended by nurses, all at three times the cost, is he/she better off? How can a price be levied on the satisfaction of achievement or the dignity of risk?

Sending the same individual to an Activity Centre which is a work facility in a separate location from the his/her place or residence, offers more opportunities for autonomy and growth. A knowledge of the city must be aquired, the person must learn to use the bus system; he/she has the satisfaction of "getting out of the house." Again, how can this be measured in dollars and cents, this feeling of well-being, at being able to go out and earn a living in keeping with the norms of our culture (College drop-outs and general fuck-offs aside).

As for recreation and workshop, isn't it time that we acknowledged that all the churches and recreation facilities in our community are for all people, not just the so-called "normal"?

The Halifax area is full of mentally retarded people whose needs and rights are being met very badly, if they are met at all. There are, however, some points of light.

The Halifax branch of the CAMR currently operates a Group Home on Vernon Street in which several retarded persons are enjoying a reasonably high quality of life. When the house was first purchased, the respectable residents of Vernon Street, (many of whom were professionals) were so concerned with the devaluation of their property and the increase in sex crimes that would obviously occur where the retarded are present, did all they could to stop the transaction. Luckily they were unsuccessful and many have since become kind and amiable neighbours. They have learned from practical experience that they have nothing to fear and a great deal to learn and to give.

Another good facility is the previously mentioned Adult Services Centre on Oxford Street. With good staff and some excellent leadership from the Halifax CAMR the Centre now offers a work programme that, if not perfect, is coming along nicely. Stress is placed on quality of workmanship, and considerable effort has been

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