Reflection on Dan Barry’s “The Boys in the Bunkhouse”

Dan Barry’s recent book “The Boys in the Bunkhouse” examines the lifestyle, treatment, and identities of people with intellectual disabilities during the 1960s till present day.

The topics that were given to us to write our reflections about were connections to our personal life and today’s society, as well as the values that are hallmarks of the Franciscan tradition. When I read these topics, I realized that they are all intertwined in one way or another.

When I think of connections in my personal life, I think of the many times I heard and saw instances where individuals with mental disabilities
were treated in such a cruel manner that it was terrifying to think about it.

I traveled to India about seven years ago and I was walking on the streets with my mother. I saw a mentally disabled boy who was working as an errand boy; he didn’t look older than 8. He was in terrible condition and he could not talk properly, but he was a keen listener. He could understand everything that a man was telling him to do: all of the cursing, all of the insults, and all of the demeaning remarks. My mom went up to the man and firmly told him to stop humiliating the boy and eventually the man scurried away. The expression the boy had when my mother told the man to go away was truly priceless. Relief. That was his first emotion. Shock. Second emotion. Overwhelmed. Third emotion. Happiness. That was his fourth emotion.

Till this day, I still cry whenever I think of what he was enduring all those years. I can’t fathom even a small fraction of the pain, the suffering, and the constant torture that he went through. And to have someone come to his aid without any hesitation must have shocked him. He couldn’t believe that someone who was that bold was out there to save him. My mother was the one who helped me see the different people who are in the world, and that each and every one of them deserves respect, integrity,
and kindness. They deserve everything we have and even more. These are some of the most powerful qualities a leader can have in this society.

There are situations when victims cannot speak out, such as in “The Boys in the Bunkhouse,” because of threats and abuse. That is when the bystanders speak out. That is when the community speaks out. That is when we speak out. But that didn’t happened in this case until almost 30 years later. Yes, there were a few very courageous and just men who had seen the conditions that these men were living in and reported them. But the superiors shut them down. What could they do now?

Here is the image some people have of those with disabilities: They believe that these individuals are senseless, that they are not able to comprehend situations and are inferior. This is a very scary mentality to have today, especially since we are progressing with incredible achievements. But sadly it does still exist. One of the things we can do is to change our mentality. But, then again, it is easier said than done.

Whether or not you believe in God, I do believe that all of the individuals who dwell on this planet are the same. We are all humans. We all have emotions. We all have thoughts. We all have beliefs. We all have a sense of our own identity. We all want someone to understand that. Yes,
we might have different emotions, thoughts, etc., but we all have them.

Whether an individual is different from another person in regards to race, religion, culture, beliefs, orientation or lifestyle, that does not give someone the right to disrespect him and dishonor him in a cruel and horrific manner.

The ignorant, conceited, egotistic, gluttonous, and lustful people who treat people with disabilities as scum are scums themselves. They are the ones who cannot tell right from wrong. They are the ones who need guidance.

Humanity is very close to us, yet far. I wonder why.

“A person is a person because he recognizes others as persons.”

- Desmond Tutu