

Village People

“Only while working on this project, I found out that I have lived in the vicinity of mentally retarded people for some time now”, one of the young designers working on this project remarks. He has a sense of wonder about it. How could he *not* know? Apparently he has been blind to an aspect of the world surrounding him. Isn't this, in a way, a shame? Yes, perhaps. But then: the world is big, way too big to acknowledge everything and everybody in it. And for people starting their professional career the world might seem to be at its biggest. They have to scan, choose and pick (now!) in order to end up on the right track. Which probably will not lay around the corner of their house.

For most of the designers, working on this project entailed their first attempt to come into contact with the mentally retarded. They did this with a lot of idealism and good intentions, but also for their own reasons – like all busy people they need reasons to contact a stranger. And, well, the designers had *research* to do.

The task is difficult. Now that a substantial group of (not severely) mentally handicapped people want to leave the institution and live a ‘normal’ life amidst ‘normal’ people, it turns out that they often find it difficult to cope in their new life. They get lonely. The only ‘normal’ people they regularly see, are their caretakers (whose job it is to be in contact with them) and the owner of the shop around the corner (who says, in a friendly enough way: ‘thank you and goodbye’).

So: the designers have the task to give busy ‘normal’ people like me a reason to get into contact with their new neighbors. The wish of these mentally retarded neighbors is clear enough: they want to be in touch with normal people. But tell me - why should I stop and start looking?

History has provided some answers to this question. A famous and persistent one has roots in Romanticism. The reasoning goes something like this: we are polluted - by money, technology. Mentally retarded people represent a pure, ‘natural’ state in which man is spontaneous, friendly, good. They are how people were meant to be (except for their poor intellectual skills – which is a complication for this perspective), and by looking at them, we, distorted moderns, can look at the source of pure humanity and be inspired by it. We can sustain our soul by looking at the mentally retarded.

The imagery surrounding this way of valuing the mentally retarded is telling. They are often placed in the garden out of which we are expelled - and for which we long ever since. The mentally retarded represent the natural state, before man needed clothes, before we needed to wear something to veil our true identity, before we knew knowledge. Paradise, in short. And now these angels feel lonely amongst us.

This is a strong trope. Think of a famous simpleton like Chance, the gardener in *Being There*, who almost becomes president because no matter what he says, it is interpreted as a pearl of wisdom and insight. His statements derive directly from his gardening-experience (and are of the stature: ‘after winter, there will always be spring’, or: ‘pruning yields a bigger harvest’). These words are revered as political metaphors. But they are just what they are – statements on something Chance knows well, and which he rather helplessly repeats under the pressure of unfamiliar circumstances.

Or take Jobe, the lawnmower-man in the movie by the same name. We see him happily riding his lawnmower in the beginning of the movie – the paths are sometimes not that

straight, but he never gets bored mowing the endless lawns of the Californian rich, as we 'normal' people would. The professor who singles him out for his technological experiments, corrupts him and makes him profoundly unhappy. Morale: keep these jolly people in their garden, and away from technology!

Quite a few of the young designers visually present the mentally retarded in a garden, or in a setting working with nature. I suspect this is at least partly because of this unconscious undercurrent in which the Garden of Eden is the place of simplicity. Which makes the garden the 'proper' place for simpletons.

There might be more to it. I hope so, because, to me, it is uncomfortably condescending to see mentally retarded people as good-natured and ever so friendly examples of how life could be for us if we paid respect to our natural roots. We might end up using mentally retarded people as a screen for our own fantasies.

So, if this image of the mentally retarded as ambassadors of the Garden of Eden is on suspicion, what other imagery might be benevolent? Here an attempt. Since a few years, I practice zen-meditation. Very Difficult. One has to sit still in an upright position for half an hour or so, and think of nothing. For me and my fellow zenners, this is practically impossible. There is always one thought or another – real worries, but more often you are visited by trivial daily thoughts on shopping lists, friends who should be contacted, things to be done. In meditation one becomes aware of the desire, or drive, to go ahead. Which impulse might be useful enough. But why should one's whole life be *useful*. Isn't that a bit shallow? Are we just some sort of problem-solving machine? And do we really pay full attention to what we are doing here, and now? Or are we already distracted, mind and heart attuned to the next problem to be solved, the next hurdle to be taken. My life often is pretty much like that, and, come to think of it, I don't like that much. That is why I practice doing nothing.

Now it seems as if mentally retarded are natural zen-masters. In comparison to us, they appear to be spontaneous, reacting freely to what *is* instead of what they judge the situation to be. They are into the moment, concentrated, in *flow* all the time, as it were. Mentally and spiritually they are in the here and now. So we-the-normal certainly gain by having them around us. They remind us how life can be.

Still, something does not feel good. It is not as if we learn something they *know* – the way we learn from a true teacher. We might learn something which the mentally retarded have no choice but to *be*. This is not what usually counts as knowledge, or wisdom. Moreover, they may well represent wisdom to us, but what we value is what this representation means to *us* – and not their experience. To us, they are symbols, not humans. Again, we use them for our own purposes.

So, let's restate the question. From the Garden-of-Eden- or zen-point of view, it might seem obvious which values mentally handicapped people represent to us. Things like 'naturalness', or 'living life here and now'. Good for us. But this was not the complete question the designers had to tackle. The challenge is: why would it work for us as well as for *them* to live in each other's neighborhood? What do both parties gain by it?

Design me an entrance to a space in which we both gain.

I think the key to this space is the feeling that we, modern people, have lost something that is still present in retarded people. What I, for one, have lost, is what I would call a village-

mentality. I have lost a calm pace, a dedication to what surrounds me directly, simple contact with the people I live with on a square are.

Now, the task is to see what is lost without becoming nostalgic. I am not talking paradise here (nor enlightenment). I am happy to have left my village. I certainly do not want to be *restricted* to this square are I happen to live on now. But this doesn't mean city-life is all that good. To me, this uncomfortable feeling that something is lacking is also alluded to by many of the designers. What is it that we lack? Surprises, I think. Plenty of kicks (a whole market of sensations lies there waiting for you), but no surprising alternatives in life-style.

Let me explain. As will be obvious by now, I was born and raised in a small Dutch village. To my own surprise, my experiences on my primary school still function as a source of knowledge and insight to me. That is because I was grouped together with so many *different* children. Ranging from firmly middle-class to socially very weak, from articulate and intelligent to slow and dull, from polite and timid to rough and aggressive. We could not avoid each other. We were facts in each others life. This ended as soon as I went to secondary school in town. All of a sudden, the other children were more or less like me. How ironical: the more the world opened up for me, the less diverse it became. And I am talking about *real* diversity here. Not the interesting and manageable differences in musical preference or hairstyle among your own peer-group. I mean the raw, unexpected, perhaps frightening but also exciting actions of a truly different person.

By now, I live in a city. I hunt my taste. I pick and choose my friends, my clothes, my gadgets, my work. I am aware that my authentic preferences for the products I buy are taken into account and foreseen by the designers of these products (how amazing – they knew the exact way in which I wanted to be authentic before I did!) I am a Type. Things are designed for my type. My task is to recognize them.

The children of this city of mine go to primary schools which are much more unified than the village-school I went to. I had no choice – there was just this one school. For these town-children, or rather their parents, choosing a school is a serious life-style question. So they end up choosing what they know, recognize, and value. They flock with their own kind. A city is an assemblage of neighborhoods which are much more unified than a village can ever be.

Now: enter of the mentally retarded in your neighborhood. He is naturally slow. Doesn't live the fast life. No *versatility* there. And he (or she, yes) is bound to this neighborhood in ways in which I am not. I, inhabitant of the global village, might take a plane to Kaapstad or New York to meet *really interesting* people just like me, or I might surf the internet to add to my set taste. For him, there is no escape. He did not 'choose' me. I am a fact in his life. I am in his habitat, which has the surface of a village, even if he lives in a town. He can't avoid me, since for him there is no other place to go. I can avoid him, and if we all do that, he will end up lonely.

And there it might seem this mentally retarded neighbor has some assets. He avoids my pitfalls, because the, to me, seductive but ultimately limiting image of a cosmopolitan is out of his sight. So, he does not care about time. He has personal attention. He is truly dedicated to his neighborhood. And though this might be for lack of alternatives, we might both benefit from this. I might meet a true stranger in my own street, who exhumes values I have lost touch with, but for which I vaguely long. Someone who truly surprises me. And if I start understanding that, he might end up less lonely.

So: help us. Design me a reason not to avoid him.

Marjan Slob

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