

'Hey, Joe'

I met a remarkable woman in a little town in southern Georgia. She worked for a service agency supporting people with intellectual disabilities in a three-county area. Her agency decided it was too focused on deficiencies and needed to think about the gifts, contributions, and capacities of the people they were serving.

So, this woman began spending time with the people the agency had once called "clients" to see if she could understand – in their homes – what gifts they had to offer. She went to the home of a forty-two-year-old man who had been the victim of special education – segregated education. His name is Joe. He has one short leg (at least he limps), and he doesn't speak the way a lot of people speak (I'm not sure what label deficiency-finding psychologists would give him. But I'm sure they would give him one.)

At age twenty-one, Joe had no place in society; so he went home to a pig farm. Every day he did two things. He fed the pigs twice a day, and he sat in the living room where he listened to the radio. (He couldn't see to watch television.)

The woman told me that after four days at Joe's house, she couldn't find his gift.

"But on the fifth day," she said, "I realized what his gift was: he listens to the radio.

"I found out that three people in town spend all their time listening to the radio, and they get paid for it. One is in the sheriff's office, one in the police department, and one in the local civil-defense office. So, I looked at each of these places where a person sits, listening to a radio all day. I liked the civil-defense best. It's a voluntary organization. They have a house that somebody gave them; so, the voluntary ambulance people sleep in its bedrooms. There's a desk and sitting right by the desk is a radio getting all the calls from the county. At the desk sits a twenty-seven-year-old woman who listens for calls and dispatches volunteers when someone needs an ambulance."

So she told the dispatcher, "I have somebody here who likes to listen to the radio as much as you do. I'd like to introduce you to him." And so she introduced Joe to her, and they put a chair on the other side of the desk, and he sat there every day listening to the radio."

This little house is also the neighborhood community center. Somebody is always there. People come and talk and drink coffee in the dining room. Sometimes they show movies.

Whenever anybody was there, Joe would go in. Everybody came to know Joe, and he became a part of that neighborhood. When Christmas came, the volunteers gave Joe a radio of his own to listen to at home in the evening because Joe had been with them and had shared his gifts in the face of their hospitality.

Joe began to go downtown at noon to eat at the diner. One day he went into the diner and the owner of the diner said, "Hey, Joe, what's happening?" Joe looked at him and said, "The Smith house over in Boonesville burned down this morning. And out on Route 90, at that turnoff where you can have picnics, there was a drug bust. And Mr. Schiller, over in Athens, had a heart attack." Everybody in the diner stopped talking and looked around at Joe. They couldn't believe it. They realized that Joe knew the answer to the question, "What's happening?" because he listened to the radio all morning.

When I went to visit this town and the woman who introduced Joe's gift of listening to the radio to the community, I saw an incredible thing. I saw, first of all, that the dispatcher and Joe were in love with each other. Then when I went with Joe to lunch, I saw that everybody who came into the diner came over to Joe first and asked, "Joe, what's happening?" And I realized that I was in the only town in the United States that now has the gift of a town crier.

The woman told me she was planning to take Joe over to the newspaper editor. It had occurred to her that in this little town with a little newspaper and one editor, the editor couldn't possibly know "what's happening." But, by noon, Joe knew. And if Joe would go over and talk to the editor every noon, the grasp, the breadth, the knowledge, of the newspaper and what it could report would expand mightily.

So, Joe is now a stringer for the local *Gazette*. He showers his gifts on the community because somebody knew that community is about capacities, contributions, and hospitalities – not about deficiencies, needs, and services.

-John McKnight