Power of the Powerless: A Brother’s Lesson

By Christopher De Vinck

I grew up in the house where my brother was on his back in his bed for almost 33 years, in the same corner of his room, under the same window, beside the same yellow walls. Oliver was blind, mute. His legs were twisted. He didn’t have the strength to lift his head nor the intelligence to learn anything. Oliver was born with severe brain damage, which left him and his body in a permanent state of helplessness.

Today I am an English teacher, and each time I introduce my class to the play about Helen Keller, The Miracle Worker, I tell my students about Oliver. One day, during my first year teaching, I was trying to describe Oliver’s lack of response, how he’d been spoon-fed every morsel he ever ate, how he never spoke. A boy in the last row raised his hand and said, “Oh, Mr. De Vinck. You mean he was a vegetable.” I stammered for a few seconds. My family and I fed Oliver; we changed his diapers, hung his clothes and bed linens on the basement line in winter, and spread them out white and clean to dry on the lawn in the summer. I always liked to watch the grasshoppers jump on the pillowcases. We bathed Oliver, tickled his chest to make him laugh. Sometimes we left the radio on in his room. We pulled the shade down over his bed in the morning to keep the sun from burning his tender skin. We listened to him laugh as we watched television downstairs. We listened to him rock his arms up and down to make the bed squeak. We listened to him cough in the middle of the night. “Well, I guess you could call him a vegetable. But I called him Oliver, my brother. You would have loved him.”

One October day in 1946, when my mother was pregnant with Oliver, her second son, my father rose from bed, shaved, dressed and went to work. At the train station, he realized he’d forgotten something, so he returned to the house and discovered the smell of gas leaking from our coal-burning stove. My mother was unconscious in her bed. My oldest brother was sleeping in his crib, which was quite high off the ground so the gas didn’t affect him. My father pulled him out of the room, through the hall, where mother revived quickly, and that was that.

Six months later, April 20, 1947, Oliver was born: a healthy looking, plump, beautiful boy. Oliver seemed like any other new born. My mother and father told my brother and sisters. There was no sign that anything was amiss. But one afternoon, a few months after he was born, my mother brought Oliver to a window. She held him there in the sun, the bright good sun, and there Oliver rested in his mother’s arms and there Oliver looked and looked directly into the sunlight, which was the first moment my mother realized that Oliver was blind.

My parents, the true heroes of this story, learned with the passing months that Oliver could not hold up, his hands or crawl or walk or anything. He couldn’t hold anything in his hand, he couldn’t speak. So they brought Oliver to Mt. Sinai Hospital in New York for a full series of tests, just to see how bad his condition was. The only explanation anyone could agree on was that the gas which my mother inhaled in her sleep during that third month of her pregnancy had reached Oliver and caused the severe incurable hopeless condition before he was born. At the end of a long week of waiting, my parents returned to the hospital and met with the doctor, Dr. Samuel De Lange. When our children are in pain we try to heal them. When they are hungry, we
feed them. When they are lonely we comfort them. “What can we do for our son?” my parents wanted to know. Dr. De Lange said that he wanted to make it very clear to both my mother and father that there was absolutely nothing that could be done for Oliver. He didn’t want my parents to grasp at false hope. “You could place him in an institution,” he said. “But,” my parents replied, “he is our son. We will take Oliver home, of course.” The good doctor answered, “Then take him home and love him.” And I guess that was sound medical advice.

Dr. De Lange speculated Oliver would probably not live beyond the age of seven, maybe eight. He also suggested Oliver to be taken to another neurosurgeon to confirm the diagnosis, and that is what my parents did. Yes, the second doctor repeated the first verdict. Oliver’s case was hopeless. While he scanned the forms that my parents filled out, the second doctor noted that my mother and father were born in Brussels which led him to say, “You know, during World War II, my parents were taken in and fed and protected by a Belgian family, for we are Jews. Now I guess it’s my turn to help a Belgian family.” And the doctor didn’t charge my parents for the tests or the care or the medication. I never met these two doctors, but I loved them all my life as the child loves the heroes in a fairy tale.

Oliver grew to the size of a ten-year-old. He had a big chest, a large head. His hands and feet were those of a five-year-old, however, small and soft. We’d wrap a box of baby cereal for him at Christmas and place it under the tree. We’d pat his head with a damp cloth in the middle of a July heat wave.

As a teacher I spent many hours preparing lessons, hoping I can influence my students in some small, but significant way. Each year thousands of books are printed with the hopes that the authors can move people to action. We all labor at the task of raising children or teaching them values, hoping something gets through, after all our efforts. Oliver could do none of these, he could do absolutely nothing except breathe and sleep and eat and yet, he was responsible for action, for love, for courage, for insight. For me, to have been brought up in a house where a tragedy was turned into joy explains to a great degree why I am the type of husband and father and writer and teacher that I have become.

I remember my mother saying when I was small, “Isn’t it wonderful that you can see, that you have eyes?” And once she said, “When you go to heaven I bet Oliver will run to you and embrace you, and the first thing he will say is ‘thank you’” It leaves quite an impression on a young boy. Of course it is I who must thank Oliver and my parents for defining to me the boundaries of love, which were the house and the yards and the woods where we ran and played. And all of the time Oliver laughed and slept.

I remember too my mother explaining to me that we were blessed with Oliver in ways that were not clear to her, at first. We were fortunate that Oliver’s case was so severe. The best we could do for him was feed him three times a day and bathe him and keep him warm. He didn’t need us to be in the room all day. He never knew what his condition was. So often parents are faced with a child who is severely retarded or is hyperactive, demanding or wild, who needs constant care. So many people have little choice but to place their child in an institution. Each circumstance is different. No one can judge another. But I have come to believe that we are here to tend to these lilies of the field, these twinkling stars of the sky. We should do the best we can. I asked my
father one day, “How did you care for Oliver for thirty-two years?” He said, “It was not thirty-two years, I just asked myself ‘can I feed Oliver today?’ And the answer was always, ‘yes I can.’”

I remember once I was a little boy sitting down beside my brother. I was alone, beside my brother. I was alone in the house and I wanted to see if Oliver was really blind. You know, whether he was faking it. So I spread my hands over his face and shook my fingers close to his open eyes. Of course, he did not blink or move. His eyes were brown like mine, yet so different. Often it was my job to feed Oliver supper – a poached egg mixed with cereal, warm milk, sugar, a banana. “Yuck”, I often thought, “I wouldn’t eat this stuff.” But feeding Oliver throughout his life was like feeding an eight-month-old child. His head was always propped up to a slight incline on pillows. A teaspoon of food was brought to his lips; he would open his mouth, close his mouth, and then swallow. Still today, I can hear the sound of the spoon ticking and tapping against the red bowl in the silence of his room. “Oh, Mr. De Vinck, you mean he was a vegetable.” I still remember the words of my student. But I called him Oliver, my brother.

When I was in my early twenties I met a girl, we fell in love. After a few months I brought her home for dinner and to meet my family. After the introductions, the small talk, my mother went to the kitchen to check the meal and I asked the girl, “Would you like to see Oliver?” For I had of course told her about my brother. “No”, she answered. She did not want to see him. It was as if she had slapped me in the face. Yet I just said something polite and walked to the dining room.

Soon after that I met Roe, Rosemary. A dark haired dark eyed lovely girl. She asked me the names of my brothers and sisters. She bought me a copy of The Little Prince. She loved children. I thought she was wonderful. I brought her home after a few months to meet my family. Introductions, small talk, dinner. All that happened. Then it was time to feed Oliver. I walked into the kitchen, reached for the red bowl and the egg and the cereal and milk and banana and prepared his meal. Then I remembered. I sheepishly asked Roe if she’d like to come upstairs and see Oliver. “Sure”, she said and up the stairs we went. I sat at Oliver’s bedside as Roe stood and watched over my shoulder. I gave him the first spoonful, the second... “Can I do that?” she asked, with ease and freedom and compassion. So I gave her the bowl and she fed Oliver, one spoonful at a time. The power of the powerless. Which girl would you marry? I married Roe, and I never regretted. Today Roe and I have three children.

When I was a child I was afraid of the dark and shared a room with my younger brother. Our room was separated from Oliver’s by a single wall. Five inches of wood and plaster divided us from each other during the night. We inhaled the same night air, listened to the same wind. Slowly, without our knowledge, Oliver created a certain power around us which changed all of our lives. I cannot explain Oliver’s influence fully, except to say that the powerless in the world do hold great power, and sometimes the weak do confound the mighty. Even now, five years after his death from pneumonia on March 12, 1980, Oliver still remains the most helpless human being I ever met. The weakest human being I ever met, and yet, he was the most powerful human being I ever met.