

Jean Vanier – Press Toolkit



Profile

Jean Vanier is a philosopher, writer, religious and moral leader and the founder of two major international community-based organizations, L'Arche, and Faith & Light, that exist for people with intellectual disabilities. The 154 L'Arche communities in 38 countries and 1,500 Faith & Light communities in 83 countries are living laboratories of human transformation. In and outside of these organizations, he has spent more than four decades as a deeply radical advocate for the poor and the weak in our society.

Jean Vanier's leadership, writing and practical works cross religious and cultural boundaries. He is a theologian and philosopher who is fully engaged with the ordinariness of everyday life and from whom people from all cultures sense a deep and honest empathy for how hard it is to be, and to do, good in a complicated world. As a practitioner he is a witness to the transforming qualities of love, vulnerability, forgiveness and simplicity: spiritual qualities that are seldom heralded today.

Where modernity calls us to privilege personal mastery, progress and doing big things, Vanier's experience of living with people with profound impairment and his spiritual reflection on this experience, lead him to focus on being with and for others, especially disadvantaged others: to cultivating sincere presence to others' desires, being attentive to the beauty in all of our ordinariness, and being of meaningful service to others. The growth of L'Arche and Faith & Light show how powerful these insights are when executed well.

Testimonials from Leading Figures

"Transcending Faith and Culture"

Timothy Shriver, Chairman & CEO, Special Olympics

Vanier is internationally honored as a humanitarian, an ecumenical moral and spiritual leader, and a social visionary recognized around the world for his message of Peace.

Dr. Rowan Williams, 104th Archbishop of Canterbury (2003-2012), Theologian, and Poet

Transcending faith and culture to speak with transforming possibility into the experience of the most vulnerable human persons, without ignoring the darkness and suffering that this entails, and lifting spirits and lives across continents in the process, is not only no mean achievement, especially for a truly humble man; it is utterly extraordinary.

Dr. Balfour Mount, Prof. Emeritus, Medicine & Palliative Care, McGill University

Jean is a man of towering intellect, global vision and impressive insight. His integrity is immediately evident on first meeting him, as are his gentleness and deep humility. To encounter Jean Vanier is to confront our human potential for thoughtfulness, compassion and sparkling joy in living.

Prof. Heather Eaton (Theology), Saint Paul University

Dr. Vanier is a man of immense and consistent integrity, with a vast international reputation and stature. Yet he remains is a humble, kind and unassuming man, offering each person dignity and deep respect.

He is the leader of a movement that has resulted in the liberation of thousands of people's lives.

Prof. Emeritus Bryan Massam, (Geography), York University

Jean Vanier is a leader in consciousness-raising about the suffering of all who are marginalized. He is internationally recognized for his compelling vision of what it means to live a fully human life and for his social and spiritual leadership in building a compassionate society

Prof. Hank Bersani (Special Education), Western Oregon University

His influence extends well beyond the US and the so called "first world".

His is a world-view that can only be created by a Nobel peace prize nominee calibre leader.

"His Vision and Inspiration"

Prof. Luther Smith (Theology), Emory University

Vanier developed an approach that inspired individuals, governments, religious institutions, and social agencies to embrace the establishment of caring community as the most holistic approach for healing the alienation experienced by persons with mental disabilities in society.

Vanier's L'Arche communities have become instructive models for the process by which societies can realize their dreams for true community.

As persons become aware of Jean Vanier's work they are not just interested in

honoring him but also in discovering how they might also establish caring relationships with the vulnerable.

Prof. Joseph Tadie (Philosophy), Saint Mary's University, Minnesota

Vanier is our model and guide in our endeavor to live lives of association with the poor; he teaches our minds and touches our hearts and helps us to gently wear down the walls that we have inherited from our culture and society about those who dwell on the 'other', less-fortunate, side of life.

Jean Vanier has inspired people from across the globe to join him in what he once called a "gentle revolution...where the powerful are dethroned and the weak uplifted; where enemies are pardoned and barriers fall, where armaments are dismantled."

Prof. Lisa Cataldo (Religion & Pastoral Counselling), Fordham University

Vanier's vision is radical in its simplicity and in its challenge. It is nothing more or less than the challenge to create peace by becoming human. I can think of no other vision that captures better what this world needs right now.

Prof. Tom Reynolds, (Theology), University of Toronto

Vanier offers a vision that is interreligious in stretch. The message of neighbourly love and hospitality for stranger is the moral heartbeat of many of the world's great faith traditions

the work of Vanier symbolizes hope for a more inclusive and human future.

Vanier's gentle wisdom is an uncommon gift for humanity in a time of uncertainty, conflict, and peril.

For over 50 years, his extraordinary vision and work have helped countless people across the globe find their way into love and life.

Vanier's way of living with and caring for some of the weakest and most vulnerable in society—i.e., people with intellectual disabilities—stands as a ray of light and hope in the world.

Prof. Christine Pohl (Theology & Social Ethics), Asbury Seminary

Vanier's influence is global and it operates primarily at the personal and interpersonal level.

His insights are seminal to current conversations and to efforts aimed at building small communities of hope and healing

Dr. Vanier's long term commitment to forming small communities that bear witness to peace, hope and wholeness is a vision and a reality worth celebrating, emulating, and honoring.

He has been a model and inspiration to countless thousands of people who long to help build a world in which the most vulnerable among us experience wholeness and full membership in community.

Dr. Balfour Mount, Prof. Emeritus, Medicine & Palliative Care, McGill University

...the examples Jean has given the world through L'Arche, Faith and Light, and Intercordia are beacons of hope for a world on the edge.

"A Messenger and His Practical Experience"

Prof. Tom Reynolds, (Theology), University of Toronto

His is a life that embodies what it proclaims.

His message is not about abstract ideas, but about living in relationships with people.

The Most Reverend Dr. Rowan Williams, Former Archbishop of Canterbury, Theologian, and Poet

We need people who know what it is to live, not without fear, but unafraid...

...in a world that knows how to divide and feel divided we need people who know how to live as one, to embrace diversity, to enjoy and help others enjoy the beauty of our common humanity.

We not only need people like Jean Vanier who have learned to understand the anxiety of being human and fragile, but also the joy of being human and fragile.

If people are to make the choice against violence in their lives, both those who live precariously, and those who are used to power and wealth, they need to know what peace, reconciliation and human flourishing – especially in the most unpromising circumstances – looks like.

Prof. Christine Pohl (Theology & Social Ethics), Asbury Seminary

The combination of his training in moral theology and his practical experience of community life has resulted in writings that are both wise and profound.

His insights into power, welcome, recognition, peacemaking, and community are deep and challenging but never sentimental. Because he lives what he writes about, he acknowledges and addresses the persistent barriers to peace and reconciliation.

The Revd Dr Sam Wells, Vicar, St. Martin in the Fields, London. Formerly Dean of the Chapel, Duke University

And now he is old. When he came to the Duke Chapel I had to hold his arm as he ascended and descended the steps and made his way down the aisle. Yet he embodies and represents a greater power than I have ever known in any other living person.

...most radical...a person whose witness for peace asks more and gives more than any other contemporary figure

Lieutenant-General Hon. Roméo A. Dallaire, (retired), Senator

He is a messenger of peace through his public speaking and writing.

"Universal Message"

Prof. Heather Eaton (Theology), Saint Paul University

In the realm of religion and religious conflict, it is my experience that Dr. Vanier's approach enables people to overcome their differences and to join efforts for a common good

Timothy Shriver, Chairman & CEO, Special Olympics

Jean Vanier's inspirational work is for all humanity, including people with intellectual disabilities. In a world where we fear differences and misunderstand each other, where our religions all too often distrust one another, Jean Vanier has used faith and values to build peace and to discover the best in all of humanity.

Professor Hans S. Reinders (Ethics), Faculty of Theology, VU University, Amsterdam

It is simple – the simple principle of being present to one another – and yet it in its simplicity, the foundational principle of L'Arche has become a sign of peace in the wider world.

Prof. Marc Dumas (Theology), University of Sherbrooke

Les Arches sont des lieux concrets, tant dans les pays développés que dans les pays émergents, tant dans les pays chrétiens que dans les pays où d'autres religions sont présentes, qui prouvent qu'il est possible de créer un monde de paix.

Prof. Hank Bersani (Special Education), Western Oregon University

...those who see his work as addressing intellectual disability have missed the point

"Vulnerability and Peace"

Prof. Stanley Hauerwas (Theology), Duke University

In a world in which religious and ideological convictions pose threats of violence in the name of security, Jean Vanier stands as a beacon helping us all to see and better understand what peace looks like.

I am a theologian committed to the practice of Christian nonviolence. As one so committed I'm often challenged to state where such nonviolence actually exists. For many years I've directed those who ask this question to the work of Jean Vanier.

Hon. Michael Ignatieff, P.C., M.P., Former Leader of the Liberal Party of Canada

His philosophy of community with the disabled speaks powerfully to his rejection of the barriers that stand to divide us. Indeed, there is no "us" in the communities that make up L'Arche, and there is no "them." There is only the pursuit of peace, taken up by those who are weak and vulnerable, whether they are disabled or not.

Prof. Heather Eaton (Theology), Saint Paul University

Dr. Vanier has spent his life teaching how we can learn to be people of peace, attending to these complex inner and social forces that impede peace.

Unlike others who simply talk of peace, Dr. Vanier committed himself to learning, observing, living and teaching the ways of peace.

Prof. Lisa Cataldo (Religion & Pastoral Counselling), Fordham University

Vanier realized that true peace, both internal and external, cannot be found in exercises of power, but rather is embodied in the mutual vulnerability of human beings who all share the desire to be valued, to be loved, and to belong.

For Vanier, peace begins "one heart at a time."

Lieutenant-General Hon. Roméo A. Dallaire, (retired), Senator

L'Arche communities are not only places of compassion and justice but are also laboratories for learning peacemaking skills.

Prof. Emmanuel Katongole (Theology), Duke University Centre for Reconciliation

Jean Vanier and the L'Arche movement he has inspired point to the gifts of gentleness as well as the everydayness that makes community and thus the search for peace possible.

Mr. Arthur Labatt, former Chancellor, University of Western Ontario

In l'Arche communities, a world of inclusion and peace is built by everyone.

Prof. Kevin Reimer (Psychology), Azusa Pacific University

Vanier sanctions peace as the grand invitation to relationship. It is welcome extended with anticipation that difference is where shared humanity is discovered and celebrated.

...the political meaning of peace is realized through embrace of those who are disabled, weak, and rejected. Invitation and welcome oblige encounter with personal frailty that makes peace a real possibility.

Professor Hans S. Reinders (Ethics), Faculty of Theology, VU University, Amsterdam

To live peacefully, Vanier teaches, requires that we recognize our own capacity for violence.

Prof. Tom Reynolds, (Theology), University of Toronto

For Vanier, the antidote to violence is not peace through strength and security, which shuns or hides weakness based on fear, but peace through shared vulnerability.

Timothy Shriver, Chairman & CEO, Special Olympics

Vanier quickly realized that, with the weakest members at the centre, L'Arche communities are not only places of compassion and justice, but also are laboratories for learning peacemaking skills.

The message of Jean Vanier and of L'Arche is profoundly original, cutting to the heart of what prevents peace. Relationships with those who are poor or disabled show us the way to defuse within ourselves and around us the causes of conflict: fear of difference, violence, and the search for power and wealth.

Prof. Joseph Tadie (Philosophy), Saint Mary's University, Minnesota

Vanier allowed himself to become vulnerable to the guidance of two marginalized men. He was led down into his own weakness and confronted with his own emotional walls. Once those walls were deconstructed, many others were drawn to the unmistakably authentic peace that was left in their place.

Rev. Prof. Emeritus Frances Young (Theology), sometime Edward Cadbury Professor of Theology & Pro-Vice-Chancellor, University of Birmingham, UK

At the heart of Jean's thinking is the recognition that peace means an ability to welcome those who are different.

"Joy"

Professor Hans S. Reinders (Ethics), Faculty of Theology, VU University, Amsterdam

I have visited L'Arche communities in various parts of the world, and have always been struck by the sheer joy of the people living there, despite the many difficulties they often face in their daily lives.

"Dignity of the Person"

Rev. Dr. Gerald A. Arbuckle, S.M., Martin D'Arcy Memorial Lecturer, Campion Hall, Oxford & Co-director, RPD Social Research Unit, Sydney

Jean Vanier has been able to highlight the dignity of all peoples, no matter what race or religion they come from, especially those with learning disabilities.

James Towey, President, Ave Maria University, Florida

Jean Vanier has brought peace by affirming and safeguarding the human dignity of the disabled while prophetically challenging society to recognize our need for relationship with them.

Prof. Joseph Tadie (Philosophy), Saint Mary's University, Minnesota

Vanier has already been gently, quietly, and lovingly calling people of many diverse backgrounds and faiths to share in a way of life where the walls that divide us from the marginalized are deconstructed on a daily basis, in acts as simple as a shared smile, a held hand, or a patient walk.

Vanier has noted, "To walk with the poor is to go against the current of society. To work for them-even to fight for their rights and to raise them into the normality of society-can be part of a culture. But simply to live with them, to share their lives or to create community with them is not!"

Timothy Shriver, Chairman & CEO, Special Olympics

People with developmental disabilities are the weakest and most marginalized of people in all societies today, and they suffer greatly because of that marginalization. Without a voice, they are victims of rejection, violence, and exclusion. L'Arche communities worldwide offer a haven of peace and a place where those with a disability are able to grow and develop to their full potential, have their own projects and interests, and make a contribution to society.

Recognizing the suffering and isolation of families of people who have disabilities, Jean Vanier responded again concretely and with compassion by co-founding Faith and Light. This organization has been particularly welcomed in countries where there are no public services for people with disabilities, offering them and their families support and hope.

The message of L'Arche transcends the world of disability.

"Becoming Human"

Rev. Dr. Gerald A. Arbuckle, S.M., Martin D'Arcy Memorial Lecturer, Campion Hall, Oxford & Co-director, RPD Social Research Unit, Sydney

He teaches us that everyone has a gift of life to offer the world, in fact those with learning disabilities can be significant teachers because they call us to acknowledge the vulnerability within each of us. The more we discover this the more we realize how much we need one another – surely a foundation for lasting peace.

Prof. Tom Reynolds, (Theology), University of Toronto

His leadership and vision reflect a deep spirituality of healing and community that is rooted in Christian faith but which cut across many faith traditions to touch something profound in the human spirit: the capacity that human fragility and weakness have to empower relationships of mutual giving and receiving, cultivating the deepest currents of solidarity and love.

He invites those in his presence to "become human", not as an expert academic but as a fellow human being who is also "becoming human".

Vanier's is a call to inclusive community.

Vanier summons us to a vulnerable communion.

Genuine healing happens here, not in miraculous cures, but through mutual respect, care, and love. Paradoxically, vulnerability becomes a source of strength and wholeness, a place of reconciliation and communion with others.

Prof. Kevin Reimer (Psychology), Azusa Pacific University

In an unexpected inversion, previously marginalized disabled are considered teachers—challenging others to live peaceably in authentic relationships. Taken from K. Reimer's book « Living L'Arche: Stories of Compassion, Love, and Disability » (Continuum, 2009). Please cite book if this quote is used

Prof. Christine Pohl (Theology & Social Ethics), Asbury Seminary

In creating and inspiring communities that recognize the centrality and contribution of the most vulnerable persons, Dr. Vanier has helped us see that strength and weakness are complexly related and that both can contribute to a shared life that is beautiful and life-giving.

Prof. Richard Kearney, Charles B. Seelig Professor in Philosophy, Boston College

His message and charism operate from the ground up, from person to person, from interiority to interiority, from one single wounded human being to another that the deep humanity which unites us is more powerful than the differences which cause violence.

Prof. Emmanuel Katongole (Theology), Duke University Centre for Reconciliation

one of Jean Vanier's most memorable insights is his assertion that what the weak and poor require of us is not so much to do things for them, as to sit at the same table with them.

Prof. Heather Eaton (Theology), Saint Paul University

His teachings bring people together. His abundance of compassion for human suffering softens people, allows them to let down barriers and open up, and become more honest and aware of those who suffering around them.

Lieutenant-General Hon. Roméo A. Dallaire, (retired), Senator

Key to Jean Vanier's work is his conviction that every person has gifts to share with others, and that in some way the marginalized person - someone with a developmental disability for instance - is particularly important and indeed prophetic in our individualistic and competitive world.

Prof. Lisa Cataldo (Religion & Pastoral Counselling), Fordham University

When we begin to view our own burdens with compassion, we begin to open to the other with the same compassion. In this way, we create the possibility of becoming human together – humbly, honestly, and peacefully

Rev. Prof. Emeritus Frances Young (Theology), sometime Edward Cadbury Professor of Theology & Pro-Vice-Chancellor, University of Birmingham, UK

...Jean's remarkable ability to move to wider insights, which bear upon the human condition in general and the conditions for humanity to live together in peace, form the particular experience of living with persons with learning disabilities.

He would never claim any great achievement for himself, yet there can be no doubt that his work has produced a kind of 'prophetic sign', pointing to new possibilities for the global human community.

Pamela Wallin, Canadian Senator

Jean Vanier believes that the human heart must be liberated from fear so that we may begin to discover our common humanity.

"Reconciliation"

Prof. William Gaventa, Director, Summer Institute on Theology and Disability

"...his work has been a call to a profound re-examination of the usual understandings of strength, power, and knowledge, and the ways in which human identity is in fact warped when we do not recognize our own weakness, vulnerability, and limits..."

Lieutenant-General Hon. Roméo A. Dallaire, (retired), Senator

Jean Vanier and l'Arche hold a set of values that contrast radically with the values of today's societies, which for the most part are founded on competition and the search for power.

Prof. Kevin Reimer (Psychology), Azusa Pacific University

Reconciliation and healing in L'Arche aren't indexed by economic productivity, competitive advantage, or status. Peace happens where disabled and caregivers together learn that difference solicits knowledge that all are broken; yet remain worthy of unqualified respect. Taken from K. Reimer's book « Living L'Arche: Stories of Compassion, Love, and Disability » (Continuum, 2009). Please cite book if this quote is used

Biography

Childhood and Spiritual Search

Jean Vanier was born a Canadian citizen in 1928, the fourth of five children. His father, Georges Vanier, Governor General of Canada from 1959 to 1967, had a diplomatic career that took the family to France and England where Jean spent his childhood.

Jean entered the Royal Navy College in Dartmouth in 1942 at the age of 13. In the middle of the Second World War, the young man embarked on an 8-year career in both the British navy and later the Canadian navy – an experience that shaped him. However, he felt called to a different life and began a spiritual quest. In 1950 he chose to leave the Canadian navy where a promising career awaited him. The following years were, for Jean, a time of searching for meaning and of deepening his faith. He reflected during those years on how he could live the gospels more fully in his daily life.

He joined Eau Vive, a centre for theological and spiritual formation for lay people. This center, headed by Dominican Father Thomas Philippe¹, had members from many different countries. Jean Vanier began his doctorate on the ethics of Aristotle, which he defended in 1962. It would become his first published work in 1966, titled "*Happiness as Principle and End of Aristotelian Ethics*". In 2000, he published "*A Taste of Happiness*" to make the wisdom of Aristotle widely accessible in clear, straightforward language.

L'Arche: A Story of Encounter

At the end of 1963, Vanier lent a hand to Father Thomas¹, who had just been made chaplain of the Val Fleuri in Trosly-Breuil, a little village situated on the edge of the forest of Compiègne, in the Oise. The Val Fleuri was a small institution that

¹ Regarding père Thomas Philippe: https://www.larche.org/news/-/asset_publisher/mQsRZspJMdBy/content/-pere-thomas?_101_INSTANCE_mQsRZspJMdBy_redirect=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.larche.org%2Fnews%3Fp_p_id%3D101_INSTANCE_mQsRZspJMdBy%26p_p_lifecycle%3D0%26p_p_state%3Dnormal%26p_p_mode%3Dview%26p_p_col_id%3Dcolumn-1%26p_p_col_pos%3D1%26p_p_col_count%3D2

welcomed about 30 men with intellectual disabilities. Later Jean returned to Canada where he taught a term at St. Michael's College at the University of Toronto, his classes in ethics quickly becoming popular with students. When the term ended, Jean returned to Trosly and began to learn about people with intellectual disabilities.

“For all three men it was the beginning of a new life, radically different than anything they had known before.”

He visited the psychiatric hospital at Saint-Jean-les-Deux-Jumeaux in a southern suburb of Paris. Living conditions there were very difficult. There he met Raphaël Simi et Philippe Seux, and was deeply affected by their suffering. He decided to buy a little house near the Val Fleuri to welcome and live with his new companions. It was not “a couple of retards” whom Jean welcomed, but Raphaël and Philippe; it was not an institution which he created, but a commitment he made to those two men whose cry for friendship had so moved him. This personal relationship would prove to be extremely rewarding.

For all three men it was the beginning of a new life, radically different than anything they had known before. It was, after some months of trial and error, the beginning of an extraordinary human adventure. Jean recalled: “Essentially, they wanted a friend. They were not very interested in my knowledge or my ability to do things, but rather they needed my heart and my being.” Within a short time, other homes were founded, and Jean Vanier sent out a call for help with this work. Young people from France, Canada, England and Germany answered the call to become “assistants” living with people with intellectual disabilities.

Assistants in these homes experience the same encounter that Jean did. What makes sense to young people – what anchors them in the daily life of L'Arche – is an experience of community which deeply impacts their understanding of disability and of being. Life shared in community by people with and without intellectual disabilities creates a whole new sense of solidarity. The organization spread quickly to other regions, other countries, and other continents.

“Today, L'Arche is made up of 154 communities spread over 5 continents, with 10,000 members.”

During this time, Jean Vanier also cofounded Faith and Light with Marie-Helene Mathieu. This organization creates “communities of encounter” which are woven around individuals – adult or children – with intellectual disabilities. These people, along with their families and friends, are invited to participate in monthly meetings to share friendship, prayer and celebration. Faith and Light has nearly 1,500 such communities in 81 countries on 5 continents.

Today, L'Arche is made up of 154 communities spread over 5 continents, with 10,000 members. There are always new projects being developed in response to the needs of people with intellectual disabilities, who are so often vulnerable and still too often rejected, despite the valuable lessons on friendship and being that they have to offer.

Honors and Awards

Joseph Kennedy Foundation Award, avec Mother Teresa, Washington D.C., États-Unis, 1971

Officier de l'Ordre du Canada, Canada, 1972

Prix de l'Institut de la vie, France, 1973
Compagnon de l'Ordre du Canada, 1989
The Maclean's Honor Roll, Canada, 1990
Prix de la Banque Royale du Canada, 1991
Grand Officier de l'Ordre national du Québec, Canada, 1992
Humanitarian Award, University of Notre Dame, États-Unis, 1993
Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur, France, 1994
Prix International Paul VI, remis par le Pape Jean-Paul II, Italie, 1997
Rabbi Gunther Plaut Humanitarian Award, Canada, 2001
Officier de la Légion d'Honneur, France, 2002
Community of Christ International Peace Award, États-Unis, 2003
Prix Gadium et Spes, de L'Ordre des Chevaliers de Colomb, Canada, 2005
Médaille de l'Ordre Ecce Homo, Tomaszów, Pologne, 2005
Prix du Sénat de la République de Pologne, 2006
Blessed are the Peacemakers Award, Chicago Catholic Theological Union, États-Unis, 2006
Beacon Fellowship Prize, Royaume-Uni, 2006
Nation Builder Award, Globe & Mail, Canada, 2008
Pacem in Terris award, États-Unis, 2013
International Human Development and Solidarity Award, University of Notre Dame, États-Unis, 2014
Prix Templeton, Fondation Templeton, États-Unis, 2015
Commandeur de la Légion d'Honneur, France, 2016
Courage of Conscience Award, The Peace Abbey Foundation, Boston, Massachusetts, 2016
Spiritual Solidarity Award, Fondation Adyan, Liban, 2018

Prix Templeton 2015

On May 8, 2015, in London, Jean Vanier was awarded the Templeton Prize. The John Templeton Foundation yearly honors a living person who has made exceptional contributions to affirming life's spiritual dimension, whether through insight, discovery, or practical works.

Vanier's five decades of living with deeply vulnerable people have led him to an understanding of weakness and common humanity.

Jennifer Simpson, the daughter of Foundation president and chairman Dr. John M. Templeton, Jr. and granddaughter of Sir John Templeton, noted that Vanier brought a much-needed perspective to how the power of love can advance spiritual progress in the world. "By recognizing the importance of every individual, regardless of their station in life, Jean Vanier underscores how each of us has the ability not only to lift up others, but also ourselves," she said. "His powerful message and practice of love has the potential to change the world for the better, just as it has already changed the lives

of countless individuals who have been touched by this extraordinary man.”

In his acceptance speech Vanier made a plea for global peace. “Before being Christians or Jews or Muslims, before being Americans or Russians or Africans, before being generals or priests, rabbis or imams, before having visible or invisible disabilities, we are all human beings with hearts capable of loving.”

Jean Vanier joins a distinguished group of 44 former recipients, including Mother Teresa, who received the inaugural Prize award in 1973; Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (1983); Desmond Tutu, the former Anglican archbishop of Cape Town, South Africa (2013) and the Dalai Lama (2012).

<http://www.templetonprize.org/previouswinner.html> (new window)

The Templeton Prize was established in 1972 by the late global investor and philanthropist Sir John Templeton. It is a cornerstone of the Foundation’s international efforts to serve as a philanthropic catalyst for discoveries relating to human purpose and ultimate reality.

Valued at about \$1.7 million dollars or €1.5 million, the Prize is one of the world’s largest annual awards given to an individual. Jean Vanier gifted all of the prize money to L’Arche and Faith and Light, and through them to other organizations in financially poor countries who are working to lift up the lives and reveal the unique gifts of people with intellectual disabilities.

[Read Jean Vanier’s acceptance speech \(PDF – new window\)](#)

Message

For over five decades, Jean Vanier has been their friend and radical advocate, inviting us to recognize the profound gifts and lessons that they can offer others when they are supported and included with dignity: *“We must stay near them and take time to listen to them because out of fear they speak quietly and infrequently.”*

By Pamela Cushing

Vanier’s work expands our understanding of human purpose and the good life through three core questions:

- What does it mean to be fully human?
- What does it mean to serve others well?
- How can unity be fostered among diverse people?

His response to these questions has been practical and intellectual, lived and written. The simple, yet transformational practice at the heart of his vision is to create supportive spaces for two people to come together across differences. In this, he shows that it is indeed possible to live out humanistic ideals.

Dignity, freedom and opportunity for all humans

In exploring what it means to be fully human, Vanier invites us to observe the tension in our world between the pressure to achieve mastery or control, and our longing to find ways to live at peace with our own and others' imperfections. Where modernity privileges progress and perfection, Vanier has drawn attention to imperfection and fallibility as important and overlooked aspects of being human. Vanier believes that highlighting the universality and centrality of our shared fragility has the potential to unite us in commonality: *"The weak teach the strong to accept and integrate the weakness and brokenness of their own lives."* Vanier's narratives reveal how people really blossom when they are welcomed as they are, with their gifts and their weaknesses together. Importantly, while acknowledging the humanness of our imperfection, Vanier also insists that we continually take responsibility to strive to grow towards freedom and serving others in spite of this.

"Strength and mastery can be impressive, yet they tend to divide people in competition and the regular disappointment of not measuring up."

The gem of inspiration at the heart of L'Arche is that mutual relationships with those who are vulnerable open us up to the discovery of our common humanity. In this way, he names human imperfection as a gift, and an opportunity. Imperfection and weakness can draw people closer together, for instance in solidarity around someone who has been hurt and needs help. Vulnerability can move others to give more of themselves, or to open up and reveal their own shortcomings. Strength and mastery can be impressive, yet they tend to divide people in competition and the regular disappointment of not measuring up. *"I am struck by how sharing our weakness and difficulties is more nourishing to others than sharing our qualities and successes."*

A meaningful life is one of compassion, in service of humane ideals

Sharing life with marginalized people galvanized Vanier's understanding that to serve others well requires us to move beyond charity and tolerance. He recognized the hubris that grows when a helper imagines himself as somehow superior or separate from those he serves. He learned how much better help feels to the person in need when animated by a sense of solidarity and common humanity than help driven merely by a sense of duty.

The felt distinction is between merely caring for others, and actually caring about them as people. And since you cannot legislate people to care about others, part of Vanier's distinct contribution to our understanding of serving others well is to demonstrate, with his communities, that it is possible to create the conditions for this mutuality to develop. *"Every child, every person needs to know that they are a source of joy... needs to be celebrated."* He suggests that it is only through this kind of profound acceptance that "our negative, broken self-images can be transformed." One example is his insistence that simply being with the marginalized in solidarity and celebration, is

as vital as doing practical things for them. He entreats people to cultivate “fidelity to the wonder of each day... visible in small and daily gestures of love and forgiveness.”

“Care relationships that are not at least on a path towards mutuality will be shallow and inadequate.”

Jean Vanier insists that while difficult and fraught, care relationships that are not at least on a path towards mutuality will be shallow and inadequate. Amidst the routine physics of care, he reminds us of the fundamental goal of service: *“to support and love people to greater freedom.”* By this of course he does not mean that one’s need or impairment disappears; but that a person should not be made to feel trapped by their need or interminably beholden to others. He points to the unbearable weight we heap onto people already living with an impairment, when we add the social burden of feeling that they are defined by their need, and have nothing to give to others.

Meaningful fulfilment emerges as we craft relationships across difference

As both a realist and a student of the heart, Vanier has long recognized that you cannot force people to love, appreciate or include others that they deem unworthy because of their differences. While this instinct to judge, fear and exclude those who are different in devalued ways is natural, Vanier points us to the opposing possibility: that the scope of our imagination can be enriched if we learn to live with the hidden lessons of the dissonance that diversity occasions. Vanier rejects resignation to our base fears and instead offers stories of the exciting possibilities of difference, designed to encourage the desire for openness by choice, not law. Vanier holds the unsentimental conviction that love is what can make power generative instead of degenerative. *“We are not called by God to do extraordinary things, but to do ordinary things with extraordinary love.”*

“When one’s gifts are properly acknowledged, a person with disabilities’ resilience and sense of worth is strengthened.”

Vanier has shown that when marginalized people are welcomed in love and friendship, their gifts have transformative effects on personal and interpersonal healing and unity. This transformation flows both ways: When one’s gifts are properly acknowledged, a person with disabilities’ resilience and sense of worth is strengthened.

The human yearning to be loved and to belong is universal, and L’Arche and Faith & Light communities are living laboratories that explore, every day, how to best respond to this yearning. In their sustained encounter with marginalized people, the community members gradually name, explore and embrace their own human fragility and thereby readjust their moral compass. They are challenged and taught how to bring their strong and their weak sides together. They learn that tenderness and compassion are as important as power and knowledge. In acknowledging their own imperfections, they also learn to live with greater humility in the face of others’ vulnerability.

The result is a cohort of peacemakers within and without these communities, trained in Vanier’s distinct humanistic ideas of care, imperfection and unity. These actors bring those ideas to bear in everyday life as citizens, leaders and family members. *“It is only*

when we stand up, with all our failings and sufferings, and try to support others rather than withdraw into ourselves, that we can fully live the life of community.”

Pamela Cushing is a cultural anthropologist and professor in Disability Studies and Social Justice for King's University College at Western University, Canada. She lived in L'Arche and did ethnographic PhD research there in 2000. Ongoing collaborations include: the Anthropology of L'Arche (with John Sumarah), Intercordia, L'Arche Canada education, and recruiting.

Conferences and presentations

Major Superiors of Religious Orders, Toronto, Canada, 1969

Empire Club of Canada, Toronto, Canada, 1971

Conference with Mother Teresa, Massey Hall, Toronto, Canada, 1971

Colloque sur l'enfance inadaptée, Alger, Algeria, 1973

Colloque Réinsertion sociale – La croisée des chemins, University of Ottawa, Canada, 1974

General meeting of the International Conference on Social Welfare, Nairobi, Kenya, 1974

Conference “In weakness seeds of hope”, Washington DC, United States, 1977

University of Saida, Lebanon, 1980

General Assembly of the World Council of Churches, 1983

Invitation of Pope Shenouda III of the Orthodox Coptic Church, Egypt, 1983

Harvard University, United States, 1988

Moscow Institute of Philosophy, Russia, 1989

Institute of Orthodox Theology, Bucarest, Romania, 1992

Harvard University, “From Brokenness to Community”, Boston, United States, 1992

World Congress of Ecclesiastical Movements, “The Spirituality of L'Arche”, Rome, Italy, 1998

Lambeth Conference, “The call to holiness”, talk to 800 Anglican Bishops, Canterbury, UK, 1998

Massey Lectures, Radio Canada, “Becoming Human”, 1998

World Youth Day address, Toronto, Canada, 2002

Les États Généraux du Handicap, comité Kristeva, Paris, France, May 2005

World Youth Day address, Cologne, Germany, 2005

Conference with Dr. Balfour Mount, “Voyage towards a personal and social transformation”, Ottawa, Canada, 2006

Conference at Lent with Axel Khan, “To be different”, Paris, France, March 2006

La Cité de la réussite, Round Table with Boris Cyrulnik, La Sorbonne, Paris, October 2006

Templeton Fondation, Humble Approach Initiative Symposium, Trosly, France, 2007

49th International Eucharistic Congress, Quebec City, Canada, 2008

La Cité de la Réussite, Round Table with Patrick Poivre d'Arvor, Marcel Rufo, Senate, April 2008

Colloque Fragilités interdites, "Advocating for the Right to be Vulnerable", University of the Social Sciences, Toulouse, France, 2009

Blackfriars Priory School, "The long Road to Freedom", Oxford, UK, January 2011

Unesco, "The Thirst for Peace", Paris, France, 2011

Colloque Fragilités interdites, "All Vulnerable, All Human!", Lyon, France, 2011

Talk for the priests of the diocese of Rome, 2012

Grandes conférences catholiques, "What Hope for Peace?", Brussels, Belgium, 2013

"Fragility, a liability or a strength?", Strasbourg, France, 2013

Colloque Fragilités interdites, "Fragile! and yet so much strength!", Nantes, France, 2013

UNESCO, "Listening to my inner voice", Paris, France, 2014

UNESCO, "To Live Together", Paris, France, 2015

House of Lords, "Why do the strong need the weak?", London, UK, 2015

British Academy, "Transforming our hearts", Templeton Prize Announcement, London, UK, 2015

Bibliography

Books by Jean Vanier

Life In community, An illustrated and abridged edition of Community & Growth, Darton, Longman & Todd, 2019

We Need Each Other, Paraclet Press, 2018

A Cry Is Heard: My path to peace, Darton, Longman & Todd, 2018

Life's Great Questions, Franciscan Media, 2015

The Gospel of John, the Gospel of Relationship, Franciscan Media, 2015

Signs: Seven Words of Hope, Paulist Press, 2014 (In the UK as *Signs of the Times: Seven Paths of Hope for a Troubled World*, Darton, Longman & Todd, 2013)

Tears of Silence, House of Anansi Press, 2014 (original edition 1974)

Mental Health: The Inclusive Church Resource, with John Swinton, Darton, Longman & Todd, 2014

Befriending the Stranger, Paulist Press, 2014 (William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2005; Paulist Press, 2010)

I Meet Jesus: He Tells Me "I Love You", Paulist Press, 2014 (original edition 1981)

Happiness: A Guide for a Good Life, Aristotle for a New Century. Arcade Publishing, 2012 (In Canada as *Made for Happiness: Discovering the Meaning of Life with Aristotle*, House of Anansi Press, 2001, 2005)

An Ark for the Poor: The Story of L'Arche, Novalis, 2012 (Crossroad Publishing Co., 1995)

The Heart of L'Arche: A Spirituality for Everyday, Novalis, 2012 (Geoffrey Chapman, 1995)

Becoming Friends, St. Paul Communications, 2010

Our Life Together: A Memoir in Letters, HarperCollins, 2009

Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness, with Stanley Hauerwas, InterVarsity Press, 2008

Becoming Human, Paulist Press, 2008 (original edition 1998)

Community and Growth, Darton, Longman & Todd, 2007 (Paulist Press, 1989)

Encountering 'the Other', Paulist Press, 2006

Seeing Beyond Depression, Paulist Press, 2005

Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John, Paulist Press, 2004

Finding Peace, House of Anansi Press, 2003 (Continuum Publishing Group, 2006)

Man and Woman, God Made Them, Paulist Press, 2000 (original edition Novalis, 1984)

Our Journey Home: Rediscovering a Common Humanity Beyond Our Difference, Orbis Books, 1997

The Scandal of Service, Jesus Washes Our Feet, Novalis, 1996

The Door of Hope, Hodder & Stoughton, 1995

Jesus, the Gift of Love, Crossroad, 1994

From Brokenness to Community, Paulist Press, 1992

Images of Love, Words of Hope, Robert Pope Foundation, 1991 (Paulist Press, 1988)

Treasures of the Heart, Meakin, 1989

The Broken Body, Darton, Longman & Todd, Paulist Press, 1988

I Walk With Jesus, Paulist Press, 1987

Eruption to Hope, Paulist Press, 1983 (Griffin House, 1971)

Followers of Jesus, Paulist Press, 1976

Be Not Afraid, Paulist Press, 1975

In Weakness Strength: The Spiritual Sources of Georges P. Vanier, 19th Governor-General of Canada, Griffin House, 1969

Books Inspired by Jean Vanier's Work

Adam, God's Beloved, by Henri Nouwen, Orbis Books, 2012

The Boy in the Moon, by Ian Brown, Macmillan, 2011

The Paradox of Disability: Responses to Jean Vanier and L'Arche Communities from Theology and the Sciences, edited by Hans S. Reinders, Eerdmans Press, 2010

Theology, Disability, and Spiritual Transformation: Learning from the Communities of L'Arche, by Michael Hryniuk, Cambria Press, 2010

Living L'Arche: Stories of Compassion, Love and Disability, by Kevin Scott Reimer, Liturgical Press, 2009

Walking on a Rolling Deck: Life on the Ark, by Kathleen Berken, Liturgical Press, 2008

Jean Vanier: Essential Writings, edited by Carolyn Whitney-Brown, Orbis Books, 2008

Enough Room for Joy: The Early Days of L'Arche, by B. Clarke, SJ, Novalis Publishing, 2006 (Paulist Press, 1974)

The Miracle, the Message, the Story: Jean Vanier and L'Arche, by Kathryn Spink, Paulist Press, 2006 (Darton, Longman and Todd, 2005)

My Life Together: L'Arche Communities and the Challenge of Unity, by Hilary Wilson, Darton, Longman & Todd, 2004

L'Arche Communities: New Movements and Communities in the Life of the Church, by Helen Reid Thomas, Catholic Truth Society, 2002.

Encounter with Mystery: Reflections on L'Arche and Living with Disability, edited by Frances M. Young, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1997