



# A Human Future

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AN E-QUARTERLY CONTRIBUTION TO THE PUBLIC CONVERSATION ABOUT VALUES AND THE COMMON GOOD. [SUBSCRIBE](#)



● Jean Vanier is a Canadian humanitarian, spiritual leader, and internationally esteemed pioneer in the field of care for people with intellectual disabilities. Born in 1928, he joined the Royal Navy at age 13 and left it at 21 to begin a spiritual quest and to study for his PhD. Appalled by conditions of institutions where people with intellectual disabilities lived, in 1964 he welcomed two men to share a home with him. Thus began what has become the worldwide movement of L'Arche. In 1971, he co-founded Faith and Light, an international support network for families.

## *Jean Vanier's Letter to the Parliamentary Committee on Palliative and Compassionate Care*

For this issue we have departed from our usual interview format to offer a slightly abridged version of a letter from Jean Vanier presented on October 15 to the Parliamentary Committee on Palliative and Compassionate Care. This all-party Committee is conducting consultations across Canada on four distinct but related challenges: palliative care, suicide prevention, elder abuse, and disability issues related to health care. The Committee will submit a report early in 2011 urging specific policy action to address these areas. *Ed.*

Thank you for the opportunity to reflect with you on the care of vulnerable people.

Your committee has a most important task, for it is said that we will be judged as a society by how we treat our most vulnerable members. It is wise to listen to, and learn from them, even as we serve them.

For the past 46 years I have lived with people intellectual disabilities. These beautiful men and women have much to teach us about vulnerability, about caring, and about the ways of the heart. As individuals and as a population, they have a lived history of suffering, of being rejected and hidden away; away from the mainstream, away from power, away from belonging. Their obvious physical impairments, their openness of heart and their cry of need for relationship have gently invited me to reflect on my own impairments, fear of openness and need for relationship. They have been my teachers in

the school of the wise and tender heart.

**What I have learned from them, in their humility and their humiliations, is that we are all vulnerable people.** Each one of us is important, especially the weakest among us. In our vulnerability we are easily hurt, and we have elaborate systems of self protection which keep us from being open with each other. We need each other, and yet we are deeply afraid of this need. Our fear estranges us from our own weakness, and keeps us from exercising the fullness of our humanity in caring for each other, individually and as a society.

I have just celebrated my 82nd birthday. As well as a sense of deep gratitude for my life, there are losses. Over the past two years I have significantly curtailed my long distance travel. I grow tired more easily. However I experience great joy as those whom I have welcomed over the years, now care for me. My vulnerability is cherished by them,

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as theirs has been by me, and this helps me to welcome mine in its newest incarnation, old age with its joys but also its various indignities.

Each of us is fragile, with deep needs for both love and a sense of belonging. We begin and end our lives vulnerable and dependent, requiring others to care for us. Throughout our lives there are other moments of fragility and dependence. In our states of dependence, our need cries out for attention and care. If this need is well received, it calls forth the powers of love in others, and creates unity around us, the gifts of the vulnerable to our world. If our cry and our need are unmet, we remain alone and in anguish.

The vulnerable people whom your committee is called to reflect about caring for, are often in a precarious state, mentally or physically or both. They are often in anguish. The old, those living with illness and perhaps near death, those in depression and with a sense of despair, those living with disabilities; these are all people living in a most fragile state. The danger in our culture of productivity and achievement is that we easily dismiss and ignore as unproductive the gifts and the beauty of our most vulnerable members, and we do so at our own peril, dehumanizing ourselves.

**The Story of Janine:** In 1973 in our little community we welcomed Janine, then age 40. Janine was physically very fragile; she had epilepsy, she was hemiplegic, she was fat, and she had diabetes. Janine was furious! She came to us having suffered forty years of humiliation; she had never been to school, she had been hidden away from others 24/7, and had lived a constant betrayal of her personhood. She would scream and scream, her screaming saying to us: “Won’t anyone ever see me as person? A person with needs and desires and dreams?” What Janine needed from us was of course that her physical needs be competently attended to. Beyond that however, what she most desperately needed from us was for people to get to know her, to respect her, and to reveal to her, beyond her obvious disability, her beauty as a human being.

This revelation occurred gradually, not through therapy, but through sustained and loving friendships, wherein Janine could find her place, and be lifted out of

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## L’Arche Ottawa presented to the Committee on behalf of L’Arche Canada



After receiving Jean Vanier’s letter, the Parliamentary Committee on Palliative and Compassionate Care invited L’Arche Canada to present to the Committee. Three members of the L’Arche Ottawa community represented L’Arche Canada, appearing as witnesses before the Committee on October 19. Donna Rietschlin, Jim Cassidy and Raphael Amato gave a brief presentation focusing on L’Arche’s experience of supporting aging members including during their time of dying. The presentation shared with MPs the importance of choice, of relationships, and of mutual vulnerability and learning as we share a common humanity. L’Arche Ottawa is one of the communities of L’Arche Canada that has had considerable experience in this area. For the past several years it has shared its wisdom by giving retreats and educational programs on aging and bereavement at the invitation of churches and other groups.

● Jim Cassidy, a senior core member of L’Arche Ottawa, was one of the presenters.



her prison of loneliness and despair. Gradually Janine blossomed. Equally important, we were transformed by her need for us. In her cry we recognized our own anguish, and our own need for recognition and love. We also recognized, faced with our individual limitations and her overwhelming needs, the necessity of our being united in caring for her.

**If such need is well received, it calls forth the powers of love in others, and creates unity.** These are the gifts of the vulnerable to our world. If our cry and our need are unmet, we remain alone and in anguish.

Of course we must also be competent professionals, clear about our skills and limits and willing to consult widely about those we serve. However, there is grave danger here that our competence becomes the goal, serving excellence rather than people. When faced with the vulnerability or anguish of another, the forces of anguish within us can be awakened. Without proper

support, we quickly protect our own vulnerable humanity. We have many wonderful and creative ways to do this, as many ways as there are people. We may use the compulsion to work to meet the unending need for service, putting the accomplishment of the work above the person cared for. We of course need to be clear about our boundaries. However, citing the need for maintaining professional boundaries, we can eternally hide ourselves behind professional distance, losing the necessary mutuality that is both the soil and fruit of humane service.

A doctor told me of visiting a colleague in a hospital. The patient was herself a doctor and most importantly a young mother. She had been acutely ill. Then she was transferred to a ward where a nurse came by intermittently. She was terrified that she would die, leaving her young children. When her friend and colleague visited her, she sat on the bed, took the patient's hand

## L'Arche Canada's new website on Aging and Disability



This site, created by L'Arche Canada in 2010, offers wisdom and practical tools to face the challenge of aging with grace and dignity. Life can be overwhelming for aging adults, especially those with disabilities, and for their families and caregivers. The vision and

practices related to aging, grieving and dying that you will find on this site come from L'Arche Canada's 45 year experience of creating community with people who have intellectual disabilities and supporting them as they age and become fragile, and also from many other organizations, individuals and government bodies. The website is made more accessible by the inclusion of numerous short high-quality videos.

Major themes dealt with in the website include

- learning to age well
- understanding and adjusting to changed needs
- responding to complex needs
- palliative care
- preparing for the end of life
- grieving

We hope that people, whether caregivers or themselves aging and fragile, will find inspiration and practical support as they explore this website.

● **Cathy Dancereau, Project Manager**



and gently asked, “How are you?” The patient responded, “This is the first time someone has touched me in a nonmedical and humane way since I arrived in the hospital three weeks ago.”

Some of the ways we must interact with vulnerable people, listening for their fears, touching them with tenderness, are not very complicated, though obviously others are much more so.

**What then is it we need to provide for those whom we ask to care for vulnerable populations?** What training and support do they require? Firstly, we need to cultivate a culture of care where the importance of each person, care givers and recipients, is the primary value. Their histories, medical and personal, are important here, as the relationship begins. We need to know a little bit about the people we are treating; who they are, what are their likes and dislikes, their hopes and dreams. The wellbeing of each individual should be upheld, over efficiency, scheduling, meetings or even standards of excellence, and to do so requires a shift in focus from the job-to-be-done to the-wellbeing-of-the-person-served. The needs of the most fragile individual should be given priority, and this in itself will foster unity and transformation.

I am reminded of the young woman who took a job as a personal care worker in an old people’s home. There one of her clients was an elderly woman who was alone in the world, disheveled, without visitors or friends. In many ways the old woman seemed invisible. Then one day the young care worker noticed her and struck up a conversation. The following day the same interaction, and gradually the young worker found herself in a friendship with the elderly woman. Most importantly, the younger woman found herself transformed by this friendship with the old woman. Not only did the old lady look forward to the visits of the younger woman, but the latter began to find new meaning in her job and new happiness in her perception of herself.

**We need to encourage caregivers to enter into appropriate but real relationships with those they serve, relationships which both validate the client and transform the caregiver.** We must help carers to recognize and welcome their own weakness. We need to create places of safety where caregivers can share with each other the anguish that rises up within from time to time, evoked by a client’s anguish. They need also to be able to share together their feelings of helplessness, inability, anger, frustration, violence and

## A man whose life has been inspired by Jean Vanier



- This year marks my 25th year since coming to L’Arche. I was a young Calgarian when I spent my first year in one of the communities of L’Arche in France. There I often had the opportunity to hear and interact with Jean Vanier. I was impressed by the breadth of his vision which was both personal and global. He helped me to see more clearly the enormous suffering in the world and how I could help. I have stayed in L’Arche because of Jean’s universal message that everyone, no matter their ability or disability, has the need to belong and a gift to give to others. My role with the L’Arche Canada Foundation is to help access the financial resources that enable L’Arche to create more places of community and belonging for Canadians.

Jean Vanier’s more than four decades as a deeply radical advocate for the poor and the weak in our society has led to his recent nomination for both the Templeton Prize and the Nobel Peace Prize. Both awards would honour Vanier but would also recognize and celebrate the weak and the voiceless of our world, for it is in their name that Jean Vanier always accepts honors.

**Nathan Ball is Executive Director of the L’Arche Canada Foundation.**

grief. These feelings are within each of us, and sharing them constructively as a group will encourage growth towards unity and maturity in the individual and within the group, and will help to prevent burnout.

Let us give our most vulnerable members a central place in our hospitals, care plans, old peoples' homes, nursing homes, psychiatric facilities, and in our own homes.

Let us acknowledge that this task is profoundly

counter cultural in a society based on competition and the need to win, so let us be prepared for the struggle this implies, individually and as a society. Let our professionalism also model openness to and welcome of vulnerability, in ourselves and others. In this way we will humanize our services and ourselves, and our communities will be enriched.

Thank you.

*Jean Vanier* ■

## "Jean Vanier at Eighty" – An Upcoming Vision TV Series

- Richard Neilson, producer of this new series, as well as of many films with Jean Vanier, says of the upcoming series:

"Jean is a compelling and persuasive presence both on and off television, but these 7 programs with Dr. Jan Hatanaka and me present Jean at his most introspective and relaxed. He responds to a variety of topics—being old to the world we see emerging around us (we were both 80 when this was filmed), the attacks on religious belief and religious organizations, and with Jan, who is author of *The Choice* and lead researcher and founder of the Grief and Reconciliation Initiative at York University, how loss and grief can nourish the spirit. Our titles indicate the wide range of our discussion: Being 80, A Fearful Joy, Trust, What is Sacred, Inwardness, A Journey to Meaning and Grief as a Process." Richard Neilson is President of Norfflicks Productions.

Monday, January 24 to Friday, 28 at 11 pm on Vision TV. As well as telecasting the series, Vision TV will offer the whole series on Vision On Demand.

### For Your Information

- CBC Sunday Morning with Michael Enright (Radio One):
  - "How Should We Die: A Conversation with Dr. Balfour Mount." (Dr. Mount is known for his founding of the Palliative Care movement in North America.)
  - "How Will We Die: Euthanasia and the Politics of Death."
- Several essays in the newly published collection, *The Paradox of Disability: Responses to Jean Vanier and L'Arche Communities from Theology and the Sciences*, ed. Hans S. Reinders, Eerdmans, 2010. See particularly Stephen G. Post, "Drawing Closer: Preserving Love in the Face of 'Hypercognitive' Values," Christina M. Puchalski, "Dementia: A Spiritual Journal for the Patient and Caregivers," and Pamela Cushing, "Disability Attitudes, Cultural Conditions, and the Moral Imagination."
- "Compassionate End of Life Care for Adults with Developmental Disabilities," a video of a January 2009 seminar held at L'Arche Toronto in cooperation with the deVeber Institute for Bioethics and Social Research. Copies are obtainable for \$20 from The deVeber Institute, 305 Jane Street, Toronto, ON M6S 3Z3. Tel: 416-256-0555 or [bioethics@deveber.org](mailto:bioethics@deveber.org).
- "Journey to Personal and Social Transformation: A L'Arche Forum with Jean Vanier and Dr. Balfour Mount."
- Palliative and End of Life Care (Health Canada website)
- Canadian Hospice Palliative Care Association
- A number of helpful documents are available on L'Arche Canada's new Aging and Disability website.