



L'Arche Canada

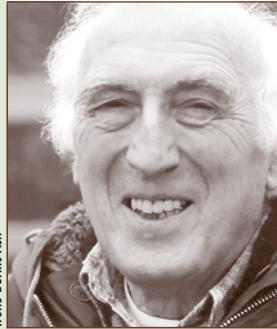
L'Arche Canada offers this "thought sheet" as a contribution to the public conversation about values and the shaping of the social ethos in which we live. Our perspective comes from two broad sources: (1) from thirty-five years of living together in community as a diverse group of people, differently abled and from various cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds; and (2) from contemporary thinkers who are open, fresh and responsive to the human spirit and are reflecting deeply on the individual and society today.

The vision and confidence to create a healthy Canadian society lies in the nexus where humanistic thinking and spirituality cross-fertilize. Indeed, today the best spiritual thinking engages contemporary culture with a view to the good of human society and the best humanistic thinking integrates spiritual values. We believe it is possible to live consciously in the gap between an ideal society and everyday reality and to make choices that contribute to the closing of that gap. It is a hopeful view, based on human and spiritual values embodied in daily life.

# A Human Future

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## *An interview with Jean Vanier* L'Arche 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary issue



Irene Borins Ash

Jean Vanier is known as a social visionary with a keen sense of what makes for a compassionate society. He has received numerous humanitarian honours including the Companion of the Order of Canada. He had a naval career, earned a doctorate in philosophy (Institut Catholique, Paris) and taught at St. Michael's College, University of Toronto, before founding L'Arche. Jean Vanier also founded an international network of support groups for families of people with developmental disabilities. He is a son of Canadian Governor-General Georges Vanier and Pauline Vanier.

*Jean Vanier, founder of the International Federation of L'Arche communities gave this interview in early November, when he joined the communities of L'Arche Daybreak and L'Arche Toronto in a celebration of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of L'Arche and the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of L'Arche in Canada.* Beth Porter, ed.

A Human Future is a free e-quarterly. We invite you to read back issues and to subscribe at: [www.larchecanfoundation.org](http://www.larchecanfoundation.org).

**BP: What keeps you on the cutting edge, open and growing?**

Jean Vanier: Meeting people, dialoguing with the fifteen young assistants in the École de Vie that L'Arche runs in France, trying to live and deepen the gospel message, reading. Recently I've been inspired by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks' book *The Dignity of Difference*. Also, sometimes I am asked to speak about world situations and this calls me to go deeper. *Finding Peace* came from an invitation to give a talk on Canadian television.

**BP: Three of your recent books have been on the *Globe and Mail* bestseller list – *Becoming Human*, for many months. What attracts people to your writing?**

JV: People want to know what it is to be human, because they sense that society is less human and they are not quite sure what is missing, so the title

**"Our security will be ...in the depths of our friendships."**

*Becoming Human* attracts them. A second factor is that people are more and more lonely. The wisdom of L'Arche

## Jonathan Sacks



*The world is a complex, interactive ecology in which diversity – biological, personal, cultural and religious – is of the essence. Any proposed reduction of that diversity through the many forms of fundamentalism that exist today – market, scientific or religious – would result in a diminution of the rich texture of our shared life, a potentially disastrous narrowing of the horizons of possibility....*

*Today we are inclined to see resurgent tribalism as the great danger of our fragmenting world. It is, but it is not the only danger. The paradox is that the very thing we take to be the antithesis of tribalism – universalism – may be equally inadequate as an account of the human situation.... The universality of moral concern is not something we learn by being universal but by being particular.... We learn to love humanity by loving specific human beings.*

*The critical test of any order is: does it make space for otherness? Does it acknowledge the dignity of difference?*

Extracted from *The Dignity of Difference: How To Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*, Continuum. © Jonathan Sacks, 2002, 2003. Used by permission: The Continuum International Publishing Group. Dr. Sacks is Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth.



is that every person has a gift or a message, but that people need to belong in order to give their gift. Belonging is important to people but it can also be a little frightening. And thirdly, many people are searching for spirituality, and my books are about spirituality, not about church or religions. People are frightened of legality and also of commitment. I'm amazed at the fascinating range of subjects in New Age brochures, but the difficulty with some of these, as well as with some religious groups, is that they encourage us to focus on our own personal welfare and inner harmony but to forget compassion and commitment to people in pain.

**BP: What are the qualities of a fully human person?**

JV: *Openness* is the sign of a fully human life. It leads to the capacity to give life to others. And *Compassion*. It's important to know our own selves, and that we are different from others, and to be compassionate first with ourself. All of us are called to grow in Wisdom, but growth is also painful. To be fully human means sometimes being able to stay in the anguish and not let it scare us away. When people experience anguish they often feel guilty, as though this shouldn't be happening. Anguish is very human. It is part of lasting relationships, and it has a spiritual aspect that is connected to loneliness and the fear of death. Life is really all about dying and giving birth, giving new life. Tagore says, "Death is not the lamp that is extinguished. It is the coming of dawn." An immense fear of anguish and poverty and death is at the root of the growing gap between the rich and the poor today.

**BP: Please say more about this gap and the fear it arouses.**

JV: Dr. Nuala Kenny has spoken about the growing gap between the highest and the lowest incomes here in Canada – that in the '70s the highest salaries were 7 times larger than the lowest, but 20 years later they were 28 times larger. What will this gap be in ten more years? All the countries of Africa together, 750 million people, have a gross national product that is smaller than the gross national product of Holland. We talk

## Heather Eaton



*A powerful argument for the preferential option for the poor is put forward by Jean Vanier, Catholic thinker and founder of L'Arche communities for people with mental handicaps. In the philosophy of L'Arche, it is the most vulnerable and disadvantaged who are the very cornerstone of humanity. They are the ones who teach us compassion and change our hearts, so that we stop competing for success and start building communities. ...human perfection has nothing to do with genetic or physical traits, and everything to do with family and community. Vanier believes that we need to honour everyone, especially the most vulnerable, and that when we do so the human community unites.*

Reproduced with permission from: *Voices Across Boundaries: A Multifaith Review of Current Affairs*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Winter 2003-04, p.30. Heather Eaton is a professor of theology at St. Paul University, Ottawa. She spent seven years as a L'Arche assistant in France and in Canada.



of peace. But how can we talk of peace when there are such inequalities? And we know that everywhere now people see on television what others seem to have that they don't have. People are getting more and more angry, upset, depressed. Today the hope that was so present in the 60s when L'Arche began has turned into discouragement and fear.

So the big question is, 'Where is our security in a world that is moving into insecurity?' Financial institutions are insecure, oil supplies uncertain, nations unstable. Our security will not be in money nor in armed protection, but in the depth of our friendships. If we love each other, respect each other, confirm each other – that's where our security will be. If we have no more money, but have friends, we'll work it out together.

The danger in our world, especially since September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, is the building up of barriers. What is important is that we have roots in our own culture and religion, and that we be open to welcome others and rejoice in our diversity.

**BP: In Toronto and Richmond Hill, L'Arche has Jewish and Muslim members and hosts interfaith events. Someone suggested we develop an interfaith institute. What do you think?**

JV: People tend to stay at the level of talk if they don't feel intensely a need to go deeper, so I'd hesitate to move away from the living experience, where people with developmental disabilities call us to unity across our differences. This is striking, for instance, in L'Arche Calcutta. Outside, faith communities are in conflict, but we are living together, Christians, Hindus and Muslims, in peace.

In Israel, I met a Jew named Aaron whose one son was killed by Hamas and whose other son had developed schizophrenia. He was in excruciating grief and he contacted another Israeli father who had lost a son in the army. They then contacted Palestinians who had lost their sons. Together they've created an association called Bereaved Families for Peace. Their work helping others is fruitful because it is based on this visceral shared pain that has enabled them to break through

the cultural barriers and enter into bonds of communion with one another.

Balfour Mount [a pioneer leader in palliative care] speaks of a similar learning from seeing very different people facing death. And I've seen this with prisoners who find a deep unity because they share the profound pain of having lost their freedom.

**BP: What is important for L'Arche today?**

JV: To live simply, to love deeply, to address conflict, to forgive, to celebrate and laugh together. Celebration is different from comedy, such as we see in films. Celebration is something that grows out of valuing our diversity, and it rises up readily in L'Arche. Our world needs to see people who are fundamentally happy and committed to peace and to justice. To see people living together in this way gives hope – it is a little sign that love is possible, that committed relationships are possible. L'Arche is called, as is each person, to move into the future with wisdom, holding onto what is precious in the past but not weighed down by it – open, living in the present in the world, not closed off. The force that comes from God helps us in this.

*A Human Future is edited by Beth Porter.*



*The L'Arche movement was founded by Jean Vanier, in France in 1964. Today there are 130 communities of L'Arche on five continents, 26 in Canada. In L'Arche, people with developmental disabilities and those who come to assist them share life together.*

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## A GENE FOR SPIRITUALITY?

Our last issue stirred some controversy. Here is a response from Margaret Somerville:

My comment, in the September issue of *A Human Future*, postulating a gene for spirituality that needs to be activated at a young age, elicited some justified criticism as limiting human freedom and was also open to misinterpretation as endorsing the “genes-R-us” view of human life – a reductionist view that I totally reject. To my statement that if these genes “are not activated the person never develops a capacity for spirituality,” I would add the phrase “through the same mechanism.” An analogy: We know that people who do not acquire a second language before puberty, when (the theory is) genes that facilitate language learning shut down, can still learn a second language. However, they do not have the same language speaking facility. I support giving children exposure to both religion – the experience of coming together with others in a religious context – and spirituality, to provide them with the broadest possible spectrum of capacities. Of course we can always choose to use or not use our capacities.

• As this publication goes to press I note that *TIME Canada* is featuring an article on “The God Gene” (Oct. 25, 2004). There is no problem in thinking that we need a physical base to experience the realities that surround us. The problem is when we think that physical base is all there is to reality. *M.S.*

*For Margaret Somerville's full response to our September issue, click here. We invite your comments on this issue: click here.*

## FOR YOUR INTEREST

- Books by Jean Vanier ([www.jeanvanier.ca](http://www.jeanvanier.ca)): *Becoming Human* (Anansi, 1998); *Made for Happiness* (Anansi, 2001); *Seeing Beyond Depression*, (Paulist, 2001), *Finding Peace* (Anansi, 2003); *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John* (Novalis, 2004). Available through Daybreak Books and Media: [pubs@larchedaybreak.com](mailto:pubs@larchedaybreak.com)
- Jonathan Sacks: [www.chief Rabbi.org/index1.html](http://www.chief Rabbi.org/index1.html)
- Balfour Mount in the Canadian Medical Assn. Journal: “Dr. Balfour Mount and the Cruel Irony of our care for the dying” by J. Hamilton: [www.cmaj.ca/cgi/content/abstract/153/3/334](http://www.cmaj.ca/cgi/content/abstract/153/3/334)  
Other articles are available in the Canadian Medical Assn. Journal.
- Bereaved Families for Peace: [www.cjre.org/bereavedfamilies.htm](http://www.cjre.org/bereavedfamilies.htm)