



A Human Future

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Jean Vanier is a Canadian humanitarian, esteemed internationally for his advocacy for all who are marginalized and for his vision of a society where every person can belong and contribute. In 1964, appalled by conditions in institutions for people with intellectual disabilities, he founded what has become the international movement of L'Arche communities. Later, he co-founded Faith and Light, for families, and Intercordia. He is a Companion of the Order of Canada and recipient of many other honours.

Jean Vanier on Leadership

Over the past months in Canada there have been notable failures in political leadership at various levels and also failures in leadership in corporate and other arenas. Jean Vanier is looked to as a Canadian social visionary and moral leader. The *Globe and Mail* has described him as “the country’s pre-eminent humanitarian” and, in 2008, named him “Nation Builder of the Year.” We reached him in France, where he continues to live in the original L'Arche community. – *Beth Porter, ed.*

Beth Porter: What do you see as primary to leadership?

Jean Vanier: I want to say first that to lead is an immense privilege. Why? Because it involves bringing people together and being a purveyor of life—life in the fullest sense of the word, so that people are alive and growing intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, and they are well. This link between carrying authority and bringing life is obvious in parenting, and also in the field of education. The educator’s role is to bring young people alive, to help them to be free to grow. On the political level, it is to create unity in a country—to work collaboratively so that all people, with all their diversity, are well and there can be peace among people and groups.

There’s always a mission in leadership, and leadership has to do with loving and serving that mission, whatever it may be. If one is the head of a corporation, or of a non-profit organization the mission may be to double productivity or to increase service, but integral also is always to be respect-

ful of people and to ensure that the employees, everybody, is happy.

Productivity grows from people feeling fulfilled and recognized and that they are a part of the mission. If everybody is unhappy, there will be many problems.

When recommending someone for leadership, are there certain qualities or values that you look for?

I always look first for a love and enthusiasm for the mission and a certain competence for the mission—

this double element. I look also for truth and humility. These go together. To always be truthful means there will be no lies or covering up. Transparency is very close to truth-

fulness and humility. It is especially important when issues arise that suggest there may be corruption. In leadership, we’re there not for ourselves but for the mission, so there’s humility in respect of the mission.

I would urge leaders to develop their ability for listening to people who are different, people with different views...

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And that also implies a sense of responsibility to stand up and really take on the mission.

Values are closely linked to mission.

Primary, is to value people. This means to understand them, to be attentive, to listen. In the exercise of authority there needs to be a deep respect for reality. We must beware of any ideology that can blind us to reality. In a government, this means listening to the reality of people's lives and what they need, so that as citizens they feel valued and part of the broader mission, implicated in it. We cannot just use peoples as if they were machines.

We human beings are body and spirit. The values I am talking about—especially being attentive to people and their well-being—are spiritual values. Spirituality is not a matter of religion. Religion should be there to help people to be open to other human beings, to love them, but you can have religious people who are authoritarian, who don't listen to others and are difficult to work with. Exercising authority is not about being authoritarian.

You connect leadership with peacemaking. What is this connection?

I think there is a very deep link between leadership and forgiveness. Stephen Verney, the Church of England bishop, said that the leader should be a model of forgiveness. I would say also a model in resolving conflicts, because in any group there are times when leaders are criticized or pushed down. People are frightened of leadership which sometimes may be too strong or not listening well. So, one element in leadership is forgiveness and attention to conflict-resolution. The leader must be helping people to be unified and walk together to the same mission. Peacemaking requires this. Martin Luther King's work of peacemaking was very clear: his dream was that the blacks and the whites could walk together as brothers and sisters. In L'Arche, peacemaking is helping people to discover the deep value and the mission and the goodness of every

L'Arche's 50th Anniversary

L'Arche celebrates its 50th anniversary in 2014. Look for special events in L'Arche communities near you. Nationally, L'Arche is running the "WITH" ad campaign. You may see donated ads in various magazines, on bill boards and other locations. The message: *When we do things WITH people of differing abilities we foster*

a more vibrant and compassionate society. (If you would like to sponsor an ad, please contact communications@larche.ca.)



On Becoming a Student Leader



In this [short video](#) (1:30 min) Jean Vanier speaks with Grade 8 student Damien Pot about becoming a leader as a young person. "To become a leader is gradually to develop a knowledge of your gifts and trust in yourself and then help others to do the same," he tells Damien.

person, whatever their ability or disability. Peacemaking is seeing every person as important and struggling against all those places in us as individuals or a group where there is prejudice, rejection, oppression, or a despising of the other.

Are there particular lessons you have learned about leading from living in L'Arche?

Through L'Arche, I've discovered some good things in myself but also I've discovered my own difficulties in relationships, my own violence, and this means that I have to work on myself. This kind of violence can manifest in defense mechanisms which prevent us from really listening to what's going on. It can manifest as a strong rejection of some people. It can manifest in shouting or it might be unspoken, perhaps just a shutting out of the other person. To address this is to



discover the blockages we have. It is important for all of us to see that there are parts of our being that reject certain people. This is a form of violence.

To me, the opposite of violence is not just non-violence but tenderness. Tenderness is a long road, listening to people, understanding, appreciating them, being attentive to the other, being non-judgmental, coming to a real meeting with the other person. I think that every person, whether with particular disabilities or not, has something to teach us. They can lead us into greater openness to the other and into seeing the beauty in the other person, to seeing that every person is more beautiful than they dare believe. People who have intellectual disabilities are often teachers about humility. The other day a person with a disability, when asked about L'Arche by a television interviewer, said, "It's about people with intellectual disabilities living with normal people with disabilities." People

with intellectual disabilities can help us discover who we are and what real love is.

How do you see leadership with regard to Canada's place in the world?

There is a beautiful culture in Canada, French and English and Aboriginal and now with people from Asia and many other parts of the world. I think Canada is about helping each group to develop and also to work together. There is a call to discover the particular gift Canadians can bring to our world. I think Canada has a mission in this regard. To my mind, it is important for politicians to discover the mission of Canada and to work for that mission. Lester Pearson had a sense of Canada's mission at a particular time. He saw Canada as a peace-making nation, and that's why he received the Nobel Prize. Being Canada is not about just following another country, being subservient. And it is not just to see the economy as the important thing. The important thing is not the economy. The economy is always at the service of human beings; it's at the service of unity inside the country. Unity is not uniformity. Unity is each group being themselves and growing and working together.

Do you have any final advice for leaders?

I would say two things: Take time for silence. Every leader should take at least half an hour a day to be quiet and to meditate and to see inside of himself or herself the dangers that reside in wanting to have power, wanting to be stronger than others, and not really thinking about the gift that lies in their call. They need this time also to reflect on the mission they are called to, and to be humble in front of that mission. Second, I would urge leaders to develop their ability for listening to people who are different—people with different views in the world of politics and people who are different in other ways. We have to work together and think together for there to be a fulfillment of any mission. ■

Wisdom from the past

On listening to people who are different

"...How can there be peace without people understanding each other, and how can this be if they don't know each other?..."

From the Nobel lecture of Lester B. Pearson

On not listening as a form of violence

"...The poor in our countries have been shut out of our minds, and driven from the mainstream of our societies, because we have allowed them to become invisible..."

From the Nobel lecture of Martin Luther King Jr.

On feeling a part of the mission

Lao-Tzu wrote about servant leadership in the fifth-century BC: "The highest type of ruler is one of whose existence the people are barely aware.... The Sage is self-effacing and scanty of words. When his task is accomplished and things have been completed, all the people say, 'We ourselves have achieved it!'"

Quoted by Jim Heskett

Servant Leadership in L'Arche

Recognizing that leadership is the single most important issue that will affect the continued growth and stability of L'Arche in the future, L'Arche Canada is developing a distinctive curriculum based on a [L'Arche version of servant leadership](#). It envisions building a culture of ownership for the identity and mission of L'Arche. L'Arche communities receive a bi-monthly bulletin providing community-building activities, discussion questions, quotes, and other suggestions around key themes to engage all members. L'Arche has trained a number of well-qualified leaders from its ranks to teach the program in its 29 communities



Louise Provost

across Canada. One is Louise Provost. She holds degrees in Political Science and Social Work and has considerable experience working in the public sphere in rehabilitation centers in Quebec and well as in L'Arche. Louise comments, "What strikes me is the inclusiveness at the core of the model and, based on this principle, what it means for each person to be a leader in our homes and communities. The program calls everyone to ask themselves, 'What do I need to be and do to become a community builder?' In the training sessions I see people gaining a new sense of themselves and their role in the mission. This is enhancing morale and the quality of community life for all. Nationally, I believe the program will bring us a new connectedness."

The mission of L'Arche is to:

- Make known the gifts of people with intellectual disabilities, revealed through mutually transforming relationships.
- Foster an environment in community that responds to the changing needs of our members, while being faithful to the core values of our founding story.
- Engage in our diverse cultures, working together toward a more human society.

For Your Information

Books and links by or about Jean Vanier

- Jean Vanier: *Signs of the Times: Seven Paths of Hope for a Troubled World*, 2013 (Vanier's latest book, due out from Novalis January 1, 2014.). [Read more.](#)
- Jean Vanier: *Becoming Human* (CBC Massey Lectures), Anansi, 10th anniversary edition, 2009. ([CBC has made Jean Vanier's Massey lectures available online.](#))
- Jean Vanier: *Finding Peace*, Anansi, 2003
- [Article](#) about Jean Vanier by Elizabeth Renzetti, accompanying the announcement of the *Globe and Mail's* "Nation Builder" award
- [Video](#) on leadership of people with intellectual disabilities
- Jean Vanier will be one of the guests of honour at the online vigil entitled 24 Hours for World Peace, to be held on January 1, 2014. [Click here to subscribe.](#)

Other books and links

- Robert Greenleaf: *Servant Leadership*, Paulist Press, 1976
- Robert K. Greenleaf [Centre for Servant Leadership](#)
- Max De Pree, *Leadership is an Art*, East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1987
- "[Why isn't 'Servant Leadership' more Prevalent?](#)" by Jim Heskett
- Harvard Business School – [Articles about Leadership and Management](#)
- [A Servant Leadership School](#) (a program of Church of the Saviour in Washington DC)
- James C. Hunter, *The Servant*, 2010. [Read a review.](#)
- The *Globe and Mail's* [Leadership Lab](#)

www.larche.ca/en/inspiration



The L'Arche movement was founded by Jean Vanier, in France in 1964. Today there are 137 communities of L'Arche on six continents, 29 in Canada. In L'Arche, people with intellectual disabilities and those who come to assist them share life together.

A Human Future is offered as a contribution to the Canadian conversation about values and the fostering of a society where everyone belongs and can make a contribution.