

JEAN VANIER: WHAT IT MEANS TO BE HUMAN

An interview with the inspiring founder of L'Arche's communities for the mentally disabled.

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When, in 1964, Jean Vanier set up home in the village of Trosly-Breuil fifty miles north of Paris, he followed what most would consider a recipe for misery. To share a small house with rudimentary plumbing and no electricity, he brought two handicapped men rescued from a local psychiatric hospital, one unable to talk, the other barely able to walk. But high-minded as this act of charity may have been, what he remembers chiefly is the sense of fun: 'There was a particular degree of fooling around – every meal was a place of laughter.'

Vanier, a Canadian whose first career had been in the Royal Navy, named the house L'Arche – 'the Ark'. Today the foundation of the same name has 120 communities around the world (including nine in the UK), and is a model for the enlightened care of people with mental disabilities. Its message is not simply that they deserve as much respect and love as anyone else, but that they can help others to reassess their priorities and discover, as Vanier puts it, 'what it means to be human'.

The communities are places of extraordinary selflessness, staffed by 'assistants' who, besides attending to their charges' basic needs, share their meals and leisure activities and sleep under the same roof. For this, they receive only pocket money; they have a total of three hours off each day, and six days off a month. Yet out of the 100 volunteers working at Trosly-Breuil, 60 have been there for over ten years, and some for as many as 30.

Vanier, now 75, has given up the day-to-day running of L'Arche, but continues to travel far and wide, encouraging its assistants and spreading its message. (On Wednesday evening he will be speaking in London at St Martin-in-the-Fields.) A devout Catholic, he has been described as 'the Mother Theresa of the mentally handicapped' and 'a living saint'. Such talk, however, makes him deeply uncomfortable. It is a measure of his humility that, in the list of 'co-founders' on L'Arche's website, his name appears beneath that of Raphaël Simi, one of the two handicapped men he first ministered to.

A tall, broad-shouldered figure with a slight stoop, Vanier has a gentle, frequently humorous manner. His hair is white and wispy, and his bushy eyebrows jut like Dormer windows, making his blue eyes seem deeper than they already are. He is bilingual, with a clipped, educated English accent, and though his voice is soft, he speaks with great distinctness and conviction, allowing him to hold in thrall an audience of several hundred – including the mentally distressed – without histrionics or apparent effort. But his work has also taught him the eloquence of a smile and a touch, and we have no sooner met outside his tiny house in Trosly-Breuil (a short walk from the one he first inhabited) than he lays his arm upon my shoulders to guide me indoors.

Here, in a bare kitchen which seems not to have changed since the Seventies, he brews a cup of tea in a cracked pot. The sitting room next door is caught in a similar time warp, with a tall rubber plant and a batik of an African mother dominating the fireplace. Shelves of neatly arranged files reach to the ceiling; a photograph of the Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi stands on the mantelpiece.

He expresses himself in unequivocally religious terms ('The big change in my life,' he begins, 'was when I left the Navy in 1950 to follow Jesus'.) But his tone is matter-of-fact rather than evangelical, and while L'Arche's

manifesto declares that it is ‘rooted in faith and trust in God’, the movement is a paradigm of tolerance: it runs Hindu communities in India, and Islamic ones in Africa. ‘We had one guy here who was an atheist,’ says Vanier, ‘and he felt a little bit awkward. But I told him, “I’d rather have someone who doesn’t believe in God than someone who believes in God but not in people with disabilities”.’

The source of his own faith is not hard to trace: Vanier had two remarkable parents, both of whom have been proposed for beatification on the strength of their exemplary lives and their work for family welfare. His father Georges was a First World War hero who became a high-ranking diplomat, and in 1959 succeeded John Buchan as Governor-General of Canada. ‘Dad was a great man,’ he says: ‘a very humble man. When he was named as Governor-General he said, “I don’t understand. Why have they come to me?” It’s an obvious and deep influence.’

His mother was equally heroic. The outbreak of the Second World War found the family living in Paris, and when the German invasion came, Pauline Vanier was forced to drive her four children south along refugee-filled roads strafed by the Luftwaffe. When a German plane crashed just ahead of them, she jumped from the car to try to pull the pilot from the flames.

The family escaped to England aboard a British destroyer, and eventually reached Canada. But the young Jean was eager to do his bit, and when he turned 13 in 1941, he asked his father’s permission to enrol at the Royal Naval College at Dartmouth – even though this meant re-crossing the Atlantic at a time when one ship in five was being sunk by German U-boats. He remembers his father’s response – ‘I trust you’ – as a ‘phenomenal’ vote of confidence: ‘It was a very important moment in my life.’

The theme of parental support is one that Vanier returns to again and again. Children born with handicaps, he argues, will be further damaged by the perception that their parents are disappointed, or in some way withholding their love. 'If they feel that they're not what their parents wanted them to be, there's a broken self-image. It can take years for them to discover that it's OK to be themselves, that people can appreciate them as they are.'

Another pivotal moment for Vanier came at the end of the war. His mother was working with the Red Cross in Paris, and one day he accompanied her to meet survivors arriving back from Ravensbruck and Dachau. 'I shall never forget,' he writes in his book *A Door of Hope*, 'those men and women coming off the trains like skeletons, their faces tortured by pain, still wearing their white-striped uniforms.' This sense of man's cruelty would be reinforced in the early Sixties, when he began visiting mental hospitals and discovered the grim conditions in which inmates were kept: 'I was shocked by the pain...and the cry that came from them – "Do you love me?" "Why have I been abandoned?"'

In the intervening years, Vanier embarked on a spiritual odyssey which encompassed a spell in a Trappist monastery and an appointment as a philosophy lecturer at Toronto University. Among his mentors was a priest called Père Thomas Philippe, who in 1963 became chaplain of Val Fleuri, a mental institution in Trosly-Breuil. When Vanier visited him there, Philippe suggested that his future too might lie in helping the mentally disabled.

Val Fleuri is now one of the ten *foyers* (or houses) that make up L'Arche in Trosly-Breuil. There is one assistant for every disabled resident, and every household is mixed as far as possible in terms of sex and age. The levels of disability vary considerably, with meningitis, encephalitis and autism as the chief causes, but most residents are able to carry out some kind of job in the

community's workshops. One *foyer* – La Forestière – is specially geared for those who are wheelchair-bound and completely dependent on others.

There is, not surprisingly, a long waiting list for admission. (The minimum age is 18, and membership is for life, though some may leave the *foyers* for individual apartments.) Applicants are taken only from the local area, so that contact can be maintained with their families, and are selected according to the urgency of their need and how they will fit into whichever house as a vacancy. As in Britain, L'Arche receives money from the government for the care and keep of each resident, but relies on fund-raising to cover general costs.

The Trosly-Breuil model is followed as far as possible by the other L'Arche communities around the world. 'There are obvious differences to do with culture and resources,' says Hugh Nelson, who runs L'Arche in Lambeth, south London, 'but if you went into a community in the UK or Haiti or India, you would know immediately that you were in the same place. There's a sense of shared vision, of living something together.' (Founded by Jean Vanier's sister Thérèse in 1971, L'Arche UK also has communities in Inverness, Edinburgh, Preston, Liverpool, Brecon, Canterbury, Bognor Regis and Ipswich.)

Having little experience of the mentally handicapped, I felt some apprehension in accompanying Jean Vanier to supper at Val Fleuri. If my inability to understand the residents didn't embarrass me, I thought, the efforts of the assistants to jolly everyone up surely would.

What I found was something akin to a student hall of residence, with people lounging in groups on battered sofas or hurrying in and out of the kitchen. Apart from a couple of withdrawn figures, it was not immediately obvious who were the carers and who the cared for; even when we sat down at the communal table, it took some time to work out, for the simple reason

that no one was being fussed over or talked down to. Vanier himself was a benevolent but not dominating presence, happy to talk quietly to his neighbours and only taking the lead when the moment came to join hands for a surprisingly unexcruciating sung grace.

The conversation, subdued at first, gradually gained momentum, wandering from birthdays to rugby to foreign languages. (One of the young men next to me, Benjamin, was particularly delighted with his few words of Polish.) By the end of the meal, the room was full of laughter, and I remembered something that Jean Vanier had told me earlier: ‘People with disabilities don't communicate about economics and politics – they communicate about having fun.’

This is not to underestimate the difficulty of daily life with the handicapped. Many of the early residents of L’Arche were given to violence after long years in institutions, and Vanier acknowledges that he could not have coped without his naval training – which made him physically robust and accustomed to team work – and the help of dedicated psychiatrists. ‘Some of our people with disabilities are super,’ he says, ‘and some are a pain in the neck. But if they’re a pain in the neck, they have a whole story behind that – of rejection and pain and psychotic difficulties or whatever it may be. What everybody needs is a place of belonging – a place where they feel appreciated.’

This belief lies at the heart of Vanier’s philosophy, along with a distinction between ‘generosity’ and ‘communion’. ‘You know what generosity is: you are superior, and you do something for someone inferior, from the top down. That's how I started. But I discovered that what people with disabilities wanted above all was friendship – to know that someone believed in them, that someone valued them. And that brings you into a completely other relationship.’

So, in the L'Arche lexicon, assistants do not 'look after' the disabled, but 'live with' them; instead of 'patients', they take in 'core members'. But if this is really a partnership, what do the core members contribute?

According to Vanier, emotional intelligence. Because the things by which we commonly judge people – profession, wealth, social status – mean nothing to the mentally disabled, they are able to see straight through to what really matters: the human heart. And what makes us feel embarrassed in their presence is not so much the fact that they might drool or be incontinent, but that they expose our greatest limitation as human beings – the poverty of our compassion.

Once we acknowledge this inadequacy, however, we can begin to conquer it. Vanier speaks of a sense of 'transformation' which comes to many who work at L'Arche – something he cannot define, but in which he detects the presence of God: 'a feeling that their prejudices are falling away, and that they have been brought here by some mysterious hand.'

But alongside Vanier the mystic, there is also Vanier the radical. To him, the disabled are victims of a society whose values are fundamentally flawed, in that it celebrates the triumph of the strong over the weak rather than compassion and unity. 'There is a part of L'Arche that is a struggle for justice. If the value of a person is just success- and efficiency-orientated, then those with disabilities are obviously at the bottom of the pile. It demands a huge movement on the part of society and parents to believe that they are important.'

He sees some grounds for optimism. The ethos that the mentally disabled should be hidden from the public gaze has begun to disappear, and the institutions in which they are treated are more humane than 20 years ago. But he is horrified by the high rate of abortion for babies with Down Syndrome, and conscious of how much harder it is for families to cope when both

parents go out to work. (L'Arche has a sister organisation, Faith and Light, which arranges for the families and friends of the handicapped to meet for mutual support.)

Like many of those who work for L'Arche, he remains unmarried and has no children of his own. I asked him whether he saw the communities he had created as somehow transcending the traditional family. No, he replied: 'The greatest joy of a human being is to give life. But giving life only begins at birth. To give life is to give hope, to give happiness – to reveal to someone how beautiful they are, and how precious.'

For more information on L'Arche, ring 01535 656186 or visit www.larche.org.uk