

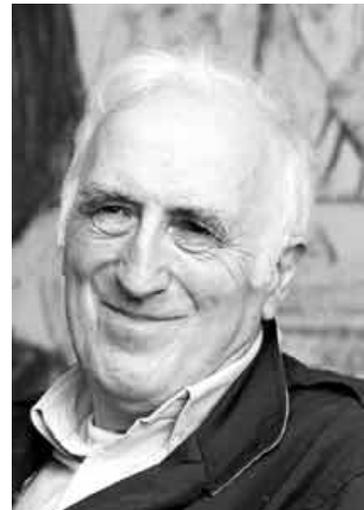
Jean Vanier A Canadian Who Inspires the World

Acclaimed as “a Canadian who inspires the world” (Maclean's Magazine) and a “nation builder” (The Globe and Mail), Jean Vanier is the founder of the international movement of L'Arche communities, where people who have developmental disabilities and the friends who assist them create homes and share life together.

Born in 1928 in Geneva Switzerland, where his father was serving as a Canadian diplomat, he is the son of Governor-General Georges Vanier and Pauline Vanier. He was educated in England and Canada and grew up speaking both French and English.

At just 13, during the most difficult period of World War II, he persuaded his father to permit him to enter England's Royal Naval Academy. He served in the British Navy and then the Royal Canadian Navy. In 1950, looking for deeper meaning in his life, he resigned his commission in the navy and began a period of spiritual search. During this time he worked on a doctorate in philosophy, which he received from the Institut Catholique in Paris.

After teaching at St. Michael's College, University of Toronto, he returned to France. Distressed by the plight of people with developmental disabilities, in 1964 he welcomed two men from an institution to live with him in a little home he called “L'Arche,” after Noah's ark in the French village of Trosly Breuil. L'Arche grew quickly as this new way of sharing life together in community with people who would otherwise be shut away in institutions attracted many young people. And Vanier himself began traveling and speaking about his own life-changing experience of coming to know people with developmental disabilities. Today, there are 130 L'Arche communities in 30 countries on six continents.



Jean Vanier has become 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. He has written a number of best-selling books. Vanier resides in the original L'Arche community in Trosly-Breuil, France, when he is not travelling and speaking.

Adapted from “Jean Vanier”, L'Arche, Retrieved on August 5, 2011 from:
http://www.larche.ca/en/jean_vanier/biography

Quotes and Thoughts by Jean Vanier

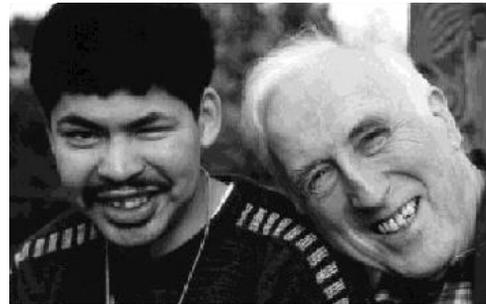
1. "To be lonely is to feel unwanted and unloved, and therefore unloveable. Loneliness is a taste of death. No wonder some people who are desperately lonely lose themselves in mental illness or violence to forget the inner pain."

2. "We are not called by God to do extraordinary things, but to do ordinary things with extraordinary love. "

3. "Every child, every person needs to know that they are a source of joy; every child, every person, needs to be celebrated. Only when all of our weaknesses are accepted as part of our humanity can our negative, broken self-images be transformed."

4. "Many people are good at talking about what they are doing, but in fact do little. Others do a lot but don't talk about it; they are the ones who make a community live."

5. "Love doesn't mean doing extraordinary or heroic things. It means knowing how to do ordinary things with tenderness."



6. "All of us have a secret desire to be seen as saints, heroes, martyrs. We are afraid to be children, to be ourselves."

7. "When children are loved, they live off trust; their bides and hearts open up to those who respect and love them, who understand and listen to them."

8. "Jesus is the starving, the parched, the prisoner, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the dying. Jesus is the oppressed, the poor. To live with Jesus is to live with the poor. To live with the poor is to live with Jesus."

9. "A community is only being created when its members accept that they are not going to achieve great things, that they are not going to be heroes, but simply live each day with new hope, like children, in wonderment as the sun rises and in thanksgiving as it sets. Community is only being created when they have recognized that the greatness of man is to accept his insignificance, his human condition and his earth, and to thank God for having put in a finite body the seeds of eternity which are visible in small and daily gestures of love and forgiveness. The beauty of man is in this fidelity to the wonder of each day."

10. "Community is a sign that love is possible in a materialistic world where people so often either ignore or fight each other. It is a sign that we don't need a lot of money to be happy--in fact, the opposite."

11. "One of the marvelous things about community is that it enables us to welcome and help people in a way we couldn't as individuals. When we pool our strength and share

the work and responsibility, we can welcome many people, even those in deep distress, and perhaps help them find self- confidence and inner healing."

12. "To love someone is to show to them their beauty, their worth and their importance."

13. "This evolution towards a real responsibility for others is sometimes blocked by fear. It is easier to stay on the level of a pleasant way of life in which we keep our freedom and our distance. But that means that we stop growing and shut ourselves up in our own small concerns and pleasures."

14. "The response to war is to live like brothers and sisters. The response to injustice is to share. The response to despair is a limitless trust and hope. The response to prejudice and hatred is forgiveness. To work for community is to work for humanity. To work for peace is to work for a true political solution; it is to work for the Kingdom of God. It is to work to enable every one to live and taste the secret joys of the human person united to the eternal."



15. "A Christian community should do as Jesus did: propose and not impose. Its attraction must lie in the radiance cast by the love of brothers."

16. "We discover that we are at the same time very insignificant and very important, because each of our actions is preparing the humanity of tomorrow; it is a tiny contribution to the construction of the huge and glorious final humanity"

17. "I am struck by how sharing our weakness and difficulties is more nourishing to others than sharing our qualities and successes."

18. "The poor are always prophetic. As true prophets always point out, they reveal God's design. That is why we should take time to listen to them. And that means staying near them, because they speak quietly and infrequently; they are afraid to speak out, they lack confidence in themselves because they have been broken and oppressed. But if we listen to them, they will bring us back to the essential."

19. "When people love each other, they are content with very little. When we have light and joy in our hearts, we don't need material wealth. The most loving communities are often the poorest. If our own life is luxurious and wasteful, we can't approach poor people. If we love people, we want to identify with them and share with them."

20. "But let us not put our sights too high. We do not have to be saviours of the world! We are simply human beings, enfolded in weakness and in hope, called together to change our world one heart at a time. (163)"

21. "Growth begins when we start to accept our own weakness"

22. "I believe every act of violence is also a message that needs to be understood. Violence should not be answered just by greater violence but by real understanding. We must ask: 'Where is the violence coming from? What is its meaning?'"

23. "A community that is growing rich and seeks only to defend its goods and its reputation is dying. It has ceased to grow in love. A community is alive when it is poor and its members feel they have to work together and remain united, if only to ensure that they can all eat tomorrow!"

24. "[...] We have to realize that this wound [of loneliness] is inherent in the human condition and that what we have to do is walk with it instead of fleeing from it. We cannot accept it until we discover that we are loved by God just as we are, and that the Holy Spirit in a mysterious way is living at the centre of the wound."

25. "At the heart of the celebration, there are the poor. If [they] are excluded, it is not longer a celebration. [...] A celebration must always be a festival of the poor."

26. "Every human activity can be put at the service of the divine and of love. We should all exercise our gift to build community."

Adapted from "Jean Vanier Quotes", GoodReads, Retrieved on August 29, 2011 from: http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/123458.Jean_Vanier

Reflection Questions

1. Based on his brief biography, in what way(s) was Jean Vanier called to be a witness of love?

2. Jean Vanier's writing is rich with thoughts on themes about human weakness, the poor, what it means to love, and living in community. Choose a quote and discuss how Jean Vanier sharing his life with developmentally-abled persons may have shaped this thought.

3. Pairs Activity:

- a) Choose one quote that struck you deeply. Why was this quote significant to you?
- b) Choose a quote that you didn't fully understand and would like to learn more about.
- c) Find someone in the class who chose the quote that you had difficulty understanding as the one that struck them the most. Ask whether (s)he can explain his/her understanding of the quote to help you.

4. Would you be interested in living in a L'Arche community for a year? Explain. What challenges do you think you would face and what personal benefits would you receive?