

“Michael Higgin’s *Jean Vanier: Logician of the Heart* is an eloquent and moving meditation on what it means to be truly human in a ‘throwaway’ culture where competition, corporate greed, and inequality reign supreme. Vanier’s work among the physically and intellectually vulnerable reveals the cost and joy of radical love. By emphasizing our common frailty and the openness and capacity of the disabled to allow Jesus to find repose in their hearts—he challenges us to en flesh tenderness in our own lives, become ‘God’s refuge’ in a largely uncaring world. A book to be treasured and reread.”

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—Bill Clarke, SJ
Spiritual Director, Ignatius Jesuit Centre, Guelph, Ontario

“Since 1964, Jean Vanier and many friends, with and without intellectual disabilities, have lived in community together. These international communities of L’Arche, and Faith and Light, show that peace on earth and goodwill among all people is possible. Michael Higgins brings his characteristic enthusiasm and wide-ranging cultural interests to this personal interpretation of the life and legacy of Jean Vanier.”

—Carolyn Whitney-Brown, PhD, editor of *Jean Vanier: Essential Writings*

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Jean Vanier

Logician of the Heart

Michael W. Higgins



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To Sue Mosteller of the Congregation of St. Joseph—
a friend and associate of Jean Vanier's
of several decades standing,
a sublime witness to the spirit and philosophy
of L'Arche,
and a personal friend and spiritual mentor to me.

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Introduction

Jean Vanier is one of the most honored men on the planet. Not that he cares. Honors are important, for sure, but they are not for him. The honors he has received, he has received for those with whom he lives, those who never receive honors and often never receive any recognition at all. They are the marginalized, the forgotten, the detritus of society. They are not the company of the honored.

But they are his company: preferred, embraced, loved—unconditionally.

In an interview in *The United Church Observer* in November 2013, Vanier spoke frankly about why we need people with disabilities: there is a mystery with these people with disabilities; they are the very presence of Jesus. For sure we can see their fragility, their weakness, and their pain, but at the same time we recognize their special place with God. In fact as we—sometimes reluctantly, sometimes fearfully—enter ever so tentatively into relationship with them, we discover that they *change* us.

Vanier recounted for the interviewer his encounter with Andrew, a man with whom he spent a year living in community. One day Andrew went to see a cardiologist, and when he returned home Vanier asked him what happened.

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Andrew said that the doctor had looked into his heart. Vanier then asked what the doctor saw in his heart, and Andrew replied: “He saw Jesus, of course.”

Vanier then asked what Jesus does in his heart, and his theologically astute interlocutor said that “Il se repose”—Jesus takes his rest/quietness there.

This is what the mystics say. It is what the gospels say: Jesus lives in our hearts. In fact, Vanier mused, the great spiritual writer Etty Hillesum, who was to perish in Auschwitz, made much the same point when she argued that though there was not much God can do for us in the encompassing darkness of the Reich, we can give God our hearts and be God’s refuge in the world, a world that rejects the Divine.

Providing a place for God to rest is part of the vocation, the ministry, and the witness of people who are disabled. There is something very particular in their kindness, in their affection. For a year Vanier lived at La Forestière with the most severely disabled members of the L’Arche home in Trosly-Breuil, the foundation or motherhouse of the worldwide network of community homes that live under the sign of the Ark. At La Forestière he would give them baths, and in so doing he discovered that it was a great and liberating mystery to touch the bodies of those who couldn’t communicate verbally. In fact it was unnecessary to do so; their very bodies proclaimed “love me.” Such a communication arose naturally from the very depths of who they are—they *are* their bodies, broken, ruptured, fragile, incomplete. But theirs are wrapped in love.

Their bodies are tender, and there is something deeply significant in that. Vanier remembers that at one point he asked their community psychiatrist what it means to be a pure human person, and he responded unhesitatingly: “tenderness.”

It is tenderness that reveals our ability to speak with great respect of others and in a way that allows us to give security to them without actually possessing them. The tenderness of the disabled heals us, breaks us free from what Thomas Merton, quoting Albert Camus, calls the “plague of cerebration.” For Vanier the intellectualizing of the faith by the church obscures the greater truth, a truth that is enfleshed and not conceptualized, the truth that allows the other, Jesus, Andrew, the unnamed and ignored, to rest in our hearts.

This is the essence of the teachings of Jesus. It is the principle, ethos, substratum, very life, and meaning of L’Arche itself: Jesus lives in our hearts as we live in his.

The L’Arche message is the text of the person of Jesus, his radicality. When we hold a meal it is not the familiar we should invite—the friends, the wealthy, and the affluent. Rather, it should be those who are poor, lame, blind, and disabled. This is not the doctrine of Nietzsche.

The tribe can crush the spirit; we need to break out of our secure orbit; we need to risk.

The people who are disabled are our reward.

And they remind us of the deeper truths, the truths that sustain us as a culture, humanize and ennoble us. This is never more imperative—this awareness, this memory—than now, when we are besotted with the allure of security, wealth, and access to chemicals and treatments that can prolong our escape from mortality. Those who are intellectually and physically challenged have no time for illusions; they force us to confront the *reality*, not the false dreamscape of humanness. They are the true sentinels of our larger hope.

In a time when the “throwaway culture” so vigorously condemned by Pope Francis still holds sway, and in a time when economic disparity has never been so wide, dangerously

wide, the witness and teachings of Jean Vanier have never been so necessary.

Nobel Laureate Paul Krugman, a Harvard economics professor and *New York Times* columnist, does not tire in warning us that the wielders of power, the plutocrats and their compliant subordinates in industry and the capital exchanges, are not inclined to rethink the global geography, not disposed to redistribute wealth, not eager to embrace a different model of wealth generation itself. Fear and greed work in tandem to ensure the preservation of the status quo.

Krugman's spirited criticism of US monetary policy and the injustices perpetuated by the priests of Wall Street is grounded in a foundational moral insight: people are more than economic agents, buyers and sellers, and their deeper needs for community, a decent living, and a feeling of human solidarity are being ruthlessly undercut by a political and fiduciary regime hostile to fundamental structural change.

In sharp contrast to Krugman and his relentless critique is the editor of Britain's *The Spectator*, Fraser Nelson, who boldly declares that the 1 percent are worth their pay, that likely they will pull even further away from the other 99 percent, and that in the end, their unchecked capacity to create wealth will work to the advantage of the rest of us. Hence, the English prime minister best move cautiously in taxing them unreasonably and concentrate instead on improving the lot of the poor.

What is true, Fraser argues, of the United Kingdom and the United States is no less true of other sovereign jurisdictions—if less egregious in their income disparity—that the best way forward is a *reakpolitik* that leaves undisturbed the entrepreneurial instinct. This is preferable to the fanciful notion that a just society can be created on the backs of the 1 percent.

Fraser's Social Darwinism stands in sharp contrast with Krugman's classical morality, and their debate is joined by countless others in the halls of academe, the corridors of parliament and congress, and in the editorial rooms of the media industry, while the seeds of dissolution mature in the dark.

In the light stands the public, a humble and eloquent testament of an alternative strategy to the crass realism of a Nelson Fraser and an endorsement of an economics with a human face that you find in Krugman's impassioned thinking—and that light is Jean Vanier and his intentional communities.

Vanier is not an economist, any more than Pope Francis. He does not issue periodic jeremiads, pronounce with oracular majesty from a distance, nor proffer solutions to complex politico-economic issues. What he does, like Jorge Mario Bergoglio, is offer a palpable alternative to being human whereby the homeless garner as much attention and sympathy as a dysfunctional celebrity or financial climber.

A moving and effective communication of Vanier's vision can be found in a correspondence conducted in the pages of Canada's national newspaper, *The Globe and Mail*, commencing on September 12, 2008, and concluding on January 2, 2010. The correspondents were Vanier himself and Ian Brown, an award-winning features writer and author, whose book *The Boy in the Moon: A Father's Search for His Disabled Son* had underscored with painful eloquence the quest of a parent to find meaning in the seemingly arbitrary and meaningless suffering of a severely disabled son.

Throughout their correspondence they spoke with sometimes searing honesty about their doubts, struggles, uncertainties, dreams, and hopes. And they did it in the pages of the country's leading paper of record and not in a religious journal of limited range and identifiable market. This was

risky stuff—baring your soul for public consumption—particularly if one of the interlocutors was in no conventional way an orthodox believer or churchgoer.

But the risk was worth it, and at the heart of the correspondence the reader can see the burgeoning of a new and substantial friendship—borne in honesty, openness, and shared pain.

Brown, the father of Walker, the “boy in the moon” who was born with a rare genetic syndrome called cardio-facio-cutaneous syndrome, makes the trek to Trosly in April of 2008. He spends some time living in one of the L’Arche homes, La Semance, and develops an abiding affection with the residents. A few months after returning to Canada, Brown writes a lead-feature profile of his trip to Trosly and his encounter with Vanier.

Throughout his feature article on Vanier and the subsequent correspondence, there is a no-holds-barred dimension to their conversation. There is honesty and forthrightness in what they reveal about themselves and in what they say to each other. This isn’t just a case for an apologia or a conventional profile; both men are on a quest for meaning and understanding.

Brown asks Vanier outright if he is afraid of dying, and he responds that he is not frightened of death but that he is of anguish. Vanier defines anguish to include fear and regret over not living the kind of life one is called to live. Like Adam in the Garden of Eden fearful of his nakedness we, too, are fearful of our nakedness, our mortality, and our incapacity to control our own lives. We are all vulnerable and we hate that; we can sign on for all the insurance we want but we are moving inexorably toward death.

Brown then segues to prayer; he notes that Walker, his son who is disabled, shares a language with him that consists

of clicking his tongue. Walker is unable to speak and struggles to find a way to communicate. That clicking seems to Brown a form of prayer.

Vanier responds unequivocally that it *is* praying because praying is not doing, it's clicking, it's compassion, thankfulness and peacefulness, gratitude and communion. "Prayer, then," Brown surmises, "is a way of reminding ourselves . . .," and Vanier completes his thought with "to be who we are."

Amazed by the vitality, resourcefulness, and high purpose of L'Arche, Brown pries out of Vanier a reflection around the genesis, meaning, and evolution of L'Arche that constitutes an essential definition. In other words, Vanier condenses a book to a few paragraphs, edits exquisitely a life project in a conversation.

Vanier makes it clear that he did not begin L'Arche because he wanted to help some unfortunate people who were incarcerated in dismal and violent institutions, as worthy as that may be. He founded L'Arche because it was part of his larger yearning for peace. During the civil rights struggles in the United States in the 1960s—even earlier in the 50s—Vanier marveled at Martin Luther King's heroic struggle to establish the truth that all women and men have a right to be free, that each is a child of God. So, too, at L'Arche: a community that witnesses to the beauty and value of each person, irrespective of culture, race, nationality, creed, abilities, or disabilities.

People with disabilities, in particular, often lack a community that can bring them life. Human beings are not made to be alone. It is not what the Creator intended. Loneliness often begets hyperactivity because we need to compensate, and so we develop dependencies that are unhealthy, we become addicted, and we become frightfully competitive. And

all this works against what we are meant to be: rooted in a place, bonded with others, supporting the weak, and comforting the strong.

In a competitive culture, individual success is privileged; those who are weak or disabled are seen at best as losers or a nuisance, and are quickly put aside, and in some cases eliminated.

Vanier never makes light of the struggles working with people who are disabled; he refuses to minimize their demands and in the process distinguishes between a religion that nurtures and one that constricts. He tells Brown that a closed religion accentuates rubrics, doctrines, and polity because they provide a form of security, whereas an open religion accentuates love for people that implies a great deal of risk and vulnerability. In other words: little in the way of security.

An open religion, in contrast to one that is closed, places great emphasis on freedom and bonding; there can be no false security built on a fabricated community. Everyone must be *real*. To that end, those who work and live in a L'Arche community must find the right balance between freedom and bonding, between individual needs and dreams and the imperatives of living together. That balance or harmony between what he terms competence and spirituality, Vanier argues, is something every L'Arche member, no matter novice or veteran, must always struggle with. It is a constant of genuine community living.

At the end of the Brown/Vanier correspondence, Vanier ruminates on the meaning of his life; he is now in his 80s, worries about what will happen to those with whom he lives once he has gone, and reflects on his loneliness following the death of Barbara, his secretary for four decades. He recounts her passing with simple eloquence and deep feeling.

He speaks of her fidelity, the fact that she was with him twenty-four hours a day and knew everything that he did and was called to be. He held her hand as she lay dying, as little by little her breath became slower and slower, agonizingly intermittent, until her breathing stopped. She slipped behind the veil of our mortality. He quotes Rabindranath Tagore when he says that death is not the lamp that goes out but the coming of dawn.

Vanier had hoped that Barbara would communicate with him, by dreams for instance. But there has been only silence, and all he can do is trust that she has forgiven him for all the many times when he did not sufficiently recognize the inestimable gift of herself.

While thinking of Barbara, Vanier does an autobiographical and metaphysical riff on the importance of L'Arche in itself and its impact on him. He remarks that he had no plan to cofound L'Arche, that he met people who were influential in forming his growth, people with disabilities that quickened his heart. They also revealed the shadow side of his personality—his anguish, anger, and fears.

But most importantly they opened him to his fragility, which in turn spurred him to form community, to be together in peace and friendship with others, those who are frail, dependent, and wounded.

For this to flourish there must be trust, which Vanier defines as the center and cornerstone of his life. In trust he comes to accept life and to foster it in others; in trust his life is born and reborn each day.

Throughout his correspondence with Ian Brown, Vanier spoke from the heart to the heart; he did so in the public arena, he displayed his own vulnerabilities, and he affirmed others in their aching into meaning.

Vintage Vanier!

CHAPTER ONE

The Vaniers

If there were an aristocracy in Canada, the Vanier family would be prominent on the list. Jean Vanier's parents were iconic figures during their tenure as a diplomatic duo and later as a vice-regal couple. Georges and Pauline Vanier have even been brought up as candidates for beatification with Monsignor Roger Quesnel of the Archdiocese of Ottawa, who is charged with the task of opening the investigation or preparatory phase prior to a formal introduction of the cause.

Pauline Vanier came from a family of estimable Quebec pedigree. Her mother, Thérèse de Salaberry Archer, was a profoundly pious woman who shared a spiritual director, the Jesuit Almière Pichon, with the Carmelite French mystic St. Thérèse de Lisieux, known to millions as the Little Flower. Her father was a Superior Court of Quebec justice.

Georges Vanier came from a prosperous business family that could trace its roots to the seventeenth century in New France. He studied law at Laval University, was instrumental in helping to organize the legendary Royal 22nd Regiment

or “Van Doos,” and returned from WWI a decorated officer sans one leg lost in battle.

Married in 1921 the Vaniers would soon be thrust into the demanding and hectic world of international diplomacy. Georges was appointed the first Canadian aide-de-camp to the new governor general Sir Julian Byng, the British war hero known as Lord Byng of Vimy, and was dispatched to spend two years at the prestigious Staff College for officers in Camberley in England. By the end of the decade he would find himself appointed Canada’s representative on the League of Nations Permanent Advisory Commission for Naval, Military, and Air Questions and would be relocated to Geneva.

And it would be in this Swiss city where Jean was born on September 10, 1928. Biographer Mary Frances Coady records the unfolding drama of his birth in *Georges and Pauline Vanier: Portrait of a Couple* (2011). She writes that Pauline’s labor pains came on so rapidly that there was little time to get the couple to the hospital by taxi. The physician arrived after the birth, and with a bit of native theatricality, Jean Francois Antoine was born. The time was less than auspicious for his father as he was to attend a Canadian delegation dinner, but Georges had no doubt where his priorities lay. With a typical sensitivity to the needs of others, he christened Jean “Jock,” as the family’s Scot nannies found the soft *J* difficult to pronounce.

Jock was the fourth of five children: Thérèse, Georges (Byngsie), and Bernard preceded him, and Michel followed. Jean/Jock’s arrival in some key ways compounded the difficulties Pauline faced adjusting to the mounting demands of a diplomat’s wife and young mother. In seven years of marriage there were five pregnancies, four births, five household moves, as well as dealing with the aftershocks of sur-

viving a fire that destroyed their rented holiday house at Pointe-in-Pic, north of Quebec City. In addition, Pauline's emotional disposition, colored by a heightened religious sensitivity and periodic bouts of depression, although in great measure the source of her success as an extrovert "working" the social room and facilitating conversation as a host, stood in stark contrast to her accumulating anxiety and exhaustion on the domestic scene.

As a consequence, one of the nannies, Nancy Thompson, in effect became Jean's mother. Ironically, although Jean's arrival was heralded by his aunt Frances Vanier as a wonderful omen for peace, being born at the seat of the League of Nations, he did not appear to bring a great deal of peace to his emotionally overwhelmed mother. He was however only one of a series of causes for her depletion of energy, and it should be noted that their relationship over the years was actually marked by a special closeness, empathy, and spiritual understanding. But in 1928, it was different. In fact, at one point as biographer Mary Frances Coady records, Jock, the child most deeply affected by his mother's absence, was heard screaming at her, "I hate you! I am going to kill you."

Pauline's emotional health continued to decline. Georges was chosen as one of Canada's delegates to a naval conference to be held in London in 1930, and Pauline accompanied him as a secretary and host. In part, he was keen on giving her some respite, some space from the demands of Geneva and the growing family. But she would have a collapse and enter a convalescent home with the not uncommon diagnosis of the period: neurasthenia.

Shortly after Georges became the First Secretary to the Canadian High Commissioner in London, England became their home. Byngsie, Bernard, and Jock were enrolled in

St. John's, a Jesuit preparatory school for the upper-level Beaumont, also Jesuit in inspiration and instruction. Prior to admission, Bernard was judged by his previous school, Egerton, to be capable of making excellent progress and had demonstrated improved prowess with a cricket bat. Jock, by contrast, was judged a slow starter, somewhat inarticulate, full of undisciplined energy, disheveled and inattentive, restless and erratic. Not the best recommendation.

But life at St. John's wouldn't be forever. With war pending, Georges was promoted to be his country's ambassador to France, and the family moved to Paris. They withstood the early months of the war, but once Belgium and Holland fell, the safety of the family in France was imperiled. They began their escape. Jean himself recalls that in May and June of 1940 he was only eleven years old and a refugee in flight with his family, that they made it to the north of France where they were placed on a British destroyer and then put on a cargo ship that brought them to safety in England. But even that was to prove difficult. After several days at sea they arrived at Falmouth but couldn't dock because of mines in the port, so they were rerouted to Wales and arrived in the capital in time for the blitzkrieg.

This experience of the hell and chaos that is war was followed quickly by the family's endangered transatlantic crossing as they headed back to Canada in 1941. Jean remembers listening to an announcement on a Nazi English-language radio network that the ship they were on had been sunk. Rather than being anxious or fearful over this intelligence, Vanier recollects that he was thrilled to be part of a great adventure. After all, he was eleven years old.

Two years later Jean would approach his father with his plan to recross the Atlantic, head for England through U-boat infested waters, and join the Royal Naval College.

Rather than just dismissing the request as an example of an adolescent's romantic heroism, an offer too absurd to be taken seriously, Georges's considered, wise, and respectful response would leave a mark on his son's formation that was nothing less than transformational.

Jean recounts with minute accuracy the charged emotion and lasting impact of the conversation. His father asked him to explain why, at the age of thirteen and in the midst of a war, he really wanted to join the navy. When Jean told him his reasons, his father said that he trusted him and that if that is what he *wanted* to do then that is what he *must* do. Upon later reflection as a maturing adult, Jean reflected on that time as one of the truly healing moments of his life because he realized that his father, whom he loved and respected, trusted him, and in so doing allowed him to trust himself. Had Georges dismissed Jean's request as premature, if not silly, urging him to wait a few more years before applying to the Royal Navy, Jean would have accepted that as reasonable, if not disappointing. He remembers that at the time he was not especially rebellious; in fact, he was fragile. And if his father had been disinclined to take him seriously, Jean believes that he would have lost trust in his own "deep intuition."

This deep intuition came from a "holy part of my being . . . the sanctuary of my being," says Jean, and as a consequence, his father's response freed him to trust his own desires. As Jean understood it, his father was saying to him that he trusts his intuition, his desire, because it originates in God. His father's considered reaction to his request underlined for Jean what later would be an operating principle in his life and ministry: we must listen to the young because they have in them the light of God, and they will never be able to trust themselves unless someone trusts them first.

And so began the next phase in his life, a phase that would start with a farewell to his parents, a journey to England—fraught with peril—and enrollment in the navy college at Dartmouth. His adolescent years would be spent not in a prestigious grammar school preparing him for Oxbridge, but in a war college that would be bombed at the start of his second term (he and his fellow students were relocated for the duration of their studies), moving inexorably toward graduation and then assignment to the war theater. Except, by the time he finished his training, the war was over.

Still, the war directly touched him. Following the liberation of Paris in August 1944, Jean accompanied Pauline, who was working with the Canadian Red Cross (she had traveled to the “city of lights” when her husband took up his duties—the first accredited ambassador to do so after the flight of the Nazis) to the Gare d’Orsay. There he witnessed the tragic parade of destitute and broken victims: the survivors of Dachau, Buchenwald, Ravensbrook, and so forth, decamping from their trains, skeletons in striped blue and white uniforms, the badge of humiliation and damnation.

He recalls with a sad vividness the searing impression made on them both by the survivors’ suffering and anguish. He could see now, as with the survivors of Hiroshima, the devastating capacity for self-destruction that lay within humanity’s reach. He was not there to liberate the camps; he didn’t taste firsthand the despair of Auschwitz, the madness of Treblinka, the morally inverted world of Terezin; but he did see the hopelessness and spiritual fragility of the survivors. Like all such memories, they would prove indelible.

Launched on his post-war career with the Royal Navy, he would in time transfer to the Canadian Navy. In this new role he traveled on board the HMCS *Magnificent* to Cuba, engaged in exercises with the United States Navy. While his

fellow officers amused themselves in the haunts and in the company that appeal to seamen when on leave, Vanier spent his time exploring local churches. And as many in his generation did, he devoured the phenomenally successful *The Seven Storey Mountain*, the autobiography of Thomas Merton, the Cambridge- and Columbia-educated convert to Catholicism who had become a global celebrity as a Trappist monk in Gethsemani, Kentucky.

This is not surprising. There was a reawakening of religious fervor following the war, with many of the veterans returning from the carnage of the European and Asian battlegrounds hungering for direction in their lives. They hungered for meaning in the new wasteland.

The Seven Storey Mountain offered a new vision; it offered a life of regulated prayer, ordered activity, genuine community, and viable hope to a lost generation. That generation was Jean Vanier's. He came to maturity during the war, and although only a teenager when he set off for England and Dartmouth, he experienced its immediacy, its chaos, its destructiveness, and its lethality.

Merton would naturally appeal to a young man poised to discover his path to God, keen on finding his way. Jean was so engaged by his reading of Merton's autobiography that he visited Friendship House in Harlem to taste something of the community *for* and *of* the poor embodied in the vision of Catherine de Hueck. Catherine was a Russian noble and now a resident in New York City, a convert to Catholicism and alive to the gifts of poverty and humility, the demands of social justice, and the imperative of racial harmony.

Increasingly restless of spirit, Vanier began to think seriously of a shift in direction. He reasoned that when he was in the navy he was accustomed to giving orders and that

that was second nature to him. He was well trained in the arts of ambition and success; he knew how to compete. But he was persuaded that in the process, community and communion suffered. The “I” triumphed at the expense of the “we.”

In 1950, following a thirty-day Ignatian retreat—with the opportunity for deep discernment that it provided—Vanier resigned his commission in the navy. He was now ready for something new. But what?