

Messy Love JEAN VANIER'S L' ARCHE Michael Higgins

The Globe and Mail is the Canadian equivalent of the New York Times. It is a Toronto-based paper (one of four), but it shares the same spot in the national consciousness as the Times, and delights in its own magisterial expanse. Some years ago the Globe and Mail established its Nation Builder of the Year award. In an effort to soften its patrician image, the paper invites nominations from its readership, an exercise in populist democracy in the largest city of a country that is still a constitutional monarchy.

Past Nation Builders have included the usual run of worthies: a philanthropist, a former leader of a political party, an Olympic athlete, a jurist or two, and the father of the BlackBerry, a communications device beloved of the mighty and the connected across the planet.

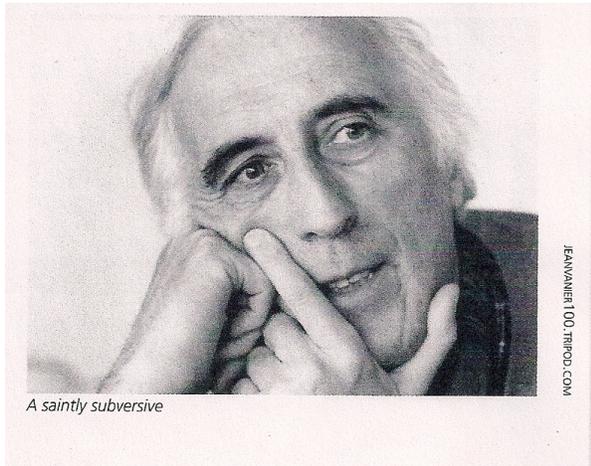
This year's winner is a man who has spent his life calling into question society's penchant for ranking, honors, and success: Jean Vanier. While others have contributed to their nation's success through their physical prowess, financial acumen, political savvy, or entrepreneurial genius, Vanier's contribution has been to call into question the very standard by which we judge "success." He is the consummate subversive of the value system that equates human dignity with utility.

Vanier's spiritual makeup seems embedded in his DNA. He is the scion of a deeply committed Roman Catholic family. His father, Georges, was an illustrious statesman, a military officer, the governor general of Canada, and a national figure of unimpeachable spiritual integrity. His mother, Pauline, was a person of national prominence and inspiration in her own right. For years, both parents have been touted for canonization, although the cause seems to have made little progress--in some ways a relief to their publicity-spurning and genuinely humble son.

An officer in both the Royal Navy and the Canadian Navy from 1942 to 1950, Vanier found military comradeship and discipline attractive, but he opted in time for a different type of discipline: the academic life. After acquiring a doctorate in 1962 at the Institut Catholique in Paris--his dissertation was published in 2001 as *Made for Happiness: Discovering the Meaning of Life with Aristotle*--Vanier taught briefly at the University of St. Michael's College in Toronto.

After his first semester teaching, Vanier returned to France to visit his spiritual mentor, the Dominican friar Thomas Philippe, who was chaplain of Le Val Fleuri, a small institution for men with mental disabilities. Vanier was profoundly moved by the experience. He decided to remain in France to do something concrete for disabled individuals confined to psychiatric hospitals and other institutions, removed from their families and the life-giving power of community.

And so he resigned from St. Michael's and, with the help of family and friends, purchased a house (of daunting decrepitude) just down the road from Le Val in the village of Trosly-Breuil. On August 5, 1964, he welcomed into his home Raphael Simi and Philippe Seux, both of whom had been incarcerated in a desolate institution following the death of their parents. Vanier dubbed his new home L'Arche--"the ark"--in reference to the covenant of love and fidelity God made with Noah.



A saintly subversive

At L'Arche, this covenant would be defined specifically in terms of a ministry of reciprocity—a ministry of discovery and epiphany. For Vanier, the L'Arche communities are "'banquets of love' prepared especially for those that society rejects and considers 'useless' or a 'problem.'" Those who assist the core members (the permanent residents in the L'Arche homes) would be the ultimate beneficiaries of this unique experience of service. Vanier's defining conviction that "weakness and vulnerability in a person, far from being an obstacle to union with God, can foster it" is enshrined in the L'Arche Charter.

Today there are 132 L'Arche communities in thirty-four countries, and the related Faith and Light organization, given to providing family support and pilgrimage outreach, numbers some fifteen hundred communities in eighty countries. There are those who would call all this an empire. Certainly, a success. For Vanier, it is an outpouring of love.

James H. Clarke, an Ontario Superior Court Justice and a respected poet, has lived in the house at Trosly. He writes in *L'Arche Journal: A Family's Experience in Jean Vanier's Community* (1973) of marveling at Beauvais Cathedral, "with its spaces of dazzling light." Echoing a Nathaniel Hawthorne metaphor, Clarke observes, "Strange how dark, lifeless, and even forbidding the stained-glass windows of the great cathedrals appear from the outside. But from the inside, what a contrast! Is this the experience of most people with the mentally challenged?" Clarke and his family were transformed by their L'Arche experience. They would come to know, as all who have served at L'Arche realize, that to love is messy, requires a naked openness, exposes our most acute vulnerabilities to scrutiny and judgment, and makes no apologies in its demands. The intellectually challenged are needy, relentless, and importunate, fearing wildly, loving unconditionally. They are the principal teachers at L'Arche. The caregivers, the assistants, come to value them less as dependants than as vessels of light.

The L'Arche philosophy is utterly revolutionary and devastatingly simple in its theological anthropology. As Vanier writes in *Our Life Together: A Memoir in Letters* (2007):

To come to L'Arche, to live and work at L'Arche, is to come face to face with brokenness: first that of the members with intellectual disabilities, then eventually our own. It can create a deep transformation I remember a young man with cerebral palsy, his body all contorted; looking into his eyes, I saw peace within him. Someone might ask, how can a man in such pain be at peace? And I'd say that .if you just see the contortion, then all you see is the brokenness. There is something deeper than the brokenness. He accepted himself as he was, and I accepted him and appreciated him as he was.

This is not the philosophy of the "superman." It is a philosophy predicated on the inversion of values found in the Sermon on the Mount. It is folly to the Greeks. It runs counter to conventional wisdom, a wisdom that fears (when it does not despise) human fragility. Vanier sees in the intellectually challenged-in all the disabled-the salvation of those deemed "whole"; he sees in the poverty of the vulnerable the route to integration for the high achievers; he sees in the emotional openness of the broken ones the path to healing for those of us deemed successful. In other words, our collective failure to see in the beauty of the disabled an invitation to human growth rather than an embarrassment cries out for correction, a correction that is best effected by living in community. We need the disabled more than they need us; in their weakness is our strength.

In *Becoming Human* (1998), Vanier succinctly outlined his vision:

A human being is more than the power or capacity to think and to perform. There is a gentle person of love hidden in the child within each adult. The heart is the place where we meet others, suffer, and rejoice with them. It is the place where we can identify and be in solidarity with them. Whenever we love, we are not alone. The heart is the place of our "oneness" with others.

There are few in our culture and time who speak as consistently and as eloquently from the heart as Vanier. He hit a national chord with *Becoming Human*, which originated as a lecture series aired repeatedly by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Vanier still lives in the French village of Trosly- Breuil.

He is courted by the mandarins of power and continues to inspire a multitude of disciples, yet he manages to abjure the blandishments of celebrity. It can't be easy. A Companion of the Order of Canada (the highest civil honor in the land) and the recipient of countless international awards and citations, including the International Paul VI Award, he can now add to a list he does not keep the Nation Builder award of 2008.

Vanier turned eighty in November 2008, and Canada and the world have taken special note of his contributions. In addition to Vanier's *Our Life Together* and Kathryn Spink's biography, *The Miracle, the Message, the Story: Jean Vanier and L'Arche* (2006), we now have *Jean Vanier: Essential Writings* (2008), edited by Carolyn Whitney-Brown.

Ours is a turbulent time, marked by geopolitical tensions, economic upheaval of unprecedented dimensions, deep uncertainty about the very meaning of human nature, disillusion with global networks and national mythologies, and a visceral collective yearning-one easily misdirected-for new icons of leadership and integrity. In a time like this, the need for a Jean Vanier has never been greater. The *Globe and Mail* got it right.

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