
Travelling in the Ark

BY HEIKI PECKRUHN

With whom are we being human together? With whom are we living together into our potentialities? These questions of community and humanity, central to the L'Arche communities, are explored in four books reviewed here.

What does it mean to be human? What must we do to live into our best human potential? In theological and philosophical discussions these questions are often answered by first defining minimum markers of humanity, and then coming up with strategies for developing these qualities in living human beings. In other words, we make a claim about what defines a human being first (made in God's image, or capable of reason and empathy), and then we muse about what it might look like to pursue the full potential of our humanity (to love and serve God and others, or to use our intellectual and emotional capacities in a moral fashion).

Jean Vanier strikingly reframes these questions in *Becoming Human* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, second edition, 2008 [1999], 166 pp., \$12.95) comprised of his 1998 Massey Lectures, part of a prestigious radio series commissioned by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and the University of Toronto. *With whom* are we being human together? *With whom* are we living together into our potentialities? Vanier invites us into his personal reflections on becoming human, reflections which center on befriending others, especially those who are marginalized, dehumanized, and excluded. Through living in relationship together we come to discover our common humanity and potential for a good life.

The Canadian philosopher Vanier is best known as the co-founder, with Father Thomas Philippe, of L'Arche (French for "The Ark"), an international network of residential communities for people with developmental disabilities (core members) and caregiver assistants who live for varying lengths of time in a L'Arche community. Vanier's reflections on friendship and sharing lives are deeply grounded in his Christian faith and his more than forty years

of experience living with men and women who have intellectual disabilities. What makes *Becoming Human* stand out is that it is neither a handbook for how to “deal” with persons with disabilities nor a defense of their value. Rather, it is Vanier’s invitation for us to reflect deeply on our own humanity. In his view, such reflection is best done in relationship with those commonly found on the margins of society, who are denied full humanity and opportunity for

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We discover the meaning of becoming human on the road with others, Vanier argues. Concerned with the liberation of all persons from loneliness and fear, he describes how a sense of belonging can set one on a journey toward healing and forgiveness. At the heart of exclusion lies fear: we exclude others because we are afraid

of difference, of being challenged, and of losing what is important to us, including our image of ourselves. This fear prevents us from being open with others and from growing and changing in relationship with them. Yet growing and changing are intrinsic to being alive. By beginning with inclusion and friendship with those we have been taught to fear and exclude because of their disability, Vanier explains, we all become human together. By sharing our needs for intimacy, changing and adapting in light of each other, and being vulnerable and trusting, we discover together our unique contributions to our communities.

Vanier’s book is rich in insight and wisdom, drawing on personal experiences, biblical stories, theological themes, and philosophical and psychological perspectives. It is a book that should be read often, and read together with others. Most importantly, it should be read with an open heart and mind.

Vanier speaks of inclusion that is grounded in a sense of belonging, which is brought about by gaining trust that we are valuable as persons, and deeply listening to each other. So what is it that those of us not living in a L’Arche community can learn from listening to Vanier? Three recent books seek to provide a response, with authors from different fields reflecting on the wisdom of Jean Vanier and other insights gained by engaging persons with disabilities.



Theologian Stanley Hauerwas and Jean Vanier help us pursue the question “What does L’Arche have to say to the Church” in their dialogue in *Liv-*

ing *Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008, 115 pp., \$15.00). The authors seek to model a prophetic ministry of transformation and hope, which John Swinton describes in his introduction as “taking seriously the ‘world of the disabled’ and allowing our perspectives to be shaped and changed by listening carefully to those who see things differently” (p. 11).

Vanier recounts how L’Arche came into being in 1964. His story makes it obvious that L’Arche homes are first and foremost built around people, taking seriously that “Jesus is calling us from a pyramidal society to become a body” (p. 35). Like any human body, these communities are fragile; Vanier does not shy away from recounting the difficulties of living in and sustaining them.

Becoming the body of Christ means taking seriously when “Paul says that those parts of the body that are the weakest and least presentable are most necessary to the body and should be honored” (p. 36). Honoring those in our communities considered weak or unpresentable is not simply about “bringing them up to speed” in a push towards autonomy and independence. Valuing independence often serves to reinforce separation and loneliness and does not address the need for belonging and relationships. This is where L’Arche can be a powerful sign to congregations today, Hauerwas says, because churches too often fall into the temptation of conforming to the speed and placelessness that marks life in the modern age (p. 51). L’Arche “helps the church find the gospel” (p. 57) by embodying gentleness, being present for one another, and caring for each other in physical ways through mutual patience, profound interdependence, and honesty.

Because people with disabilities are among the most vulnerable and the most marginalized, it is in friendship with them that we learn the meaning of love. L’Arche is not meant to be *the* solution, the prescription for a better world. Rather, it is a *sign*, an embodiment of the hope that a more just world is possible (p. 45). Hauerwas challenges the Church to become the embodiment of hope as members embrace their own and one another’s vulnerability, and seek to live gently and hospitably with each other (p. 79).



In *Becoming Human*, Vanier insists that the friendships between core members and caregiver assistants at L’Arche is changing and transforming for all involved. The caregivers are not moral heroes or persons with a special calling, but ordinary people who are open to being changed in intimate friendships. But is there warrant for this claim? What does this care and intimacy look like, and how does this transformation manifest? Kevin Reimer’s *Living L’Arche: Stories of Compassion, Love, and Disability* (Collegetown, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009, 184 pp., \$26.95) is a behavioral psychological study of “compassionate love” within L’Arche communities through interviews and

observation. It is the first ethnographic study of United States L'Arche communities, providing a close look at the relationships and challenges in the residential communities. Reimer explores how compassionate love manifests in assistants, and how its development leads to personal transformation.

Reimer takes seriously the task of listening to his interviewees, and he writes captivating narratives that provide a glimpse into the everyday life of several L'Arche communities. He inquires into the motivations and consequences of those choosing downward mobility in a materialistic and individualistic Western culture. Reimer is able to have his own conceptions and assumptions challenged by what he observes, and presents the fullness of life in L'Arche, including both joyful and painful experiences. He uses the interviews and observations to reflect on the nature of moral development itself.

This engaging and enlightening study would be a great companion read to Vanier's *Becoming Human*. It can serve congregations that are interested in pursuing more inclusive life styles and compassionate ministry practices as a testimony to the power of life centered on Christ-like compassion. Reimer's interviews and observations will correct some common presumptions about L'Arche caregiver assistants. They are not super-human heroes; they are flawed yet beautiful persons who learn about themselves and about living together in friendship with core members. This serves as a reminder that all of us, with our flaws and our abilities, have the need and capacity to live in radical friendship.



The Paradox of Disability: Responses to Jean Vanier and L'Arche Communities from Theology and the Sciences (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010, 183 pp., \$18.00), edited by Hans Reinders, is a wonderful compilation of engagements with the work of Jean Vanier. In an opening essay by Vanier about learning from being on a journey with persons with disabilities, we hear again his reflections on being human as grounded in love. It is living in loving relationships (which are necessarily mutual), rather than physical or cognitive capacities, that marks humanity. The responses to Vanier include essays from the fields of psychology, medicine, anthropology, and theology. They ask probing questions such as these: What would happen if we adopted Vanier's understanding of being human and took seriously his idea that we can only do something *for others* if we learn how to receive the gift offered by them *to us*, which crucially involves accepting our own neediness (p. 4)? What if we began to understand disability as a resource to examine, understand, and claim the good life—rather than following the more commonly (even if covertly) held assumption that disability is the opposite of what is good and desirable (p. 176)?

In these varied essays the social psychologist Roy F. Baumeister reflects on the emotional and biological effects of social exclusion, physician Christi-

na Puchalski explores the need for spirituality in the care for dementia patients, and the social justice and peace studies professor Pamela Cushing sees the need for disseminating more stories that exemplify the value of persons with disabilities in order to expand the cultural imagination. Despite the contributors' diverse interests and approaches, all of them seriously engage Vanier's challenge to hypercognition, the attitude pervasive in Western society that privileges cognitive abilities and makes strong connections between intellect and being human. Rather, as Stephen Post argues, humanity is constituted by "other-regarding" love, love that brings to life persons with disabilities and caregivers alike (p. 31).

The theological responses presented here inquire about the embodied practices modeled in L'Arche such as peacemaking, prayer, and knowing God. Brian Brock uses prenatal screening and the concept of supererogation ("beyond the call of duty") to demonstrate how different perspectives on being human and moral obligations can influence ethical frameworks and decision making. Brock argues that the call to duty is commonly framed only in regards to the "normal." But Christian hospitality must not consist of laws or duties; it goes beyond good intentions and beyond what is considered "normal" charitable behavior. It is attentiveness and neighborly love that inspires a social ethic that witnesses to the voices of the most vulnerable who challenge our politics as usual (p. 138).

Many essays in this book help to dispel our prejudiced attitudes and stereotypes of the disabled and their caregivers (e.g., as holy innocents and unflawed heroes). Certainly we all need to experience mutual love and to overcome our own challenges in receiving and extending it. Yet Bill Gaventa also alerts us to the crucial component of honesty and self-reflection. Without these the value of people with disabilities "becomes that of helping us discover who we are" and the people themselves are used by us to work out our own issues (p. 107).

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Disability is a paradox. On the one hand, disability is *culturally created* via social structures and habits that turn impairments into disabling conditions and lead to experiences of oppression. On the other hand, impairments are *natural* conditions, and we are all experiencing our bodies and minds in flux and deterioration over the span of our lives. The paradox of disability reminds us that we are neither fully nor eternally able, in control, self-suffi-

cient, and healthy. The gift of this paradox of disability is that it allows us to live into our humanity with the challenges and gifts presented to us on our journey; it allows for transformation of human relationships, our values, our questions, and even our understanding of love. The latter point is powerfully made by Christopher Newell, who reflects on suffering, the disabled body, and human brokenness through his own experiences. He shares his realization that the more important issue is not *whether* but *how* brokenness will be valued. Love can turn into a threat if it seeks to alleviate suffering by eliminating it from sight, rather than transforming it by embracing the brokenness of all. He writes, “part of the cultural context of suffering is the ubiquitous tendency to worry about its adequate representation rather than actually allowing it to be present...to create a space so that we may listen to the *still* voice of those with disability” (pp. 174-175).

This book, though decidedly academic in approach, is a great resource for readers who are already interested in reflecting on the many directions that engagement with Vanier and L’Arche narratives can take. It provides little concrete, how-to guidance for those feeling the impulse to act upon the charges presented by Vanier. However, given that each individual and congregational situation is unique, this is one of the book’s strengths because it helps us to change our perspectives and examine our specific situations with new eyes.

All of these books are great resources not only for beginning to think about disability, but also for deeply engaging questions of community and humanity. They compel us to engage in self-reflection about our values, fears, needs, and assumptions about what is “normal.” Hopefully they will spark a desire in us to replace rejection and exclusion with friendship.



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