

What Jean Vanier taught us

Death always catches us by surprise.

So it was on May 7 when I learned of the death earlier that morning of **Jean Vanier**, the founder of L'Arche communities, which allowed those with disabilities to live with friendship, dignity and kinship side by side with those who consider themselves "enabled."

I had emptied my coffee pot, made my bed and sat in prayer when I finally checked my phone. What? Jean Vanier is dead?

How could this death surprise me? Vanier was 90 years old, ill and living in a nursing home. But there are some people who make this weary world more bearable. We want to know they walk among us. How can you leave us, Mr. Vanier?

More important, What have you left us?

L'Arche communities are built around the concept of relationship. It's not caretakers providing for the needy; it is people experiencing each other in their unique humanity. I've known Jesuit Volunteer Corps friends who have spent a year living in a L'Arche community. It's life-changing.

In the world in which we live, certainly in American society, our values are the reverse of Gospel values. We value beauty as defined by the cosmetics industry and Hollywood. We value financial success and our "stuff." We value titles and degrees for what they say about us. We want our kids to be "happy" and rich and successful — and perfect, whatever that means.

I've experienced several early morning phone calls that continually challenge those values.

One of my best friends, calling with the news of her child's birth. We had been pregnant at the same time and I had beaten her to the birthing room by a few days, home with a healthy baby daughter. She called to let me know Patrick had arrived with Down syndrome.

Another morning, my friend Dave calling to report the birth of his first son, with Down syndrome. A few years later, an early morning call introducing my brother's son Ethan, a Down syndrome trifecta.

Those delivering this news speak in a certain tone. There is gratitude for the gift of life, but a brokenness that speaks of challenge. It's not just that there are unique physical and intellectual hurdles lying ahead for families of children born with varying degrees of ability.

It's that families confront a world of upside-down values.

Into this world of scrambled standards of worth and goodness, Jean Vanier stood, like another Christ embracing the leper and walking among the poor, because Vanier knew what we don't always get: We are all lepers and we're all poor. We're in this together.

Vanier, beautiful in his ecumenism and respect for all religions, could echo the words of Mary's Magnificat in Luke: "He has shown might with his arm, dispersed the arrogant of mind and heart. He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones but lifted up the lowly."

I recently went to a "Special Musicians" concert in which my nephew, Ethan, now a teenager, performed.

Ethan sang, with great gusto, Queen's "We Will Rock you." It didn't matter that the words were difficult to understand. It didn't matter that some of the musicians could barely hold their instruments or needed a lot of help. It mattered that the audience felt a kinship and a relationship with each other and with those on the stage.

Vanier changed attitudes toward the intellectually and physically disabled in ways so deep that we can hardly comprehend it.

What he has left us is the call to Gospel values of inclusion and a rejection of the false values that so permeate our culture.

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