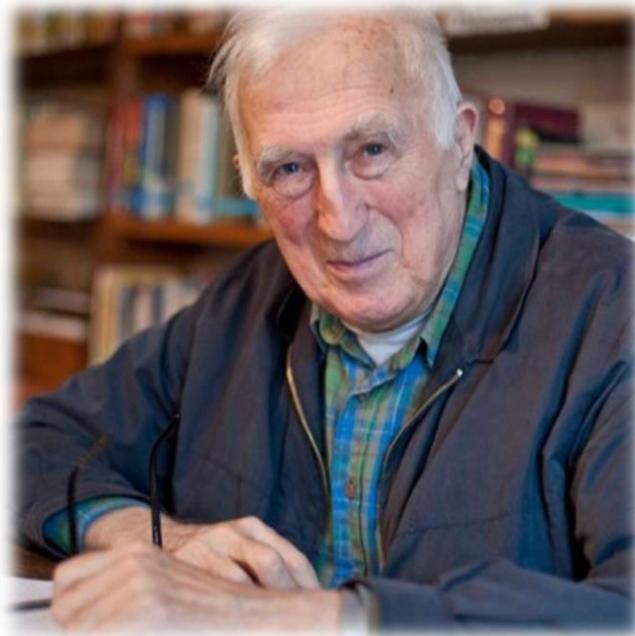


Jean Vanier Videos

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.

In late 2016, Christian Horizons (www.christian-horizons.org) partnered with Canadian think-tank Cardus (www.cardus.ca) to travel to France and develop an extended interview with Jean Vanier and CBC Ideas' Paul Kennedy.

This document includes key quotes from the resulting video clips, together with discussion questions and room for further notes. They can be used in small group formats or for personal reflection. The questions draw on the Christian tradition and are beneficial for Christian social service teams, but also for churches and Christian ministries with and by people who experience disabilities.



Jean Vanier Part 1: "Life and Culture" Quotes

"At my age, I have to accept my gifts, but I've also a lot to learn about growing downwards, living with anguish, without running away from it. Acknowledging that today I'm tired and weak and can't solve the problems of others. I'm called to enter into new types of relationships and into deeper communion of love with Jesus, and with all of my brothers and sisters."

"The poet Tagore said, 'Death is not a lamp that is extinguished, it is the coming of dawn.' Weakness, crises and death are never an end, but a new beginning."

"Somehow must act in such a way that the other person becomes human."

"Somewhere we can lose what it means to be human and to belong to a human family. We can get closed up in a culture."

"There's something beautiful in that person. So it's as we begin to relate to people we discover a little bit better who I am."

"Maybe we can only discover what humanity is when we meet 'the different'."

"At the basis of the human being there is a fragility, there's a weakness, there's a poverty because somewhere I am always searching for the infinite."

"The gospel message is a bit crazy. It's 'Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.'"

"Religion is to enhance - for us to become human beings... not to change you, but to listen to your story so you can grow. Spirituality, then, is about getting close to people who have been rejected. It's breaking the wall that separates the rich and the poor. It's easy to be generous. You know, you just write a check... But how to move from repulsion - with 'the horror' - to tolerance, how to move from tolerance to good laws that protect people, how to move from good laws to generosity - to doing things for people. And then how to move from generosity to a meeting, which is not a question of generosity. When you're generous, I'm above, you're below... there's something else. It's a meeting. And a meeting implies 'I'm not better than you, you're not better than me, we're just children of God.' It's that movement of going down."



Questions for further reflection:

Review your notes and think back over Jean Vanier's insights. What stood out to you from this video?

Theme One: Valuing People

We live in a culture that often glorifies youth, vitality, and strength. Vanier talks about the whole of life being about loss, and loss becoming a gain. This is a profound mystery. As he gets older, he speaks to the importance of accepting the reality of accepting weakness and even death. In 2 Corinthians 12:9, God tells Paul "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

- a.) Vanier talks quite openly about weakness and death, yet we live in what has been described as a "death-denying" or even "death-defying" culture. Many people with profound disabilities face medical challenges or are unable to hide their "weakness" from the world.
 - How might Paul's words and the Incarnation of Christ change the conversation?
 - How do people with disabilities challenge preconceptions or illusions held by people in their communities who would not see themselves as weak? Give examples where possible.
- b.) Jean Vanier speaks of how people can be harmed through the power of others. In what ways might power harm vulnerable people? How might I be complicit in this kind of harm?
- c.) Vanier talks about being "Called into new types of relationships. With Jesus, with other brothers and sisters." This is a *meeting* of the other. How does our understanding of the range of life, from health and accomplishment to death and setbacks, shape the relationships we're called into as Christians? What are the relationships that you feel "called" to?
- d.) Culture conditions us deeply. In following Christ's example, what are some ways that we might be perceived as "traitors" to our own culture as we make space for people with disabilities? What are some of the tensions that arise in our own attempts to be "efficient" and "effective" as business organization? What are some of the tensions that arise in churches and faith communities?
- e.) Vanier says that this new understanding will lead to "growth in love and prayerfulness." What might this growth look like for us personally or as an organization?

"Somewhere we can lose what it means to be human and to belong to a human family. We can get closed up in a culture."

Theme Two: Serving Others

Talking about children and similarities with people with developmental disabilities becomes complicated quickly. We know the damage that is caused by not treating people with intellectual or developmental disabilities according to their age. When Jean Vanier talks about a “primal innocence,” or the “inner voice,” though, he is speaking to something he feels we *all* need. We recall Christ’s words, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” (Matt 19:14, NIV) One is reminded here not only of the perceived innocence of childhood, but also its “powerlessness.” Children recognize their dependence on others in a way that many of us fail to.

- a.) What are some of the ways that Christ’s teaching on power and powerlessness contrast with many examples of corporate or political power in our world today?
- b.) Think of some of the ways that you are dependent on others, and some of the ways that you are independent. Do you tend to see yourself primarily as independent, interdependent, or dependent?
- c.) What are some of the advantages as seeing ourselves as independent? What are some of the benefits of understanding our dependence on others?
- d.) Have you known or supported people who might be described as “dependent”? If so, what did you learn from that relationship?
- e.) Think of your community or neighbourhood. How might we help people in these neighbourhoods come to a greater appreciation for the gifts of *everyone*, including those who they might see as “dependent”? What are some practical examples of what this might look like?

Theme Three: Fostering Belonging

We each have a certain degree of power in whatever roles we fulfill. “Professionalism” is one of the ways that we seek to be intentional about using the power “of the ladder” to do good.

- a.) What is the positive impact of professionalism in the lives of people who are vulnerable?
- b.) As followers of Christ, how might we use our “power” or social capital to lead to “meetings,” where people with intellectual or developmental disabilities find belonging in community?
- c.) What are some of the disadvantages of being known as a professional? In what ways might it hinder opportunities to “meet” as equals, as children of God?
- d.) Consider those times when people with exceptional needs truly “meet” others, in community or in friendship. Whether from the perspective of your own role, or in the role of a Direct Support Professional, how might we engage professionally in a way that makes space for these “meetings?”

Jean Vanier Part 2: "Going Down the Ladder" Quotes

"We discover our real humanity when we come together over the barriers to somehow come close to those in pain."

"It's never really easy to meet someone at the bottom of the ladder."

On Saint Francis among the lepers, "But then one day, he felt called to be among them. And he went there, not with medication in his pockets, nor money, but he went to be with them. And there he discovered that, under all of the difference, ...he listened to them, he met them, and he heard their tears, and I imagine he wept with them. They met."

Saint Francis, "says in his testament, written a few years before his death, 'When I left them, there was a new gentleness in my body and in my spirit.' Something had changed. He discovered maybe his real identity as a person. As a person that could meet another person. And we could weep together. We could weep together because we're both just human beings. In our poverty... Meeting is something about humility. To see in the other person, particularly if that person has been pushed down to the bottom of the 'scale' of our societies, to discover that that person has a beauty, and I've got something to receive from them.

They can tell me something about what it means to be human."

"They were the ones who were healing him. His real self was in the meeting."

The Australian caregiver who came across a young fellow dying of an overdose, "She took him in her arms, and his last words were 'You have always wanted to change me, you never wanted to meet me.' To meet is different. 'Tell me your story, tell me your pain'... It's not a question of changing people. It's about revealing to them their primal innocence. 'You're more beautiful than you dare believe'... It's the meeting, but in that meeting I'm not there to change you, I'm there to meet you. And when we begin to meet, something happens. Your primal innocence, maybe, will awaken my primal innocence. In a way, all we are is children of God."

"But then somewhere, the discovery that we can meet. Without any ladders. And I receive your gift, you receive my gift. So there's something that happens - a moment of communion, a moment of joy. And that's where fundamentally joy is. When we meet people not above them, not below them, but as children of God together."

Questions for further reflection:

Review your notes and think back over Jean Vanier's insights. What stood out to you from this clip?

Theme One: Support People

Robert Bellah, in his book *Habits of the Heart*, writes that these days most of us live in "lifestyle enclaves" that make it difficult to meet people that are very different from us. The move to the suburbs was part of this, but there are countless factors that are at play in preventing us from "uncomfortable" encounters with "the other." In Vanier's words, it's "Never really easy to meet someone at the bottom of the ladder."

- a.) Think back on Christ's example of work and ministry. Identify a few of the times that he reached out to people who would have been seen as "below his status." How did he engage with these people?
- b.) Do you think seeing people as further "down the ladder" is a perception, a reality, or both?
- c.) While people who experience disabilities are at various points "on the ladder," there is often a risk of being marginalized and excluded. What are some of the factors that keep us from meeting people on "different rungs" of the ladder?
- d.) In Vanier's account of Saint Francis of Assisi, St. Francis lost his reputation, his opportunities for advancement, and his wealth. "When I left [the leper colony], there was a new gentleness in my body and in my spirit." He discovered his real identity, his real self in *the meeting*. How has meeting people who are different from you shaped who you are now? What have these interactions taught you about your "real self" or what it means to be *human*?
- e.) How might we help communities to appreciate the value in meeting people who are different from them? Think of some practical examples.

Theme Two: Nurture Relationships

Jean Vanier recounts the story of "Peter" in London. Not one of his siblings knew that they had a brother in the institution. He goes on to talk about the fear and prejudice that can take place about people with intellectual or developmental disabilities. Having a child with a disability might be seen as a "punishment from God." Vanier reminds us of the story from John, where the man was born blind. "Rabbi," his disciples asked him, "why was this man born blind? Was it because of his own sins or his parents' sins?" "It was not because of his sins or his parents' sins," Jesus answered. "This happened so the power of God could be seen in him." (John 9:2,3 NLT). Another example of problematic theological assumptions is when people insist on praying for someone who may or may not want to be "healed" from their disability, assuming that no one would want to "live like that."

- a.) In some countries, religious superstitions and fears can dominate the discourse on disability. Disability can be seen as a curse from the gods, or people with disabilities may be revered as angels! North America is not exempt, though. Disability is all-too-often related to the sin of someone or their parents, or without asking people will assume that someone wishes to be “healed” from their disability and pray for them.
- In working with partners from the Christian community in North America, have you seen similar attitudes to that of Jesus’ disciples? If so, describe the scenario.
 - How would you respond to someone who approaches a person you are supporting and insists on praying for their healing? How might this become an opportunity for education and growth rather than simply correction?
- b.) What opportunities do you see, going forward, to continue to shape theological and religious conversation about the role and contribution of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in faith communities and society? Think of some practical examples of how this change could happen.

Theme Three: Celebrate People

“You have always wanted to change me, you never wanted to meet me.”

Vanier tells the story about the dying man on the street who says this to a caregiver/social worker in Australia. Like each of us, this man had a story that brought him to the point that he was at in life.

- a.) Vanier describes people with developmental disabilities as “People of meeting.” He holds this up as an example to *every* human being. Do you feel that you have progressed from “changing people” to “meeting them?” What are some examples of this?
- b.) Thinking over the Gospel accounts, when do you feel that Jesus truly “met” those he encountered? What are the signs that these were true meetings?
- c.) In what ways might Direct Support Professionals, volunteers, or caregivers truly “meet” the people they support? What factors might make this problematic?
- d.) The place of meeting is where “You receive my gift” and “I receive your gift.” *Respecting gifts* must be our ethos with *whomever* we meet. How might we better respect one another’s? Give practical examples of how this might be put into practice.

Jean Vanier Part 3: “Vocation and the Inner Voice” Quotes

“This is what matters, to love each other.”

“In the trust, there’s a belief in what the other person thinks.”

“[Religion is] to help people to become themselves. And to become themselves is to be in contact with their interiority, what is most beautiful within them – I’d say their secret person... Where I am me, and I am not you, and I am allowed to be ‘me’. But to become me, I have to learn that we must become a ‘we.’ We need community, we need others, we need relationship.”

“Love is respecting the secret of the other person.”

“So I move from generosity to revelation, and revelation is somewhere in the meeting. And in a mutual belief. We have to move from generosity to belief that the other person is precious. And that other person has also a mission in this world, in this country... each one has a mission to be fulfilled.”

“Giving the gift to be yourself, and not what I would have liked you to have been.”

“Celebration. Maybe that’s what humanity is about. Not going up the ladder and telling people what to do, but learning to celebrate together. Somehow this goes counter-culture. So the future of our humanity can only be if there are more and more communities if people can come together and have fun together.”

“If you come here, it’s not communication - it’s presence. To be present to someone. But you might feel a bit awkward to begin with, because you don’t know how to relate. As we live together, it begins to happen. It takes time.”

“The whole strength of the family is a mutual belonging. They belong together. In the belonging, it must be for becoming. Belonging is for becoming. Helping people to leave and create another belonging.”



Questions for further reflection:

Review your notes and think back over Jean Vanier's insights. What stood out to you from this clip?

Theme One: Love and trust

"This is what matters, to love each other"

Love is a complicated word in support provision. Where Jean Vanier feels quite comfortable using "love" in describing his relationship with people with disabilities, many in a professional setting would find this uncomfortable. Part of this difficulty may lie in the many different ways of using the word "love." At the same time, Christ's command is to "Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples." (John 13:34-35)

- a.) Do you think of the provision of support in caregiving environments is a kind of "loving"? If so, would you use the word "love" to describe it? Why or why not?
- b.) John Swinton has written that "Care lies at the very heart of the vocation given to human beings by God." *Care* is a word that professionals are generally more receptive to than *love*. In what ways do you express *care* in the work that you do? Give an example of this.
- c.) Henri Nouwen wrote of his fellow direct support providers, "[T]rue care is mutual care. If their only reward had been the small salary, their care would soon have become little more than human maintenance."
 - o In what ways do support professionals provide and receive *mutual care*? What does reciprocity look like in the caregiving relationship? Give examples where possible.
 - o How does this sense of reciprocity, of mutual care, shape organizational culture?

Theme Two: Interiority and revelation

"Love is respecting the secret of the other person."

Vanier places great emphasis on the "inner voice," learning to recognize and listen to our own conscience and helping others to listen to theirs. Hearing this 'inner voice' happens most often in community, though. As the mother described, "the only way to help people discover their inner conscience is to ask them what they think."

- a.) What are some of the ways that systems and processes make room for people to express their "inner voice," their interiority, their individuality?
- b.) What are some ways that society or systems and processes create barriers to people with developmental disabilities expressing their "inner voice?" How might

we begin to change this and encourage the flourishing and uniqueness of every person?

Theme Three: From communication to community

There are many small communities springing up in solidarity with people who live on the streets, people who use drugs or people with mental illness. There are many other examples of this, from communities with Alzheimer's patients to homeless youth. We see signs of blossoming community in the world but also signs of growing disconnect, sometimes in the way that technology is used to communicate.

- a.) Describe a time when you truly felt "present" with another person or that they were "present with you. What does it mean to be "present" with one another? In what ways might technological influences make this presence difficult or rare?
- b.) Vanier talks about the movement from communication to fraternity or friendship, then potentially to communion or *togetherness*. How might technology and communication be leveraged to lead *to* community and presence?

