

*Living Gently*  
in a  
Violent World




The Prophetic Witness of Weakness

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& JEAN VANIER

*Introduction by* JOHN SWINTON

Resources for Reconciliation  
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# The Fragility of L'Arche and the Friendship of God

JEAN VANIER



I have been living for forty-two years with people with disabilities. It has been a wonderful time. Many people have come to L'Arche angry at being excluded or closed up in depression—they were crying out for authentic relationship. Many have come to our communities to be with people with disabilities, and they are transformed by their relationships. However, at one point, Anglican theologian David Ford told us, “In L'Arche you have a wonderful spirituality, but if you don't have a good theology, this spirituality will peter out.” Therefore I am delighted to have this opportunity to be in dialogue with Stanley Hauerwas. I am

sure this will help me and many in L'Arche to strengthen the foundation of our theology.

I want to begin by saying something about knowing and not knowing. I love chapter two of the Gospel of John when Jesus brings the disciples to a wedding feast. It is a wonderful moment of celebration and relaxation, showing us that our life is to be enjoyed and that we are all called to a feast. At the wedding feast of unity, people drink lots and laugh and have fun. It is a time of togetherness and friendliness. And I imagine that Jesus came to this feast to have fun. I don't think he looked at his watch (which he didn't have) and said, "I must hurry and do a miracle there because they need me!" No, Jesus at Cana was having fun. Mary saw that the wine was running out, knew that the family would be humiliated, and asked Jesus to do something about it. There's something profoundly human about Jesus—the first thing he does in John's Gospel is to turn water into wine so a bride's father won't be embarrassed.

Later on in John 3, something else happens that I've always loved. A leader of the Jews named Nicodemus comes to see Jesus and says, "We know that a guy like you, with all the stuff you are doing, must be sent by God." Jesus replies in his enigmatic way that we must all be born from on high; he continues to say that we shouldn't be surprised to learn this because we can hear the wind—maybe even feel it on our faces—but we don't know where it's coming from or where it's going. So it is with things of the Spirit. You don't

quite know where you are coming from or where you are going. And so it is with L'Arche. We don't quite know where we are going.

My life has been privileged enough that I never knew quite where I was going. I knew a little about where I was coming from, but I wasn't quite sure where I was going to. I left my home in Canada in 1942, at the age of thirteen, to join the British Navy. God knows why my father said I could do it. I joined knowing nothing, and I left the Navy in 1950, not knowing why I'd left except that I had been propelled into the gospel. That's when I met Father Thomas Philippe, who had founded a community in France for young people searching for their way in life. Father Thomas was a man of God. But I still had no idea where I was going.

Years went by and things fell into place. In 1963 Father Thomas had become chaplain of a small institution for people with disabilities. Because I wanted to be close to this priest, I discovered the terrible ways people with disabilities were treated. Why not do something for them? But what to do? God knows I didn't know. I wasn't a social worker. Having finished a Ph.D. in philosophy, I knew quite a bit about Aristotle, but beyond that, my knowledge was pretty limited!

I was able to buy a small house in the village where Father Thomas lived, and I met two men with severe disabilities who had been locked up in a dismal institution. We started living together. I was naïve—I thought I was going to do a little bit

of good to Raphael and Philippe. But things started happening. People arrived to assist me, and six months later I was asked to take over the establishment where Father Thomas was chaplain. We moved from a very prophetic, small community to an institution for thirty people with disabilities. I knew nothing about how to run an institution.

Five years later I was asked to go to India, so I went to India. Within a year, a L'Arche community began in Bangalore with Hindus and Muslims. I knew nothing about inter-religious cooperation. Later a community started in the United Kingdom, which, of course, was ecumenical. But all I knew was the Roman Catholic Church. For me, to be ecumenical meant having a priest come to perform mass every day and getting permission for all the Anglicans to participate with the Roman Catholics. We only discovered little by little what it really meant to be ecumenical.

Today the challenges we face in L'Arche are very different. Governments give orders about how large bedrooms, bathrooms and corridors should be. Of the twenty-eight little houses in the areas where L'Arche started, eighteen have had to be remodeled. In my own particular community, about sixty people with disabilities live in nine homes, and sixty others live with their families and come to work in our workshops. About a hundred assistants are present in this community, and nearly half are volunteers. But the government passed a law recently, making it difficult for volunteers to come to L'Arche. We had to struggle with

the legislators tremendously—if we had no volunteers, our communities would be in severe difficulty and many young people would not benefit from the friendships of our members with disabilities.

Things eventually worked out, but L'Arche is a fragile reality. Will it still be here in twenty years? There will always be people with disabilities, but will there always be people who want to live with them as brothers and sisters in community, in a place of belonging that helps each member, each person, grow to greater freedom? L'Arche is also a complex and beautiful reality—a place of transformation. People arrive and people leave—even the people with disabilities leave. Some get married. Looking back on the story of L'Arche, we can see how many people have been transformed.

I think of Janine, who came to L'Arche at the age of forty with one arm and one leg paralyzed. She experienced epileptic seizures and had difficulties understanding and learning. There was a huge amount of anger in her. She didn't want to come to L'Arche; she wanted to stay with her sisters, but she was terribly jealous of them because they had many children and she couldn't have any. To be placed in L'Arche was the last thing she wanted. She needed to express her anger, so she broke things and screamed and yelled. We took a lot of time to reflect, to try to understand where the anger was coming from. She was angry with her body, angry with her sisters, angry with God, angry because she

didn't want to work in our workshops. But gradually, gradually, she discovered who she was and that she was listened to, understood and loved.

Janine used to love those old French Parisian songs that most people don't remember now. She loved singing them, and she discovered that she could dance to those songs and that other people appreciated them as well. Then she discovered something extraordinary: she was loved by God. She asked to be baptized and learned that we needed her to pray for us and our broken world. The last three years of her life were beautiful. I used to go and sit down beside her sometimes; she would see that I was tired and would put her hand on my head, saying, "Poor old man."

It is not easy to name how and when Janine's transformation took place, but somehow it did, as it has for many at L'Arche. Transformation has to do with the way the walls separating us from others and from our deepest self begin to disappear. Between all of us fragile human beings stand walls built on loneliness and the absence of God, walls built on fear—fear that becomes depression or a compulsion to prove that we are special.

Many assistants who come to us are also transformed. One young woman came to L'Arche at the age of seventeen like a wounded sparrow. Her parents had divorced. She was fed up with school, which forced her to learn things she did not want to learn. She had heard about L'Arche from her aunt. She came, and she was healed by people

with disabilities who loved her and trusted her. So she began to trust and love herself. She became responsible for a home with ten severely disabled people. She left us after five years as a mature woman, going to Peru to work with kids in the streets.

What makes such transformation possible? Jesus says that when we're born of the Spirit, we don't know where that Spirit is coming from or where it's going—there is a reason for not knowing. Transformation gives us the audacity to advance along a road of unknowing. At the same time we can't be totally unknowing. There must be points of reference, particularly today as we participate in complex interreligious dialogue. We face, for example, the desire of a group of people in Kuwait to create a new community in their country. The group is led by a Muslim woman who spent some time in our L'Arche community in Syria. With our help, this group has spent three years reflecting on the conditions necessary for a L'Arche community to begin in Kuwait. To be a L'Arche community it will be necessary for them to affirm, "We are a Muslim group that also welcomes people from other religions." Just as in my community in France we welcome a number of Muslims, so the desire of this Kuwaiti group is to be interreligious. In L'Arche we have always had to work at interreligious cooperation, and today we are confronted with many new realities.

There is always uncertainty about how L'Arche will go on. But we have learned over the years to nurture the be-

belief that God is protecting us. As I read Kathryn Spink's book on L'Arche, *The Miracle, the Story, and the Message*, I see how often we were not understood and sometimes rejected. Authorities in Rome, for example, didn't want to work with us because we were not exclusively Roman Catholic. They asked me, "Are you Catholic?" I said, "Yes, I am, but not all the members of L'Arche are. Catholics and Protestants, Hindus and Muslims, people with disabilities and assistants—they are all our brothers and sisters." The authorities broke off dialogue with us at this point, though with time the relationship was reestablished.

So life has not always been easy. But we've kept going. There is a vital need to listen to each other, to pray together, to listen to reality, to listen to God. We are at a point in our history where many of the people who come to serve and live in communities hardly know why they are there. Many do not have much Christian faith. So you see that there are many complexities in L'Arche. "Good" religious people don't always come to us; we get the ones who don't quite know what it means to be a "good" religious person and who will discover simply that to be a Christian is to grow in compassion.

### **MINDING THE GAP**

In L'Arche we are searching our way. We are trying to understand. We do not have all the answers. But the vital thing is to remember and to tell the story of how it all began. And

the story begins with a huge gap of injustice and pain. It is the gap between the so-called “normal” world and the people who have been pushed aside, put into institutions, excluded from our societies because they are weak and vulnerable or even killed before birth. This gap is a place of invitation in which we call people to respond.

We have to come back to the gospel vision. When I reflect on the gospel vision, I find that it is incredible. It is a promise that we human beings can get together. It is a vision of unity, peace and acceptance. It is a promise that the walls between people and between groups can fall, but this will not be accomplished by force. It will come about through a change of heart—through transformation. It will begin at the bottom of the ladder of our societies. Jesus didn't spend too much time in the rich cities of Israel, such as Tiberias. He spent time with people who were caught in prostitution, the people they called “sinners” who were excluded from the temple. He spent time creating relationships. That's what Jesus did. His vision was to bring together all the children of God dispersed throughout the world. God cannot stand walls of fear and division. The vision of Jesus shows us that division is healed by dialogue and by meeting together.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus tells us that the Samaritan knew what to do. He picked up the injured Jew from the side of the road and took care of him. He put him on his own donkey, carried him to an inn and spent the evening with him. They talked, and they realized they were brothers

in humanity. These two men met and spent time together. And both were transformed. Their prejudices fell away.

Throughout the Gospels there is a contrast between those who are well-integrated in society but are too busy and those who are excluded from society and have too much time. In the parable of the wedding feast (Matthew 22; Luke 14), some people are too caught up in short-term projects—marrying off a daughter or buying land. They have no time for the banquet of love. So the king, or the head of the house, tells the servants to go out into the high-ways and byways and bring in all the excluded—the poor, the people with disabilities, the blind. Bring them all in. And they come running to the banquet of love.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1 that God has chosen the weak, the foolish and the crazy to shame the clever and the powerful; he has chosen the most despised, the people right at the bottom of society. Through this teaching we see a vision unfold in which a pyramid of hierarchy is changed into a body, beginning at the bottom. One might ask if that means Jesus loves the weak more than the strong. No; that is not it. The mystery of people with disabilities is that they long for authentic and loving relationships more than for power. They are not obsessed with being well-situated in a group that offers acclaim and promotion. They are crying for what matters most: love. And God hears their cry because in some way they respond to the cry of God, which is to give love.

That was my experience the first time I entered an institution. The cry of people with disabilities was a very simple cry: do you love me? That's what they were asking. And that awoke something deep within me because that was also my fundamental cry. I knew I could be a success. I had done well in the Navy. I had a doctorate in philosophy. I knew I could go up the ladder, but I didn't know whether I was really loved. If I fell sick, who would be there? I knew the need for admiration. I knew the need to be both accepted and admired. But something deep down within me didn't know if anybody really loved and cared for me as a person, not just for my accomplishments.

I had left my parents when I was thirteen. I knew they loved me, but I didn't feel in any way called to stay with my family. Something was awakened within me as I started to visit people with disabilities and heard their primal cry for relationship; it became clear to me that Jesus was at ease with people yearning for love. I began to understand that these people could help me grow in the wisdom of love. They would help me grow in a relationship with Jesus. It did not matter if people thought I was crazy.

We had lots of questions when we began communities in India. Interreligious dialogue or living together is never easy. We sought our own way. We had a little chapel and we put a tiny cross at the center. Then Mohanraj came to us, bringing with him a big picture of Ganesh. Ganesh is a Hindu god in the form of an elephant. We Christians

are more used to doves than elephants. But elephants are strong and can remove obstacles and blockages. What were we to do with Mohanraj and his picture of Ganesh? Mohanraj had always prayed in front of this image. But we could already hear all the things some Christians might say if they visited. We didn't know what to do. It took time to find the right balance. Eventually Mohanraj's family took him back. We no longer kept the picture of the god Ganesh.

There are many things about people with intellectual disabilities that I do not understand, and I don't know how to communicate well with each one. But gradually, over the years, I have learned many things from them and about them—primarily, that within these people is an openness to God. And their longing for closeness with God is felt on a personal, intimate level. I don't know whether it's just the culture of my community in France, but I never hear a person with a disability talking about "Christ" or "the Lord." They only talk about "Jesus," using his little name. We also talk about Mary, his mother, and I'm always moved by the intimacy with which those names are spoken in our community. People with disabilities realize there is holiness there.

Over the last forty-two years we've had many deaths, and we've spent a lot of time celebrating death. It's very fundamental to our community. To celebrate death is to gather around and talk about the person—about Janine, for

example, who died recently. We gathered to say how beautiful she was, how much she had brought to us. Her sisters came, and we wept and laughed at the same time. We wept because she was gone, but we laughed because she did so many beautiful things.

I remember when Francois, an assistant, died. Jean Louis, who walks with a walker, and Philippe, who has cerebral palsy, came and approached the place where Francois's body lay. They said to Jacqueline, "Can we say hello to Francois?" She said, "Of course," and they went up and looked at Francois. Then they said, "Can we kiss him?" She said, "Sure." They bent over reverently. "Oh sh-t, he's cold!" one of them exclaimed. As they hobbled out, one said to the other, "Mummy will be so surprised when she knows I kissed a dead person."

We begin to open up and accept our own handicaps when we accept death. Kissing and touching somebody who is dead has to do with accepting our own death, and that's why it's vital that we celebrate it. Jean Louis and Philippe taught me about accepting death.

The simplicity of our people, their closeness to God, helps us understand also that there should be no ideology of receiving holy Communion at the Eucharist. Sometimes we hear from parents, "I want my child to go to Communion." But does the child want to go? That is the question. We should never have an ideology of mandatory Communion but be open to desire. Communion in our communities is

not just receiving consecrated bread; it is the satisfaction of a deep yearning for communion in the hearts of people with disabilities. They are called to become saints, people of communion with others.

### **LEARNING TO SEE THE HOLY**

There are many holy people in our communities, but it is not always easy for people to see this if they do not share the conviction that the meaning of life is to become holy and prayerful. Every time I leave the community, Pascal comes up to me and gestures to say, “I will be praying for you.” I believe in his prayer. I believe we can ask people with disabilities to help us.

Jacqueline, who began L’Arche with me many years ago, now has Parkinson’s disease. We couldn’t keep her in the community, so she is in an old persons’ home. I see her as often as I can. But what really brings her alive is when I say, “I need you to offer what you’re living as a prayer for us.” As we get weaker and poorer, the challenge is to believe that the cry of the poor truly is a cry to God. God listens to the cry of the poor.

Does the church really believe in the holiness of people with disabilities? Some people believe the church should do good things for the poor. But do we believe in their holiness? I get upset when people tell me, “You’re doing a good job.” I’m not interested in doing a good job. I am interested in an ecclesial vision for community and in living in a gospel-

based community with people with disabilities. We are brothers and sisters together, and Jesus is calling us from a pyramidal society to become a body.

A fundamental text for L'Arche is Luke 14:12-14, where Jesus says, "When you give a meal, don't invite the members of your clan, members of your family, your brothers, your sisters, your rich neighbors and your friends. Don't invite those that you normally get together with to flatter each other." This is what people usually do when they throw a party. They invite their clan. One person says, "You're super." The other says, "No, you're super! You gave me good wine last time. I will give you good wine next time." This is Aristotle's vision of friendship—sharing among equals. But Jesus says, "No, when you give a banquet—a really good meal—invite the poor, the lame, the disabled and the blind. Invite those who are excluded, and you shall be blessed." You will be repaid in the kingdom's currency. If you become a friend of somebody who is excluded, you are doing a work of unity. You are bringing people together. You are doing God's work.

Aristotle says that to become a friend of someone, you should eat a sack of salt together. Food and love are linked closely. Our first meal as human beings was at our mothers' breasts. We were filled with love and security and filled with nourishment. One of the worst books I have ever seen is a manual that explains how to teach people with disabilities to behave at mealtimes. Every page is about how to eat

properly. When I read it I said, “They’re all going to be constipated or have diarrhea!”

A meal is supposed to be a place where you can laugh, even if you get a chunk of food in your face when somebody spits on you! That’s all part of the game. I am not saying we shouldn’t teach good manners. That’s another thing. But to make the meal a place of pedagogy is crazy. If people are tense, they risk having constipation or diarrhea. When Jesus says, “Invite them to your table,” he’s talking about bringing people together in friendship. And Jesus knew this wasn’t always comfortable—people criticized him because he ate with sinners and prostitutes; he became their friend.

### **THE MYSTERY OF MEMBERSHIP**

Another fundamental text for L’Arche is 1 Corinthians 12, which remains an enigma to me. It’s about the body of Christ, the church, and 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. Often the parts of the body of society that are weakest and least presentable are the ones we hide away in institutions or try to get rid of. There is today a movement for reintegration of people with learning disabilities, through work that is very positive, but we must not forget the numbers of people who still cannot work, who have psychotic behavior, who are anti-social, and who do not find acceptance and integration.

Today some people idealize people with disabilities when they find autonomy, live alone, look at television and drink beer. Autonomy can be good to a certain extent, but in our community a number of people who wanted to live alone fell into loneliness and alcoholism. The problem was not that they lived alone but that they lacked a network of friends. It always comes back to belonging. We have to discover more fully that the church is a place of compassion and fecundity, a place of welcome and friendship. We need time to listen to and understand people with communication problems. It takes time to become a friend of people with disabilities.

Before starting L'Arche I was rather serious. I prayed, I did philosophy, I taught. When I started living with people with disabilities, I learned to fool around and to celebrate life. There are three activities that are absolutely vital in the creation of community. The first is eating together around the same table. The second is praying together. And the third is celebrating together. By celebrating, I mean to laugh, to fool around, to have fun, to give thanks together for life. When we are laughing together with belly laughs, we are all the same. We're all just belly laughing. Some of our people are really crazy and really funny. They are funny because they are crazy, and they are crazy because they are funny. It's super to be with them.

In L'Arche we take every opportunity to celebrate. We celebrate birthdays. We celebrate Christmas. We have a big celebration when somebody feels called to a long-term

commitment in L'Arche. We celebrate ten years, twenty years, thirty years in L'Arche. We really spend a lot of our time celebrating. And when we celebrate, we don't just give gifts. We say to one another, "You are a gift. You're a gift to the community." Around the table we can see the relationship between prayer, food and celebration. It's the place of our covenant. We are bonded together.

In my community there are about sixty assistants who have been in L'Arche more than twenty-five years. Some are married. Some are not married. There are lots of children. We know we are there for each other. Then we have all these volunteers who come and go over the years. They are super as well. We are open to each other. We laugh together. In our community there are beautiful relationships between people with disabilities. They care for each other, too.

All of this takes time. For Janine, who had all that anger in her, it took years to become peaceful. What we are living is fragile. In a document he wrote about a year before he died, John Paul II said:

There is no doubt that in revealing the fundamental frailty of the human condition, the disabled person becomes an expression of the tragedy of pain. In this world of ours that approves hedonism and is charmed by ephemeral and deceptive beauty, the difficulties of the disabled are often perceived as a shame or a provocation and their problem as burdens to be removed or resolved

as quickly as possible. Disabled people are instead living icons of the crucified Son. They reveal the mysterious beauty of the One who emptied himself for our sake and made himself obedient unto death. They show us over and above all appearances that the ultimate foundation of human existence is Jesus Christ. It is said justifiably so that disabled people are humanity's privileged witnesses. They can teach everyone about the love that saves us; they can become heralds of a new world, no longer dominated by force, violence, and aggression, but by love, solidarity, and acceptance—a new world transfigured by the light of Christ, the Son of God, who became incarnate, who was crucified, and rose for us.<sup>1</sup>

In our communities things can be going badly, and a visitor will come and say, “Oh, what peace you have in this place.” Everybody sort of smiles. Somewhere it is true that there is peace. But it is so fragile. It is all a gift. Not all of it comes from our efforts. In time we learn to see and receive the gift of our life together and the peace that is there. And somehow, in the process, we are transformed.

The brothers of Taizé recently organized a pilgrimage in Bangladesh for people with disabilities, along with their families and friends, who were all from very different religious backgrounds. Afterward one of them wrote:

These days of pilgrimage of interreligious trust for the handicapped were an occasion for solidarity, for nu-

merous discoveries, and for many a profound change of heart. The prayer and the celebration of the presence of God in the lives of handicapped people have made these days of communion a feast of hope. We discover more and more that those who are rejected by society because of their weakness and their apparent uselessness are in fact a presence of God. If we welcome them, they lead us progressively out of the world of competition and the need to do great things towards a world of communion of hearts, a life that is simple and joyful where we do small things with love. The challenge today in our country urges us on to show that the service of our weak and vulnerable brothers and sisters means opening a way of peace and unity; welcoming each other in the rich diversity of religions and cultures, serving the poor together, preparing a future of peace.

I have become very influenced by Etty Hillesum, who was assassinated at Auschwitz in 1943. At one point, when she was waiting with ten thousand Jews to be carted off, she said to God, "One thing is becoming increasingly clear to me: that you cannot help us, that we must help you to help ourselves. . . . We must help you and defend your dwelling place inside us to the last."<sup>2</sup> How can God come into this world if our hearts are not open to receive him so that God can be present in this world? It's somewhat similar to the

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words of the Apocalypse, where the Lord says, “I stand at the door and knock. The person who hears me and opens the door, I will enter and eat with that person, and that person will eat with me” (Revelation 3:20). We have to hear Jesus knocking at the door and then open the door and let him come in to be our friend. To become a friend of Jesus is to become a friend of the excluded. As we learn to be a friend of the excluded, we enter into this amazing relationship that is friendship with God.