

*Living Gently*  
in a  
Violent World




The Prophetic Witness of Weakness

STANLEY HAUERWAS  
& JEAN VANIER

*Introduction by* JOHN SWINTON

Resources for Reconciliation  
*series editors*

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# Series Preface

## *The Resources for Reconciliation Book Series*

A partnership between InterVarsity Press and the Center for Reconciliation at Duke Divinity School, Resources for Reconciliation books address what it means to pursue hope in areas of brokenness, including the family, the city, the poor, the disabled, Christianity and Islam, racial and ethnic divisions, violent conflicts, and the environment. The series seeks to offer a fresh and distinctive vision for reconciliation as God's mission and a journey toward God's new creation in Christ. Each book is authored by two leading voices, one in the field of practice or grassroots experience, the other from the academy. Each book is grounded in the biblical story, engages stories and places of pain and hope, and seeks to help readers to live faithfully—a rich mix of theology, context and practice.

This book series was born out of the mission of the Duke

Divinity School Center for Reconciliation: *Advancing God's mission of reconciliation in a divided world by cultivating new leaders, communicating wisdom and hope, and connecting in outreach to strengthen leadership.* A divided world needs people with the vision, spiritual maturity and daily skills integral to the journey of reconciliation. The church needs fresh resources—a mix of biblical vision, social skills of social and historical analysis, and practical gifts of spirituality and social leadership—in order to pursue reconciliation in real places, from congregations to communities.

The ministry of reconciliation is not reserved for experts. It is the core of God's mission and an everyday call of the Christian life. These books are written to equip and stimulate God's people to be more faithful ambassadors of reconciliation in a fractured world.

For more information, email the Duke Divinity School Center for Reconciliation at <[reconciliation@div.duke.edu](mailto:reconciliation@div.duke.edu)>, or visit our website: <[www.divinity.duke.edu/reconciliation](http://www.divinity.duke.edu/reconciliation)>.

*Emmanuel Katongole*

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# Introduction

*Living Gently in a Violent World*

JOHN SWINTON



*I'm not interested in doing a good job. I am interested in an ecclesial vision for community. We are brothers and sisters, and Jesus is calling us from the pyramid to become a body.*

Jean Vanier

*B*efore I entered academia I spent many years as a psychiatric nurse and then as a mental health chaplain working alongside people with various forms of mental illness and intellectual disability. Unlike many of my mental health colleagues, I was never very interested in the diagnosis or

etiology of people's conditions. Even though I was young, I recognized that diagnoses and labels do not accurately represent people. In fact, these explanations can lead to destructive labels and stigmatizing assumptions that devastate their recipients. What did interest me was how people with these life experiences viewed the world. They saw things differently. And when I listened carefully, those whom the world called "mad" or "disabled" became a conduit that allowed me—and anyone else who chose to look and listen—to receive a different truth in the midst of a world that loves to deceive.

In chapter three of this book Jean Vanier tells us, "I realize as I get older that I have difficulty meeting so-called normal people. I don't know what to talk about. I can fool around at the dinner table with people with disabilities, but I can see that I am becoming marginalized. I know it is important to speak to the wider world. But it is not always easy when you discover you are living in two worlds." I know what he means. Negotiating the world of disability and the world of people who don't consider themselves disabled can be tragic, frustrating and deeply joyful all at the same time! But such encounters carry the potential to transform our friendships, our politics and our spirituality.

Marginalization is often the primary currency used by the citizens of both worlds.<sup>1</sup> But the dialogue between these two worlds is vital for the church to be the church and for the world to recognize Jesus and be transformed. Taking seriously the "world of the disabled" and allowing our perspec-

tives to be shaped and changed by listening carefully to those who see things differently is a prophetic ministry of transformation and hope that all of us need to engage in if we are to live faithfully. One of the hopes of the authors of this book is that the essays presented here will help you the reader to become “odd,” to see the world differently and thereby recognize the prophetic nature of that oddness for faithful discipleship. So a warning: By the time you’ve finished reading, your friends may start to think you’re a little strange!

### **SEEING THE WORLD DIFFERENTLY**

The society we in the West inhabit is a strange place. We are oddly comfortable with truths that, on reflection, are deeply dissonant and even disturbing. For example, we seem quite comfortable with the knowledge that up to twenty thousand children die every day from preventable diseases. We miss the deep irony that we constantly seek peace by going to war. We develop policies and practices that welcome people with disabilities into our communities, offering them rights and responsibilities, and at precisely the same time we develop forms of genetic technology designed to prevent them from entering society in the first place.

If Vanier is correct that in France within the next few years there will be no children born with Down syndrome because they will all have been aborted, then something is deeply wrong with our society. As my friend John, who has Down syndrome, puts it, “That doesn’t make us feel

very welcome, does it?”<sup>2</sup> And he’s right. Stanley Hauerwas correctly points out in chapter two that one of the real dangers for people with disabilities in Western cultures is compassion! Our desire to alleviate perceived suffering in the name of compassion easily leads to the destruction of people whom God has created and loves beyond all things. How odd. I suspect that the question of precisely whose “suffering” we are alleviating in aborting children with disabilities will depend on whom we ask. It is rare for our society to take the time to ask people with disabilities. How odd.

*Signing in heaven?* Over the past few years those of us involved in practical theology at the University of Aberdeen have worked alongside people with disabilities in various forms of participatory research. This research is designed to help us work through key issues relating to disability, theology, church and society, and to explore the meaning of lives lived well with disability.<sup>3</sup> Part of our work has involved listening carefully to the stories of people with disabilities. As we have been drawn into the “strange world of disability” and learned how to hear the transforming narratives people have shared with us, our understandings, perspectives, values and expectations have changed. As we approach the work of Vanier and Hauerwas in this book, it will reward us to listen to two such prophetic voices. Let’s begin with Angela.

A couple of years ago I was teaching a course on pastoral care. It was a distance-learning course, which meant that some people were in a classroom in Aberdeen and others

were on the telephone throughout the United Kingdom. On that occasion the class was made up of people with differing backgrounds and perspectives. Among these was one person who had no sight and another who was profoundly deaf and spoke through an interpreter. At one point in the class, people were sharing their various spiritual experiences. The woman who was deaf, Angela, began to tell us about a dream she'd had. In that dream she had met with Jesus in heaven. She and Jesus talked for some time, and she said she had never experienced such peace and joy. "Jesus was everything I had hoped he would be," she said. *"And his signing was amazing!"*

For Angela, heaven's perfection did not involve being "healed" of her deafness. Rather, it was a place where the social, relational and communication barriers that restricted her life in the present no longer existed. What had been a "disability" now became the norm; that which had led to exclusion, anxiety, separation and loss of opportunity now became the precise mode in which Jesus addressed her. As we listen to Angela's story our minds are renewed (Romans 12:2) and we are freed to see Jesus differently as he speaks to us from his residence within the "strange world" of disability. How odd.

***Renarrating the world.*** Dianne, a young woman with Down syndrome, also challenges us to see the world differently. When asked to describe how she experiences her spirituality, Dianne says, "I was born with a hole in my heart. When I was little it needed a patch and I was very ill.

It might be because of this but I have always felt special. . . . God is my best friend. God made me special because I was special to him.”<sup>4</sup>

What is perhaps most startling about Dianne’s description of her relationship with God is the way she turns the cultural narrative of disability on its head, countering many prevalent ideas about suffering and compassion. For example, a traditional theological discussion of someone in her situation often focuses on theodicy: “How can a good and loving God allow such deformity and suffering?” On the other hand, our liberal cultural assumptions often insist, “Isn’t it better and more compassionate not to allow such people to exist at all?” Dianne does not allow such positions to masquerade as orthodoxy; she renarrates cultural and theological myths, and reframes her disability in the light of the truth that God loves her just as she is.

Rather than raising questions about whether God is good and loving, Dianne’s disability draws her into the very presence of God and marks her out as special. Society often uses the term *special* in negative ways (“special needs,” “special education”), but Dianne places it in the frame of love. To recognize one’s own specialness is a gateway to friendship with God. It makes a radical political statement in a world that often forgets who we are and traps us in complex webs of labels, stereotypes, caricatures and false assumptions. In her gentle description of divine recognition, Dianne reveals a politics that stands in stark contrast

to the politics of the world—a mode of politics that, as we shall see in chapter four, is the very essence of the coming kingdom of God.

Dianne’s and Angela’s stories draw together some of the key elements of this book. In uncovering the oddness of many of our cultural and theological assumptions about disability, they resonate deeply with the thinking of Hauerwas and Vanier presented in the essays to come. Both authors have noticed the types of cultural dissonance that Dianne highlights, and both (in different ways) offer us new modes of framing and entering the strange world of disability. Indeed, as we listen to the voices of Angela, Dianne, Stanley Hauerwas and Jean Vanier, it becomes clear that it is not the world of disability that is strange, but the world “outside,” which we dare to call normal. It turns out that the world of disability is the place God chooses to inhabit.

### **HOW THIS BOOK CAME TO BE**

The essays presented in this book emerged from a unique conference organized by the Centre for Spirituality, Health and Disability at the University of Aberdeen ([www.abdn.ac.uk/cshad](http://www.abdn.ac.uk/cshad)). In 2006 we invited Hauerwas and Vanier to come to Scotland to spend two days together, discussing and reflecting on important issues of disability and theology. They had not met before, though Hauerwas had written many times on the importance of Vanier’s work and the significance of the L’Arche communities. Perhaps one of the

most important aspects of the event was that these two men graced one another with the gift of friendship, a friendship that I suspect will last into eternity.

Hauerwas and Vanier spent two fascinating days sharing both publicly and privately their thoughts, joys and concerns surrounding the issue of disability and, in particular, around the question, “What does L’Arche have to say to the church?” All of us sensed that the church is in crisis, that there is a need for a shift from lukewarmness to faithfulness, from alienation to friendship with God and one another. Indeed, addressing this need is critical if the church truly desires to live its mission to the world and to honor the God who is love. Their gentle conversations began to tease out the implications of the church’s situation and to start to think through what disability can tell all of us about the nature of God and of faithful discipleship.

Both Vanier and Hauerwas note that honoring such a God requires us to recognize the fundamental gospel principle that the weakest and least presentable people are indispensable to the church (1 Corinthians 12:22). However, to quote Vanier’s words in chapter three, “I have never seen this as the first line of a book on ecclesiology! Who believes it?” Vanier and Hauerwas believe it. This book is an attempt to help us begin also to do so.

## **WHY L’ARCHE?**

A vital aspect of a paradigm shift is the need for exem-

plars—people or groups who can model the new paradigm, challenge our presuppositions and draw us into the belief that the new paradigm might actually be possible.<sup>5</sup> L’Arche is precisely such an exemplar. Jean Vanier founded the L’Arche communities in 1964, initially by simply living with two people with profound intellectual disabilities. Since then the L’Arche communities, with their fundamental ethos of “living with” rather than “doing for,” have become an international network of communities in which people with intellectual disabilities live with people who do not share that life experience. They do not live together as carer and cared for but as fellow human beings who share care and need. The L’Arche communities provide a unique model of inclusiveness underpinned by a profound Catholic spirituality and theology. L’Arche is truly odd—it refuses to do what society thinks it should.

*L’Arche as a sign and sacrament.* This refusal to conform to societal norms has caused Hauerwas to see L’Arche as a powerful exemplar of the community God gave us as a marker for our redemption: the church. He views the L’Arche communities as witnesses to the reality that the Christian story is both true and livable. For Hauerwas, “Christianity is unintelligible without witnesses, that is, without people whose practices exhibit their committed assent to a particular way of structuring the whole.”<sup>6</sup> Christianity is much more than an idea, he says: “Rather it is a bodily faith that must be seen to be believed.”<sup>7</sup>

L'Arche shows, as the church is called to show, that Christianity is true by demonstrating what community would look like if the gospel were true. Unlike learning moral principles, following Jesus requires a change of heart. "The very content of Christian connections requires the self to be transformed if we are adequately to see the truth of [its] convictions."<sup>8</sup> L'Arche is a sign of hope and new possibilities, but above all it is a marker for the truth of the gospel; it is living proof that the story Christians bear is not fantasy or a collection of abstract principles but real and true and revealed clearly. When we view L'Arche this way, we begin to see how the question "What does L'Arche mean for the church?" might have implications far beyond the idea that disability theology is a "specialist interest." It is the heart of the gospel.

*Unlikely allies?* At first sight Jean Vanier and Stanley Hauerwas seem unlikely allies. Hauerwas (named America's best theologian by *Time* magazine in 2001) is a battle-hardened academic whose natural inclination is to defend people with intellectual disabilities by using his well-honed intellectual skills. As he says in chapter four, he sees himself as "a warrior on behalf of L'Arche, doing battle against the politics that threaten to destroy these gentle communities." At one level he stands in stark contrast to the gentleness of Jean Vanier and L'Arche. He states, "Where I see an enemy to be defeated, he [Vanier] sees a wound that needs to be healed. That's a deep difference."

## *Introduction*

And yet Vanier is no less of a warrior. He has fought many a hard battle as L'Arche has taken shape.<sup>9</sup> He is gentle, but, as we shall see, he also has the capacity for violence because, like all of us, he carries the deep wound of his own loneliness. But unlike many of us, he has learned to see his enemies as wounded people who are loved by God. Though it did not come easily or naturally, he learned gentleness as he allowed his experiences with people with profound disabilities to shape his presumptions and behaviors.

Gentleness is a vital dimension of the kingdom of God (Matthew 11:28-30), but it is a learned skill that requires work and demands patience, slowness and timefulness.<sup>10</sup> Such work means that we have to become “friends of time,” a patient people who recognize that “we have all the time we need to do what needs to be done.” Such friends of time seek to develop the patience to slow down, to recognize that our lives are not our own creation and that the God who filled the universe with beauty and who created all of us (Psalm 22:9-10) always finds time to be with us, to sit with us and to move us to a place in history we can call our own.

In recognizing the gift of creation and of our lives, we are freed to live differently. Like Dianne and Angela, we are freed to renarrate our lives in light of Jesus' revelation and the hopeful presence of L'Arche. In other words, we are freed to love. We are freed to greet one another with a holy kiss (Romans 16:16) and, as Josef Pieper puts it, to offer

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one another the words of love: “It’s good that you exist; it’s good that you are in this world.”<sup>11</sup> The essays in this book offer a beginning place for all of us to start to do this. We offer them to you as transformative gifts. We pray that they may bring you many blessings.