

'There's a culture of fear in England today'

An affecting new documentary is taking the L'Arche founder's vision to a global audience. It couldn't be more timely

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When I spoke to Jean Vanier recently, I felt blessed. By chance, I was due to interview Vanier, whom many consider a living saint for his work with those with learning disabilities at the L'Arche community he founded in northern France, on the day after one of Britain's worst tragedies.

Hours before our chat, an inferno had swept through a London tower block. Scores died as others told how they saw babies being dropped from windows in the hope that they might survive. And this fresh tragedy comes swiftly after terrorist attacks in Manchester and London.

"There is a culture of fear in England today and in the world," says Vanier when I ask him about the recent events. "We've lost a serenity. We fear anything might happen."

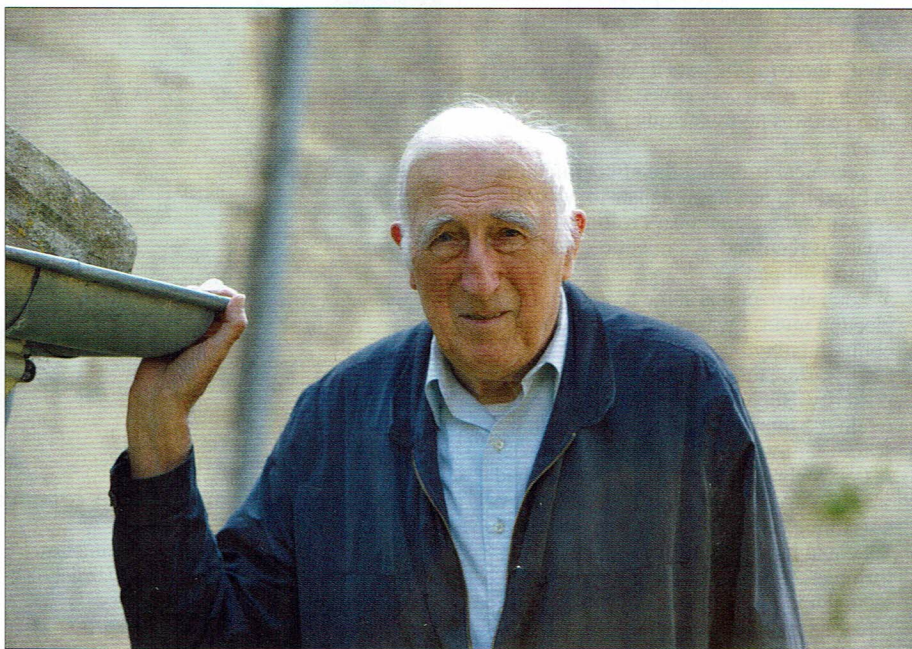
And it is this culture of fear that encourages us to put up barriers, he continues. "Barriers against people who are different, people who are frequently rejected." In fact, barriers against exactly the sort of people with learning disabilities that Vanier has spent a lifetime embracing.

For all the fear, there is also hope, Vanier says. And nothing summons up a feeling of hope more than *Summer in the Forest*, a new film about Vanier's work and the community at L'Arche which will be released in Britain today.

For some time director Randall Wright had wanted to make a film that captured the world that Vanier had created. Although there had been some films made for French television about Vanier's work, there was nothing on the scale of Wright's tender and moving documentary. It is often said that a film or a book can be life-changing. I think this documentary truly merits the description.

The 90-minute film took more than a year to make and dignifies its subject matter with high production values and beautiful music and cinematography. It tells the story of the love and friendship between people with and without learning disabilities who share life together. We get to know Philippe and André, Patrick and Celine, and Michel and Sara. They live and work at the L'Arche communities of France and Bethlehem. And of course we get to know Vanier himself.

Now 88, he cuts a handsome figure: tall with a shock of grey hair so thick that in one scene we see him having a haircut. He is tanned with a warm smile and beaky nose.



Jean Vanier: 'Find someone who is lonely and go and visit them'

My abiding memory of the film is how he is almost always turning to talk to someone and giving them a hug.

Vanier himself is the film's undoubted star, but throughout he shies away from the limelight. Although this is the story of his life, the overwhelming characteristic he displays is modesty. In a celebrity-obsessed world, he is a non-celebrity.

For me the film's power is through its understatement. Nothing dramatic happens and there are no scandalous revelations and gut-wrenching back stories, though we do learn of beatings in institutions that some have suffered. But this is not a polemic. We are not made to feel there is "message" we must absorb about those we so often marginalise in society. With simplicity and charm, the film allows those who are featured to be themselves, to be given a voice, to demonstrate their humanity, and to show how their humanity can bring out the humanity – and the fun – in others.

L'Arche is a place of joy. There's humour, there's laughter and celebration, as well as moments of profundity when anyone watching will question what it is to be human, and how much more human we could all be.

Yes, of course life is not always perfect

and some of the characters experience moments of difficulty, like us all. The film isn't sentimental. There are moments when you might flinch, so unused are we to knowing the truth of the lives of those with learning disabilities. We meet support workers who are gentle and kind, but also sometimes impatient or bored. They too are human.

But the feeling I had after watching the film was that of peace, joy and, yes, hope.

"I think the film is about the beauty of the people in it," Vanier says. "I hope it will touch people at a deep level. The danger in our society is that we always want to move up the ladder. Here at L'Arche it's a question of having fun."

Vanier believes that our competitive spirit stems from when we are first hurt. "We don't understand why. We feel we have to prove something, by doing well, at school or on the sports field. But the people at L'Arche are not like that. They are not like others in the quest for power."

Instead, they are seeking relationships. "You love me as I am. It's about accepting people as they are. They are beautiful."

When I scroll through my notes for the interview, I realise that Vanier repeats this last phrase more than any other.

We are all called ...

We may not all be called to do great things that make the headlines, but we are all called to love and be loved, wherever we may be. We are called to be open and to grow in love and thus to communicate life to others, especially to those in need.

Jean Vanier,
Seeing Beyond Depression, p.89

Giving Grace

People who are old or sick and offer themselves to God can become the most precious members of a community – lightning conductors of grace. There is a mystery in the secret strength of those who bodies are broken, who seem to do nothing all day, but who remain in the presence of God. Their immobility obliges them to keep their minds and hearts fixed on the essential, on the source of life itself. Their suffering and agony bears fruit; they give life.

Jean Vanier,
Community and Growth, p.155

Believe Spring will Come

Just as the vine has to be pruned in order to bear more fruit, so too each of us has to be pruned. There are moments of grief and disappointment that are like rough and painful times of pruning so that there might be more life. But when it is winter and it is very cold, when the vine has been pruned, stripped of its branches, we find it difficult to believe that spring will come again and that life is lying dormant but will soon re-emerge.

Jean Vanier,
Seeing Beyond Depression, p.45

The Gift of Listening

This is an important gift in community. But if we are able to listen, we must offer security. An assurance of confidentiality is an essential part of being a listener. This means knowing how to respect the wounds and the sufferings of others and not divulging these.

Jean Vanier,
Community and Growth, p.253

Humility

Unity grows from the soil of humility, which is the safeguard against schisms and division. The spirit of evil is powerless against humility.

Jean Vanier,
Community and Growth, p.218



A scene from Summer in the Forest – a ‘life-changing’ documentary

Vanier was born in Canada in 1928, the fourth of five children. His father, Georges Vanier, was governor general of Canada from 1959 to 1967. His career took his family to France and England, where Jean spent his childhood.

“As children we were loved,” Vanier recalls. “My upbringing as a Catholic was deeply prayerful. Our life was one of peacefulness and openness.”

In 1942 he entered the Royal Navy College in Dartmouth aged 13. In the middle of World War II, Vanier embarked on an eight-year career in the British Navy and later the Canadian navy. His choice of career was not about power, he explains, but duty – the guiding value of his family.

By 1950, he had left the navy. “Somewhere inside me I was being called to pray more,” he recalls. “I wanted to follow Jesus, and to announce the Good News to the poor.”

His subsequent journey is well documented. His path has been celebrated around the world and seen him lauded with awards such as the Templeton Prize. He joined L’Eau Vive, a centre for theological and spiritual formation for lay people from many different countries. It was run by the Dominican Fr Thomas Philippe, who would become Jean’s spiritual father.

At the end of 1963, Vanier lent a hand to Fr Thomas, who had been made chaplain of the Val Fleuri in Trosly-Breuil, a little village situated on the edge of the forest of Compiègne, in the Oise.

The Val Fleuri was a small institution that welcomed about 30 men with intellectual disabilities. Later Vanier returned to Canada where he taught a term at St Michael’s College at the University of Toronto, his classes in ethics quickly becoming celebrated.

When the term ended, Vanier returned to Trosly-Breuil and began to learn about the situation of people with intellectual disabilities. He visited the psychiatric hospital at

Saint-Jean-les-Deux-Jumeaux, east of Paris. There he met Raphael Simi and Philippe Seux, and was deeply touched by their distress. He decided to buy a little house near the Val Fleuri, to welcome and live with his new companions. Vanier welcomed Raphael and Philippe to the home he created. It was not an institution, but rather a commitment he made to those two men whose cry for friendship had touched him.

For all three, it was the beginning of a new life. Vanier recalls: “Essentially, they wanted a friend. They were not very interested in my knowledge or my ability to do things, but rather they needed my heart and my being.” Within a couple of years, other homes were born, and Vanier sent out the call for people of good will to help him.

Young people began to join him from France, Canada, England and Germany, and became assistants who made the choice to live with people with intellectual disabilities. Today, L’Arche is made up of 147 communities spread over five continents. There are more than 5,000 members.

Vanier is not interested in formal displays of religion. His faith is not about the number of times he prays or goes to church. Instead, there is only one commandment: to love each other.

Our time is up. After the recent traumatic events, I ask what he would advise anyone seeking solace. Find someone who is lonely, he says, and go and visit them. “Visit them once a week. They will see you as the Messiah. People want to change the world by doing everything. But just go and see someone lonely once a week.”

Summer in the Forest is released today at Picturehouse and independent cinemas across Britain. It is also available on video on demand. For more information, visit Summerintheforest.com