"What We Lose in Certainty"
Re-grieving Jean Vanier
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When Jean Vanier died in May 2019, a flood of written tributes poured forth, each expressing various facets of grief.1 In February 2020, details of Vanier’s manipulative sexual practices through much of his adult life were revealed by an external inquiry requested by L’Arche International.2 Another surge of writing followed, as people around the globe grieved again, this time for the women who were hurt by Vanier and for the Jean Vanier we thought we knew. Anger. Denial. Confusion. More anger. Depression. Bargaining.

In the first days after the news broke, I found a scene from the movie *Love Actually* played in my mind. Emma Thompson’s character responds to her husband’s admission of unfaithfulness by saying to him, “Yes, but you’ve also made a fool out of me, and you’ve made the life I lead foolish, too.” In an inarticulate and irrational way, I felt in myself that same sentiment, that the ways in which so many of us have tried to live Vanier’s compelling vision of transformative community, even of prayer and closeness with Jesus, suddenly felt foolish, naive, maybe even suspect.

I agreed to write something for *Critical Theology*, but I realize these are thoughts-on-the-way, not a final answer—comments that I may later recognize as a bargaining stage of grieving, or a kind of salvage effort.3 “What we learn today is a huge blow and a cause of great confusion but what we lose in certainty, we hope to gain in terms of maturity,” wrote L’Arche International in its public letter. A whole world of theology exists in that sentence, accepting a terrible reality with a faithful intention to be open to hope and growth.

Thus I have been thinking about maturity. I find myself pondering two unrelated moments from the same year, more than half a century ago.

In a documentary broadcast across Canada the same year, filmmaker Peter Flemington asks the 38-year-old founder of L’Arche (the Ark) if he is a saint. Jean Vanier laughs for a while, says that saints are recognized only after their deaths, then offers an unexpected insight into what sanctity is and why the people with intellectual disabilities with whom he lives are more likely to be “the real saints.”5 Let me be quick to say: no one has to take up the saint role. Now seems like the right time to drop that adoring and alienating word altogether when referring to living persons.

L’Arche does have a kind of magic. One founder of a L’Arche community, while noting its limits, also affirmed, “L’Arche is magical – transforming the unwanted, the unvalued into precious friends and teachers.”6 Part of that magic is the freedom, even irreverence, of life on the margins. Vanier loved to tell of how in the early days of the new L’Arche house in France, they encouraged a government inspector to stay for dinner, then passed him a pot of mustard. When he opened it, out jumped a cloth snake on a spring, and the household fell about laughing. Vanier liked physical comedy, such as tossing orange peels around the room after a meal together. Stories of rule breaking and boundary pushing abound, such as the time a person with an intellectual disability, while waiting with L’Arche representatives to meet the Pope, went and sat on the Papal throne to see how it felt. This shared humour and social liberation is part of the unexpected pleasure, the magic of L’Arche.

But Cohen’s poem offers a gentle suggestion that perhaps Etiquette comes before Magic.

Do I have to say that coercing anyone into sexual intimacy in the context of spiritual accompaniment is never good etiquette? One of the six women who testified to the investigation said that when she later told and wrote Vanier of her distress, all he said was that he thought it was “good.” It was not good. The theological justification provided by Vanier and his mentor Father Thomas Philippe of offering to be Jesus through secret sexual touching amounts to pretending or presuming to be god to others. This is self-idolatry, fake magic, and uncritical theology.
Genuine etiquette requires being considerate of each person. The rule-bending humour of L’Arche is good etiquette, because while it shifts assumptions about propriety, each person is respected. In L’Arche, people with intellectual disabilities are central in creating culture, actively building communal memories, and developing their own stories. L’Arche often upends overly serious power structures to give space for people of all abilities to discover each other and have fun together. I am not saying L’Arche is perfect—anyone who knows L’Arche would never say that. At its best, however, L’Arche embodies the key etiquette of sharing life with respect for each person, especially in their vulnerability. ¹⁰

I hope the six women who brought forward their stories feel a sense of both justice and respect. The public letter released by L’Arche International asserted: “If the words of those who testified bring to light a troubled part of our history, their efforts give L’Arche a chance to continue on its journey, to become more aware of our history, and, ultimately, better able to face the challenges of our time. We understand that this was also their intention, and we are grateful for it.”

Ten years ago, L’Arche International asked me to begin a project exploring complex aspects of L’Arche founding stories around the world. The idea was that overly idealized founding stories limited L’Arche’s creativity and freedom. Some of those remarkable international founding stories of L’Arche in Canada, India, the UK, the US, Ivory Coast, Haiti and Honduras were published just last fall in Sharing Life: Stories of L’Arche Founders. My recent book, Tender to the World: Jean Vanier, L’Arche and the United Church of Canada, is likewise a book of stories about how people with and without disabilities in the United Church took up the challenge of L’Arche, with times of ecumenical discovery and personal growth, as well as painful misunderstandings and failure. To set aside stories like these because of our deep disillusionment with Vanier himself risks overlooking the many inspiring stories of everyone else.

This leads to a bigger question of whose stories and wisdom might be unjustly dismissed with Vanier’s. Much of the writing by Jean Vanier was not written solely by one person; many were works of Vanier’s collaboration with others, often women. ¹¹ If bookstores and publishers pull Vanier’s books off their shelves and catalogues, will we lose the collective contributions of Vanier’s many unacknowledged co-authors as well? I don’t have an answer to this, but I know that the seemingly singular authorial voice of “Jean Vanier” includes insights of other writers and the community. It will be sadly ironic if the result of Vanier’s horribly newsworthy story is to leave him still the centre of attention, silencing or eclipsing the stories of others, whether those are the women who were harmed or founders, members, and supporters of L’Arche beyond Vanier.

I want to encourage everyone grieving their loss of certainty. The news about Jean Vanier does not devalue or diminish anything you have been living. The lives we have chosen are not foolish. We need each other. Now is not the time to lose faith in our efforts to build bridges across difference, to create communities and alliances with others.

More than ever in our world today, we need mature and diverse communities of prayer, of generosity, of peace-making, of activism, and yes, of fun. We need the etiquette of respect woven with the magic of kindness.

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⁴ Leonard Cohen, Stranger Music: Selected Poems and Songs (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1993), 188. I do not have copyright permission to quote the poem here, but I suggest you pause to read it online: it can be found by searching inside his 1993 collection, Stranger Music.
⁶ Ibid., 73. See also 192–94, notes 18–19, for a partial list of L’Arche-related scholarship in many fields.
⁸ This includes the ongoing commitment of L’Arche to ensure the safety of every community member, with and without disabilities: www.larche.org/prevention-and-safeguarding. Accessed March 3, 2020.