Too Chicken to Cross the Road?  
Jean Vanier and Getting to the Other Side

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I was recently invited to update my 2008 Introduction to Jean Vanier: Essential Writings, and I have been thinking about that old joke: “Why did the chicken cross the road?” The answer, of course, is “To get to the other side.” The joke comes to mind because in reading Jean Vanier’s books and presentations from the past decade, I find in nearly every text the same curious little story about a road in Chile that gripped Vanier’s imagination. As a literary scholar, I can’t resist an influential story, all the more because it is actually not much of a story at all.

I am prompted to write this article because I see the possibility of a whole Vanier industry heating up after his death on May 7, 2019, and I want to offer a corrective note now, early on. Already books and articles about his work have appeared in an astonishing range of scholarly disciplines.¹ A Jean Vanier Research Centre opened this spring at King’s University College in London, Ontario. A feature-length film, Summer in the Forest, has been shown around the world. Immediately after his death, dozens of obituaries and tributes appeared internationally. All this could serve to reinforce a myth of Jean Vanier as a stand-alone writer and thinker, when in reality much of his writing was done collaboratively, and his most original and significant contributions arose from his life in community with others, shaped especially by people marginalized and rejected in nearly every culture.² So perhaps this little non-story can provide a compass point orienting us to Vanier’s core message, and helping us and our students become a little less chicken.

Here’s the story as Vanier told it in 2013 when accepting the Pacem in Terris Peace and Freedom Award: “I went to Chile some years ago, and on the road from the airport to the city my driver at one moment said to me, ‘On the left side of the road are all the slum areas of Santiago and on the right are all the rich houses, protected by police and military.’ And he added, ‘Nobody crosses this road. Everybody is frightened.’”³ This moment in Chile seized Vanier’s imagination: he recounted it in a series of conversations with the Christian ethicist Stanley Hauerwas published in 2008 as Living Gently in a Violent World. Versions of the same story can be found in Signs of the Times, a book “born out of exchanges with Cristiana Santambrogio” (2011, translated in 2013), Mental Health: The Inclusive Church Resource, co-authored with John Swinton (2014), The Gospel of John, the Gospel of Relationship (2015), Life’s Great Questions, “written in close collaboration with Janet Whitney-Brown” (2015), and Un cri se fait entendre (2017), translated as A Cry Is Heard (2018), written with François-Xavier Maigre.

I have been wondering: Why? His experience in Chile is uneventful compared to his other oft-repeated stories, which usually involve specific moments of encounter and transformation, often told with a hint of subversive humour at toppling social expectations or relational assumptions. But perhaps it is a story pared down to its essence, like late artworks by artists at the end of their careers, a whole lifetime distilled into just a few lines.

In a book about Aristotle, which is based on his doctoral thesis, Vanier, which is based on his doctoral thesis, Vanier explains the connection between ethics, psychology, and spirituality:

Psychology helps us to understand human behaviours and grasp the fears and blockages that are in us, in order to help us free ourselves of them. Spirituality is like a breath of inspiration that strengthens our motivation. Ethics help to clarify what is a truly human act, what justice is, and what the best activities are – those that render us more human and happiest.⁴ Vanier’s story of the road in Chile can be read on all three levels: psychologically, spiritually, and ethically. He introduced the story to his Pacem in Terris audience saying, “Peace comes not when we say or believe that each and every person in the vast human family is precious and important, but when we begin to leave the security and comfort of our own clan and group, in order to meet and become friends with those who are different and who belong to another clan or group or culture.” In other words, the invitation of peacemaking is not to words, but to action: meeting and becoming friends of people with different lives. But, as Vanier understands, the communities on each side of the road are both afraid.

Fears and blockages within us, Vanier suggested, are questions in the realm of psychology, reminding me
of another reflection on crossing the road, this one from an unpublished 1966 talk by Henri Nouwen to a Unitarian congregation near Notre Dame University, titled “Confession and Forgiveness.” Nouwen ponders the limitations of self-understanding: “If you are afraid to cross the road and someone helps you to understand that this is caused by a traumatic experience in your early childhood, the only result is that now you cannot cross the road, while knowing why you cannot. The problem remains that you still cannot cross the road.” Nouwen frames the challenge as forgiveness, which for him is a form of giving that is the opposite of taking. Forgiveness, Nouwen insists, creates new possibilities: “Forgiveness is more than understanding; it is mobilizing; and it creates a new life and does not stop by understanding the old one.”

For Vanier, the motivation to cross the road must come from somewhere deeper than words or ideas: “Spirituality is like a breath of inspiration that strengthens our motivation.” Especially when speaking with younger people, he urged people to develop and trust their conscience. Quoting Gaudium et Spes, Vanier says:

Conscience is something that echoes deep inside of us and helps us live in harmony and grow to greater love, truth, and inner freedom. It calls us to grow to a plenitude of our humanity; it calls us to grow to God. The first chapter of Gaudium et Spes (which means Joy and Hope), a text resulting from the Second Vatican Council, describes the dignity of the human person. “Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a human being. There one is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in one's depths. In a wonderful manner, conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbor.”

Vanier defined ethics as helping to “clarify what is a truly human act, what justice is, and what the best activities are.” I assume crossing the road would be among his Aristotelian “best activities.”

In Life’s Great Questions, Vanier elaborates on the meaning of his experience of the road in Chile, presenting the road as an ethical challenge to face the reality of divisions between people:

So often the division between rich and poor is reinforced with barriers that keep us comfortably ignorant of one another. … This question of what is reality is essential. We must be careful not to be enclosed within a narrow perception of the world. We must not be led to believe that reality is what is on my side of the road.”

The road can represent limiting narratives: “Healing our reality means breaking out of the narratives that pro-

tect and limit us.” He offers the example of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, which was undertaken as a part of a response to injustices and harms of Indian residential schools. Vanier explains:

The TRC is about exposing the incredible injustice that lies behind what was and still is perceived as normal. Today there are no more residential schools. But the narrative of inferiority and the consequent segregation persists. We cannot live in reality until we are free of embedded judgments and racism so that we can accept our neighbors as they are, not seeking to change them or to become the same, but celebrating together our differences and our humanity.

After recounting his story of the road in Chile to his Pacem in Terris audience, Vanier continued, “To cross the road to meet people who are different and belong to another culture, and to become their friend is to take a risk, it is the risk of peace. I took this risk to leave a normal and conventional road when I began L’Arche.”

The motivation to take such a risk, we might intuit from Vanier’s other writing, comes from conscience, and is fulfilled by taking action to love God and neighbour. He cheerfully admits, “I had no plan; my idea was just to live together, eat together, work together, have fun together and pray together.”

He continues his Pacem in Terris acceptance by describing the life of L’Arche:

Bishop Amos, many of those to whom you awarded this prize before me were heroes for peace. Some were imprisoned for their courage and determination for peace; some were assassinated. How is it you turned to us? We are a strange and crazy bunch in L’Arche. The road of peace which we have learnt in L’Arche is a very simple one. You see, we are not very austere or stressed, struggling to be heroes. We eat wonderfully, we drink merrily, of course Coca-Cola, orange juice and now again wine and beer, moderately, we sing loudly and frequently out of tune, and we dance wildly and we play as much as possible. Feast days, birthdays are all occasions for parties and for fun, we pray with all our heart but not long hours. We do put our trust in God who is watching over us.

For Vanier, understanding our fears, then making choices to cross a road of difference to make friends is not just an ethical imperative or a worthy response to the proddings of conscience: it is fun. In conversation with Hauerwas, Vanier identifies “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 celebrat-
ing together. By celebrating, I mean to laugh, to fool around, to have fun, to give thanks together for life.”

I have often used Vanier in my religious studies courses at St. Jerome’s University; students find him accessible, engaging, and inspiring, in large part because he insists on the pleasure of building communities that are founded in all kinds of difference. In an exchange of letters with the renowned feminist philosopher Julia Kristeva in 2009, Vanier announced, “What is the secret that allows L’Arche to exist still? I’ll tell you: pleasure!” Kristeva agrees, writing in 2013:

In this central role of empathy and of this love, that is continuously clarified and questioned ... the exceptional experience of Jean Vanier is pioneering. We have recently seen a secular version ... in the film Untouchables (produced with the support of the association Simon of Cyrene). The love, with the humour and gaiety that result from it, this roar of laughter, which breaks through pain, this joyful alchemy, all this embodies marvellously the philosophy of sharing in the singular ... This secular and stimulating corpus mysticum, which I am now talking about, which Jean Vanier practices in his way, which the film Untouchables brings to the general public, is a horizon and a hope for all, parents and professionals alike. Kristeva highlights what she calls a “joyful alchemy,” suggesting that the joy of unexpected mutual relationships can turn base metals to gold.

Conclusion

It bears repeating: Vanier’s legacy is a communal discovery, not the individual work of one person. He shared what he learned each time he crossed a road, which was not about himself, but rather what his friends taught him. The pleasure as well as the suffering and struggles in the life that they mutually discovered became for them a road of peacemaking. Crossing the road is something we can all choose over and over in small and large ways throughout our lives. “Perhaps today, I would say that it is not only people with disabilities but all those who have been humiliated and put aside who transform us if we enter into relationship with them.” Vanier mused in a public letter in October 2018. It can be too easy to latch onto Vanier’s ideas while remaining firmly on one’s own side of the road, still overlooking people with disabilities or people who are pushed aside or rejected. Vanier insists that while the challenge of crossing the road is not easy, it is significant and can even be fun: “maybe we will change the world if we are happy. Maybe what we need most is to rejoice and to celebrate with the weak and the vulnerable. Maybe the most important thing is to learn how to build communities of celebration. Maybe the world will be transformed when we learn to have fun together.”


7 Ibid., 11, 14.

8 Ibid., 14.


10 Ibid., 14.

11 October 2019 marks 50 years since L’Arche crossed the Atlantic – L’Arche Daybreak was founded in Canada by Anglicans Steve and Ann Newroth, with Bill Van Buren and Peter Rotterman – thus also marking 50 years since L’Arche became ecumenical. See Carolyn Whitney-Brown, Sharing Life: Stories of L’Arche Founders (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2019).


14 Hauerwas and Vanier, Living Gently in a Violent World, 75.