

and theological heft. This is no “how-to” manual, with practical suggestions for putting theory into praxis. It is however, I would suggest, a valuable resource for all who teach and study in fields of theology and ethics.

— Ron McConnell

**OUR LIFE TOGETHER:  
A Memoir in Letters**  
by **Jean Vanier** ■■■ **Toronto,**  
**ON: HarperCollins, 2007,**  
**565** ■ **pages.**

Many of us know adults with intellectual disabilities who are active participants in work, social interaction, spiritual and community life. It was a different reality in 1964, when Jean Vanier, son of a Governor-General, formerly in the navy, now teaching ethics at the University of Toronto, visited his friend Père Thomas, chaplain of a small institution for intellectually challenged adults in Trosly, France. These residents had been previously “locked up in psychiatric hospitals or hidden by their families” (p. 5). Soon Vanier identified his true vocation. He left his university post, bought a modest house in Trosly, which he named L’Arche, and received into it two men with intellectual disabilities. This was the small beginning of what is now a

worldwide network of over 130 such houses, in which assistants live with the residents, tending to their needs and building relationships of mutual caring and respect with them, together creating a sense of home and family. All this began with Vanier’s own intuitive sense of what was needed, as did the Faith and Light groups for families of the intellectually challenged.

To learn more about Vanier’s experience with the L’Arche movement, you can now read this book, which contains selected letters dating from 1964 to 2006, the first written for about 40 friends, the later ones for a wider audience. They are not intended as history but, as the subtitle indicates, memoir. Vanier includes introductions to each section, and an introduction and conclusion to the whole book, so that he can highlight the main themes and offer a retrospective view.

For sustained and stimulating philosophical and theological reflection, one must look elsewhere in Vanier’s writings. These are, simply, letters, and, like most letters, contain some details more interesting to their original recipients than to you and me. As in any social justice and advocacy organization working with marginalized people, this letter writing has the purpose of informing supporters, encouraging their

continued support, engaging others in the cause, and repeatedly communicating the vision behind the organization. If it is hard work to read 42 year's worth of such correspondence, even selected, this reflects the hard work of supporting care and empowerment of vulnerable and marginalized people.

The letters are, of course, a resource for support and advocacy of special-needs adults. More broadly, anyone involved in social action and community-building can find inspiration in the amazing growth and persistence of this movement from modest beginnings and against all the odds. Those of us who do theology from the "underside" in light of the preferential option for the poor and marginalized can benefit from Vanier's practical way of applying this theology in his choice to live with, and learn from, the most vulnerable of people. L'Arche is, as Vanier reiterates, profoundly "countercultural" and so is Vanier's own vision, as he speaks against our own culture's individualism, lack of community, global injustice and the fear-based responses to 9/11. He has a growing awareness of global concerns based on 40-plus years of travel to Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America. Raised as a traditional Catholic, he develops more and more openness to other

faith traditions, and more and more, he honours the indigenous cultural and spiritual contexts of each L'Arche home. Like many activist Catholics, Vanier knows how to connect developing inner spiritual peace, making peace in one's own local community, and doing those small works of compassion that help free the world from divisions, barriers and violence.

I suspect that few young people will take up Vanier's repeated invitation to make the same lifelong commitment he has, especially if celibacy is also implied; my compassionate and community-minded Generation Y contacts are likely to practise their vocations in more mobile and eclectic ways. Thus, *Our Life Together* is probably more engaging for the not-so-young. It illuminates the midlife realism that informs both individuals and communities, the spiritual deepening that comes with accepting our own inner complexities, and the possibility of deepening our sense of God's patience, tenderness and vulnerability.

The patience it took for me to finish this book is nothing to the patience, simplicity and humility embraced by Vanier in his chosen life — qualities that could also ground our faith, our justice-seeking and our care for the vulnerable.

— Jane Doull