

Jean Vanier: PHILOSOPHER AND FRIEND

Editor's note:

Some kids have special needs. They may need extra help to speak, to read, or to walk. They may have trouble concentrating on a lesson. We didn't always know as much about the needs that kids have as we do now. We know a lot more about bodies and brains today.

My Aunt Lenore had special needs. She couldn't walk or hold her head up, so she sat propped with pillows in my grandma's big chair. She couldn't feed herself, so my grandma fed her. Her voice was loud and hard to understand, so my dad had to tell me what she said. She didn't go to school, but she was smart and funny.

Lenore lived on the family farm with her parents and her 13 brothers and sisters. They carried her, fed and dressed her, and put her to bed. But my aunts and uncles grew up, left home, and started families. It was too hard for my grandma to care for Lenore alone.

Lenore moved into a nursing home after my grandpa died. She received good care, but she didn't always like living there. Most of the people she lived with were old. Lenore loved holidays, when her brothers picked her up for the day so she could celebrate with her big family!

This week's *Venture* story is about Jean Vanier. He saw people with special needs who lived in hospitals their whole lives. Some of these hospitals were harsh places where people were not treated well. Jean has spent his whole life working to make sure that people with special needs live in communities where they are loved and respected.



Jean Vanier was born on September 10, 1928, in Geneva, Switzerland, where his father was working for the Canadian government as a diplomat. Jean's family lived in France and England during his childhood.

Jean served in the British and Canadian Royal Navies. He visited his family in Paris in 1945 at the end of World War II. Jean



volunteered his mother to help people who had survived the Nazi concentration camps. He never forgot how thin and full of fear they were.

Jean went back to school to study philosophy. He then decided that he wanted to do more spiritual or church work. Jean met a priest named Father Thomas Phillippe.



To find out more about L'Arche, visit larche.org. Watch one of the As I Am videos.



Father Thomas worked with people who had intellectual disabilities.

At that time, many children with special needs were sent by their families to live in institutions. An institution was more like a hospital than a home, and the people who lived there were called “patients.” Some of the people who lived in institutions were not treated with respect or love. They could be lonely places. Jean didn’t like what he saw. He has said, “We must do what we can to diminish walls, to meet each other. Why do we put people with disabilities behind walls?”

Jean got to know two people—Raphaël Simi and Philippe Seux—two young men who lived in institutions.

He invited them to live with him at a home in Trosly-Breuil (TROSS-lee BR-hull), France. This was the start of L’Arche International—a group of communities where people with intellectual and developmental disabilities live with people who support and care for them. Jean believes that people with disabilities can teach others, and that they

should not be thought of as burdens who should be kept separate from society. He also understands that every person wants to love and be loved.

L’Arche (pronounced larsh, like marsh) means “the ark” in French. It comes from the story of Noah’s Ark (Genesis 6–9) and means that everyone in the community is welcomed and safe together. Everyone who lives in a L’Arche community does chores, makes decisions, and participates in meetings, get-togethers, and celebrations. They participate as they are able and as they choose.

Today, people live together in more than 160 L’Arche communities in 37 countries on five continents. Jean still lives in the original L’Arche community in Trosly-Breuil. He also writes books and travels around the world to speak to people about valuing those who have intellectual disabilities.

L’Arche is now a successful, worldwide charity. But Jean does not like the word *charity*. For him, charity means an unequal relationship, where someone is better

and someone is less. Jean says, “Sometimes those of us who have more power, more money, more time, or more knowledge bend down to those have less power, less knowledge, or less wealth; there is a movement from the ‘superior’ to the ‘inferior.’”

Instead, Jean likes the word *solidarity*, which means that people watch out for each other, like friends do. He prefers community and equal relationships. Jean says, “The strong need the weak as much as the weak need the strong.”



- 1** When Jean Vanier says, “The strong need the weak as much as the weak need the strong,” what does he mean?
- 2** In what way could a disability be a blessing?
- 3** Think of a challenge you face. How can it be a positive thing?
- 4** How does the way you see someone change if they become a friend, not just a person who needs your help?