

[Opinion](#)
[Spirituality](#)
[Soul Seeing](#)



Jean Vanier, founder of the L'Arche communities, is pictured in a March 3, 2011, photo. Vanier died May 7 at age 90. (CNS/Courtesy of Jean Vanier Association)

by Dani Clark

[View Author Profile](#)

[**Join the Conversation**](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

May 28, 2019

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

Rest in peace Jean Vanier. You said, "Come and see," and I followed.

We met once. October 1997. You were leading a retreat for the L'Arche and Faith and Light communities in Bologna, Italy, speaking about Jesus' love for the weak, the tax collectors, the prostitutes in all of us.

I was a recent college graduate, starting a year as an assistant in the L'Arche community just outside of Rome, straining to understand your soft and gentle voice in French, interpreted into Italian. Yet on some level, I understood everything. Because you lived your words. I remember core member Maria, who had severe autism, sitting cross-legged at the foot of your stool, staring at her twirling fingers, muttering guttural sounds. You looked at her with love.

That year at L'Arche changed my life, and by that I mean my heart, because if there's one thing you taught us it's that a life should be lived there: in the love, in the light, and also, paradoxically, in our wounds. It's all the same place anyway, the place where we are smiling and blowing out candles at a birthday party, where we are dancing, where we are encountering each other in the suffering that each one of us holds, visible or invisible to others.

I'll never forget shaking your hand. Your grip was strong, it hurt for a second. You looked me right in the eyes and I had to look away. I couldn't believe how tall you were. Six-foot-five at least. Later, I bragged to anyone I met that I had met a saint. Later still, I learned everyone said that same thing about you. Those of us who knew or met you, liked to remark on that blue jacket you wore and never seemed to take off. Always like a pilgrim, never needing much.

How to put into words that year? I am but one of thousands of assistants and friends of L'Arche who know the most effective way: Show, don't tell. We ate pasta together at a long table each afternoon. We washed and dried dishes. We took long walks through back roads through Roman farmland, someone pushing a wheelchair, someone being pushed. Each night before bed, we lit a candle and sang the prayer you wrote:

Lord, give us hearts that are open,

hearts that are humble and gentle,

so that we may welcome those You send,

With tenderness and compassion.

It's a hymn I still want to sing my life to.

Not much happened that year, but maybe everything did, in the ways that matter. I read your book *Community and Growth* and understood why it was not easy living with others, but why we should try. I read your book *Becoming Human* and I understood that what it takes to become human has nothing to do with a college degree or a good job or anything on the outside really. I lived with the core members and finally, finally understood who Jesus was because the friends you invited to share your life with starting in 1964, the friends you kept inviting, the friends who could not walk or could not speak, they taught me to see beyond the surface, where Jesus dwells.

Advertisement

I remember one evening, a fellow assistant and I took core members Paolo and Giorgio to a local high school musical production.

The finale was the Gospel song "Oh Happy Day" with the young performers decked out in white robes, swaying to the music under spotlights. Hundreds watched in the packed gymnasium.

The music was too catchy. The lure of dancing too strong. Without warning Paolo, who lived with Down syndrome and loved to dance, bolted onto the stage with the performers, waving his hands and weaving in and out of their carefully choreographed formations. Giorgio followed him like a dart, straight into the action. A communal gasp rose from the audience. I sat frozen scared. They were ruining the show and there was no way I could stop it.

I turned to the other assistant in shock. We both knew there was nothing to do. And then, we burst into laughter.

The dancers and singers didn't seem to mind the two new performers on stage. Paolo and Giorgio were having the time of their lives. And I was watching, my heart so full. I was learning what it means to let go. Learning what it means live in the light

and the joy. O happy day! Thank you, Jean Vanier. May your light always shine.

[Dani Clark, a regular contributor to Soul Seeing, is a member of the Community of Sant'Egidio and works in communications at an international development organization. She lives in Washington, D.C., with her husband and young son.]

Editor's note: *You can sign up to receive regular Soul Seeing emails [here](#).*

A version of this story appeared in the **May 31-June 13, 2019** print issue under the headline: Thank you, Jean Vanier, for teaching me to see.