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Real growth begins when we accept our weaknesses

Jean Vanier

Jean Vanier is a Canadian philosopher, theologian and religious leader, and he is the founder of the L'Arche communities. These are communities which provide a home, care and love, for people with disabilities. Having become aware of the plight of so many people with developmental disabilities who were institutionalized, in 1964 he invited two men, Raphael Simi and Philippe Seux to leave the institutions they were living in and live with him in Trosly-Breuil in France. This was the beginning of the first L'Arche community and since that time he has helped develop such communities in other parts of the world. Vanier has written and spoken much about what he has learned living with people with disabilities. They have taught him how to live in community, how to be truly present to one another and how to love. I had the privilege of attending one of his talks many years ago when he visited Sydney, and just sitting in the audience, listening to him speak, I was aware of being in the presence of a truly holy man, a man whose inner being and life have taken a holy shape. But Vanier's life and his message are counter-cultural in many ways. In his book, *The Broken Body*, he speaks of going *down* the ladder of success. Weakness and brokenness, he points out, are not to be feared or shunned. Rather we need to embrace them and welcome them, for recognizing our own weaknesses, our own imperfections and limitations will bring us into community with others. Embracing our weaknesses will also become a channel of grace.

"The vision that each person is precious is at the origin of L'Arche", he writes. "And yet, in this era, one can forget why each person is precious: not on account of their personal success but by reason of their relationships of communion with others; we need other people in order to be truly human. In order for each person to become responsible and to open themselves up to others in a friendly relationship, they need to know how to live with others, in a family or in a community. A community is not a group of people shut in on themselves, in the belief that they are the best. It is a group of men and women who want to learn to love and to open their hearts to others". If, as Vanier says, we are to open our hearts to others, we need to do that with some honesty. That means a communion of our whole self, 'warts and all'. The tone of our world certainly does not lend itself to admissions of weakness. It's a very competitive world, our world of selfies and ceaseless communication where we are constantly 'showing off', parading our successes, our 'perfect lives'. In such a space weakness is not welcome. But while we may not show the less glossy side of ourselves and our lives to others, the fact is, it is there. "We are born in extreme fragility, and we die in extreme fragility," he says. "Throughout our lives we remain vulnerable and at risk of being wounded". Yet this very human characteristic is something we are afraid of. We are afraid of being wounded and so we hide our vulnerability. We may hide it from others, and we may hide it from ourselves, for a while anyway, but we cannot escape it. We begin to live a lie and this impacts on our ability to relate with others. Through his experience in the L'Arche communities, living in

communion with those who do not hide their weakness and vulnerability, Vanier has written much about the blunt and beautiful honesty of these people who have taught him so much. It's a disarmingly simple truth that they speak. There is no pretense or place to hide. The honesty of these people taught Vanier to love.

What might it be about acknowledging and accepting our weaknesses that can lead to growth? There is much reference in Scripture to what is referred to as a humble heart, or a humble spirit. And similarly there is much reference to the dangers of a proud spirit. The words arrogant, proud and haughty are mentioned numerous times. A proud spirit in this sense is self-sufficient, turns away from community, acknowledges no need, and certainly does not acknowledge weakness. And the resounding affirmation throughout Scripture is, as we find for example in the Book of Proverbs, that "All those who are arrogant are an abomination to the Lord". There are two Greek forms of the word arrogance which are used in the New Testament: one is *hyperogkos* which means 'swelling' or 'extravagance', as in using arrogant words; the other is *phusiosis* meaning 'puffing up of the soul'. This expression reminds me of those wonderful Irish nuns who taught me at school in South Africa with their to-the-point turn of phrase, admonishing us to 'not get above ourselves'! And while we did like to have a bit of a laugh at the quaintness of their words there is something of a wonderfully down to earth and very biblical spirituality in them.

What is at play here is that such an attitude, 'puffing up of the soul', takes us further and further away from ourselves, from our deepest longings, from the Spirit poured into our hearts. Such an attitude is ultimately life-denying, although it may not appear so at first glance. This is an ego-driven life, with its focus on status and affirmation, being the best, perhaps one-upmanship. And it feeds itself. Calvin Miller, in *A Hunger for the Holy*, points to this danger: "To linger when we are complimented, to make too much of personal affirmations, to study our own cleverness - all of these can addict us to human praise, and steal from us our desire to have more of Christ". In contrast, Mary, in her prayer of praise known as the *Magnificat*, an ancient biblical form of prayer which Luke places on her lips in his story of the annunciation, says that God will scatter the proud of heart and that God will bring down the mighty from their thrones. And she herself declares, "Let what you have said be done to me"! Hers was a humble heart. Jesus too taught about the need for a humble spirit: "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of God". It is a pre-requisite if we are to walk God's way. A humble spirit will acknowledge weakness and not be ashamed of it. A humble spirit will offer itself in a beautiful surrender. As the prophet Jeremiah counselled, be like the clay in the potter's hand.

St Paul, that great traveller and missionary, was a man of passion. He had experienced very powerfully the life-changing presence of Christ as he went about his way, secure in his knowing, secure in his strength and power. And he set out to tell the world about it. But Paul too, even in his missionary fervor, was brought to his knees: "To stop me from getting proud I was given a thorn in the flesh", he tells the people of Corinth (2Corinthians 12: 7-10). "About this thing I have pleaded



with the Lord three times for it to leave me but he has said, ‘My grace is enough for you; my power is at its best in weakness’”. And Paul then continues, “So I shall be very happy to make my weaknesses my special boast so that the power of Christ may stay over me ... For when I am weak then I am strong”. Paul realized that this strength was the power of Christ within him, the Spirit poured into his heart and the gifts of that Spirit. And he realized that his weakness was not something to be afraid of but was in fact the opening needed to let the Spirit have its way with him. That is why he could write so passionately and so eloquently about this. He knew it first-hand. Paul had been a proud man, persecuting the early followers of Jesus, a man with power and clout! A man secure in his own self-righteousness. I am sure he must have smiled to himself from time to time as this once powerful man boasted of his weaknesses! His power thereafter was a different kind of power. We are not sure what his thorn in the flesh was – it may have been a physical affliction or it may have been something troubling him, an emotional issue. We just don’t know, but what we do know is that just as it was for Paul, a thorn in our side keeps us humble. It reminds us that we are not a cut above others. A thorn in the side, a weakness, can also embarrass or shame us. In some cultures weakness is indeed seen as shameful. In our world where ‘having it all together’ is flaunted and admired and envied, weakness is not something to be welcomed. As a result the weaknesses we all have can all too easily get pushed down into that place where they fester and hurt us. And hand in hand with our avoidance of weakness, we grow further and further apart, falling out of communion with each other. But into such a world, words of release are spoken: *My grace is enough for you.*

There is great release in being able to name our weaknesses and bring out of the darkness what is burdening us and causing shame. It is good to unburden to someone we trust who will gently hold our fears, will not judge us or find us wanting. This is why we are often moved to tears when we do that. It is the sheer relief and release of bringing into the light and into acceptance that which we can’t ultimately escape and which we have carried around for so long. As we befriend our weaknesses we make room for the inpouring of grace. And grace brings growth. “My soul makes its boast in the Lord: let the humble hear and be glad ... I sought the Lord and he answered me ... This poor soul cried and was heard by the Lord” (Psalm 34).

In a letter to friends of the L’Arche communities, Vanier writes: “With a new year, one always hopes for something new. It’s a deep hope, not only that things will get better in the world and in our societies, that we will have more support, more communities, better health, more and more ... etc. Above all, it is the hope that a new love will come into our hearts. Aren’t we waiting somehow to be set free? To be released from all that closes us up, our feelings of guilt, our negative emotions and our compulsion to win and be thought the best. In this yearning for liberation, there is the hope of rediscovering what is deepest within each of us: the child within. At this place, we are all children who need to be loved, to be a source of joy, to live relationships full of joy, through communion and mutual presence. Yes, we all thirst to be set free, to find a new source of life, our hearts at one with

the heart of God". Growth can only happen when we acknowledge that we do need to grow! We need to prepare the ground, till the soil, create the conditions for receptivity. We cannot expect seeds to sprout and grow in a hard, unyielding land. Growth requires preparation. In the same way, accepting our weaknesses will make us yielding, receptive to the Word who will enter our hearts and bear fruit there. There is some degree of dying involved in all growth and that is what makes it so hard: a seed dies to allow germination, old ideas must be allowed to die for new ones to excite and enliven us, old behaviours must be abandoned and give way to more healthy and life-giving ones. We need to close one door in order to open another. Our weaknesses and vulnerability allow us to do this for in acknowledging them we let go of our sometimes iron-clad grip on what we believe is the right and only way to be, and we begin to grow.

Whoever knows the febleness of human nature has acquired an experience of the strength of God

St Maximus

Ms Kerry McCullough

Dean of Mission

