



Letter of Jean Vanier

Trosly, September 2011

Dear Friends,

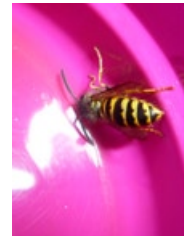
My peaceful rest-break at the monastery of Orval began with a bump!



Young people on retreat in Orval
© Dieter van Belle

I had been asked to give a talk to some young people on retreat at the abbey. The talk got off to a good start, but then crash! The chair collapses beneath me, and I find myself on the floor on my back, all at sea. Several of those listening spring forward to help me back onto my feet behind the table. I reinstalled myself on a more solid chair, in front of the table, so that I could carry on speaking about how Jesus washed the feet of the disciples, while kneeling on the ground! Nothing more serious than a bruised rib, which gave me some slight discomfort during the night. The doctor informed me: *“There is nothing you can do; just wait a while and you will be right as rain – but avoid carrying heavy weights.”* Yes, to wait, is to hope.

Two days later, at a little outdoor picnic with the monks, a wasp slips unseen into my glass of apple juice. Unaware of his presence, I drink the juice and naturally swallow the little fellow. Fortunately, alerted by one of the young people who had spotted the wasp vanish into my mouth, I manage to spit it out.



Obviously, it isn't too thrilled to have found itself locked into the prison of my mouth and expresses its displeasure by stinging me on the palate. The poor thing then drowns in the apple juice. The doctor – having already witnessed my earlier misfortune, offers her professional advice: *“put ice-cubes in your mouth to reduce the swelling, and that's about it, I'm afraid.”* Within a few hours, it was all over, and the pain of the sting was a thing of the past.

I am not looking for any symbolism in these two events. I am learning to accept that, even with these minor “inconveniences,” my body is at prayer, and my mouth still called to speak about what is essential.

It is during such a beautiful time of blessed tranquillity with the peaceful, prayerful monks of Orval, that I am discovering the Gospel of John more and more: he is called the beloved disciple – not to indicate that he was the most loved of all the disciples, but that his deepest identity, - like the identity of each of us - is to be loved and called by Jesus, by God. I say “discover” for it is true that discoveries open up one's heart and spirit. Perhaps, we have too often wanted to “teach about” Jesus, to form people's minds, to transmit clear ideas, instead of also helping them discover God one step at a time, as heart speaks to heart through words, daily life experiences, and moments of prayer and meetings of one sort or another. The discovery comes as a surprise, as the revelation of an openness towards a new meeting with Jesus, bringing peace and joy. This

meeting is not something we can manufacture by ourselves: it comes as a gift, a God-given moment of sheer joy and blessing. In truth, it is not I who makes a discovery, but rather God who lets himself be discovered.

The swallows which, when I first arrived, used to flit to and fro around the abbey bell-towers, must have sensed summer drawing to a close: they have all headed off for North Africa – a long haul for them. And now their nests are empty, which tinges my day with sorrow.

Right now, I am again reading a book by Fr. Joseph Wresinski, who died a few years ago. A good friend of L'Arche, he founded Work for All in Dignity, Fourth World or ATD Fourth World: a movement of support for the marginalised, the ones pushed down and out in humiliation. The primary purpose is not to offer them material support, but to help them discover themselves truly as human beings, and to take pride in themselves and get their confidence back. Fr. Joseph used to like to say *"the poor are the Church,"* (which is in fact the title of this book). Those whose misery is a cry of desperate pain are close to God and God is close to them. For Fr. Joseph, the very first thing to do was to meet them in all humility, to take time with them, and to listen to them with deep respect, seeing them as a gift offering a glimpse of God's presence. This book has brought back memories of when Fr. Joseph used to come and speak to us at L'Arche: about our need to be converted, so that we can be with the poor of the earth, recalling the words God gave to Isaiah (57.15)



Fr. Joseph Wresinski

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"I live in a high and holy place, and I also live with people who are humiliated and helpless." I deeply desire that, in my present situation, my life be a proclamation (by both word and deed) that God is close to the downcast, and that if we but stick close to them we will find a true inner joy.

How fortunate to have men like Fr. Joseph affirming our need to meet the people shut out, and to offer them a network of friendship like ATD. It is the Gospel path as well as the path of L'Arche.

Before long, I will be back in Trosly. The twinge of pain in my side is no more. I feel happy to come back to my foyer with Patrick, Dédé, Anisette, Stephanie and each one, to get back to this simple life around meal-times and washing up, happy to live once more our moments of celebration and of prayer together. My delight is to be part of a community where we carry the load together, one with another. I will continue to give retreats at La Ferme - a special joy for me! And I will give a talk in Paris sometime with Julia Kristeva, with whom I wrote the book, *"Leur regard perce nos ombres"* (only available in French). This book is an exchange of letters where each of us was able to express what we hold most dear.

At Trosly, there are changes afoot. As of September 2012, Christine McGrievy is set to become our director and shepherd following her 12 years as Vice-International Coordinator. She is following on from Karol Okecki, who has guided the community with such competence and dedication for 8 years. It is a real gift that Christine has been able to take on this responsibility. She will bring an International flavour to Trosly, and at the same time, she has been at Cuise for 30 years. She knows our community well.

Cariosa Kilcommons is due to leave us, to become community leader of the Sycomore in Chambéry, near the French Alps. She has been here in Trosly for the last 22 years, so she will be missed, but I am so happy for her and for the community of the Sycomore.



Renovation works at Rameau

© Jean de la Selle

For me, this year will also bring its passages. I am now 83 (I am having trouble believing that!) and the future will bring fresh weaknesses as well as new gifts. Of what kind? Jean-Christophe and Christine have insisted that I up sticks from my little home where I have been living for 36 years and move into a small house beside La Ferme. The Foundation of the Friends of L'Arche is in charge of the renovation works. That will help me to welcome the arrival of new infirmities more easily, when they visit me. There is even a lift! At the side of my new house will be accommodation for Odile Ceyrac, entrusted with the mission to keep an eye on my health and my ageing... I am touched by the attentiveness of Jean-Christophe and Christine

towards me, as well as that of Odile and the Board of the Foundation. The little house will also have a living-room, so I can offer tea and a bit of food when meeting small groups of people from the community – with whom I have been living for a long time, in some cases for 47 years!

Our type of community with people who have been pushed to the edge seems to inspire new forms of community. In France today, small communities are being created with people on the streets, with people with other kinds of disability or with psychiatric illness. Isolation is a contributing factor to anguish; being together, even allowing for all the built in relationship pitfalls, is a source of joy and security. A man of the street once told me, *“Social services want to give me an apartment, but living on my own would be simply appalling.”* These new communities naturally need leaders who can encourage the shared life to hatch, someone able to animate the meals and celebrations, as well as the meetings called for when the inevitable conflicts crop up.

What is new in these different forms of community, is that they are a source of healing both for the marginalised people they welcome, and also for those who live with them. These are not just do-gooders, performing works of charity to others but helpers who are healed by a life of relationships that are simple and loving. In the gentle business of loving and of working for justice and peace, they find their place of growth.

The prophet Isaiah had already announced, (58.7-8): *“if you share your bread with the hungry, give shelter to the homeless, if you see a naked man and cloth him, while not neglecting your own kith and kin, then will your light shine out like the dawn, and your wound be quickly healed over, and your justice will go before you, and the Glory of God behind you.”*

The presence of those who feel bereft and on the margins cry out, and their cry for friendship transforms us. They awaken our love and our light. Of course, this life is demanding and can drive us up the wall!, but God knows it is worth it. Jesus is truly here, hidden in the poor, the vulnerable and the weak (Mt. 25), present even when unrecognised: whatever we are doing for the least of people, we are doing for Jesus. Community life then becomes a source of life and of unity between people who are truly different, and who live their human and spiritual pathways on very different levels.

Let's not pretend that community life is not demanding, reducing our time for prayer and for deepening our interior life. The times of relaxation and renewal that we need are hard to come by. Pretty soon, we can be more taken up by what appears to be “work” than by “brotherly fellowship.” Ety Hillesum, of whom I have often spoken in my letters, sought to bring into harmony the union with God and love and compassion for others, above all in Westerbork camp where she endeavoured to be a light and a support for the thousands of Jews crammed inside a world of suffering. She writes: *“There is a very deep well in me. And in this well, there*

is God. Every now and then, I manage to reach him. But more often than not, God is buried under the stones and rubble that block the well. So we are obliged to seek him in our very depths, behind all the blockages. She speaks of being in the arms of God and of listening to “the small inner voice,” which calls her to stop and wait in God’s presence. Isn’t this the same little voice as the one proclaimed in the book of Revelation, where God says, “Behold, I am standing at the door and knocking; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to his house and eat with him, side by side” (Rev. 3.20)? To share a meal with the Lord is to become his friend, to become good and compassionate like him.

To find the harmony between this interior life, this communion with God and this fellowship with people who are weak: to let ourselves be formed by these people, not to be swallowed up too fast in activities, that is a challenge – our challenge. To discover that there is only one love. Isn’t this what the beloved disciple, John, said in his letter, “a person who does not love the brother before his very eyes, will not know how to love the God whom he doesn’t see.” Yes, this is the commandment that we have received from him: let the person who loves God, love his brother as well (1 John 4.20).

My last letter was mentioning the future publication of the History of Faith and Light, (in October, in French) written by Marie-Hélène Mathieu: I encourage you to read it. This history is exciting. It was during the Faith and Light pilgrimage of 1971 that we made the discovery that the relationship with the weak person is a source of life. This weak person is part and parcel of the body of humanity, and of the body that is the Church. They have something vital to offer to this body. They are like a vivid reminder to commit oneself on the path of love and to welcome the person who is different.

I am closing this letter by saying how much I am thinking of each person in L’Arche and Faith and Light and of so many friends right across the world. Many thanks for your letters, and for this communion which knits us together. This communion is like a vast network of prayer. So many people in our world are suffering: these bitter, tragic conflicts in the Middle East, others desperately hungry enduring famine in the heart of Africa and elsewhere.

I am happy to be alive, and I give thanks to God for the years of my life, and at the same time I want to remain deeply united with all those who are suffering. As Etty Hillesum says at the close of one of her letters, “*if only we could be poured out like a balm on so many wounds...*”

Holding you warmly in my heart,
Jean