

Jean Vanier: The Wisdom of Tenderness by Unknown Yet

The following is the audio and transcript of an onbeing.org interview between Krista Tippett and Jean Vanier.

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KRISTA TIPPETT, HOST: It took me a while to put a name to the rare quality that is palpable in Jean Vanier's life and presence. It's a wisdom of tenderness. He's a philosopher and a Catholic social innovator and simply one of the great elders in our world today. The L'Arche movement, which he founded, centered around people with mental disabilities, is celebrating its fiftieth anniversary this month. And, Jean Vanier has just won the Templeton Prize. He has devoted his life to the practical application of Christianity's most paradoxical teachings; that there's power in humility, strength in weakness, and light in the darkness of human existence. The 147 L'Arche communities in 35 countries have become places of pilgrimage, transformative for those involved and for the world around them.

[music: "Seven League Boots" by Zoe Keating]

JEAN VANIER: It's the realization of how to create a culture which is no longer a culture just of competition, but a culture of welcoming, where tenderness, where touch is important, and it's not — neither sexualized nor aggressive. It has become human. And I think that this is what people with disabilities are teaching us. It's, it's something about what it means to be human and to relate and to celebrate life together.

MS. TIPPETT: I'm Krista Tippett and this is On Being.

[music: "Seven League Boots" by Zoe Keating]

MS. TIPPETT: Jean Vanier grew up during World War II, the son of a prominent French Canadian statesman. He still lives in the original L'Arche community in Trosly-Breuil, France. I sat with him in Maryland in 2007, while he was leading a retreat for college students.

The story of L'Arche, which is French for "the ark," began in 1964. Jean Vanier was a professor of philosophy at St. Michael's College in Toronto. He had done his doctoral work on happiness in the ethics of Aristotle. At Christmas time that year, he went to visit a friend in France who was working as a chaplain for men with mental handicaps. He was especially moved by a vast asylum south of Paris in which all day, 80 adult men did

nothing but walk around in circles and take a two-hour compulsory nap. He bought a small house nearby and invited two men from that asylum to share life with him. This was not a linear career move. Jean Vanier had entered the British Royal Naval College as a teenager and commanded an aircraft carrier in his 20s. When he left the military, before he studied philosophy, he spent a year in a contemplative community in a poor area near Paris. L'Eau Vive, as it was called, "water of life," was dedicated to serving the poor, praying, and studying metaphysics.

MR. VANIER: That community near Paris had been founded by a French Dominican priest, and he was very, very deeply a man of God. I think I had a very open intelligence, you know? Since the age of 13, I had been in the world of the navy, I hadn't done philosophy, I hadn't done any particular reading. I mean, I was geared for the military. But here was somebody who opened up new visions, new vistas. I remember once following his courses — and he was so up in it — and he was saying, he was talking about something [unintelligible]. And he said, "You know, take a very concrete example, the angels, for example."

And everybody laughed and he couldn't understand, you know, why people are laughing, because it was, to him, a very concrete example. So he was a metaphysician. He was a thinker. He was really a man of God. And he was the one who encouraged me to do studies and encouraged me particularly to work on Aristotle. And the big thing with Aristotle is the primacy of experience over idea. A lot of people don't know that. The worst thing that can happen is for Aristotelians to become Aristotelians, because then they start reading Aristotle, but they're no longer in linked with reality — to touch reality, to listen to people, to see the world evolving and so on.

MS. TIPPETT: Right. I thought it's so interesting you said that Aristotle talked about an ethics of desire that is resonant with who we are today because people want to have meaning in their lives, which Aristotle identified, and they want to be thrilled by it. And you said, "An ethics of desire is good news for us at a time when we have become allergic to an ethics of law."

MR. VANIER: Yeah. Yes, you see, the heart of everything with Aristotle, desire and pleasure. And for Aristotle, pleasure is not, you know, something which is just sort of fooling around. Pleasure is when you have an activity, which you have performed well, be it philosophizing or struggling for justice. Whatever you do and you do well, it's filled with pleasure. It's joyful, the fulfillment of a desire in an activity you're doing well.

MS. TIPPETT: And what I think is so edifying about talking about that is, I think, often people might say, look at the life you've led and the work that you do and contrast that with what they might call our pleasure-seeking, entertainment-oriented society. But what I hear when you talk about Aristotle, is that you're not condemning that basic impulse that we have to seek pleasure, to, you know, you're just saying that we can take that to a much deeper and more profound level.

MR. VANIER: Yeah, it's just finding, where, what activity will give you the greatest, the deepest pleasure. I mean, for some people it might be drinking whiskey, rock, and so on. But for me it was to find a meaning through philosophy, through my relationship with Jesus, through justice, through, through a struggle. And it's true that I sense deeply that I've always been really a happy person. That doesn't mean to say I haven't had difficulties, that doesn't mean to say I didn't go through difficult conflicts or stuff like that, but fundamentally, I've had a pleasurable life, a joyful life.

MS. TIPPETT: Talk to me, though, about, you know, how you connect a word like pleasure and this longing with the place where I really sense you found your calling, you understood what was meaningful for you, when you went back to France and you encountered men in an asylum. And somehow, you were seized by that and that has kind of mapped out the direction of your life.

MR. VANIER: Yes, I come back to the reality of pleasure and to the reality of what is my deepest desire and what is your deepest desire? And what — and somewhere, the deepest desire for us all is to be appreciated, to be loved, to be seen as somebody of value. But not just seen — and Aristotle makes a difference between being admired and being loved. When you admire people, you put them on pedestals. When you love people, you want to be together. So really, the first meeting I had with people with disabilities, what touched me was their cry for relationship. Some of them had been in a psychiatric hospital. Others — all of them had lived pain and the pain of rejection. One of the words of Jesus to the, to Peter —and you find this at the end of the gospel of Saint John — "Do you love me?"

MS. TIPPETT: "Do you love me?"

MR. VANIER: So, thus, the cry of God saying, "Do you love me?" and the cry of people who have been wounded, put aside, who have lost trust in themselves, they've been considered as mad and all the rest. And their cry is, "Do you love me?" And it's these two cries that come together.

MS. TIPPETT: Not just in the context of disabilities, you know, you've posed this question, you know, the whole — you've said the whole question is, how do we stand before pain?

MR. VANIER: Yeah.

MS. TIPPETT: All kinds of pain and weakness are difficult for us as human beings. Why is that so excruciating? Why do we such a bad job with it?

MR. VANIER: I think there are so many elements. First of all, we don't know what to do with our own pain, so what to do with the pain of others? We don't know what to do with our own weakness except hide it or pretend it doesn't exist. So how can we welcome fully the weakness of another if we haven't welcomed our own weakness? There are very strong words of Martin Luther King. His question was always, how is it that one group — the white group — can despise another group, which is the black group? And will it always be like this? Will we always be having an elite condemning or pushing down others that they consider not worthy? And he says something, which is quite, what I find extremely beautiful and strong, is that we will continue to despise people until we have recognized, loved, and accepted what is despicable in ourselves. So that, then we go down, what is it that is despicable in ourselves? And there are some elements despicable in ourselves, which we don't want to look at, but which are part of our natures, that we are mortal.

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

MR. VANIER: We are very fragile in front of the future. Accidents and sicknesses is the reality. We are born in extreme weakness and our life will end in extreme weakness. So this, people don't want to hold on to that. They want to prove something. They want

security. They want to have big bank accounts and all that sort of stuff. But then also, hold lots of fears within us.

MS. TIPPETT: Yes.

MR. VANIER: We are a frightened people. And, of course, the big question is, why are we so frightened of people with disabilities? Like a woman who said to me just recently, asked me where I — what I was doing. And I said that I had the privilege of living with people with disabilities. And she said, "Oh, but I could never work with people." And I said, "Why not?" And she said, "Well, I am frightened of them." It touches very — and I believe we're in front of a mystery of the human reality and people who are very deeply disfigured in their face, in their body. And so — and it's the fault of nobody. It's a reality that is there. And maybe we can work things out and discover what gene it is and so on. But the history of humanity is a history of people being born extremely fragile because sickness and death is part of our — of our reality.

MS. TIPPETT: And as you've also pointed out many times, we all have, what did you say — you called them our weaknesses, our limitations, our disfigurements. Um, they don't all show on our bodily surface, right? But somehow that, we recoil when it shows.

MR. VANIER: You see, there's such a need to be appreciated, such a need to be loved. With that sense somewhere that if they see what is broken in me, they'll no longer love me. So somewhere there has to be a complete change. That we love people not because they're beautiful or clever, because they're a person.

MS. TIPPETT: You told a story, when I heard you speak at St. John's University years ago, about very happy members of your community. Do you remember that story?

MR. VANIER: Oh, yes, yes. Yes, I was sitting and there was a man who was a bit glum like a lot of people, a bit glum. And but, and anyway, there was a knock on the door. And before I could say "Come in," Jean Claude walked in and Jean Claude technically would be Down syndrome. And Jean Claude shook my hand and laughed, and shook the hand of the other fellow and laughed, and went out laughing. And the man that had been in my office looked at me and said, "Isn't it sad, children like that?" And I mean, he, what was sad was that he was totally blind. He didn't see that Jean Claude was happy.

[music: "Alec Wilder: Music for Horn: Suite for Clarinet, Horn and Piano - Movement 4" by David Jolley]

MS. TIPPETT: I'm Krista Tippett, and this is On Being. Today, the "Wisdom of Tenderness" with Jean Vanier. He created L'Arche, a model of religious community centered around people with mental and intellectual disabilities.

[music: "Alec Wilder: Music for Horn: Suite for Clarinet, Horn and Piano - Movement 4" by David Jolley]

MS. TIPPETT: You know you've written that, from the point of view of faith, those who are marginalized and considered failures can restore balance to our world. Talk to me about that.

MR. VANIER: The balance of our world frequently is seen as a question of power. That if I have more power and more knowledge, more capacity, then I can do more. But does this

tension between the doing and the being — and when you have power, we can very quickly push people down. I'm the one that knows and you don't know, and I'm strong and I'm powerful, I have the knowledge. And this is the history of humanity.

MS. TIPPETT: Yes.

MR. VANIER: And that is all of what I'd call the whole educational system, is that we must educate people to become capable and to take their place in society. That has value, obviously. But it's not quite the same thing as to educate people to relate, to listen, to help people to become themselves. So the equilibrium that people with disabilities could bring is precisely this equilibrium of the heart. Children. You see, maybe a father is a very strong man and businessman, and when he comes home, if he gets down on his hands and knees and plays with the children, it's the child that is teaching the father something about tenderness, about love, about the father looking at the needs of the child, the face of the child, the hands of the child, relating to the child. And the children, the incredible thing about children is they're unified in their body and in — whereas we, we can be very disunified. We can say one thing and feel another.

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

MR. VANIER: And so as a child can teach us about unity and about fidelity and about love, so it is people with disabilities. It's the same sort of beauty and purity in some of these people — it is extraordinary — and say, "Our world is not just a world of competition, the weakest and the strongest. Everybody have their place."

MS. TIPPETT: That's — seems that you have developed quite an important theology of the body through your work with L'Arche. I mean, I think maybe you're just, you're edging towards it there, but it's bigger than that also.

MR. VANIER: Yes, I, you see, L'Arche is not based first on the word. You'll find a lot of communities which are based on the word, thus to say we speak of an ideal together and we are committed to an ideal or to a vision and so on. But L'Arche is based on body and on suffering bodies. And so they are seen as useless, and so we welcome those who apparently are useless. And it's a suffering body which brings us together. And it's attention to the body. You see, when somebody comes to our community and is quite severely handicapped, what is important is to see that the body is well. Bathing, helping people dress, to eat. It's to communicate to them through the body. And then, as the body can become comfortable, then the spirit can rise up. There's a recognition. There's a contact. There's a relationship.

We see this with some of our people, like Françoise. Françoise came to our community in 1978, very severely handicap. She couldn't speak, she could walk a bit, she couldn't dress herself, she was incontinent, and she couldn't eat by herself. And today, she is nearly 30 years older. She has become blind and a beautiful person.

There was somebody who came to our community not too long ago who was, saw Françoise and the reaction was, "Oh, what is the point of keeping Françoise alive?" And the leader of the little house said, "But madam, I love her." I mean, it's as if you come in to a home and grandma is in the home and she has Alzheimer's and you say, "What is — but she's my grandmother." I mean, so it's based on the body, and then from the body, relationship grows.

MS. TIPPETT: You know that when I went to spend a few days in a L'Arche community a few years ago, I've never been hugged so much in my life. It was very physical, joyfully physical and without, you know, some of the inhibitions, you know? On the one hand, yes, our culture says bodies have to be beautiful and faces have to be beautiful, but we also sexualize everything.

MR. VANIER: Yeah, yeah.

MS. TIPPETT: So that touch becomes complicated and, and touch was so uncomplicated and it was also so appropriate.

MR. VANIER: And that has been something very important for me, because in the navy and then the time after the navy, I think I was a little bit frightened of relationships, particularly with women. I was a man who knew how to be efficient and quick. And I knew how to teach. I knew how to give commands in the navy. And so — and then starting to live in L'Arche with Raphael and Philippe, it was precisely the realization that what they were crying out for was touch, but also, maybe that's what I was crying out for and what we would, what I would call safe touch. That's to say a touch which gives security and reveals. The way one can put one's arm around the shoulder of some. It's not to possess them. It's not to hold on to them. It's to reveal. And I say this now, you know, it's super getting older because now I'm 79. And very quickly, you know, I was responsible for one of the homes after I left the directorship. And now, these people who are still in the home, they'll be saying to me, "You're looking tired." And now, after 70, they said, "You don't have to do the washing up anymore."

So, so the very fact that I'm getting older and weaker have brought them closer to me and come up to me and hug me like somebody like Janine who was a very violent woman who had hemiplegia and epileptic concerns. And gradually, she became very peaceful. But sometimes, I'd go and sit down beside her and she would put her hand on my head and she'd say, "Poor old man."

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

MR. VANIER: There was a sort of tenderness. And so, it's the realization of how to create a culture which is no longer a culture just of competition, but a culture of welcoming, where tenderness, where touch is important, and it's not — neither sexualized nor aggressive. It has become human. And I think that this is what people with disabilities are teaching us. It's, it's something about what it means to be human and to relate and to celebrate life together.

[music: "Helium" by Tin Hat Trio]

MS. TIPPETT: I interviewed Jean Vanier at a retreat center in rural Maryland. At onbeing.org, you can watch the video of our entire 90 minute conversation. And while you're there, download and subscribe to our podcast. All this and more at onbeing.org.

[music: "Helium" by Tin Hat Trio]

MS. TIPPETT: Coming up, how Jean Vanier's vision has expanded beyond Christianity. Also, his understanding of the anguish and commitment of someone to whom he's been compared, his late friend Mother Teresa.

I'm Krista Tippett. On Being continues in a moment.

[music: "Helium" by Tin Hat Trio]

MS. TIPPETT: I'm Krista Tippett and this is On Being. I'm speaking today with one of the wise voices in our world, the French Canadian philosopher and social innovator Jean Vanier. He founded the L'Arche movement which is celebrating its 50th year. This model of community began with one home in France and is now in 35 countries on five continents. Mentally disabled core members share daily life and spiritual community with non-disabled "assistants".

As described in the writings of Jean Vanier, Henri Nouwen, and others, this experience is transformative for all involved — and for the world around them. L'Arche communities today draw members and visitors or pilgrims from many traditions. Within Roman Catholicism, Jean Vanier is considered by some to be a living saint. I met him in 2007.

MS. TIPPETT: You know, this question that Jesus asks, who do you say that I am? I wonder how you answer that question or respond to that question here at 79?

MR. VANIER: My experience today is much more the discovery how vulnerable God is. You see, God is so respectful of our freedom. And if as the Epistle of John says that God is love, anyone who has loved in their life knows they've become vulnerable. Where are you and the other person and do you love me back? So if God is love, it means that God is terribly vulnerable. And God doesn't want to enter into a relationship where he's obliging or she is obliging us to do something. The beautiful text in the Apocalypse, the Book of Revelations: "I stand at the door and I knock. If somebody hears me and opens the door, then I will enter." What touches me there is God knocking at the door, not kicking the door down, but waiting. Do you, will you open? Do you hear me? Because we're in a world where there's so much going on in our heads and our hearts and anxiety and projects that we don't hear God knocking at the door of our hearts. So I'd say that what touches me the deepest, maybe because I'm becoming myself more vulnerable, is the discovery of the vulnerability of God, who doesn't oblige.

The other element, which is probably, again, linked to that, is that the only thing that's, what I see important for myself is just to become a friend of Jesus and nothing else. And the whole I think of the mystery of Christianity is just living with Jesus the way Jesus lived in Nazareth with his, with Mary, his mother, and with Joseph. A relationship. John the Baptist was strong, he was powerful.

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

MR. VANIER: He was prophetic. Jesus was quiet. And he ate with people who are caught up in prostitution, with tax collectors, with lepers and all that. I mean, there's something so simple about Jesus that he is disarming. We don't quite know what to do with it. Because frequently, we would want a powerful Jesus who will put everything straight, who will cure everybody, who will do everything that we tell him to do. And it's not like that.

MS. TIPPETT: And, of course, one implication of the vulnerable God, of honor in human freedom, is precisely this dark side that, you know, that we've been talking about, that human beings cause each other pain, dominate, and destroy. And so, you know, so

then I'm kind of coming back at you with the, that theodicy question, the, the question of still, if God is God, you know, is that enough to honor our freedom?

MR. VANIER: Yeah. That's a good question. I mean, there are so many things we don't know. And, I mean, I just have to honor what I don't know. And I can't — there's so many things I cannot explain, because explanation is something about headiness. You won't have it in the head. But the whole question is not to understand, but it's to be attracted to the place of pain in order to give support to those who are suffering. So if we spent, maybe I'm making something — but if we try to know too much, it might cut us away from being present. In the degree according to where I'm at and how I am, it is vital that I be present to situations. It's a very moving thing with St. Francis of Assisi. St. Francis said he couldn't stand lepers. And one can understand a disfigured leper with no nose or no ear or parts of gaping, you know? And in the Middle Ages or something like in Europe, 20,000 leprosariums, you know, filled with these people that, you know, smelt bad and he said, "I hated it. I couldn't stand it." And then he said that one day, the Lord brought me into the lepers. "And when I left, there was a new gentleness in my body and in my spirit." It was, what struck me when he said a new gentleness in my body and in my spirit. And it says, "From there, I really left to serve the Lord."

So Francis the conversion, when I say the conversion, I'm talking about a change of the attitude because conversion is a change of attitude. It's not just a quest of changing religion or that sort of stuff. It's an inner change. And from the sort of fear and despal of what appeared the most dirty, which in this period was the smell of the leper and the — he discovered there was a presence of God in the leper. So we can then begin to understand the whole mystery of rejection of God because we don't want a god who is hidden in the dirt or hidden in dirty people or in smelly people or disfigured people or in those 40 million people who are in the refugee camps throughout the world.

MS. TIPPETT: You are deeply Catholic, I believe. And you were raised in the Roman Catholic tradition, or steeped in Catholic theology. And the L'Arche communities are Christian at their core and based on this essence of your understanding of God and Jesus that you've been describing. And one interesting thing that's happened, I think, in the course of this great experiment of L'Arche is that, you know, the communities in India also have Hindu participants. And I was reading something you wrote recently that your community in France now has some Muslim members of the community. And I wonder if that surprises you or, you know, how you've experienced that to happen, and how that participation of people from other faiths adds to the knowledge to your sense of what this means or your theology or anthropology.

MR. VANIER: It's important. And I'm glad you began by saying Catholic. See, catholic means universal.

MS. TIPPETT: Yes. Right.

MR. VANIER: And ...

MS. TIPPETT: Catholic with a small c.

MR. VANIER: Yeah. It is - catholicism is an openness. You see the heart of God is open. But there was a tendency when I was younger — when I left the navy — of Catholicism where there was a sort of wall around it, of the right and the wrong and the better and the best and all that sort of stuff. And it's really very interesting the history of L'Arche.

History of L'Arche is the relationship between a vision or a principle and experience. What has experience taught us?

That for instance Nadia is a Muslim — Moroccan — lady in the community next door, and I see her quite regularly. And I love listening to her. And I love hearing what she's saying of how she's discovering the heart and relationship. How she's discovering the depth of the Qur'an. Rakhi is the head of our community in Calcutta, she's Hindu. I could sit at the feet of that woman and listen to her. She is amazing. Like the last time I saw her was about a year ago and she was telling me that in Calcutta, they were having difficulty, we're in a tough area of Calcutta. And she was saying that many of our people with disabilities were being laughed at and people were throwing stones at them. And she said something was going wrong. We were being rejected by the — so we decided, she said in the community, to do a play, a theater. And that we would take one of Tagore's stories. And the Tagore story was a story between somebody who was a very liberal on the religious and a very — another man who was very conservative and how they were in conflict and how gradual reconciliation came. She said, we did this and there were 300 people from a local area, and they've changed.

So it's — what I've discovered as I've listened to Rakhi or I've listened to Nadia, the relation between the principle and the experience has been a sort of movement in L'Arche over 40 years. And, you know, you could — I could have difficulty with some of the changes or difficulty with discovering that experience is important. Sometimes, you want to clutch on to principles and yet experience is saying go further, go further.

[music: "Middle of the Night [Instrumental]" by Wes Swing]

MS. TIPPETT: Another, you know, a piece of wisdom I think about L'Arche is, as you say, its presence, the physical presence. I — this is another conversation I have with people all the time in different context that the world's pain comes to people in Western cultures often through their television sets or through reading some horrific story in a newspaper or seeing an absolutely heartbreaking picture, you know, like a picture I saw of an Iraqi child crying at a funeral the other week that haunted me for days. And yet, there's nothing I can do for that Iraqi child, you know? He's thousands of miles away. I think I'm also aware that it's not only that I can't touch his pain or the sources of it directly. It's that I don't know his sources of solace. I don't know what's going to help him get up the next day and somehow start to heal. I'm just, I'm throwing that out ...

MR. VANIER: You're seeing this ...

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

MR. VANIER: It's — you see, we are in an incredible world of technology, the global world. And yet, with television and even with cell phones and Internet, we can cut away from relationship, you see? To get an email, you don't see the eyes of the person, you don't see the face, you don't see the smile, you don't see the hands, you don't see the tone of voice. And we have to come down to small is beautiful because small is where we really ...

MS. TIPPETT: Isn't it funny that global technology may bring us back to small is beautiful.

MR. VANIER: Possibly. Or take us away from it. As I had said, you see, I mean, as you look at that Iraqi child and you were wounded and wanted to do something, yet, you were confronted by your incapacity because the child was not in front of you. If that child was in front of you, you could have taken the child in your arms. So we're going into a world where the imagination, the virtual, the long distance, see things far away appear as close. But you can't touch them. They're close to the imagination, but they're not close to the body. So let's come back to the reality of the small. There, we can ...

MS. TIPPETT: Like the people who live down the street from us.

MR. VANIER: We can touch them, we can be with them. The difficulty with L'Arche, which is also a beauty — I say it's our difficulty, it's our beauty, is that it's small and it's just very little and it ...

MS. TIPPETT: And it's small, and yet the story of L'Arche is that from one community in France, you are now all over the world. You're in Africa. You're in Bangladesh. You've talked about Calcutta, some of the places you've mentioned.

MR. VANIER: Yes. L'Arche has grown. But the reality of every day is sometimes quite painful in the smallness in a world where people are being pushed to pretend that they're big.

MS. TIPPETT: I think it is, it's deeply countercultural that you say repeatedly, you don't want with L'Arche to change the world. That's not the goal.

MR. VANIER: What we can do is what Gandhi says, we can't change the world, but I can change. And if I change, and I seek to be more open to people and less frightened of relationship, if I begin to see what is beautiful within them, if I recognize also that there's brokenness because I'm also broken, and that's OK, then there's something that begins to happen.

But it's so counterculture but that doesn't matter. What has happened, what I sense for the future of our poor little world, with all its ecological difficulties and financial difficulties, that maybe the big thing that's going to happen is that little lights of love will spread over the country. Little places where people love each other, and welcome the poor and the broken. Where each other, we give to each other their gifts, and have these little, little places. And that the world is, you know, we'll never hit the headlines but we'll be creating these little lamps. And if there are sufficient number of little, little lamps in each village or each city and parts of the city, well then the glow will be a little bit greater.

MS. TIPPETT: What is it you've said that L'Arche is not meant to be a solution but a sign.

MR. VANIER: Yes, we can't. You see, once I was speaking to a man in a big city in the United States. He said, 'Give me the formula and I'll create 300 L'Arches in the next two years.' I said, 'It doesn't work like that. It's a transmission of a vision and it's counter culture. But that's OK. Who we are, who we are.'

[music: "Esperanto" by Tin Hat Trio]

MS. TIPPETT: I'm Krista Tippett with On Being. Today: exploring Jean Vanier's understanding of religious virtue, the pain of the world, and "The Wisdom of Tenderness."

[music: "Esperanto" by Tin Hat Trio]

MS. TIPPETT: I'm sitting with you outside Washington and you're meeting with — you've been spending the weekend leading a retreat with college students. And I wonder both what they teach you — I sense that you are a person who encounters other human beings as you talk often about standing with humility before humanity and learning. And so what do you learn from them? And I'm also curious about at this stage in your life, at 79. What insights are you through what's happening in your body, the aging of your body, the encounter with frailty that we all have it as the other end of life? How has that changing you? I have two questions.

MR. VANIER: Two questions.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

MR. VANIER: Two questions. Yeah, the beauty of young people is their openness, their yearning, their enthusiasm. On the other hand, a feeling of discouragement because the machine is too big, machine of the world.

MS. TIPPETT: Kind of what we've been talking about, yeah.

MR. VANIER: Yeah. It's too big. So there's an immense yearning, thirst, but also a fear of commitment. Of course, in some ways, they've been too manipulated. I can think of my adolescence some — whatever it is — 60 or more years ago and, in a way, things were much simpler. Today, with the technology, this excitement, and yet we're losing the sense of what it means to be human. This brings me back to the second question ...

MS. TIPPETT: OK.

MR. VANIER: ... which is that I'm human. And I have my weaknesses and I have my fragility, physical ailments of the heart, I have to take things quietly. And intellectually, I get tired much more quickly. So it's just the acceptance of reality. And you see, the big thing for me is to love reality and not live in the imagination, not live in what could have been or what should have been or what can be to this reality, and somewhere to love reality and then discover that God is present in the reality. That doesn't mean to say that we're just to be passive to welcome reality, because we also have to know how to react in front of reality.

Reality is a beautiful reality, but how to just to live that reality and live it with my own body, my own weaknesses, my own need for greater sleep, to get to sleep after lunch and all the rest of — and this is my reality. And I know that in so many years, time — would it be five years — I might be in a wheelchair, or whatever it is.

I mean I am somebody who's moving towards that ultimate reality, which is much closer, which is death. And my secretary, Barbara, who is my secretary for 40 years, died last July. We held hands together for two hours and she just left. And not to be frightened of death. Death is a passage, which will be an extraordinary discovery, something that'll be so amazing that we can't even imagine it.

It's like my little niece who died of AIDS, and she wasn't a believer. She said, "What it's going to be like?" And I said, "Well, you're going to fall asleep. And when you wake up, you'll be in such joy, such peace. Something that you've never, never lived before." And she said, "But I'm not a believer." I said, "But you remember when you're in that apartment in Paris and there were some Turkish immigrants that you make cakes for them. I've always seen you as somebody kind. And so your kindness you'll find, it'll be OK. And then the rest we will discover. It's going to be exciting. It's going to be wonderful."

MS. TIPPETT: This is another something you know, clearly. You know this. And all of your philosophy, all of your studies can't explain that to you, something you know.

MR. VANIER: Yes. Something that we have experienced — you see, if you just experience somewhere the peace of Jesus, the peace of being with other people, the peace of loving people. Well — and that experience transcends everything, the ideas we might have, because it's that experience where we live trust. And in Greek, the word "faith" and "trust" are the same word. Trust in other people, trust in God, trust in the peace that is in our hearts, trust also in those who are struggling to find peace and who got their angers and their pain. That's OK too. We're in it together.

[music: "Faun" by Olafur Arnalds]

MS. TIPPETT: I just want to ask you one more question. I'm sure you don't enjoy being reminded that like Mother Teresa, in her lifetime, people said she was a saint, and in Jean Vanier's lifetime, they're saying that you are a saint. And I don't sense that a lot of energy has been put into becoming a saint. There was this great shock recently that in Mother Teresa's letters were revealed that she struggled with darkness and depression, and I wonder how you responded to that and ...

MR. VANIER: There are, again, number of questions.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah, it's a number of questions.

MR. VANIER: What I respond to that ...

MS. TIPPETT: Yes.

MR. VANIER: ... is I knew Mother quite well.

MS. TIPPETT: Yes.

MR. VANIER: She was a fantastic woman. I'd have breakfast with her and she'd be telling me about her foundation in Yemen and how she was hoping to get to China and what she was doing in Africa and so on. She might have had difficulties in praying but never, never, never did she have the slightest doubt in her mission.

MS. TIPPETT: Mm-hmm. I mean I think somehow the astonishment over that is connected to what you've just said that you are all about loving reality, and she was facing reality. She may have been a saint by some definition, but that doesn't mean that she was removed from darkness. In fact, it means that she was actually touching it and facing it and grappling with ...

MR. VANIER: She had a lot of anguish, you see? And to bring anguish, which she had, and then to think that it doubted her faith, she never doubted her faith, but in her prayer that she lived anguish. This is what everybody lives. I mean it's — this is human reality. And I think when Mother Teresa was writing and telling these — and I still feel upset because she said that should be destroyed. And we didn't take seriously what she had said. But she was obviously a woman of great anguish.

And so when you're a great anguished, your prayer will be anguished. I mean don't be surprised and don't make a big thing out of it. I mean this is the reality of everyone. And she's telling us now stop thinking about this anguish. Just get on and start loving people. We must listen to what she said, which was we will be healed by the poor. So let's get down to it.

MS. TIPPETT: OK. All right. All right. Thank you. Is there anything you want to say about being compared to her as a living saint?

MR. VANIER: Sanctity put it in — what is important is just to become a little friend of Jesus.

MS. TIPPETT: OK. That's your last word. Thank you very much.

[music: "York (A) Bantu" by Los Angeles Guitar Quartet]

MS. TIPPETT: Jean Vanier is founder of the L'Arche Federation, which is celebrating its 50th year in 2015. He now lives full-time in the original L'Arche community in Trosly-Breuil, France. His books include *Befriending the Stranger*, *The Story of L'Arche*, and *Signs of the Times*.

[music: "York (A) Bantu" by Los Angeles Guitar Quartet]

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[music: "Safe in the Steep Cliffs" by Emancipator]

On Being is Trent Gilliss, Chris Heagle, Lily Percy, Mariah Helgeson, Nicki Oster, Michelle Keeley, and Selena Carlson.

Special thanks this week to Joan Mahler and Sister Anita.

[music: "Safe in the Steep Cliffs" by Emancipator]

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