

A Cry Is Heard

My path to peace

JEAN VANIER

with François-Xavier Maigre



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The truth will make you free.

The Gospel of John 8:32

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Praise for the Gift of Encounter

This book grew out of a sense of urgency.

In the face of the sad spectacle of divisions, fears, wars and inequalities that pervades our world, in the face of the depression and despair of so many young people, I dare to share with you a path of hope that was opened to me.

During my life, it has been people with an intellectual disability who gradually transformed me, freeing me from my fears, revealing to me my own humanity. After the terrorist attacks that have hit various countries recently, it seemed more important than ever to witness to the fellowship that is possible between people of different cultures, religions and histories. All is not lost. A path to unity, fellowship and peace is possible. The future depends on each one of us. Pope Francis has encouraged us since the beginning of his pontificate to encounter the poorest, the marginalized and all those who are different in some way. He invites us to let ourselves be evangelized by them, to receive their share of wisdom. The pope calls us to live a culture of encounter.

Encountering difference and working constantly to build bridges and not walls: this is the path of peace.

For more than 50 years, the most vulnerable in our L'Arche communities have taught me to accept my own weaknesses and

limits. By their side, I understood that I must break free from my resistance, my bursts of pride, to become more free so I can love them better and let myself be loved. The pope consistently calls us to love all those who have been set aside, weakened by broken relationships, marginalized and oppressed: people who have no home, prisoners and others. I am also thinking of people who are homosexual, who, in a way, often live their difference as marginalization in a world that has trouble accepting them. At L'Arche, I understood that the suffering of people with a disability gradually made me one with the suffering of refugees and migrants fleeing wars in the hope of a life that is more human and more free. I am now 89 years old, and my strength is waning. But I dare to cry: Let us set ourselves free! Free of our fears that build walls between groups and people. Free of our dreams of power that make us dominate others. Free of our rivalries, our desires to win, that blind us. Free of our race for success, our unhealthy possessions and our desire for superiority, which prevent us from living fully the culture of encounter and from making room for a world of peace and unity. These words go against the spirit of competition that tends to rule our modern societies. Always higher, always ahead; this approach can trap us in elitist groups where we feel protected. The oppressed with whom I share daily life have taught me otherwise. And I am a witness: true happiness can be found in living this hectic race in reverse. The people I live with taught me the path of joyful wisdom. With them, I slowly learned to relinquish myself, to lower myself, to accept myself with my weaknesses, even though I have a long way to go to become like them.

*

In the twilight of my life, I wanted to try to trace a few stages of this inner liberation.

My words are those of a poor man, in a constant state of conversion, who wants to share his passion for living and his commitment. I often meet young people who work in various fields: social action, interfaith dialogue, renewal for our planet Earth, welcoming of the most vulnerable.... I admire their enthusiasm: it tells me that help is on the way. I would like, through these words, to encourage all those who work for peace by tearing down walls.

Such an endeavour, with the weariness that comes with age, was a challenge. My friendship with François-Xavier Maigre, a poet and writer, editor of the magazine *Panorama* where I publish a column once a month, meant we could work on it together, patiently and cooperatively. This book would not exist without him, and I wish to warmly thank him for his time. François-Xavier would have been my grandson's age, if I had had one, and he was able to find the words to help me pass the torch to new generations. These pages reveal a special alchemy between my thought, my experience and the poetic sensibility of a young writer. For several months, we met often at my house, in Trosly. We shared and talked a lot... François-Xavier discovered a little of the intimacy of our home, Val fleuri, by sitting at our always lively table. And that is how, week after week, this praise for the gift of encounter was born...

*

Did you know that L'Arche started almost by chance? Deep down, I had this desire for a life of community with the poor, rooted in the Gospel. The spark was ignited more than 50 years ago, when our societies were open to all kinds of new

things. At that time, I discovered the atmosphere of violence in institutions for people with an intellectual disability. In one of those institutions, I became friends with two men, and I invited them to come with me. We started living together, and we laughed a lot. We were happy. We spent our happiest times in the kitchen, around the table. So many unforgettable moments... Then L'Arche grew, so wonderfully, through the gentle hand of God. If I was the engine behind it, no one was more surprised than I. We were simply responding to an urgent need. Requests poured in; we tried to welcome them. Volunteers from around the world came to help us. Some found their vocation there. Although inspired by Christianity, L'Arche gradually began to welcome Hindus, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists. Today, it includes 140 communities in around 40 countries on five continents. Together, we started to discover unity on a human level. We witnessed the possibility of shared happiness, despite our cultural differences. What's more, we found that life with people with intellectual disabilities is a source of unexpected joy. Many of them reveal an immense, sensitive and loving heart. Our international community grew quickly.

Little by little, I was transformed as I discovered a new vision for our society. The success of L'Arche brought me honours that I sometimes accepted, to draw attention to the richness of the most fragile. Proclaiming a message of fellowship – that is what motivated me more and more noticeably. Thanks to L'Arche, we learned that living with people with a disability is a way to heal our hearts, which are so often closed, and to go out and meet all those who bear the disability of marginalization and oppression. Transformed by the weakest, we discover that together we can work for a transformation of our societies. The most fragile open us up to hope.

When the news is at times grim and discouraging, when selfishness, fear, insecurity, despair and hate close us in on ourselves, I thought it was important to bear witness to this hope, in a new light.

As though the healing of fears that paralyze our world and are the source of our violence, our rejection of the other, our closing in on ourselves, depended on each of our private liberations.

So many walls arise between us. So many protective mechanisms harden our consciences. I think we need little signs of hope to create new paths... Paths that lead to universal fellowship.

Here are a few.

In their own quiet way, they inspired my journey and have given me insight over the years ...

A Hidden Presence

If there is any wisdom that I can never get enough of, it is that of Etty Hillesum. In her journal, this young Jewish woman, who died at Auschwitz, talks of the existence of a well hidden in the depths of her being. In this well, she writes, lives God: *“Sometimes I am there too. But more often stones and grit block the well, and God is buried beneath. Then he must be dug out again.”*

To be in relationship with God, we must free ourselves of everything that prevents us from encountering him. I truly believe this. God is this hidden presence, this spring that can quench our thirst. We must go down to find him.

All it took for me to experience it was to let myself be led by the weakest, the most foolish and the most oppressed of our societies. A long road lay before me. I had to patiently learn to remove these stones, this rubble that prevented me from encountering God. And I am far from being finished. L'Arche allowed me to discover how much the walls that separate people can seem difficult to knock down, reinforced by the stones that lodge deep in our hearts and block the spring. It's all about how to remove them.

Roadblocks within Me

When I went to Chile a few years ago, Denis met me at the airport. He had offered to drive me to Santiago, a city of five million people, where I was going to visit our Faith and Light communities. There we were on the road. The first few kilometres passed under an enormous sun. My gaze was focused on the curving landscape when, at the side of the road, a pile of tin and cinderblocks appeared. Poverty in its rawest expression. This was only the first of the surprises awaiting me. On the other side of the road, just a few dozen metres away, the ambiance was very different. Luxury, calm, opulence. A striking contrast! Denis pulled over and told me a bit more.

“On the left are the slums of Santiago. On the right are the homes of rich families, under tight police and military protection.” My host became silent. He looked at me sadly: “This road, Jean – no one ever crosses it.” The rich are afraid of the poor, and the poor are afraid of the rich. Something powerful separates them. Like a wall. A border. Each group is locked behind its security walls. We are living in a paradox where some roads, designed to allow for communication, mark boundaries that cannot be crossed. But there are other barriers, more underground, that enclose our hearts. They are hidden from view. They feed on our most secret fears, our deepest wounds. They dry up our lives, without our realizing it. Experience has