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Copies of the Discussion Version of the **belonging** video may be obtained from the following sources:

(\$29.95 plus taxes and shipping):

L'Arche Canada Foundation, 905-770-7696,
office@larchecanfoundation.org

Daybreak Publications, 800-853-1412,
pubs@larchedaybreak.com

Windborne Productions, 905-472-0445,
windborn@istar.ca

Faith & Values Media (USA) 800-588-8474 ext. 492



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*Personal Reflection and Group
Discussion Questions for*

belonging

the Search for Acceptance

A film essay on the social vision of Jean Vanier



**Jean Vanier proposes, "A new vision for our world –
one where every human being is important."**

Personal Reflection and Group Discussion Questions

belonging:

Introduction:

When Canadian filmmaker Karen Pascal traveled to France to meet Jean Vanier, she planned to make a film about *him*, but *he* wanted to make a film about what he said is the most important issue facing humanity today in our post 9/11 world – **belonging**. The outcome is this fast-paced, intense and challenging film essay.

Who Is Jean Vanier?

Jean Vanier is the founder of the international movement of L'Arche communities, where people who have developmental disabilities create homes together with the friends who assist them. He was born in 1928, the son of Governor-General Georges Vanier and Pauline Vanier. After a career in the Navy and teaching philosophy at the University of Toronto, he lived in a community in France led by his mentor, Fr. Thomas Philippe, O.P., who was chaplain to an institution for people with developmental disabilities. In 1964, Vanier welcomed two men from an institution to share a house with him in the village of Trosly-Breuil. The house was called "L'Arche," after Noah's ark.

Soon, young people from other countries came to experience this new way of living together in community and to assist. The first community grew to several households and L'Arche communities sprang up in countries around the world as assistants returned home. Today, there are 120 L'Arche communities on

five continents. Vanier also founded an international support movement for families of people with disabilities, called "Faith and Light." Now, well over a thousand such groups flourish around the world. Vanier resides in the original L'Arche community in Trosly-Breuil, France, when he is not traveling and speaking.

Jean Vanier has become a leader in consciousness-raising about the plight of all who are marginalized. He is internationally recognized as a social and spiritual leader. He has been acclaimed as "a Canadian who inspires the world" (*Maclean's Magazine*) and a "nation builder" (*The Globe and Mail*), and is author of the best-selling book, *Becoming Human* (The 1998 CBC Massey Lectures). His most recent book is *Finding Peace* (Anansi, 2003). Vanier is recipient of numerous honours recognizing his humanitarian work and his leadership as a social visionary, and is a Companion of the Order of Canada.

Note to group leaders:

The purpose of these questions is to help individuals reflect on their lives. The intent is to create a safe place for growth in self-awareness and spiritual groundedness. People often find it more comfortable to start talking one-on-one and then in smaller groups. We suggest you encourage people to listen to one another "with their hearts," and be clear that the purpose of the group is not to try to solve others' problems.

Belonging is quite a dense documentary and lends itself to discussing in parts. We recommend obtaining the Discussion Version of the video, which presents the film in six thematic parts with sub-headings. If you are using the regular version, one suitable break is at 22:37 minutes, after the Cockburn song and Vanier's "...to prove that I'm okay."

Here are some questions posed in the film. You might choose one of them as a jumping off point for discussion:

- a. “How do we love [our] own culture but be open to other people’s culture?” How do we “welcome difference?” (Jean Vanier)
- b. “Who am I when my systems of meaning and belonging collapse?” (Mary Jo Leddy)
- c. “What is a mature man or woman? What does it mean to be fully, fully human?” (Vanier)

Other questions to choose from:

1. What is culture? How would you describe the culture to which you belong?
2. Eric Barton says that many apparently successful people don’t know where they’re going in life. In the same segment of the film, Bruce Cockburn sings, “I’ve proved who I am so many times, The magnetic strip’s worn thin; And each time I was someone else, And everyone was taken in.” In what ways can you relate to these ideas?
3. Mary Jo Leddy observes that we all have our “briefcase” or “little bag” and “there’s usually nothing in it.” What is your “briefcase?” What would you do without your “briefcase?”
4. Vanier says, “It’s only when I know who I am that I can discover who you are.” How is knowing our own identity connected to forming friendships? What helps you or has helped you grow in your own sense of your personal identity?
5. The pictures of the L’Arche community where Vanier lives showed many different people celebrating together. What do you think enables such a diverse group of people to live together in community?
6. In speaking of Patrick’s birthday, Vanier says that everybody’s life deserves to be lifted up. How has your life been raised up? How do you lift up the lives of other people?
7. Vanier says, “Loneliness comes because [we are] not God,” and that to belong, we have to know “how to live our loneliness.” In what ways is this statement borne out (or not borne out) in your own experience?
8. What is the value of competition? How do you think about balancing competition and compassion in your life?
9. In the sequence about babies, Vanier speaks of “the incredible power of the weak” and says, “The weak person reveals that it’s okay for me to be weak.” In what ways does the weak person have power? Under what conditions is the power of the weak person negated?
10. One of the teachers states that the social codes in the classroom are intricate and complex, and that they determine who is included and who is different and, therefore, excluded. How similar is adult society? In your experience, does difference necessarily bring exclusion? Where do you feel alienated from the norms of your group or community? What will you not tolerate in order to belong?

11. Many of us have experienced “bullying” – as a victim or a bully or both – at different times. How do these experiences shape us? How do we bring these experiences to our adult lives?
12. Vanier asks, “How can I today be an artisan of peace and pray to have the strength to welcome the enemy – an enemy that might be in my own family?” How does this statement relate to you?
13. Mary Jo Leddy says if we can see that the world “belongs to God, we are more likely to say, ‘It’s not mine to decide who can belong and who can’t.’” She adds, “We have to welcome the world.... Otherwise we will end up at war with one another because we don’t know one another.” How might her thinking impact your life?
14. Rabbi Marmur comments, “The challenge is how to make people recognize that there is another way of belonging than just building my own little borders.” In what ways can you relate this thought to your own life and relationships?
15. Vanier says, “At the heart of everything is forgiveness. I’ve hurt you; you’ve hurt me. Well, we can forgive each other.” How does this comment speak to you today?
16. Javed Akbar of the Pickering Islamic Centre suggests, “We can better serve God’s purposes...by reaching out to those who are different from us.” How do you do this?
17. Christina deJong says she didn’t realize how much she had expected her sense of belonging to be generated by her husband, church and working community.” In what ways can you relate to her experience?

18. Vanier says that inside each of us is a “yearning for the infinite” and that “there is a force of love that is stronger than us.” Is this your experience? Discuss.

19. Vanier suggests holiness is about how we relate to the world around us. He says, “Holiness is the growth from ‘closedness’ to openness.” Is this a new vision of holiness for you? How does Vanier’s statement call you?

For private reflection:

20. Vanier says, “To love someone is not just to hold onto them and protect them” but also to reveal, “You are precious. Have trust in yourself! You can grow; you’ve got gifts. You’re special!” How well do I love those close to me in the ways Vanier describes? How do I want to grow in this regard?
21. Vanier says that ultimately “we belong to God.” Is this your experience? What might you do to nurture your awareness of belonging to God?