

A Canadian inspiring the world...

Jean Vanier



Build a world where everyone belongs!

On Becoming Human

Questions for Students

Supplementary curriculum material for
senior high school Philosophy, Religion,
Leadership, Social Studies



LEARNING FROM LECTURES



Photo: Courtesy of WP Wittman Photography

On Becoming Human®

By Jean Vanier

A Supplementary Curriculum Package for Grades 11 and 12 Religion, Philosophy, Leadership, and Social Studies

(To be used with accompanying audio material)

QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS

This section provides discussion questions for each of the 16 tracks on the CD *On Becoming Human*. The teacher may wish to choose among the questions and to lead a class discussion or invite students to answer the questions in groups or on their own, perhaps by journaling.

The CD *On Becoming Human* presents an introduction to students by Jean Vanier and short excerpts (“mini-lectures”) from Vanier’s CBC Massey Lecture series, *Becoming Human*. You may wish to listen to the entire five 55-minute lectures. These are available as a CD set from the CBC (www.cbc.ca). The lectures were edited and published as the best-selling book *Becoming Human*, (Toronto: House of Anansi Press). There are slight differences between the book and the lectures.

Written by Greg Rogers, M.ED, Staff Development Department, Toronto Catholic District School Board and Beth Porter, M.A., Coordinator of Educational Initiatives, L’Arche Canada (authors of the *Belonging: The Search for Acceptance* curriculum).

*This curriculum package, **On Becoming Human** (CD, Questions for Students, and Teachers’ Guide), may be obtained from the L’Arche Canada office, 10271 Yonge Street, Ste 300, Richmond Hill, ON L4C 4Y7 (905-770-7696 ext. 108 or 1-800-571-0212 or e-mail: education@larche.ca)*



© L’Arche Canada, 2007. *Pages of this booklet may be reproduced for educational purposes.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We wish to thank the following people for their feedback and suggestions as we prepared this package:

SENIOR STUDENTS

Christina Miceli, Cameron McKinnon, and Amanda Wong from Cardinal Carter School for the Arts, and Grade 12 Philosophy teacher Paul Raso of the Toronto Catholic District School Board, who participated in a focus group.

YORK REGION DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD

“Character Matters” curriculum consultants
Stephen Rensink and Michael Slodovnik, who helped select the audio content.

TORONTO CATHOLIC DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD

Teachers: Robert Lato and Tomasz Bednarczyk, who gave feedback on the draft manuscript.

Anapaula DaCosta in the Curriculum and Accountability Team,
who carefully formatted this material.

Susan Travis of L’Arche Canada, who proofread the manuscript.

CBC RADIO

Special thanks to CBC Radio for permission to extract clips of Jean Vanier’s CBC Massey Lectures and to Philip Coulter, producer of the Massey Lectures, who prepared the CD clips and specially recorded Jean Vanier’s Introduction to Students. The CBC Massey Lectures are co-sponsored by The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and Massey College of the University of Toronto.

Cover Photos Courtesy of WP Wittman Photography and the Catholic Curriculum Corp. (Photos taken at the Jean Vanier Youth Forum, October 2007)

QUESTIONS FOR THE 16 MINI-LECTURES (tracks)

| | | Page |
|-----|---|-------------|
| 1. | Jean Vanier’s Introduction to Students | 2:32 1 |
| 2. | The Journey from Loneliness to Belonging | 1:56 3 |
| 3. | Loneliness as Part of Being Human | 5:13 5 |
| 4. | Life is Constantly Evolving | 3:20 6 |
| 5. | Five Principles for Recognizing the New | 4:37 7 |
| 6. | Balancing Being Alone and Connected | 1:46 8 |
| 7. | Belonging - Its Importance and its Pitfalls | 2:51 9 |
| 8. | Trust and Distrust in Diversity | 3:26 10 |
| 9. | Weakness at the Heart of Belonging | 4:22 11 |
| 10. | The Child’s Early Years | 5:03 12 |
| 11. | Communion as the Trust that Bonds Us Together | 1:46 13 |
| 12. | Belonging as Where We Learn to be Human | 3:51 14 |
| 13. | Signs of a Healthy Belonging | 1:40 15 |
| 14. | A Healthy Belonging Seeks the Common Good | 3:19 16 |
| 15. | What Kind of Society Do We Want? | 4:21 17 |
| 16. | Moving Beyond Fear to Trust and Inclusion | 3:44 18 |

TRACK 1: Vanier's Introduction to Students (2:32)**Questions**

1. What does Vanier say his talks are about?
2. What is it to be fully human, fully alive?
3. Where did Vanier start to think about what it is to become human?
4. How does Vanier describe what he learned from people with intellectual disabilities?
5. How does he say human maturity grows? What's involved in this process?
6. a) Vanier's first idea for the title of his lecture series was "From Chaos to Life." By "life," Vanier does not mean just biological life—being physically alive. How is he using the word "life" here, in contrasting it with chaos?
b) What does this imply about the meaning he gives to the word "chaos" here? Give a dictionary definition of "chaos."
c) Can "chaos" describe an individual life as well as the state of a classroom or a society? Why is chaos usually seen as a problem?
7. Vanier says he changed his title from *From Chaos to Life* to *Becoming Human*. How do these two titles differ in what they convey about the content of the lectures he will give? Why do you think Vanier changed his title? Which title do you prefer? Why?
8. What does Vanier say about new technologies?

Applied Values/Ethical Reflection/Changing the World

1. Research the Massey Lectures. Who broadcasts them? What is their purpose? Why does a public broadcaster need to present programs about ideas?
2. Interview someone who knows a person with an intellectual disability to find out what they have learned from the person with a disability.

A Note on Changing Language: Language is living and can change quickly. Jean Vanier uses the term “people with intellectual disabilities” in this introductory clip, recorded in 2006. When the Massey Lectures were recorded in 1998, the term “mental handicap” was more commonly used... “People with developmental disabilities” has been widely used as well for the past few years. This is a good example of how language is living and changes, especially when negative connotations develop around a particular word. But there is also a question about why we have such labels at all and whether they are obstacles to people becoming fully integrated into society. Perhaps we are all simply “differently-abled.”

In this guide we generally use the phrase “people with intellectual disabilities,” when a term seems necessary for the sake of clarity.

Students may already be sensitive to “People First” language, which is the standard today. It names the person first rather than the quality or disability they may have, so that they are not defined by their disability. Everyone is first of all a person. Thus, we say “a person with a disability,” not “a disabled person” or “the disabled.” The People First usage guidelines may be downloaded from: <http://www.disabilityisnatural.com/peoplefirstlanguage.htm>



Jean Vanier and Students, photo: Nicholas Béland

TRACK 2: The Journey from Loneliness to Belonging (1:56)

Questions

1. What is Vanier's theme for these talks?
2. Vanier speaks about a liberation. What is the liberation from?
3. He speaks about a journey from one state of being to another. From where to where is this journey?
4. Vanier distinguishes between being alone and loneliness. What is the difference?
5. How does he describe "true loneliness?"
6. Who has helped him learn about being human?
7. What does Vanier hope?

Applied Values/Ethical Reflection/Changing the World

1. In tracks 1 and 2 Vanier introduces certain key concepts. Can you name some of these? (A list can be found on page 4). How has your understanding of these key concepts changed after hearing this passage from Jean Vanier? How has what Vanier said influenced or added to your understanding of loneliness?
2. Vanier says, "It may seem strange that people with mental handicaps have been my teachers." Relate an experience of learning from someone whom you didn't expect to learn from.
3. Journal exercise: Describe a time when you were plunged into loneliness. How does what Vanier says about loneliness resonate with you or throw light on that experience?
4. In your own community are there individuals who are at risk of not belonging? Who are they? How can we provide connections through "a love that transforms"?

Note: If students are having difficulty grasping the content, at this point the teacher may wish to make available to them the transcript of Track Two in the Appendix A of the Teachers' Guide.

Glossary Exercise (*Based on Tracks 1 and 2*)

Vanier combines some words in particular ways to convey his main concepts. Here are some concepts he introduces. Write down what you think each of these means as used by Vanier. (The Teachers' Guide offers definitions for these terms in Part A Track 2)

- a) *Liberation of the human heart*

- b) *Journey* (used as a metaphor)

- c) *A love that transforms*

- d) *Belonging that can include as well as exclude*

- e) *Loneliness as an essential human experience*

- f) *Chaos*

- g) *Men and women with mental handicaps*

- h) *Community life*

- i) *The weak*

- j) *Our common humanity*

TRACK 3: Loneliness is Part of Being Human (5:13)

Questions

1. In what context did Vanier come to his conclusions about loneliness?
2. What does Vanier mean when he says that loneliness is part of the human condition?
3. Why don't we as humans feel lonely all the time?
4. According to Vanier, when does the feeling of loneliness surface?
5. Explain and give examples of how artists, poets, and mystics use loneliness to express dissatisfaction with injustice and the competitive world.
6. Why did the children in the hospital not cry out?
7. What are some of the words Vanier uses to describe the negative effects of loneliness?

Applied Values/Ethical Reflection/Changing the World

1. For personal reflection: Identify a time in your life when you have felt (or feel) lonely. Were you able to overcome this feeling of loneliness? How did you cope with it?
2. Many elderly people feel lonely. Explain why loneliness is so dominant in this age group.
3. Who do you know who might be feeling the deep and confusing loneliness that Vanier describes? How does this person show this? What might you do to reach out to this person?

TRACK 4: Life is Constantly Evolving (3:20)

Questions

1. What does Vanier say about chaos and order?
2. Give 1 or 2 examples of how these alternate in our lives.
3. Vanier uses the word “disorder” to refer to chaos. How are they the same?
4. Why are transition periods that are caused by crises not easy to live through?
5. What is the constant tension within human beings?
6. Vanier says, “change is the essence of life.” What happens when we refuse to accept that loneliness and insecurity are part of life?
7. He says, “Life is an evolving reality.” What does it mean?
8. Vanier says, “Empires of ideas, as well as empires of wealth and power come and go.” What does he mean?
9. What is the benefit of living in some insecurity, anguish and loneliness?
10. Vanier says too much security and the refusal to evolve, to embrace change, and too much insecurity can both lead to what?

Applied Values/Ethical Reflection/Changing the World

1. Who do you know who may be living a period of chaos now? Can you think of a way you could contribute to helping this person find sufficient order to be able to move forward with their life?
2. Vanier says, “To be human is to create sufficient order so that we can move on into insecurity and seeming disorder. In this way we discover the new.” What do you think he means? Give an example. What might you do to help there to be enough order for yourself or others to risk and move forward in some situation.
3. “To live well is to observe in today’s apparent order the tiny anomalies that are the seeds of change, harbingers of tomorrow”—What does noticing these seeds of change have to do with living well? Where do you see “the new” starting to appear in some group to which you belong—your class, or school, or family or some other group? What can you do to help the new to come?

TRACK 5: Five Principles for Recognizing the New (4:37)

Questions

1. What are the five principles Vanier says have helped him to understand and read the signs of one's personal evolution and growth? Give a short explanation or summary for each of these principles.
2. Why is the metaphor of an orchestra a good illustration of Vanier's understanding of humankind?
3. What are your reflections on how we live and love the essential values of the family in today's and tomorrow's world?
4. Who in your life has provided you with dialogue (rich conversation) that has helped to define you as a person? What do you dialogue about with this person/these people?
5. What communities provide you with the strongest sense of belonging? What role do you play in these communities?
6. With whom are you "searching," and what are you searching for in life?

Applied Values/Ethical Reflection/Changing the World

1. In what ways are you responsible for your own life?
2. In what ways are others responsible for your life?
3. In what ways are you responsible for the lives of others?

TRACK 6: Balancing being alone and connected (1:46)

Questions

1. Give examples of how a community or communities are involved in a search for order.
2. Why do communities impose order?
3. Explain how imposed order in a community or family can sometimes prevent the life of the individual or the community from evolving.
4. Give an example where you or someone you know has stepped outside the norm (maybe even into a state of loneliness) to discover a new order or new way of doing things.
5. Define the term “paradox.”
6. a) What are the competing drives that Vanier describes as paradoxical?
b) Do these competing drives present a paradox in your own life?



Dan and Mike

TRACK 7: Belonging - Its Importance and Pitfalls (2:51)**Questions**

1. Vanier says, “Each of us needs to belong, not just to another person but to a family, a group, a culture.” How do you live this belonging in each of these settings?
 - a) Family
 - b) Group
 - c) Culture

2.
 - a) How do you understand the terms “maturity” and “inner freedom?”
 - b) How is belonging to a family, group, or culture important for your growth to maturity? To inner freedom?

3. Vanier names three reasons for the human drive for belonging. What are they?

4. Vanier says groups use religion and culture to dominate others – and that if it weren’t religion and culture that people use as a stick to beat others, it would be something else.
 - a) Why do groups try to dominate other groups?
 - b) What other things beside religion and culture are used as sticks to beat others?

5. Vanier quotes Jean Paul Sartre, who says, “human beings are basically evil.”
 - a) Do you agree or disagree?
 - b) Do you think Vanier agrees or disagrees with Sartre?

6.
 - a) What parallel does Vanier draw between belonging in a human society and belonging for plants in an ecosystem?
 - b) What is at the centre of Vanier’s vision for humanity?

TRACK 8: Trust and Distrust in Diversity (3:26)

Questions

1. Describe the L'Arche community in Bethany (location, people, and challenges).
2. In what ways, does Vanier say, “all human beings are fundamentally the same”?
3. How do those who are “weak or in need” bring people together?
4. a) Why did the people in both Bethany and Jerusalem question Vanier’s choice to have contacts in the other town or city?
b) Is it your experience that people judge other cultures according to their own fears and prejudices?
5. How do we:
 - a) Break down the walls that separate us from other cultures?
 - b) Open up to one another?
 - c) Create trust and places of dialogue between different cultures?

Applied Values/Ethical Reflection/Changing the World

1. In light of your answers in question 5, what are some actions your school community could undertake?



His Fu and Ryo

TRACK 9: Weakness at the Heart of Belonging (4:22)

Questions

1. Explain what Vanier means by the statement “our lives are a growth from weakness to weakness.”
2. Give examples where “weakness” can lead to a place of chaos and confusion, and a place of joy. What allows weakness to be a place of joy?
3. a) When does weakness in others annoy you?
b) What can help you cope when the weakness of another annoys you?
4. When does weakness in others bring out compassion in you?
5. According to Vanier, what are three key elements to being human?
6. a) When is a relationship between two people light and bliss? (You may want to use the example of husband and wife or parent and infant.)
b) When is a relationship between two people darkness and depression?
7. “Belonging is a school of love where we learn to open up to others and the world around us, where each person and every thing in our world has its unique existence and is respected.” Vanier
 - a) Could you ever live this vision of belonging?
 - b) What is motivating you to do so?
 - c) What is a barrier to you in doing so?

Applied Values/Ethical Reflection/Changing the World

1. How can you spread this vision of belonging that accepts and respects weakness in your classroom or school?

TRACK 10: The Child's Early Years (5:03)

Questions

1. “One’s personality and character traits are formed in the early years of childhood.”
Defend or reject this statement from your own experiences.
2. Vanier says that when a child doesn’t understand and can’t express his or her inner feelings of anguish, depression and revolt are pushed inside to the unconscious or shadow part of the self. Does everybody have this shadow side to themselves?
Explain.
3. What experiences and contexts for living will help children live a life of belonging and grow to maturity?
4. What gives you your identity?
5. Identify one or two goals for yourself in the following areas:
 - a) Physical development
 - b) Psychological or emotional development
 - c) Human development (values and outlook on life)
6. Vanier talks about one’s surrounding community as the tribe or village. According to Vanier how are children influenced to accept or reject someone in the village who is different or a stranger?
7. A perspective or paradigm is a way of seeing the world. It is shaped by the way we were taught. Describe a time when you experienced a paradigm or perspective shift and came to a new way of seeing a situation or a person or group of people.
8. In the teen world, is weakness seen as “a place of being crushed and manipulated” or “a place of love” which allows the person to be himself or herself? Give examples to support your position.
9.
 - a) In your experience is communion and trust a sign of human plenitude (i.e. the opposite of being weak and lacking basic necessities)?
 - b) When does communion and trust seem to be associated with a lack of identity or an unwillingness to assume responsibility for one’s life?

**TRACK 11: Communion as the Trust that Bonds us Together
(1:46)****Questions**

1. What does Vanier mean when he uses the word “communion” in this section?
2.
 - a) Can a trusting relationship exist between teenagers?
 - b) Can it exist between any two people?
 - c) What are signs that trust exists in a relationship?
3. Vanier says that trust that is part of being in communion with another and that it “calls forth trust in oneself.” The brief bio of Jean Vanier mentions that his father’s trust in him when he was a youth and wanted to join the Navy was very important to Jean. His statement here reflects the impact that his father’s trust had on him—that it helped him trust himself.
 - a) Do you experience being trusted?
 - b) How is trust growing between you and those with whom you are in communion?
 - c) Who helps you to trust yourself?
 - d) How is this trust in yourself shown in your life?
 - e) How is the trust in this relationship growing and evolving?

Applied Values/Ethical Reflection/Changing the World

1. Vanier moves from describing communion and trust between people to talking about those who are easily excluded from this kind of communion.
 - a) Who are they?
 - b) What happens to people if they are not respected or given a place?
2. What two responses can our hearts have when we encounter people who are weak or different?

TRACK 12: Belonging as Where We Learn to be Human (3:51)

Questions

- How does Vanier describe the individualism that is the antithesis of belonging?
 - What reasons does Vanier mention that might cause people to be excessively individualistic?
- Explain what Vanier means when he says a sense of belonging is “a necessary mediation between the individual and society”?
- Vanier uses two metaphors to describe the role that belonging plays in our growth to maturity. What are these?
 - Choose one of these metaphors and draw a picture to show how it helps illustrate your relationship among the three entities Vanier mentions—belonging, the self, and society.
- What does Vanier say we learn in a healthy belonging to society?
- What are signs of a group or community where the belonging is healthy?

Applied Values/Ethical Reflection/Changing our World

- Find and read the biblical passage in Isaiah chapter 58 to which Jean Vanier refers. What is this passage about?
 - What are supposedly religious activities that religious people may do today that God might reject?
 - Who are some of the people today who would be in the categories of the poor and needy he describes?
 - Who do you actually know or encounter in your daily life who would fall into these categories?
 - What could you do to respond to their need?
 - Had you thought before that doing this would be part of religious observance—as just as important, for instance, as praying or going to mass? Why had you made this connection—or why not?
 - One of the problems of treating people as “the poor” or “the oppressed” is that this very language tends to keep them different and separate from us in our minds, not part of the body we belong to. How can such people be included in a body that you are part of? What can you do to help this happen?

TRACK 13: Signs of a Healthy Belonging (1:40)

Questions

1. What are the signs of a healthy group that Vanier mentions on this track?
2. How does Vanier use the history of the relationship between churches as an illustration?
3. Does this example of the churches apply to different cultures or ethnic groups? Explain.
4. a) Name a group that fits Vanier's description of healthy belonging.
b) What is the evidence that this group is healthy?
5. a) Do you belong to one or more groups that fit the description of healthy belonging?

b) Choose one and describe how belonging to this group helps you to be open to people who are different, to appreciate their gifts, and to dialogue with them.

Applied Values/Ethical Reflection/Changing the World

1. How does your school community reflect Vanier's three criteria for a healthy belonging?
2. What role could student leadership play in helping a healthier school community to develop?

TRACK 14: A Healthy Belonging Seeks the Common Good (3:19)

Questions

1. a) What is Vanier's fourth sign of a healthy group?
b) Have you had an experience of a school group or team that has evolved and changed for the better because it recognized errors and learned from others? Describe this. How did you feel as the group was evolving?
2. a) What do healthy groups or teams do for their members?
b) Do you belong to any groups like this? Describe one.
3. Name a leader who in your opinion lives the message that we all belong to each other and are for each other.
4. How does Vanier describe the common good?
5. What does Vanier say are the criteria for getting involved in the common good of a nation?
6. What did Donald Nicholl say was the problem that prevented the Catholic and Protestant churches in Nazi Germany from rising up in support of the Jews persecuted by Hitler even though they knew what was happening was wrong?
7. Vanier says all nations are bonded to a common destiny and all are called to be concerned about this destiny. What is this common destiny, and what needs to take place for it to become a reality?
8. Vanier describes religion that closes people up and contrasts it with religion that helps us open our hearts to those who are different. How does he describe the effects of each of these two kinds of religion?
9. What is an ideology?

TRACK 15: What Kind of Society Do We Want? (4:21)**Questions**

1. What do you think Vanier means by “reading the signs of the times”? Give an example.
2. Vanier asks is his vision utopian, are the needs of our egos too great and are we hard wired to put ourselves at the centre, can we break out of selfishness and need for security to work for peace and the good of all people? How does he answer this question?
3.
 - a) Compare the dreams of Vanier and Martin Luther King.
 - b) Explain the metaphor Vanier uses for the society he dreams of?
4. Why does Vanier believe his dream is reasonable?
5. What do we each need to do to follow this aspiration for peace and the good of all?
6.
 - a) How does Vanier say inspiration often comes?
 - b) Can you recall a moment of such inspiration or clarity in your own life, or in the life of someone you know or have read about? Describe this.
7.
 - a) What should we do when a moment of inspiration comes?
 - b) What danger do we need to beware of as we move forward and what should we do about it?
 - c) Who or what helps you to discern the negative forces that Vanier describes?
8. Vanier says that the freedom he describes is not for an elite. What does he mean?
9.
 - a) What is it about some people that leads Vanier to be in awe of them?
 - b) What do you think enables these people to be more trusting?
 - c) Do you know people like this? Describe one of them.

TRACK 16: Moving beyond Fear to Trust and Inclusion (3:34)

Questions

1. What did Vanier do when the woman accosted him asking for money? Why? What do you think he later wished he had done?
2. a) How is fear “a terrible motivating force in our lives”?
b) Are there areas of your life or the lives of your peers where fear is a terrible motivating force?
3. Vanier says *fear* is at the root of all forms of exclusion, and *trust* is at the root of all forms of inclusion. Do you agree? Give some examples to illustrate each part of this statement.
4. Vanier says that the history of humanity is a history of wars, slavery, oppression, rejection—and that every society has created its own forms of exclusion. Give some examples.
5. a) What are some effects of fear on us?
b) When Vanier says the status quo leads to death, what do you think he means?
6. a) Vanier lists various groups of people whom we may exclude. Who are they?
b) Besides other people who are different, what are some of the things Vanier suggests that we fear?
7. Vanier suggests that loss of trust in our capacity to make our world more beautiful can lead us to live in an illusion of a beautiful world and not see the brokenness and suffering and failure and pain—we shun our own weakness and the weakness of others? Is this true in your experience? Give an example.
8. What does Vanier suggest is necessary if we are to not live in such illusion and to see the world as it really is, in its brokenness?

9. a) Why are people frightened of a beggar?
 - b) Vanier describes some problems that can arise when we welcome a homeless person or a beggar? What are these?
 - c) How do you think we can help someone who is very needy without being overwhelmed ourselves?
10. What can you do to strengthen your own trust in yourself and your capacity to make a difference?

Applied Values/Ethical Reflection/Changing the World

1. Where are you being invited to take the risk to include someone who is excluded? What will help you do this?
2. What can you do to encourage trust and inclusion of those who are different and excluded in your school or family or a group you belong to?



Janet's Graduation

L'Arche Canada
10271 Yonge Street, Ste 300
Richmond Hill
ON L4C 3B5

