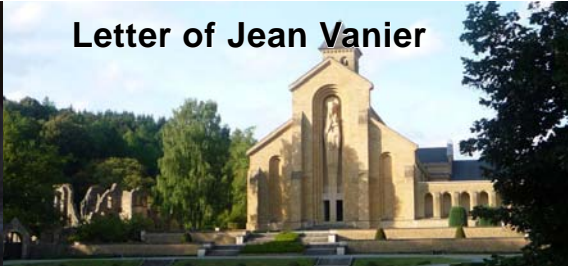


Letter of Jean Vanier



Trosly, September 2010

Dear friends,

The swallows have definitely left now! The nest is empty. Every day here in Orval I used to come to see these three or four little swallows in their nest. Day after day, as the mother swallow fed them with her big beak, the little ones grew. They became less and less comfortable in their nest, squashed and piled on top of each other. When the time came, the little ones began to fly without any lessons from their parents; that's how nature works. The flight of freedom. Then the swallows left, the nest is empty and it seems that later on they will leave for the African sun; next spring they will come back to build nests in their turn. That's how life works. We are born, we grow, we travel, we build our houses, we bring forth life, the little ones leave and then we take flight towards the heavens, another heaven.



It is like that for all of us. Last year, I talked to you about Jacqueline d'Hal-luin's flight towards God on August 24th. This year, my brother Bernard took flight; he was a year and a half older than me. He lived south of Paris. I used to love going to see him when I could, unfortunately not that often. Laurence, his daughter whom I love very much, used to cook for us (oysters and a leg of lamb every time). When Bernard and I were young, we were very close. We slept in the same room and we used to get up to all sorts of mischief together. Later on at Marcoussis, where Bernard lived, we would laugh about the things we would get up to as children. That did us good. It was like an understanding between us. At 13, I left for the Royal Naval College in England. After that, our paths did not often cross but when we did manage to see each other it was always wonderful. His departure has deeply affected me. I lost a brother who was also a friend. Thank you to all of you who have written to me in sympathy over his death.

This is the cycle of life: we are programmed to grow but also to weaken and then to die.

There is also the evolution of mankind and the universe to consider – something the swallows don't have! In fact, their species does not seem to evolve very much. The first men and women, who it seems were born in Africa millions of years ago, spread across the Earth and formed groups, clans and tribes with their own cultures and traditions. There were conflicts within tribes and between the tribes; there were murders and wars. These human beings, men and women, progressed, they discovered many things; they grew in knowledge and sometimes in wisdom. They were incapable of remaining trapped in the finite world. In human hearts and in human intelligence, there is a desire to open up to the infinite: in the horizontal world but also in the vertical world. A search for the meaning, source and purpose of life. Yes, there has been this extraordinary evolution of mankind over millions and millions of years to greater maturity and sometimes to a horrible de-

cline. Each generation would discover new things. This evolution was beautiful and profound but also painful. Weapons made of wood became the nuclear weapons of today.

The relationship between human beings was transformed, it matured, it moved towards more openness and tenderness, towards mutual acceptance of each other and yet at the same time, we see new forms of hatred and violence. The links which used to bring people together in unity have been weakened by a desire for personal and individual freedom. Evolution is both beautiful and painful.

L'Arche too has evolved. It is true that I was the first person to welcome two people, Raphael and Philippe who came from an institution where they had been suffering, to live with them and create a new form of community. It took me some time to see myself as a founder as I didn't know where I was going or how L'Arche could or should develop. Today, 46 years later, I can say that I am the happiest of founders! I no longer have any responsibility for the organization of L'Arche, Jean-Christophe and Christine are at the helm of all of our communities. I marvel at their wisdom, the way they lead the ensemble. I give thanks for them and for all the other leaders responsible for the international life, the life of the communities, just as I also give thanks for those who are part of this large family, which desires to be a sign of the evolution towards peace and unity of humanity, through love rather than force.

I can say the same for Faith and Light. I am no longer in a Faith and Light community but everything that I hear about these communities gives me a great deal of joy. The weakest and most vulnerable people continue with their mission of love, to open hearts and to give a new vision of our society. A society where it is not force and power that dominate but rather a life of love for each person as they are. I encourage Marie-Hélène Mathieu to continue writing her book on Faith and Light. I have read some parts of it and can assure you that it will be a wonderful book!

I am deeply happy with my life; I no longer travel outside France (except to come to Orval!) It's true that I would have loved to visit Jacqueline Sanon and the communities in Haiti, as well as other communities throughout the world. But I believe I needed to stop preaching community life and simply live it, in my home and in my community. No longer talking about the strength and weakness in each person but living them in my own body when my legs are tired and my head befuddled. Gradually welcoming the weakness and not just putting up with it; welcoming the reality with joy and knowing how to react with wisdom because it is in reality that we find God and true happiness.

At the end of July, I resigned as Chair of the Board of la Ferme. It was a gift for me to be able to support Odile Ceyrac in the birth of the new Ferme in 2000 then, for Veronika Ottrubay who followed her as leader in 2006. Jean-Claude Mallet, an old friend, has succeeded me. I am so happy about this! It is a joy for me to be



a meal in Le Val Fleuri, Trosly © Elodie Perriot

able to continue to give retreats there, to talk about the Gospel and Jesus present in the most vulnerable people and the hidden beauty in each person, whatever their weaknesses and difficulties. My role today is to try and live and to announce L'Arche through my life, through little gestures of love in daily life, in this world which for many appears so horribly painful and violent, with no apparent hope.

I must confess that when I hear about the atrocities in Iraq, about what is happening in Israel and Palestine, the situations in Haiti, Pakistan and the fires in Russia, I realise that my role is to live as humanely and as full of love as possible, and to live in trust.



Etty Hillesum
© Joods Historisch Museum,
Amsterdam

Etty Hillesum often comes to mind. In 1942 when she was living in that terrible camp for Jews who were destined to die in Auschwitz and when Europe was dominated by Hitler's demonic clan, she used to pray: *"Yes my Lord, you seem so incapable of changing a situation which in the end is so bound up with this life. I do not ask for an explanation, on the contrary it is up to you to call us to account one day. It seems to me more and more clearly at every beat of my heart that you cannot help us but that it is up to us to help you and to defend to the end the home that shelters you in us."* What is important, she is saying, is to live in the arms of God.

I like the words that we pray at compline every evening, *"God is our refuge, He protects us and covers us with his wings."* In a world where there is so much violence, fear, insecurity and hopelessness we can, with so many others, create a little place of peace where we love each other and where God lives. To be a sign that love is stronger than hate.

To create these places of peace, gentleness and tenderness, we need to work on ourselves, as the Patriarch of Constantinople, Athénagoras, used to say *"The hardest war is the one we wage against ourselves. We need to disarm ourselves. I have waged this war for many years. It was terrible, but now I am disarmed of the need to be right"*. The path to peace is always a path of humility.

The word which comes to my spirit and my heart, time and time again is 'presence'. Being present to reality and to others, not escaping into imaginations and ideas; living in the present moment, not fleeing into dreams of the future, or shutting off in the past. Accepting myself as I am with my weaknesses, my difficulties and my gifts and opening myself up to the Presence of God. Quite a programme for the coming year!

I pray with each of you and I send you my love, and thank you for your kind letters and wishes for my birthday,

Jean