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### The L'Arche *Habitus*: A Way of *Being* That Builds Unity in Difference

**Abstract:** This paper seeks to address three questions: *How* does community shape and form a person's *way of being* in the world? *What* aspects of L'Arche support a person in welcoming and valuing difference. And, what insights might L'Arche have to offer other communities? Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* provides the framework in which to understand *how* community forms people into a new way of being. This framework is utilized to look specifically at four aspects of L'Arche, a community where people with and without intellectual disabilities share life. The conclusion offers implications and insights in seeking to form communities and people that build unity in difference.

"Do you want to become my friend? Do you love me? Will you come back to see me?"<sup>1</sup> These are the questions Jean Vanier heard from people with intellectual disabilities upon his earliest visits to asylums and psychiatric hospitals in France.<sup>2</sup> The cry was for relationship—to be seen and loved.<sup>3</sup> It resonated with Vanier's own deeply felt need for relationships as well as the invitation he heard from Jesus in the Gospels. In 1964, responding to this cry for relationship, Vanier invited three men with intellectual disabilities from an institution in France to share life with him in what became the first L'Arche home. He did not intend to start a movement, yet he "was on the road to an amazing discovery, a gold mine of truth, where the weak and the strong, the rich and the poor would be brought together in community and find peace."<sup>4</sup> Vanier grew to identify that forming relationships across difference was a vitally important aspect of the mission of L'Arche. Many people across the world responded to similar invitations for relationship and L'Arche is now an international federation of 154 communities of people with and without intellectual disabilities sharing life in 38 countries on five continents.<sup>5</sup>

Mutual relationships are at the heart of L'Arche. It is in and through relationships with those whom our societies often deem as "other," "weak," and "vulnerable" that people in L'Arche learn to live in communion—truly seeing the other as their brother or sister—while also announcing the unique gifts of each person, especially those with intellectual disabilities. Unity in L'Arche exists through an understanding of our common humanity and an appreciation for, and welcome of the distinct gifts our diversity brings. Relationships of communion shape the L'Arche way of being, specifically relationships between people with diverse abilities.

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Vanier, *We Need Each Other: Responding to God's Call to Live Together* (Brewster, Massachusetts: Paraclete Press, 2018), 51–52.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community*, Wit Lectures (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 12.

<sup>3</sup> Vanier, *We Need Each Other*, 51–52.

<sup>4</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and Jean Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness*, Resources for Reconciliation (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Books, 2008), 25–26.

<sup>5</sup> "In The World - L'Arche Internationale," accessed December 17, 2018, <https://www.larche.org/en/in-the-world#all>.

Vanier's response to his encounter with people with intellectual disabilities was to draw close in friendship. Often when we encounter people who look, walk, or think differently than "we" do, we push the other person aside or seek to control or dominate them. Sometimes the other person embodies what we try to hide deep within ourselves. The human tendency, when faced with the discomfort, is to build walls of separation based on superiority, inferiority, or difference. Instead of building these internal (and external) walls of separation, Vanier made a life-altering choice to live with three men from the institution. He learned that "[l]ife in community is painful but it is also a marvelous adventure and a source of life. [His] hope is that many people can live this adventure which in the end is one of inner liberation – the freedom to love and be loved."<sup>6</sup> Vanier's desire to follow Jesus' commandment to love one another led him to build small communities where people with differences in abilities shared life. Since 1964 many people have chosen to share life in L'Arche communities and experience the freedom in drawing close in relationship rather than building walls of separation. The people in L'Arche absorb a new way of being that builds unity and celebrates diversity.

Three questions emerge: *How* does community shape and form a person's *way of being* in the world? *What* aspects of L'Arche support a person in welcoming and valuing difference? And, what insights might L'Arche have to offer other communities? This paper turns to the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) and his concept of *habitus* to probe *how* community shapes a person's way of being. Then, the paper will turn to the unique way that L'Arche approaches transformation and growth to demonstrate how particular aspects of the community facilitate building unity in a divided society. And finally, the paper will conclude with four insights from L'Arche that apply to other contexts.

### **Pierre Bourdieu**

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) was concerned with "the theory of practice, or, more precisely, the theory of the mode of generation of practices."<sup>7</sup> The ability to understand a practice is not as simple as treating the practice objectively, detached from the history that shaped. Bourdieu's interest is the "*dialectic of the internalization of externality and the externalization of internality*, or, more simply, of incorporation and objectification."<sup>8</sup> For this paper, Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* explains the process of socialization, internalization, and reproduction of the L'Arche culture. It is a process which altogether is the formation of people into a *way of being*.

#### ***Habitus***

Bourdieu's word for this process is *habitus*. His formal definition is "systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures...."<sup>9</sup> In the words of Colleen M. Griffith, "*Habitus* is a referent for acquired ways of thinking and acting that individuals and groups develop in response to absorbed conditions of social structures. Socialization ensues at a bodily level in what is often a preconscious or at least pre-reflexive way."<sup>10</sup> Merely by living in a L'Arche community, a person absorbs a way of being

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<sup>6</sup> Vanier, *Community and Growth*, 10.

<sup>7</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology; 16 (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 72.

<sup>8</sup> Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 72.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>10</sup> Colleen M. Griffith, "Practice as Embodied Knowing: Epistemological and Theological Considerations," in *Invitation to Practical Theology: Catholic Voices and Visions*, ed. Claire E. Wolfeich (New York / Mahwah, NJ, Paulist Press, 2014), 59.

that is expressed in concrete practices as well as in one's body. It does not require one to be aware of what is happening while they are learning and absorbing the L'Arche *habitus*.

An interesting aspect of the *habitus* is that it continues to generate practices without much prompting. In *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Bourdieu uses an example provided by G. W. Leibniz, in which Leibniz describes two clocks that have the same time.<sup>11</sup> There are three possible reasons why the clocks have the same time: they could be mutually influencing; there could be a person who is constantly keeping them at the same time; or, the clocks could have been made in such a way that they would keep synchronized time.<sup>12</sup> The last answer reflects the functioning of the *habitus*—the *habitus* is the undergirding principle that enables them to maintain the same time. If a person visited three L'Arche communities in different contexts, the consistency of valuing, celebrating, and living in a way that builds unity in difference would be consistent. There is something distinct about L'Arche that even across different cultures, many of the dispositions remain the same. There is no person constantly adjusting and directing the practices; rather they are expressed externally as part of the person's way of being (their *habitus*). To the extent that a group has similar experiences, they will share a *habitus*.

### **Reproduction**

An important note about the *habitus* is the way the *habitus* is ever-evolving. It constantly reproduces itself and creates new structures based on previous experiences. The earliest experiences “have particular weight because the *habitus* tends to ensure its own constancy and its defense against change through the selection it makes within new information by rejecting information capable of calling into question its accumulated information, if exposed to it accidentally or by force, and especially by avoiding exposure to such information.”<sup>13</sup> The *habitus* is predisposed to reinforce itself, selecting data that does not challenge its dispositions but, instead, chooses situations that are most consistent with past experiences. Bourdieu adds further, “[...] the basis of all the avoidance strategies are largely the product of a non-conscious, unwilling avoidance.”<sup>14</sup> The *habitus*, often unconsciously, seeks like-minded environments in which to reproduce itself.

Some scholars raise a concern surrounding Bourdieu's *habitus* because of the determinative nature of one's earliest formation and the perceived lack of human agency. Since the *habitus* seeks to preserve itself, by selecting data that is consistent with earlier socialization, it is difficult to adjust. Since it is always evolving as it encounters new situations, there is room for the *habitus* to be changed. Might an immersion in a community that offers a counter-*habitus* provide an avenue to adjust the *habitus* formed in the earliest years? Communities such as L'Arche can offer a new way of being that challenge existing practices and dispositions that lead toward division.

One cannot control the outcome or results of formation into a way of being. People are complex and carry with them, often unconsciously, the history of their previous communities. Bourdieu notes, “In practice, it is the *habitus*, history turned into nature, i.e. denied as such, which accomplishes practically the relating of these two systems of relations, in and through the production of practice.”<sup>15</sup> No two people share all the same experiences, nor do they internalize

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<sup>11</sup> Bourdieu is quoting G.W. Leibniz, “Second éclaircissement du système de la communication des substances” (1696), in *Oeuvres philosophiques*, ed. P. Janet (Paris: de Lagrange, 1866), vol. II, p. 548

<sup>12</sup> Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 80.

<sup>13</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1990), 60–61.

<sup>14</sup> Bourdieu, 60–61.

<sup>15</sup> Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 78.

the structures in the same way.<sup>16</sup> However, inviting people into a social structure with particular practices and experiences does produce similar dispositions.

Another concern could be that a person would lose their uniqueness by adapting to a different *habitus* and their behaviors become merely a mechanical reproduction. Bourdieu believes humans are **not** limited to a mechanical reproduction even though they are predisposed to act in particular ways. L'Arche welcomes people from a variety of backgrounds and each individual contributes and adds to the community. The internalization of the way of being is not separate from one's history and experiences. Individuality comes through in a person's contribution to the community and in how they appropriate the *habitus*.

Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* ("systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures...."<sup>17</sup>) provides a framework to see *how* a community shapes and forms a person's way of being in the world while also maintaining their unique integration based on past experiences. Using this framework, we turn to the second question of the paper, *what* aspects of L'Arche support a person in welcoming and valuing difference?

### **L'Arche**

L'Arche is a way of life—a way of being—that forms a person to live *in* communion with and value people who are different than themselves. The very people who are pushed aside in society and deemed "weak" are the heart of L'Arche—they are cared for and loved. L'Arche offers the world suffering from division an invitation to a renewed sense of the value of diversity. Four aspects that shape the L'Arche *habitus* in welcoming and valuing difference are a foundation in Christ, mutual relationships, the structure of the community as a body, and the role of the physical body.

#### **Foundation in Christ**

*As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love...*

*That is the commandment that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. (John 15:9, 12-13)<sup>18</sup>*

The first aspect of L'Arche is the foundation in Christ. Vanier's relationship with Jesus guided his whole life. Vanier's prolific writing is replete with stories from scripture intermixed with stories of his own life. He shares about his relationships with people with intellectual disabilities and ultimately of his and others' transformations. L'Arche was born out of his desire to know Jesus more intimately and follow the Gospel. He heard Jesus' question to Peter, "Do you love me?" in the cries of people with intellectual disabilities. His Catholic upbringing, prayer, and spiritual mentors guided him. Throughout his life, Vanier came to know a God who desires to be in relationships, especially with the most fragile and neglected in society. He found that in and through relationship, one comes to know Jesus and oneself more fully. His faith inspired him to start L'Arche, and throughout his life, he nurtured and guided the community from a strong belief in the love of a God who desires to be in relationship.

Vanier tells a story of an eleven-year-old boy with intellectual disabilities who received his First Communion. At the celebration after the event, the boy's uncle, and godfather, said to the mom, "The only sad thing is that he didn't understand anything." This was overheard by the

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<sup>16</sup> R. McGee and Richard Warms, *Theory in Social and Cultural Anthropology: An Encyclopedia* (Thousand Oaks, California, 2013), 93, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452276311>.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>18</sup> Vanier, *Community and Growth*, 12.

boy who, “with tears in his eyes, said to his mother, ‘Do not worry, Mummy. Jesus loves me as I am.’”<sup>19</sup> “You are loved as you are” is a message woven throughout L’Arche, and this message is and grounded in the Gospel. Each person is precious in God’s eyes. Vanier hopes that community is the adventure, “which in the end is one of inner liberation – the freedom to love and be loved.”<sup>20</sup> The undergirding love is the love of Jesus, and it is a love that is unmerited. When one knows they are loved, truly loved as they are, they are able to grow and do wonderful things. The way walls of separation are broken down between people is through telling them *you* are important. You are precious. You matter. Vanier highlights this through a story of someone in the community:

A few years ago, we welcomed Eric into our community. Eric has his own story, which began with a lot of pain. When his mother discovered the seriousness of his disability, she was devastated and heartbroken; she did not want a child like him! Both mother and Eric were wounded. At [the] tender age of four his mother took him to the local hospital, where it was recommended that he be put into a regional psychiatric hospital. This is where we found Eric twelve years later. He was sixteen [...] His mother had only come to see him once because she could not bear the lack of love and care that she saw in the hospital. I can say that I have never met a young person so vulnerable and with so much anguish. Eric was living with so much inner pain, yet within that pain lay a mystery.<sup>21</sup> [...]

The anguish of Eric arose as he sensed that he was not wanted, that he was alone and unloved [...] At the beginning of his life at L’Arche, Eric was incontinent, so one of the first things we did was to try to help him urinate in the toilet. One day he did! We all had champagne that day. People came in and asked what we were celebrating, and we said, ‘Today Eric has peed in the toilet!’ Life is made up of little things. You do not have to do big things to celebrate together in joy. Every morning, one of us living with Eric would give him his bath. Even though he was sixteen, he was small. Bath time was a very precious moment. Through the touch involved in bathing Eric, we helped him to relax and to discover that he was loved.”<sup>22</sup>

Starting at an early age, the way Eric had been treated communicated to him he was unloveable. Unconsciously, he presumably expected the same at L’Arche, only to confirm his *habitus* (his dispositions, ways of thinking, and acting). The message in L’Arche that he was loveable confronted his *habitus*. Through practices such as tender touch and care, he began to learn the message he was precious. His *habitus* of seeking and reproducing situations where he was told he was unlovable was being confronted and transformed. It was not merely words that were used to tell Eric he mattered; it was the way he was celebrated, cared for, and nurtured.

Much like the clocks that keep a synchronized time, Vanier’s response to the question from Jesus and the men in the institution, “do you love me?” informs the L’Arche *habitus* from the beginning. Vanier’s desire to be in relationship with Jesus led to the founding of L’Arche. L’Arche exists all around the globe, and people come to L’Arche from a variety of religious backgrounds and professions of faith, or no faith. The practices and dispositions of L’Arche originate in a model of Jesus’ love for each person. Regardless of one’s professed faith, Jesus’ message, “You are loveable as you are,” undergirds the practices at L’Arche.

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<sup>19</sup> Vanier, *We Need Each Other*, 28–29.

<sup>20</sup> Vanier, *Community and Growth*, 12.

<sup>21</sup> Vanier, *We Need Each Other*, 20–21.

<sup>22</sup> Vanier, 22–23.

## Mutual Relationships

The second aspect of L'Arche contributing to a *habitus* that builds unity in diversity is mutual relationships. Mutual relationships are the center of life in L'Arche. People with intellectual disabilities (core members) and people without intellectual disabilities (assistants) share life: eat together, clean together, celebrate together, pray together, and attend to daily life. Assistants arrive at L'Arche for a variety of reasons. They might be seeking community, or potentially, coming to "serve the poor." If the relationship remains stuck at the level of the giver (assistant) and the receiver (core member)—the assistant who seeks to be generous remains in a position of power. The relationship changes when the two become friends. Vanier shared, "[w]hen I become your friend, I become vulnerable to you. When I am vulnerable to you, I listen to your story; I hear how much you have suffered; and you listen to my story. In some mysterious way, friendship is the beginning of a covenant whereby we are all tied to each other. You have to know that once you become the friend of someone with disabilities, much of your life begins to change."<sup>23</sup> Friendship takes time to develop. Friends need time to learn how to communicate with one another and care for each other. Mutuality is possible when the power dynamic is no longer one of a generous giver who is "serving the poor," and instead has become mutual in vulnerability and care. To truly see and love someone is to see their gifts and to reveal to them their beauty. It is looking at them with respect.<sup>24</sup>

Vanier describes this relationship as being in communion; "[t]o be in communion means to *be with* someone and to discover that we actually belong together. Communion means accepting people just as they are, with all their limits and inner pain, but also with their gifts and their beauty and their capacity to grow: to see the beauty inside of all the pain. To love someone is not to do things *for* them, but to reveal to them their beauty and value [...]"<sup>25</sup> Inner pain presents itself in L'Arche in core members and assistants alike. The path of L'Arche, and of liberation, is realizing you are loved as you are and able to love others as they are.

Friendship requires bringing down the walls of power and control. Friendship entails entering into a way of "being with" as to reveal to the other their belovedness. A person Vanier often shares about is Janine.

[She] came to L'Arche at the age of forty with one arm and one leg paralyzed. She experienced epileptic seizures and had a lot of difficulties understanding and learning. There was a huge amount of anger in her. She didn't want to come to L'Arche [...] She needed to express her anger, so she broke things and screamed and yelled. We took a lot of time to reflect, to try to understand where the anger was coming from. She was angry with her body, angry with her sisters, angry with God, angry because she didn't want to work in our workshops. But gradually, gradually, she discovered who she was and that she was listened to, understood and loved. Janine used to love those old French Parisian songs that most people don't remember now. She loved singing them, and she discovered that she could dance to those songs and that other people appreciated them as well. Then she discovered something extraordinary: she was loved by God [...] The last three years of her life were beautiful. I used to go and sit down beside her sometimes; she would see that I was tired and would put her hand on my head, saying, "Poor old man."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Vanier, 53–54.

<sup>24</sup> Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 3.

<sup>25</sup> Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community*, 16.

<sup>26</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and Jean Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness*, Resources for Reconciliation (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Books, 2008), 25–26.

Janine brought a lot of pain into the community. The community welcomed her as she was, and through the consistency of being loved as she was, she gradually discovered her gifts. Janine began singing and dancing and sharing her gifts with the community. Her experience of love enabled her to unveil who she was and share herself with others, including Vanier. There exists a mutuality—Janine was not merely in a position of receiving; she too was sharing herself with the community. It is Janine's transformation that one can see the ability for L'Arche to serve as a counter-*habitus*. Janine absorbed the way of being in L'Arche, and while she resisted at first (preserving a *habitus* from earlier in her life), she slowly absorbed the L'Arche *habitus*. Not only did she adjust to a new way of being, but she also reproduced the dispositions she absorbed in the way she shared a tender moment with Vanier.

A community that places the most vulnerable at the center and enters into relationships of mutuality—relationships that take down the walls between the “strong” and “weak” and sees the giftedness and value of each individual—is a community working toward justice and peace. By opening one’s heart to the vulnerable person in the community, one grows an ability to welcome others who are weak and needy in other parts of society.<sup>27</sup> The L'Arche *habitus* can be absorbed and then reproduced in contexts both inside and outside of L'Arche.

### **Structure of the Community as a Body**

The structure of the community also contributes to the formation of the *habitus*. Western society tends to favor the strong and marginalize the weak. The fear of being weak causes us to hide our weaknesses and separate ourselves from people who are deemed vulnerable. Our societies are often structured like a pyramid. The most "successful" person is at the apex and the weak somewhere at the bottom. Or, maybe some people are not even part of the pyramid at all. The L'Arche structure is quite different. Vanier references 1 Corinthians 12, where St. Paul speaks of the image of community as an interconnected body with the weakest parts as the most honored.<sup>28</sup> Jesus came to transform the pyramid into a body, "where each member of society has a place, is respected and is important."<sup>29</sup> In L'Arche, all members contribute to the community in a way that is reflective of their gifts. In a society that values efficiency over people, the community might have missed hearing what Janine was saying in her anger. Janine’s voice mattered. Listening to her, the way she communicated, enabled her to learn new ways of sharing herself and enriching the community.

In L'Arche, those who are most vulnerable are at the center of the community and given the title “core member” identifying the place of priority.

The vision of Jesus is that we meet people at the bottom and help bring them up to trust themselves. In order to break down the walls that separate people we must not hit the walls. We must begin at the bottom. Jesus came to announce good news to the poor, freedom to the captives, liberty to the oppressed, sight to the blind. Let’s help the poor to rise up, and then help those who have power and money to see for the sake of peace, which is the greatest good humans can seek, they too should enter into this vision and start helping the weak to rise up.<sup>30</sup>

Entering into friendships of communion and discovering the gifts of the other—of the weak or powerless—is the path of L'Arche and the path toward peace.

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<sup>27</sup> Vanier, *Becoming Human*, 60.

<sup>28</sup> Hauerwas and Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World*, 36.

<sup>29</sup> Vanier, *Befriending the Stranger*, 39.

<sup>30</sup> Hauerwas and Vanier, 71.

The structure of L'Arche requires a move from "how can community serve my needs?" to "how can my gifts serve the community." It is a vision that allows for and encourages each person to contribute. When a person feels cared for, seen, and loved they are free to encounter their gifts (as well as inner pain). When the need to protect oneself or prove one's worth is dominant, people set up walls of separation, and people climb the ladder or the pyramid pushing the vulnerable aside. L'Arche places at the center of the community (of the body) those who are weakest and most vulnerable and says, "you are important." This is the same message shared with each member of the body, regardless of ability or disability.

The structure of the community is a critical component when considering the *habitus*. The structure or practices alone do not fully reveal the *habitus*, however, the *habitus* is both generated from the structure as well as is the "structured structures."<sup>31</sup> Two features stand out in the structure of L'Arche that contribute to a more inclusive *habitus*: placing the vulnerable at the center and honoring each person's contribution to the community.

### **The Physical Body**

The physical body is of utmost importance in life in L'Arche an aspect that highlights the embodied nature of the *habitus* in welcoming and valuing difference. The strong emphasis on the body in L'Arche is rooted in the belief in a God who became flesh. The physical needs of people to the structural makeup of the community reveals the importance of the body. It is rooted in a God who came into the world as a fragile baby without power. How we value a person without "power" and how we treat the fragile body are both significant in communicating a broader message of value and importance across difference.

The message of "you are important" is communicated not just through words but through the body. The above narrative of Eric spoke of bathing Eric. As Vanier writes, "Bath time was a very precious moment. Through the touch involved in bathing Eric, we helped him to relax and to discover that he was loved."<sup>32</sup> In the tenderness and care of Eric's physical body, he learned he was important. Words are not enough. In the story of Janine, she communicated with Vanier in words and also a tender physical moment. "She would see that I was tired," writes Vanier, "and would put her hand on my head, saying, "Poor old man."<sup>33</sup> Vanier spoke of the importance of touch in a 2007 interview. He said, "[i]t'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 neither sexualized nor aggressive. It has become human. I think that this is what people with disabilities are teaching us. It's something about what it means to be human and to relate and to celebrate life together."<sup>34</sup> A person can come to know great truths, inaccessible in words, through a bodily knowing, including their worthiness. Bodies are also the site of profound abuses, especially for many people with disabilities, which brings to light how appropriate and tender care of a person's body is essential.

Living in L'Arche, a person almost immediately recognizes practices that are different from societal norms of power and efficiency. It could be the pace of the community, the way people communicate, or maybe even a dinner table full of people with diverse abilities. The daily life of L'Arche involves the care for the body through activities such as eating, bathing, and exercising. These and many other practices and dispositions become stored in the body. It is not

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>32</sup> Vanier, *We Need Each Other*, 22–23.

<sup>33</sup> Hauerwas and Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World*, 25–26.

<sup>34</sup> Krista Tippet, "Jean Vanier — The Wisdom of Tenderness," The On Being Project, accessed March 18, 2019, <https://onbeing.org/programs/jean-vanier-the-wisdom-of-tenderness/>.



from explicit teachings or rules, although those exist in L'Arche, but from a lived experience. As Griffith said, this socialization "ensues at a bodily level in what is often preconscious."<sup>35</sup> The socialization becomes absorbed, often without realization and produces a set of behaviors or ways of being and thinking (*habitus*). The practices of L'Arche become deposited in the body; through what Bourdieu describes as "the process of acquisition - a practical *mimesis* (or mimeticism) which implies an overall relation of identification and has nothing in common with an imitation that would presuppose a conscious effort to reproduce a gesture, an utterance or an object explicitly constituted as a mode[...]. What is 'learned by the body' is not something that one has, like knowledge that can be brandished, but something that one is."<sup>36</sup> The way of being in L'Arche carried in the body becomes part of the person.

The four aspects of L'Arche touched on above (foundation in Christ, mutual relationships, the structure of the community, and the physical body) are not an exhaustive description of practices and dispositions in L'Arche. They are, however, illustrative of the L'Arche *habitus*. These aspects of life in L'Arche support assistants, core members, and friends of the community to experience transformation. The transformation is marked by the dissipation of walls separating one from another, the lessening of fear and discomfort of difference, and a celebrating of unity in difference.

### **Transformation and Growth—Unity and Difference in L'Arche**

Exploring L'Arche with more depth this paper explores a community that provides a different milieu, one where the *habitus* is often quite distinct from the previously acquired ways of being.<sup>37</sup> When people come to L'Arche, they arrive with a *habitus*; they naturally and unconsciously bring with them their own history full of inclinations, ways of being, behaving, and thinking. Through the experiences and socialization of living in L'Arche, transformation and growth are possible as the individual's previous way of being evolves to be more reflective of the L'Arche *habitus*. L'Arche offers a counter-*habitus* that builds peace and unity in a world marked by division.

The four aspects, along with the writings and narratives of Jean Vanier, demonstrate the capability for a *habitus* to adjust when confronted with a different environment. People in L'Arche use the language of transformation and growth when speaking of acquiring a new way of being reflective of life in L'Arche. As Janine realized her community would love and accept her as she was, her transformation became visible. She went from being angry to dancing and singing old French Parisian songs. Eric's transformation was witnessed in the way he began to relax—his body demonstrating the reception and trust of the love he was receiving.

Vanier himself experienced growth even after years of living in community. He was surprised when his inner anguish was awoken through the screaming of Lucian, one of his housemates. Vanier writes, "I could sense anger, violence and even hatred rising up in within me. I would have been capable of hurting him to keep him quiet. It was as if a part of my being that I had learned to control was exploding. It was not only Lucian's anguish that was difficult for me to accept but the revelation of what was inside my own heart – my capacity to hurt others – I who had been called to share my life with the weak, had a power of hatred for a weak

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<sup>35</sup> Griffith, "Practice as Embodied Knowing: Epistemological and Theological Considerations," 59.

<sup>36</sup> Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 73.

<sup>37</sup> "The word *disposition* seems particularly suited to express what is covered by the concept of *habitus* (defined as a system of dispositions). It expresses first the *result of an organizing action*, with a meaning close to that of words such as *structure*; it also designates a *way of being*, a *habitual state* (especially of the body) and, in particular, a *predisposition, tendency, propensity, or inclination*." (Bourdieu 1977, p. 214--note from chapter 2, point 1)

person!”<sup>38</sup> Life in community provides plentiful opportunities for one's inner darkness to come forward like what Vanier describes. The darkness within is often unconscious, controlled, or protected. Rather than ignoring the pain and anguish, the opportunity is to discover our common humanity through our anguish and brokenness.<sup>39</sup> In reflecting on his inner anguish, Vanier discovered shared brokenness between him and Lucian. What could have been an experience of division between him and Lucian became a more profound unity in our common humanity.

The process of transformation, of learning to live in love rather than fear takes time and a willingness to engage in relationships. Vanier explains, “[w]e are called to grow in order to become fully ourselves and fully alive, to receive from others, and to give to others, not being held back by fears, prejudices, or feelings of superiority or inferiority.”<sup>40</sup> Fears, prejudices, and feelings of superiority and inferiority create division. As Vanier (or Hauerwas) states, “[b]etween all of us fragile human beings stand walls built on loneliness and the absence of God, walls built on fear.”<sup>41</sup> The walls separating one person from the other cause division in our communities and society.

In L'Arche, one discovers the liberation in experiencing *not* having to prove one's worth of bringing down the walls. Vanier discovered that when a person can grow and become fully themselves, unity is possible. The person can freely give to and receive from others without as many walls. It takes time to get to this place of inner liberation and requires facing one's brokenness and ultimately self-acceptance just as Vanier encountered with Lucian. Transformation is possible when nurtured through relationships that reveal one's beauty. Transformation does not come from force; it comes from a grounding of love—a real experience of feeling seen and loved as you are complete with brokenness and giftedness.

Some people come to L'Arche and stay, and others are on a different trajectory. Not everyone who comes experiences transformation; some leave unable to let their walls come down. Often, those who have entered wholly into the life of L'Arche, and choose to leave, have a new way of seeing and being in the world that they are able to share in other contexts. They share it in the way they enter into relationships of mutuality, in the way they place people who are pushed aside in society at the center, in the way they show up to the person who is in front of them. It looks different for each person—it has become a way of being and engaging the world. It has become their new *habitus*.

### **Implications—Unity in a Divided World**

Division is everywhere. One does not need to look far to find people who are different than themselves. The uncomfortable feelings which arise are often accompanied by building walls of separation, consciously and unconsciously. However, exploring the concept of *habitus* in relationship to L'Arche four insights emerge that can be applied in other contexts where the desire is to build unity in difference:

- (1) Believe each person is valuable just as they are. Vanier's words are worth repeating, “[t]o be in communion means to *be with* someone and to discover that we actually belong together. Communion means accepting people just as they are, with all their limits and inner pain [...]”<sup>42</sup> It is all too easy to value people based on what they produce. When people feel loved as they are, they become more fully themselves and

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<sup>38</sup> Jean Vanier, *Befriending the Stranger* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2005), 62.

<sup>39</sup> Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth*, 2nd rev. ed.. (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 99.

<sup>40</sup> Vanier, *Becoming Human*, 61.

<sup>41</sup> Hauerwas and Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World*, 26.

<sup>42</sup> Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community*, 16.

freer to enter into relationships of communion. In what ways do we communicate to each person that they value because they *are* not because they *do*?

- (2) Prioritize the most vulnerable. Relationships are central, especially mutual relationships with those pushed aside in society. These relationships are marked by mutuality which enables a deep listening to the other. While fears and inner darkness may emerge, it is through the process of relationship that the unity between self and other is grown—often in our vulnerability and frailty. Who are the most vulnerable in our community? And, how are we listening to *all* members of our community?
- (3) Organizational structures contribute to the *habitus*. The structure of the community contributes to the socialization that becomes internalized and thus impacts a person's *habitus*. Often the pyramid model leaves some people behind. How can the structure of the community better reflect unity in diversity?
- (4) The body matters. How we treat and engage the physical body is not secondary, but a primary way of knowing. The body is an essential part of who a person is, and the *habitus* is deposited in the body. The body carries a knowledge not always available in other ways. In the community, what is being communicated and absorbed by the body?

Formation into a way of being that builds unity in diversity is all-encompassing. It is not limited to a particular practice, a good mission statement, or a fantastic program. The organization communicates a way of being in everything it does. The key to building unity in diversity is looking holistically at the community and asking honestly what is being communicated followed by, how can we consistently honor diversity as a way to build unity?

The practices and dispositions in L'Arche enable the breaking down of walls, celebrating difference, and building communion. The experience of inner liberation—the freedom to be loved and love impacts the way the person engages individuals and communities in other contexts as well. It is the very dialectic that Bourdieu spoke of: “*internalization of externality and the externalization of internality*.”<sup>43</sup> To conclude in the words of Jean Vanier:

There can be no peacemaking or social work or anything else to improve our world unless we are convinced that the other is important. You are precious. You—not just “people,” but you. And we have a call to make history, not just accept history. We are called to change things—to change the movement of history, to make our world a place of love and not just a place of conflict and competition.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 72.

<sup>44</sup> Hauerwas and Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World*, 63.

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