

YOU DID NOT CHOOSE ME, BUT I CHOSE YOU.

Reflections on Friendship and Choice

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Introducing My friend

Over the years I have learned that there are many ways to describe one's connections with persons with intellectual disabilities, but I have also learned also that friendship is not one of them. Of course when you tell people that you have such a person for a friend they will not contradict you, but that's usually motivated by politeness, it does not mean that they believe what you are telling them. The reason, I suspect, is that our common notion of friendship is guided by Aristotelian intuitions, the intuition namely that friends are in important respects like one another. One cannot really be friends with someone so unlike oneself. With regard to my own example, there seems to be plenty of evidence to support this intuition.

My friend Ronald is a man of fifty with a mild intellectual disability. People do not immediately see that he has this disability, but as soon as he opens his mouth and starts to talk, which he does most of the time, they will notice that 'something is wrong'. Ronald is an outreaching character who is happy to let everybody know that I am his best friend. For example, when we arrive at the campground where we have our annual holiday together he goes around to introduce himself, and correct people in their assumption I am his father, or his uncle, "He is my friend! Yeah, really!" The response

he receives is a friendly smile, followed by some kind of compliment. “Good for you!” “You lucky man!” Their compliments sound as if he has won himself a prize-winning ticket in the lottery.

However, when I tell people that I consider Ronald to be a friend, the response is usually quite different. “Oh, is he now?” they say, in a skeptical tone of voice. That is their Aristotelian intuition kicking in. In a sense, that’s not strange. I am an academic, after all. I supposedly embody intellect, which is what one people don't expect from Ronald. The very notion of intellectual disability as it is defined in modern times tells us what’s wrong with him. I live a life of the mind; Ronald presumably does not have much of a life in this respect. That is why friendship is not the word that comes to mind when people see us together. Whether in a restaurant, or in a shop, as soon as people notice there is 'something strange' about him, I see their faces changing. When in the next moment they glance at me it is frequently with a look in their eyes that says, “Am I lucky not to be in your shoes.” And frankly, it is not always easy to discard these glances, and not let them make me feel uneasy about going out with him. “Friends are people who make you feel at ease with yourself,” Aristotle says. I cannot in truth say, that Ronald always does that with me. But then we might ask, of course, whether Christian friendship is about making us feel at ease with ourselves. I will leave this question just hanging, and will come back to it later in this lecture.

Regarding friendship, then, an ancient metaphysical truth is still alive: sameness attracts sameness, and not otherness. And of course, widely diverging IQ-scores are not the only difference between us; they do not even signify the most significant one. I read and write books; Ronald neither reads nor writes, which he regrets. As a university professor I make a substantial amount of money; his wages consists of a handful nickels and dimes, so money is always in short supply. His apartment in the group home where

he lives is about fifteen square meters; mine is about hundred and fifty squares meters, ten times as large. My work takes me to many places in the world; I meet many people. His traveling is limited to a number of sleepovers in my apartment in Amsterdam and to our annual camping trip in another part of the country. Apart from myself he has one other 'visiting volunteer', which is how his service providers prefers to name us.

In view of all these observations, a question arises: How did I come to choose this guy for a friend? What led me to make such a decision? I raise this question explicitly, because it goes against the grain of my previous attempts to think about friendship in connection with disability. That is to say, more than once I have argued that Christian friendship has little to do with choice. We do not choose our friends; we receive them. While I think that is basically true, the question of way I chose this particular man for a friend is an obvious question to ask. It resonates with the kind of questions we often raise in connection with friendship. Questions regarding how to choose our friends, regarding what a good friend is like, what good friends owe to one another? And so on.

So, there is reason to think once again about the connection between friendship and choice because the suggestion that choosing one's friends wisely does not easily go away. So, there is reason to think once more about the nature of friendship in general, and about the nature of Christian friendship in particular.

The Presumption of Choice

The argument that separates friendship from choice somehow remains counterintuitive. So the first thing I want to do is to build the case for feeding this counter-intuition. In a sense it is obviously true that we choose our friends. For most people friendships are among the most important things in shaping their lives, which indicates that friendship – as Aristotle had it – is an activity. To explore this, I will start with briefly summarizing

the argument that separates friendship and choice. Then I will turn to the particularly modern context in which the two are indissoluble connected.

My main point against this connection has been that friends are not chosen, but received. The argument to support this claim starts with the observation that some of the most important things in our lives are not at our command, and that friendship is one of these things. We say of friendships that they are offered, and we accept that there is no obligation for anyone to become friends with any particular person. Other people cannot lay claim to our friendship. The point of being befriended, I argued, is that one is chosen for one's own sake. We cannot command other people's friendship, just like we cannot command their love, or their kindness, which means that friendship is among the goods in human life that are *other-dependent*. Being loved, being befriended, being accepted, or even being respected are ends we cannot attain by ourselves. The passive tense in these phrases is by no means accidental. Friendship belongs to the cardinal human goods that are not at our disposal and that, therefore, can only be received.

The problem with this argument, however, is that it takes friendship, and love, and kindness out of the world of human agency. It places these goods in the world *in which we find ourselves*, rather than the world *in which we operate*. Friendship is located in the world as *it acts upon us*, rather than in the world *that we create*. The difference between both perspectives comes out nicely in an aphorism by Ethel Watts Mumford, an American artist and author in the first half of the twentieth century. She illustrated a book with the title *The Cynic's Calendar*.

Mumford's aphorism also addresses friendship from the perspectives of choosing and receiving, but the author does so in a way that squarely reverses my central claim. Her aphorism reads: "God gives us our relatives; thank God we can choose our friends."

Obviously none of us can choose the family that we are born in, but thank God we at least are free to choose our friends.

Mumford's aphorism nicely captures the spirit of freedom that is characteristic of modernity, which with regard to the present context will be worth our while to explore. In modernity's vision the good life for human beings is committed to freedom in such a way that what we think worthwhile to pursue in our lives is of our own choosing. In this sense, the good life itself becomes the object of choice.

Our lives are lived under conditions many of which are not actually chosen, of course, but upon reflection they could have been. For example, I did not choose to be born in The Netherlands, but when I ask myself whether I rather would have been born in another country the answer would be "Good heavens, no!" Imagine something as dreadful as being born in Scotland! I have might have ended up being a Scottish miser, which is clearly a much less attractive character than being a Dutch miser!

This I take to be the essence of the modern conception of the good life. A human life is good when it is lived under conditions that could have been chosen had there been a choice. Obviously, family is among the conditions that are not the option of choice, which in the eyes of Mumford's cynic is to be regretted, but in this respect friendship is different. "Thank God we can choose our friends."

When it comes to the assessment of conditions that shape our lives, modernity uses two parameters, generally known as "nature" en "nurture". The first names the physical dimension of our lives, the second names their socio-cultural dimension. I will give two examples to indicate how freedom is at the heart of the modern conception of the human good.

The first example is taken from the American philosopher Tristram Engelhardt who is well known for his work in the field of bioethics. In his theory on the foundations

of secular bioethics, Engelhardt argues that the goal of medicine and healthcare is to eliminate, or at least contain the physical conditions that impede people's options in life. The good of medicine, in other words, is to serve human freedom. To be sure there are substantial conceptions of the good that may trump human freedom, but these cannot lay the foundations of bioethics in a secular context. Religious people may want to claim that the good of human being exists in the obedient service of God, but this vision of the good cannot serve as a foundation of medicine in a society that wants its public sphere to be secular. So, when it comes to what medicine and healthcare can do to make our lives better, the answer is clear. They can eliminate or at least control the conditions of our physical existence that impede our freedom. Unsurprisingly, there is no liberal argument, in Engelhardt's view to oppose people who want to use genetics in order to enhance the quality of their offspring. Nor is there a valid liberal argument to oppose people who want to use medicine to prolong their lifespan indefinitely. The order of nature names the physical conditions of our lives, but there is no secular reason not to manipulate rather than just accept them. People are free in the attempt to change, or at least control, the order of nature that impedes their freedom.

The second example relates to nurture as the other dimension of our lives. Here the socio-cultural conditions in which we are born are the object of reflection, which in the context of modernity follows the same pattern. My example here is the Canadian philosopher Will Kymlicka who is known for his work on the liberal theory of culture. Kymlicka wants to defend liberal theory – as exemplified, for example, in the work of John Rawls – against criticisms that it is committed to a notion of the 'disembedded' self that has been leveled against it particular by feminist thinkers. The disembedded self in liberal theory, according to these thinkers, understands itself as independent from social bonds. It is governed by its capacity for self-determination, and disregards the relevance

of its social relations. It takes social relations to be optional rather than constitutive for its own being. A famous metaphor in this connection is Sheila Benhabib's metaphor of the mushroom self. The liberal self appears to itself as if it were as mushroom. It pops up without any awareness of its own history of dependence.

Kymlicka rejects the critique of the disembodied self by saying that liberal theory has no problem in recognizing the social and cultural ties that nourish the self and that shape it to what it has become. The only thing that stands out in liberal theory in this connection is the so-called exit-option. Human beings are free to leave any social and cultural bonds in which they have been born and raised. The same is true of whatever communities that have been shaped by these bonds. People are free to leave. They can move into another community, become part of a different subculture, and change their identity if that is what they choose to do. Nurture, in other words, is the socio-cultural order that shapes our identity but it does not determine it. In this respect we can choose who we want to be.

On both dimensions of human existence, then, modernity's vision the good life is committed to the freedom of changing the conditions of our lives according to our own preferences. The project of modernity is in fact no other than the continuing struggle to obliterate conditions, stemming both from nature and nurture, that limit our freedom for self-determination. The apparent fact that some of the conditions that shape our lives cannot be changed does not jeopardize the relevance of choice, because upon reflection we might just be content with what they are, at least for the time being.

As I suggested before, the modern spirit of freedom explored here is captured in Mumford's aphorism. "God gives us our relatives," it says, which is something for which we *may* be grateful, but not necessarily are, as Mumford's cynic suggests. In the latter

case, when we resent our relatives, this need not be a lasting impediment to leading a good life, because we can always choose to leave.

Friendship is an entirely different matter, however. It is constituted by human freedom, which in all cases is a reason to be grateful. Friendship is a cardinal good for human beings precisely because it is rooted in deliberate action. Its point is that we choose the bonds of friendship that we want *to commit ourselves* to. In contrast to family, then, friendship is key because it is *created* rather than *received*.

The Call to Friendship

To review this liberal account of friendship as the option of choosing one's friends, I propose we look at someone who has understood the friendships he has committed himself to as a matter of calling. I am speaking of Jean Vanier, the founder and long-time leader of L'Arche, a community of people with and without disabilities living together under the same roof that he started now fifty years ago in Trosly-Breuil, north of Paris.

I assume that most of you have heard about Vanier, but what you may not know is that he is the 2015 Templeton Prize laureate, an honorary award that he received just a few weeks ago in London. The Templeton Prize is awarded to persons whose life and work is dedicated to either humanitarian service or scientific work. I mention this fact about Vanier because the very first sentence of the text that introduced him as the 2015 Templeton laureate starts with naming friendship as the essence of Vanier's life and work in L'Arche:

What began quietly in northern France in 1964, when Vanier invited two intellectually disabled men to come and live with him as friends, has now grown into 147 L'Arche residential communities in 35 countries.

With this introduction the issue of choice is apparently back on the table because Vanier deliberately invited two men to come and live with him as friends, but this appearance changes when we learn about what preceded this invitation.

In 1963, Vanier visited psychiatric hospitals in France where many people with disabilities were living, and concluded that they are among the most oppressed people in the world. Jean's understanding of their need was crystallized when an institutionalized man asked him simply, "Will you be my friend?"

Here I want to turn to Vanier's own account of this foundational moment in his life, and see how he himself reflects about what happened in that moment. My aim is to show that Vanier has always understood his life and work in L'Arche in the context of divine providence, and that this also shapes his understanding of his friendships.

In the road to the beginning of L'Arche Vanier was guided by his spiritual teacher, a Dominican priest by the name of Père Thomas Philippe. At the time he regards himself as in search of a vocation.

Without having any big vision (that's not my way) it seemed quite clear that Jesus wanted me to do something. I was – and am still – quite naïve. I didn't ask too many questions. I was open and available; I wanted to follow Jesus and live the way of the gospel."¹

To add some material content to doing "something" Father Thomas suggested to Jean he should come and spend some time in *Le Val Fleuri* in Trosly-Breuil, an institution for men with intellectual disabilities, where he was the acting chaplain. Vanier went to this place and witnessed the pain and loneliness of the men he met. *Le Val Fleuri* was a place of sadness, but Vanier also saw a glimmer of light in their faces. In spite of their despair, he

¹ Vanier, *An Ark for the Poor*, 16.

saw the longing for being connected to other people. He noticed there was a question in their eyes. It remained unspoken, but Vanier heard it as a question addressed to him:

“Will you be my friend? Will you come back tomorrow?”

*Accidents or sickness had caused them pain and suffering, but they had been wounded even more deeply by the contempt and rejection they had known. My visit moved me very much. Each of the men I met seemed starved of friendship and affection.*²

In subsequent weeks he came back a number of times only to find confirmation of his first impressions. Their need for attachment to other human beings could not but evoke a strong response in his soul. As Vanier recollected in later years, *Le Val Fleuri* was a place of great injustice, but at the same time he sensed a mysterious presence of God. It became the place where Vanier knew he had found his calling that would shape his life as a follower of Jesus.³

Discerning the mysterious presence of God in the lives of destitute human beings crying out for loving kindness and communion, Vanier found the conviction that would guide him for the rest of his life. He did not embark on designing a program to improve institutions like *Le Val Fleuri*, which would seem to be an appropriate response. Instead he followed his intuition, namely to answer the question he read in the eyes of the men.

There is an important distinction here. While there is every reason for eliminating the injustice of institutional warehousing of people with intellectual disabilities, as most western countries have been trying to do in the last decades, Vanier did not commit himself to this task. He did not aim at improving institutional arrangements. In his eyes the men he encountered in *Le Val Fleuri* longed for friendship that even improved

² Jean Vanier, *Our Journey Home: Rediscovering a Common Humanity Beyond Our Differences* (Ottawa, Ont. □: Novalis, 1997), vii.

³ *Ibid.*; Spink, *The Miracle, the Message, the Story*, 57, 73–4.

institutional arrangements would not provide. Vanier took the question he read in their eyes to be a personal one. Even more important, he took this question to be directed to him personally. Given that reading, there was only one possible answer. He discerned that the cry for communion and love he heard could only be answered by the friendship that he could offer. This discernment would become the founding moment of L'Arche. It was founded in "weakness and pain," always intent to discovering the presence of God amidst, rather than outside of suffering.⁴

When I welcomed Raphaël and Philippe there wasn't a specific or rational reason – it just seemed obvious. They were crying out for relationship, and I could provide it. Practically everything I did with L'Arche was intuitive, based on the sense that this is what should be done. There was a beauty in these disabled men that was being crushed at the large, dismal, violent institution in which they had been put. These men were persons and precious to God, and so it seemed right, even evident, for me to do something about their unjust situation.... People often ask me the reasons for starting L'Arche, but I haven't any reasons.⁵

The response that suggested itself as 'obvious' was clear by now: God was calling him to discipleship by sharing his life with people with intellectual disabilities. Vanier bought a small house in Trosly-Breuil, and welcomed the first of what would become a growing number people into his home. On August 5th in 1964 the first community of L'Arche got started.

Guided by Providence

⁴ Vanier, *Our Life Together*, 400.

⁵ Vanier, *Our Life Together*, 5–6.

The very first night of their life together was horrific. In Vanier's words, on that first night, he was "completely lost."⁶ Actually he had not asked two men in his house, but three. The third was Dany. Dany managed to wake up every hour screaming, getting more and more upset by his new surroundings, till at one point in the middle of the night he left the house and ran away. Vanier could not even find a flashlight in order to search for him. Eventually they found Dany in the early hours of the next morning, but then decided that he should return to *Le Val Fleuri*. The project of sharing their lives started with apparent failure.

The inauspicious lack of preparation on Vanier's part to get this project started was not just a matter of ignorance, but it indicates the way he worked. As the earlier quote suggested there was not much reasoning about what had to be done, in the sense that Vanier's mode of operation was not guided by the prospect of success, but by the need that was felt.⁷ So when he claims that he had no reason for starting L'Arche, he means to say there was no ulterior motive against which success or failure could be measured. In view of this point L'Arche would be more properly described as a journey than as a project. There was no conception of what it had to look like to be successful. Nor was it an idea that could be developed into a scheme for how it might be put into effect.

In order to understand the rationale for this mode of operation, it is important to notice that Vanier has always regarded L'Arche to be attending to the mystery of God's presence in the pain and anguish of its people. L'Arche did not embody a moral task to be accomplished in the service of God, but an attempt to respond to this presence. This consciousness made him see what they were trying to do as by the providence of God. It was based on the trust that by attending closely to the wounds that had been inflicted

⁶ Quoted in Spink, *The Miracle, the Message, the Story*, 61.

⁷ Greig, *The Story of L'Arche*, p.8.

upon them by rejection and rebuke, there would always be a way to find out what to do next. As Jason Greig puts this: “Although he did not fully know the way forward, his trust in God’s providence and the guidance by the Holy Spirit meant that he just needed to open himself to where the Gospel might lead him and then respond adequately.”⁸

I want to suggest that seeing his undertaking in this providential light reveals Vanier’s understanding of L’Arche as a gift. Vanier writes about the early years how one sign or gift led them to another sign or gift: “It was as if we were walking on a road without knowing quite where it was leading. We were sure it was leading somewhere and that it was all in God’s plan of love for the poor and the weak.”⁹

This is not to say that Vanier’s endeavor was akin to charismatic types who go around preaching “Just believe in Jesus and everything will be all right.” To begin with, his providential understanding of L’Arche as a community guided by the Spirit did not preclude the need for professional support from psychologists and psychiatrists. They were called upon and have served its communities throughout its history. But their knowledge and expertise never displaced, or called into question the primary task of finding God’s presence in their midst of their community.

Second, the absence of managerial logic in the way in which L’Arche operates might suggest a lack of sustained reasoning when it comes to moral decision-making. But this suggestion would be mistaken also. Vanier occasionally talks in a way about his work that might leave that impression, for example when he says that he had really no idea what he was doing. But this figure of speech is only to say that indeed L’Arche was not a preconceived idea that was ready to be carried out. To use the same language that Marco Hofheinz used yesterday: L’Arche is not the application of Christian belief.

⁸ *Idem.*

⁹ Vanier, *An Ark for the Poor*, 53.

Vanier is not an idealist. As I have put the very same point elsewhere: “L’Arche had to be lived before it was thought of. In the beginning was the deed.”

For Vanier the Gospel itself provided the core of what it meant to respect each and every human being. It does not do so in abstract categories such as for example the concept of human personhood, but in the very concrete sense of reading people’s actual presence in the light of the Gospel. In this light, each and every of the core members of L’Arche appears as an invaluable and irreplaceable gift. It is not by accident that Vanier often uses the language of the Beatitudes to name people with intellectual disabilities; he uses this language because of his strong conviction that we find God in the presence of their afflictions.¹⁰ For Vanier, then, respect for every human person is at the heart of the Gospel. So far for being superficial about the task of moral decision-making, finding out what God is telling them is hard work. I don’t think I ever found it referenced in Vanier’s writings, but his posture seems to reflect Augustine’s dictum *Ama et quod vis fac*, “Love and [then] do what you want.”¹¹ But of course, for Vanier, as for Augustine, it takes to attend to the Gospel to discern what love means. It means trying to discern the beauty of the person in the midst of their affliction and rejection and in doing so restore the humanity that had been taken away from them.¹²

The Gift of Friendship

It occurs to me that following Vanier’s lead about providence can help to see how the two perspectives that I have been exploring here go together. Let me add that in trying to give an account of how I see this, I am addressing the issue that arose yesterday with regard to Marco Hofheinz’s paper. Marco said he was exploring friendship as theological

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¹¹ Ioannis epistulam ad Parthos, tractatus X

¹² Vanier, *Our Journey Home*, xiii.

key to read the three different offices of Christ and hold them together, but in the end, as Ralph Kunz suggested, he might just have done the opposite, and offer his reading of the threefold office as a key to arrive at an Christian understanding of friendship.

In his response Hofheinz attested to his Barthian conviction that in proper theological understanding the Gospel precedes human experience, for which he used the language of subject and predicate. But it seems to me that the circle of this logic can be opened up precisely by asking how God's presence in the world is actually working in friendships that present themselves as exemplification of Christian faith. Vanier's reading of the friendships found in L'Arche in the light of divine providence might just be the kind of example showing us how this works.

There is no doubt that on the level of human experience we choose our friends, not to say, "Thank God we can choose our friends." But there is equally no doubt that this experience might take on a quite different meaning when read in the light of God's presence in our lives.

To see what I have in mind, think for a minute about the story of Joseph and his brothers in Genesis 45. Assuming we all know the story as it unfolds in chapters 37-45, its final act is the visit by his brothers to the palace of Egypt's viceroy, while they have no clue that he is their brother. When he reveals himself the brother are immediately reminded of their crime, and they become very anxious that now, finally, their brother will get his revenge. But then Joseph speaks.

I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me there; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it

*was not you who sent me here but God.*¹³

There are apparently two readings of the story of Joseph's betrayal by his brothers, then. One from the point of human experience, in this case the experience of both Joseph and his brothers, and the other from the point of view of divine providence. On the level of human experience it is the story of jealousy and betrayal, but in the perspective of divine providence, this experience takes a quite different turn, which at some point later Joseph makes explicit. "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today."¹⁴

This twofold perspective is true of all of human experience, of course, and not limited to the subject we are discussing here. We can look at whatever is happening with regard to the friendships in our lives by framing it in the categories of the present day and age, and then we will talk about the wisdom of choosing friends, of friendship betrayed, of friendships found and lost, and there is no harm in that. After all we are children of our present day and age. But that's not all, and I would venture to add, for Christians there is another perspective to read what is happening in their lives, and that is to ask where is God present in these events, what is he telling us?

When Vanier entered the institution of Le Val Fleuri he read a question in the eyes of the people he met there. "Will you be my friend? Will you come back?" No doubt he could have said that he would certainly love to do that, but that there were also other commitments that he could not just abandon. But he didn't. The reason he gives is that he ventured to believe that he was called to be friends with these people. On the one level, of level of human experience, there are all sorts of awkward stories that can be told

¹³ Genesis 45: 4-7.

¹⁴ Genesis 50:20.

about L'Arche. Read Vanier about community life, and how annoying that is, and you will get the picture. In the light of their Christian faith, on the other hand, it is clear what the people of L'Arche have trusted themselves to do, guided by the belief in God's presence. They have ventured to look at the people that came to them, and ask themselves this question: "When we look at these human beings with the eyes of God, what do we see?" Once that question was raised, it was pretty obvious that they were called to be friends with them.

In the light of the Christian faith, then, friendship is a gift. Called to be friends is not a moral task, then. Friendship is a gift, but not in the abstract form. There are bad friends, and therefore bad friendships. Learning to discern Christian friendships, I might add, is learning to look at what is happening in our lives in the light of a providential God. God will send us the friends we need.