

Cuba's Earthy Traditions, and Jean Vanier

By [Prof Susan Babbitt](#)

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Jean Vanier, dead last week, was philanthropist and Christian, founder of L'Arche, a remarkable organization for developmentally disabled. Vanier was also a philosopher who left Academia for society's vulnerable. I used his *Becoming Human*, in class after philosophy class, to explain 20th century Marxist philosopher, **Che Guevara**.

The connection surprises some. They don't know Cuba's earthy traditions. "Earthy" is the word used by Cuban philosopher, **Cintio Vitier**, to link early 19th century Cuban priests - reformists - to the radical vision of independence leader, **José Martí**, and the eventual Cuban Revolution.[i]

It has to do with feelings. More specifically, it has to do with energy arising when we do the right thing, where "right thing" is not necessarily moral but useful. It's creative mental energy, making imaginable what was not imaginable previously. Ancients called it "faith".

It's confidence, not intellectual but felt, explained by laws of nature, cause and effect, mind/body connection.

When you know you're doing what you're supposed to do, you gain, even if your actions fail. It's a kind of dynamic reciprocity. Earthy. Che Guevara's "hombre nuevo" is in this line. It's not a new being, as critics claim. It's people aware - in a felt, experiential sense - of shared humanity.

It's what Vanier explained. He left a life of privilege to live with disabled folk, saying it made him more human. It was about truth, not morality. He identified a paradox: We seek community to avoid loneliness. But loneliness is the natural state of reflective human beings, aware of vulnerability.

We escape our condition through community, but loneliness, being universally shared, provides grounds for *human* community: between people *as people*. "Reality is the first principle of truth", and the reality of human existence is insecurity. Loneliness "can only be covered over, it can never actually go away".

His point is how to *discover* community. It was Guevara's point, but it goes back further in Cuba. It was raised by priests who wanted independence from Spain, the US, the UK and slavery. It was a time when ideas from Europe persuaded young people "it's all good", if it feels right.

José de la Luz y Caballero, who could have been a rich lawyer, taught Philosophy because of slavery, a social cancer. Privileged progressives criticized Spanish colonialism, resisted US annexation, and decried social vices, but could not imagine living without slaves. Slavery was an expectation.

José Antonio Saco, who preceded Luz at the institute founded by Félix Varela (1811), could not imagine abolition. Precisely because slavery was so taken for granted, consistent with opposition to almost all other wrongs, Luz dedicated himself to educating privileged youth about how to know justice when injustice is part of who you are.

Luz was a Christian, of Vanier's sort. He cared about truth. He was a scientist who knew how understanding works. It depends on expectations, rooted in habit patterns. We identify with them and they must be broken, occasionally. A remarkable national debate (1836-8), the Cuban Philosophical Polemic, was about thinking. It anticipates late 20th century philosophy of science, in North America.

But North American philosophers don't accept "earthy" thinking.

It involves loss. Vanier wrote about "brokenness". It is how we know the invisible, the "discarded":

"Why are we unable to look Lazarus straight in the eye and listen to him? ... [W]e will discover that he is a human being ... That is why it is dangerous to enter into a relationship with the Lazaruses of the world".

We risk being changed. Loss.

It's also about gain. According to Vitier, the leaders of Cuba's agonizingly long struggle for independence shared an idea: Freedom requires raising the most vulnerable. Piero Gleijeses says it's why Cuba went to Africa in the 70s, defying the Soviets. The CIA knew it: Cuba sided with the poor and non-White. The USSR was rich and white. The division between North and South was the major fault line.[ii]

This is the "earthy" thinking that Vitier refers to: formation of people through bold, sacrificial resistance to deep-seated, dehumanizing lies.

Vanier's brokenness defies a lie of that sort: part of the social fabric. A useful, compassionate new book on dementia, *The Last Ocean*, [iii] argues that the tragedy of dementia is loss of a coherent self. We spend entire lifetimes building a "vast rich palace of the self", which falls away. US philosopher **Ronald Dworkin** says that without a *sense* of self - different from a self - suicide is rational.

Yet that "palace" is a myth. And seeking it - a *sense* of self as opposed to a self - is counterproductive. You seek to escape insecurity, fabricating an identity - a 'narrative self' - and you deny in the process what is really shared: insecurity.

Guevara called it an "invisible cage" or the "bourgeois myth of the self-made man". **Patrick Modiano** (Nobel Prize 2014) shows why. [iv] He tries "to impose some order on my memories. But many are missing, and most of them remain isolated." He can't do it, and yet the stories he wants to forget "rise to the surface like a drowned man".

"Real encounters" are more interesting. They might "drag you in their wake when they disappear". But they're real, unlike the "coherent self" of memories, made of "bits of sentences spoken by anonymous voices".

We don't accept illness and we don't admit death. We suffer for that. But in arguing that we

are diminished by dismissing the vulnerable, *The Last Ocean* nonetheless maintains the myth that prevents seeing those vulnerable as people: a secure place that doesn't exist, not just for those with dementia, but for anyone.

So argues Vanier, and Guevara, and earthy thinkers for millennia.

Some are Lazaruses. Looking them in the eye and hearing their story involves loss: of lies, unimaginable to give up, like liberalism and "development". But there's also gain. Vanier's life was all about that.

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Susan Babbitt is author of *Humanism and Embodiment* (Bloomsbury 2014). She is a frequent contributor to *Global Research*.

Notes

[i] *Ese sol del mundo moral* (Havana 1996) 14-15

[ii] *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington and Africa 1959-76*(2002) 377

[iii] Nicci Gerrard, Penquin Press (2019).

[iv] *Sleep of Memory*(Yale University Press, 2018)

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