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STRICT EMBARGO:
Wednesday, March 11, 2015
10:30 AM GMT (London)
6:30 AM EDT (New York)

STATEMENT BY JEAN VANIER: “Transforming our Hearts”

Templeton Prize News Conference, British Academy, London, March 11, 2015

I first of all want to thank you, Jennifer Simpson, and your father, Dr. John M. Templeton, Jr., and all those who work with you, especially the judges, for the wonderful prize you have awarded me.

I want to thank in a special way all those I represent here, people with intellectual disabilities of L’Arche and Faith and Light. They have brought me so much over the past 50 years, and have taught me more than all those teachers and professors in schools and universities that I have attended. They have taught me about what it means to be human and about how our societies can be transformed to become more peaceful and unified.

Our world is evolving rapidly, and is at a crisis point today. Either we will move together towards a deeper unity of all people, in a spirit of openness, fraternity and mutual respect, or the divisions that exist will grow into terrible forces of fear and hate, encouraging wars, terrorism and even the use of atomic weapons, each of which is a form of suicide for humanity.

A change for peace is beginning. The horrible age of slavery, where human beings were cruelly brought from Africa to the Americas, has largely gone. Unfortunately other forms of slavery, such as prostitution and sex trafficking, still exist. That age however left after effects, in apartheid and in forms of racism that persist today. Thank God that the people of Africa, as well as the indigenous people of Canada and other countries, are no longer seen as “savages”, but as dignified peoples with sacred traditions that could benefit all of humanity.

There is also a change in the way people with intellectual disabilities are seen. For many years these wonderful people were seen as “errors”, or as the fruit of evil committed by their parents or ancestors. We see for instance in the Gospel of John, the disciples of Jesus asking him about a

man born blind. Was he born blind because of his sins, or because of the sins of his parents? This idea that people with disabilities were the fruit of evil committed by ancestors still remains in some strands of religions. Children born with disabilities were traditionally hidden away in big institutions, or in poorer countries where institutions did not exist, in the cupboards of their homes, or sent as beggars into the streets. They were seen as hardly human, and as a shame and dishonor for their parents. They were terribly humiliated and rejected. Today we are discovering that these people have a wealth of human qualities that can change the hearts of those caught up in the culture of winning and of power.

There is also a change in the way we are discovering the qualities of a person, hidden underneath their capacities of knowledge and of power. The value of human beings resided so often in their qualities of strength, of competence, of efficiency and of knowledge. Sometimes, fortunately, these were also coupled with values of honesty and integrity. Countries, groups and people were more or less fighting to win and to be the best, to have more and to do more. So it was that generals and politicians were applauded, monuments created in their honor, and streets named after them. It was power and competence that defined the identity of someone.

Change is gradually taking place, like a little seed in fertile earth, a seed of peace. For this change the whole world of psychology has helped us all to see how people can be manipulated by their unconscious needs to win, and by compulsions grounded in the fear of losing and of being no good. People can throw themselves into ideologies that cut them off from experience and reality.

Universal peace can only come if we develop and awaken those very human qualities, hidden under the more superficial needs for power and of winning, which lead us to welcome reality. These qualities are those linked to the heart – the capacity to love people, to respect them deeply, to live authentic relationships with others, to yearn for truth and justice in the huge family of humanity; qualities of humility, of forgiveness and of compassion for those who are weaker and in need; in short to seek the wisdom of the heart.

There is also a huge evolution as people from different religions begin to meet. All the religious leaders of our world met in Assisi in 1986 under the inspiration and the invitation of Pope John Paul II. A new vision was being created and opened up the road towards collaborating for peace. Those who had for a long time been fighting each other on religious issues, began to *meet* each other and to *listen to each other*. It is not just a question of dialogue between religions, but essentially a meeting of people from different religions.

With this wisdom we learn to meet as human beings. The horrors of Auschwitz and of the atomic bomb at Hiroshima have been a wakeup call. The cry is for no more war. No more treating people as evil or just to be pushed away as having no value. We must start to meet: people must meet people; we are all human beings. Before being Christians or Jews or Muslims, before being Americans or Russians or Africans, before being generals or priests, rabbis or imams, before having visible or invisible disabilities, we are all human beings with hearts capable of loving.

It is here that I want to speak of what we have learned in L'Arche and Faith and Light. As you know, people with intellectual disabilities are not able to assume important roles of power and of efficacy. They are essentially people of the heart. When they meet others they do not have a hidden agenda for power or for success. Their cry, their fundamental cry, is for a relationship, a meeting heart to heart. It is this meeting that awakens them, opens them up to life, and calls them forth to love in great simplicity, freedom and openness. When those ingrained in a culture of winning and of individual success really meet them, and enter into friendship with them, something amazing and wonderful happens. They too are opened up to love and even to God. They are changed at a very deep level. They are transformed and become more fundamentally human.

Let me tell you about Pauline. She came to our community in 1970, hemiplegic, epileptic, one leg and one arm paralyzed, filled with violence and rage. It was not easy to live in one of our small homes with her. Our psychiatrist gave us good insight and advice: her violence was a cry for friendship. For so long she had been humiliated, seen as hardly human, having no value, handicapped. What was important was that the assistants take time to be with her, listen to her and show their appreciation for her. Little by little she evolved and became more peaceful and responded to their love. Her violence disappeared. She didn't particularly like to work in our workshops, but she loved to sing and to dance. When she was quite a bit older I would go and visit her. Sometimes she would put her good arm on my head and she would say "poor old man". It takes a long time to move from violence to tenderness. The assistants who saw her initially as a very difficult person, began to discover who she was under her violence and under her disabilities. They *also* began to change. They discovered that for a person, growth was not primarily climbing the ladder of power and success, but of learning to love people as they are. Love, in the words of St Paul, is to be patient, to serve, to bear all, to believe all, and to hope all.

Isn't it vital that the culture of winning so common in our societies today, be transformed? This culture of winning means that few people win, and *many* lose. Those who cannot win are shoved aside, and very quickly society becomes divided. On one side are those who are gaining and producing money and goods, and on the other, those who need to be looked after. A terrible rift is

created between winners and losers, between the so-called normal and the so-called abnormal, between the rich and the poor.

The social difficulties then become enormous. The winners must look after, in every way and in particular financially, all the losers. With medical advances, more fragile people live, lifespans lengthen, and the losers increase in number. Many young people, disillusioned in the face of societies built for winners, take to drugs and alcohol because of their sense of not making it. So we find large numbers of people of all ages and abilities or disabilities in need, and few winners willing to support them. Very quickly people entertain talk of eliminating the weakest to “solve the problems”. We risk moving towards a philosophy of a perfect race, instead of welcoming the poorest and weakest among us, who transforms us.

For peace, people must meet across differences. I say to *meet* people, not just to send them money and offer better professionals. All need to change. Fear must be changed into openness. Those on the rich side need to change and open their hearts to those on the other side. Those on the needy side also need to change; from anger, anguish, depression and a sense of being victims of a society, they must become agents of hope and of love. They too need to be awoken to love.

It is only as we meet and share together person to person, eye to eye, and heart to heart that we discover what it means to be human and to discover the joy of being together, working together towards a common mission of peace and unity. It is only moving from winning and loneliness to collaboration, and from hostility to seeing enemies as friends, that we discover the real meaning of peace.

L'Arche and Faith and Light are like an immense laboratory. They are places of healing of rifts and of hearts where all become more human. There are now other forms of community developing, like ours, where people in need are living with people from so-called normal society. There are communities where people from the streets are now living in apartments with volunteers who desire to live with them; the same is happening with people who are mentally sick, with people who are old and in the fog of Alzheimer's, as well as with men and women from prisons seeking rehabilitation.

What is important in all these communities is not simply to have good professionals and to do things for people in need. Neither is it just through material aid or through new technology that people can be helped, though these can be useful. *People are healed and become more human as they enter into real relationships with others.* They then discover that under all the feelings of stress, rejection and humiliation, that *they are someone!* Those in need and those who come to help are *all* being healed, and are all, *together*, becoming more human. Our society will really become human as we

discover that the strong *need* the weak, just as the weak need the strong. We are all together working for the common good.

My dream for this magnificent prize you have given me, and through me to L'Arche and Faith & Light, is for us to create spaces and opportunities for such meetings, meetings which transform hearts. Places where those caught up in the world of success and normality, and those who are in need, but who are also teachers of love and of simplicity, come together. Places where they can share together, eat together, laugh and celebrate together, weep and pray together; where the hearts of those who carry power in our society can be melted and rest; and where all together we may become a sign of peace.

Peace and love to you.

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