Finding My Way Home

PATHWAYS TO LIFE AND THE SPIRIT

Henri J.M. Nouwen

Discussion Questions for Nouwen Reading Groups
Five week Program

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About Henri Nouwen

The internationally renowned priest and author, respected professor and beloved pastor Henri J.M. Nouwen wrote over 40 books on the spiritual life. He corresponded regularly in English, Dutch, German, French and Spanish with hundreds of friends and reached out to thousands through his Eucharistic celebrations, lectures and retreats. Since his death in 1996, ever-increasing numbers of readers, writers, teachers and seekers have been guided by his literary legacy. Nouwen’s books have sold over 2 million copies and been published in over 22 languages.

Born in Nijkerk, Holland, on January 24, 1932, Nouwen felt called to the priesthood at a very young age. He was ordained in 1957 as a diocesan priest and studied psychology at the Catholic University of Nijmegen. In 1964 he moved to the United States to study at the Menninger Clinic. He went on to teach at the University of Notre Dame, and the Divinity Schools of Yale and Harvard. For several months during the 1970s, Nouwen lived and worked with the Trappist monks in the Abbey of the Genesee, and in the early 1980s he lived with the poor in Peru. In 1985 he was called to join L’Arche in Trosly, France, the first of over 100 communities founded by Jean Vanier where people with developmental disabilities live with assistants. A year later Nouwen came to make his home at L’Arche Daybreak near Toronto, Canada. He died suddenly on September 21st, 1996, in Holland and is buried in King City, Ontario, not far from the Daybreak Community.

Nouwen believed that what is most personal is most universal. He wrote, “By giving words to these intimate experiences I can make my life available to others.” His spirit lives on in the work of the Henri Nouwen Society, Henri Nouwen Stichting (Holland), the Henri Nouwen Legacy Trust, the Henri J. M. Nouwen Archives and Research Collection, and in all who live the spiritual values of solitude, community and ministry, to which he dedicated his life.


1 Photo of children with Henri in Guatemala by Peter Weiskel. Used with permission.
2 Henri Nouwen in Ukraine.
Finding My Way Home
PATHWAYS TO LIFE AND THE SPIRIT
by Henri J. M. Nouwen

© 2001 by the Estate of Henri J. M. Nouwen
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Discussion questions for Nouwen Reading Groups
Prepared by Claire S. Merritt

Suggested number of meetings for this book: 5

This book joins together in one volume three previously published essays: “The Path of Power,” “The Path of Peace” and “The Path of Waiting,” plus an article, “The Path of Living and Dying” from unpublished material. All reflect Henri Nouwen’s search for his true spiritual home, a search shared by all those who feel homeless in our modern world and unfulfilled by the paths to success offered by our secular culture.

Preface and Part One: The Path of Power, pp. 11-49
Questions for Discussion:

1. In the Preface Sue Mosteller summarizes the book and then states that: “It names the powers that seduce us to a life of unfulfilled self-seeking, as well as describing some practical choices to keep us on the path of meaning and faithfulness” (p. 15). Identify times in your life when you have been seduced into following a path that ultimately disappointed you. What made you realize that you were on the wrong path and how did you choose a better one?

2. Henri blames our sense of insecurity on our tendency to use whatever power we have in order to get control. When have you felt insecure and what did you do to regain control?

3. According to Henri, “The most insidious, divisive, and wounding power is the power used in the service of God” (p. 28). Give examples of this from history and current events. Have you been wounded personally by this abuse of power? If so, how did you respond?

4. Henri states: “It is through total and unmitigated powerlessness that God shows us divine mercy” (p. 31). How do you understand this mystery?

5. How do you respond to the various forms of power held by people and institutions of our world? How, according to Henri, has God responded through Jesus?

6. How does the life of Jesus exemplify what he teaches in the Beatitudes? In what ways are we being asked to respond to such powerlessness in others?
7. Henri states: “If a theology of weakness becomes a theology for weaklings, then such a theology is a comfortable excuse for incompetence, submissiveness, self-denigration, and defeat in all fields!” (p. 38). Discuss the dangers of such an interpretation of powerlessness.

8. How can we understand the paradox of a theology of weakness that is in reality a theology of power?

9. What is the nature of God’s power as manifested in Jesus? How can we participate in this power?

10. Which persons, either public figures or individuals you know personally, are powerful in the way that Henri describes? How have they influenced you?

11. Henri suggests three disciplines to help us see life through God’s eyes: a focus on the poor, the trust that God gives us the resources to care for the poor, and the ability to be surprised by joy. How can these disciplines empower us to do God’s work?

Notes
Part Two: The Path of Peace, pp. 51-85
Questions for Discussion:

1. After telling the story of Adam, Henri wonders: “For Adam’s gift to be recognized, someone has to lift it up, hand it on, and someone has to receive it. That, maybe, is the deepest vocation of the one who assists people with disabilities. It is helping them to share their gifts and helping others to recognize and receive them” (p. 61). Do you share your life with people with disabilities? How did your relationship evolve? What were this person’s gifts that you received and might wish to announce?

2. “Adam’s peace is first of all a peace rooted in his being” (p. 61). How does Adam’s helplessness instill a sense of peace in Henri?

3. According to Henri, “Peace is not primarily about doing. It is first of all the art of being” (p. 64). Do you agree? Why or why not? When do you believe it is necessary to just be? When is it important to do?

4. When Henri says that Adam is all heart, what does he mean? How is his definition of “heart” different from what we usually think of?

5. In what ways can Adam be seen as “the preferable mediator of that first love poured into his heart by God” (p. 69)?

6. How is Adam, who is the weakest member of Henri’s family at L’Arche, the strongest bond that creates peace and community?

7. What have you gained from Adam’s story? How can it help you in your own peacemaking efforts?

8. Discuss how Jesus is the source of all peace.

9. How do you understand Henri’s assertion that true peace is found in our weakness?

10. Henri ends this essay with the Hassidic tale of how to recognize the hour of dawn. What does this story mean to you?

Notes
Part Three: The Path of Waiting, pp. 87-117
Questions for Discussion:

1. Henri observes that “waiting is a dry desert between where we are and where we want to be” (p. 91). Describe a time in your life when you were waiting for something. How do you feel about having to wait?

2. Give examples, both from personal experience and world events, that show how fear leads to violence and aggression.

3. Recount briefly the stories of the characters in the opening chapters of Luke that are examples of waiting. What are they waiting for and what enables them to wait actively without becoming discouraged?

4. What are the differences between passive and active waiting?

5. What prevents us from being open and trusting in our waiting?

6. What is the importance of family and community in our waiting? If you have ever been alone in waiting for something, how was that experience different from waiting in the company of others?

7. Henri quotes Simone Weil, who wrote: “Waiting patiently in expectation is the foundation of the spiritual life” (p. 101). What do these words mean to you?

8. Henri uses the expression “to be handed over” to distinguish between Jesus’ active life when he does things and the time after his arrest when things are done to him. Describe a time in your life, perhaps a serious illness, when you were “handed over” to others. How did this make you feel?

9. Henri says: “Jesus in his passion is the one who waits for our response” (p. 112). How does this reveal his love, as well as his suffering?

10. Explain the paradox of the statement: “Precisely when Jesus is being handed over into his passion, he manifests his glory” (p. 113). How can we see new life and resurrection in this time of weakness? How can this kind of waiting help us in our own suffering?

11. Henri says: “We can learn to be obedient people who do not always try to go back to the action but who recognize the fulfillment of our deepest humanity in passion, in waiting” (p. 117). How is this kind of waiting different from being passive?

Notes
1. A brush with death made Henri reflect on his own mortality and invited him to live his remaining life more fully. What events in your life have led to your own reflections on death? How have they changed the way you live?

2. How does our culture discourage us from thinking about death?

3. Henri states: “Jesus sees that the real fruits of his life will mature after his death” (p. 126). What does this statement mean to you?

4. Henri asks, “how can I live so that my death will be fruitful for others?” (p. 126). Reflect on the years that have passed since Henri’s death and try to answer his question.

5. Jesus knew that he was God’s beloved and he taught us that we too are the beloved sons and daughters of God. How can the realization of this love change the way we live our lives and approach death? How is this being chosen by God different from being chosen in our culture?

6. Reflect on the passages that you have gone through in your life. How have these experiences (joyful as well as painful) changed you? To what extent have you lived each passage “as an exodus to greater life and freedom?” (p. 135).

7. Henri says: “When I die love continues to be active, and from full communion with God I am present by love to those I leave behind” (p. 140). Illustrate this statement by recalling someone no longer living who has been transformational in your life.

8. Henri reminds us “that fruits are always the result of vulnerability” (p. 142). How does Jesus’ death illustrate this? How can this be true for our own lives?

9. What can we do to mitigate our fear of death?

10. Because parts of this essay were addressed to a conference on HIV/AIDS, Henri makes special reference to persons who die young. In what ways is such a death harder to deal with than that of one who dies in old age?

11. What thoughts have you given to your own death? How has this book changed your feelings about death?
Nouwen Reading Group book:__________________________________

Group Members:

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Leadership tasks that could be shared within your group:

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<th>Date of meeting</th>
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<th>Video or DVD segments: <em>Journey of the Heart</em></th>
<th>Reader: themes, questions, text passages</th>
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Nouwen Reading Groups

Feedback Form

Thank you for your interest in Nouwen Reading Groups! We would be most appreciative if you could take a few minutes at the end of your last meeting to complete this feedback form and send to our office in the United States or Canada. We are eager to hear about your experience in the group and about the materials prepared by the Henri Nouwen Society. We continue to learn as we go along and with your help, we hope to improve and expand our offerings. Blessings!

1. Why did you decide to start/join a Nouwen reading group? (check as many as are appropriate for you)

☐ Enjoy discussing books  ☐ Interested in discussions of a spiritual nature
☐ Enjoy getting together with friends for any reason  ☐ Want to meet new people who are interested in spirituality  ☐ Nouwen’s writing resonates with me
☐ Did not know Nouwen’s work but was interested ☐ Other: ________________________________

2. How did you invite people to join your reading group/learn about the reading group?

☐ Spoke with friends/co-workers  ☐ Notice in church bulletin/newsletter
☐ Announcement to congregation  ☐ Email  ☐ Facebook
☐ MeetUp.com  ☐ Other
_____________________________________________________________________________  
_____________________________________________________________________________

3. What book did you reflect on? _________________________________________________

4. Why were you interested in discussing this particular book?

_____________________________________________________________________________

5. How would you evaluate the Henri Nouwen Society reflection guide? (please circle appropriate number)

Not helpful    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10  Extremely helpful

6. How was the reflection guide used?

☐ Used it as a starting point only  ☐ Followed it carefully  ☐ Didn’t use it at all
What would be one step we could take to make our reading group resources more helpful?____________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

7. Was the Nouwen Reading Group a positive experience for you? ☐ Yes ☐ No Why? ______________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

8. Would you consider leading or joining another Nouwen Reading Group in the future? ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Maybe

Additional comments welcome:____________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

Thank you!

Additional questions for group leader:

9. Where did your group meet? ☐ Your home ☐ Church hall ☐ Library ☐ School ☐ Other:____________________ City:____________________ State/Province:________

10. How often did your group meet? ☐ Once a week ☐ Bi-weekly ☐ Monthly ☐ Other:____________________ Duration of meeting:______________ hours

11. Your group met from (month)______ (year)______ to (month)______ (year)______

12. How many people were in the group at the beginning?________ At the end?________

13. What occurred during your first meeting?

☐ Prayer ☐ Fellowship ☐ Invited others to take on some leadership roles (ex. introduction to a chapter; organize refreshments, prayer, etc.) ☐ Viewed “Journey of the Heart: the life of Henri Nouwen” film ☐ Discussion based on reflection guide ☐ Other:______________________________________________________________

Additional comments welcome:____________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
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Please return completed forms to Maureen Wright at the Henri Nouwen Society:
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In the USA — P.O. Box 220522, St. Louis, MO 63122