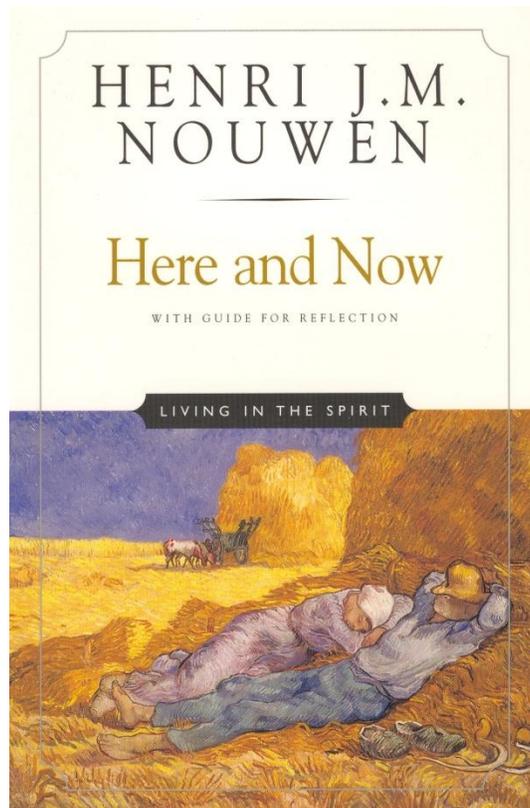


Here and Now

Living in the Spirit

By Henri J.M. Nouwen

Discussion Questions for Nouwen Reading Groups



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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.

For more information about Henri Nouwen, his writing and the work of the Henri Nouwen Society visit: www.HenriNouwen.org.

¹ Photo of children with Henri in Guatemala by Peter Weiskel. Used with permission.

² Henri Nouwen in Ukraine.

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Prepared by Claire Merritt

Chapter 1: Living in the Present

One: A New Beginning

In what ways does your past shape your present and your future?
What voices from your past experience keep you from doing something new?

Two: Without “Oughts” and “Ifs”

Do you feel guilty about things you have done or not done?
What do you worry about?
How can you experience God in the present moment?

Three: Birthdays

How do you celebrate your birthday and that of your family members? What meaning do your birthday celebrations have for you?

Four: Here and Now

Nouwen sees God as “a lover, whose only desire is to give us what our hearts most desire.” How do you see God?
How does prayer lead you into an awareness of God’s loving presence?

Five: Our Inner Room

Do you have a favorite prayer? Does it help you to quiet your mind?

Six: With Others

How do you pray for others?
Are there people you find it hard to pray for? Why?

Seven: The Hub of Life

What is at the center of your life?
How does your center relate to God and to others?

Chapter II: Joy

One: Joy and Sorrow

What differences do you see between joy and happiness?
When have you experienced both joy and sorrow at the same time?

Two: The Choice

Do you agree with Nouwen that we can choose joy?
Nouwen suggests that we end each day by remembering its events with gratitude.
Have you ever tried this and, if so, how did it affect you?

Three: Speaking about the Sun

Describe someone you know who spreads joy like Nouwen's friend. How do you react to that person?

Four: Surprised by Joy

What surprises you more often – sorrow or joy?

Five: Joy and Laughter

How would you define play?
In our busy lives how can we become like children and make time for play?

Six: No Victims

Can you maintain a hope-filled attitude in the midst of all the suffering and evil of our world? If so, what enables you to maintain that hope?

Seven: The Fruit of Hope

How does hope differ from optimism? Do you agree with Nouwen's distinction between the two?

What does Nouwen mean when he says that "joy ... is the fruit of hope"?
Do you often reminisce about the "good old days"? In what ways might your memories of the past be selective and unrealistic?

Eight: Beyond Wishes

How do wishes differ from hope and happiness from joy?
Share an experience of pain that brought you closer to God.

Chapter III: Suffering

One: Embracing the Pain

How do you deal with pain and sorrow?
In what ways does Jesus' life and death help you to reconcile the paradoxes of suffering and joy, death and life?

Two: A Meal on a Tombstone

How can we help others, especially children, come to terms with the death of a loved one?

Three: A Fellowship of the Weak

Do you feel comfortable sharing your pain with others? If not, why not?
If you tell a problem to someone how would you like that person to respond?

Four: Beyond Individualism

Where do you see yourself on a continuum between individualism and community? What dangers do you see in the two extremes?
How can we break down the barriers that keep us from relating to each other with compassion?

Five: Our Desire for Communion

In what ways do you seek communion?
How do you nurture your communion with God?

Six: Stepping over Our Wounds

Nouwen states that we are most wounded by those who love us and are close to us. Do you agree and, if so, why do you think this is true?
How can we increase our capacity to forgive those who have wounded us?

Seven: Faithful to Our Vocation

How do you react to all the suffering in the world?
How can we keep from being overwhelmed by all the suffering yet still care about those who suffer?

Eight: The Way of the Dalai Lama

Do you agree with the Dalai Lama's position? Why or why not?
Jesus asked God to forgive those who crucified him. Should we strive for that kind of absolute forgiveness and, if so, how can we attain it?

Nine: The Hurts of Love

Tell about a time that you lost someone or something you loved. How did you come to terms with your loss?

Chapter IV – Conversion

One: The Spirit of Love

Have there been times in your life when the Spirit of God moved you to do something that surprised you?
How can we open ourselves to God's Spirit?

Two: Turn Around

Nouwen states that "God's kingdom is ... the active presence of God's spirit within us." How do you envision God's kingdom?
Have you ever had the experience of beating against a locked door? How did you resolve your dilemma?

Three: Answer from Above

What does Nouwen mean when he says that "Jesus answers from above to questions raised from below"?
What does he mean by "being reborn from above"?

Four: Invitation to Conversion

What do you look for when you read newspapers, magazines or books?
What is meant by reading "in a spiritual way"?

Five: Why AIDS

The AIDS epidemic has raised some profound questions. Share your thoughts on it. How do you see God's role in it?

Six: The Reverse Mission

What is meant by "reverse mission"? When and where have you experienced it?

Seven: God's Questions

What are some of the signs of our time that we need to interpret?
Whom do we condemn and how does this keep us from being a true follower of Jesus?

Eight: The Burden of Judgment

Do you judge others and, if so, how hard would it be to give up this tendency to judge?
How do you react when others judge you?

Nine: Claiming God's Love

On what do you base your identity and self-worth?
Has your experience of God's non-judgmental love evolved over the years?

Chapter V – Disciplined Living

One: Living for the Gold

Do you have a goal that you pursue with as much dedication as an Olympic athlete?
How do you structure your life to attain your goal?

Two: A Clear Goal

What is the role of prayer in the pursuit of our lives' goals?

Three: Eternal Life

What distinction does Nouwen make between “eternal life” and “afterlife”?
How can we know eternal life in the present moment?
How can Nouwen's insights help us overcome our fear of death?

Four: Spiritual Reading

What books have you read that nourished you spiritually?

Five: Reading Spiritually

Why do you read what you read on a daily basis?
How does spiritual reading differ from reading done to acquire knowledge?

Six: In Search of Meaning

How can we become more aware of the meaning of our lives?
What have you read that was especially helpful in your search for meaning?

Chapter VI – The Spiritual Life

One: The Still Small Voice

Nouwen describes himself as restless and preoccupied with everyday tasks. Does this description fit you?

Do you have a hard time being still and listening for God's voice? If so, what keeps you from listening?

Do you set aside time to listen to God's voice?

Two: Do You Love Me?

Nouwen links our attempts to reassure ourselves that we are loved with our fear of death. How does God's love overcome that fear?

Three: From Fatalism to Faith

What do you tend to be fatalistic about?

How can we transform fatalism into faith?

Four: Under the Cross

Nouwen tells the heartbreaking story of the death of his friend's newborn daughter. When such a tragedy occurs, how can we be there for a bereaved friend? What can we say and do, and what should we not say or do?

Five: The Grateful Life

With what attitudes do you remember your past?

How have the bad things that happened to you shaped your life for the better?

Can you see God's guidance in the events of your life?

Six: The Blessings from the Poor

Nouwen says: "Ministry is, first of all, receiving God's blessing from those to whom we minister." Explain what he means. Has this been true in your life?

Seven: Adam's Gift

The profoundly handicapped Adam became a spiritual guide for Father Bruno. Have you ever received spiritual guidance from what at first glance appeared to be an unlikely source?

Eight: Two by Two

Nouwen states that "Jesus doesn't want us to travel alone." Whom would you choose for a travel companion and why?

Chapter VII – Prayer

One: Mother Teresa's Answer

What do you think of Mother Teresa's answer to Nouwen's question? How hard is it to live as she suggests?

Two: From Worrying to Prayer

What sorts of things do you worry about?
How can we transform worry into prayer?

Three: From Mind to Heart

Do you have a prayer that helps you move beyond your worries?

Four: Nothing Is Wanting!

The Twenty-Third Psalm is a favorite for many people. How do its well-known words affect you?
Do you have a prayer that you recite repetitively?

Five: Contemplating the Gospel

Nouwen describes his practice of reading the Gospel passage chosen for each day. Have you ever done this and, if so, how has it helped you?

Six: Pictures on Our Inner Walls

What mental pictures decorate your inner walls? Why did you choose them?

Seven: A Spiritual Milieu

In what ways does the milieu in which you live enhance or detract from your spiritual life?

Chapter VIII – Compassion

One: From Competition to Compassion

What differences do you see between a competitive life and a compassionate life? Our culture emphasized competition. How can we change that emphasis to compassion?

Two: Being the Beloved

The “Tempter” asked Jesus to prove that he was God’s Beloved Son by doing something spectacular. Have you ever done anything designed to win the love of a person or of God?

Three: Downward Mobility

The notion of downward mobility runs counter to our culture’s expectations, yet Jesus urges us to choose it. In what ways can we do this? Do you think that we literally have to sell all we have and give it to the poor?

Four: The Secret Gift of Compassion

Have you ever worked with those whom we consider disadvantaged? If so, what was the experience like for you? According to Nouwen: “Joy is the secret gift of compassion.” How have you experienced this joy?

Five: Right Where We Are

How can we become more compassionate toward the hidden suffering of people around us?

Six: Suffering with Others

What is the difference between pity and compassion?
What do we need to do to show real compassion to others?

Seven: Together in Silence

Do you find it hard to be with someone in silence? Why is this so difficult?

Eight: Giving and Receiving

Share an experience where you received as much or more than you gave.

Nine: The Gift of Self-Confrontation

Have you ever had the experience of someone rejecting a gift you gave them?
How did you react?

Ten: God's Heart

When do you feel the limits of your compassion?
How can we share in God's unlimited compassion?

Chapter IX – Family

One: Leaving Father and Mother

Do you agree with Nouwen's interpretation of Jesus' words: "Leave your father, mother, brothers, and sisters for the sake of my name"?
In what ways are you influenced by the family in which you grew up? Does this influence limit what you do?

Two: Free to Follow Jesus

How can following Jesus free us from the restricting ties to our families?

Three: Forgiveness and Gratitude

What do you resent about your family? How can you forgive them for their imperfect love?
What are you grateful for in the way you were raised?

Four: Many Mothers and Fathers

In what ways has your relationship with your parents and siblings changed?
What was your role in changing the relationship?

Five: To Be Forgiven

If you are a parent how have you raised your children differently from the way you were raised?
How hard is it to accept that your love for your children is imperfect? Can you accept that they will leave you?
Nouwen says: "Only God is the father and mother who can love us as we need and want to be loved." How can this help us relate to our families?

Six: Children Are Gifts

What has surprised you about your children?
How can we learn to become less possessive of our children?

Seven: The Pain of Love

Share an experience when someone you love did something you strongly disapproved of. How did you respond?

The parable of the Prodigal Son comes to mind. How do you understand the father's role in this parable?

Eight: Our Worrying Minds

Are you a worrier? If so, what ways have you found to cope with your worries?

Chapter X – Relationships

One: Complexity of Intimacy

What do we look for in a human relationship? Why are our expectations unrealistic?

Have you ever had a relationship turn sour? How do you explain the failure?

Two: To Be Called Together

Nouwen says: "To love is to embody God's infinite love in a faithful communion with another human being." What do you think of this definition of love? How hard is it to live it?

Three: Living Witnesses of God's Love

Nouwen says that God is the source of all love and that our relationships "are meant to be signs of God's love for humanity as a whole and each person in particular." How does this view differ from our usual concept of love between people?

Four: Revealing God's Faithfulness

How have you experienced God's faithfulness in your life?

In what ways can our actions reveal this divine faithfulness?

What is the difference between true faithfulness and merely "sticking it out together to the bitter end"?

Five: Living Discipleship Together

In what ways is living the discipleship of Jesus different as a couple than it is as an individual?

Six: Choosing Our Friends

What do you look for in your friendships?

How can we nurture our friendships?

Chapter XI – Who We Are

One: We Are God's Beloved Children

How does recognizing yourself as a child of God differ from seeing yourself in terms of your success, popularity or power?

Two: Claiming Our Belovedness

Jesus recognized his true identity at his baptism. Has there been a moment in your life when you saw yourself as God's beloved?
When we claim our belovedness what powers does this give us? What obligations?

Three: The Discipline of Prayer

Do you pray regularly? What helps you quiet your inner voices so that you can listen for God's voice?

Four: No Victims of Clock-Time

What is the difference between *chronos* and *kairos*?
How can we free ourselves from our obsession with clock-time?

Five: Preparing for Death

What are your fears concerning death and dying?
How do you understand the statement that "Death ... is that moment in which total defeat and total victory are one"?
How does seeing ourselves as God's beloved children help us prepare for death?

Six: Going Home

What, according to Nouwen, is our mission during our lives? Do you agree?
Can you anticipate your death as a joyful event? If not, why not?

Afterword

How will you continue to explore your spiritual life?

Nouwen Reading Group

Book: _____

Group Members:

Name	Phone Number	E-mail

Leadership tasks that could be shared within your group:

Date of meeting	Prayer/song and check-in with each other	Video or DVD segments: <i>Journey of the Heart</i>	Reader: themes, questions, text passages	Discussion leader	Refreshments

Other comments about the reflection guide: _____

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: _____

Please return completed forms to Maureen Wright at the Henri Nouwen Society:
In Canada — 113 St. Joseph St., Toronto, ON M5S 1J4
In the USA — P.O. Box 220522, St. Louis, MO 63122