

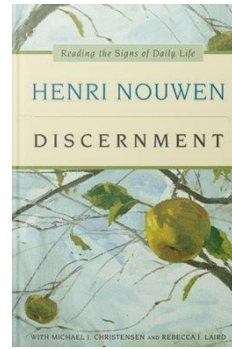
Henri Nouwen Book Club

Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life

November 10, 7pm Eastern

Week 1: Introduction & Part 1 (chapters 1 & 2)

What is Discernment?



We encourage all participants to share openly, at whatever level feels comfortable. You're always welcome to pass on a question and revisit it later during personal reflection or journaling. To honor our time together and ensure everyone has a chance to contribute, please keep your responses focused and concise. Thoughtful preparation before the group discussion will help create a meaningful and engaging conversation for all.

1. Share with your group what you were taught about the spiritual practice of discernment (accessing and seeking to understand what God is saying) in your formative years. What, if anything, did your tradition teach you about discernment? What have you learned on your own? Have you had to do any “unlearning”?
2. What did you *feel* reading Henri’s letter, “When there is darkness, light”? What drew you in? What resonated with you?
3. Henri wrote, *“I have come to a place in my life where these obvious and beautiful differences among us seem small in the context of the unity that binds us all together. The unity of life among us is even deeper and stronger than the diversity between us”* (p.xxiv) Can you relate to Henri’s experience? If so, how have you experienced this mystical connection with those who differ from you? How might such experience offer hope in our fractured and wounded world? How might you embody this in your daily life?
4. *“When we are spiritually deaf, we are not aware that anything important is happening in our lives. We keep running away from the present moment, and we try to create experiences that make our lives worthwhile. So we fill up our time to avoid the emptiness we otherwise would feel.”* (p.5) How busy is your life in this season? How comfortable are you with emptiness? How have you experienced God’s presence in the slow, perhaps mundane realities of life?
5. *“The purpose of discernment is to know God’s will, that is, to find, accept, and affirm the unique way in which God’s love is manifest in our life.”* (p.8) How have you understood the concept of God’s will? In what ways is God’s love most manifest in your life in this season? How has the manifestation of God’s love evolved over your life?
6. *“People we pray for regularly come to receive a very special place in our heart and in the heart of God, and they are helped. Sometimes this happens immediately and sometimes over time. In addition, an inner community begins to grow in us, a community of love that strengthens us in*

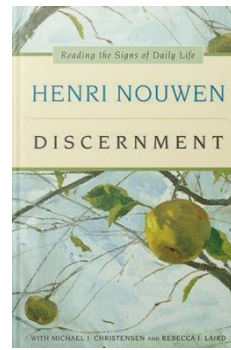
our daily life." (p.12) Henri offers a unique blessing of the discipline of intercessory prayer – that we experience a sense of inner community that strengthens us. Share with your group some of your experiences in offering prayer for others.

7. In speaking of Daybreak, Henri offers what seems to be such a simple description: *"We gather to be made into a spiritual body in which God's presence can be made manifest."* (p.15) How have you experienced belonging in such a group that is *made into* a spiritual body? How have you experienced God's presence being made manifest in community?
8. *"Discernment is not about judging other people's motives. It's about distinguishing good guidance from harmful messages, and the Holy Spirit from evil spirits. This essential sorting, known as discernment of spirits, is intended for our protection and not for our judgment."* (p.23) In a world that blurs the lines between what is true and what is false, how are you growing in the gift and discipline of *discernment of spirits*? How are you resisting the urge to judge those who seem oblivious to things that concern you? How are you inviting others to grow in the discipline of discernment in these challenging times?
9. *"There always remains a choice to be made between the creative power of love and life and the destructive power of hatred and death. I, too, must make that choice myself, again and again. Nobody else, not even God, will make that choice for me."* (p.25) What are some of the destructive powers of hatred and death that you specifically recognize in your day-to-day life? What helps you to see these powers for what they are? What might you be unaware of as you go through your weekly routines? Where do you most find the renewing and creative powers of love and light?
10. *"I know from experience that I cannot always find the light, or walk in the light of God, alone. I need the love and support of my brothers and sisters in the community of faith. My own spiritual life has been unthinkable without the intercessory prayers of others."* (p.28) How did you feel reading about Henri writing to 12 friends to ask them to pray for him each day for a month? Do you find it easy or difficult to ask for help? How have you experienced the prayers of others? What would you ask 12 friends to pray for specifically for you personally?
11. Who is in your "great cloud of witnesses"? When you think of them, do you remember their frailties as well as their spiritual strength? How do you imagine the ordinary lives of spiritual giants you look up to?
12. Consider Henri's story of Marthe Robin. What do you find most encouraging about her story? What do you find most challenging? Have you encountered anyone who has experienced a similar vocation? Describe a place you have prayed where you most sensed the presence of God energized by the faithful prayers offered in that space.

Henri Nouwen Book Club

Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life

November 17, 7pm Eastern



Week 2: Part 2 (chapters 3 – 6)

Discerning Guidance in Books, Nature, People and Events

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1. In this part of the book, Henri points to some areas in which we can grow in discernment: Reading spiritually, being fully present in nature, learning from spiritual people, and paying attention to events that are happening around us. As you went through this section of the book, which of these did you relate to the most? Is there one particular area that has been meaningful to you in practicing discernment? Besides these four areas, are there other experiences through which you have practiced discernment?
2. What have you learned about reading spiritually about spiritual things? Besides Henri Nouwen, who have been some of your most influential spiritual guides through their writing?
3. Henri refers to *asceticism* in his remarks about Merton and Huxley and concludes that only through such self-denial “*can the spirit know itself and find God.*” (p.46) In what ways have you practiced self-denial through the years? Was this a fruitful practice for you? Self-denial can, in some contexts, become a source of legalism that fails to deepen our connection to God’s presence – yet Henri speaks of the mystical Christian tradition on asceticism that becomes a well to drink deeply from. How have you connected to this mystical tradition? What might be a next best step for you to welcome the invitation of self-denial to open yourself more deeply to God?
4. “*Letting nature speak opens up new aspects of discerning the divine presence in what we so dimly see.*” (p.56) Share with the group a time you felt particularly close to God while in nature. What message did God share with you? How might you be more intentional to spend more time to walk in nature? What other ways might you interact with creation to practice deeper discernment?
5. “*It is not enough for me to discern God’s will for my life. I must discern God’s desires for my life as one small but important part of God’s great call to renew and redeem all the earth.*” (p.61) When you read this assertion of Henri, what is your first reaction? As you reflect, in what ways

have you discerned your “small but important part” of renewing the earth? In what ways has that participation evolved or changed throughout your life?

6. After an encounter with Mother Teresa, Henri makes the observation, *“Getting answers to my questions is not the goal of the spiritual life. Living in the presence of God is the greater call.”* (p.67) Who in your life has helped you shift from the complexity of your problems and questions to abide in the heart of God? What about this person helped you to let go of the urgency of your dilemma? If you have had the opportunity to be like that for someone else, share with the group what you have learned about openness, simplicity, and availability.
7. Henri describes how Dr. Bramachari, a Hindu monk, had a deep influence on Merton – including to encourage him to delve more deeply into the Christian mystical tradition. Henri says, *“How like God to speak through an unexpected source in a surprising way.”* (p.71) How have you encountered *“unexpected sources”* and how did they *“surprise”* you? In part 1, Henri encouraged us to grow in the *practice of discerning spirits*. How does that practice inform how we can be open to an *unexpected source* of God’s presence? How have you responded to different spiritual traditions – and has that shifted over time?
8. In speaking of friendship, Henri says, *“The power of friendship is great if it doesn’t find all its meaning in itself..... Friends may be guides who see what we may not be able to see ourselves.”* (p.72,73) What do you think contributes to healthy friendship, the kind that helps us to discern God’s will? Share with the group the friendships, or your longing for friendships, in this season of your life.
9. *“God’s time (kairos) has to do with opportunity and fullness of meaning, moments that are ripe for their intended purpose. When we see time in light of our faith in the God of history, we see that the events of this year are not just a series of happy or unhappy events but part of the shaping hands of God, who wants to mold our world and our lives.”* (p.85) How have you (struggled to) see the events of this year as part of the shaping hands of God? What are some specific things that have happened in which you had a deeper sense of what God was up to? What are some of the things that are happening this year that you are having a hard time seeing the shaping hands of God in? How have the current events of our days been changing your heart?
10. *“Patience is the attitude that says we cannot force life but have to let it grow in its own time. Patience lets us see the people we meet, the events of the day, and the unfolding history of our times as all part of that slow process of development and final liberation.”* (p.85,86) In what ways are you finding it challenging to be patient as you engage people and current events? In what ways have you experienced such patience growing in you?
11. Those who identify as Christian are a diverse group. How do you respond when you encounter Christians who seem to be interpreting critical events very differently than you? Where do you feel challenged by the reactions of your own heart? How has reading about the connection of

current events and discernment created new opportunities for you to reflect on today's happenings in a new way?

12. *".... It is clear that God is present in the events of my life, yet I act and speak as if I am in control. But if the future is not in my hands, then I have all the more reason to stay in the present and give honor and glory to God from where I am, trusting that God is the God of life who makes everything new."* (p.87) What are some of the things you find yourself trying to control? How difficult is it for you to stay in the present moment? What practices have you learned that help you return to the present?
13. *"In the final analysis, all we have are signs that lead us to suspect something unspeakably great.... We have the freedom and responsibility to look at our lives with the eyes of faith and a heart of trust, believing that God cares and is active in our lives."* (p.88) Discernment, Henri reminds us, is both a gift and a practice and will always include uncertainty and mystery. Describe to the group where you have received the good fruit of discernment in recent days, and, where you are living with mystery and uncertainty.
14. *"If you claim nothing as your own, including your own life, you can expose the illusion of control and the false basis of war and violence by refusing any compromise with evil. Thus the self-emptied person is the true revolutionary in the world. How might we stand aside from all our demands and desires in this age of consumerism and militarism and seek peace within – peace for our immediate community and peace in the world?"* (p.90) How do you respond to the question Henri poses?

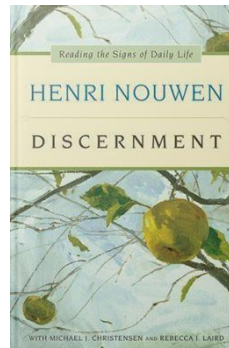
Henri Nouwen Book Club

Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life

November 24, 7pm Eastern

Week 3: Part 3 (chapters 7 - 10)

Discerning Vocation, Presence, Identity, and Time



We encourage all participants to share openly, at whatever level feels comfortable. You're always welcome to pass on a question and revisit it later during personal reflection or journaling. To honor our time together and ensure everyone has a chance to contribute, please keep your responses focused and concise. Thoughtful preparation before the group discussion will help create a meaningful and engaging conversation for all.

1. *"God has a very special role for you to fulfill. God wants you to stay close to his heart and to let him guide you. You will know what you are called to do when you have to know it."* (p.99) When you read these words of Henri, what do you feel? How have you experienced clarity from God about what you were called to do? In what ways are you searching today for (re)affirmation of your vocation?
2. *"I know that sometimes a call from God is planted in our imagination, and if it persists we need to bring others into our discernment process to test if it is something to pursue or just a diversion."* (p.100) Henri describes how his imaginings about Alaska turned out to be a diversion. It can be challenging to admit how prone we are to diversions – and yet that is a normal part of discerning what God is calling us to do. How have you identified ideas that were really diversions? Have you experienced getting over-involved in a diversion? How did God redirect you?
3. *"The Spirit of God in us recognizes God in the world. The eyes and ears by which we see God in others are in fact spiritual sensitivities that allow us to receive our neighbors as messengers of God. Thus, to go to the poor is to go to the Lord."* (p.103) How have you encountered God in your neighbors? How have you had opportunity to "go to the poor" – and how have you experienced God in those situations?
4. Of his concluding discernment that he was not to live long-term in Latin America, Henri says, *"I did not have the grace to live there long term. And you must have the gifts and grace to fulfill a task for it to be a vocational call from God."* (p.106) What do you experience as you read Henri's words? Have there been times when you thought something was your calling – but it shifted? How did you feel about coming to this awareness – and any accompanying changes?
5. *"There is no such thing as the right place or the right job. I can be miserable or joyful, restless or at peace, in all situations.... Living in Lima or not for five, ten, or twenty years was no great decision. Turning to the Lord fully, unconditionally, and without fear is. He reminds me that I have no lasting dwelling on this earth, that I am a traveler on the way to a sacred place where*

God holds me in the palm of his hand. This deeper awareness sets me free to be a pilgrim, to pray without ceasing, and to be grateful.” (p.107) How have you experienced your life as a pilgrimage? Have you been able to experience the kind of freedom from the fear of making the wrong decision that Henri describes? What most helped you live into this kind of freedom?

6. *“... without this one hour a day for God, my life loses its coherence, and I start experiencing my days as a series of random incidents and accidents rather than divine appointments and encounters.”* (p.113,114) Would you say you are in a season of coherence or randomness? When you have found yourself in randomness in the past, what has helped you return to a regular rhythm of connection with God?
7. *“... I shared with him the details of the events that caused my dark state of mind. He listened for a long time, and then gently showed me that I was on the same road as he, that I was being led through much pain to a new place. This new place was actually one that had been created in the gospel encounter between the two disciples and the stranger. When I opened my heart to this new reality, I was no longer an isolated and lonely individual who returns to the old place of his youth. I was no longer alone; I had found a friend, a companion, a voice of love. As I confessed, a heavy burden fell away from me. Later, when we had a meal together, I knew that God had sent his angel to me to offer me comfort and consolation and turn my despair into hope.”* (p.121,122) Henri speaks of the power of a witness to our pain, the power of breaking our isolation, the power of encountering love, and the power of confession. Consider the last time you had such an encounter. Was it recent or quite some time ago? How might you make this a regular practice? What makes it hard to reach out to others when you find yourself in a “dark state of mind”? Who are the people who might meet you on the road? How has this book club offered some sense of companionship?
8. *“When I relate to my past with remorse, shame, or guilt, the danger is that I will harden my heart and be unable to discern the divine presence within and without.”* (p.126) In what ways have remorse, shame, or guilt been impediments in your life? How have you been able to recognize the connection between experiencing remorse, shame, or guilt and the challenge in discerning God’s presence?
9. Henri speaks about remembrance of Christ transforming “remorse into contrition”, converting “shame to compassion”, and preventing “guilt from overwhelming us” and making us “receptive to forgiveness.” (p.126) Share with the group experiences you have had of contrition, compassion, and forgiveness. How have these experiences released you from experiences of remorse, shame, or guilt?
10. *“Between Jesus and us there is no essential difference. We are as much God’s children as Jesus is a child of God.”* (p.132) What is your first reaction to this declaration? As Henri unpacks a number of scriptures in the following paragraphs, is this consistent or challenging to how you have been taught to understand our relation to Jesus?

11. *"When you start believing this [that you are beloved], this spiritual knowledge will grow until it transforms your daily life. You will still have rejections and you will still have pain and losses, but you will live them no longer as a person searching for his or her identity. You will live them as the beloved. You will live your pain and anguish, your successes and failures, as one who knows who you are."* (p.134) What difference might it make if you lived from the center of this truth more consistently? In what ways have you learned to return to this spiritual knowledge?
12. *"To give someone a blessing is the most significant affirmation we can offer.... To give a blessing is to affirm another's core identity, to say yes to a person's belovedness."* (p.136) Describe a time when you received the kind of blessing that Henri articulates. Describe a time when you were able to offer this kind of blessing to another. What happened in your own heart in each of these instances?
13. Henri asks, *"Can you and I remember that we are the beloved of God when we fail? When we hurt someone else? Even then, we are God's beloved called to remember that beneath our woundedness or frailty is the deeper call to live out of the inexhaustible riches of God's love."* (p.138) In what ways has your embrace of your belovedness helped you to be less afraid of failure? In what ways has your embrace of your belovedness helped you to forgive yourself? What other areas of weakness make it hard for us to fully embrace our belovedness? How does Henri's honesty and vulnerability help you to look at those fragile places in yourself?
14. After describing many instances of suffering and profound injustice, Henri says, *"I came to understand that I was called to speak on behalf of the voiceless so that they might find hope but also so that the oppressor could be converted. Acting out of discernment will not lead to all persons affirming our actions, but it will point to the call to transformation of our own lives and the society in which we all live."* (p.149) How have you come to experience transformation, through repentance and gratitude, as you seek discernment to respond to injustice? In what ways have you integrated your prayerfulness and action as a response to injustice? What questions are you currently living through prayer as you reflect on our wounded world?