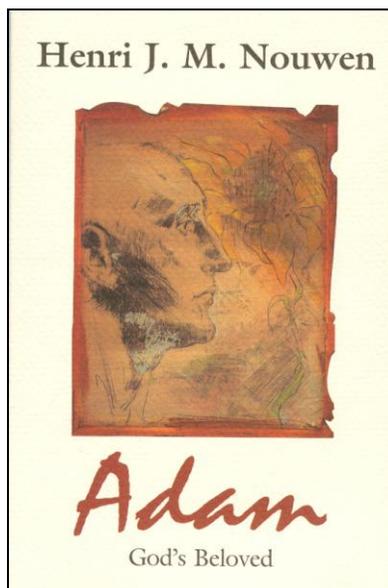


Adam: God's Beloved

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 kind permission.

² Henri Nouwen in Ukraine.

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Prepared by Ed Wojcicki

About this book

Adam Arnett died in February 1996. Henri Nouwen wrote a draft of this book within the next few months, but then he died suddenly on Sept. 21, 1996, and his literary executrix and good friend, Sue Mosteller, CSJ, did some additional research and finished the book. Adam, who could not speak or even move without assistance, was the first person Henri was asked to care for when he moved to L'Arche Daybreak north of Toronto. Henri's book is about the friendship that developed between the two men. He explains why Adam was not only his friend, but also his teacher and his guide. Henri ultimately sees Adam's story as similar to Jesus' story. You can see just from the chapter titles how Henri leads you through Adam's early years, his public life and finally, his death and resurrection. In doing so, he helps us see how people can be great gifts to us if only we let them in.

Recommended number of meetings for small-group discussion of *Adam: God's Beloved*: **4**

Notes

Meeting #1 (pp. 9-39)

Foreword, Introduction, and Chapters 1 and 2
“Adam’s Hidden Life” and “Adam’s Desert”

Summary:

These opening chapters provide the details of Adam’s early life – epilepsy, seizures, very loving parents, time in the hospital, and finally, his parents long search for a place for Adam to call home. He was welcomed to L’Arche Daybreak in 1985. Adam never spoke a word in his life but “Adam was chosen to witness to God’s love through his brokenness. ... He had few distractions, few attachments, and few ambitions to fill his inner space” (page 30). Adam didn’t accomplish much in his lifetime, but Henri says Jesus didn’t, either (page 37). Adam’s parents and their friends kept Adam’s “truth” alive – the truth that he was God’s beloved son, not a client with disabilities and in need of care.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. When you think of a person with disabilities that you know, do you wonder if that person needs your care – or somebody else’s care – more than you consider what gifts the person has to offer?
2. For Adam’s parents, taking the time to care for him was a high priority but not a burden. That is love. What in your life might seem like a burden because of the time that is required of you, but may actually be teaching you something? What is it teaching you?
3. Just as Jesus did, Adam spent time in the desert – his time in the hospital before it was clear what would happen to him next (page 36). What part of your life has been time in the desert? Are you in the desert now? [If so, know that it’s OK, and that you have something to learn from it!]

Notes

Meeting #2 (pp. 40-82)

Chapters 3 and 4

“Adam’s Public Life” and “Adam’s Way”

Summary:

It is important not to romanticize the relationship that Henri had with Adam. Henri wants you to see not that he learned how to take care of Adam physically, but that his own life was gradually transformed so that his time with Adam was precious time with another person, a friend, and not someone with whom Henri was the giver and Adam the receiver. He wants you to understand that Adam changed *him* because Henri eventually allowed himself to be changed. “While I was preoccupied with the way I was talked about or written about, Adam was quiet, telling me that God’s love is more important than the praise of people” (page 56). Henri also reveals that he had a profound personal emotional crisis (page 78) that required him to leave Daybreak for a few months for intensive therapy. He admitted he became as disabled as Adam.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. It was only gradually that Henri learned that his two hours with Adam in the morning “became my quiet hours, the most reflective and intimate time of the day” (page 48). Do you tend to rush through your routine activities, especially those that you do with other people? How could you change your thinking so that these times became intimate moments of love, caring and sharing?
2. Do you ever silently wonder or worry, as Cathy did (page 73), that people might not love who you really are? How do you feel about that?
3. Is there anyone in your life or community who may be as powerful a teacher as Adam was? Who? Why? Have you ever perceived of this person as offering a gift of love to you?
4. What reaction do you have when you read that Murray the successful businessman has worries, fears and failures (page 62), Cathy the wealthy woman suffered from depression and wondered whether she was lovable (pages 72-73), and that Henri himself resisted accepting the reality that he was emotionally out of control, weak, dependent, needy and vulnerable (page 79)?

Meeting #3 (pp. 83-103)

Chapters 5 and 6

“Adam’s Passion” and “Adam’s Death”

Adam Arnett, 34 (1961-1996)

Summary:

Like Jesus, who endured a time of “passion” after a public ministry, Adam’s life was one of passion in which everything was done to him, for him and around him. Henri identifies Adam’s passion as a “radical call to accept the truth of our lives”. Adam’s total dependence and peaceful presence invited those around him to create a loving community where he could live a fully meaningful life. Adam’s life and death helped Henri to befriend his own death and to know that God had not left him alone.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. Adam was never able to express in words what was ailing him. Have you ever had a loved one who was too sick, too disabled or too young (e.g., a baby) in a similar position? What did you do? Do you believe the person knew you were there and could feel your love?
2. Rosie was not able to speak, either. Reflect quietly on this passage: “Silently she looked right into Adam’s eyes. He appeared to look back. She reached out and took his hand, something that no one had ever seen her do, and she held his hand and looked into his eyes for almost two minutes. Gently she laid his hand back on the bed, and leaned back in her chair, ready to go. Rosie and Adam had said farewell to one another. Rosie was ready to leave” (page 97). As a group, sit still, close your eyes and be silent for two minutes. How does this affect your relationship at this moment with someone else in the room? Do you ever do this with a friend – just agree to sit and be still together?
3. Have you been present with someone during the last minutes of their life? Reflect on this experience with the group if you are comfortable doing so. How has that experience affected your life?

Notes

Meeting #4 (pp. 104-128)

Chapters 7-9 and the Conclusion

“Adam’s Wake and Burial” and “Adam’s Resurrection” and “Adam’s Spirit”

Summary:

Family, friends and L’Arche assistants came from all over the United States and Canada to attend Adam’s funeral. Henri writes of the finality felt by Adam’s loving community as dirt was shoveled onto the lowered casket and they struggled to continue on without their ‘still center’. During the months that followed, Henri discovered that when he told Adam’s story to others, “they listened in a different way than when they listened to my other words. ... Every time I told it I could see new life and new hope emerging in the hearts of my listening friends. ... Very slowly I started to see Adam coming alive in the hearts of those who had never known him.” (page 119)

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. How has the story of Adam’s life and death touched your life?
2. “In Adam, we touched the living Christ among us.” (page 111) Do you have an ‘Adam’ in your life, someone who speaks to you about God? Can you share with the group something about their life and your relationship? What has it meant for you to have this person in your life?
3. Henri says that he could not have told Adam’s story if he had not first known Jesus’ story. “Jesus’ story gave me eyes to see and ears to hear the story of Adam’s life and death.” (page 126) What does this statement mean to you?

Notes

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: _____

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