

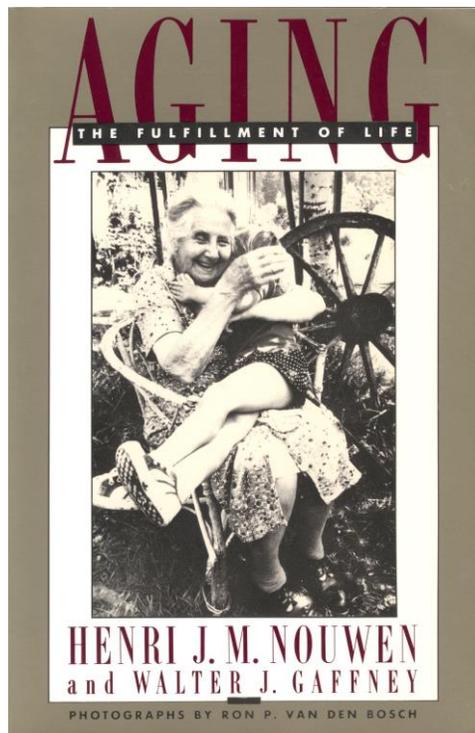
# ***AGING***

## ***THE FULFILLMENT OF LIFE***

By Henri J.M. Nouwen and Walter J. Gaffney

**Discussion Questions for Nouwen Reading Groups**

**Three Week Program**



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# *Aging*

## *The Fulfillment of Life*

by **Henri J. M. Nouwen & Walter J. Gaffney**

**Photographs by Ron P. van den Bosch**

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## **Discussion questions for Nouwen Reading Groups**

Prepared by Claire S. Merritt

Suggested number of meetings for this book: 3 or 4

In this thought-provoking and spiritually oriented book Henri and Walter explore what it means to age. Although the inevitable process of growing old is for many people a path of darkness and despair, it can also be a path of light and fulfillment. In the second part they examine the need to care for ourselves and others as we age. The beautiful and evocative photographs add a powerful visual dimension to the written text.

### **Meeting #1**

#### **Prologue, Introduction to Part One and Aging as a Way to the Darkness, pp. 13-49**

#### **Questions to consider as you read, reflect and discuss:**

1. In the Prologue Henri and Walter use the image of a wagon wheel to evoke the cycle of our life, in which all the phases, like the spokes of a wheel, are equally important. How do you interpret this image? How does it relate to your own life?
2. Give examples from your life or the life of someone close to you how aging can be “a process of growth by which the mystery of life is slowly revealed to us” (p. 14).
3. What can the elderly teach us about life? If you are one of the elderly, what lessons can you teach others?
4. In the old Balinese legend the grandfather saves the community with his knowledge, which had been all but lost. In our modern society what do we risk losing by ignoring the wisdom of our elderly?
5. For many people the fear of old age is greater than the fear of death. Which do you fear more and why?

6. We live in a society that places more value on “doing” and “having” than on “being.” How does this lead to the segregation of the elderly? If you are retired, in what ways, if any, do you feel segregated and less valued than persons that are working?
7. In what ways do we self-segregate as we age and thus become alienated from society? How can we keep this from happening?
8. Henri and Walter describe “desolation” as “the gnawing feeling of being left behind by those who have been close and dear to you during the many years of life” (p. 36). Which losses of loved ones have you suffered? How have you coped with these losses?
9. What do Henri and Walter mean by the “loss of self”? Why is this loss so devastating?
10. For many people old age is nothing but a way to darkness. To what extent, if any, do you share this pessimistic view of aging? What are your greatest fears as you grow older?

### **Notes**

## Meeting #2

### *Aging as a Way to the Light and Conclusion to Part One, pp. 51-87*

#### Questions to consider as you read, reflect and discuss:

1. How is Simeon in Luke's gospel different from the stereotypical old person in our society? What lessons can we learn from him?
2. Henri and Walter see in the faces of many elderly that "a new light has become visible – a light that cannot die because it is born out of growing old" (p. 61). Think of persons you have known who exemplify this observation. What made them special?
3. Henri fondly recalls his grandmother. Describe an older person of whom you have happy memories.
4. Do you agree that "in human life pain always seems easier to understand than happiness" (p. 62)? If so, why? If not, why not?
5. What is the difference between "wishes" and "hope"? What does it mean to convert from wishes to hope and why is this conversion necessary in aging toward the light?
6. Henri and Walter tell the Taoist tale of an oak tree that grew large and old because it was useless. Discuss the paradoxical meaning of "useless" in this story. How can this apply to our lives as we age?
7. "Humor is knowledge with a soft smile" (p. 74) according to Henri and Walter. What is the importance of humor in your life? How does it help you cope?
8. Describe someone you know that has a good sense of humor. How do you feel when you are with him or her?
9. What are some things you have discovered as you have grown older? How have these discoveries enlarged your view of life?
10. Henri and Walter evoke "the nearly overwhelming vision that aging can be a growing into the light, the light which takes away all the dark and gray lines that divide religious cultures and people and unites all the colors of the human search into one all-embracing rainbow" (p. 83). What have you learned from other faith traditions that point to a unifying concept of light? How can "light" be a bridge between generations, cultures and religions?
11. Henri and Walter conclude this section by asking: "Who is that young man who will have the courage to step forward in his society and proclaim that by ostracizing the old men, the traditions will be lost and a series of disasters could

take place” (p. 86). What steps can any of us take to make sure that the elderly are included and valued in our society?

### Meeting #3

**Introduction to Part Two, Caring as a Way to the Self, Caring as a Way to the Other, Conclusion and Epilogue, pp. 91-154**

**Questions to consider as you read, reflect and discuss:**

1. “Rembrandt realized that what is most personal is most universal” p. 95). What realizations about yourself have you experienced that apply to all people?
2. Why is it important to be present to our own aging before we can care for the elderly?
3. Henri and Walter state that “caring is first a way to our own aging self, where we can find the healing powers for all those who share in the human condition” (p. 102). How can this understanding of oneself overcome the distance that separates us from the elderly and thus allow them to become friends instead of strangers?
4. “Poverty is the quality of the heart which makes us relate to life, not as property to be defended but as a gift to be shared” (p. 106). Why is this kind of poverty essential to caring for others?
5. “Compassion makes us see beauty in the midst of misery, hope in the center of pain” (p. 113). Describe an experience you have had that illustrates this statement.
6. In what ways does compassion differ from pity?
7. How are we enriched by our compassion for others?
8. What are the pitfalls of making care for the elderly a specialization? How do you feel about gerontology as a specialized branch of medicine? What are its values and its drawbacks?
9. Henri and Walter emphasize the importance of intergenerational families and communities. In our modern society what has diminished this kind of community? If you live in an intergenerational family, what are its challenges and its joys?
10. “The mystery of a failing life is too deep to grasp” (p. 126). Have you been close to someone whose last years were lonely and miserable? How have you responded to this person?
11. Name some of the ways in which our society contributes to the suffering of many elderly. What can we do to alleviate their pain?

12. How can we as caregivers guide someone to an experience of God's unconditional acceptance?
13. "It is indeed the task of everyone who cares to prevent people – young, middle-aged and old – from clinging to false expectations and from building their lives on false suppositions" (p. 137). What are some of the false expectations and suppositions that we need to release? What do we need to put in their place?
14. It is our mortality that makes life precious. What things remind you of the preciousness of life?
15. How can the life, death and resurrection of Jesus become the model for the fulfillment of our own cycle of life?
16. How have the photographs by Ron P. van den Bosch enhanced your understanding of this book? Is there a particular photo that struck you? If so, which one and why?

### **Notes**



## 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 21<sup>st</sup>, 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](http://www.HenriNouwen.org).

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<sup>1</sup> Photo of children with Henri in Guatemala by Peter Weiskel. Used with permission.

<sup>2</sup> Henri Nouwen in Ukraine.





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!*

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### 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" DVD  Discussion based on reflection guide  
 Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Additional comments welcome: \_\_\_\_\_

Please return completed forms to Maureen Wright at the Henri Nouwen Society:  
In Canada — 214-95 St. Joseph St. Toronto, ON M5S 2R9  
In the USA — P.O. Box 220522, St. Louis, MO 63122-0522