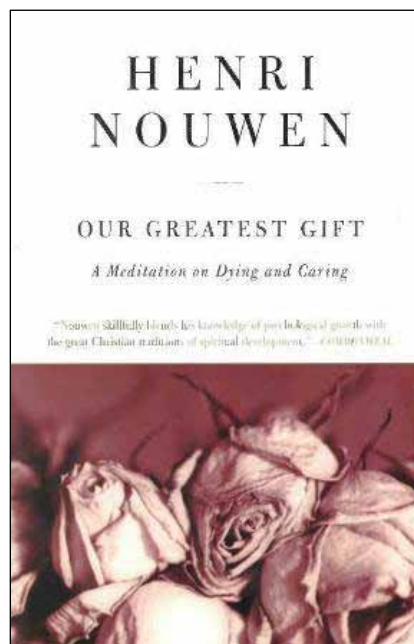


Our Greatest Gift

A Meditation on Dying and Caring

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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Harper One
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Discussion Questions for Nouwen Reading Groups

Prepared by Claire S. Merritt

Recommended number of meetings for this book: 4

The deaths of family members and friends inspired Henri Nouwen to write this book in which he explores how to live in a way that will give meaning to our death and how to care compassionately for those who are dying.

Prologue, Introduction and Part One: *Dying Well*: pp. xi-46

Questions for Discussion:

1. In the Prologue Henri describes Maurice Gould, “Moe”, a member of L’Arche Daybreak, who had died, as someone “who, through his fragility and weakness, had helped us create community during his life” and who “did so even more through his death” (p. xv). What does Henri mean? Have you experienced someone’s death as an event that brought you closer to others? If so, share your experience.
2. Henri’s friend Nathan asks him: “Where and how do you want to die?” (p. xvi). How would you answer that question?
3. Henri asks how we can prepare ourselves for our death. What thoughts, if any, have you given to preparing yourself for your death?
4. In the introduction Henri uses the solitude of a borrowed apartment in Germany to try to befriend his own death and to find ways to help others befriend theirs. Why do you think it is necessary to come to terms with our own death before we can help others?
5. According to Henri, in order to prepare for death we must enter a second childhood. What does he mean by this? How does the life of Jesus illustrate this point?
6. How did Henri’s serious accident change his attitude toward death? If you have ever come close to death how did that experience change you?

7. Henri talks about the freedom that comes with recognizing that we are children of God. What does this freedom consist of? How does it differ from the freedom we associate with personal independence?
8. How did you respond to the story about the twins who argue about whether or not there is anything after the womb?
9. Henri states: "Two of the greatest joys experienced are the joy of being different from others and the joy of being the same as others" (p.21). Share how you have experienced each of these joys.
10. "A good death is in solidarity with others" (p. 24), according to Henri. Why is that so? Why is death not the ultimate separation?
11. How does the recognition of our common mortality enable us to help others?
12. What has Henri learned from his sister-in-law as she prepares for her death? What have you learned from a loved one who was (or is) dying?
13. How can Jesus' death serve as an example for us? How can our death "bring the Spirit of God to those we leave behind" (p. 35)?
14. What does Henri mean by "fruitfulness"? How does Jesus exemplify this concept? Which other historical figure illustrates this for you?
15. "Our doing brings success, but our being bears fruit" (p. 38). What are the fruits that you hope your life will bear?
16. Henri is deeply moved by the suffering of people dying of AIDS. How have the churches failed these persons? What hope does he find in their deaths?

Notes

Part Two: *Caring Well, Conclusion and Epilogue: pp. 47-109*

Questions for Discussion:

1. "Caring for [Moe] became a great challenge, a challenge at once painful and joyful." (p. 52). Reflect on a time when you were called to be a caregiver – how did you experience this relationship?
2. "The choice to see our own and other people's decreasing abilities as gateways to God's grace is a choice of faith" (p. 54). How can the story of Jesus help us make that choice?
3. It could be said that the health care system has become an industry in which care is a commodity. How does this vision dehumanize those in need of care?
4. What is Henri's concept of care? What are specific ways of caring for others?
5. "Our greatest suffering comes from losing touch with my/our belovedness and thinking of ourselves only as a useless, unwanted presence" (p. 57). Share your own experience of this suffering.
6. What does it mean to be present to someone who is dying? Why should we not try to do this alone?
7. What is the importance of community? Where have you experienced a true community?
8. Share an experience of serious illness or death that brought you closer to others.
9. How can the image of trapeze artists be an analogy of our relationship with God?
10. Henri describes visits to the graves of departed loved ones as a way to keep them in his life. How do you remember and commemorate the lives of family members and friends you have lost?
11. "By dying with and for us, Jesus wanted to dispel our illusions, heal our divisions, and forgive our sins so that we can rediscover that we are each other's brothers and sisters." (p. 72). Explore the implications of this statement for how we care for persons who are dying.
12. "To care also means to gently encourage our dying friend to die with and for others" (p. 74). How does Henri suggest we do this? How does this help both the dying person and those that care for him?
13. Why is it good to keep dying people connected to what is happening in the outside world instead of shielding them from it?
14. How do the images of our planet from outer space give us a new perspective on our lives?
15. As a result of a debilitating illness, how does our search for meaning change? What can give new meaning to our life? How does Jesus' passion illustrate this?
16. How can we help the dying move from action to dependence, to an understanding of their weakness not as a failure but as a fulfillment of their lives? How does our society make it difficult to see the fruitfulness of our death?

17. “In our dying, we become parents of generations to come” (p. 90). What does Henri mean by this?
18. Henri describes meals at L’Arche Daybreak as “memorial meals” (p. 93). How do these meals celebrate both life and death? How has modern life eroded the importance of family meals?
19. How has this book changed your thinking about your own death and that of others?

Notes

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	DVD segments: <i>Journey of the Heart</i>	Reader: themes, questions, text passages	Discussion leader	Refreshments



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
 - Did not know Nouwen's work but was interested Nouwen's writing resonates with me
- 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
- Social Media 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										Extremely helpful
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	

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: _____

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