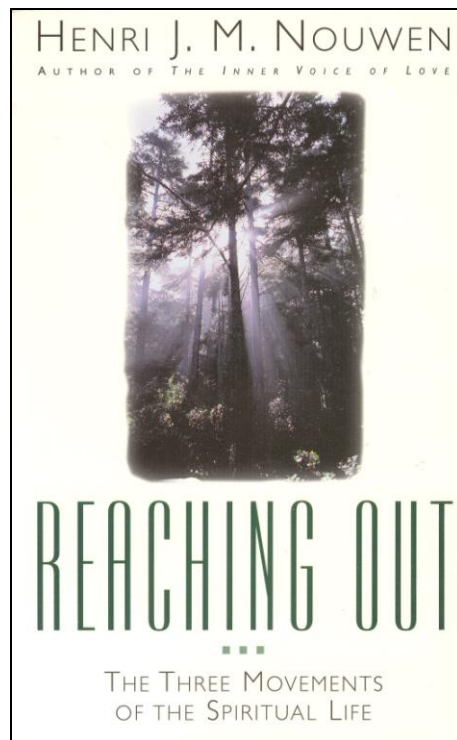


# *REACHING OUT*

By Henri J.M. Nouwen

Discussion Questions for Nouwen Reading Groups

**Six Week Program**



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# *Reaching Out*

By Henri J.M. Nouwen

© 1975 New York: Doubleday, 165 pp. (softcover)

## *Discussion questions for Nouwen Reading Groups*

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*Recommended number of meetings for this book: 6*

In *Reaching Out* Henri Nouwen explores the question “What does it mean to live a life in the Spirit of Jesus Christ?” He examines this life in the context of three movements: “reaching out to our innermost self, to our fellow human beings and to our God” (Foreword). Drawing on many examples from his own experiences, he describes our reaching out to our innermost self as a movement from loneliness to solitude, our reaching out to others as a movement from hostility to hospitality, and our reaching out to God as a movement from illusion to prayer. Our lives flow between the polarities of these three movements, and it is only by delving deep into the negative poles of loneliness, hostility and illusion that we can reach out to solitude, hospitality and prayer.

### **Reaching Out to Our Innermost Self – *The First Movement: From Loneliness to Solitude***

Loneliness is a painful universal human experience that we cannot avoid, no matter how hard we try. It is exacerbated by the competitiveness and superficiality of modern life, as well as by the mistaken belief that we are supposed to take each other’s loneliness away. It is only when “we enter into the desert of our loneliness” (p. 34) that we can begin to transform it into solitude. Solitude is not isolation in a remote place but rather a solitude of the heart where we can discover our innermost self. Living in this inner center, far from being a selfish endeavor, is how “we can sense an inner unity and live in union with our fellow human beings and our God” (p. 44). It is in solitude that we can glimpse the deeper meaning of life. Only in solitude can we learn to engage the world’s suffering in a creative and compassionate way.

#### **Meeting #1 (pp. 20-62 softcover) – Questions for Engaging “From Loneliness to Solitude**

1. Henri says a lot about loneliness – what it is, how he experiences it, how it relates to community, etc. What things stand out to you about Henri’s description of loneliness? Why do they seem important? Why does he call it “a suffocating loneliness” in the title of the first chapter?
2. Why do we tend to avoid our loneliness? Why is loneliness important?
3. In the light of Henri’s discussion, what might the quote from Henri’s friend mean: “Learning to weep, learning to keep vigil, learning to wait for the dawn. Perhaps this is what it means to be human” (p. 36).
4. What do you understand Henri to mean by solitude? What does solitude have to do with receptivity? How can we learn to distinguish between being present in loneliness and present in solitude?

5. How would you describe the difference between physical solitude and solitude of the heart?
6. How does solitude help to build true community?
7. What does Henri mean when he says: “The movement from loneliness to solitude is not a movement of growing withdrawal but is instead a movement toward a deeper engagement in the burning issues of our time” (p. 49).
8. Henri asks: “But what if our interruptions are in fact our opportunities, if they are challenges to an inner response by which growth takes place and through which we come to the fullness of being?” (p. 53). How do you react to interruptions? How can you respond more creatively, at least some of the time?
9. Why is a solitude of the heart a prerequisite to compassion?

### **Meeting # 2 -- Suggestions for Personalizing “From Loneliness to Solitude”**

1. How does contemporary society make you acutely aware of your own loneliness? When do you feel it most intensely? What do you do with it or how have you tended to deal with it?
2. Avoidance is a big issue in the way we handle loneliness. But avoidance is often the one thing that goes unnoticed. Think of a few ways to pay attention to how you might be avoiding your own loneliness. What would you say are your favorite avoidances? Where might you be clinging or rescuing others? How have you sought for a “final solution” in relationships, hobbies, comparison and criticism of others, job success, your own private thought life, etc. (name that tune!)?
3. Take time to muse on the ways in which God has helped you in the past to move from loneliness to solitude. What circumstances invited that movement or pushed you into it?
4. As you look back through this reading and present life circumstances, how might the Spirit be inviting you now to move deeper into healthy solitude in the “mess” of your present situation? How might this movement into solitude enable you to find the gift of God’s presence for yourself and enable you to be present to others in a free and healing way?
5. Take time to offer a prayer to God that comes out of your reading and reflection. It might be a written prayer in your journal. Or it may be a nonverbal prayer – a drawing, a scribbling of colours, a clay model, a body movement, a photograph, or a song, etc. that helps you to express what has moved you through this section.

### **Notes**

## **Reaching Out to Our Fellow Human Beings – *The Second Movement: From Hostility to Hospitality***

We live in a world surrounded by strangers, and our mutual fear engenders hostility toward each other. Yet we yearn for community where strangers are welcomed as fellow human beings and where our hostility can be transformed into hospitality. Henri recalls the biblical stories of hospitality, in which the strangers who are welcomed as guests can reveal to their hosts the precious gifts they are carrying. We must recognize our own hostilities before we can create “a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy” (p. 71). This creation of free space is essential in all our relationships – family, school, workplace, church, etc. Both receptivity and confrontation are part of hospitality. We receive others and at the same time confront them with our presence. To be good hosts we must develop poverty of mind and heart, whereby we grow beyond our convictions and prejudices to embrace the incomprehensible mystery of life.

### **Meeting #3 (pp. 63-109) -- Questions for Engaging “From Hostility to Hospitality”**

In the first section of the book, Henri asked the question, “How do I relate to myself?” He responded by discussing the tension that we struggle with between loneliness and solitude. Now in this section we have the second tension of the spiritual life, the tension evoked by the question “How do I relate to others?”

Henri suggests that our experience of “feeling at home in our own skin without neediness” can be brought to fruition in reaching out to others in their own painful search for a hospitable place where life can be lived. He sees that the crucial movement here is from hostility to hospitality – not just a nice alliterated caption, but one of Henri’s most powerful discussions.

1. Both terms, hostility and hospitality, need to be clarified so that we can better grasp how they touch our own lives in a meaningful way. We normally think of hospitality as having people in our homes and “entertaining” them. What do you understand Henri to mean by the term hospitality? How does he use Scripture and psychology to deepen and broaden it into a deeply significant stance on our part?
2. Most of us would not think of ourselves as hostile people. How does Henri use the term hostility to talk about our fears in relationship?
3. In Chapter 5 Henri suggests three kinds of relationships that could be based on power (parent/child, teacher/student, and healer/patient) and how they can be fruitful if they are based on hospitality rather than simply based on power. How does he see the essence of this transition in each of these relationships? What other relationships can you think of that could be deepened by growth toward hospitality (i.e. church members/non-members; clergy/laity; etc.)?
4. Why are both receptivity and confrontation essential to being a good host? What is the importance of boundaries?
5. In chapter 6, Henri talks about being the host. What is the difference between offering hospitality out of our poverty and offering hospitality out of our having it all together? What does Henri mean when he maintains that poverty makes a good host? How do you respond to what he says?

6. What does Henri mean by “the poverty of heart”? How does this poverty create community?
7. Henri states: “But real training for service asks for a hard and often painful process of self – emptying” (p. 108). What do you understand this self-emptying to consist of?

#### **Meeting # 4 -- Questions for Personalizing, “From Hostility to Hospitality”**

1. In chapter 5 Henri names three relationships in which hospitality is important. What have you experienced in one or the other of these in the past, either as the one with power (i.e. teacher) or the one without power (i.e. student)? What other relationships might you include that are part of your experience?
2. How have you experienced true hospitality from another person? How has that helped you become free to be who you truly are?
3. How have you experienced hostility in yourself or in someone else? How did you learn to cope with that hostility? How has that taught you to be more hospitable or how has it closed you from becoming hospitable? What growth would you like to move toward in your present relationships as a result of this reflection?
4. What are the present relationships that are inviting you to move out of fear and hostility toward creating a free and open space for the other?
5. In what ways might becoming “host” in your present relationships call forth either greater receptivity or clearer confrontation from you?
6. How do you personally respond to Henri’s discussion of “poverty” and “host” in chapter 6? What does it challenge in you or confirm for you?

#### **Notes**

## **Reaching Out to Our God – *The Third Movement: From Illusion to Prayer***

Henri opens with a clear statement that we will never learn to deal with our loneliness or learn to provide a fearless place for others unless we reach beyond our fragile selves toward our loving God. It is only when we learn to dispel our illusion that we are immortal and that our life belongs to us that we can enter the spiritual dimension where true prayer occurs. Although learning to pray requires discipline, prayer is ultimately a gift from God. God is both present and absent, both at the center of our life and beyond it. To help us find our personal prayer, our prayer of the heart, Henri prescribes three rules: “a contemplative reading of the word of God, a silent listening to the voice of God, and a trusting obedience to a spiritual guide” (p. 135). He describes the spiritual tradition of Hesychasm, which is exemplified by the Jesus prayer. In true prayer of the heart God becomes our only thought. Even though prayer flows from the center of our personal being it must be shared in community.

### **Meeting # 5 (pp. 111-162) -- Questions for Engaging “From Illusion to Prayer”**

1. Why does Henri say this movement is hard to get hold of? And why would you say it is key to all the others?
2. How does Henri see immortality as an illusion? Don't we all know we are mortal? In what ways do we and our society ignore our mortality?
3. How do sentimentality and violence show us the two sides of our illusion of immortality?
4. What is the paradox of prayer and how does it relate to our sense of immortality?
5. Chapter 8 is about “prayer of the heart.” What are the biggest impressions for you as you read this about this kind of prayer? What questions does it raise for you? What objections? What longings?
6. How does community help provide a balance for and a context for true prayer of the heart? How does this sense of community differ from our normal senses of community?
7. As you look back over these last three chapters, how would you summarize what Henri is trying to get at? What stands out as particularly helpful or annoyingly unhelpful to you?

### **Meeting # 6 -- Questions for Personalizing “From Illusion to Prayer”**

1. Henri speaks of sentimentality and violence as signs of the illusion that our life belongs to us. How would you name the signs in your life (either small or large) that reveal how tenaciously you cling to that illusion despite the fact that you know better?
2. How do you respond to descending into your heart to pray? What gifts might it bring? What might it call you to face? What would you need?
3. How do you personally respond to Henri's suggestion that prayer is not just a private and personal thing but a community reality? How might a contemplative community be an encouragement? What would it mean for you to draw more deeply into a community of prayer and contemplative awareness?

4. As you come to the end of this book, what do you wish you could read more about? What seems to stick most clearly in your mind as a gift that you have received through this book? What sticks as a gift you have received through the group?
5. You may want to write a prayer or a poem or some other expression of your gratitude for this experience that you can offer as a gift to the group. It doesn't have to be full of expertise to be a gift!

### **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.



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 us in the return envelope provided. 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  
 Nouwen's writing resonates with me  
 Did not know Nouwen's work but was interested  Other: \_\_\_\_\_

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2. How did you invite people to join your reading group/hear about the reading group?

- Spoke with friends/co-workers      Notice in church bulletin/newsletter  
 Announcement to congregation      Other: \_\_\_\_\_

3. What book did you reflect on? \_\_\_\_\_

4. Why were you interested in discussing this particular book?  
\_\_\_\_\_

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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

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" video  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