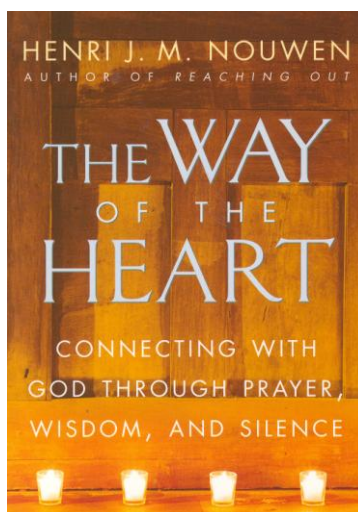


# *The Way of the Heart*

By Henri J.M. Nouwen

Discussion Questions for Nouwen Reading Groups

Three Week Program



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***The Way of the Heart***  
***Connecting with God through Prayer, Wisdom and Silence***  
by Henri J.M. Nouwen

© 1981 New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 100 pp. (paperback)

Discussion questions for Nouwen Reading Groups

Prepared by Claire S. Merritt

*Recommended number of meetings for this book: 3*

*The Way of the Heart* had its genesis in a seminar that Henri Nouwen taught at Yale University. In this short but profound book Henri turns to the spirituality of the Desert Fathers to show his readers a spiritual path away from the noise, busyness and consumerism of modern life toward a life centered in God. He divides this path into three disciplines: solitude, silence and prayer, the practice of which leads the individual from preoccupation with the superficiality of ordinary existence into the depth of life devoted to God.

**Meeting #1 (Prologue and Solitude, pp. 1-32) – Questions for Discussion:**

***Prologue***

1. Writing in the early 1980's, Henri says that "our world has embarked on a suicidal journey" (p. 1). What does he mean and in what ways is his statement still true a quarter century later?
2. Henri found it difficult to minister to others during his troubled times. What obstacles to ministry do you encounter in your life?
3. The fourth and fifth century Desert Fathers and Mothers sought escape from the conformity to their world. Where do you seek spiritual refuge?

***Solitude***

1. St. Anthony was "transformed into the new self of Jesus Christ" (p. 10) during his solitary life in the desert. What role has solitude played in your life?
2. Henri states: "The secular or false self is the self which is fabricated ... by social compulsion" (p. 13). What is the false self? Which social compulsions do you find hard to resist?
3. How does Henri distinguish solitude from privacy? In what ways is the solitude of the Desert Fathers more than just time to be alone?
4. Why is it essential that the experience of solitude be centered in Christ?

5. Henri says: “We have, indeed, to fashion our own desert where we can withdraw every day, shake off our compulsions, and dwell in the gentle healing presence of our Lord” (p. 21). If you have created such a desert for yourself, describe it. If not, what can you do to fashion it?
6. “Compassion is the fruit of solitude and the basis of all ministry” (p. 24). What does real compassion require and why can it be so difficult?
7. How is compassion incompatible with judgment?
8. Discuss Henri’s statement: “The goal of our life is not people. It is God” (p. 32).

### **Notes**

## **Meeting #2 (Silence, pp. 33-60 – Questions for Discussion:**

1. “Silence is solitude practiced in action” (p. 36). Describe an incident where silence, yours or someone else’s, was more powerful than words.
2. “The word no longer communicates, no longer fosters communion, no longer creates community, and therefore no longer gives life” (p. 39). Where do you experience an overabundance of words diminishing the quality of your life?
3. For the Desert Fathers “the word is the instrument of the present world and silence is the mystery of the future world” (p. 42). How do you interpret this statement?
4. If we are pilgrims, as Henri states, how can silence keep us from sin? Do you agree that silence is generally preferable to speaking? Under what circumstances could silence become a sin?
5. “Our first and foremost task is faithfully to care for the inward fire so that when it is really needed it can offer warmth and light to lost travelers” (p. 47). How can silence aid us in this task?
6. “A word with power is a word that comes out of silence” (p. 48). How does our own silence participate in God’s silence?
7. Henri recognizes that silence during a worship service can make us feel uneasy. How do you respond to such silence? How can we transform restless silence into peaceful silence in which we can experience God’s presence?
8. According to Henri “pastoral counseling is the attempt to lead fearful parishioners into the silence of God” (p. 55). If you have ever sought pastoral counseling, how did it help you?
9. “Silence is primarily a quality of the heart that leads to ever-growing charity” (p. 57). How does this silence go beyond simply not speaking?

### **Notes**

**Meeting #3 (Prayer and Epilogue, pp. 61-96) – Questions for Discussion:**

1. According to Henri, the real purpose of desert life is to pray always. To that end, what is the role of solitude and silence?
2. Henri describes our mistaken notion that sees “prayer primarily as an activity of the mind that involves above all else our intellectual capacities” (p. 68). Describe your experience of prayer. Is it primarily talking to God or is it something else?
3. In the tradition of hesychasm “Prayer is standing in the presence of God with the mind in the heart” (p. 74). Discuss your understanding of “heart” according to this tradition. How does it differ from our popular notion?
4. What does Henri mean when he says that “the prayer of the heart is the prayer of truth” (p. 75)?
5. In prayer why are a few short, simple words preferable to a long discourse? Do you have any brief prayers that you repeat?
6. How has Henri’s explanation helped you understand what it means to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17)?
7. “Through prayer we can carry in our heart all human pain and sorrow, all conflicts and agonies, all torture and war, all hunger, loneliness, and misery, not because of some great psychological or emotional capacity, but because God’s heart has become one with ours” (p. 86). Share your reflections on this mystery of prayer.
8. How is the prayer of the heart at the very center of ministry?
9. Henri has found great value in the spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers. What have you found in his reflections that you can incorporate in your own spiritual life?

**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 communion, 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:**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Phone Number</b>	<b>E-mail</b>

**Leadership tasks that could be shared within your group:**

<b>Date of meeting</b>	<b>Prayer/song and check-in with each other</b>	<b>DVD segments: <i>Journey of the Heart</i></b>	<b>Reader: themes, questions, text passages</b>	<b>Discussion leader</b>	<b>Refreshments</b>



## 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
- Nouwen's writing resonates with me
- Did not know Nouwen's work but was interested  Other: \_\_\_\_\_

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?  
\_\_\_\_\_

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" DVD  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