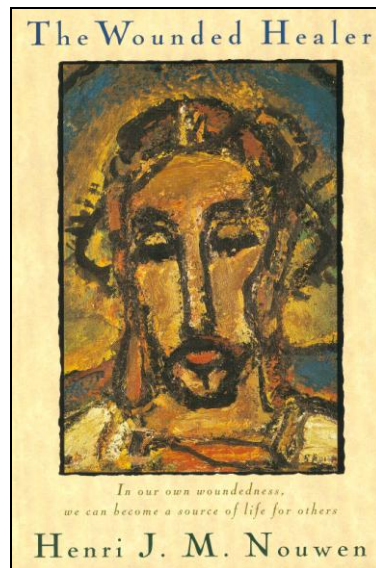


# *The Wounded Healer*

By Henri J.M. Nouwen

**Discussion Questions for Nouwen Reading Groups**

**Four Week Program**



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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 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 please 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

***The Wounded Healer***  
***Ministry in Contemporary Society***  
**by Henri J.M. Nouwen**

© 1972 New York, Doubleday, Image Books, 100 pp. (paperback)

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

Prepared by Claire S. Merritt

*Recommended number of meetings for this book: 4*

In this short volume Henri Nouwen examines the challenges of ministry in the modern world, where those involved in ministry no longer have the certainties of the past but instead are likely to be as wounded, broken and unsure as those to whom they minister. How can they use their own wounds to guide others toward greater wholeness? Although written in the early 1970's while Henri was teaching at Yale Divinity School, this book remains relevant more than four decades later, for the problems confronting spiritual leaders, both clergy and lay ministers, are still with us. The main thing that dates this book is the male-dominated language, for which Henri apologizes in his acknowledgments, promising to do better in future books – a promise he kept!

**Meeting #1 (Introduction and Chapter I, *Ministry in a Dislocated World*, pp. XV-22) --  
Questions for Discussion**

Henri begins his book by asking what it means “to be a minister in our contemporary society” (p. XV), and by describing the predicament of what he calls the “nuclear man.”

1. In the introduction Henri states, “Maybe our fragmented life experiences combined with our sense of urgency do not allow for a ‘handbook for ministers’” (p. XVI). Why is it more difficult to compile such a handbook in modern times than it was in the past?
2. How does Henri define nuclear man? To what extent do you see yourself as a nuclear man or woman? In what ways are you different?
3. What does Henri mean by “historical dislocation”? In what ways is this concept still, or even more, relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?
4. Why has it become difficult, if not impossible, to live according to a fixed ideology? Describe a belief you once held that no longer works for you. What brought about the change in your thinking?
5. What do we gain by rejecting a fixed ideology? What do we lose?
6. In discussing immortality Henri states: “When man is no longer able to look beyond the time and space of his life, he loses his desire to create and the

- excitement of being human” (p. 13). What is your concept of immortality? How does it differ from the traditional one expressed “in symbols such as Hell, Purgatory, Heaven, Hereafter, Resurrection, Paradise, and the Kingdom of God” (p. 14)?
7. In searching for liberation from the predicament of nuclear man, Henri identifies two main ways, which he calls the mystical way and the revolutionary way. How does each of these ways reflect your own search for meaning?
  8. Henri says “that in Jesus the mystical and the revolutionary ways are not opposites, but two sides of the same human mode of experiential transcendence” (p. 19). Give examples of this from Jesus’ life.

### **Notes**

**Meeting #2 (Chapter II, *Ministry for a Rootless Generation*, pp. 25-47) –  
Questions for Discussion**

In this chapter Henri tries to answer two questions: “First, how do the men and women of tomorrow look today? And second, how can we lead them to where they can redeem their people” (p. 26)?

1. Henri calls the young people of the late 1960’s “the inward generation.” What does he mean? What are the promises and dangers of this inwardness? After more than forty years since Henri wrote this book how has this generation turned out?
2. What does Henri mean when he describes the “generation without fathers”? In what ways do his observations still apply today?
3. “Convulsiveness” is a third characteristic that Henri ascribes to young people. What are the reasons for this convulsiveness? Does it continue to manifest itself in our present-day culture and, if so, how and where?
4. Henri states that the Christian leader “must first have the courage to be an explorer of the new territory in himself and to articulate his discoveries as a service to the inward generations” (p. 40). Why is it important that the leaders be able to communicate their inner life to those whom they serve?
5. How does Henri define compassion? What are some of the threats to that compassion for the Christian leader?
6. What does Henri mean when he invites the Christian leaders to be “contemplative critics”? In what sense can they be “people of hope”?
7. Why does this leader have to be a “person of prayer”?

**Notes**

**Meeting #3 (Chapter III, *Ministry to a Hopeless Man*, pp. 51-77) –  
Questions for Discussion**

Henri places a conversation between a hospital patient and a theology student at the center of a discussion about life and death.

1. Reread the conversation between John and Mr. Harrison. What is your reaction to it? Why do you think it went nowhere?
2. Recall a time when you visited someone in the hospital or someone visited you. How was the visit helpful? If it wasn't helpful what made it fail?
3. Henri talks about Mr. Harrison's fear of death. Have you ever feared that you would die? If so, describe what you felt.
4. "Isolation is among the worst of human sufferings," (p. 60) according to Henri. Why is that so? Have you ever felt truly isolated?
5. Henri states: "The emptiness of the past and the future can never be filled with words but only by the presence of a man" (p. 65). How could John have been present to Mr. Harrison? How can we be truly present to each other and what difference does this presence make?
6. What does Henri mean when he says that "'I will wait for you' is an expression of solidarity which breaks through the chains of death" (p. 69)?
7. Discuss Henri's statement: "The great illusion of leadership is to think that man can be led out of the desert by someone who has never been there" (p.72). Why is a refusal to become involved detrimental to ministry? How does sharing our personal concern enable us to help others?
8. Why is "faith in the value and meaning of life" (p. 74) essential to the Christian leader? How can this faith bring about new life, even in the face of death?
9. What justifies hope in the Christian context, even when years of work do not produce any concrete results?

**Notes**

**Meeting #4 (Chapter IV, *Ministry by a Lonely Minister* and Conclusion, pp. 79-100) –  
Questions for Discussion**

In the final section of his book Henri describes what it means to be both a wounded minister and a healing minister.

1. According to Henri, loneliness is our human condition. What are the dangers of denying this fundamental loneliness? How can we see it as a gift?
2. Why is the professional loneliness of ministers even greater now than it was in the past? How can a minister turn this loneliness into a source of strength?
3. What does Henri mean by “spiritual exhibitionism” (p. 88)? Why does this not help to alleviate suffering?
4. How does Henri define hospitality? How do concentration and withdrawal relate to hospitality? Why is this kind of hospitality so difficult?
5. Henri states: “Perhaps the main task of the minister is to prevent people from suffering for the wrong reasons” (p. 93). What are some of the wrong reasons why we suffer? What might be some of the right ones?
6. What is the basis of the community that Henri describes? In this community, what is the role of mutual confession?
7. Many have asked, “When is the Messiah coming?” How does Henri answer this question? What is your understanding of the concept of the Messiah?
8. In his conclusion Henri says: “The minister is the one who can make this search for authenticity possible, not by standing on the side as a neutral screen or an impartial observer, but as an articulate witness of Christ, who puts his own search at the disposal of others” (p. 99). Think about persons who have ministered to you in this way. How has Henri’s book helped you understand your own role as minister?

Nouwen Reading Group

Book: \_\_\_\_\_

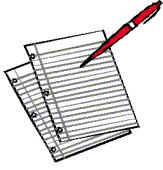
**Group Members:**

<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>Video or 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
- 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
- MeetUp.com       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