

The Henri Nouwen Society

From Fear to Love:

Spiritual Grounding in Anxious Times

Video Meditations featuring Marjorie J. Thompson

Episode One: Naming Fear, Claiming Hope

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Greetings and welcome to all who are listening today. Today, I'm going to be sharing some reflections on our first theme: naming fear, claiming hope. And my hope is that you may hear a few fresh insights here, but more importantly, that my words might evoke your own heart-knowing in a way that is helpful or clarifying.

Let's open with prayer: Blessed and holy God, we call on your Spirit to guide us with wisdom greater than our own, as we learn to live in fearful times with hope, courage, and love. We affirm these words from the African prayer book: "Goodness is stronger than evil. Love is stronger than hate. Light is stronger than darkness. Life is stronger than death." And we thank you that Jesus clearly shows us these truths in his life and death and rising. Amen.

Two-and-a-half years ago, we turned the corner of a decade into 2020. It took a few days before I caught the ocular metaphor: 20/20 vision. I pondered how that year might present us with an opportunity to gain real clarity of insight, personally and collectively. You know, the Greek god for whom January is named, Janus, has two faces: one facing forward, one backward. I think with each new year, now, I wonder what I need to see back, to remember and acknowledge about my past, that positions me to bring greater clarity of vision to my future. I need a little bit of that Janus face, back and forth.

The personal and collective issues facing us at every level have only intensified since 2020. Divisive politics and fragmented worldviews. The increasing intensity of the climate crisis. Refugees fleeing that crisis as well as poverty, oppression and war. Cyber insecurity. Social media amplifying misinformation and conspiracy theories. The rise of support for authoritarian leaders among those apparently seeking simplistic answers to complex problems. And then, of course, a global pandemic that seems never-ending. Any one of these realities is enough to keep me up at night, restless, anxious, often angry. I need spiritual grounding in divine wisdom more than ever in these days.

And at the same time, I wonder, how do I obscure my own vision through distorted or partial perceptions? How many projections and old stories or ingrained habits do I unconsciously drag from my past into my future? Because I think I do that not just every year, but probably every day. These are questions of self-examination. Spiritually speaking, the weighty, unsettling matters in our world invite us to examine ourselves more deeply. The state of human affairs in this world holds up a mirror to our soul, multiplied by the billions.

Henri Nouwen, one of my early mentors, references the words of one of *his* mentors when he says: "Merton knew only too well that the sin, evil and violence he found in the world were the same sin, the same evil, the same violence he had discovered in his own heart through . . . prayer. The impurity of the world was a mirror of the impurity of his heart."

I think the challenge in our world and in our souls is how to face a sense of the crisis and chaos around us with the mind of Christ. Sometimes it's helpful to be really clear about what we are afraid of, and why. I'd like to name some of my own greatest fears in these days. Please understand I'm speaking for myself, aware that while my views may echo some of others, they will not resonate with everyone. I really offer them to encourage you to name your own fears just as clearly as you can.

So, first on my list is the climate crisis. Leaders in many countries continue to deny the urgency – some, even the reality – of climate change, despite all the evidence, including – gracious – the most severe hurricanes and tornadoes and floods and fires that that we have seen in any of our lifetimes. The science is so clear, and yet resistance to change is deeply embedded among many in positions of power, whose choices could change the picture. So, my fear is that we are closer to the tipping point where global warming really causes irreversible damage. Closer than we imagine.

I think it's quite conceivable that not only many life forms will go extinct, but possibly including the human species, who have been fueling the crisis since the Industrial Revolution. And of all the fears I can name, this is the one that probably has kept me awake at night for decades, because it seems to me, if we can't turn this ship around, no other cause is going to make much difference to our future.

Well, my second fear is that our social and political life has become just frighteningly polarized. This hyper-partisan divide is fed by different versions of reality, in which news, opinion, theory disagree on basic facts. The fracturing of common understanding has led to unfruitful argumentation in place of genuine public discourse. And the loss of basic civility damages the kind of well-informed debate that supports a healthy democracy.

I'm fearful that social media platforms are structured in a way that allows partisan voices to amplify their views with very little accountability. And given the lack of accountability, malign players are free to spread intentional disinformation. So, my fear is really for democracy itself, which depends on people's trust in elected officials, and the rule of law, and governing institutions. And that trust, it seems now, is purposely undermined by some, for political gain.

The emergence of this deadly virus has given us, I think, an opportunity to see our profound connectedness within our local communities and in our nations and in our world. It's given us reason to work together toward common goals for a common good. And yet, due to the politicization of virtually all aspects of the pandemic, it seems only to have hardened the divisions among us. I'm deeply saddened by the number of needless deaths and the remarkably self-defeating consequences of those who would elevate "individual liberties" – their idea of liberty – above the common good. The common good.

What's at play in our culture is also reflected in our churches, which of course are made up of just imperfect people like ourselves. Some church leaders and believers, who vociferously proclaim their Christian identity, seem uninterested in living lives that resemble Jesus's life. And in particular, I observe disinterest in serving the least, and the last, and the lost, in loving our enemies, in expressing grace or hospitality to those who are different from ourselves.

It seems that the chasm, sometimes, between proclamation and practice undermines the credibility of the gospel and dishonors the one we call Lord. Young people have been leaving the church in droves for two to three generations now, citing hypocrisy and judgmental attitudes. And I fear that the life-giving dimensions of Jesus's message are getting lost in distortions.

So, they're the major ones. My fears paint a pretty disheartening picture, which tends to lead me to cynicism and sometimes sarcasm. Those are aspects of myself I don't particularly like, but there they are. And your response may be different. Your fears may be ones other than mine. I believe that the energies of fear and anger are raw on all sides of our cultural divides, and that these volatile energies remain very much at the surface of our collective lives, here in 2022.

Nouwen spoke frequently to the spiritual challenges of fear. He writes:

Though we think of ourselves as followers of Jesus, we are often seduced by the fearful questions the world presents to us. . . without fully realizing it. We become anxious . . . people, caught in questions of survival: our own survival, the survival of our families, friends, colleagues, the survival of our church, our country, our world.

He goes on:

Fearful questions never lead to love-filled answers; underneath every fearful question, many other fearful questions are hidden. . . Once these survival questions become the guiding questions of our lives, we tend to dismiss words spoken from the house of love as unrealistic . . . sentimental, pious, or just useless.

This is from Henri's book, *Lifesigns*. Personally, I have not figured out how to remain consistently grounded in the love of Christ when I am buffeted by the day's news. Consistent love calls me to a higher level of awareness, one that I glimpse only in fits and starts.

You know, it has been said that we cannot change human problems from the same level of consciousness that created the problem in the first place. I think that's a really profound truth. We need to go both deeper and higher. The heart, the core of our being, the divine image within connects us with a higher consciousness of love. I aim to live from such love. But since I'm merely a fellow struggler toward that goal, the best I can offer, I think, are a few perspectives and practices that have helped me go deeper, in the hope that they may be helpful to you, too.

So, first I want to look at the perspective of the overall arc of human history. Of course, as Christians, we hold an historical understanding of salvation. We trust the unfolding of God's will to follow a trajectory over time, moving us toward the fullness of what we call "God's reign." And I think if we look at the record of human history that we have at hand, it suggests that we are growing in understanding of all aspects of life on this planet, including our own humanity. Our worldviews, our mythologies, our interpretations, our knowledge, all evolve.

So, for example, we no longer engage in human sacrifice to the gods, or pour vats of boiling oil over our enemies' heads from parapets, or, thank God, burn people at the stake. We look back and consider such practices barbaric, although some of them are not that many hundred years ago.

And despite the fact that we have our modern versions of abuse and torture, we have abandoned some outdated biblical notions, too. So, gone is that wretched idea of stoning disobedient children. We no longer believe that a person's illness is always due to personal sin. Among dated cultural norms, we have moved beyond the 18th-century, European notion of justice, which was limited to property rights for wealthy men. That's all it meant. We've embraced the rather novel idea of universal human rights, even if unevenly practiced. As human cultures interact globally, we recognize more fully the value of diverse races and ethnicities and cultures, although tribalism continues to rear up in protest. With respect to the Earth's wilderness, for thousands of years it was seen as a hostile realm to be conquered by "civilization." It was only a hundred years ago that we began to value wild places and creatures

in their own right. And only over the past 50 or 60 years have we begun awakening to how our way of life harms the natural world, whose interconnected web of life sustains our own.

So, these are just a few examples of advances that suggest a slow human maturation into more open-minded open-heartedness. Of course, the process does not always move forward. We go backwards and sideways, undermining our best intentions and sometimes our best interests. Yet overall, the human species is less parochial and more conscious of global realities. We have more knowledge and more capacity to act on that knowledge. Beyond biology, the idea of evolution is widely embraced in relation to technology, sociology, psychology, and theology. If we are a dynamically evolving species, which I believe we are, surely this applies to our spiritual awareness as well.

Some of you may know the work of Teilhard de Chardin, Jesuit priest and paleontologist and author. He was ahead of his time in articulating a theory of spiritual evolution, what we might call today "evolution of consciousness." I, for one, am grateful to live in a time that has entered into exploring the frontiers of consciousness. The landscape of the unconscious remains unfamiliar to most people, and yet more and more of us are opening to these deep repositories of both woundedness and wisdom. The idea of evolving consciousness gives me hope. It helps me to trust those words of Theodore Parker that are sometimes attributed to Martin Luther King, Jr.: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

I believe that arc also bends toward awareness of the deeper human unity underlying our great and beautiful diversity. Identifying patterns in history gives us perspective on both the strangeness and the familiarity of our present challenges. In some ways, I think former times have been as dangerous, if surely as chaotic. Think of the Black Plague or the Civil War, World War II. Two factors mark the decisive danger of our time: unimaginably powerful nuclear weapons that could wipe out all higher forms of life on this planet; and then climate change, moving faster than scientists had predicted with the equally devastating impacts that I already mentioned. In light of these realities, I think our hope needs so much to be rooted in God's reality, a larger reality than our own. So, here are a few faith perspectives that help me through difficult days.

The first is just that divine reality is far greater and more mysterious than anything we can comprehend. It encompasses the whole, vast cosmos known only within the divine mind. Entire worlds may come and go in this, the unimaginable reaches of time and space. It's been helpful for me to remember that text in Revelation 21, just one verse. The author speaks of seeing, "a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more." That's a pretty different picture from what we know, but what that vision communicates to me is a deep trust that in the eternal heart of God, all life in this world or any other is securely held and loved, regardless of changes in outward form.

Whatever God creates is good and beloved and belongs entirely to divine being. Here is a scripture verse that we rarely hear beyond weddings, which is a great shame because it deserves a much more central place in our reflection: "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." That's 1 Corinthians 13:7. This verse assures us that God's love bears everything, everything human, with immense patience, even our foolishness and our intentional harm. Divine being, it seems, understands far better than we that human evil springs from unhealed wounds of pain and fear. Love bears with our slow evolution, trusting that we can become fully what God created us to be; truly, that God believes in us more than we believe in ourselves.

The holy one steadfastly hopes for us, and so is willing to endure everything we can think up or dish out. And isn't that actually a beautiful description of what Jesus does on the cross? God's love endures eternally. It never gives up. It never ends. Love like this is the greatest possible source of our hope and courage, regardless of our circumstances. I try to remember that. We're called to receive this quality of love so deeply, to enter it so fully that we can embody the description found earlier in 1 Corinthians 13, that we all remember so well: "Love is patient and kind. It is not irritable or resentful. Love finds joy in the truth."

What a difference such love can make, and does make, in a world like ours. The 14th-century mystic and anchoress, Julian of Norwich, understood this love and the hope that it holds. It's helpful to know that she barely survived a very grave illness early in her life, that she lived through the 100 Years War. (We think our wars are long!) She witnessed wave upon wave of the Black Death decimating the population of Norwich. And surely, she must have heard the cries of the "heretics" who were being burned alive less than a mile from her cell's window onto the world.

Julian would have known plenty of fear, and yet she could write with conviction, "all shall be well and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well." That's the phrase for which she is famed. But few of us know the rest of the sentence: "for there is a Force of Love moving through this universe that holds us and will never let us go." A force of love. The hope that is woven into God's love is a gift that we can hold very close in these disorienting and frightening days. The author, Cynthia Bourgeault, speaks of how important it is to develop what she calls "a conscious connection to the wellspring of our hope." Jesus offers another way to imagine this conscious connection, I think, when he bids us to abide in him, as he already abides in us. An abiding connection requires sustained practice.

So, we move now from perspective to practice, and I'd like to just lift up two practices that I think help us name fear and claim hope. First is writing our own psalms of lament and imprecation. In chaotic times, our emotions are heightened, but maybe we wonder, can we trust God to accept all of our feelings, even the scariest ones? We may have been taught that God does not approve or tolerate our so-called negative emotions, like doubt or fear or anger

or hatred. So, it may help to remember that our feelings are part of our God-given nature. They belong to our precious humanity, and God understands our emotions and their root causes better than we do. So, let's bring to mind the infinite, eternal character of divine love and confidently open our heart to its flow. And then into that unlimited flow, we can release our feelings in all their vivid colors. So, this practice allows us to articulate in writing our own poems of lament and imprecation.

The Psalms are poems and songs. We can write our own. "Lament" expresses grief, sorrow, incomprehension. "Imprecation" means calling down divine justice and judgment on our perceived enemies, presumably so we don't need to judge them ourselves. So, that's a real fig leaf, isn't it? Because asking God to judge our enemies reveals our actual judgements with crystal clarity. We need to remember that God does not judge others the way we do, nor judge us the way we expect. God understands the human anguish behind imprecation and does not condemn it. Even rage powerful enough to want babies dashed against rocks, rage that makes us deeply uncomfortable – even that is permitted in the Psalms.

As one modern writer has put it so beautifully, "God holds with understanding the ugliest, most desperate, furious, broken parts of us." (Adele Crawford, *Presbyterians Today*.) God holds these with understanding. The practice of writing personal psalms involves recognizing and naming our actual feelings. Feelings need expression in ways that will not harm others or ourselves. But it's helpful to get them out in front of us where we can take a good look and decide how best to deal with them.

One helpful way to process the feelings is maybe to share our psalms with a friend or a mentor wise enough to hold our feelings with compassionate regard. Another way forward is to surrender our feelings to God, praying for release and transformation of those feelings. Or, if very strong emotions persist in disrupting or being destructive in our lives, then the best path may be working with a good therapist who can support our healing process. And these are not mutually exclusive options. They can work together very well toward our emotional and spiritual maturation.

The second practice I want to mention is called "befriending a difficult feeling." It deserves more than the brief description I can offer in our time today. So, you have a one-page synopsis to download and work with at your leisure, along with a couple of other – I call them handouts, I guess they will be downloads for you. So, here's the essence of this practice of befriending difficult feelings.

We start by identifying a circumstance that evokes a difficult feeling, and then name that feeling as specifically as we can. It's important to distinguish between the feeling itself and our internal story or narrative about the feeling. We all have stories that we've devised around our

feelings over time. The process then invites us to notice where that emotion shows up in our body. How do we carry it physically, because our feelings impact our bodies physically in tension or pain? Where does it show up? And then allow that feeling to be what it is while we breathe with it.

Accepting and breathing into the feeling is really the heart of befriending it. We do not have to like the feeling, yet giving ourselves permission to actually feel the emotion, in a way that calms our bodily response to it, opens up something new. And that new thing is an experience of self-compassion. Self-compassion. That's really the seed bed for transforming difficult feelings. And it's also the tap root of our compassion for others. We're going to talk more about that next week: How can we be compassionate with others in their difficult feelings?

I want to say this is a pretty powerful practice. I discovered it when the pandemic increased my own sense of isolation, adding to my general anxiety about the state of the world. This practice re-centers me. It connects me with my body. It helps me to hold my fearful and angry emotions with less judgment and more grace. And that, in turn, generates dividends for those people out there, toward whom I can feel so graceless and judgmental. A practice like this also really gives me hope that ingrained habits of mind and heart really can be transformed. And if it's possible at my age, it's possible for anyone.

So, just to conclude: As this year, 2022, began, I set an intention for myself to seek signs of hope, to savor that hope wherever I find it, and to be a source of hope in this world, to whatever extent I can. I'm attempting to put into practice the rather humorous and frank wisdom of Anne Lamott, who wrote:

What if I practice my latest theory, that the center not only can and does hold, but . . . the center can only hold because of the nature of the center? If the center is not the way things have always been, but rather breath, precious community, humanity, evolution, and casseroles, then we see it all around us. . . Those who say it can't be done should get out of the way of those who are doing it. We take action – soup kitchens, creek restoration, mentoring . . . by showing up with hope to help others, I'm guaranteed that hope is present. And then my own hope increases. We create goodness in the world, and that gives us hope.

Wise words from a wise woman. I think there is a great deal we can do by showing up with hope in this world. And as we do so, I think it also helps to remember that it is slow, persistent work we're called to. The poet, Elizabeth Stevens, expresses this truth very powerfully. And I would just like to end these reflections today with her words, a poem called Slow Work:

Oh, my dear ones,
I know you were hoping
For a once-and-done.
For an earthquake,
A tidal wave.
Hoping that if we gave it our all,
A single push would be enough.
That after this,
we could
Sink
Back into complacency,
Back into the comfort of our privilege.
I confess, in the secret corners of my heart,
I wanted to believe it could be that easy
That justice would emerge as from an egg
Fully grown
Not with wet down and weak wings. . .
But beloveds,
We are chipping away at a mountain,
Not a boulder.
Calcified structures
Created to oppress,
Control,
Kill.
2,000 years of this stupid idea
That some are worthy,
Some deserve power by virtue of who they are.
Erosion is slow work, sweethearts.
Celebrate the progress
The triumphs.
Celebrate also the heartbreaking almosts.
Breathe.
Rest for a time.
Then get up and turn again to kindness,
Toward your neighbor in need,
Toward those who are still trapped in the stone.
Tell them, "I won't give up."
Tell them, "I am with you . . .
Until the mountain crumbles to dust."

May we all be blessed in this slow work. May the blessing of God be with us. Thank you.