

The Henri Nouwen Society

**From Fear to Love:**  
**Spiritual Grounding in Anxious Times**  
*Video Meditations featuring Marjorie J. Thompson*

**Episode Five: Transforming Anxiety into Hospitality**

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My heartfelt greetings to every one of you joining us today for our fifth and final meditation, on transforming anxiety into hospitality.

I want to say, right up front, how very grateful I am for your participation in this webcast series. In the hours that we have spent together over the last five weeks, I really hope that you have been finding spiritual nourishment as well as some perspectives that perhaps challenge you to live more fully into the way of Christ. You know, I'm sure many of you are aware of this, but the early followers of Jesus were not called Christians, but followers of the Way, this whole new way of life governed by the spirit of love that Jesus embodied. And one of the great expressions of Jesus' way of life was, and is, hospitality.

Hospitality, I think, is the natural fruit of our movement from fear to love. When we consider what makes our hearts anxious in these times, so much can be traced to one big taproot, I think, which is fear of the other, fear of the stranger, or anything that seems strange and unaccustomed in our lives. I'd like to name just a few forms of "otherness" that feed our anxiety.

Consider the reaction of so many people, now, in so many countries to the influx of refugees and asylum-seekers from other parts of the world. Behind the rhetoric and the laws restricting immigration, I think there is a great deal of fear of the stranger, the person with differently hued skin, the one who speaks a different language, or holds a different faith. Someone who embodies different traditions and understandings. Adding to our natural fears of difference, I think, is an increasingly overt ideology that claims that our "original" race or culture or language will somehow be diluted, maybe even polluted by these strangers. That we will lose the distinctiveness and preciousness of our culture or our national identity, somehow, if we allow too many others into our accustomed world.

It's an old ideology - I might even call it an idolatry - that keeps rearing its head in various ways over time. Fear of otherness, we know, causes conflict, violence, even war. Much of our social and political polarization is based on fear of those who see and think differently than we do. Anxiety around differences sometimes drives us to pressure others to see and feel as we do. This is the basic dynamic of peer pressure, which our youth feel so acutely. But adults are not immune from it, either. Pressure to conform creates friction in relationships from family life, to friendships, to faith communities, to nations. We don't like feeling pressured or coerced, for good reason.

Another angle on this sense of otherness that we fear, it's worth noting: In our current climate crisis, I think that we've often seen the natural world as strange, overwhelming, unfriendly. We fear dark and tangled woods, the unfathomable depths of ocean, the poisonous and the predatory creatures of jungle and desert and mountain. We fear the unpredictable powers of storm and flood, earthquake and fire. And the dangers, of course, are real.

What we mean by "civilization" includes conquering, controlling, or at least trying to predict the fearful forces of nature as much as possible. I think we often deem these forces and landscapes "inhospitable to human life." We use that language: that many parts of the natural world are inhospitable to human life. And perhaps in turn, we have often chosen to be inhospitable to nature - as if we could somehow be independent of her.

What about the otherness that may even be our greatest fear: the stranger we find in our own, divided selves? Who is this part of us that periodically erupts so fiercely or sneaks out surreptitiously? Have you ever entertained a thought or said things that made you wonder, "Where did that come from?" And we have already named this hidden realm, "the shadow." We do fear our shadow, the strangeness of our dreams, the unknown recesses of our hearts and minds. For some, I think that the deepest fear is that if we searched our inner being, we would find nothing there - just emptiness. Now, you know, theologically speaking, that's impossible; no creature made in the image and likeness of God can be nothing.

But we can *feel* empty. We can fear that we are nothing. Afraid of what lies within, we then ignore our inner life and stay focused on externals, where it feels safe. But then, our faith becomes superficial and our emotional maturity gets stunted. And our self-knowledge is still-born. If we refuse to get acquainted with the inner stranger, how can we be comfortable getting acquainted with the stranger outside us? If we can't receive the stranger within, we will repel the strangers around us.

So, how does all this relate to hospitality? Well, the very essence of hospitality is welcoming the stranger. Welcoming the stranger. The letter to the Hebrews says, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares." That's a

reference to Abraham showing hospitality to the three strangers who are also called angels or messengers of God. Hospitality is an expansive movement of the heart to include the "other." And this welcoming of the stranger is mysteriously tied to welcoming God, in our spiritual tradition. Jesus even assures us that whatever we do or fail to do for "the least of these," we do or don't do for him.

And Jesus was himself, in so many ways, the ultimate stranger. The prologue of John's gospel reads: "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, and yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him."

When we look at the gospels, we have to acknowledge that in many ways, the people of ancient Palestine saw Jesus' teaching as strange and his way of life as unwelcome. So, he was labeled a law-breaker and a blasphemer by religious authorities. At one point, he was mobbed by people eager to throw him off a cliff. His own family, at one point, basically accuses him of being out of his mind. He was misunderstood and, as we know, abandoned, betrayed, denied by his own, handpicked disciples. He died the death of a common criminal, as if he were the refuse of humanity. And after his resurrection, Jesus' disciples at first did not recognize this stranger on the road to Emmaus or beside the lakeside. So, despite the crowds he attracted, Jesus was often seen and treated as a stranger in this world.

And yet Jesus was supremely hospitable. His heart remained fully open to the other. St. Clement of Rome, in the early centuries, wrote: "Jesus was found extending hospitality to tax collectors, publicans, sinners, and other outcasts of society." Jesus' ministry was often extended to foreigners, Samaritans, Greeks, even the hated Roman occupiers. He was open to scribes and Pharisees - entering their homes, teaching them. Jesus' love was absolutely fearless.

We often say he was perfect and you know, the Greek word *teleios*, translated "perfect" in English, actually means "complete, whole, fulfilling its purpose." Jesus' love was more complete and whole than anything we can comprehend. And I think in him, we actually can see that perfect love - whole, complete love - casts out fear. There was no room for fear in his love.

Of course, our love remains imperfect. And so, fear still determines many of our choices in life. I think moving from fear to love is always going to be a growing edge for us. And yet our high and beautiful calling is to learn to love as God loves. And every one of us is capable of growing more toward that love, by the grace of God. The Spirit draws us to participate in the hospitality of Jesus' heart.

Let me share with you my understanding of hospitality. In my book, *Soul Feast*, I have a chapter on hospitality there. I write: "Hospitality means receiving the other, from the heart, into my own dwelling place. It entails providing for the need, comfort, and delight of the other with all the openness, respect, freedom, tenderness, and joy that love itself embodies."

Now my own dwelling place may be physical or metaphorical. Receiving others into my mental and emotional space takes hospitality deeper than simply opening my front door. Our culture has reduced the practice of hospitality to entertaining friends or inviting trusted people, maybe, to stay overnight in our guest rooms. It is really difficult for us to comprehend that codes of hospitality in the ancient world applied particularly to strangers and enemies. Those codes were a matter of mutual survival in a time when travel across boundaries could be brutally dangerous. I wonder if we understand that hospitality to strangers and enemies is still a matter of mutual survival – and not just spiritually.

But let me pick up on the mutuality piece of this, because this is really one of the chief characteristics of authentic hospitality. Parker Palmer, in his book, *The Company of Strangers* (one of his early books), reminds us that the root word *hospice* means, actually means both "host" and "guest." It can be used either way. And I think this is part of our experience, isn't it? That when we find the courage to invite strangers into our hearts or our homes, we often discover unexpected gifts in that person's humanity: who they are, what they love, the perspectives they hold, the light they cast on our bias, which allows our illusions about "otherness" to evaporate, sometimes. We receive a blessing in offering one.

True hospitality means allowing others to be who they are, rather than expecting them to become more like us. And Henri Nouwen understood this very early in his ministry. In his book, *Reaching Out*, he writes:

The paradox of hospitality is that it wants to create an emptiness, not a fearful emptiness, but a friendly emptiness where strangers can enter and discover themselves as created free. . . free to sing their own songs, speak their own languages, dance their own dances; free also to leave and follow their own vocations. Hospitality is not a subtle invitation to adopt the lifestyle of the host, but the gift of a chance for the guest to find his own.

Giving others freedom to be who they are, and opening our hearts to receive their gifts, feeds our joy and confidence in the goodness of humanity. It's empowering to both host and guest. But I think we can also recognize that mutuality and joy are not generally our very first reaction to being with strangers. We are more often cautious, anxious, even suspicious when we encounter otherness.

So, how do we move from fear to love? This is really the big question. I would suggest that the place to begin is with a spirit of wonder and curiosity. Think of what can happen when we open our hearts to wonder, open our minds to inquiry. So, just as we might approach some aspect of the natural world with a sense of awe and inquisitiveness, we can wonder, "Who is this other person? Who is this child of God? What has she experienced in life? What does he feel in my presence? How might this stranger see me? What are the hopes and fears, the hurts and joys that shape this person's life? I wonder what I might learn by just listening."

I also think it's important for us to wonder, "Who do I see as a stranger?" and why, because the answer isn't always evident, you know? It may not be the typical differences of, let's say, race or religion or politics. Maybe a friend betrays a confidence and becomes a stranger to us. We can become estranged from people we know quite well, including our spouses, our children. If family members get caught up in addictions or suffer from mental health issues, we may well have difficulty recognizing who they are. I can tell you that my Aunt Gerry was the stranger in our family. Had she been born 20 years ago, she would surely have been diagnosed with ADD, and probably located somewhere on the autism spectrum. No one knew about such things in her lifetime. And so, her behavior was just painfully awkward to all of us, including to herself. Who are the strangers among us?

A few more questions to ask ourselves: When I face otherness, what fears arise in me? What assumptions do I tend to make? What judgments or labels do I apply? Because all of us have prejudices. That word prejudice just means pre-judgment - judging someone before we actually know them. It's so important to get acquainted with those we see through prejudiced eyes.

I want to share with you my most important experience in learning to open to real hospitality of heart. Maybe some of you have read my book, *Courage for Caregivers*. If so, you will know that my husband and I cared for his mother in the last 11 years of her life, from age 89 to 100. Her nickname was Bab - B.A.B. - a name inadvertently given to her by my husband when he was two years old. Somehow it stuck. So, a bit of background: Bab was not easy to live with. Her stature was large, her personality larger than life. She didn't walk, she strode. She didn't talk, she proclaimed - in a loud, adamant voice with a very British accent. Bab could carry on a social conversation with finesse and she charmed everyone she met. Our mail carrier once asked if she was royalty; she could give that impression. As you might imagine, Bab's presence took up a lot of psychic space in the household. She was also mostly deaf, physically and emotionally. In fact, she was masterful in staving off emotions. Bab could not seem to penetrate the surface of life. She judged by appearances, saw things in black and white. With very little capacity for abstract thought, she did not understand metaphor or poetry. Pretty much everything, including scripture, was to be taken literally.

During her final year, in an uncharacteristic moment of self-awareness, she observed, "I am not given to looking inward." And God forgive me, I found it the understatement of the century - at least, the century of her life. Perhaps you can imagine, then, the challenge that Bab's personality posed for my husband and me: two introverts who swam daily in the waters of metaphor, for whom soul and spirit were the very air we breathed, what brought us together. But with Bab at the dinner table, we could no longer discuss theology or spirituality. The topics that included her were simpler fare: food, medical appointments, our two cats. She kept us well-grounded in the physical world.

It is against this backdrop that my own journey from anxiety and, I would say, resistance to hospitality, took place. Caring for Bab brought out my anxiety about the fate of my own ministry. When was I going to have time to complete preparations for the next retreat or week of teaching? How would I get back to that writing project? Whose expectations would I disappoint this time, when the weekday caregiver couldn't come and I had to fill in at the last minute. How could I maintain my own spiritual practices, when caregiving duties continually got in the way? I often felt frustrated and impatient that Bab's care needs kept interrupting my "real" work. And I feared that I was losing my capacity to exercise my spiritual leadership. Until one day, I woke up and realized that caring for Bab was my primary spiritual practice, for that season in my life. It wasn't an interruption at all. It was simply what God was calling me to, in and through the circumstances of our life together. Then it became clear to me the quality of my presence to Bab, the way I responded to her needs, the tenderness of my care, the listening I brought to our relationship, was my central vocation for that time.

What a revelation! In retrospect, it seems so obvious. It did help to relieve a good deal of the anxiety that I felt about how I was expressing my call. But more importantly, it opened my heart to this woman who had felt in so many ways to me like a stranger in my home. It allowed me to see her as she was, with greater acceptance and patience. I was more able to relax and just open up to her personhood, with all its limitations and peculiarities. I became more curious - curious about her life, her memories, her family stories. And I began to express little gestures of physical affection for her in ways that she would never have initiated, but she could respond to - and did. I was starting to become more hospitable to her presence with us in a deeper way, not just providing an apartment in our home, but providing space in my heart, room in my love, for her to find full acceptance and comfort.

This movement in me from anxiety to hospitality meant that the final years of Bab's life really had a different quality. And not just for the two of us; my husband picked up on my gestures of affection to his mother, and he joined the dance.

Now, I'm not suggesting that all tensions among us ceased or that there weren't plenty of moments of anxiety around our care for Bab as she continued to decline. But the mutual qualities of hospitality really did bear some beautiful fruit. I remember she and I could just get

giggling like schoolgirls over simple daily rituals, and we could share moments of real connection and tenderness. When I tucked her under the covers at night, sometimes I could say things to her then that I wouldn't at any other time of day. And she was so receptive at that time. We came to love each other in our own ways. And I was really surprised, I think, at the growth in my capacity to love a woman I had never imagined truly loving. You know, I believe so deeply that the Spirit of God will work patiently with any of us to bring about real transformation in ourselves and in our relationships, if we are simply willing to open our hearts to one another and to grace.

Let me describe two practices that can help us grow in hospitality. The first is developing a habit of deep and open listening; and the second is holding our own ideas and convictions with a little humility.

First: listening. You know, many of us don't have a great track record on listening very well. But if we want to approach those we perceive as different with wonder and curiosity, then the art of listening is essential. To understand where people are coming from, what has shaped their worldview and values and priorities, we need to listen in ways that go beyond conventional hearing. So often, when we try to listen, we're being distracted by other concerns, or time constraints, or the chatter of people around us. Or we may *appear* to be listening - I think I'm really good at this - appear to be listening when we're really framing a response in our mind or revisiting a familiar, internal argument. Real listening begins with our full presence and attention. One spiritual writer says, "Listening is silently bearing with another person. When we're truly listening, we're silent inside. We neither agree nor disagree with what's being said. We simply listen openly, permitting the other person to be what he or she is . . .freely."

Does that sound like hospitality? I hope so.

Our beloved Henri has this to say about listening as an act of hospitality. He says:

To listen is very hard, because it asks of us so much interior stability that we no longer need to prove ourselves by speeches, arguments, statements, or declarations. True listeners no longer have an inner need to make their presence known. They are free to receive, to welcome, to accept. Listening is much more than allowing another to talk while waiting for a chance to respond. Listening is paying full attention to others and welcoming them into our very beings.

And then he says:

The beauty of listening is that, those who are listened to start feeling accepted, start taking their words more seriously and discovering their own true selves. Listening is a form of spiritual hospitality by which you invite strangers to become friends, to get to know their inner selves more fully, and even dare to be silent with you.

One of my favorite stories illustrates the second part of Henri's insight about how true listening helps other people discover themselves more fully. I've told this story several times in different ways; some of you may be familiar with it: Dr. Rachel Pinney was a prominent anti-nuclear activist. And at some point, she turned to wonder - wondering in particular why her very well-reasoned arguments against the proliferation of nuclear weapons often had so little effect on her critics. And so, she decided to try something different. One by one, she sought out those she knew disagreed with her. And after asking a few simple questions, she simply listened to what they had to say without interrupting them. Every so often, she would summarize what she was hearing, to make sure that she understood it accurately. And she found that that once her opponents realized that Dr. Pinney was not going to contradict or try to convert them to her views, they let down their guard and began to speak more thoughtfully, with more nuance, so they could acknowledge shades of gray in their views, and points of uncertainty. And as her listening drew these people deeper into hearing their own words more clearly, some of them even began to notice and question their own assumptions. So, Dr. Pinney saw more real transformation coming from her listening than from all her ardent and well-reasoned talking.

Very important for us, I think, to hear stories like that. When we listen hospitably to those we disagree with, a kind of prayerful quality grows between us. In the presence of an open, patient heart, people find themselves free to move beyond ego barriers and defensive arguments. Deep listening draws us toward what I would call the sanctuary of God's Spirit in the other, the other person. So, maybe our loving, listening ear will free up the authentic beauty of another person's character. It might even invite their listening to us, helping to draw out our deeper authenticity in a new way.

As we practice listening, it's important to learn the kinds of questions that invite an undefended response. And the most helpful are open-ended questions that evoke personal reflection and storytelling. So, I might say to someone, "I would really like to understand your viewpoint on this issue. Would you be willing to share some of the personal experience that has shaped your way of seeing it?"

Or I might ask, "Who has most influenced your way of thinking about this matter?" And when we ask these kinds of questions, we need to be ready to receive with interest - real interest and gratitude - what the other person is comfortable sharing.

The second practice I want to lift up is having humility about what we think is right. The more absolute our certainty is about being right, the more easily we condemn those who think differently and the more we put them off. But when we hold our convictions with a sense that we could, perhaps, be wrong about some things, at least, we tend to be more gentle with those who differ from us, and more open to new perspectives.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, saw how easily we can be mistaken in our opinions. In his Preface to the Sermons, he writes:

Are you persuaded that you see more clearly than me? It is not unlikely that you may. Then treat me as you would desire to be treated yourself. . . Point me out a better way than I have known. . . Take me by the hand and lead me as I am able to bear. But I entreat you do not beat me down in order to quicken my pace. Suppose I were ever so much in the wrong, I doubt this would set me right. Rather it would make me run so much the farther from you. . . Perhaps if you are angry, so shall I be too; and then there will be small hopes of finding the truth. If once anger arise. . . this smoke will so dim the eyes of my soul that I shall not be able to see anything clearly. For God's sake, if it be possible. . . let us not provoke one another to wrath. . . For how far is love, even with many wrong opinions, to be preferred before truth itself without love! We may die without knowledge of many truths and yet be carried into Abraham's bosom. But if we die without love, what will knowledge avail?

I find myself truly moved every time I read these words. Truth is indeed important, but love is the supreme value of faith. It is too easy for us as fallible human beings to get caught up in arguing over what is true. The history of religion and politics is full of such arguments. Even modern science has its disputes over what is "factual," and new research sometimes proves long-held scientific theories to be untrue, or at least more complex than first imagined. Good science is not dogmatic. It is experimental and empirical, always correcting itself with further knowledge. Religion and politics are at their best when they, too, avoid dogmatism and are willing to self-correct in the light of new knowledge.

The principle for taking account of new learning is embedded in scripture itself. "I still have many things to say to you," Jesus tells his disciples, "But you cannot bear them now." This is in John's gospel, chapter 16, verses 12 to 13. Jesus says this to his disciples, even as he promises the coming Spirit who "will guide you into all truth."

Well, the Spirit of God is still active in our day and has not stopped guiding us into greater truth. In this world, we will always be evolving toward greater understanding; thanks be to God. The problem seems to be that our ego greatly enjoys being right. The ultimate ego trip is believing that we understand the truth, capital T, and should therefore have authority to

impose it on everyone else. Theocratic states are built on this kind of thinking and political correctness can lean this way, too.

Yet, authentic love can help us sort out what is most deeply true from turf wars about truth. As you know, I believe that God's love is the ultimate reality, the highest truth in the universe that is really the plumb line for all truth. Divine love places kindness, compassion, and mercy right at the center, at the heart of life. I join John Wesley in trusting that God's justice and judgment serve only a loving desire to heal, redeem, and transform the human heart. When our hearts abide in that quality of love, our fears are transformed. Our fear of God becomes reverence. Our fear of others becomes compassionate prayer and listening. Our fear of circumstances in life becomes trust, hope, and endurance, which takes us back full circle to First Corinthians 13: "Love bears all things, hopes, believes, endures all things." Remember, we spoke of this in our first week together.

Hospitality is an expression of this love, and the way we love each other is truly the way we love Christ in this world. So, to turn back again to those verses in First Corinthians 13: "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking. It is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs."

Few of us reflect these qualities consistently, but this is our calling, the upward call in Christ to become all that we can be, with hearts as deeply hospitable as Jesus' heart. Friends, I believe it is possible to grow into this greatness of heart. I've experienced just a little bit of that in my own relationship with my mother-in-law, which was a problematic relationship. I think it is possible to live in this world, to learn to live in this world of shadow and light with greater self-awareness, greater acceptance, greater compassion, equanimity, peace. We can learn to make this journey again and again, from anxiety to hospitality, from fear to love. And it's a journey we have to take many times, because we keep falling back. It's not habitual for us to live fully in the love of Christ. This is the great movement that we practice with the help of the Spirit, guided by grace, filled and enabled by grace.

So, in closing, I want to offer a prayerful benediction:

May we invite the love of Christ to shape and mold our hearts so deeply that we truly participate in this love, bearing, believing, hoping, enduring all things with him, in him. May we find our release from fear and our awakening to joy in that great force of love moving through this universe, that will never let us go, that holds us and never lets us go. Those beautiful words of Mother Julian of Norwich: "May we consciously live and move and have our being in this most generous love, so that we may, in turn, pour out in joyful hospitality that love to all, all that God has made." And may God bless us in our continued journey into the fullness of Christ. May it be so. Amen.

And again, my thanks to all of you for participating in this. God bless you.