

# Henri J. M. Nouwen

## *Bringing Solitude into Our Lives*

### INTRODUCTION TO THE AUTHOR

Henri Nouwen (1932–1996) was born in Nijkerk, Holland, and came to the United States in 1964. A Roman Catholic priest and psychologist, he taught at several prestigious universities, including Yale, Harvard, and Notre Dame. He wrote over twenty books, among them *The Genesee Diary*, *The Wounded Healer*, and *With Open Hands*, with the more recent ones being *Gracias* and *The Road to Daybreak*.

Nouwen's spiritual pilgrimage brought him to serve the mentally handicapped in L'Arche, an international network of communities. After spending one year in Trosly, France, he was at Daybreak in Richmond Hills, Ontario, Canada, from 1986 until his death. At a L'Arche home, the mentally handicapped and their assistants live together as God's children trying to en flesh the gospel. Assistants provide basic care for their charges: cooking, cleaning, encouraging, and praying.

Henri Nouwen's spiritual sensitivity is both refreshing and prophetic. The following selection invites us to intimacy, invites us to the spiritual life.

### EXCERPTS FROM *Making All Things New*

#### 1. Hard Work

The spiritual life is a gift. It is the gift of the Holy Spirit, who lifts us up into the kingdom of God's love. But to say that being lifted up into the kingdom of love is a divine gift does not mean that we wait passively until the gift is offered to us.

Jesus tells us to set our hearts on the kingdom. Setting our hearts on something involves not only serious aspiration but also strong determination. A spiritual life requires human effort. The forces that keep pulling us back into a worry-filled life are far from easy to overcome.

"How hard it is," Jesus exclaims, "... to enter the kingdom of God!" (Mark 10:23, JB). And to convince us of the need for hard work, he says, "If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matt. 16:24, JB).

#### 2. The Small, Gentle Voice

Here we touch the question of discipline in the spiritual life. A spiritual life without discipline is impossible. Discipline is the other side of discipleship. The practice of a spiritual discipline makes us more sensitive to the small, gentle voice of God.

The prophet Elijah did not encounter God in the mighty wind or in the earthquake or in the fire, but in the small voice (see 1 Kings 19:9–13). Through the practice of a spiritual discipline we become attentive to that small voice and willing to respond when we hear it.

### 3. From an Absurd to an Obedient Life

From all that I said about our worried, overfilled lives, it is clear that we are usually surrounded by so much outer noise that it is hard to truly hear our God when he is speaking to us. We have often become deaf, unable to know when God calls us and unable to understand in which direction he calls us.

Thus our lives have become absurd. In the word *absurd* we find the Latin word *surdus*, which means “deaf.” A spiritual life requires discipline because we need to learn to listen to God, who constantly speaks but whom we seldom hear.

When, however, we learn to listen, our lives become obedient lives. The word *obedient* comes from the Latin word *audire*, which means “listening.” A spiritual discipline is necessary in order to move slowly from an absurd to an obedient life, from a life filled with noisy worries to a life in which there is some free inner space where we can listen to our God and follow his guidance.

Jesus’ life was a life of obedience. He was always listening to the Father, always attentive to his voice, always alert for his directions. Jesus was “all ear.” That is true prayer: being all ear for God. The core of all prayer is indeed listening, obediently standing in the presence of God.

### 4. The Concentrated Effort

A spiritual discipline, therefore, is the concentrated effort to create some inner and outer space in our lives, where this obedience can be practiced. Through a spiritual discipline we prevent the world from filling our lives to such an extent that there is no place left to listen. A spiritual discipline sets us free to pray or, to say it better, allows the Spirit of God to pray in us.

### 5. A Time and a Space

Without solitude it is virtually impossible to live a spiritual life. Solitude begins with a time and a place for God, and him alone. If we really believe not only that God exists but also that he is actively present in our lives—healing, teaching, and guiding—we need to set aside a time and a space to give him our undivided attention. Jesus says, “Go to your private room and, when you have shut your door, pray to the Father who is in that secret place” (Matt. 6:6, JB).

## **6. Inner Chaos**

To bring some solitude into our lives is one of the most necessary but also most difficult disciplines. Even though we may have a deep desire for real solitude, we also experience a certain apprehension as we approach that solitary place and time. As soon as we are alone, without people to talk with, books to read, TV to watch, or phone calls to make, an inner chaos opens up in us.

This chaos can be so disturbing and so confusing that we can hardly wait to get busy again. Entering a private room and shutting the door, therefore, does not mean that we immediately shut out all our inner doubts, anxieties, fears, bad memories, unresolved conflicts, angry feelings, and impulsive desires. On the contrary, when we have removed our outer distractions, we often find that our inner distractions manifest themselves to us in full force.

We often use these outer distractions to shield ourselves from the interior noises. It is thus not surprising that we have a difficult time being alone. The confrontation with our inner conflicts can be too painful for us to endure.

This makes the discipline of solitude all the more important. Solitude is not a spontaneous response to an occupied and preoccupied life. There are too many reasons not to be alone. Therefore we must begin by carefully planning some solitude.

## **7. Write It in Black and White**

Five or ten minutes a day may be all we can tolerate. Perhaps we are ready for an hour every day, an afternoon every week, a day every month, or a week every year. The amount of time will vary for each person according to temperament, age, job, lifestyle, and maturity.

But we do not take the spiritual life seriously if we do not set aside some time to be with God and listen to him. We may have to write it in black and white in our daily calendar so that nobody else can take away this period of time. Then we will be able to say to our friends, neighbors, students, customers, clients, or patients, "I'm sorry, but I've already made an appointment at that time and it can't be changed."

## **8. Bombarded by Thousands of Thoughts**

Once we have committed ourselves to spending time in solitude, we develop an attentiveness to God's voice in us. In the beginning, during the first days, weeks, or even months, we may have the feeling that we are simply wasting our time. Time in solitude may at first seem little more than a time in which we are bombarded by thousands of thoughts and feelings that emerge from hidden areas of our minds.

One of the early Christian writers describes the first stage of solitary prayer as the experience of a man who, after years of living with open doors, suddenly decides to shut them. The visitors who used to come and enter his home start pounding on his doors, wondering why they are not allowed to enter. Only when they realize that they are not welcome do they gradually stop coming.

This is the experience of anyone who decides to enter into solitude after a life without much spiritual discipline. At first, the many distractions keep presenting themselves. Later, as they receive less and less attention, they slowly withdraw.

### **9. Tempted to Run Away**

It is clear that what matters is faithfulness to the discipline. In the beginning, solitude seems so contrary to our desires that we are constantly tempted to run away from it. One way of running away is daydreaming or simply falling asleep. But when we stick to our discipline, in the conviction that God is with us even when we do not yet hear him, we slowly discover that we do not want to miss our time alone with God. Although we do not experience much satisfaction in our solitude, we realize that a day without solitude is less "spiritual" than a day with it.

### **10. The First Sign of Prayer**

Intuitively, we know that it is important to spend time in solitude. We even start looking forward to this strange period of uselessness. This desire for solitude is often the first sign of prayer, the first indication that the presence of God's Spirit no longer remains unnoticed.

As we empty ourselves of our many worries, we come to know not only with our mind but also with our heart that we were never really alone, that God's Spirit was with us all along. Thus we come to understand what Paul writes to the Romans, "Sufferings bring patience . . . and patience brings perseverance, and perseverance brings hope, and this hope is not deceptive, because the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given to us" (Rom. 5:4-6, JB).

### **11. The Way to Hope**

In solitude, we come to know the Spirit who has already been given to us. The pains and struggles we encounter in our solitude thus become the way to hope, because our hope is not based on something that will happen after our sufferings are over, but on the real presence of God's healing Spirit in the midst of these sufferings.

The discipline of solitude allows us gradually to come in touch with this hopeful presence of God in our lives, and allows us also to taste even now the beginnings of the joy and peace which belong to the new heaven and the new earth.



The discipline of solitude, as I have described it here, is one of the most powerful disciplines in developing a prayerful life. It is a simple, though not easy, way to free us from the slavery of our occupations and preoccupations and to begin to hear the voice that makes all things new.

### BIBLE SELECTION: 1 KINGS 19:9-13

At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there.

Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

*The following questions can be used for discussion within a small group, or used for journal reflections by individuals.*

1. Henri Nouwen refers to the twofold nature of the spiritual life: it is both a gift and hard work on our part. How has your journey been like receiving a gift? In what ways has it been hard work?
2. We engage in the spiritual disciplines, writes Nouwen, in order to "prevent the world from filling our lives to such an extent that there is no place left to listen." What things are currently filling your life and preventing you from listening?
3. Solitude, according to Nouwen, creates space for God, but it also removes our protective distractions, forcing us to deal with our inner chaos. Why does this make solitude all the more important for us?
4. The thoughts that bombard us during times of solitude may be compared with visitors who are no longer welcome. How does Nouwen use this analogy to help us feel encouraged as we do battle with distractions?

5. God could have spoken to Elijah in the violent wind, the earthquake, or the fire, but instead chose to speak in a still small voice. How has God used silence to speak to you?

## SUGGESTED EXERCISES

The following exercises can be done by individuals, shared between spiritual friends, or used in the context of a small group. Choose one or more of the following.

1. This week make the move from an absurd to an obedient life by actively listening to God in solitude. Begin to push aside the distractions as you engage in the discipline of solitude.
2. Do not run from distractions but, rather, turn them into prayers. Keep a pad and pencil by your chair as you relax in solitude; when a distracting thought comes into your mind, write it down and then commit it to prayer.
3. Schedule appointments with God. Nouwen suggests that we actually write our devotional times in our daily calendars. This will help us keep our appointments with God, and it will prevent others from usurping this precious time.
4. Get up early next Sunday and go to the sanctuary for a time of solitude before worship. Spend an hour or so listening to God, and praying for the people who will share this space with you.

## REFLECTIONS

*Solitude is one of the deepest disciplines of the spiritual life because it crucifies our need for importance and prominence. Everyone—including ourselves at first—will see our solitude as a waste of good time. We are removed from “where the action is.” That, of course, is exactly what we need. In silence and solitude God slowly but surely frees us from our egomania.*

*In time we come to see that the really important action occurs in solitude. Once we have experienced God at work in the soul, all the blare and attention of the world seem like a distant and fragmentary echo. Only then are we able to enter the hustle and bustle of today’s machine civilization with perspective and freedom.*

—RICHARD J. FOSTER

## GOING DEEPER

Nouwen, Henri J. M. *The Genesee Diary: Report from a Trappist Monastery*. New York: Doubleday, 1981. A journal record of Nouwen’s stay at the upstate New York monastery near Rochester.

Nouwen, Henri J. M. *Making All Things New: An Invitation to the Spiritual Life*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1981. This slender volume calls us into the depths of a spiritual life. It tries to answer the twin questions, "What does it mean to live a spiritual life?" and "How do we live it?"

Nouwen, Henri J. M. *The Road to Daybreak: A Spiritual Journey*. New York: Doubleday, 1990. The story of Nouwen's journey to the L'Arche community. He writes: "The noncompetitive life with mentally handicapped people, their gifts of welcoming me regardless of name or prestige, and the persistent invitation to 'waste some time' with them opened in me a place that until then had remained unavailable to me, a place where I could hear the gentle invitation of Jesus to dwell with Him. My sense of being called to L'Arche was based more on what I had to receive than on what I had to give."

Nouwen, Henri J. M. *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society*. New York: Doubleday, 1979. A living exegesis on how we can minister healing and wholeness in today's broken world.