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SPIRITUAL DIRECTION



Wisdom for the Long Walk of Faith

[colophon]

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



Technically, Henri Nouwen did not write this book, yet the words and wisdom are his. In his lifetime, he wrote only one article with the words “Spiritual Direction” in the title, and he taught only a few courses on “spiritual direction.” The book in your hands is a posthumous book of spiritual direction by Henri Nouwen himself, developed by the editors as we identified strands of timeless wisdom and personal guidance in his many sermons, articles, journal records, class lecture notes, unpublished manuscripts, and published writings and adapted the core material for practical use. The two-year process required the permission and collaboration of the Henri Nouwen Literary Trust to recontextualize Henri, update his language, focus his wisdom, and in many places construct transitions in ways that we trust are true to his meaning and style.

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our spiritual lives alone. Although we need solitude to know God, we require a faithful community to hold us accountable. We need to learn how to listen to the word of God, ever present within our hearts. We need disciplines of study and spiritual practice to discern the word of God in words of scripture. We need a church or faith community that provides opportunities for worshiping and sharing, engaging in mutual correction and bearing of burdens, confessing faults, offering forgiveness, and celebrating life. We also need guides: spiritual friends, a spiritual director, or a spiritual accountability group that can function for us as a safe place to bear our souls.

Henri created community wherever he went, and within those communities he offered spiritual direction, sometimes formally, but mostly in informal conversations and friendships. He also was a spiritual director to many through his personal correspondence, public teachings, and published writings. Before his death, he told his friends that when he died his spirit would be accessible to those he loved and who loved him. Therefore, we trust that your own experience of spiritual direction with Henri Nouwen is possible here and now by the power of the written word and the work of the Holy Spirit.

HOW THIS BOOK CAME TO BE WRITTEN

The idea for this book came out of a simple encounter. During a banquet at which Rebecca was to speak on Henri Nouwen, a young Protestant woman studying to be a spiritual director was seated at her table and told her of some recent struggles. Depression resulting from infertility had rendered her lethargic and despondent. She said, “Reading Henri’s books was the only thing that got me through last summer. Through his books, he served as a personal guide through my dark night.”

How was it that a male Roman Catholic priest who was in his sixties when he wrote his last books and who never experienced the ups and downs of infertility or marriage was able to touch the wounded heart of this woman? Sure, depression crosses gender and ages, but it was more than that. Henri spoke to universal spiritual needs and longings and understood that what is most personal is also what is most universal. He lived from the depth of the Christian spiritual tradition and knew how to listen for the fundamental questions underlying common human struggles.

Many people turn to Henri’s books for spiritual guidance. Yet many of us wish we could have sat knee to knee with Henri and asked our most pressing spiritual questions. But that can no longer be. Henri is physically gone now. We began to wish for a book that would walk readers through the big questions that many people face when they intentionally begin to explore universal spiritual questions and go looking for a guide.

Michael, who benefited from Henri’s spiritual guidance in seminary, recalled that he still had his notes from a class Henri taught on spiritual direction at Yale Divinity School. That was enough to get us started. We searched the Henri Nouwen Archives, held at St. Michael’s College in Toronto, for his unpublished writings on spiritual formation through spiritual direction. What we found was limited, but wonderful, and required considerable literary knitting and patching.

As a labor of love, we pieced together previously unpublished reflections, presentations, homilies, course lecture notes, and recommended exercises. We also wove in material originally published as journal articles, which we found to be more informal and direct than the more polished versions found in his books. We occasionally used excerpts from Henri’s books when no better original source was available to cover the subject at hand. The resulting tapestry is our attempt, in

PART ONE



*Look Within to
the Heart*

ONE

Who Will Answer My Questions?

A BUDDHIST monk once came to visit me and told me the following story:

~The Zen Master~

Many years ago, there was a young man who searched for truth, happiness, joy, and the right way of living. After many years of traveling, many diverse experiences, and many hardships, he realized that he had not found any answers for his questions and that he needed a teacher. One day he heard about a famous Zen Master. Immediately he went to him, threw himself at his feet, and said: "Please, Master, be my teacher."

The Master listened to him, accepted his request, and made him his personal secretary. Wherever the Master went, his new secretary went with him. But although the Master spoke to many people who came to him for advice and

counsel, he never spoke to his secretary. After three years, the young man was so disappointed and frustrated that he no longer could restrain himself. One day he burst out in anger, saying to his Master: “I have sacrificed everything, given away all I had, and followed you. Why haven’t you taught me?” The Master looked at him with great compassion and said: “Don’t you understand that I have been teaching you during every moment you have been with me? When you bring me a cup of tea, don’t I drink it? When you bow to me, don’t I bow to you? When you clean my desk, don’t I say: ‘Thank you very much?’”

The young man could not grasp what his Master was saying and became very confused. Then suddenly the Master shouted at the top of his voice: “When you see, you see it direct.” At that moment the young man received enlightenment.⁷

The distance between a Zen Master in the Far East teaching an eager young student and a Christian spiritual director in the West responding to a spiritual seeker might seem too wide a bridge to cross. Still, this story powerfully points to the wisdom we need to *live the questions* of our lives, both alone and in community, as we seek our mission in the world.

The young man in the Zen story has unspoken but urgent questions: *What is truth? How may I find joy and happiness? What is the right way of living?* To his, we might add our own life questions: What am I to do with my life? Whom shall I marry? Where shall I live? What gifts do I have to share? What do I do with my loneliness? Why am I so needy for affection, approval, or power? How

can I overcome my fears, my shame, my addictions, and my sense of inadequacy or of failure?

Once, quite a few years ago, I had the opportunity of meeting Mother Teresa of Calcutta. I was struggling with many things at the time and decided to use the occasion to ask Mother Teresa’s advice. As soon as we sat down I started explaining all my problems and difficulties—trying to convince her of how complicated it all was! When, after ten minutes of elaborate explanation, I finally became quiet, Mother Teresa looked at me and quietly said: “Well, when you spend one hour a day adoring your Lord and never do anything which you know is wrong . . . you will be fine!”

When she said this, I realized, suddenly, that she had punctured my big balloon of complex self-complaints and pointed me far beyond myself to the place of real healing. Reflecting on this brief but decisive encounter, I realized that I had raised a question from below and that she had given an answer from above. At first, her answer didn’t seem to fit my question, but then I began to see that her answer came from God’s place and not from the place of my complaints. Most of the time we respond to questions from below with answers from below. The result is often more confusion. Mother Teresa’s answer was like a flash of lightning in my darkness.

Seeking spiritual direction, for me, means to ask the big questions, the fundamental questions, the universal ones in the context of a supportive community. Out of asking the right questions and living the questions will come right actions which present themselves in compelling ways. To live the questions and act rightly, guided by God’s spirit, requires both discipline and courage: discipline to “ask, seek, knock” until the door opens (see Matthew 7:7–8).

GOING DEEPER: EXERCISES FOR SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

Receive the ultimate affirmation by praying the Beloved Prayer. This prayer was composed by Arthur LeClair, director of the Spiritual Life Center in Denver, for use in solitude, with a spiritual director, or in small prayer groups.¹⁴

Sit relaxed and at ease. Have confidence that God's love will show itself in some way. For the first ten minutes, without fuss, say the following words slowly and fervently:

Jesus, You are the Beloved.

Repeat the words as necessary. Let your heart fill with non-verbal praise and thanksgiving. Let distractions float by, even when they press upon you. After a while the distractions will seem less and less urgent as you let them be. Simply be with Jesus in this precious moment.

Then, gently and without fanfare, move on to the next ten minutes. Paul reminds us in Romans 9:25 that we too are destined to become the Beloved. Another color is added to the beauty of this scene:

Jesus, I am the Beloved.

Let your core-being soak up God's favor. At first, this shift might seem jarring. But rest in the depth of prayer and let this truth settle in.

Then go on to the next ten minutes. I used to imagine that this part would be a distraction, but I have found it to be a rich and holy connection with others.

Jesus, we (all) are the Beloved.

Let people come into your heart: a neighbor, a friend, a relative, someone you read about in the morning paper. The important thing is not to exclude anyone. Your heart will bring to the surface the ones you need to give attention to.

At the end, simply conclude with a word of thanksgiving, or the Lord's Prayer.

This form of prayer can be done individually or in a group. It can be done on the way to work, in the quiet of early morning, or in the evening before retiring. When you do this as a group, you will find that the members of the group come out of the depths slowly and need a space of silence before speaking again.

Those who have used this prayer speak about a deep healing that takes place within them. If you stay with this form of prayer on a regular basis over a period of time, you will live with a clearer understanding of your place in the universe.

REFLECT AND JOURNAL:

Write a two-sentence answer to the question:

Who am I?

What does your answer reveal about what you value?

In what areas of your life are you most prone to self-rejection?

For Further Reading

BOOKS BY HENRI J. M. NOUWEN

- Adam: God's Beloved* (Orbis, 1996)
Aging: The Fulfillment of Life (Doubleday, 1974)
Behold the Beauty of the Lord: Praying with Icons (Ave Maria Press, 1987)
Beyond the Mirror: Reflections on Death and Life (Crossroad, 1990)
Bread for the Journey: A Daybook of Wisdom and Faith (HarperCollins, 1997)
Can You Drink the Cup? The Challenge of the Spiritual Life (Ave Maria Press, 1996)
Clowning in Rome: Reflections on Solitude, Celibacy, Prayer, and Contemplation (Doubleday, 1979)
Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life (Doubleday, 1982)
Creative Ministry: Beyond Professionalism in Teaching, Preaching, Counseling, Organizing, and Celebrating (Doubleday, 1971)
A Cry for Mercy: Prayers from the Genesee (Doubleday, 1981)
Finding My Way Home: Pathways to Life and the Spirit edited and with a preface by Sue Mosteller (Crossroad, 2001)
The Genesee Diary: Report from a Trappist Monastery (Doubleday, 1976)
Gracias! A Latin American Journal (Harper & Row, 1983)
Heart Speaks to Heart: Three Prayers to Jesus (Ave Maria Press, 1989)
Here and Now: Living in the Spirit (Crossroad, 1995)
In Memoriam (Ave Maria Press, 1980)

- The Inner Voice of Love: A Journey Through Anguish to Freedom* (Doubleday, 1996)
- In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (Crossroad, 1989)
- Intimacy: Pastoral Psychological Essays* (Fides Publishers, 1969)
- Jesus and Mary: Finding Our Sacred Center* (Saint Anthony Messenger Press and Franciscan, 1993)
- A Letter of Consolation* (Harper & Row, 1982)
- Letters to Marc About Jesus* (HarperCollins, 1988)
- Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World* (Crossroad, 1992)
- Lifesigns: Intimacy, Fecundity, and Ecstasy in Christian Perspective* (Doubleday, 1986)
- The Living Reminder: Service and Prayer in Memory of Jesus Christ* (Seabury, 1977)
- Love in a Fearful Land: A Guatemalan Story* (Orbis, 2006)
- Making All Things New: An Invitation to the Spiritual Life* (HarperCollins, 1981)
- Ministry and Spirituality: Three Books in One* (Continuum, 1996)
- Our Greatest Gift: A Meditation on Dying and Caring* (HarperCollins, 1994)
- Out of Solitude: Three Meditations on the Christian Life* (Ave Maria Press, 1974)
- The Path of Waiting, The Path of Freedom, The Path of Power, and The Path of Peace* (Crossroad, 1995)
- Peacework: Prayer Resistance Community* (Orbis, 2005)
- Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (Doubleday, 1975)
- The Return of the Prodigal Son* (Doubleday, 1992)
- The Road to Daybreak: A Spiritual Journey* (Doubleday, 1988)
- Show Me the Way* (Crossroad, 1994)
- Sabbatical Journey: The Final Year* (Crossroad, 1997)
- Spiritual Journals: Three Books in One* (Continuum, 1997)
- Encounters with Merton* (Crossroad, 2004)
- Walk with Jesus: Stations of the Cross* (Orbis, 1990)
- The Way of the Heart: Desert Spirituality and Contemporary Ministry* (Seabury, 1981)
- With Burning Hearts: A Meditation on the Eucharistic Life* (Orbis, 1994)
- With Open Hands* (Ave Maria Press, 1972)
- The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (Doubleday, 1972)

SELECTED COMPILATIONS AND EDITED VOLUMES

BY AND ABOUT HENRI J. M. NOUWEN

- Ford, Michael, ed., *Eternal Seasons: A Liturgical Journey with Henri J. M. Nouwen* (Sorin Books/Darton, Longman & Todd, 2004)
- Ford, Michael, ed., *The Wounded Prophet: A Portrait of Henri J. M. Nouwen* (Doubleday, 1999)
- Greer, Wendy Wilson, ed. and comp., *The Only Necessary Thing: Living a Prayerful Life: Selected Writings of Henri J. M. Nouwen* (Crossroad, 1999)
- Imbach, Jeff, ed., *Words of Hope and Healing: 99 Sayings* (New City Press, 2005)
- Jonas, Robert A., ed., *Henri Nouwen: Writings* (Orbis Books, 1998)
- Jones, Timothy, ed. and comp., *Turn My Mourning into Dancing: Finding Hope in Hard Times* (W Publishing Group/Thomas Nelson, 2001)
- Laird, Rebecca, and Michael J. Christensen, eds., *The Heart of Henri Nouwen: His Words of Blessing* (Crossroad, 2003)
- LaNoue, Deirdre, *The Spiritual Legacy of Henri Nouwen* (Continuum, 2000)
- Mosteller, Sue, ed., *Finding My Way Home: Pathways to Life and the Spirit* (Crossroad, 2001)
- O'Laughlin, Michael, *God's Beloved: A Spiritual Biography* (Orbis, 2004)
- O'Laughlin, Michael, ed., *Jesus: A Gospel* by Henri J.M. Nouwen (Orbis, 2004)
- , *Henri Nouwen: His Life and Vision* (Orbis, 2005)
- Porter, Beth, ed., with Susan M. S. Brown and Philip Coulter, *Befriending Life: Encounters with Henri Nouwen* (Doubleday, 2001)

BOOKS ON SPIRITUAL DIRECTION RECOMMENDED

BY HENRI NOUWEN

- Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship* (Cistercian, 2005)
- Anonymous, *The Way of a Pilgrim*, translated by Helen Bacovcin (Image, 1978)
- Caussade, Jean-Pierre de, *The Sacrament of the Present Moment* (HarperSan-Francisco, 1989)
- DeMello, Anthony, *Sadhana: A Way to God: Christian Exercises in Eastern Form* (Image, 1984)
- Doyle, Charles, *Guidance in Spiritual Direction* (Mercer Press, 1958)
- Edwards, Tilden, *Spiritual Friend: Reclaiming the Gift of Spiritual Direction* (Paulist Press, 1980)
- Foster, Richard, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*