

Reading
with
Leader's
Guide

VINTAGE Saints & Sinners

Henri J.M. Nouwen (1932-1996)

1. The many contradictions in our lives—such as being home while feeling homeless, being busy while feeling bored, being popular while feeling lonely, being believers while feeling many doubts—can frustrate, irritate, and even discourage us. They make us feel that we are never fully present. Every door that opens for us makes us see how many more doors are closed. But there is another response. These same contradictions can bring us into touch with a deeper longing for the fulfillment of a desire that lives beneath all desires and that only God can satisfy. Contradictions, thus understood, create the friction that can help us move toward God.

- *Nouwen names pairs of contradictions. Which pair of feelings is most familiar to you? Why do you think that is?*
- *How do contradictions make us feel that we are never fully present? Can you describe a time when you felt fully present?*
- *What do you think Nouwen is naming when he speaks of the “desire that lives beneath all desires”?*
- *How could contradictions make us better aware of that deeper longing?*
- *Has any kind of friction moved you toward God? Could you share something of that experience?*

2. 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.

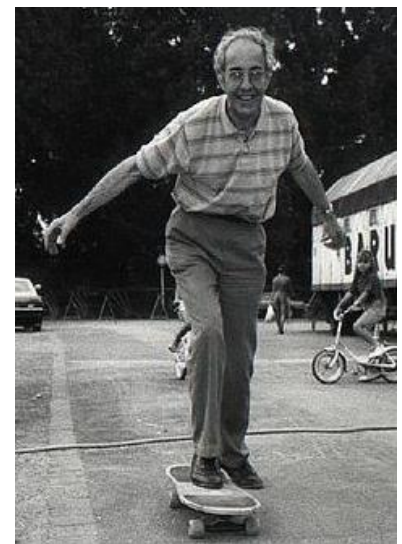
Listening is much more than allowing another to talk while waiting for a chance to respond. Listening is paying full attention to others and welcoming them into our very beings. The beauty of listening is that, those who are listened to start feeling accepted, start taking their words more seriously 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 to dare to be silent with you.

- *How does Nouwen describe true listening?*
- *Can you name one person who has offered you the hospitality of listening? How do you feel in the presence of that person?*
- *Do you find it hard to listen? Why is that?*
- *What do you think is the relationship between listening and hospitality?*

- *In this next reading, Nouwen begins with the account of Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan River:*

3. “No sooner had Jesus come up out of the water than he saw the heavens torn apart & the Spirit, like a dove, descending on him. And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; my favor rests on you.’” Matt 3:16-17

Yes, there is that voice, the voice that speaks from above and from within and that whispers softly or declares loudly: “You are my Beloved, on you my favor rests.” It certainly is not easy to hear that voice in a world filled with voices that shout: “You are no good, you are ugly; you are worthless; you are despicable, you are nobody—unless you can demonstrate the opposite.”



These negative voices are so loud and so persistent that it is easy to believe them. That's the great trap. It is the trap of self-rejection....Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the "Beloved." Being the Beloved expresses the core truth of our existence....

Though the existence of being the Beloved has never been completely absent from my life, I never claimed it as my core truth. I kept running around in large or small circles, always looking for someone or something to convince me of my Belovedness. It was as if I kept refusing to hear the voice that speaks from the very depth of my being and says, "You are my Beloved, on you my favor rests." That voice has always been there, but it seems that I was much more eager to listen to other, louder voices saying: "Prove that you are worth something; do something relevant, spectacular, or powerful, and then you will earn the love you so desire." Meanwhile, the soft, gentle voice that speaks in the silence and solitude of my heart remained unheard, or at least, unconvincing...

Aren't you, like me, hoping that some person, thing or event will come along to give you that final feeling of inner well-being you desire? Don't you often hope: "May this book, idea, course, trip, job, country, or relationship fulfill my deepest desire." But as long as you are waiting for that mysterious moment, you will go on running helter skelter, always anxious and restless, always lustful and angry, never fully satisfied...Well, you and I don't have to kill ourselves. We are the Beloved. We are intimately loved long before our parents, teachers, spouses, children, and friends loved or wounded us. That's the truth of our lives. That the truth I want you to claim for yourself. That's the truth spoken by the voice that says, "You are my Beloved."

Listening to that voice with greater inner attentiveness, I hear at my center that says: "I have called you by name, from the very beginning. You are mine and I am yours. You are my Beloved, on you my favor rests. I have molded you in the depths of the earth and knitted you together in your mother's womb. I have carved you in the palms of my hands and hidden you in the shadow of my embrace. I look at you with infinite tenderness and care for you with a care more intimate than that of a mother for her child. I have counted every hair on your head and guided you at every step. Wherever you go, I go with you, and wherever you rest, I keep watch. I will give you food that will satisfy all your hunger and drink that will quench all your thirst. I will not hide my face from you. You know me as your own as I know you as my own. You belong to me...wherever you are I will be. Nothing will ever separate us."

Every time you listen with great attentiveness to the voice that calls you the Beloved, you will discover within yourself a desire to hear that voice longer and more deeply. It is like discovering a well in the desert. You want to dig deeper...

{*Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World*}

- *Do you connect with Henri Nouwen's experience as he describes it here? In what way?*
- *What voices are loudest in our lives?*
- *Why do negative voices often seem more compelling than affirming ones?*
- *Nouwen says that "Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life". Do you agree or disagree? Why?*
- *Nouwen speaks of his "core Truth". What is that core to truth for him? What is your core truth?*
- *What voice would you like to hear speak more clearly to your life? What words would it say to you?*
- *At the end of this reflection, Nouwen writes from God's perspective. Find one line in this paragraph & read it out loud to the group.*

4. A life of faith is a life of gratitude---it means a life in which I am willing to experience my complete dependence upon God and to praise and thank Him unceasingly for the gift of being. A truly Eucharistic** life means always saying thanks to God, always praising God, and always being more surprised by the abundance of God's goodness and love. How can such a life not also be a joyful life? It is the truly converted life in which God has become the center of all. There gratitude is joy and joy is gratitude and everything becomes a surprising sign of God's presence. {*Translated from Nachts bricht der Tag, 86*}

- *What is the connection between dependence and gratitude?*
- *What does the word "Eucharistic" mean to you?*
- *Have you ever been able to say that everything is a sign of God's presence? Is that easy for you or say---or is it difficult?*
- *So what would Nouwen say is the secret to a joyful life?*

5. Gratitude in its deepest sense means to live life as a gift to be received gratefully. But gratitude as the Gospel speaks about it embraces all of life: the good and the bad, the joyful and the painful, the holy and the not so holy. Is this possible in a society where gladness and sadness, joy and sorrow, peace and conflict, remain radically separated? Can we counter the many advertisements that tell us, “You cannot be glad when you are sad, so be happy: buy this, do that, go here, go there, and you will have a moment of happiness during which you can forget your sorrow?” Is it truly possible to embrace with gratitude all of our life and not just the good things that we like to remember?

Jesus calls us to recognise that gladness and sadness are never separate, that joy and sorrow really belong together, and that mourning and dancing are part of the same movement. That is why Jesus calls us to be grateful for every moment that we have lived and to claim our unique journey as God’s way to mould our hearts to greater conformity with God’s own. The cross is the main symbol of our faith, and it invites us to find hope where we see pain and to reaffirm the resurrection where we see death. The call to be grateful is a call to trust that every moment of our life can be claimed as the way of the cross that leads us to new life. When the disciples were on the way to Emmaus and met Jesus, they could not believe that there was much fruit to be expected from all the suffering they had witnessed. But Jesus revealed that it was precisely because of the suffering and pain that new life was born. It is so easy for me to put the bad memories under the rug of my life and to think only about the good things that please me. By doing so, however, I prevent myself from discovering the joy beneath my sorrow, the peace hidden in the midst of my conflicts, and the strength that becomes visible in the midst of my weakness. {“All is Grace” 39-40}

- *What is countercultural about Henri Nouwen’s insights?*
- *Can you think of a time when you felt gladness and sadness, joy and sorrow, mourning and dancing in the same movement? Could you share that experience?*
- *What do you hear Nouwen saying about suffering and pain?*
- *If you were truly grateful for every moment, how would your life be different?*
- *Nouwen refers to the disciples on the way to Emmaus. Can anyone refresh our memories on that story?*
- *What do you think is the most significant insight in this section?*
- *Do you disagree or question anything that Nouwen has said so far?*

6. “We are really grateful for all the good things . . . We simply have to accept or try to forget the painful moments.” The attitude expressed in these words made me aware of how often we tend to divide our past into good things to remember with gratitude and painful things to accept or forget. Once we accept this division, however, we quickly develop a mentality in which we hope to collect more good memories than bad memories, more things to be grateful for than things to complain about. But this way of thinking, which at first glance seems quite natural, prevents us from truly allowing our whole past to be the source from which we live our future. Is this the gratitude to which the Gospel calls us?

Gratitude is not a simple emotion or an obvious attitude. It is a difficult discipline to constantly reclaim my whole past as the concrete way in which God has led me to this moment and is sending me into the future. It is hard precisely because it challenges me to face the painful moments---experiences of rejection and abandonment, feelings of loss and failure---and gradually to discover in them the pruning hands of God purifying my heart for deeper love, stronger hope, and broader faith. Jesus says to His disciples that although they are as intimately related to Him as branches are to the vine, they still need to be pruned in order to bear more fruit (John 15:1-5). Pruning means cutting, reshaping, removing what diminishes vitality. . .

Grateful people are those who can celebrate even the pains of life because they trust that when harvest time comes the fruit will show that the pruning was not punishment but purification.

I am gradually learning that the call to gratitude asks us to say “everything is grace.” When our gratitude for the past is only partial, our hope for a new future can never be full. . . If we are to be truly ready for a new task in the service of God, truly to be sent into a new mission, our entire past, gathered into the spaciousness of a converted heart, must become the source of energy that moves us toward the future. (“All is Grace” 39-41)

- *Does Nouwen add any new thoughts about gratitude here?*
- *What do you think is most difficult about gratitude?*

- *Have you ever known anyone who was able to say, “Everything is grace.” How could you be just a little more like that person?*
- *If Henri Nouwen were here right now, what would you ask him?*
- *Looking back on all of these readings, what is Nouwen’s gift to you today?*

For more on Nouwen: *Vintage Saints and Sinners* by Karen Wright Marsh (IVP, 2017)

THEOLOGICAL HORIZONS
