The following article is located at: https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2017/january-web-only/henri-nouwens-weakness-was-his-strength.html

Henri Nouwen’s Weakness Was His Strength

How a gifted, high-achieving spiritual guide learned to share his wounds with others.

WESLEY HILL | JANUARY 31, 2017

Over 30 years ago, a Catholic priest and sought-after spiritual guide wrote the following in a letter to an inquirer: “I have been increasingly aware that true healing mostly takes place through the sharing of weakness.” Pressing beyond generalities, he made his reply personal: “[I]n the sharing of my weakness with others, the real depths of my human brokenness and weakness and sinfulness started to reveal itself to me, not as a source of despair but as a source of hope.”

For us today, in the era of self-help gurus, the priest’s words may sound like a truism whose luster has grown dull with over-familiarity. Or—worse—they might be misconstrued as an encouragement to wallow in our wounds, to valorize our frailty as somehow redemptive in and of itself. Is there any reason, then, to treat this letter as an instance of spiritual insight?

Inner Wounds

The priest who wrote it was named Henri Nouwen, and almost a decade before, in 1972, as a newly minted instructor at Yale Divinity School, he had published a book titled *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society*. It was to become, according to most of his ecumenical readership, Nouwen’s signature title. Before Brené Brown appeared on the TED stage, before spiritual counseling and small group ministry in evangelical parachurch ministries had encouraged believers to disclose more of their doubts and insecurities, before movements like the charismatic Cursillo and the contemplative Taizé and Renovaré had gone mainstream, Nouwen was already advocating a spirituality that took its cue from Christ’s nail-scarred risen body. Any spirituality and ministry we might hope to cultivate should be one that’s pursued, as Nouwen put it in another letter, “in the name of the One who healed through his wounds and who revealed his healing presence as the crucified one, who took the marks of his crucifixion into his new life with God.”

What had prompted Nouwen to embrace a spirituality and a ministry model like this one? Born in the Netherlands in 1932, Nouwen had grown up a pious, conscientious—and ambitious—eldest child. By the time he was five years old, Nouwen had acquired specially made child-size priestly vestments so that he could say Mass at a play altar. “I did all the proper things,” he would later write, comparing himself to the elder brother in Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son, “mostly complying with the agendas set by the many parental figures in my life—teachers, spiritual directors, bishops, and popes.” Two decades later, having already graduated from two seminaries, Nouwen was ordained to the Catholic priesthood at Utrecht, ready to fulfill a

calling—an inevitability, it seemed to those who knew him best—he'd sensed from boyhood. In short, a walking specimen of oozing spiritual wounds, Nouwen most certainly was not. Gregarious, theatrical, often childishly playful, his priestly work led him from strength to strength.

But Nouwen's deepest self-identification was with the younger son in the parable, not in his outward behavioral choices but in what he described as an inner pain of lostness. This accounts, it would seem, for his constant talk of woundedness. His distance from God the Father's heart, as he would put it in what is probably his second most-loved book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, had to do not with public rebellion but with an acute inner sensitivity and susceptibility to feelings of rejection. At one of his life's crucial turning points, he recorded the following sentiment in his journal: "What I am craving is not so much recognition, praise, or admiration, as simple friendship. There may be some around me, but I cannot perceive or receive it." This insensibility would dog him through his exit from the academy, through his twilight years spent as a carer in a home for disabled persons, through his quieter days of writing, until, en route to St. Petersburg for another viewing of Rembrandt's *Prodigal Son* which had renewed his faith years earlier, he died.

Monotonous Suffering

One of the hallmarks of Nouwen's work is the breadth of its reach. I first heard of him through my reading of Philip Yancey, then a regular columnist for *Christianity Today*. When I enrolled at Wheaton College, often dubbed the flagship evangelical center for higher education, Nouwen's books appeared on multiple course syllabi, no matter that their author wasn't an evangelical himself. The coordinator of the college's discipleship small group ministry spiced his talks liberally with Nouwen quotes like a clap-happy chef.

To my Roman Catholic friends, Nouwen is like an old uncle, beloved but virtually taken for granted, while my evangelical friends treat him as an unofficial patron, invoking him in the same breath as they do beloved standbys like C. S. Lewis and A. W. Tozer. Staff members with Reformed University Fellowship, the campus ministry arm of the conservative Presbyterian Church in America, are Nouwen devotees, as are numerous counseling instructors and students at evangelical seminaries. When Tim Keller preached the sermons that he eventually collected in his bestselling *The Prodigal God*, Nouwen was his acknowledged muse. And when I recently gave a talk on Nouwen's life and work to a group of Christian professionals, mainly Presbyterians and theologically conservative Anglicans, three-fourths of the group raised their hands in response to my question about who already knew and loved his books. The Dutch priest, it would appear, is as beloved among Protestants as he is among his fellow Catholics.

In 2010 I published a book titled *Washed and Waiting*, a memoir about being gay, celibate, and Christian, and I devoted an entire chapter to Nouwen. His life was one of the catalysts that prompted me to write. A producer with the BBC had broken the news of Nouwen's gay orientation after his death, and suddenly much of what Nouwen had written about coming to terms with his celibate calling and his attendant isolation gained greater poignancy. As Yancey put it, "I go back through [his] writings and sense the deeper, unspoken agony that underlay what

he wrote about rejection, about the wound of loneliness that never heals, about friendships that never satisfy."

Nouwen was sexually abstinent, adhering to his priestly vow, but that didn't prevent him from falling deeply in love with one of his coworkers at L'Arche Daybreak in Toronto, the home for disabled persons where he worked after leaving Harvard. Even after weathering that storm, he regularly fell back into the experience of wanting more intimacy than simple friendship usually affords. It was a disappointment he chose, repeatedly, to live with.

It's this kind of monotonous, pedestrian suffering—the kind that many are reluctant to name as *suffering*, fearing the supposed hubris of comparing it to more obvious forms of hardship like cancer or addiction—that Nouwen has helped me, and, it would appear, many other Christians, learn how to dignify, how to offer to God in self-dedication. The scarlet thread running through Nouwen's three-dozen-plus books is that the task of navigating the mundane vicissitudes of the human heart is its own kind of spiritual pilgrimage, one that bears just as many possibilities for blessing as any other arduous trail.

"[Y]our story," Nouwen wrote to one of his students, "is the story with which you can come to know God's story better, and it is his story that makes your story worth living." Or, as he put it elsewhere, "[M]y own life struggles"—with the implication that the same is true for every believer—"my doubts, my hopes, my fears and my joys, my pains, and my moments of ecstasy [ought to be] available to others as a source of consolation and healing." Echoing John's gospel, Nouwen maintained that to "witness for Christ means to me to witness for him with what I have seen with my own eyes, heard with my own ears and touched with my own hands."

Nouwen the Pastor

For newcomers to Nouwen's work, the best place to start reading may now be his letters. Late in 2016, the 20th anniversary of Nouwen's death, *Love, Henri: Letters on the Spiritual Life* appeared, beautifully produced with wide margins and deckle-edge pages by Convergent books. Offering a selection of his correspondence from over two decades, *Love, Henri* provides as intimate a glimpse into Nouwen the pastor as we are likely to see, at least until his full epistolary output appears. (Gabrielle Earnshaw, the editor of this collection, speaks in her preface about it being a "first book." Fans of Nouwen will take that as an encouraging sign. The one glaring annoyance of this collection, for me, was the heavy-handedness of the editorial commentary and selection; I would have rather combed through volumes of Nouwen's letters to draw my own conclusions about its shape and emphases, and it looks as though I might get that chance in the years to come.)

All of Nouwen's characteristic themes crop up over and over again in *Love, Henri*: the importance of exposing our wounds, the centrality of Jesus and his portrayal of his Father as a God of mercy and tenderness, the need to face our loneliness and embrace the call of community, the solace of prayer, and more besides. Consider, for example, a letter addressed to pastoral workers in the Free Methodist Church to whom Nouwen had been asked to speak on the theme of his book *The Wounded Healer*. The letter is dated "March 1991," nearly 20 years after the book's publication. In it, Nouwen seeks to obviate misunderstanding—"It is clear that we need to

do anything possible to avoid oppression, exploitation, and war"—but also reinforce the thesis he'd argued years earlier:

There was a time when I really wanted to help the poor, the sick, and the broken, but to do it as one who was wealthy, healthy, and strong. Now I see more and more how it is precisely through my weakness and brokenness that I minister to others.

There are also some surprises. I hadn't known, for instance, that Nouwen's personal piety was as anchored in Communion as it was: "In my own life, the Eucharist is the center." He returns to this theme over and over again, recommending it to his correspondents. To a friend in 1979: "Be sure to make the Eucharist the center of your life." To his teaching assistant in 1988: "The Eucharist is such a gift indeed! I wished I had the language and the spiritual power to convince my fellow Catholics in Holland of that." To a priest friend who is gay and is contemplating renouncing his vow of celibacy in 1989: "Every time I celebrate the Eucharist, I feel that enormous connection with Jesus…, and I continue to hope that you do not let go of that so precious connection." To the parents of children preparing for their first Communion in 1992: the Eucharist "is the place through which God really enters into our lives."

Coupled with—indeed, inextricably linked to—this emphasis on Communion is Nouwen's relentless focus on the person of Jesus. "Speak often about the life of Jesus," he writes in 1985 to a nun preparing a talk. "That is where the spiritual life starts. It makes us look at the poor, obedient, and prayerful man of Nazareth." Far from endorsing a soupy "spiritual-but-not-religious" outlook, Nouwen repeatedly directs his fans and friends to "know nothing but him and proclaim him at all times and at all places." "Words like 'God' and 'Spirit' so easily tempt us to overlook the 'word became flesh and dwelled among us,'" he wrote to his friend Sister Connie.

Nor is Nouwen's focus on Jesus limited to his charitable, moral example. For Nouwen, Jesus is above all the nearness of God to us and the achiever of our salvation: "God truly [has] become God-with-us. … Jesus, who was without sin, has taken on himself all the sins by humanity and has been crushed under its weight. There lies our first hope." And there, in brief, do we learn what prayer is: "Be sure to pray much, that is, to keep your inner eye focused on Jesus." To the chagrin of those for whom "inclusivity" is synonymous with "non-specificity," Nouwen turned his readers' attention again and again to the particular crucified and risen Jew from Nazareth.

Nouwen for Evangelicals

In *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, historian Mark Noll stated an obvious truth about evangelical Protestants: We "have been distinctive for activism." Built into the evangelical DNA is an impatience with theory and passivity and a thirst for practicality and world-changing accomplishment. We like to *work*, and we relish seeing tangible results.
But as Noll notes, the central movement of the Christian life—which is gratitude, from whose Greek antecedent we derive the word *Eucharist*—"may indeed issue in activism, but it may also issue in other manifestations, such as study or contemplation, that are less well known in North America." If Noll is right, and many other contemporary cultural observers have endorsed his thesis, then the ministry of Nouwen may be one of the resources evangelicals could most use for our own renewal.

Initially Nouwen looks like a poster boy for activism. Climbing the ladder to the highest echelons of the ivy-covered ivory tower, jetting around the world as a conference speaker and lecturer, publishing books with prestigious New York houses, Nouwen was a high achiever. He relished the stage and often fell prey to its attendant trials of loneliness and overly sensitive self-awareness. But the arc of Nouwen’s whole life paints a different picture. Disillusioned with his successes, he sought what one evangelical pastor has described as the “liberation of ministry from the success syndrome.” For Nouwen, “the true task of life might be the task to live our life faithfully in communion with the Lord [rather] than to change it.”

After withdrawing from his teaching post at Harvard and moving to the Daybreak community in Toronto, Nouwen was given the task of caring for a 25-year-old epileptic patient named Adam Arnett, about whom Nouwen wrote his final book. In it, he describes what Adam taught him about the limits of activism. Caring for Adam, Nouwen had to slow down, to realize the futility of pushing Adam beyond his limits, to accept the inability of Adam to *achieve* anything. “I found myself beginning to understand a new language,” Nouwen wrote. It was the language of stillness, the language of simply being present to another. Nouwen learned what he had so often tried to teach others: that offering one’s wounded self to a needy other is achievement enough. It’s a lesson evangelicals might continue to learn from Nouwen too.

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