

MY PERSONAL INTEREST IN HENRI NOUWEN

It all started as a mere curiosity, and a rather mild one at that. One day in class my counseling professor raved about Henri Nouwen's book *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. That was in 1994, back when I was still in the Philippines. Years later while working on my master's in theology here in the United States, I learned that Nouwen had died two years after my initial "chance encounter" with his work. That was enough to bring him back to my attention.

When I began my Ph.D. program in 1999, I was invited to be a teaching assistant for one of the largest classes at Fuller Seminary. To my surprise, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* was required reading. This unexpected reacquaintance with Nouwen's work turned my once mild curiosity into a growing fascination with his life and work. I did not have to meet Henri Nouwen personally for my interest in him to develop. His books—which I devoured one after another—had a transparent quality that made it easy for me to become familiar with his person.

By the time I entered the second year of my Ph.D. program, I was convinced beyond doubt that my doctoral work would focus on Nouwen. To begin with, my interest in him and his work actually grew out of my own personal journey. In retrospect, the well-used conceptual threads running through most, if not all, of Henri Nouwen's writings—*spirituality*, *psychology*, *ministry*, and *theology*—were the same threads that once wove and continue to weave themselves through my own spiritual journey.

At the age of nineteen, I began serving God full-time in *ministry*. The international, interdenominational parachurch organization I joined became for me the "sun" around which my life orbited for eighteen long years. Those were highly productive years for me but I came to realize that something was missing in my life. I was so outwardly focused that

I did not even know who I was anymore. It was at this juncture in my life that I turned inward in order to discover more about myself via the route of counseling and *psychology*. Little did I know that while I was busy ministering to others, my own soul was fast asleep. Busyness provided me a safe shield so that I did not have to face up to who I really was and how I was trying to live my life. I experienced a rude awakening, to say the least. So immersed was I in my new, introspective journey that I even thought of becoming a Christian counselor or therapist. But my desperate need for a firmer grounding in God and his word (versus my existential self) led me instead towards the path of *theology*.

Not surprisingly, given my history, studying theology turned out to be as consuming an endeavor—if not more so—as delving into psychology had been. I should confess that my study of theology reached such an “intoxicating” level that my own personal ministry took a back seat for a couple of years. But before I could plunge into yet another extreme direction—from *ministry* to *psychology* to *theology*—I experienced a second awakening of sorts.

I met a person whose spiritual journey was similar to my own. This person, who instantly became a dear friend, possessed solid experience in ministry, a deep know-how of counseling and psychology, and an excellent grasp of theology. But he had something more: a profound, lived experience of *spirituality* and spiritual formation. Through his impact and influence, I ended up pursuing a Ph.D. in practical theology with a special concentration in the areas of spirituality and spiritual formation at Fuller Theological Seminary.

My immersion into the writings of Henri Nouwen has thus become very important to me personally. It has enabled me to come full-circle into the vital realization that true spirituality is dynamically integrated with psychology, ministry, and theology. Indeed our spiritual journey inevitably consists of an inward, an outward, and an upward reality: a movement towards one’s self, towards others, and most importantly, towards God.

I also discovered in Nouwen's writings, a particular brand of spirituality that proved to be freeing for me personally. Growing up as a devout Catholic, I spent the first sixteen years of my life striving to reach moral perfection only to fail miserably time and again. Even after having had a taste of the reality of God's grace as a Protestant, I realized how hard it was for old habits to die. For the most part, I still nourished the erroneous thinking that the Christian life was about *being* perfect as opposed to moving towards becoming perfect—however slowly that process might be.

As a growing Christian, I held on to the belief that sustained victory over sin was the norm and anything less was a substandard lifestyle. The reality of struggle became muted in my own experience since I was led to believe that struggle was not supposed to have a place in a victorious Christian existence. But through the reinforcement of Henri Nouwen's life example, I found, much to my relief, that deep spirituality can coexist with the sobering realities of imperfection—that the route to perfection is, in fact, through imperfection.

Thus, as I write about Henri Nouwen, I do so through the lens of my own personal journey. As I seek to understand and interpret Nouwen's perspective, I realize that my interpretation cannot help but be influenced by my own background. Since my work represents but one side of Nouwen—Nouwen as I see him—I can make no claim to being able to sketch a full-orbed picture of his spirituality. Nor do I have the last word concerning it; I believe no one can do that. Just the same, I venture to offer a certain portrayal of Henri Nouwen that emerges out of a sustained and thoughtful reading of him.

Having said all this about my interpretive perspective, I need also to add that I write as a Protestant evangelical with decidedly ecumenical leanings and deep Catholic roots (something which I have recently come to appreciate anew). While remaining loyal to my denomination of preference, I have also reached a point in my journey where issues of

denominational differences have become less and less important to me. My appreciation for the wide spectrum of the Body of Christ has increased dramatically as a result of the ecumenically broad exposure that Fuller Seminary has provided for me over the years. I stand convinced that we can indeed pursue genuine unity amidst existing diversity within God's Church. More than anything, I have personally learned—and I am still learning—to embrace a more “generous orthodoxy” (to borrow the title of Brian McLaren's book) in terms of my beliefs and convictions. To a large extent, this type of spiritual generosity was precisely what Henri Nouwen embodied, being the true ecumenist that he was.

Finally, I simply want to say that, overall, my dissertation work (and now a book) on Henri Nouwen is about a spiritual journey. It was one that Henri Nouwen himself has taken and with which I intimately identify. In reality, it is a spiritual journey that we all can freely choose to embark on. My writing therefore serves as an open invitation for us to survey its terrain and familiarize ourselves with its contours and textures, with Henri Nouwen as our reliable guide.