



Henri Nouwen on Presence in Absence

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Next, perhaps, only to the famous Trappist monk Thomas Merton, Henri Nouwen, the Dutch Roman Catholic priest who authored more than forty books during his lifetime, stands as one of the most prolific spiritual writers of the last century. While known foremost for his writings, Nouwen equally proved to be a spiritual companion *par excellence* to many people with whom he journeyed throughout his ministry—either as a friend, a guide, a mentor, a spiritual director, or in some cases, a combination thereof. To a few close individuals, Henri Nouwen was a spiritual friend, but he was widely regarded as a spiritual guide by many. In certain instances, he was both an intimate friend to those he guided and a wise guide to those he befriended. A good number have testified experiencing Nouwen not only as a skilled mentor but also a discerning spiritual director. (For a closer look at Nouwen’s spiritual companioning approach, see Hernandez 2008.)

Regardless of the role he assumed, the common thread in the way Nouwen carried out his ministry of spiritual accompaniment was that of real, active presence. No doubt the notion of presence ranks highest in his overall dynamics of doing ministry as it is repeatedly emphasized in a variety of ways in virtually all his works.

The Ministry of Presence

Nouwen did not just abundantly address the subject of presence. He lived and breathed out presence, and many of those to whom he reached out validate this in their own experience of him. Michael O’Laughlin echoes what many others say about Nouwen’s authentic ministry of presence:

He gave most people the sense that he was so utterly focused on them that little else mattered, and in most cases, he really was completely tuned in to them. He had an ability to zoom in on the person he was speaking with and block out everything else. (4)

Arguably, presence was the greatest gift Nouwen

bestowed upon people. “He was with us,” as one of his friends from Yale proudly proclaimed (Glaser, 133). It is not hard to imagine hearing Nouwen tirelessly reminding one and all—just as he reminded one of the people he mentored—that “the ministry is about being present with people” (Lywood, 234). To him, it was uppermost. Nouwen exercised genuine presence with people because he knew how to be present with himself and his God, who was ever-present to him.

Integrated Presence

In one of his most well-read books, *Reaching Out*, which focuses on the foundations of our spiritual life, Nouwen explicates the idea of presence in an integrated manner, using his schema of the three movements on our journey: toward self, toward others, and toward God. I take liberty in referring to them in terms of the inward, the outward, and the upward (or Godward) movements.

Nouwen identifies three primary disciplines respectively associated with each of these three movements: *solitude*, *hospitality*, and *prayer*. Each of these spiritual practices is designed to help us cultivate real presence inwardly, outwardly, and upwardly. “In solitude we can become present to ourselves” (Nouwen 1975, 41), or, as Nouwen also puts it, we can be “at home in our own house” (101). Only then can we exercise true hospitality towards others and be present with, to, and for them. It is in prayer, which Nouwen describes as “a loving intimacy with God,” that we can be truly present to God, who is present to us and who speaks to us in our solitude (122). From Nouwen’s perspective, this quality of real presence comes about through the conscious and deliberate creation of space in our lives.

The dynamic outworking of Nouwen’s trilogy of real presence is summarized as follows:

In solitude, we become present to ourselves by creating an open space in our heart in order to understand who we truly are in God; through the service of hospitality, we become present with, to, and for others as we create a friendly space wherein we can reach out to them as hospitable soul hosts; by prayer, we become present to the



“What is life? An illusion, a shadow, a story.” — Sundaram Ramaswamy

Divine Presence by creating a free space for God so we can understand and experience God more intimately. (recast from Pananchimootil, 87)

Nouwen was able to minister and accompany others on their journey more holistically because he himself learned to cultivate and integrate this threefold intersecting presence—inwardly, outwardly, and upwardly (or Godwardly)—in his own life.

Nouwen believed that one can only be effectively present for the other if, first of all, one is truly present to one’s self and to the God present within the self. As David Benner, Emeritus Distinguished Professor of Psychology and Spirituality at Richmond Graduate University in Atlanta, Georgia, puts it, “Genuine presence involves being genuinely myself. I can be present for another person only when I dare to be present to myself. And I

can be genuinely present to myself only when I can be genuinely present to God” (51). The people whom we seek to accompany by our presence can detect, sooner or later, if we ourselves are disconnected from our own soul and estranged from God, whose very presence we might not feel at all. People experience our love deeply if we love ourselves and let our love for God overflow in and through us. As we grow equally at home with God and ourselves, others will feel increasingly at home with us. Needless to say, this intertwining reality of presence is a nonnegotiable dynamic in any ministry of spiritual companionship.

The Ministry of Absence

While Nouwen rightly emphasizes the ministry of presence as we seek to companion people on their walk with God, he likewise calls for the need to equalize presence with the ministry of absence, which, in his mind, is just



as critical to sustain in our ministry. However, absence, as Nouwen contextualizes it, in no way means not showing up. As he hastens to point out, “without a coming there can be no leaving, and without a presence absence is only emptiness” (Nouwen 1977, 45). What Nouwen is specifically advocating is a more purposeful art of leaving—an act of “creative withdrawal” (44). The rationale for such withdrawal is to pave the way for the Spirit of God to work freely in a person or situation without us potentially getting in the way. In short, “we have to learn to leave so that the Spirit can come” (45).

Sometimes our presence, though well meaning, can prove imposing, or at worst, suffocating. If only hospital patients could speak up more truthfully, many of them would probably beg to be left alone for a while instead of being inundated by an endless flow of visitors. Our coming to be present with others through our visitation ministry is good, but so is our timely departure to ensure that we honor the space that people also need. Absence can provide some breathing room for people to come to terms with themselves or their situation on their own apart from our presence, which may be stifling at times.

Nouwen is persuaded that “there is a ministry in which our leaving creates space for God’s spirit and in which, by our absence, God can become present in a new way” (44). Being in complete step with the Spirit requires that we be discerning as to how God chooses to work in people and certain circumstances, so that we do not end up becoming a hindrance to God’s way. There are times when appropriate withdrawal or backing off from a situation or individual may be the best way to cooperate with God’s intentions. To do otherwise can potentially abort the process as well as the timing of God’s unique work in people’s lives.

Our tendency to eagerly come to people’s rescue when they seem to be in dire need—and even our sometimes premature acts of offering comfort or consolation when we can no longer stand the sight of their suffering—can actually get in the way of what God may be doing inside their hearts. Though our withdrawal may not convey the surface appearance of love and concern, sometimes the truly loving thing to do is to back off for a while and resist the temptation to play God by trying to fix others and their seemingly messy circumstances.

Without our willingness and readiness to exercise this art

of creative withdrawal, we can easily find ourselves “in danger of no longer being the way, but *in* the way; of no longer speaking and acting in his name, but in ours; of no longer pointing to the Lord who sustains, but only to our own distracting personalities” (47–48). However, when we learn how to incorporate this purposeful, articulate absence in our ministry, we are afforded the meaningful opportunity to “participate in the leaving of Christ, the good leaving that allows the sustaining Spirit to come” (48).

Nouwen points out our all-too-common tendency to be over-available, which he associates with our desire to feel needed. This can lead us into setting ourselves up as indispensable creatures—a deceptive illusion that we need to shatter each time we become conscious of it (49). The God-complex in us can readily take over if we fail to rein in our fleshly drive to act like the savior we are not. Only Jesus can fully come through for people.

Yet even Jesus did not come through for everyone to whom he sought to minister. If we examine the gospel accounts, we discover that Jesus himself was not always available for people. Neither did he feel compelled to be so, despite the expectations imposed upon him, even by those closest to him. Just imagine the pained words his friend Martha uttered when he finally came to see her brother Lazarus who had just died: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (Jn 11:32b). Jesus did not predictably heal everyone nor perform miracles on demand. He had his own reasons for choosing to be unavailable. In the case of Lazarus, he revealed to his disciples what was behind his seeming delayed action: “Then Jesus told them plainly, ‘Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him’” (Jn 11:14). Jesus knew how and when to be present and absent, as dictated by his divine purposes, which were infinitely higher than our human expectations.

In the midst of his active ministry, Jesus consistently pulled away from people. But as Nouwen qualifies, “When [Jesus] withdraws himself from the crowd and even from his closest friends, he withdraws to be with the Father” (50). He “continued to return to hidden places to be alone with God,” to be nourished through prayer (Nouwen 1997, Aug. 13). To be sure, it was a calculated, purposeful withdrawal.

Nouwen believed that “a certain unavailability is



essential for the spiritual life of the minister” in order to devote unhurried time to prayer, which he deemed as reason enough to be creatively unavailable. He gives the following example:

When someone says, “The minister is unavailable because this is his [sic] day of solitude,” could that not be a consoling ministry? What it says is that the minister is unavailable to me, not because he is more available to others, but because he is with God, and God alone—the God who is our God. (Nouwen 1977, 49)

As Nouwen concludes, “When our absence from people means a special presence to God, then that absence becomes a sustaining absence” (50).

The Dynamics of Presence and Absence

In John’s gospel, we read these words of Jesus forewarning his disciples of his imminent departure from their company: “Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you” (Jn 16:7). Jesus did physically leave his followers on Earth just as he foretold, but, as equally promised, he did not abandon them as orphans; he sent his very Spirit to inhabit each of them, thus empowering them to do the task he asked them to do.

The Holy Spirit’s dramatic arrival in the disciples’ midst on the day of Pentecost, against the backdrop of Jesus’s physical absence, serves to highlight an intriguing reality—that of presence in absence. In Jesus’s actual absence, he made his own presence felt in a uniquely powerful way through his Spirit.

Authors James and Evelyn Whitehead like to refer to Jesus’s absence as a “generous absence,” for through the seeming “crisis” the followers of Jesus faced, they themselves emerged as leaders (149–50) through the enablement of the Holy Spirit residing in them. Here we see one operative example of the fascinating dynamics between presence and absence.

From this familiar farewell discourse in the Gospel of John, we can draw several more applications that can significantly impact the way we live out our own spirituality and ministry. For one, Nouwen is convinced—insofar as our close relationship with Christ is concerned—that the

experience of intimacy deepens through the “continuous interplay between presence and absence” (Nouwen 1977, 47). How so? Through the powerful construct of memory.

In verses 13–14 of the same chapter in John, Jesus declares: “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (Jn 16:13–14). Here Jesus seems to imply, according to Nouwen, not just the truth that “only in memory will real intimacy with him be possible,” but likewise, “only in memory will [the disciples] experience the full meaning of what they have witnessed” (41).

We know from the gospel accounts that the followers of Christ often did not comprehend all that Jesus was about, despite being in close contact with him while he was still on Earth. But, as Nouwen points out, “a new and more intimate presence” was made possible by Jesus’s absence, the quality of which “nurtured and sustained” them amidst their many trying challenges in life. This same unique presence fueled in them an even greater desire to see Jesus physically again (42). Nouwen underscores what he perceives as the mysterious interplay between presence and absence in the person of Jesus and how that dynamic directly relates to our own experience of his reality:

The great mystery of the divine revelation is that God entered into intimacy with us not only by Christ’s coming, but also by his leaving. Indeed, it is in Christ’s absence that our intimacy with him is so profound that we can say he dwells in us, call him our food and drink, and experience him as the center of our being. (42)

Nowhere is this reality so palpably dramatized, and with such depth of meaning, than in the liturgical celebration of the Eucharist, which stands as a memorial of the death and resurrection of our Lord, “a memorial that sustains us here and now” where “as we become aware of his absence we discover his presence” in a very real way (47). In a mystical way, “this early ritual is itself a celebration of presence and absence,” since the early believers “recognized that when they broke the bread in Jesus’ memory (that is, in



his absence), Christ became present to them in ways that enlivened their spirits” (Whitehead, 147).

Each time we gather around the Lord’s table with the bread and wine in front of us, we keep encouraging one another with an attitude of gratitude to wait in eager expectation for his coming again. Nouwen adds, “But even as we affirm his absence we realize that he already is with us.... Thus, while remembering his promises in his absence we discover and celebrate his presence in our midst” (Nouwen 1977, 46).

The mystery of God’s presence and absence through Jesus Christ—mystifying as it may seem—is not merely an abstract reality. There are in fact rich implications as well as practical ramifications we can extract from this rhythmic interplay, which apply directly to the dynamics of human relationships in general and ministry in particular.

Here Nouwen expounds on the vital importance of engaging in a joint ministry of presence and absence and the necessity of balancing the two. It is one thing to emphasize the role of each one within the relational context of ministry. It is quite another to hold both in creative tension. Therein lies the bigger challenge: viewing presence and absence beyond their simultaneous and alternating thrusts—that is, grasping the reality of presence in absence and absence in presence.

Presence in Absence and Absence in Presence

The dynamics of presence and absence, when creatively applied within the realm of human relationships—particularly to that of spiritual companionship—generate a vision of intimacy much like the fascinating art of dancing where a right balance between closeness and distance is required. Nouwen applies the artful maneuverings of dancers this way: “Sometimes we are very close, touching each other or holding each other; sometimes we move away from each other and let the space between us become an area where we can freely move” (Nouwen 1997, Feb. 22). This intentional balancing requires hard work on our part if we wish to participate in the dance of life in a more life-giving way.

Particularly within the context of companioning ministry, our presence—via the powerful avenue of memory—can be experienced more appreciatively by others through creative gestures of absence on our part. As Nouwen qual-

ifies it, there is a certain “absence that creates presence,” for “if we are able to be fully present to our friends when we are with them, our absence too will bear many fruits,” paving the way for them to “discover in our absence the lasting grace of our presence” (Mar. 13).

Likewise, through our absence, there can be a much more compelling presence felt through the unhindered work of the Spirit while we deliberately engage in prayer on behalf of those with whom we cannot be literally present at particular junctures in their journey. Nouwen may be right in pointing out that, more often than not, the Spirit of God reveals Himself more distinctly during the course of our absence—usually during those non-orchestrated moments when we are not likely to give in to the urge of wanting to help God out. Nouwen assures us:

When we claim for ourselves that we come to our friends in the Name of Jesus—that through us Jesus becomes present to them—we can trust that our leaving will also bring them the Spirit of Jesus. Thus, not only our presence but also our absence becomes a gift to others. (Mar. 14)

With his characteristic flair for organizing his thoughts into three main points, Nouwen summarizes his own conclusions about the dialectic between the ministry of presence and the ministry of absence:

- ◆ We sustain each other in the constant interplay between absence and presence.
- ◆ A sustaining ministry asks ministers to be not only creatively present but creatively absent.
- ◆ A creative absence challenges ministers to develop an ever growing intimacy with God in prayer and to make that the source of their entire ministry. (Nouwen 1997, 53)

The ministries of presence and absence represent spiritual polarities that can be employed both alternately and simultaneously in a cooperative mode, despite their inherent tension. Nouwen has shown that this is both possible and necessary as we seek to embody a more authentic and well-integrated ministry of spiritual companionship. ■



Note

This article is based on Wil Hernandez, *Henri Nouwen and Spiritual Polarities: A Life of Tension*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2012.

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Enlightenment's Swing Door

In an inner cavern rounded by its loss of sight
 I clamped my simplicity in a chair,
 The All in my thought
 The only fire.
 Can you gauge purity?
 That talon wore beauty,
 Beckon silence,
 Child my mind,
 Cancel gravestones.
 Right here
 The Friend
 Held me a little push.
 I grasp
 The way up,
 Enlightenment's pull-bar.

This is no easy stepladder.
 Down here,
 I sit with my senses in,
 A peck of nothingness
 Allows the cave its light.
 I am not tired of afternoons.
 I am full-bodied at work in the world.
 This is a cave handle,
 The direction I face inside,
 A large amplified room,
 Not so much as
 The littlest intolerance,
 Mobile,
 As mobile as the world,
 A great better on direction.

Donny Duke