



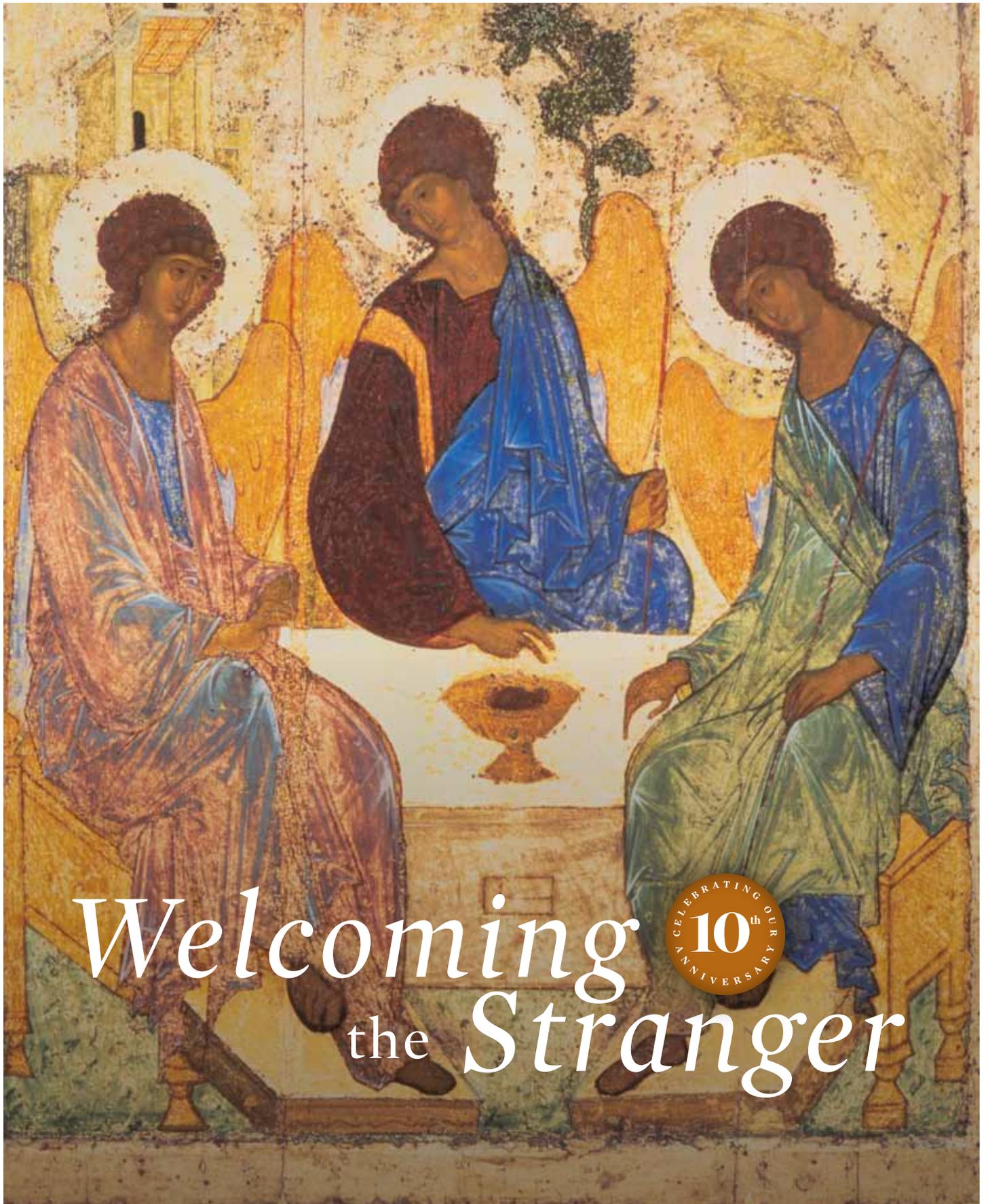
CONVERSations



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Welcoming the Stranger



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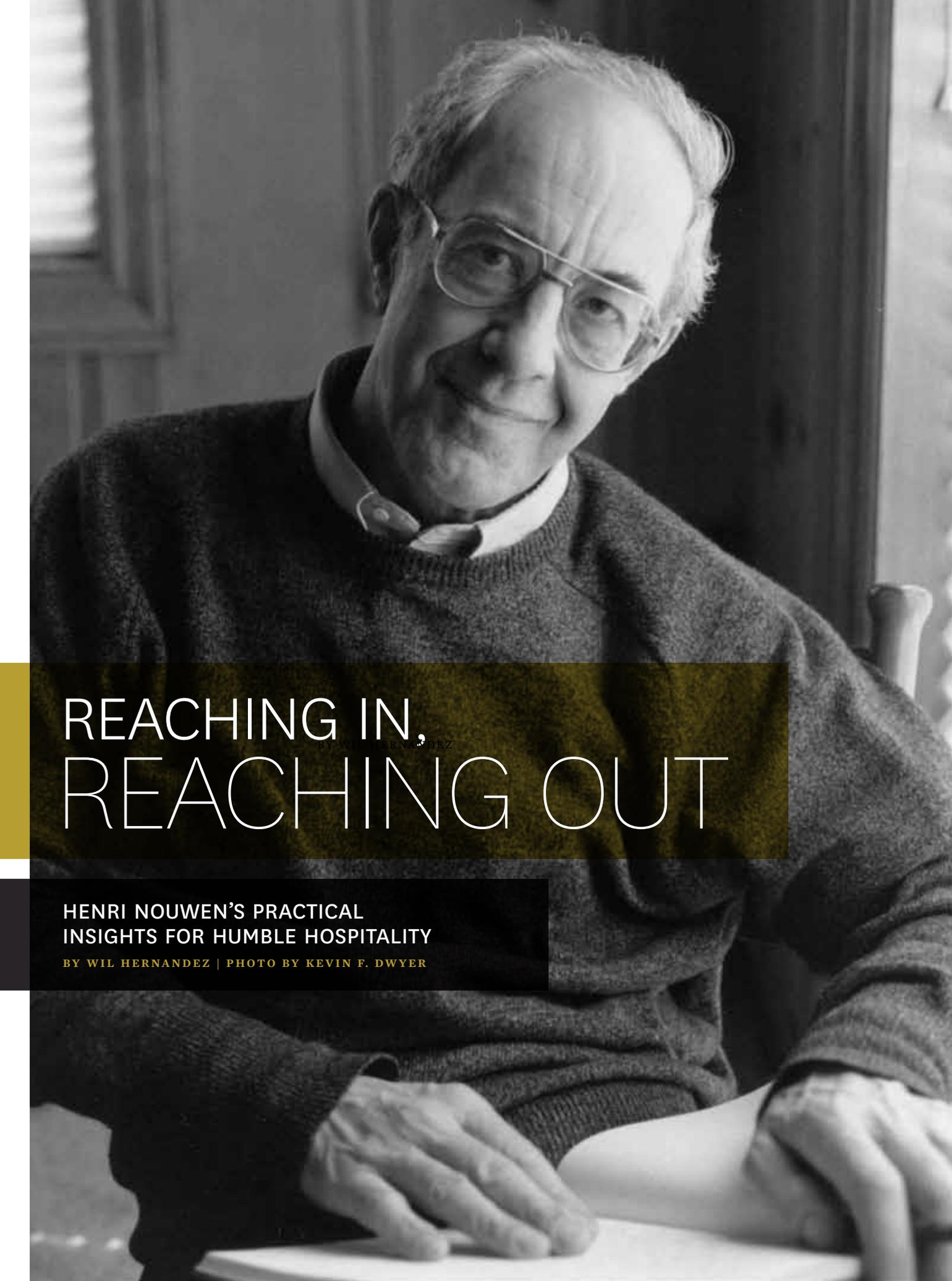
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REACHING IN, REACHING OUT

HENRI NOUWEN'S PRACTICAL
INSIGHTS FOR HUMBLE HOSPITALITY

BY WIL HERNANDEZ | PHOTO BY KEVIN F. DWYER



HENRI NOUWEN REMAINS ONE OF THE MOST PROLIFIC AND INSIGHTFUL WRITERS WHEN IT COMES TO SPIRITUALITY AND MINISTRY. IN THIS COMBINED FIELD, THE RECURRING THEME OF HOSPITALITY STANDS OUT AS A KEY FOCUS IN A NUMBER OF HIS WORKS. MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN ON THE TOPIC OF HOSPITALITY AND HOW IT FIGURES WITHIN THE BROAD UMBRELLA OF SPIRITUAL MINISTRY.

What does it mean to be a good soul host to others? In keeping with Nouwen's famous flair for organizing his thoughts into a three-point outline, I highlight here at least three hospitality traits a good host needs to cultivate. Drawn from the richness of Henri Nouwen's teachings on the subject, I submit the following key considerations: the integrated exercise of *presence*, the deliberate creation of *space*, and the creative holding of *tension*.

H

enri Nouwen's unique take on it is hailed by many as the most nuanced, if not the most substantive, in this area of study. The sheer expansiveness of his treatment of the subject is unparalleled, although his conclusion is strikingly

plain and simple: ministry is all about hospitality, and real hospitality is what embodies an authentic ministry.¹

EXERCISING REAL PRESENCE

Contrary to the popular and prevailing notion of ministry that is held by many, Nouwen never equates ministry with sophisticated curricula, transferrable materials, or high-powered events that usually are reduced to programmatic and formulaic delivery. Given his conviction, Henri Nouwen frowns at what he labels the "professionalization" of ministry, where it becomes associated with a certain exercise of power instead of an expression of true service for others' sake.² To him, ministry is foremost a people-to-people enterprise—both empowering and life-giving—with the minister in the role of a host, exercising genuine hospitality for the other. In fleshing this idea out, Nouwen reveals the depth and breadth of what he means by being hospitable through and through—well beyond the customary notion of "entertaining" strangers by providing them food and shelter.

Henri Nouwen did not just abundantly address the issue of presence. He lived and breathed out presence and employed this gift in his ministry to others. "The ministry is about being present with people," Nouwen reminds one and all.³ He was able to exercise genuine presence with people because he knew how to be present with himself and his God, who was ever-present to him. His life exemplifies an integrated quality of real presence.

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For one, Nouwen emphasizes, "In solitude we can become present to ourselves."⁴ As we deeply connect with ourselves, it becomes much easier for us to connect with others and exercise real hospitality towards them

3 Wendy Lywood, "Rediscovering My Priesthood," in *Befriending Life: Encounters with Henri Nouwen*, ed. Beth Porter with Susan M. S. Brown and Philip Coulter, New York: Doubleday, 2001, 234.

4 Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 41.

1 Nouwen, Henri. "Education to Ministry." *Theological Education* 9 (1972): 49.

2 Nouwen, Henri. *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*. New York: Image Books, 1975, 91, 93.

by being present with, to, and for them. For another, 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.⁵ Henri Nouwen was able to minister and accompany others on their journey more hospitably because he himself learned to cultivate and integrate this threefold intersecting presence—to oneself, to others, and to God—in his own life. Indeed we can only be effectively present for the other if, first of all, we are truly present to ourselves and to the God present within ourselves. David Benner sums up this interrelated dynamic: “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.”⁶

The people to whom we seek to extend hospitality 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. Conversely, people are more apt to embrace our offer of hospitality if they sense our simultaneous connectedness with our inner being and the Divine Being. Needless to say, this integrated exercise of presence is a nonnegotiable practice we need to deepen more consciously if we are to be good, effective soul hosts.

CREATING OPEN SPACE

Hospitality, Henri Nouwen writes, is not about effecting change in people, but rather about lavishly providing space where such change can actually occur.⁷ Without this crucial element of space, hospitality is

less than authentic. What exactly does Nouwen mean by “space”? In describing what he means, Nouwen uses a broad variety of terms: open, free, friendly, welcoming, fearless, empty, and empowering.⁸

An open space is not governed by tight control but is

rather characterized by precious freedom for people to move around—to come and go on their own terms—without any pressure of obligation whatsoever from the host. Only in such free space can hospitality be celebrated without misgivings. The genuine host, according to Nouwen, is able to offer this kind of space—the kind in which the guest need not be afraid to listen to his or her own inner voice and, consequently, to find his or her own personal way of being human. In this sense, an open space is also a friendly and welcoming space in that people, including strangers, are allowed to enter in and discover themselves as created free: “free to sing their own songs, speak their own languages, dance their own dances; free to leave and follow their own vocations” (RO:72).

Nouwen likewise speaks of the need for us as hosts to offer a kind of empty space, not an occupied and preoccupied space filled with busy activities, distracting noises, and restless moods. In an intriguing but forceful way, Nouwen insists that a certain type of inner poverty makes a good host: a poverty of mind and heart.

He was able to exercise genuine presence with people because he knew how to be present with himself and his God, who was ever-present to him. His life exemplifies an integrated quality of real presence.

On the issue of poverty of mind, he concludes: “Someone who is filled with ideas, concepts, opinions and convictions cannot be a good host. There is no inner space to listen, no openness to discover the gift of the other” (RO: 103). How very true this charge is! When we are so wrapped up with our own selves, we fail miserably to accommodate others into our world.

As for the imperative to exercise poverty of heart, Nouwen laments over the fact that “when our heart is filled with prejudices, worries, jealousies, there is little room for a stranger” (RO:106). Thus, he urges hosts to be welcoming, open, and inclusive in creating a fearless space for a wide variety of human experiences that encourages a sense of community built around “creative interdependency” versus self-sufficiency (RO:107).

Lastly, to Nouwen the ministry of hospitality is meant to be empowering. Such quality of hospitality is akin to love expressed concretely in other-centered fashion. By no means is it “a subtle invitation to adopt the life style of the host, but the gift of a chance for the guest to find his own” (RO:72). By the same token, its paradox lies in creating space for people to find their own soul on their

⁵ Ibid., 122

⁶ Benner, David G. *Sacred Companions: The Gift of Spiritual Friendship & Direction*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003, 51.

⁷ Nouwen, “Education to Ministry,” 71.

⁸ The core source for this entire section is from *Reaching Out*, pp. 65–109 and is presented here in a paraphrased and synthesized way. The abbreviation RO followed by page number(s) are used where direct quotes are given.

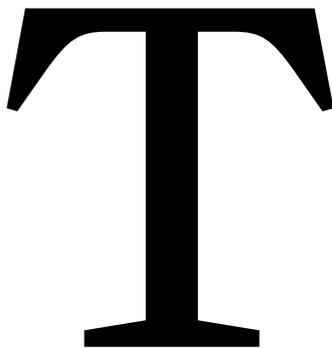


As we grow equally at home with ourselves and with God, others are bound to feel increasingly at home with us and will more comfortably welcome our offer of hospitality.

own.⁹ Real hospitality is meant to have a freeing and never constricting effect upon others.

Space is paramount in the practice of hospitality. Henri Nouwen not only articulates its vital importance, but he also exemplifies for us how we, too, can create, facilitate, and nurture its use such that our movement toward hospitality wisely leads to freedom and empowerment.

HOLDING TENSION IN BALANCE



he existence of polarities (a deadline to meet when a child is sick; a desire to be welcoming when there's construction going on at home) is a given fact—something we inevitably have to reckon with all the time. In ministry as in life, we must learn to hold such conflicts in

creative tension as a way of balancing what otherwise would be easily deemed as irreconcilable differences. This is just as true in our exercise of hospitality. To be a good host requires the skill of regularly adjusting the three tensions that Henri Nouwen believes should be lived out in careful balance: self-possession and self-giving, receptivity and confrontation, presence and absence.

SELF-POSSESSION AND SELF-GIVING

Nouwen describes ministry in terms of a willingness to lay down one's life for others—not necessarily in a literal way, but as a matter of identity. He hastens to stress that if a person is to lay down his or her life, that person must have a real "life" to lay down.¹⁰ This corresponds directly to the most concise definition of ministry Nouwen has ever articulated in his writings: ministry is all about "the giving of self."¹¹

Henri Nouwen firmly believes that you cannot give away anything you do not first possess or own, like your

"self."¹² Indeed we cannot give or share of ourselves if we do not have a sense of self which we know, understand, accept, and love—one ultimately worth offering to others. Moreover, we can only minister (self-give) out of who we genuinely are. What enables us to minister with real depth and effectiveness is our capacity to live out of our center, where our core identity is deeply lodged.¹³

It is only when we claim our own belovedness in God and we become confident that we are unconditionally received and loved by God that we can love others gratuitously. It is from this secure place that we are completely able to give of ourselves to the service of others.¹⁴ For Nouwen, this is what the genuine ministry of hospitality is about—it comes straight out of who we are, and it embodies the self we embrace as our very own, which is the same self we are able to give to others freely as a gift. Here is the direct application of this principle: People can experience our loving hospitality deeply if we are hospitable to ourselves to start with—that is, if we truly love ourselves and let our love for God and God's love for us overflow in and through us. As Nouwen also emphasizes, it is critical that we feel "at home in our own house" (RO:102—that is, at home with our own hearts where God dwells and we dwell with God. The truth is, as we grow equally at home with ourselves and with God, others are bound to feel increasingly at home with us and will more comfortably welcome our offer of hospitality.

RECEPTIVITY AND CONFRONTATION

The hospitable place and space Nouwen has in mind are at once inviting, encouraging, trusting, revealing, healing, affirming, compassionate, supportive, and receptive.¹⁵ He places special weight on the importance of receptivity. Accordingly, any type of outreach ministry that is lacking in honest receptivity can be dangerous. It can easily give rise to "manipulation and even to violence ... in thoughts, words and actions," whereas genuine receptivity (has to do with inviting others into our world on their terms, as opposed to ours RO:98).

⁹ Nouwen, Henri. *The Wounded Healer*. New York: Image Books, 1979, 92. Cf. *Reaching Out*, 72.

¹⁰ *Journey of the Heart: The Life of Henri Nouwen*, dir. by Karen Pascal (2004, Windbourne Productions, 2005, DVD)

¹¹ Nouwen, Henri. *¡Gracias!: A Latin American Journal*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993, 85.

¹² Nouwen, Henri J.M., *The Inner Voice of Love: A Journey Through Anguish to Freedom* (New York: Image Books, 1998), 65.

¹³ See Henri Nouwen, "Living in the Center Enables Us to Care," *Health Progress* 71 (July-August 1990): 53.

¹⁴ Nouwen, *Inner Voice*, 65.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 75ff.

The ministries of *presence* and *absence* represent spiritual opposites that can be employed both alternately and simultaneously in a cooperative mode, despite their inherent tension. *Henri Nouwen shows that this is both possible and necessary as we seek to embody a more authentic and well-integrated service of hospitality.*

The moment we start imposing our own agenda—including our personal convictions, ideologies, and lifestyle—and use any of that as leverage to determine how far we are willing to connect with others, we slip into exploitative posturing. Hospitality of this sort smacks of a business transaction in which we make sure we have the upper hand.¹⁶ Genuine reception of others—a trademark of hospitality—has love, friendship, and care fueling it, not the manipulative imposition of our viewpoints or attitudes.

Receptivity, however, is but one face of hospitality; just as critical is the bold face of confrontation. Nouwen explains: “Real receptivity asks for confrontation because space can only be a welcoming space when there are clear boundaries, and boundaries are limits between which we define our own position. Flexible limits, but limits nonetheless.” This is what Nouwen calls “articulate presence,” which he identifies as “the presence within boundaries,” where the host assumes a position of “a point of orientation and a frame of reference” for the guest (RO: 99).

Nouwen is obviously balancing the notion that real hospitality is not only about receiving strangers or guests but also confronting them with the kind of presence so direct that it is neither ambiguous nor neutral. Primarily, it means presenting—not imposing—our position to the other in a clear manner:

No real dialogue is possible between somebody and a nobody. We can enter into communication with the

other only when our own life choices, attitudes and viewpoints offer boundaries that challenge the strangers to become aware of their own position and to explore it critically.

Applying this aspect of hospitality directly to our efforts at being a good, hospitable host means we need not be timid to bear witness to our convictions so long as we do not impose them on others in a manipulative fashion. Henri Nouwen was a true example of this attitude and action, according to L’Arche founder Jean Vanier, who said, “[Nouwen] led people closer to Jesus, to truth, to a greater acceptance of themselves and of reality” without ever imposing his own faith on them.¹⁷ He received and accepted others with respect while never failing to be a powerful and continuing witness in their lives.

Receptivity and confrontation represent two sides of our Christian witness that we would do well to carefully keep in good balance. As Nouwen states, “Receptivity without confrontation leads to a bland neutrality that serves nobody. Confrontation without receptivity leads to an oppressive aggression which hurts everybody.”¹⁸ Receptivity is a true expression of the tender care that materializes through confrontation. Both are needful traits for us to imbibe if we seek to be a hospitable host.

¹⁷ Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 99.

¹⁸ Nouwen, Henri. *The Living Reminder: Service and Prayer in Memory of Jesus Christ*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1977, 45.

¹⁶ Ibid, 98.

