

~Other Speakers A-F: Classic Devotionals:

Excerpts from 'Devotional Classics' edited by Richard Foster and James Bryan Smith

Henri J. M. Nouwen (1932-)

Introduction to the Author

Henri Nouwen was born in Nijkerk, Holland and came to the U.S. in 1964. A Roman Catholic priest and psychologist, he has taught at several prestigious universities, including Yale Harvard and Notre Dame. He is the author of over 20 books.

Nouwen's spiritual pilgrimage has brought him in recent years to serve the mentally handicapped in L'Arche, an international network of communities. In the L'Arche homes, the mentally handicapped and their assistants live together as God's children trying to en flesh the Gospel.

Nouwen's spiritual sensitivity is both refreshing and prophetic. The following selection invites us to intimacy, invites us to the spiritual life.

Excerpts from 'Making All Things New'

1. Hard Work

The spiritual life is a gift. It is the gift of the Holy Spirit, who lifts us up into the Kingdom of God's love. But to say that being lifted up into the Kingdom of love is a divine gift does not mean that we wait passively until the gift is offered to us.

Jesus tells us to set our hearts on the Kingdom. Setting our hearts on something involves not only serious aspirations but also a strong determination. A spiritual life requires human effort. The forces that keep pulling us back into a worry filled life are far from easy to overcome.

2. The Small Gentle Voice

A spiritual life without discipline is impossible. Discipline is the other side of discipleship. The practice of a spiritual discipline makes us more sensitive to the small, gentle voice of God. Through the practice of a spiritual discipline we become attentive to that small voice and willing to respond when we hear it.

3. From an Absurd to an Obedient Life

From all that I said about our worried, over filled lives, it is clear that we are usually surrounded by so much outer noise that it is hard to truly hear our God when He is speaking to us. We have often become deaf, unable to know when God calls us. Thus our lives have become absurd. In the word absurd we find the Latin word *surdus* which means deaf. A spiritual life requires discipline because we need to learn to God, who constantly speaks but whom we seldom hear.

When, however, we learn to listen, our lives become obedient lives. The word obedient comes from the Latin word *audire* which means listening. A spiritual discipline is necessary in order to move slowly from an absurd to an obedient life, from a life filled with noisy worries to a life in which there is some free inner space where we can listen to our God and follow His guidance.

4. The Concentrated Effort

A spiritual discipline, therefore, is the concentrated effort to create some inner and outer space in our lives, where this obedience can be practiced. Through a spiritual discipline we prevent the world from filling our lives to such an extent that there is no place left to listen.

5. Time and Space

Without solitude it is virtually impossible to live a spiritual life. Solitude begins with a time and a place for God, and Him alone. Read: Matt. 6:6

6. Inner Chaos

To bring some solitude into our lives is one of the most necessary but also most difficult disciplines. As soon as we are alone, w/o people to talk to, books to read, TV to watch or phone calls to make, an inner chaos begins.

This chaos can be so disturbing and so confusing that we can hardly wait to get busy again. This is what makes solitude all the more important. Solitude is not a spontaneous response to an occupied and preoccupied life. There are too many reasons not to be alone. Therefore we must begin by carefully planning some solitude.

7. Write it in Black and White

Five or ten minutes a day may be all we can tolerate. The amount of time will vary for each person according to temperament, age, job, lifestyle and maturity. But we do not take the spiritual life seriously if we do not set

aside some time to be alone with God and listen to Him. We may have to write it in black and white in our calendars or daytimers so that nobody else can take away this period of time. Tell others that you are sorry but you have already made an appointment for that time.

8. Bombarded by Thousands of Thoughts

Once we have committed ourselves to spending time in solitude, we develop an attentiveness to God's voice in us. In the beginning during the first days, weeks or even months, we may have the feeling the we are simply wasting our time. Time in solitude may at first seem little more than a time in which we are bombarded by thousands of thoughts and feelings that emerge from hidden areas of our mind.

This is the experience of anyone who decides to enter into solitude after a life w/o much spiritual discipline. At first, the many distractions keep presenting themselves. Later as they receive less and less attention, they slowly withdraw.

9. Tempted to Run Away

It is clear that what matters is faithfulness to the discipline. When we stick to our discipline, in the conviction that God is with us even when we do not yet hear Him, we slowly discover that we do not want to miss our time alone with God.

10. The First Sign of Prayer

As we empty ourselves of our many worries we come to know not only with our mind but also with our heart that we were never really alone, that God's Spirit was with us all along.

11. The Way to Hope

In solitude, we come to know the Spirit who has already been given to us. The pains and struggles we encounter in our solitude thus become the way to hope, because our hope is not based on something that will happen after our struggling is over, but on the real presence of God's healing Spirit in the midst of these struggles.

The discipline of solitude allows us gradually to come in touch with this hopeful presence of God in our lives and allows us also to taste even now the beginning of the joy and peace which belong to the new heaven and the new earth.

The discipline of solitude, as I have described it here, is one of the most powerful disciplines in developing a prayerful life.

Read: 1 Kings 19:9-13

Reflection

1. Henri Nouwen refers to the twofold nature of the spiritual life as both a gift and hard work on our part. How has your journey been like receiving a gift? In what ways has it been hard work?
2. We engage in spiritual disciplines in order to prevent the world from filling our lives to such an extent that there is no place left to listen to God. What things are currently filling your life and preventing you from listening?
3. How has God used silence to speak to you?
4. This week make the move from the absurd to the obedient life by actively listening to God in solitude. Begin to push aside the distraction as you engage in the discipline of solitude.
5. Schedule appointments with God. Nouwen suggests that you actually pencil them in you calendar or daytimer.
6. Get up early and go to the Worship Center at church for a time of solitude before worship. Send some time just listening to God and praying for the people who will share the Worship Center with you that morning. Pastor Bob will have the church open on April 11th at 8am.