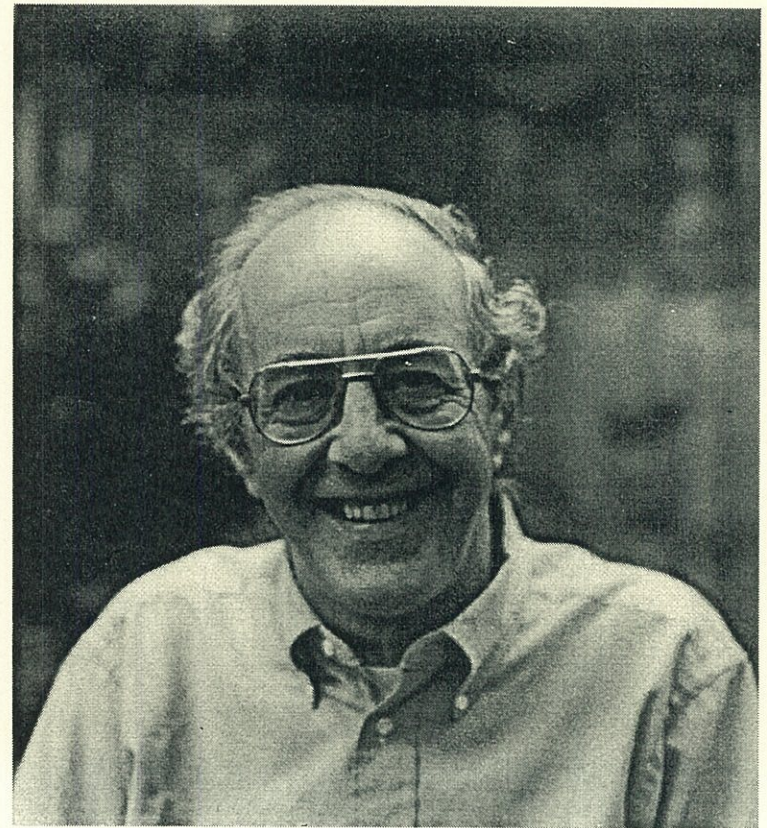


SACRED  
JOURNEY  
CLASSICS



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# INTRODUCTION

## *SACRED JOURNEY CLASSICS*

For more than fifty years, Fellowship in Prayer, the publisher of *SACRED JOURNEY*, has brought words of wisdom and experiences of insight and transformation to readers of many faith traditions.

Every once in awhile, one of the people featured in the pages of our journal makes a lasting impression and leaves us all mulling over deep spiritual truths. Request for reprints pour in. When all original copies of an issue disappear, we know we have a *SACRED JOURNEY CLASSIC* on our hands.

This interview with Henri Nouwen, conducted in August, 1996 and published that December, turned out to be the final interview Nouwen gave before his sudden death. Even several years later, these words simply won't stay on the shelf. We offer this reprint to you in the belief that it will enrich your life. We also hope it will introduce you to *SACRED JOURNEY*, our bimonthly, interfaith journal. Welcome to our community of readers. An order coupon is on the back cover. Call or write to subscribe, and we'll send you the next issue with our compliments. It is our greatest prayer that you find sustenance for your own sacred journey through the following pages.



# FROM THE EDITOR

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REBECCA LAIRD

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“Guess who is coming to dinner?” my husband said as he came home waving a fax in his hand.

Henri Nouwen, a former professor and longtime friend, wanted to reconnect now that we lived in the East. He had said by phone, “I’m not interested in seeing buildings, but I am interested in seeing you.” Over the course of a decade our paths had crossed with this kind soul whose proficiency and profundity, as the author of dozens of books on the spiritual life, never seemed to alter his humility and commitment to live simply in the present moment. When we married he sent us an icon of Jesus. When each of our daughters was born, he sent an angel to hang on our Christmas tree.

So the night came. Henri arrived late and flustered. Unfamiliar roads and vague directions had left him circling and re-circling our street. As he collected his thoughts, I handed him a copy of our journal. He was familiar with it and with a number of our advisors and contributors. He said, “If I can be of help to you, let me know.” I would later heed those words and request an interview.

We settled in to eat and talk. It was mid-August, 1996 and the opening night of the Atlanta Olympics, so at Henri’s request, we gathered around our tiny television to watch the extravaganza. During a commercial, my four-year-old asked me

the question she had repeated for months when she saw a large, impressive vista, like a Manhattan skyscraper or a wide-open yard, “How big is God?” My answers had not satisfied, so emboldened by our guest’s presence, I said, “Ask Henri.” And she did.

He replied, “God is as big as your heart.” She persisted, “And how big is my heart?” He smiled and gestured with his large hands, “Your heart is big enough to contain the whole world.”

A couple of weeks later, I spent the morning in a cozy converted barn that served as a guest house and Henri’s home for part of the sabbatical year he was taking. Henri sat curled up in an overstuffed chair with his favorite Van Gogh print hung on the wall nearby. He took my first question and ran with it. He eloquently outlined his core convictions about prayer, community, and ministry.

When noon neared, Henri drove me to the train station, his focus more on me than on the road. Characteristically, Henri turned his full attention to the one he was with and made me feel valuable and important.

Later as I worked to turn his spoken words into text, I marveled at the clear and complete thoughts that had flowed from him that morning. While at my computer doing a final edit, the phone rang. Henri had died of a heart attack. His accent still resounded in my ears. How could this be?

But it was true. On September 21, 1996, Henri suffered a heart attack. The morning I spent with Henri had resulted in the final interview he would give. Soon biographers and editors collecting his writings would ask permission to reprint from “Parting Words.”

In recent years when gathered with others who knew Henri, I’ve noticed two common refrains. First, most who met him felt close to him. His gift of vulnerability engendered friendship and built community. Second, in his presence no one felt shame. Rather, he helped each of us to embrace our humanity as a holy means of giving and receiving love. With him it was possible to believe ourselves to be God’s beloved ones.



We invite you to savor Henri's "Parting Words." As you read, consider yourself included in God's worldwide heart. Henri would have had it no other way.



Left to right: Megan Christensen, Henri Nouwen, Rachel Christensen and Rebecca Laird, August 1996 in Madison, New Jersey. Photo by Michael Christensen.

# Q U E S T I O N S & A N S W E R S

## PARTING WORDS: A CONVERSATION WITH HENRI NOUWEN

*Henri J.M. Nouwen was a priest for nearly forty years. He wrote more than thirty books, taught at the University of Notre Dame and Harvard and Yale Divinity Schools, and served as pastor of L'Arche Daybreak Community in Toronto, an interfaith residential community for the mentally disabled. In August of 1996 while Henri was completing a sabbatical year in northern New Jersey, he invited my husband and me to join him for morning prayers—Henri celebrated Eucharist daily whenever he could. When we arrived at the converted barn that served as a wonderful place of retreat, we prayed with more than two dozen neighbors. Afterwards, Henri spoke profoundly of the core elements of the spiritual life and allowed us to see his humanity. We share his thoughts with you with joy—for Henri was full of life and fervor when we talked. He spoke passionately and gestured freely. He wanted you—our readers—to be encouraged in the practice of prayer. We didn't know it then, but this would be one of his final gifts to us. We are supremely grateful to share some of his parting words of wisdom with you.*

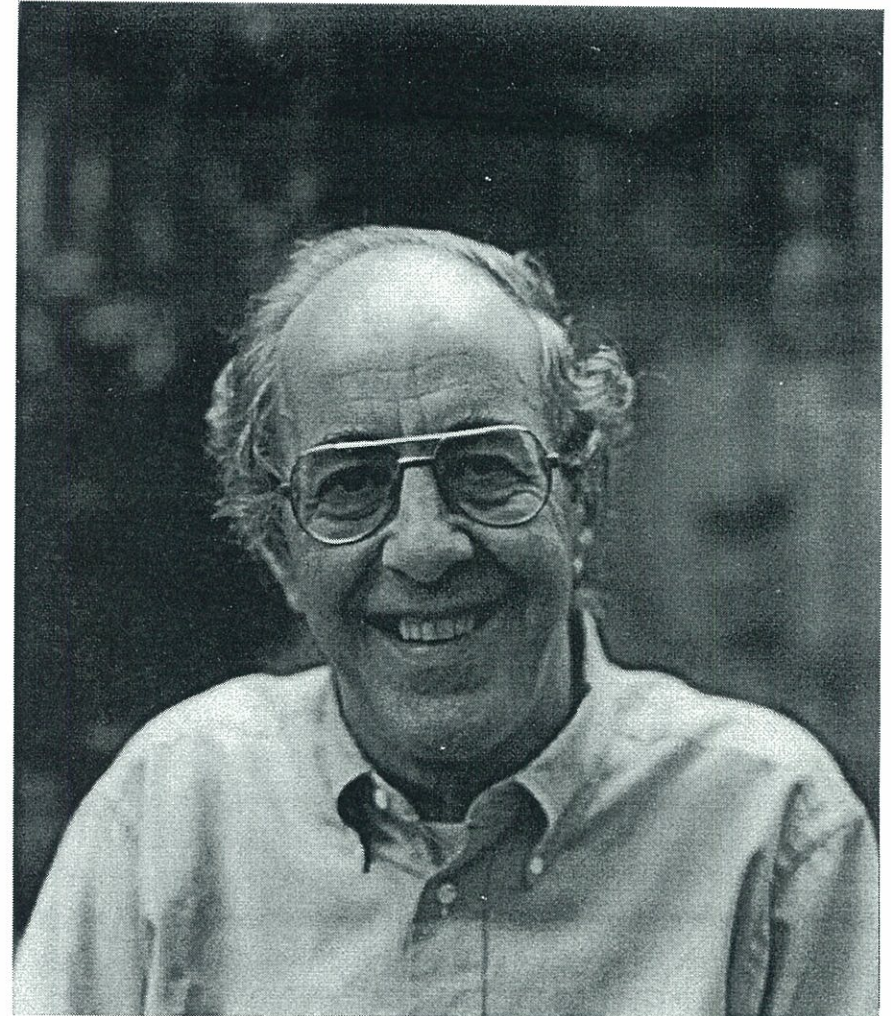


**In your book, *Here and Now*, you write, “Prayer is the discipline of listening to that voice of love.” What can you tell our readers about listening to God’s voice of love?**

Let me say a few things systematically about prayer. A biblical text that has been very, very important for me is the story in Luke 6:12-19 where Jesus spent the night in prayer on the top of the mountain. In the morning, he came down and created a community of apostles around him. Then in the afternoon, with his apostles, he ministered—he went out and healed and proclaimed the good news. I’ve been fascinated by that because it basically says, prayer at night, community in the morning, ministry in the afternoon. Now night, morning, and afternoon are symbols for the vision that Jesus starts. The three areas we have to consciously focus on are: one, communion with God—prayer—or being in solitude with God; secondly, creating community; and thirdly, ministry.

## **PRAYER**

- What is prayer? That is what you have to start with. I very much believe that the core moment of Jesus’ public life was the baptism in the Jordan, when Jesus heard the affirmation, “You are my beloved on whom my favor rests.” That is the core experience of Jesus. He is reminded in a deep, deep way of who he is. The temptations in the desert are temptations to move him away from that spiritual identity. He was tempted to believe he was someone else—*You are the one who can turn stone into bread. You are the one who can jump from the temple. You are the one who can make others bow to your power.* Jesus said, “No, no, no. I am the beloved from God.” I think his whole life is continually claiming that identity in the midst of everything. There are



*Photo by Neal McDonough*



times in which he is praised, times when he is despised or rejected, but he keeps saying, *Others will leave me alone, but my Father will not leave me alone. I am the beloved son of God. I am the hope found in that identity.*

Prayer, then, is listening to that voice—to the one who calls you the beloved. It is to constantly go back to the truth of who we are and claim it for ourselves. I'm not what I do. I'm not what people say about me. I'm not what I have. Although, there is nothing wrong with success, there is nothing wrong with popularity, there is nothing wrong with being powerful. But finally, my spiritual identity is not rooted in the world—the things the world gives me. My life is rooted in my spiritual identity. Whatever we do—we have to go back regularly to that place of core identity.

Prayer is listening. I've said often that it is listening with obedience—listening with attention. Jesus listens with obedience to the Father—he keeps listening to the Father's affirmation. Now it is interesting that Jesus listens in the night for 'night' means symbolically that when this listening happens it does not always satisfy the senses. 'Night' might mean I can't feel that I'm the beloved. I'm not experiencing that in my flesh, but I know that I'm the beloved. Prayer doesn't mean that you have loving, tender feelings as you listen to God's voice. Sometimes, yes, but sometimes no. Prayer is a discipline. You go back to the place of solitude with God and claim who you are. You let that voice speak in you, but that doesn't mean that a little, tiny voice whispers in your ear. The voice of prayer is spiritual.

That is why prayer requires discipline. Discipline means to create boundaries around our meeting with God. Our times and places can't be so filled up that there is no way of meeting. So you have to work very hard to say this is the time in which I am with God, whether I like it or whether it satisfies me. It is very interesting that people who follow a prayer discipline for ten minutes a day or so, when they

keep doing it regularly or so, eventually, they don't want to miss it—even though it doesn't satisfy right away on the level of the flesh. They may be distracted throughout the whole ten minutes, but they keep going back to it. They say that: something is happening to me on a deeper level than my thinking. I don't have wonderful thoughts when I pray nor do I have wonderful feelings when I pray, but God is greater than my heart and my mind.

The larger mystery of prayer is greater than what I can grasp with my emotional senses or intellectual gifts. I trust that God is greater than me when I dwell—let myself be held—in that place of prayer. Eventually, when I do this I do live the very spiritual life.

## COMMUNITY

Only out of that prayerful place can we hope for community. Only when we know on some level that we are God's beloved can we start relating to other people. It's not before or later as in chronological time—but spiritually, we need to know God in order to know other people. We need to love God in order to love each other. Communion with God precedes community with people in a spiritual sense. Community is characterized by two things: one is forgiveness, the other is celebration.

Forgiveness means that I continually am willing to forgive the other person for not being God—for not fulfilling all my needs. I, too, must ask forgiveness for not being able to fulfill other people's needs. Our heart—the center of our being—is a part of God. Thus, our heart longs for satisfaction, for total communion. But human beings, whether your husband, wife, father, mother, brother, sister, or child, are all so limited in giving that which we crave. But since we want so much and we get only part of what we want, we have to keep on forgiving people for not giving us all we want.



So I forgive you since you can only love me in a limited way. I forgive my mother that she is not everything I would like her to be. I forgive my father. This is of enormous importance right now because constantly people look to blame their parents, the church, and their friends for not giving them what they need. So many are so angry. They cannot forgive people for offering only limited expressions of an unlimited love. God's love is unlimited but people's love is not. If you enter into any relationship in communion, friendship, marriage, community, the relationships are always riddled with frustration and disappointments. So forgiveness becomes the word for love in the human context.

The interesting thing is that when you can forgive people for not being God then you can celebrate that they are a reflection of God. You can say, "Since you are not God, I love you because you have such beautiful gifts of his love." You don't have everything of God, but what you have to offer is worth celebrating. By celebrate I mean to lift up, affirm, confirm, to rejoice in another person's gifts. You can say you are a reflection of that unlimited love. That is why community becomes important. A husband or wife can do so much but then you need children, friends, parents. The community is in a way a mosaic in which every person is a little piece of a different color that when seen together show us the face of God. But each little piece on its own is a very limited reflection of that great love.

So celebration becomes important and can be very concrete expressions of love, like birthday celebrations that simply say, "I'm happy you are here." It doesn't mean lifting up people's talents like "You're a good piano player." I lift up your gifts of joy, peace, love, perseverance, kindness, gentleness. We lift up the gifts of the spirit—and these are the reflections of God.

You're not more lovable because you can play the piano better than I can. Those are talents. I'm talking

about celebrating spiritual gifts and that can happen in all sorts of ways, like meals. We celebrate, acknowledge, and express gratitude for each other's gifts around a table, which is the most communal of events, and a practice that is quickly dropping out of our culture. The meal is one of the sacred moments when we celebrate our being together.

If you look at that passage in Luke, Jesus' community is named one by one, and at the end it says, "Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor." So you see, as soon as you have community, you have a problem. Someone once said that, "Community is the place where the person you least want to live with always lives." I mean there is always that one person. A traitor means to "hand over." It doesn't so much mean betrayal. There is always someone in the community who hands you over to something. It's not just one person. He may be my Judas, you may be another's Judas. It's not that one person in the community is the problem, it is more that different people are handing other people over to suffering all the time without even wanting to. There is always someone who doesn't satisfy my need or someone who irritates me. In every community—whether family or congregation—there is always someone who for someone else is a hair shirt, but that is essential for community. It may not be that we want it, but it is always there. It is not the sentimental life that we want community to be where everybody loves each other. That's never going to be there. People have to be trained to realize that community doesn't mean emotional, affective, total harmony. That's not even good, for we are always on the way, on the move. Imagine if community were all we want it to be, we'd never want to go anywhere. We are a people on the road.

## MINISTRY

In the text in Luke we see that Jesus starts community right away. He does his whole ministry with others. He sent the disciples out to heal, drive out demons, and announce



his coming. From the very beginning Jesus sees his task as a ministry with others. He goes out to minister with his disciples.

The Bible says that Jesus went out and the crowds were there. So he was one with God, then together with a few people, and then the crowds came. One of the things I like to say is that if you are living in communion with God and in community with people you cannot do other than minister. Ministry is not something you do next. I have a terribly hard time with ministry as something that consists of techniques you have to apply. Ministry is the overflow of your love for God and for your fellow human beings. Someone said to me, “Ministry is when two people toast their glasses of wine and something splashes over.” Ministry is the extra. The question is not, “How do I bring all of these people to Jesus, or how do I make these people believe, or how do I now do the hard work of ministry?”

Ministry happens. I have done nothing here while on sabbatical to do ministry. I didn’t come here to get people who mostly don’t go to church to join me in prayer and the Eucharist. I just started to pray, and invited one person to join me, and these others—neighbors and friends—simply came. I’m not concerned with fixing the marriage of the one who is considering divorce or convincing the woman who doesn’t believe in Jesus. I’m here to say this is who I am, and to be there for others.

Jesus never did much ministry. Jesus spoke what his heart was full of. And anybody who touched him was healed. He didn’t sit people down and diagnose them, or say, “I can help you but I can’t help you.” People touched him and were healed. He was even wondering what was happening. You cannot other but minister if you are in communion with God and in communion with other people. People want to know where your energy comes from. They get the overflow. It’s not something that requires professional credentials. Ministry isn’t something you do for certain hours

during the day and then you come home and relax. Who knows? Ministry might happen while you are relaxing.

## COMPASSION AND GRATITUDE

Two words I think are helpful for ministry are compassion and gratitude. Ministry happens when you participate in the mystery of *being with*. The whole incarnation, God-with-us, Emmanuel, is first of all being with people. Caring means “to cry out with.” Compassion literally means “to be with those who suffer.” Ministry means that we lift the incarnation—we lift the God who says, “I will be with you.” We are to be precisely where people are vulnerable, not to fix it or to change it. That is an unintended fruit of it, but that is not why you are there. Compassion is the priesthood of Jesus—read the letter to the Hebrews. Since nothing human was alien to him, he was the compassionate high priest. Jesus is first of all God-with-us. For thirty years he was just living in a small village, living the same life that we live. It was only for three years that he was preaching. So even when you look at it in a spiritual way, Jesus’ ministry wasn’t just the three years he was preaching. The mystery is that he shared our lives. God is a God-with-us. Ministry is being with the sick, the dying, being with people wherever they are, whatever their problems. We dare to be with them in their weakness and trust that if we are entering into people’s vulnerable places, we will experience immense joy. That is the mystery of ministry.

You can’t solve the world’s problems, but you can be with people. I’ve been with two people who were dying in the last months. It wasn’t a burden—it was a great joy to have the privilege to be there when they made their passage.

If I follow God, I pray, I say certain things, and I tell others in need that I care. But I don’t sit down beforehand and plan how to get this person from here to there. If I am



not in communion with God or in community with other people, then I become a technician who got involved, but as a technician I cannot lay down my life for my friends. My life is my joy, my peace, and my sorrow. Ministry is witness. It's nothing else but saying, "I've seen something, I've experienced something, and I'm not afraid to share it with you if you ask me to." Ministry doesn't have that quality of compulsiveness that it has to happen right away or if I don't say something at the right time that person will become lost.

Secondly, gratitude is essential to ministry. Gratitude basically means to receive the gifts of others—to say thank you for being you. It is a central part of ministry to receive the gifts of others. Only when you yourself have experienced your own giftedness can you be free. We have a desire to get things to other people so that we can be on the giving side. We forget that the greater joy for other people is for them to realize that they have something to give to us. I can care for handicapped people my whole life, and they need thousands of things, but the greater joy for other people is to be able to do some things themselves. When I can be excited about them, take them on a lecture tour with me and hear others say to them, "Wow, you were great!" These are gifts. When I take Bill or one of the others from L'Arche with me, it's not to show other people how much I care for them, rather I do it so they can offer something. I'm the mediator of that. I need to be there with them. They cannot give their gifts if I'm not there to make it visible.

For instance, I am leaving New Jersey soon. When I began praying here, the group said, "You're the one who knows all about prayer." Yes, I have a certain sophistication around these things, but if I stayed here longer, they would see that I am not always grateful and things don't always work for me. The point is that, finally, I have to empower

people, and say, "You have as much to give as I do." Ministry always means to empower others to give their gifts to each other. Ministry is about multiplication. You give away what you have—that little piece of bread in your hand—and it multiplies. You give away the little ministry that you have and everyone becomes a minister to others. Then there is more ministry being done than you have ever seen.

This is what Jesus meant when he said, *It is good for you that I die. If I go then you can do your job.* Jesus' task was to create a community that was empowered. Jesus said, *I will go and I will send my spirit, and my spirit will empower you. All the things the Father told me, I'm telling you. All the things I am doing, you will do, and even greater things.* Jesus never said that he could do something that we couldn't do. He never said that he was something we are not. He said, *I am the son of God, and you are children of God. I am called from death to life and you can do the same. I know everything about the love of God and I hold back nothing from you.* That's the whole concept of the church; we are the body of Christ—we are the living Christ. The sacramental vision of Christ means that Christ is where we are. Just as Christ went away in order to empower others, every minister has to go away sometimes to empower others. *It's good for you that I die, that If I go then you can do your job.* Jesus' task was to create a community that was empowered. Jesus said, *I will go and I will send my spirit, and my spirit will empower you. All the things the Father told me, I'm telling you. All the things I am doing, you will do, and even greater things.*

That's the whole concept of the church; we are the body of Christ—we are the living Christ. The sacramental vision of Christ means that Christ is where we are. Just as Christ went away in order to empower others, every minister has to go away sometimes to empower others. It's good for



you that I die, that I go away so that you can claim the gifts of God. But for awhile I have to be with you so that you can discover your gifts, but then you have to let me go so that they can fully bloom.

If we go back to that text in Luke, we see that prayer, community, and ministry must all be there as parts of the spiritual life. All three are disciplines. They are a part of discipleship. Yes, first there is a call—to pray, to belong, to care, but a disciple is one who always listens to God, who always is in community among people wherever he or she goes, and who ministers through a compassionate and caring attitude.

That's my vision of what your magazine is all about.

**Do you have a parable or illustration of the forgiveness that is essential to community? In other words, what does forgiveness in community look like?**

First of all forgiveness has two qualities: one is to allow yourself to be forgiven, and the other is to forgive others. The first quality is harder than the second. To allow yourself to be forgiven puts you in a dependency situation. If someone says to me, "I want to forgive you for something," I may say back, "But I didn't do anything. I don't need forgiveness. Get out of my life." It's very important that we acknowledge that we are not fulfilling other people's needs and that we need to be forgiven. There is great resistance to that. We come from a culture that is terribly damaged in this area. We find it hard to forgive or ask to be forgiven. If the Pope would just say a few more times in his sermons that the church has been so oppressive over the centuries, it would be such a relief. But we keep trying to defend ourselves. It makes no sense to defend the Crusades, or to defend Galileo, or to defend the pogroms. Nobody has any need for that. It's not just individuals who need to forgive and be forgiven.

We all need to be forgiven. We ask each other to put ourselves in that vulnerable position—and that's when community can be created.

I wrote a whole book about this called *The Inner Voice of Love*, published by Doubleday. Once I got very attached to a person who loved me and I loved that person very deeply. And that person had enormous capability to open up a place in me that had been closed. I became very dependent on that person. In the presence of that person I felt very much alive. At a certain point that person started to realize that my whole life emotionally was centered around that person. Finally, that person could no longer hold on to me. And that person said, "I no longer want to be with you. Whenever I'm with you there is so much pressure. You want to be right with me." So instead of supporting me, I slipped into an incredible depression. I thought, here is a person who really understands and loves me, who brings me in touch with the most important part of myself, and then goes off and drops me like a stone. I just broke down, totally broke down. I was totally paralyzed—I couldn't do ministry, so I left the community. I went to this therapeutic center, and stayed there for four months just screaming. I had to gradually forgive that person for not holding on to me—for not being God. I couldn't do it for a long time, I was so angry, so rejected, so repressed. I was in a literal depression. Why should I keep on living when the only person who ever really loved me well thinks I am intolerable to live with? It was an enormous suffering and an extreme opportunity to grow into the core of saying only God can give me what I wanted from this person. I had to forgive this person. It wasn't an intellectual act. I could say it a thousand times but my emotions weren't there. It took me months of immense anguish, suffering, and pain. And the psychiatrist I saw said, "It is very simple, you got infatuated with somebody, that person dropped you. You



are depressed, it'll take six months of grieving, be sure you'll never see this person again, and it'll all be fine. You are normal. On the scale in our psychiatric handbook, your neurosis is a number 2." He treated me like a horse doctor. He said it would take six months, that I would have to get out of my community, that I never should have been a celibate because I obviously get very attached to people, so it isn't positive. I just didn't buy it. I said to the psychiatrist, "I'm not going to keep seeing you. You have it all figured out, so I'm not going to see you anymore."

I knew that what I experienced was a God-given relationship, that the love was real, that I experienced something that was extremely important, and that I didn't have to leave my community, that I might not have to leave the person, that I would work it through. In the beginning I did not say all that clearly. Finally, when it was all over, I returned home and reestablished contact with that person who by that time realized that I was no longer projecting it all. Now we are very, very good friends.

I don't deny the infatuation part of this crisis; I don't want to make it sound only spiritual, yet it was God's way of calling me to claim my belovedness. To listen to that voice and hear God say *I love you with an unconditional love, with or without that person in your life. You would have come to that person, instead you came to me.*

### **Could you have forgiven that person if you were not rooted in community?**

No, no, no. It was very important that the community supported me, sent me to that therapeutic center, and came to visit me. When that person rejected me I felt rejectable. I generalized it to say, nobody is there. The opposite was true; they told me just because this person can no longer be

with you doesn't mean we don't love you. We love you a lot. You're very important to us. I didn't believe it at first. I felt their love was very superficial. You don't love me like that person did. I don't think I would have lived it so well without them. And the community wanted me back. And they didn't want to send that other person away.

### **How does community life impact your life today?**

More and more I see an interest in spiritual life and prayer for it is so beautiful. There is a lot said about caring for people. But the process of purification is found in community. Community is full of support but it is also hell. You see it in your own kids. Parents are the most important and the most irritating part of their kids' lives.

I sought a community to belong to for many years. I was in university life until 1986. Why did I go to L'Arche? I wanted to pray more. I wanted to live in community. I wanted to care for the poor, and all three things didn't seem to happen at Harvard. There was little time or place to pray. Community happened only between individuals, and the poor were not to be seen. To be the church is again to pray, to be in contemplation and meditation, to live in community, to care for the poor, and to heal the sick. I'd been looking for a community for a long time; then I found L'Arche and realized I was called there. The community is very bright and caring and they want me to keep writing and be of service both to my community and to all the L'Arche communities. L'Arche is a Christian community with a very open attitude toward people of other religions. We have Jews and Muslims in the community. We are not trying to find some common denominator. We literally try to help other people live their faith as deeply as they can.



*For my final question of the morning, I asked Henri what prayers he returned to often. He said that he frequently recited the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi and a prayer of Thomas Merton's found in Merton's book, Thoughts in Solitude. After learning of Henri's death, I reread the Merton prayer that is printed below. Knowing it was often on Henri's lips and in his heart made me believe he travelled the final days of his journey in the best possible company.*

“My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.”

For more information on Henri's books and upcoming events that continue his work and ministry, contact the following organizations:

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