

Foreword

When I arrived at Yale Divinity School in the fall of 1973, Henri Nouwen was not yet Henri Nouwen—or at least not yet the bestselling author of dozens of books, whose reflections on prayer, ministry, suffering, and compassion would become lifelines for hundreds of thousands of readers worldwide.

In 1973 he was still a lecturer in pastoral theology whose new book, *The Wounded Healer*, had come out the year before. He lived in Porter Hall, the men's dormitory, where he famously left his door unlocked for anyone in need of counsel or company. Since memory fails, I cannot tell you whether he continued to do so after someone stole all of his stereo equipment, but the invitation remained open: Henri was there for anyone who needed him, day or night.

Students who watched television in the student lounge would sometimes look up to see him coming through the door with a stack of books pinned under his chin. This meant that Henri had published a new title, and that his box of complimentary author's copies had

just arrived. Staggering from couch to chair, he would pull one off the top of the stack for each of us, then disappear back into his apartment with the leftovers. In this way I acquired *Out of Solitude* (1974) and *Reaching Out* (1975)—not because I was special to Henri but simply, I think, because he had no one else to give them to.

I became his student, which gave me opportunity to learn what a complicated person he was—a celibate who taught courses in human sexuality, a solitary who wrote volumes about intimacy, a solemn man who loved circus clowns. He spent six months at the Abbey of the Genesee in upstate New York during my middle year, returning with a new book manuscript in hand (*The Genesee Diary*).

When I read it, I was struck once again by the distance between Henri-in-person and Henri-on-the-page. In person, he sometimes shook with the effort of containing his rage at those who had disappointed him. On the page, he pulled his heart open with both of his hands so that anyone who wanted could walk in. Henri's very great gift, both in person and on the page, was to struggle publicly with the essential business of becoming human before God.

Never was this truer than when he wrote of his mother's death. Maria Nouwen died precipitously in 1978, two years after my graduation from Yale. By then my only contact with her son was through his books, so that I did not learn how this seminal event had affected him until I read *In Memoriam* in 1980, followed by *A*

Letter of Consolation in 1982. While neither volume is bigger than a slice of bread, both are full of Nouwen's characteristic head-on honesty and Catholic faith.

In Memoriam is the shorter of the two. Nouwen wrote it, he said, because so much happened in the last, quick days of his mother's life that he feared it would escape him unless he found words to frame his experience. The words he found are deep and defenseless, showing the reader how intimately his vocation as a son nested inside his vocation as a priest. Nouwen read psalms to his mother, gave her last rites, celebrated the Eucharist at her funeral, and prayed over her grave. His priesthood offered him a way to stay present to his whole family during a time of great grief. It offered him a "safe house" in which to dwell, until he could discover the "strange joy" of becoming "a man alone in a new way."

A Letter of Consolation is a very different book. The subject is still his mother's death, but the audience this time is his father—a retired lawyer both known and feared, Nouwen says, for his irony and sarcasm, for his sharp wit and critical analysis. Feeling "strong enough to raise the question of our most basic human infirmity," Nouwen decides to write his father a long letter during the last days of Lent in 1979. While the putative purpose of the letter is to comfort his father, the deeper reason is to give in to his own grief. By putting his thoughts on paper, Nouwen hopes to unite his pain with that of his father—and it works. As he sits

writing in his little room at the Abbey of the Genesee, he notices the first tears he has shed for his mother coming from his eyes.

A Letter of Consolation is rawer (and therefore truer to life) than *In Memoriam*. Early on, Nouwen speaks convincingly of how important it is to befriend death. If we could really do it, he says, then we would be free people. Nearer the end of the book, he says just as convincingly that “If anyone should protest against death it is the religious person, the person who has increasingly come to know God as the God of the living.”

Yet this tension is the strength of the book, not its weakness. Like the composer of a symphony that moves from major to minor chords and back again, Nouwen plays all the keys at his disposal. When a finger slips, he does not stop. He just keeps pounding out the chords until he reaches the mystical resolution that seems to surprise even him, and may surprise you too. That this moment comes on a brilliant Easter after a stormy Good Friday will seem very fitting to anyone familiar with Nouwen’s work. Once again, his life in Christ turns out to be the key that opens his life to everything and everyone else.

While these books go together, they do not equal a handbook on grief. Instead, they testify to the truth that every death lays bare what really matters, and what really matters will not be the same for any two readers. “In many different ways,” Nouwen says, his mother told

him and still tells him “that what is most universal is also most personal.”

Since I first read both of these books while my own parents were still alive, I read them as messages in bottles, sent from an island I knew I would one day visit but that I hoped to stay away from as long as possible. Thirty years later I am sitting on the beach with both messages in my lap. The good news is that they are true, which means that they are also deeply consoling—even for those whose love is not this pure, whose faith is not this real—for Nouwen is right that we find comfort where our wounds hurt most, and he has never been afraid to meet us there.

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