

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

Spiritual Direction

by

Henri J. M. Nouwen

In this compilation of Henri J. M. Nouwen's mostly unpublished writings on spiritual formation through spiritual direction, the author guides us through the life of faith and its three key components: the heart, the book, and the church.

INTRODUCTION

1. Nouwen writes, "Spiritual direction provides an 'address' on the house of your life so that you can be 'addressed' by God in prayer" (p. xv). What does he mean by this statement? What does it say to you about creating space for God and what that might entail in your life?
2. "Almost anything that regularly asks us to slow down and order our time, desires, and thoughts to counteract selfishness, impulsiveness, or hurried fogginess of mind can be a spiritual discipline" (pp. xv–xvi). According to

this definition, what in your life works as spiritual discipline? What doesn't work as well?

3. What parts of yourself do you hide from God and others? What keeps you from bringing your whole self into God's presence in prayer?
4. Why is community such a key aspect of spiritual formation? How can the church function as your spiritual director?

PART ONE

LOOK WITHIN TO THE HEART

CHAPTER 1: WHO WILL ANSWER MY QUESTIONS?

1. What comes to mind when you think of a spiritual director? What appeals to you about approaching a spiritual director with your questions? What concerns you?
2. Throughout this chapter, Nouwen refers to "living the question." What does he mean by this phrase? What question or questions are you living right now?
3. Why is it so important to understand spiritual guidance as a quest or journey? What does the idea of a journey imply?

CHAPTER 2: WHERE DO I BEGIN?

1. How does the world around you make you deaf to God's voice? What has helped you move from "absurd living" to "obedient listening" (pp. 17–18)?
2. Do you view the spiritual life as something you are currently experiencing or as something that will begin one day when things are right (p. 20)? What is the difference between the two perspectives?

CHAPTER 3: WHO AM I?

1. We often answer the question "Who am I?" with what we do, what people say about us, or what we have (p. 29). Which of these do you most often allow to define you? What is the result?
2. How does picturing God declaring, "You are my Beloved son or daughter, on you my favor rests," change your perspective? What does it mean for you to "become the Beloved" (p. 34)?

CHAPTER 4: WHERE HAVE I BEEN, AND WHERE AM I GOING?

1. Has anyone in your life played the role of an Adam (Nouwen's friend)—spoken from his or her vulnerabil-

- ity and brokenness with a profound message about God? If so, what did you learn from him or her?
2. How does attempting to look at your story from God's perspective change the way you view it?

PART II

LOOK TO GOD IN THE BOOK

CHAPTER 5: WHAT IS PRAYER?

1. What is the difference between prayer and prayerfulness (p. 56)? How does each fit into your life? What time and place work best for you in your prayer practice? What time and place might you set aside for prayer in the future?
2. Nouwen lists three aspects of prayer: crying out to God, simple conversation, and contemplative listening in the presence of God (p. 64). Which aspect of prayer are you most comfortable with? How will you move forward to practice other aspects?
3. What does Nouwen mean by describing prayer as “useless time” (p. 66)? Does this description change the way you feel about prayer? Why or why not?

CHAPTER 6:
WHO IS GOD FOR ME?

1. Why is “Who is God?” the most important question?
2. Why is it so dangerous to suggest, even to yourself, where God is working or where God isn’t (p. 78)?
When have you been tempted to do so?

CHAPTER 7:
HOW DO I HEAR THE WORD?

1. How does listening to the Word differ from how we often listen in life, which Nouwen describes as a way of “checking the other person out” (p. 88)? What have you learned from listening to the life of Jesus?
2. “Silence is the royal road to spiritual formation,” (p. 97).
What does it mean for our spoken words to be born out of silence? Why is this so important?
3. How has either engaging in spiritual writing or reading someone else’s personal writing revealed God to you?

PART III

LOOK TO OTHERS IN COMMUNITY

CHAPTER 8: WHERE DO I BELONG?

1. Nouwen notices in Luke 6:12–19 that Jesus follows a sequence of solitude, community, and then ministry (pp. 110–11). Is this sequence or rhythm present in your life? If not, how do you flow from time with God to time with others to time in ministry?
2. Why is forgiveness “the cement of community life” (p. 120)? What is it that we have to continually forgive one another for?
3. To “celebrate” is to “lift up, affirm, confirm, and rejoice in another person’s gifts and graces as reflections of God’s unlimited gift of love and grace” (pp. 123–24). What is it about forgiveness that leads to this celebration? When is the last time you truly celebrated another or were yourself celebrated within your community?

CHAPTER 9: HOW CAN I BE OF SERVICE?

1. “Ministry happens. You and I *do* very little. . . . I’m here to say this is who I am, and this is who God is for me, and to be there for others” (pp. 130–31). Do you *try* to do ministry, or do you view ministry as “the overflow

of your love for God and others” (p. 131)? What is the difference between the two?

2. Nouwen points out that Jesus did not preach or heal alone (p. 132). What has been your experience of performing ministry in community? How has it differed from ministry done on your own?
3. “Ministry happens when we move from resentment to gratitude” (p. 134). Has anyone ever ministered to you by helping you feel gratitude even in the midst of pain? Why is gratitude such a central component of the spiritual life?