

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

Spiritual Formation

by

Henri Nouwen

Spiritual Formation, compiled and developed after Henri Nouwen's death, is an edited volume of Nouwen's writings about "the way of the heart," that inner place where we are shaped by God. Nouwen describes seven major movements of the Spirit in our hearts and lives: from opacity to transparency, illusion to prayer, sorrow to joy, resentment to gratitude, fear to love, exclusion to inclusion, and denying to befriending death.

SPIRITUAL FORMATION: THE WAY OF THE HEART

1. Do you tend to view the spiritual life in terms of performance and progress—i.e., what level you are on and how you can get to the next one? If not, how do you view it? What is the difference between viewing the spiritual life in stages or steps and viewing it in movements (p. xvi)?

2. To describe the process of spiritual formation, Nouwen uses the analogy of a journey, one that must be guided in a careful and planned way by practices such as reflection, *lectio divina*, silence, community, and service. Which of these practices has most closely guided you in your spiritual journey? Which practices would you like to begin or engage in more regularly?
3. Why are prayer and community always found together (p. xxvii)?
4. Nouwen writes, “The way of the heart is from solitude with God to community with God’s people to ministry to and for all” (p. xxviii). How has your faith traveled this path?

CHAPTER 1: FROM OPAQUENESS TO TRANSPARENCY

1. Nouwen explains that spiritual formation leads to an “articulate not-knowing” of God (p. 4). Describe what you think he means by that. How do you react to the idea that we will never, on this earth, be able to comprehend God?
2. What is the difference between *chronos* and *kairos* (p. 9)? How can changing our perspective to *kairos* help us feel less burdened by our busy schedules?
3. Have you experienced *theoria physike*, a vision of the true nature of things (p. 12)? Explain.

4. Has anyone ever seen something more in you than you saw yourself? How did that affect or change you? How does Nouwen explain this in terms of “unmasking the illusions” around us (p. 13)?

CHAPTER 2: FROM ILLUSION TO PRAYER

1. “The various disciplines of the spiritual life are meant for freedom and are reliable means for the creation of helpful boundaries in our lives within which God’s voice can be heard, God’s presence felt, and God’s guidance experienced” (p. 18). What does Nouwen mean by “boundaries”? How can boundaries help us experience God?
2. One of Nouwen’s favorite themes is that we cannot think about prayer in terms of its usefulness, what it will do for us, but instead we must prepare to “waste” time in prayer (p. 19). What does this mean, and how might such an idea change how you pray?
3. Nouwen writes about the dangers of not having “a solitary place” (p. 21) in our lives in order to balance action with contemplation, and fellowship with solitude, as Jesus did. What time and place is set aside in your life for prayer?
4. What are some of the tools Nouwen recommends to help us move past distractions and engage in daily prayer? How might you use these tools?

CHAPTER 3: FROM SORROW TO JOY

1. How did you feel after reading the Tale of Kisa Gotami and the Mustard Seed (pp. 37–38)? When have you been comforted by the realization that your sorrow was not the only sorrow in the world? That you did not have to suffer alone?
2. How do you “live your losses” (p. 41)? Are there any losses you have not yet faced?
3. What losses have you experienced, and how have you mourned them?
4. On the road to Emmaus, Jesus gave the disciples an awareness of God’s presence in a time of disorientation and loss, but it wasn’t until later that they could see it (pp. 48–49). When you look back at the losses in your life, how has new direction or new hope come out of them?

CHAPTER 4: FROM RESENTMENT TO GRATITUDE

1. “Resentment is the curse of the faithful, the virtuous, the obedient, and the hardworking” (p. 60). Have you observed this statement to be true? Why can those in ministry be particularly susceptible to resentment?
2. Nouwen defines gratitude as “the attitude that enables us to let go of anger, receive the hidden gifts of those

we want to serve, and make these gifts visible to the community as a source of celebration” (p. 63). Why is it important to both give gifts *and* receive the gifts of others? What can make receiving difficult?

3. To Nouwen, resentment comes when we realize that our lives are not unfolding the way we planned (p. 65), and only with gratitude can we recognize God’s hand at work in exactly these unexpected circumstances (p. 67). If you’ve experienced resentment, does Nouwen’s explanation help you understand why and how to move forward? How can we cultivate gratitude for all things?

CHAPTER 5: FROM FEAR TO LOVE

1. Can you name some of your fears? How has fear engendered fear in your life (p. 75)?
2. Nouwen observed that the poor and oppressed people he visited in Latin America were not living in fear. He writes, “Where I saw hunger, suffering, and agony, I also found joy, gratitude, and peace. Soon I realized that the other side of oppression, the other side of poverty in the Southern Hemisphere, is the fear, anguish, and captivity of those who live in the North” (p. 76). Do you agree? How might the prosperity of North America have led to a culture of fear? In what ways are you living in fear?

3. Nouwen points out that many Christians apply Jesus's teaching to their personal and family lives but not to social, economic, or political realities (p. 82). Do you agree? What changes might occur in our country and in our world if more Christians started living in the "house of love" and applying their faith to other spheres of influence?

CHAPTER 6: FROM EXCLUSION TO INCLUSION

1. "Real hospitality is not exclusive but inclusive, requires a radical openness, and creates space for a wide range of human experience. Real ministers are powerless servants who offer the gifts of availability and hospitality" (p. 91). What are some characteristics of each of these gifts? When have you been called on to offer the gift of availability? To whom do you struggle to offer availability and hospitality?
2. What do we learn from emphasizing what we have in common with others, rather than our differences? How does putting aside judgment lead to inclusivity? How is judgment a heavy burden? Where do you most struggle with judging others?
3. Many of us struggle with wanting to make our faith a private matter between us and God, but Nouwen describes how recognizing God's presence in our own hearts then leads us outward, to recognizing Christ in

the hearts of others. How can you, as Nouwen suggests, “draw your circle wide” (p. 99)?

CHAPTER 7: FROM DENYING TO BEFRIENDING DEATH

1. Why is befriending death so frightening to us?
2. Nouwen’s experience of confronting death on his hospital gurney left him longing to forgive and be forgiven (pp. 107–109). Are there any people you might need to forgive or be forgiven by, so that you can set down the burden of judgment?
3. What does it mean to “reclaim your belovedness” (p. 109)? How can doing so help you befriend death?
4. Nouwen describes how those in his community at L’Arche Daybreak remembered those who were no longer with them with pictures, prayers, and memories (p. 115). How do you remember those from your family or community who have passed on? Why is it important to do so?