

A 4-MAT Review System: Reaching Out

Three Movements to the Spiritual Life

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## Abstract

Henri Nouwen's book, *Reaching Out, the Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, (Nouwen, 1975), was written to introduce the reader to a spiritual journey that integrates three "movements" that can take one from the busyness and confusion of a worldly existence, to the interior life of prayer and daily communion with God. Born out of Nouwen's personal spiritual journey and struggle, he identifies those human conditions that are common to all humanity. Chief among them is that of loneliness. For Nouwen, loneliness is at the core of what causes many of the emotional and spiritual crises which are so much a part of our modern world. While loneliness is very much a part of the human experience, Nouwen suggests that God can and does provide a way to convert the negative of loneliness into the benefits of solitude. This is not to say that he advocates a monastic life free of the distractions and suffering of the world – as if to avoid pain at all costs. On the contrary, his view of solitude is far from some kind of escapism. He likens solitude as a beautiful garden residing in the desert of the soul – the desert of loneliness. In doing so, we find ourselves in the inner room of our heart where God's Holy Spirit resides and welcomes us. It is a place, where man, as Jurgen Moltmann maintains, returns to be in harmony with God and His creation. Outside of this sacred harmony, man is not human as he is rebellious and in his rebellion exploits and destroys the rest of creation. Returning to a harmonic existence with God returns him to the Eden of his soul making him fully human as God intended him to be. (Moltmann, 1985)

Mankind then, as part of God's creative process graces us with the ability to be transformed and go from the restlessness of our hearts to inner peace through prayerful solitude while living in a restless and violent world. Correctly, Nouwen intentionally uses the word courage because as finite and imperfect beings, we prefer to deal with the world and all its problems using our own

devices in our search for permanent satisfaction and peace. These devices oftentimes cause us to find escape from our loneliness in unhealthy and destructive ways. As an example, codependency, or what some have called relationship addiction, places unreasonable expectations on others to satisfy our insatiable desire to be loved or “stroked” in ways we feel are needed.

Once we find the courage to go into the desert of our loneliness to experience solitude, it is then possible to create a space for others to enter. The space that is created makes room to go beyond ourselves by extending hospitality even to our enemies.

Hospitality is the natural extension of solitude as it expresses the God-given love that defies the closeness of the busy and inhospitable world in which we live. However, Nouwen makes it clear that openness and hospitality should not be misunderstood as not possessing healthy boundaries.

There is a dichotomy that can be drawn from the practice of solitude. Quoting the Trappist Monk and spiritualist Thomas Merton, Nouwen underlines the importance of solitude as being born out of love for others which respects the solitude of others. (Nouwen, 1975, p. 42) With this understanding, the suffocating desire to be constantly in search of answers to life’s questions is not as important as the questions themselves. In this God-given spiritual state, healthy relationships are more natural and even in the physical absence of loved ones, contentment and joy are possible. We can also allow others to be themselves as we extend the same freedom to them as we do ourselves.

Undergirding all of this is the need for inner prayer. Nouwen delves into the ancient practice of Hesychasm which is more deeply explored in his small book titled, *The Way of the Heart: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*. (Nouwen, 1981) The inner prayer, or Prayer of the Heart, calls one to go, as instructed in Matthew 6: 5-6, into the heart to pray. It is the

bringing down of the intellect, *nous*, to the heart in an unceasing prayer which evokes the name of Jesus *Κύριε Ιησού Χριστέ, Υιέ του Θεού, ελέησόν με τον αματωλόν* (*Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me a sinner*). It is the prayer of solitude and of perfect hospitality that brings to mind our insufficiency in the light of God's uncreated power and wisdom. It is the inner prayer (*noetic prayer*), of the heart that heals the sickened soul and creates community in this anthropocentric epoch that we now live in. The inner prayer found in one's spiritual solitude pulls us out of our loneliness to move with the fullness of our being to live out our lives as given to us in Luke 4: 18-19. It is in these words where we find true liberation in our theology.

### Concrete Response

The title of this book, *Reaching Out: the Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, was aptly chosen as it describes attributes which I have always believed essential for the spiritual life. In essence, Nouwen laid out for the pilgrim what the church fathers called <sup>1</sup>*ἄσκησις*. I was very blessed to have lived briefly with the monks of Mount Athos, which is located on a peninsula in the northern Greek state of Macedonia. While there, I was introduced to Hesychasm and the doctrine of *Θέωσις* <sup>2</sup>. By the time I was introduced to Nouwen, I was already well-exposed to the very same doctrine that helped shape his spirituality. What this book confirmed for me is that the spiritual discipline of solitude is indeed like finding a beautiful oasis in a dry and barren

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<sup>1</sup> The term askisis (ἄσκησις) is used as an umbrella term to describe spiritual exercises. These exercises include, but are not limited to, fasting, silence, physical labor, prayer, breathing, posture etc.

<sup>2</sup> Theosis is the third of three stages of what the Christian West would term *sanctification*. The first stage in this spiritual process is purification (*catharsis*), the second is illumination (*theoria*), and lastly divinization (*theosis*) or union with God.

desert of loneliness – a desert that I had languished in during the most spiritually challenging years of my life. Once found and lived, it caused me to *move* physically and spiritually from my place in the desert to meet my fellow sojourners. I italicized the word “move” because I believe that I was moved by God’s saving Spirit from the abyss of despair and alcoholism to a life of freedom and hope.

Among the monastics of Mount Athos<sup>3</sup> and of the vast North African desert, hospitality is of paramount importance. Isolation or shunning of the world is unheard of and considered sinfully prideful. It is for this reason one can find monks among the local population teaching, healing, and comforting the suffering and drifting souls of the world around them. This is, in my opinion what it means to live *sacramentally*.

#### Reflection

Without knowing something about Henri Nouwen and the life experiences that shaped his spirituality, the novice reader of his works may come away with the impression that his spiritual views are tinged with Eastern mysticism. Having researched his life and ministry (Henri Nouwen Society, 2010), I was well acquainted with his spirituality and know that it is firmly of Christ and His gospel. As I was reading the initial pages of his book I couldn’t help but aware of how one could misunderstand his words. In his Christ-like sense of hospitality he of course addressed Christians, but he also reached out to all of God’s children. I came to particularly understand this quality of his in his Latin American journal and in reading about his work with the L’Arche community. For me, Henri Nouwen’s appeal is universal as his spirituality carries with it a universal message of love. The other concern that I have is that the depth of his

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<sup>3</sup> To learn more on the monastic communities of Mount Athos, please visit <http://www.inathos.gr/>

spirituality may not be easily understandable without having some background on patristic thought. As an example, one of the illustrations he gives is that of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian classic *The Way of the Pilgrim*. The idea of a wandering anonymous pilgrim searching for inner illumination through the Jesus Prayer may be a foreign concept for most readers. But then again, his use of this Russian classic to illustrate his thoughts may prompt others, as it prompted me, to go deeper into their study. The truth is that there is a great hunger for the kind of deep Christian spirituality Nouwen presents in his writings. There is also a great shortage of “Spiritual Directors” to help modern-day pilgrims travel through our own deserts of loneliness to find oasis’ of solitude that are so greatly needed. Perhaps finding this oasis in a secular humanist world is Henri Nouwen’s greatest legacy left to us.

#### Action

Continuing with my last point, I firmly believe that Christian counselors have not fully accepted that the power for the healing of the soul is within all of us. Of course I can include myself in this. It is my prayer that as a pastor and counselor I may have the heart and true belief that Jesus words given to us in John 14:16 provides us the hope for the healing of our sick souls. We are not alone as orphans; we have been given an advocate who teaches us all things about ourselves and the world we live in. There is power in this, and where there is power there is neither fear nor any need to escape from this world. Oftentimes even the most faithful of us forget this promise of inner power and healing which had been gifted to us. It is for this reason and sprinkled with a good amount of pride that we find ourselves drifting and lost. It is for this reason that we look to others to bring us out of our misery and hopelessness and not to God. By embracing my own solitude, perhaps I can find the space in my heart – in my soul to welcome others in with a hospitality that is outside of my weak and powerless self. Perhaps then I can

give God all honor and glory by extending His love, a great and saving love that is within me to even my enemies.

## References

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