

# Let's Look Together

*Henri Nouwen as Spiritual Mentor*

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## *Introduction*

The norm for many of us seems to be that from the moment we wake up, we face a race of activities to be run through: a quick cup of coffee or tea, a shower, maybe getting others ready for the day, eating a light breakfast, nabbing a quick glimpse at the internet to check the news and any messages received overnight, maybe saying a quick morning prayer, and then, like a sprinter, taking off.

Nights are often like a bookend to this experience. After dinner, activities with children or friends, preparations for the next day, maybe some television or reading if time permits, possibly another check or two of the internet, and then before you know it, you' dozing off. Not one more thing is possible—except maybe worrying about what you're going to face tomorrow or unhappily mentally reliving something that happened today.

Life rushes along and carries us with it. It is like we are transported through the day by myriad little things we must do until of course we can no longer do them. We get sick, something happens to change our routine like the dawning of Covid-19, or we die.

Whenever we tell ourselves we need to break through our denial that life is fleeting and fragile so we can change this pattern, we put it off or say it is impractical given all that is on our plate. This is, of course, based on the erroneous belief that we still have time. We will al-

ways have time. Henri Nouwen knew such experiences and feelings too. He had been planning a trip to the Hermitage Museum in Russia when he had a heart attack. I feel certain that this would have been a warning sign and experience he would have reflected and written on, but he didn't get the chance. Instead, he had another attack and abruptly died at sixty-four.

Yet Nouwen, despite being like the rest of us in failing to keep a sense of impermanence before his eyes, did take out time to truly live the days he had. He wasn't perfect at it. No one is. But his discipline of reflecting on what is important, and his desire to go deeper in life, made the days as meaningful as possible for him and for us who have the good fortune to reflect on his thoughts now that he is gone.

We need Henri and his wisdom and experience. By embracing the themes he was graced with writing so convincingly on, we can return to our lives each day with different eyes and perspectives. By taking just a few minutes each day in stillness at home or work as we read reflections from his books, letters, and talks we can open ourselves to new possibilities. I have found doing this to be immensely rewarding and freeing, and I continue to reread and open myself to where I am being led, perhaps to places where I might not have gone before.

Maybe his greatest gift is in showing us how to be more centered on what is important, even if only for just a few moments each day. This was Henri's hope and purpose in writing—both for himself and others. What he had to say distilled lessons from life and was steeped in sacred scripture as well as in sound pastoral psychology, which he had studied at the Mayo Clinic.

In what follows you will find opportunities to stop for a few moments, breathe deeply, read and listen to Nouwen, and consider my expansion on his ideas and practices as a way to set the tone for your life. You could use this book to close your day with a desire to be renewed, to redirect yourself back onto the path—or you could use it to start your day each morning, fresh and refocused. Nouwen offers some light in life's darkness so that we might grow more compassionate to others . . . as well as to ourselves.

If you are not yet familiar with the writings of Henri Nouwen, I hope the following reflections will encourage you to go deeper by reading some of his books, all of which are cited in the notes and then again at the end of this book. For those of you who have read Nouwen, or perhaps even knew or personally experienced Henri himself, as I did, my hope is that you will read what is to follow with fresh eyes and experience joy in being reminded of his words. During these challenging times, with hidden possibilities to be revealed, we need to hear his voice in our ears, urging us on.

When I shared with my wife, Michaele, the idea of writing a short book on Henri's spiritual guidance, she encouraged me to do it. She felt that reviewing the material Henri wrote as well as his letters to me and what transpired in our two meetings long ago would be good for me as well as for others. She was right. I truly felt evangelized by returning to his wisdom and recalling once again who he tried to be for others with his life.

Nouwen had a strong influence on me, not because he had the answers, but because he could articulate the questions and challenges in such a way that I believed he understood me. He made me feel I wasn't alone in my searching. And so, if the reflections to follow are the

“lyrics” of this book, the “music” underlying it is a sense of belonging to a community. *Let’s Look Together* is an attempt to help us in our collective search for meaning, for a way to live a rich and compassionate life, and, of most importance, in our search for the God in whom we wish to be centered—especially during these uncertain times.

Henri’s openness to the intimacy and personal vulnerability that grounded his caring nature were evident as soon as you met him. This also came through in his books. They were clear, compelling, and (thank heavens!) short enough for the busiest of us to read and reflect on in the midst of our hectic lives. But Henri’s ability to be with people was as purposeful in his writings as it was when he met you in the flesh. He wanted to reach out and find a place in others’ lives. He longed to be truly present to searching souls looking for something missing at the center. He wanted to have others join him in his personal search for a life that was nourishing, challenging, solid, and real. He truly wanted to be a spiritual friend—a mentor. So in the brief mentoring lessons that follow, we give him the opportunity to do all those things again.