

Flying
Falling
Catching

HENRI
NOUWEN
CAROLYN
WHITNEY-
BROWN

READING
AND
DISCUSSION
GUIDE

Reading and Discussion Guide

by Carolyn Whitney-Brown

Flying, Falling, Catching's co-authors Henri Nouwen and Carolyn Whitney-Brown lived in a L'Arche community, where people with and without intellectual disabilities found ways to share with each other. If you are using this guide for group discussion, plan ahead: how will you invite and include everyone who would like to be part of the group, recognizing that not everyone reads quickly or easily?

You could read sections of the book out loud, or listen to the audiobook together. Henri's experience began with seeing the Flying Rodleighs in performance: you can see videos of their performance on the [Henri Nouwen & Carolyn Whitney-Brown YouTube channel](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC2WhsMh-adhph4YnQFz39YQ) (www.youtube.com/channel/UC2WhsMh-adhph4YnQFz39YQ).

Make sure each person feels welcome and safe. Offer each other time to share without interruption, without judgment and with confidentiality. Take time to listen deeply to each other. After each person speaks, leave a space of silence to let their unique contribution sink in. Sharing our hearts and experience is an act of generosity, so at the end of each time together, remember to thank each other.

Prologue:

Like the trapeze act, this book is not a solo performance.

What do we know about the two authors of this book and their relationship? How are Rodleigh Stevens and Dennie Wulterkens also part of Carolyn Whitney-Brown's story-telling team?

Henri Nouwen wanted to write about the Flying Rodleighs as a story, because he wanted readers to share his experience. Carolyn begins the story with Rodleigh at Henri's funeral in Holland. What do you learn about Henri in these first pages?

Chapter 1: The Call

***Flying, Falling, Catching* begins with an emergency.** What is that crisis? Describe an emergency that was part of your life or the life of someone important to you.

Henri liked to explain that the word ‘vocation’ comes from the Latin *vocare*, to call. Carolyn titled this section ‘The Call.’ What kinds of calls do you find in these chapters of *Flying, Falling, Catching*? Can you remember and describe a time in your life when you felt called, or when you called someone?

Looking back at his first experience of the Flying Rodleighs, Henri explains that their performance gave him ‘a glimpse of a world that had eluded me so far, a world of discipline and freedom, diversity and harmony, risk and safety, individuality and community, and most of all flying and catching’ (17). Think about these different dimensions of Henri’s initial experience. When have you had an unexpectedly strong physical reaction to something? Tell the story of your experience.

Chapter 2:

Falling

In this section, Henri discovers that relationships allow him to fall. 'Individual people, even the best and strongest, will soon be exhausted and discouraged, but a community of resistance can persevere even when its members have their moments of weakness and despair. Peacemaking can be a lasting work only when we live and work together' (71). How does being part of a community support Henri in his time of despair? Think of a time of 'falling,' of failure or exhaustion or despair in your own life. What made it possible for you to persevere and carry on?

In Chapter 8, Henri describes watching two performances, one by Tina Turner and David Bowie, and the other a choir singing Bach's St. Matthew's Passion. He explores how he is attracted to both. Which performance would attract you more at this point in your life? Why?

Henri was desperately uncomfortable when he was asked to help Adam start his day: 'I was afraid walking into Adam's room and waking up this stranger' (79). Can you remember a time when you had to overcome your fear to build relationships and grow as a person? Did others help you?

Chapter 3:

Teamwork

Henri wrote, 'I realized from the very beginning that this group has to be really well together, and I saw that they enjoyed it, they really had fun doing it, and there was a kind of excitement in them that became very contagious for me' (12) and 'So that's another aspect of the whole thing—how they work together, practice together, and so on. They really are sensitive to each other's needs' (97). Think about the teamwork of the Flying Rodleights, of Dennie and his emergency rescue team, and the co-authoring teamwork of Carolyn Whitney-Brown and Henri Nouwen. How do any of these stories of collaboration and teamwork inspire you? Can you remember a time when you were able to do something more successfully or more enjoyably because you did not do it alone?

'As I walked back to the muddy circus grounds, I wondered how it all fit together. There is no reason to idealize the circus. Much that goes on there is quite unspectacular, inside as well as outside the tent. Nor is there any reason to romanticize the church. Much that goes on there is quite unspiritual. And still, the human heart searches for something larger, something greater than its own pettiness, and everyone who enters the circus or the church is looking for something that reaches out to the stars, or beyond!' (115). Think about an organization or community that you are part of. In what ways is it 'quite unspectacular'? How does it express a desire for larger purpose and meaning? Share about a community or a group of people that you have been part of, or that inspires you.

Chapter 4:

Trust the Catcher

Henri wrote to his friend Bart Gavigan, 'the flyer flies across the whole span of the circus, with outstretched arms and hands, to be caught by the catcher on the moving catch bar. The words that really struck me were the words by Rodleigh, "When I have done my flying, I have to stretch out my hands, and trust that the catcher will be there for me. The greatest mistake I can make is to try to catch the catcher." I have thought about these words as words that express the human challenge to trust your neighbour, to trust your God, to trust love, to trust that finally we will be safe' (171). How does the catcher's role require the trust of the flyer? Can you think of a time when you have experienced being caught?

The flyer does not stop when they are caught. As Carolyn explains, 'The soaring flyer had faith that the catcher would grab them to renew their momentum, then launch them onward to the next catcher. Trust and risk in continued motion together' (148). Most people have times of feeling more like a flyer and other times of being the attentive catcher. Think of and describe an example from your life when you experienced both trust and risk, perhaps a time when you were sent on to a new adventure, or your own experience of catching and sending someone.

Henri shared an image of heart-expansion with people at the 1994 National Catholic HIV/AIDS Ministry Conference: 'Maybe my whole life has been a life in which boundaries were pushed out and broken down, and it has been frightening for me every time ... I tell you that for me personally, and I would guess in some places for you, that when the boundaries are falling away you get anxious sometimes and say 'now where do I say stop or here, here, this is it?' And it's no longer there and suddenly you realize that your heart is expanding and there are no boundaries to that expansion'(167-8). Can you relate to Henri's image of boundaries dissolving and his heart expanding without boundaries? Why or why not?

Chapter 5:

Flying

Carolyn ends the Trust the Catcher section with Henri's words, 'the body tells a spiritual story' (180). He told the 1994 National Catholic HIV/AIDS Ministry Conference, 'What I have learned is that the body is indeed not just a metaphor, and that I've lived the body very much as a metaphor. I've been increasingly afraid to live in my body as a reality, as a real place of being. I don't even have the full words to know what this all means but I know somewhere that I have to really discover what it means to be a body, to be in the body, to be incarnate, to be the temple of the Spirit, to be at home in myself and therefore fully intimate with God because of that, at home in my home where God dwells. I've learned in the conference that there is not only one way, not a thousand ways, but more and more ways to be and live with the body' (201). How do you think Henri's new understanding of his relationship with his body grew out of his experiences in L'Arche and with the Flying Rodleighs? How have you experienced that the body tells a spiritual story?

Carolyn imagines Henri reviewing his life, how he took courage to step out of his comfortable, familiar settings to follow his heart even when he was afraid. 'The Rodleighs are saying to me indirectly, don't be afraid to fly a little, don't be afraid to take a few doubles or triples or a few layouts. If you really miss the catcher you fall into the net so what's the big issue? After all, take a risk and trust, trust, trust. That's how it applies to my life. You know life is full of new possibilities, full of new adventures, and I just want to keep trying out what life is all about' (225-6). In what ways might Henri's story awaken a desire in you for new risks or adventures with others?

Epilogue

Throughout this book, Henri and Carolyn have been building a new image of the spiritual life as a communal experience, an act of peacemaking, with beauty, discipline, fun and teamwork. When Henri Nouwen died, his family and his many communities gathered to celebrate his life with two funerals, three caskets and two burials! Carolyn ends the book with Henri's words of gratitude and encouragement: 'I'm grateful that we could be together – let's pray for one another that what we do in the coming years will be full of courage, full of confidence, and full of trust' (230). After reading this book, how do these words 'courage, confidence, trust' speak to you?

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