

DISCERNMENT

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Reading the Signs of Daily Life

HENRI J. M. NOUWEN

with Michael J. Christensen
and Rebecca J. Laird



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This third volume completes the spiritual trilogy presenting Henri Nouwen's distinctive approach to contemplation, community, and compassion in the world through *spiritual direction, formation, and discernment*. All three volumes were developed from original materials found in the Henri J. M. Nouwen Archives in the Kelly Library, Saint Michael's College, University of Toronto, with the support and cooperation of the Henri J. M. Nouwen Estate and Nouwen Legacy Trust.

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We appreciate Robert A. Jonas for agreeing to write the foreword (and an appendix) to this volume. A former Harvard student and close friend of Henri Nouwen's, and now our good friend and colleague, Jonas (as he likes to be called) helped us process the structure and approach to this book. He offers his own unique vision of discernment by employing the marvelous metaphor of *sailing the seas* true north determined by the wind, sea, and sails, as well as the company on board the ship. We hope the reflection he prepared for this work will find its way into his own writing on spiritual practice.

Finally, we want to thank our youngest daughter, Megan, for typing many excerpts into a text that was finally woven into this book. Now in college, Megan, at three and a half years of age, once sat on Henri's lap at our home, two months before he died in 1996, and asked him an important question: "How big is God?" Henri responded with a mystic's insight: "God is as big as your heart; and your heart is as big and wide as the universe." A good answer, repeated often in our household.

And so to the memory of Henri Nouwen and the image of him holding a little child on his lap and leading us to the unfathomable love of God, we dedicate this labor of love entitled simply *Discernment*.

PREFACE

What This Book Is About

The premise of this book is that God is always speaking to us—individually and as the people of God—at different times and in many ways: through dreams and visions, prophets and messengers, scripture and tradition, experience and reason, nature and events. And that *discernment* is the spiritual practice that accesses and seeks to understand what God is trying to say.

When we are rooted in prayer and solitude and form part of a community of faith, certain signs are given to us in daily life as we struggle for answers to spiritual questions. The books we read, the nature we enjoy, the people we meet, and the events we experience contain within themselves signs of God's presence and guidance day by day. When certain poems or scripture verses speak to us in a special way, when nature sings and creation reveals its glory, when particular people seem to be placed

in our path, when a critical or current event seems full of meaning, it's time to pay attention to the divine purposes to which they point. Discernment is a way to read the signs and recognize divine messages. Henri Nouwen is a trustworthy guide in this ancient spiritual practice.

Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life, the third and final volume of Nouwen's posthumous spiritual trilogy, builds on the previous volumes as it moves the reader from *questions* to *movements* to *signs*. The first volume, *Spiritual Direction* (HarperOne, 2006), is about *living the questions of the spiritual life* (Who am I? What am I called to do? Who is God for me?). The second volume, *Spiritual Formation* (HarperOne, 2010), is about *following the movements of the Spirit* (from resentment to gratitude, fear to love, denying to befriending death). This third volume, *Discernment*, is about *reading the signs of daily life* (primarily seen in books, nature, people, and events).

Discernment follows Nouwen's journals and other writings, focusing on what he has to say about discernment and vocation for today. Characteristically informed by biblical insights and patterns of the church year, the book is divided into three parts: 1) the nature of discernment, including the spiritual gift and scriptural practice of distinguishing spirits of truth from falsehood; 2) the process of seeking God's guidance in books, nature, people, and events; and 3) ways of discerning vocation, presence, identity, and time for divine purpose.

For Henri Nouwen, *spiritual discernment* is hearing a deeper sound beneath the noise of ordinary life and seeing through appearances to the *interconnectedness* of all things, to gain a vision of how things hang together (*theoria physike*) in our lives and in the world. Biblically, *discernment* is spiritual understanding and experiential knowledge, acquired through disciplined spiritual practice, of how God is active in our lives, which leads to a life "worthy of our calling" (Col. 1:9). It is a spiritual gift and practice

that “ascertains and affirms the unique way God’s love and direction are manifested in our lives, so that we can know God’s will and fulfill our calling and mission within the mysterious interworkings of God’s love.”¹

But, as all who attempt to live the questions and follow the movements of the Spirit know, discernment is not a step-by-step program or a systematic pattern. Rather, it is a regular discipline of listening to the still, small voice beneath the rush of the whirlwind, a prayerful practice of reading the subtle signs in daily life. Discernment is not once-and-for-all decision making at critical points in one’s life (Should I take this job? Whom should I marry? Where should I live and work?), but a lifelong commitment to “remember God” (*memoria Dei*), know who you are, and pay close attention to what the Spirit is saying today.

Because Nouwen situates discernment in both a personal and a community context, we have organized his approach in three parts according to common themes of the journey of faith. Rather than offering a systematic presentation of the process, the themes presented are condensed and adapted from the whole of Nouwen’s corpus, published and unpublished, culled mostly from his journals and previously unpublished reflections but supplemented by excerpts from published writings.

In part 1, Nouwen defines the gift and practice of discernment as rooted in the core disciplines of the Christian life: prayer, community, worship, and ministry. He shares his firsthand experience of what he calls “fighting the demon” as part of the ancient biblical practice of “discernment of spirits.” He invites his readers—and shows us how—to embrace the struggle and trust in the power of God, to resist the spirit of darkness and live in the light of God, who reminds us that we are beloved.

Part 2 describes what Nouwen learned from his mentor, Thomas Merton, and from his own experience of reading the signs of God’s presence and finding daily guidance in the Bible

and other books, nature's beauty, people in our path, and current and critical events in our life.

Part 3 engages what might be called Nouwen's "spirituality of discernment." Readers familiar with his major themes in other works will recognize vintage Nouwen here and will gain new insights about our core identity as God's beloved children; experiencing the divine presence in the human heart (*memoria Dei*) through discernment; and knowing *when to act*, *when to wait*, and *when to be led* or acted upon, according to *God's time (kairos)*, which is the purpose of discernment.

HOW THIS VOLUME WAS WRITTEN

While the first two volumes of this trilogy were developed primarily from lecture notes and reflections for the courses he taught at Yale Divinity School and Harvard Divinity School in the 1980s, the present volume draws primarily from unpublished portions of his discernment journals over twenty-five years: "On Retreat: Genesee Diary" (1974) published as *The Genesee Diary*; "South American Diary" (1981-1982) published as *Gracias!*; "The L'Arche Journal" (1985-1986) published as *The Road to Daybreak*, "Ukrainian Diary" (1996) unpublished; and "Sabbatical Journal" (1996) published as *Sabbatical Journey*. We attempted to compile in one volume most of what Nouwen had to say about discernment, weaving the fragments together with lessons he learned from classical Christian writers like Teresa of Avila and Jean-Pierre de Caussade, contemporary mentors like Thomas Merton and Jean Vanier, and his favorite mystics and saints. Such a redaction required the support and cooperation of the Nouwen Literary Trust, without which the book would be only a compilation of quoted material.

HOW THIS BOOK CAN BE READ

Most of Nouwen's books are short enough to be read either in a day or two or slowly over a few weeks of devotional practice. We recommend reading this book in three part segments, over a period of several weeks, perhaps during the season of Advent or Lent.

One good way to begin is to simply choose which part to read first. While there's no need to read the major parts in order, within each part, it is best to read the chapters sequentially.

If you belong to a book study or spiritual practice group, try reading a chapter each week for ten weeks. Or use the book in relation to a season of the church year. At the end of each chapter are exercises for deeper discernment that can be used for individual journaling or small-group sharing.

Those reading this book as part of an academic course or certification process in spiritual direction or formation may find the material in the appendix helpful for understanding Nouwen's distinctive approach to discernment. Robert Jonas's foreword, "Henri's Way of Discernment," and his appendix, "Spiritual Friendship and Mutual Discernment," provide good material for going deeper into the topic. Michael's appendix, "Henri Nouwen on Hearing a Deeper Beat," extends his use of Henry David Thoreau's metaphor of discernment as one who "hears the beat of a different drummer" and "steps to the music which he hears, however measured or far away" (*Walden*, ch 8)."

Finally, like the previous volumes, this book is best read devotionally and accompanied by regular spiritual practice. Nouwen provides detailed instructions on how to do *lectio divina* (spiritual reading) and *visio divina* (spiritual gazing) in contemplative prayer and meditation. If you have access to an audiotape by Nouwen, you may want to try *audio divina* (spiritual listening) in conjunction with your reading. For example, chapter 10, "Know

the Time: When to Act, When to Wait, When to Be Led” would be enhanced by listening to Nouwen’s audiotope *A Spirituality of Waiting* (Crossroads, 1995).

By living the questions, following the movements of the Spirit, and reading the signs of daily life, we can better live a spiritual life in a world with too many easy answers, conflicting movements, and confusing signs.

Michael J. Christensen and Rebecca J. Laird
Feast of the Epiphany 2013

FOREWORD

Henri's Way of Discernment

by Robert A. Jonas

Henri was a very unusual Roman Catholic priest. He felt comfortable with Protestant ministers, Latin American peasants, urban intellectuals, U.S. senators, wealthy patrons, and the mentally and physically disabled. His books are cherished by millions of readers around the world, including celebrities like Fred Rogers and Bill Moyers and political leaders such as Hillary Rodham Clinton, who has stated publicly that Henri's book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, had a profound effect on her at a critical time.¹ Henri's parish was everywhere, and his congregation was everyone. He was a priest for all sorts of people and for all seasons of the human condition.

Over his nearly forty years of ordained life, Henri presided

at the Eucharist almost every day and brought a sacred presence to hundreds of births, weddings, and funerals across North America, South America, and Europe. As a much sought-after counselor, mentor, and guide, he participated in countless individual pastoral conversations. He did not know how to type or to send email, but just about every day he wrote personal letters in a beautiful calligraphic script. Henri's followers savored the way that Henri deftly, reverently told the story of Jesus in a way that expressed his conviction that "Jesus's story is our story," and that we, like Jesus, are God's beloved.

Henri's life did not follow a familiar trajectory or keep to a predictable path. His journey makes perfect sense only when one looks back over its course. If one plays it forward, he was breaking new ground with just about every choice he made. For Henri, discernment was a daily practice. In fact, it was a moment-to-moment practice, because he found no model, no pattern for what he felt called to do. He stepped into the unknown like a tightrope walker stepping into nearly thin air, or like someone leaping from rock to rock across a stream in an impenetrable cloud. Somehow Jesus, his rock, would always rise up to meet his foot.

Henri learned from spiritual leaders that included Dom John Eudes Bamberger, the abbot of the Abbey of the Genesee, and Jean Vanier, the founder of L'Arche, and he had many friends, but in the end he trusted no one but Jesus to show him the way to God. For Henri, Jesus was the archetype of a fully discerning person, sensitive and responsive to God's presence in everything he did.

Henri was a genius in the art of spiritual spelunking as he explored the cave of the heart. Wearing the headlamp of the Holy Spirit, he reached out for every available tool to break new ground—theological wisdom, psychological insights, scripture, the writings of Christian mystics and saints, teachings from other religious traditions, literature, the arts, prayer, academic research, and world travel. Henri believed that he had discovered

the living waters of spiritual awakening in Jesus Christ, and he dedicated his whole life to the process of inviting others to drink from those eternal streams. For Henri, Jesus was the light that shone in the darkness—the gateway, the healer, the deliverer, the inspiration and guide for anyone who seeks to live from the infinite place in the heart from which Jesus lived.

Henri emphasized that Christian discernment is not the same as decision making. Reaching a decision can be straightforward: we consider our goals and options; maybe we list the pros and cons of each possible choice; and then we choose the action that meets our goal most effectively. Discernment, on the other hand, is about listening and responding to that place within us where our deepest desires align with God's desire. As discerning people, we sift through our impulses, motives, and options to discover which ones lead us closer to divine love and compassion for ourselves and other people and which ones lead us further away.

In Henri's sermons and retreats, as well as in his thirty-five books, he highlighted a distinctive vision of Jesus Christ that was thoroughly grounded in scripture and Catholic theology. To understand what Henri meant by *discernment*, it's important to repeat that for Henri the name Jesus meant the eternal presence of the one who is God's continuing incarnation in human form. Henri was interested in the timeless dimension of Jesus Christ, the life that the crucified and risen Jesus shares with us now. According to Henri, the historical life of Jesus opened a new frontier in human experience so that the incarnation of Christ—which has no beginning and no end—could become an ongoing event for all human beings and, indeed, for all creation. Eventually, we can learn to discern the face of Christ everywhere and at all times. Henri's view often reminded me of the medieval Dominican friar, Meister Eckhart, who advised, "Expect God evenly in all things."

Henri understood the name of Jesus as the reality of the resurrected Christ who unites humanity and divinity. Jesus is the

life of the divine that longs to become present in every moment of our ordinary existence. Henri trusted that a relationship with the timeless Jesus would gradually transform our lives, enacting a complete rapprochement between our will and God's will. Perhaps this alignment would be complete only after our deaths, but it would be complete. For Henri, the Christian liturgical language of time that is used for Christ—the one who was, is, and will be—describes the fullness of Jesus's presence. For those who have faith, Jesus was, is, and will be the divine archetype that animates our lives.

In Henri's view, discernment should proceed from a person's grounded, ordinary life. He did not want people to think that our goal is to escape from our everyday stresses and conflicts. Instead, we should invite the Holy Spirit into our direct experience, into our thoughts, memories, worries, and plans. Instead of seeking a life free from pain and suffering, we should trust that Jesus is present in our pain and suffering. We need to acknowledge our suffering honestly—our loneliness, regrets, sadness, hopelessness, and anger—and then open our hearts to the one who loves us in every detail of our lives. In this way, as Henri often said, our sorrow can turn to joy, our hostility to hospitality, and our loneliness to a solitude pregnant with possibilities. If we experience grief at the loss of a loved one, we should not simply tough it out or forcibly turn our attention to more pleasant things; rather we should let Jesus bear the loss with us. After all, as Henri would say, Jesus lost your loved one, too.

For Henri, the journey of discernment begins as soon as a person begins to seek God, the mystery who is the source of all that is. What tradition will help me find my way to my true self, my true vocation, and my true community? Where does my complete flowering as a human being connect with the needs of the world? Henri never said that Christianity is the only way or even the best path. It was *his* way; his own true north. He deeply believed that through faith in Jesus and with the help of a guide

and a loving community of faith, each of us can become deeply rooted in a life that manifests the qualities we see in the life of the historical Jesus. For Henri, these qualities include those named as the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23): love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Henri himself longed to embody these qualities, and his ministry was ardently focused on the question, How can I spread the word about the transforming path of Jesus, and how can I create contexts where people can hear the gospel message of love in fresh ways?

L'Arche communities are rooted in the Roman Catholic tradition, and during the ten years that he spent as pastor of the L'Arche Daybreak community in Toronto, Henri presided at the daily masses and at frequent baptisms, marriages, and funerals. He enjoyed introducing potential converts to the Roman Catholic Church, but he also worked with the rest of the staff to honor the non-Catholic faith traditions of core members of the community. Being a faithful Roman Catholic was his way, but he was at peace with the likelihood that it would never become everyone's way.

Henri supported hundreds of people around the world, serving as a friend, priest, and spiritual counselor. He was heartbroken when he saw people suffering because they were unaware of the gift of Christ's love. He was eager to help everyone—including himself—to remember who we really are: the beloved and chosen of God. Henri often declared, "If I am chosen, that doesn't mean that others are not chosen. When I really receive this gift of being God's beloved, I look around and see that all others are beloved, too!"

In one of his most popular books, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, Henri reflects on the prodigal son who squandered his life but is nevertheless welcomed home to the unconditional embrace of a father whose loving hands represent the dual father-mother nature of God. If we experience this ultimate embrace as our own and if we receive this truth into our hearts—moment by moment,

in our path, when a critical or current event seems full of meaning, it's time to pay attention to the divine purposes to which they point. Discernment is a way to read the signs and recognize divine messages. Henri Nouwen is a trustworthy guide in this ancient spiritual practice.

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