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Henri Nouwen, Thomas Merton, and Donald Nicholl

Pilgrims of Wisdom and Peace

Michael W. Higgins

Spirituality is everywhere these days. That is a strange way of putting it, admittedly, but it does speak rather directly to the problem. What, in fact, is spirituality? Why have so many individuals suddenly become experts in the field, if in fact it is a field? And what is one to make of distinctions that allow religion and spirituality to be defined as antinomies?

In a recent article in the *Toronto Star*, discussing the ambitious Toronto stage production of *The Lord of the Rings*, Brent Carver, the Tony-award-winning actor who plays Gandalf in the production, was quoted as saying that “faith is a word with particular resonance for me but although I define myself as spiritual I am not necessarily religious. No one has a patent on faith. No one has a patent on God. We can all write our own way.”¹ But how exactly does one write one’s own way when it comes to spirituality?

That gnomic scourge of settled opinion Rex Murphy, the CBC and *Globe and Mail* commentator, has acerbically noted vis-à-vis North American culture that “a culture that offers intellectual hospitality to the chattering of Dr. Phil and the romps of *Desperate Housewives* does not have the stamina to pursue the idea of faith and its agency.”² A stern judgment, but one not without validity.

Dom Laurence Freeman, O.S.B., author and disciple of the great Benedictine spiritual figure John Main, does not hesitate when it comes to identifying the fault lines of our contemporary spiritual crisis: “It is puzzling and frustrating to try and understand how the mainline Churches, despite all their determination and resources, still seem unable to connect with the profound spiritual needs of our time. . . . [Young people] dismiss what they find as narrowness of mind, intolerant dogmatism, internal feuding, inter-denominational sectarianism, medieval sexism and . . . lack of spiritual depth.”³

Freeman is talking about the failure of established religion. But he is not talking about its indispensability. He is talking about the skewering of the gospel message, not its irrelevance. So where can we turn for direction, for enlightenment, for sane commentary, and for an integrated maturity of vision?

Thomas Merton, Donald Nicholl, and Henri Nouwen, twentieth-century spiritual writers and thinkers, were, for significant chunks of time, contemporaries. To some degree they spoke out of similar contexts. To some degree they addressed similar crises.

To get a "read" on the three of them, I have drawn on a particularly intriguing idea put forth by J. S. Porter, Canadian poet and professor, who sees in a particular word a point of entry, a code to be unraveled, a probe to be measured. The word, the right word, is the key that unlocks. Porter's book, *Spirit Book Word*, identifies particular words with particular writers and explores why it is that the word is a signature of and an aperture to their soul and imagination. But Porter had difficulty finding his own word. He writes: "I still hadn't found my word. The word that called me, claimed me, owned me. The word written on my body. The word that branded itself in my forehead the way 'Being' burnt itself into Heidegger, the way 'love' surrounded Carver, or the way 'modernism' scalded Swift. I hadn't found a way to link my trinity: words, books and spirit."⁴ He discovers at the end that indeed the word was there staring him in the face. It was "Spiritbookword: the breadth of the word in the book. I jumped up and down like a four year old. Hallelujah! I had found my word. I could now look for spiritbookwords in others."⁵ One of those others, Thomas Merton, was given the word "mercy."

Spiritbookwords is a marvelous idea, a conceit or principle that can also work when applied to the three subjects under consideration. Thomas Merton's spiritbookword is *point vierge*, for Donald Nicholl it is *scientia cordis*, and for Henri Nouwen it is "wounded healer." I know, they look more like spiritbookphrases than spiritbookwords, but you get my drift.

Point Vierge

In the late 1960s the stage was set for the final installment, the final quadrant, the fourth Zoa: Urthona, or Wisdom. The meaning of wisdom for Merton was fluid, evolving over time, a mature and ripe dimension of life that cannot be hurried, scheduled, or programmed. He thought about wisdom a great deal in its many configurations. If finally he was to embody wisdom, become Urthona, it was a natural progression of many years' seasoning.

The first extended and major treatment of the theme of wisdom can be found in his lengthy prose-poem "Hagia Sophia" (Holy Wisdom), published in 1962, the product of a correspondence he had with his close friend Victor Hammer. A typographer, bookbinder, and calligrapher, in addition to his teaching duties in lettering, drawing, and painting, Hammer was the consummate artist and craftsman. On one occasion when Merton was visiting

Victor and his wife, Carolyn, Hammer showed his guest a triptych he had been working on. The central panel showed a woman crowning a young boy, and Merton asked aloud who the woman was. Hammer had initially conceived of the woman and the young boy as Madonna and Child but no longer knew who she was. Merton then responded, "I know who she is. I have always known her. She is Hagia Sophia."

In a letter dated May 2, 1959, Hammer invited Merton to come and bless the triptych and explain in greater detail what he meant by Hagia Sophia. This latter request Merton met in a twofold manner: in a letter dated May 14, and in the prose-poem of the same name.

The poem is an eloquent meditation on and celebration of wisdom. It is divided into four sections—"Dawn," "Early Morning," "High Morning," "Sunset"—and is modeled on the monastic "Hours": Lauds, Prime, Terce, Compline. Of dawn, or Lauds, Merton writes:

There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence that is a fount of action and joy. It rises up in wordless gentleness and flows out to me from the unseen roots of all created being, welcoming me tenderly, saluting me with indescribable humility. This is at once my own being, my own nature, and the Gift of my Creator's Thought and Art within me, speaking as Hagia Sophia, speaking as my sister, Wisdom.⁶

It is in the dawn, the moment of pristine innocence, the moment of prelapsarian joy, the sweet point, or *point vierge*, that one may happen on Hagia Sophia. In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, in a passage about the "first chirps of the waking day birds," Merton observes that they

speak to Him, not with fluent song, but with an awakening question that is their dawn state, their state at the "point vierge." . . . All wisdom seeks to collect and manifest itself at that blind sweet point. Man's wisdom does not succeed, for we are all fallen into self-mastery and cannot ask permission of anyone. We face our mornings as men of undaunted purpose. . . . For the birds there is not a time that they tell, but the virgin point between darkness and light, between non-being and being. . . . Here is an unspeakable secret: paradise is all around us and we do not understand. It is wide open. The sword is taken away, but we do not know it. . . . "Wisdom," cries the dawn deacon [the bird] but we do not attend.⁷

Merton corresponded with Louis Massignon, the distinguished Islamicist, and it was from him that he first heard the term *point vierge*, which means "the center of the soul, where despair corners the heart of the outsider." It is not only the sweet point but the enlightened awareness at the juncture of despair. Wisdom represents the voice of creation and the voice of unity, the summons to being and the sound of judgment. In the dawn state, the poem says, one can recognize

ties and issues, and struggled throughout his life to understand what we mean by *holiness*. But to achieve holiness, one must begin somewhere, and for Nicholl it begins with a call from the Holy Spirit, for every call of the Holy Spirit begins with a revelation of the bankruptcy of one's present, habitual mode of life, its tendency toward the death of one's spirit. That moment of awakening inevitably has to be a moment of anguish, of agony, and of repentance, because it is only from the pain of awakening to the contradiction in one's life that the energy to change arises. Nicholl cites an example of an expression of such anguish by one of the most remarkable priests in England, Austin Smith, who spent twenty-five years serving on the front line, in the slums of Liverpool. In *Vocation for Justice* Fr. Austin related how he was struck by the contrast between the way Christians protested against the celluloid *Last Temptation of Christ* of Scorsese's film yet succumbed daily to the real last temptation against which Jesus had to struggle to the very end. Jesus' last temptation, in Gethsemane, was to feel that

there was still time and space to carry on [with his campaign for the kingdom] and get somewhere. And yet the message of God was, "It is time to suffer and die." This temptation was, if one may so express it, to keep the show going when the show has really run out of steam. Or, to put it another way, a much more radical way, it is the temptation to keep going when we are really washed up, or, if you prefer it, washed out. We keep going when the very gospel of Jesus is saying to us, "Your day is done." We are seduced by the thought that we still have something to offer. We will not die in our present comfortable state to rise to a new state.¹⁰

To rise to a new state, to undergo the dramatic process of *metanoia* (conversion), we must cut ourselves off from the old ways in order to answer the call to a "new, dangerous form of existence." Our fear hobbles and diminishes us. Although each person's *metanoia* will follow a different direction, we are all called to discard the false self, "infected by death," for the true self, open to the Spirit of Life.

Throughout his own life Nicholl sought bravely to change, to resist always the blandishments of successful and homogenizing ideologies, to avoid the easy comforts of establishment living, to hear the cries of the poor and abandoned, to forge out of the sufferings and crises of both religious and artistic leaders, as well as out of the anonymous multitudes, a genuinely liberating spirituality.

To that end Nicholl read the Russian mystics and poets, explored the spirituality of resistance that occasionally found expression among German Catholics to the Nazis' tyranny, argued for intelligent and respectful dialogue between Catholicism and the other great religions, and campaigned vigorously in the interests of peace. Nicholl believed that humanity could find a common ground of the spirit by pursuing what he called a *scientia cordis*, science

of the heart. This *scientia cordis* is a genuine science with an appropriate authority, but it is not a positive science,

because positive science tries to formulate immutable laws about what is, psychology too attempts to freeze human beings in terms of laws about needs and demands that can be specified—but the aspirations of the heart always go beyond what can be specified in such laws; and it is these aspirations which keep the heart in motion and prevent it from being frozen into immobility.¹¹

Because the *scientia cordis* concerns itself with human aspirations, its medium of expression is not some law or formula—characteristic of the positive sciences—but the narrative, the story—which is more proper to art in form. Nicholl, then, told stories, plenty of them, because he knew that in matters of aspiration, the chief motto and mode of disclosure is Newman's *cor ad cor loquitur* ("heart speaks to heart"), because he knew that along the path of storytelling "dance and joy and truth can travel." But these stories arose out of Nicholl's own empathy for the suffering and alienated; they spoke of grace and heroism dearly bought. There is nothing light and frolicsome about them. Out of Nicholl's spirituality comes a sweet incandescence, luminous wonders in a darkening landscape.

Wounded Healer

In 1972 *The Wounded Healer* by Dutch psychologist-priest Henri Nouwen ushered in an era of new attention to the "healer" and added a new phrase to the lexicon of spiritual terms. Nouwen realized that the loneliness and alienation often experienced by healing professionals, especially those who are ministers of the spirit, could be a precious gift. As Michael Ford expressed this insight,

A deep understanding of their own pains . . . makes it possible for them to convert their weakness into strength and to offer their own experience as a source of healing to those "who are often lost in the darkness of their own misunderstood sufferings."¹²

By the time he died of a heart attack in Hilversum on September 21, 1996, Nouwen had established an international reputation as a spiritual writer. Author of more than forty books and a retreat-giver and popular lecturer of promethean stamina, Nouwen stamped a generation with his holistic approach to spirituality. Although born in the Netherlands on January 24, 1932, educated in Holland at the famed Catholic University of Nijmegen, and ordained a priest for the Archdiocese of Utrecht on July 21, 1957, Nouwen in fact lived most of his life outside the continent of Europe. He traveled widely and

taught in numerous institutions, including stints at the University of Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard. But he also experimented with nonacademic settings, including monasteries, mission centers, and homes for the disadvantaged. Nouwen embodied in his own life that spirit of restlessness and searching that resonated with the youthful rebels of the 1960s, a spirit that resisted amelioration as he aged.

Nouwen understood, both as a psychologist and as a spiritual director, that an essentialist spirituality, a spirituality of the manuals, a spirituality disembodied or disincarnate, could no longer speak to people. Spiritual traditions, exercises, and formulas that failed to respond to the aching disquiet of the individual, that discounted the deep personal experiences of the searcher, and that did not take account of cultural shifts and adjustments failed dismally to address the needs of the time. It was the *kairos*, the hours of the Lord, and people thirsted for a living spirituality. Nouwen would be their oasis.

This living spirituality was profoundly christocentric, and in a moving passage from *Show Me the Way*, Nouwen recounts a Good Friday liturgy at Trosly, France, motherhouse of the international L'Arche communities, when Père Thomas and Père Gilbert took the huge cross that hangs behind the altar and held it for the ritualistic veneration of the congregation. Nouwen was struck by the sweet juxtaposition of anguish and joy found in the faces of the broken and the whole as they came to kiss the dead body of Christ.

Imagining the naked, lacerated body of Christ stretched out over our globe, I was filled with horror. But as I opened my eyes I saw Jacques, who bears the marks of suffering in his face, kiss the body with passion and tears in his eyes. I saw Ivan carried on Michael's back. I saw Edith coming in her wheelchair. As they came—walking or limping, seeing or blind, hearing or deaf—I saw the endless procession of humanity gathering around the sacred body of Christ, covering it with their tears and their kisses, and slowly moving away from it comforted and consoled by such great love. . . . With my mind's eye I saw the huge crowds of isolated, agonizing individuals walking away from the cross together, bound by the love they had seen with their own eyes and touched with their own lips. The cross of horror became the cross of hope, the tortured body became the body that gives new life; the gaping wounds became the source of forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation.¹³

This visceral passage, teetering on the sentimental, is in many ways vintage Nouwen. It is graphic, unapologetically emotional, and classically orthodox. Nouwen engages the reader with an explicit appeal to the imagination and to the heart, grounding a theological truism in the direct experience of a people at prayer mediated through the observing, but not detached, eye of the writer.

A psychologist of the heart and the soul, Nouwen wrote not only to guide others but to discover himself, to find himself. In his spiritual enchiridion or

handbook, *Making All Things New*, he highlighted the spiritual confusion that afflicts our culture: "One way to express the spiritual crisis of our time is to say that most of us have an address but cannot be found there. We know where we belong, but we keep being pulled away in many directions, as if we were still homeless."¹⁴

Nouwen appreciated the profound displacement at the heart of contemporary humanity, a rootlessness that he shared to an often disturbing degree. He understood that everything in our culture that defines success or fulfillment is predicated precisely upon those qualities that work against our yearning for wholeness. We need to cultivate what he calls "the discipline of solitude and the discipline of community," because we need to attend to the silent voice of God, to eliminate the extraneous sounds that dominate our lives. But he also knew his own "wound":

What to do with this inner wound that is so easily touched and starts bleeding again? It is such a familiar wound—this immense need for affection, and this immense fear of rejection—will it ever go away. It is there to stay, but maybe for a good reason. Perhaps it is a gateway to my salvation, a door to glory, and a passage to freedom!

I am aware that this wound of mine is a gift in disguise. These many short but intense experiences of abandonment lead me to the place where I'm learning to let go of fear and surrender my spirit into the hands of the One whose acceptance has no limits. I am deeply grateful to Nathan and to my other friends who know me and are willing to bind my wounds so that, instead of bleeding to death, I can walk on to the full life.¹⁵

Nouwen understood only too clearly the demands of success. His various professorships at prestigious universities, his highly lucrative and very public writing career, and his popularity on the invitational lecture circuit combined to assure him a level of professional success that was the envy of all, but the costs were great. Nouwen often found himself diminished by his achievements, and he sought protection from his own success. He frequently fled to the anonymity of monastic enclosure, requested and received spiritual direction from the abbot, and then wrote about his experience in his next book. Similarly, he would abandon the security of the academy and work in the *barrios* of Latin America. Naturally, he wrote about this experience as well. But these occasional departures from lecturing, teaching, and writing were, in the end, incapable of settling his wandering spirit.

Nouwen was desperate for that mixture of discipline and community that he passionately wrote about but that consistently eluded him. That is, it escaped him until he happened upon the second largest L'Arche community in the world, Daybreak, north of Toronto. Here he would spend the last decade of his life (1985–96), fall in love, experience a breakdown of immense proportions, be emotionally rejuvenated, and, however briefly, come to terms with his homosexuality. Daybreak defined Nouwen's later years, allowed

him to speak *about* the wounded *among* the wounded, and provided him with that still point that released for him a refreshing and yet unnerving spring of self-knowledge.

Nouwen's writings could be quite formulaic and predictable. He cherished patterns of three; he drew heavily upon biblical stories, images, and themes; his anecdotes were autobiographical without being tantalizingly confessional, although the books he wrote during the last half of his Daybreak years betray a taste for candid disclosure not found in his other writings; his tone was honest without being ostentatious; he maintained a syllogistic but not constrictive logic in his writing; and he wrote to reveal and not conceal God's encompassing love.

More than anything, Nouwen was committed to shaping a voice for the wounded—the physically handicapped and mentally challenged, the socially marginalized and politically persecuted, the lonely and sexually oppressed or repressed. He proclaimed for all to hear a spirituality of peacemaking:

I want to speak to you about prayer, in the context of our Christian vocation to be peace-makers; to show you a little bit about how prayer is a way of peace-making. Only then can we speak creatively about resistance as a form of peace-making and only then we can see how prayer and resistance can in turn build community. The three indispensable components, then, of a meaningful spirituality of peace-making are resistance, prayer, and community.¹⁶

Throughout his life Nouwen sought different settings wherein to embody these three components: lecture room, monastic cell, slum, and group home. He pursued the wounded with frenetic energy and sometimes exasperating zeal. Over time, he came to understand his own wounds and to experience rejection as much as love, abandonment as much as affirmation. The humanizing of the celebrity proved to be liberating.

Two years before his death he wrote, in my opinion, his finest work, *Our Greatest Gift*. There is an unnerving prescience about this work, a work written with the intention of befriending his death. Nouwen allows the reader to hear and share in his vulnerability, his fear, in the face of death. But more important still, he invites the reader to experience that hope that makes of death not a foe but a friend: "Our death may be the end of our success, our productivity, our fame, or our importance among people, but is not the end of our fruitfulness. In fact, the opposite is true: the fruitfulness of our lives shows itself in its fullness only after we have died."¹⁷

Following a funeral Mass in Utrecht, presided at by Cardinal Adrianus Simonis and with a eulogy by Jean Vanier, Nouwen's body was returned to Toronto for a three-hour Mass of the Resurrection conducted at the Slovak Byzantine Catholic Cathedral of the Transfiguration of Our Lord in the neighboring town of Markham. The fruitfulness of the life of this solitary with a desperate hunger for community, of this pastor with a passion for interiority, has only begun to show itself fully.

Spiritbookwords: *point vierge*, *scientia cordis*, wounded healer. A remedy or elixir for our time? Perhaps. An invitation to deeper self-knowledge? Most certainly.

Notes

¹ Richard Ouzounian (theater critic), *The Toronto Star*, January 29, 2006.

² Rex Murphy, *The Globe and Mail*, April 9, 2005.

³ Dom Laurence Freeman, O.S.B., as quoted in James Roose-Evans, "Into the Light," *The Tablet* (December 17/24, 2005): 30.

⁴ J. S. Porter, *Spirit Book Word: An Inquiry into Literature and Spirituality* (Ottawa: Novalis, 2001), 30.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁶ Thomas Merton, *Hagia Sophia* (Lexington: Stamperia del Santuccio, 1962).

⁷ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday Image, 1968), 131–32.

⁸ Thomas Merton, *Turning toward the World: The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 4, 1960–1963, ed. Victor Kramer (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 17.

⁹ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 158.

¹⁰ Austin Smith, in Donald Nicholl, "Holiness—A Call to Radical Living," *Grail: An Ecumenical Journal* 5 (December 1989): 68–69.

¹¹ Donald Nicholl, "Scientia Cordis," in *The Beatitude of Truth: Reflections of a Lifetime* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1997), 161.

¹² Michael Ford, *Wounded Prophet: A Portrait of Henri J. M. Nouwen* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 46.

¹³ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Show Me the Way: Readings for Each Day of Lent* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 134.

¹⁴ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Making All Things New: An Invitation to the Spiritual Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1981), 36.

¹⁵ *The Heart of Henri Nouwen: His Words of Blessing*, ed. Rebecca Laird and Michael J. Christensen (New York: Crossroad, 2003), 139–40.

¹⁶ Henri J. M. Nouwen, "A Spirituality of Peace-Making," inaugural Devlin lecture delivered at St. Jerome's University, Waterloo, Ontario, September 12, 1982.

¹⁷ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Our Greatest Gift: A Meditation on Dying and Caring* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 38.