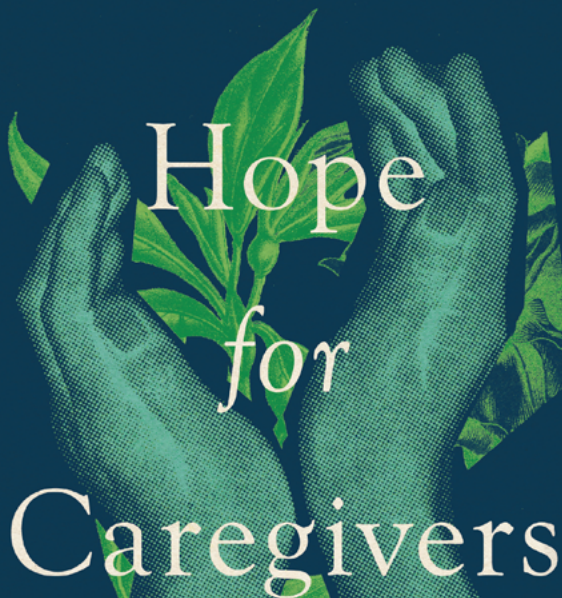


A 42-Day Devotional
in Company *with*
Henri J. M. Nouwen



Hope
for
Caregivers



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WEEK 1

The Eyes of Pain

Much of caregiving is unseen by anyone but the caregiver, who may also feel unseen. The experience of caregiving becomes a lens for seeing life.

THIS WEEK CONSIDER THIS QUESTION

What is your story of seeing and being seen as a caregiver?

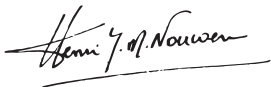
AFTER READING YOUR VERY pain-filled but also very grace-filled letter, I had only one desire—to come visit you. More than anything I wanted to spend some time with you, to offer you my love and friendship and to learn from you who has been tempted so much. I realize that I cannot come to you and you cannot come to me.

I simply want to ask you to trust that the Lord will continue to give you the strength to live through your pains with your husband and your son. Your letter shows that you have a great faith, courage and confidence, even though you yourself do not feel it as much. But God has not left you alone. I am sure that he will give you all the strength you need to be faithful in the midst of your agony.

Love
Hanni

THE HEART OF BEING HUMAN

*In the realm of the Spirit of God, living and caring are one. Our society suggests that caring and living are quite separate and that caring belongs primarily to professionals who have received special training. Although training is important, and although certain people need preparation to practice their profession with competence, caring is a privilege of every person and is at the heart of being human. When we look at the original meaning of the word profession and realize the term refers, first of all, to professing one's own deepest conviction, then the essential spiritual unity between living and caring becomes clear. I look at care as helping others to claim for themselves the spiritual truth that they are—
as we are—children of God, brothers and sisters of each other,
and parents of generations to come.*



God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.

—1 JOHN 4:9–11

REFLECTION

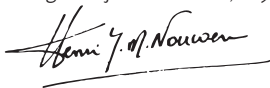
Offering care easily becomes reduced to tasks—the sometimes unpleasant activities that the care receiver cannot do independently. But that is a detached mindset. Caregiving as a calling or privilege is not rooted in tasks but in connection between human beings. The writer of 1 John tells us that this connection is through love, first from God and then through us as we see each other as human beings all beloved by God. Through love, living and caring are one.

- How do you respond to the idea of caregiving as a privilege at the heart of being human?
- What has been your most privileged moment in your caregiving story?

God of generations to come, show the realm of your Spirit and fill your people with overflowing love in the unseen moments of caring. Amen.

LISTENING FOR GOD

The word obedience includes the Latin word audire, which means “listening.” Living a spiritually mature life is living a life in which we listen to the voice of God’s Spirit within and among us and in which we try to respond to that voice at every moment of our lives. The great news of God’s revelation is not simply that God exists, but also that God is actively present in our lives at all times and in all places. Our God is a God who cares, heals, guides, directs, challenges, confronts, and corrects us. He is a God who wants to lead us closer to the full realization of our humanity. To be obedient means to be constantly attentive to this active presence and to allow God, who is only love, to be the source as well as the goal of all we think, say, and do.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Henri J. Nouwen". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style and is underlined with a single horizontal line.

The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice.

He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them,
and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.

—JOHN 10:3–4

REFLECTION

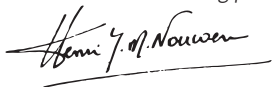
Parents will often say of a child, “He doesn’t listen,” meaning that the child is not obeying. From the child’s point of view, obeying means doing what the parent wants rather than the child’s own will. But if the root of obedience is listening, we have the opportunity to actively engage our hearts in hearing and seeing the ways that God is present, going ahead of us in the experience of caregiving. Wherever we go, we will find that God is already there.

- In what ways does God call your name as a caregiver and go ahead of you?
- In what environment do you feel most open to hear what God wants to say to you?

Great shepherd who sees and calls your sheep by name, reveal your presence and love with bright surprises of the obedient life. Amen.

WOUNDED AND WEAK

We live in a world that suggests one person is strong and another person is weak, or some people have it together and others do not. And that those who are strong should help the weak. Now that's not what the gospel is speaking about. It belongs to the center of the gospel that God became vulnerable. That God stripped himself from power. That he didn't cling to his equality with God, but emptied himself and became a human being like we are. As a follower of Jesus, what I have to offer is first of all my own vulnerability. My own weakness, my own brokenness, my own wounds. My wounds can only be a source of healing for others if I care for my wounds, if I bandage them well with my willingness to create a fellowship of the weak and trust that there God's healing power will become visible.



Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.

—PHILIPPIANS 2:5–7

REFLECTION

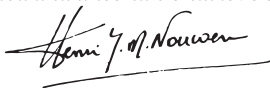
As a caregiver you may feel that you have to be strong for the sake of the one you care for. When Jesus emptied himself of power and became human, as we are, he showed us that our weaknesses and vulnerabilities may be as much a gift of caring as any experience of knowledge and competence. What we expect to see in the caregiving relationship may not be what God means for us to see. Reconsidering the balance of weak and strong may open our eyes.

- In what ways have you felt too weak to be a caregiver?
- How might accepting your own weakness change your relationship with the one you care for?

God who offered vulnerability to a broken world, be the one who bandages wounds in a fellowship of the weak. Amen.

TO KNOW AND BE KNOWN

As Jesus ministers, so he wants us to minister. He told Peter to feed his sheep and care for them. He wants us to care not as “professionals” who know the clients’ problems and take care of them but as vulnerable brothers and sisters who know and are known, who care and are cared for, who forgive and are being forgiven, who love and are being loved. Somehow we have come to believe that someone serves, someone else is being served, and be sure not to mix up the roles. We are not the healers, we are not the reconcilers, we are not the givers of life. We are sinful, broken, vulnerable people who need as much care as anyone we care for. The mystery of ministry is that we have been chosen to make our own limited and very conditional love the gateway for the unlimited and unconditional love of God.

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Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.”
Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.”
—JOHN 21:15

REFLECTION

Jesus chose Peter to lead the early church despite all of Peter’s mistakes, for which he is famous. Jesus did not give the church a leader-shepherd who did not know what it was to feel weak or to have regrets. Few caregivers can rightly say they can think of nothing they wish they had done differently. We are vulnerable people caring for vulnerable people and receiving care from vulnerable people. This simple truth opens the gate for us to see each other and for love to flow.

- How do you respond to the idea that your vulnerability is a part of your caring?
- Do you open yourself to receiving the care of others, or do you resist it?

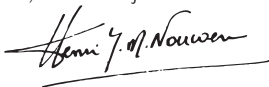
God who knows every vulnerability, by your unlimited love heal every limited resistance to know and be known for the deeper riches of caring. Amen.

FREE TO BE PRESENT

Caregiving is a deeply ingrained human response to suffering. We want to ease pain, to restore calm and peace to those in need. But caregiving takes a toll.

There is often a huge cost to the caregiver, and sometimes the care we give springs not from a well of love and altruism but from a bitter sea of resentful duty and obligation. It is hard to listen to others when the pains and troubles of our own lives are clamoring for attention. But if we learn to listen to our own needs and wants, that listening can free us to become truly present to the inner deep and fragile beauty of those under our care. Even the most mundane and repetitive caregiving tasks can become a means for us to grow.

With patience, with time, we can develop relationships of respect, listening, presence, and truthfulness with those we care for.

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I will both lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone,
O Lord, make me dwell in safety.

—PSALM 4:8

REFLECTION

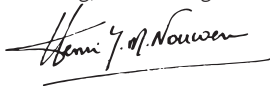
Offering care easily becomes reduced to tasks—the sometimes unpleasant activities. A bitter sea of resentful duty and obligation can roil with waves so rough that we fear we will capsize. Then we feel guilty that caring is reduced to tasks rather than perceiving it as a privilege of love. Our own health in the caregiving process is vital to obediently listening to how God calls us to respond. Something as simple as releasing the stress of caregiving long enough for a good night's sleep can refresh both body and spirit.

- Using the imagery of a sea, how would you describe your relationship with the person you care for?
- How might you receive care from others that would allow you respite before bitterness sets in?

God who sees every desire and need, make plain the path away from the bitter sea and toward the patient presence of love. Amen.

A GENTLE AND TENDER HAND

What does it mean to care? The word care finds its roots in the Gothic kara, which means “lament.” The basic meaning of care is to grieve, to experience sorrow, to cry out with. I am very much struck by this background of the word care because we tend to feel quite uncomfortable with an invitation to enter into someone’s pain before doing something about it. Still, when we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives means the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving much advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a gentle and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair, who can stay with us in an hour of grief, who can tolerate not-knowing, not-curing, not-healing—that is the friend who cares.



Moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes.
Immediately they regained their sight and followed him.

—MATTHEW 20:34

REFLECTION

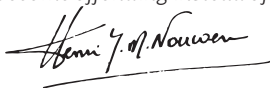
Often the gospels describe Jesus healing individuals by saying that he touched them. Jesus is “moved with compassion” to touch, making touch a part of what it means to enter into the suffering of another. We are created both body and spirit, and compassionate care means in some way to touch both body and spirit. Often care requires physical touch, but touching the spirit is essential as well. Touch is assurance that we have been seen, whether giving or receiving care.

- What kind of touch, both bodily and spiritual, reassures you in your role as caregiver?
- In what ways can you touch the spirit of the person you care for?

God of compassion, may your touch be an example of entering another’s lament with care even when there is no cure. Amen.

HEALING PRESENCE

To care means first of all to be present to each other. From experience you know that those who care for you become present to you. When they listen, they listen to you. When they speak, you know they speak to you. And when they ask questions, you know it is for your sake. Their presence is a healing presence because they accept you on your terms, and they encourage you to take your own life seriously and to trust your own vocation. Our tendency is to run away from the painful realities or to try to change them as soon as possible. But cure without care makes us into rulers, controllers, manipulators, and prevents a real community from taking shape. Cure without care makes us preoccupied with quick changes, impatient and unwilling to share each other's burden. And so cure can often become offending instead of liberating.

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Though I walk in the midst of trouble,
you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies;
you stretch out your hand
and your right hand delivers me.
—PSALM 138:7

REFLECTION

The difference between *care* and *cure* colors how we relate to people in need of care, and how we open ourselves to care. In the gift of presence, we settle into *this* moment and allow it to change us. Scripture reminds us we do not walk alone in the midst of trouble, whether as one who gives care or one who receives it. Ultimately we find ourselves in both categories, and our path does not hurry past one or the other but bridges them both.

- In what ways have others been present to you in your vulnerable moments?
- How might understanding the meaning of presence change your caregiving?

*God who is always present, reveal your caring touch.
Give us strength to be weak enough to see your light in the dark places.*

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