

## READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

# *A Letter of Consolation*

by

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*A Letter of Consolation* presents many provocative ideas about the meaning of death, both our own and the deaths of those we love. The following questions can be used for individual reflection or journaling or for discussion within a small group. The questions follow the order of the letters, so they can be used either as a companion as you read through *A Letter of Consolation* or as a tool for additional reflection after you have finished the entire book.

1. Nouwen writes to his father: “[Mother’s] death became an ongoing death for us. Every time we lived through another event without her, we felt her absence in a new way. We became aware of deep connections with her that we had forgotten for a while but that were brought back to consciousness by the forward movement of history. And each time, she died again in us” (p. 15). How

have you experienced a loss as ongoing? What events, both large and small, caused you to feel most deeply the absence of your loved one?

2. What does Nouwen mean by saying that time deepens our grief rather than taking it away? What can we learn from the deepening of our grief?
3. How is it possible to know someone more fully through his or her death? How have you experienced this phenomenon?
4. Nouwen noticed that his father was forced to step forward emotionally after the death of Nouwen's mother, to fill more of the role that she used to play in her son's life. How has the death of a loved one caused you to take on a new role, to change the way you related to others? How did you feel about the change?
5. For Nouwen, the changes in his father and the increased closeness between father and son are part of the "harvest" of his mother's death, a reference to Jesus's statement that if a grain of wheat dies, it will yield a rich harvest. Nouwen believes strongly that, because of Jesus's death, our own deaths have meaning—meaning that is most clear and most powerful for those we love. In the way that Nouwen thinks about life after the death of his mother, where have you seen the harvest of the death of a loved one?
6. What does Nouwen mean when he directs us to "befriend" death? What might that look like for you?

7. In reflecting on his mother's death, Nouwen cannot help but think about his own death. How has the death of someone close to you caused you to reflect on your own mortality? Has the experience had the effect of simplifying and laying your life bare, as it did for Nouwen?
8. Nouwen writes: "Mortification—literally, 'making death'—is what life is all about, a slow discovery of the mortality of all that is created so that we can appreciate its beauty without clinging to it as if it were a lasting possession" (p. 42). Why is it so necessary to realize the finitude of our lives, indeed of all created things, in order to appreciate their beauty?
9. For Nouwen, death teaches us about our own powerlessness and the importance of detachment and surrender. How do you feel about the idea of death as an invitation to surrender more freely to the future? What would surrendering to the future look like for you?
10. Nouwen writes, "We must have the courage to believe that her death was good for us and that she died so that we might live" (p. 57). How does Jesus's death make this statement a reality? How has the death of someone you loved helped you glimpse eternal life?
11. Despite all that death means and all it can teach us, we are not to welcome it or to feel that it is the high point of our lives. Death is to remain our enemy; we no more welcome it than Jesus did. Which is easier for you—befriending death or recognizing death as the enemy? How can you better hold the two in balance?

12. How has the rhythm of Holy Week—from the sharing in Christ's body that is Maundy Thursday, to the agony of Holy Friday, to the waiting of Holy Saturday, to the utter shock and joy of Easter Sunday—given you insight into death? How have you experienced love as being stronger than death?