

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

Our Greatest Gift

by
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Henri Nouwen's *Our Greatest Gift*, written toward the end of his life, is a reflection on what it means to die or to care for those who are dying. He redefines death not as a loss, but as a journey of grace and a gift to those we leave behind—the ultimate symbol of our solidarity with our brothers and sisters and the point at which we begin to see the ultimate fruitfulness of our lives.

PROLOGUE BEFRIENDING DEATH

1. What is your attitude toward death? Is death a taboo subject to be avoided at all costs or something you are preparing for and living open to, or are you somewhere in between these views? Can you conceive of viewing death the way Henri Nouwen suggests, as the fulfill-

ment of our lives, for which we wait as for a friend to welcome us home (p. xiii)?

2. Nouwen noted that the days after his friend Moe's death were "the most intimate, the most uniting, and, in a strange way, the most sacred" he had at the Day-break community (p. xv). Have you experienced a loved one's death uniting and blessing those left behind? Have you ever considered your own death as "a new way to send our and God's spirit to those whom we have loved and who have loved us" (p. xvi)?

INTRODUCTION GRACE HIDDEN IN POWERLESSNESS

1. Nouwen writes, "Silence and solitude call me to detach myself from the scaffolding of daily life and to discover if anything there can stand on its own when the traditional support systems have been pulled away" (p. 3). Have silence and solitude had a similar effect on you? Do you think this feeling of separation from the familiar and comforting patterns of daily life is the reason many avoid silence and solitude? Why or why not?
2. Do you feel prepared for death? If so, how? If not, what might preparing for death entail for you? What does it mean to die well?

CHAPTER 1

WE ARE CHILDREN OF GOD

1. What stage of life do you consider yourself to be in? Do you think others perceive you as being in a different stage? Young versus middle-aged? Middle-aged versus old? How does (or should) your understanding of your stage of life affect the way you live?
2. Nouwen tells us that the first step in preparing for death is to become a child again (p. 14). How does perceiving yourself this way lead to freedom and strength—and, ultimately, the ability to accept death?
3. “Once we have come into a deep inner knowledge—a knowledge born more of the heart than of the mind—that we are born out of love and will die into love, that every part of our being is rooted deeply in love and that this love is our true Father and Mother, then all forms of evil, illness, and death lose their final power over us and become painful but hopeful reminders of our true divine childhood” (pp. 16–17). Do you view evil, illness, and death with hope? Explain. How might we attain the “inner knowledge” of which Nouwen writes?
4. Can you relate to the metaphor of death as a process resembling childbirth, as we pass from one place into a bigger, better one—“the painful but blessed passage that will bring us face-to-face with our God” (p. 19)? What emotions does such an image evoke in you—comfort, hope, fear?

CHAPTER 2

WE ARE BROTHERS AND SISTERS OF EACH OTHER

1. Nouwen talks about two kinds of joy we all experience: the joy of being like everyone else and the joy of being different (p. 23). When have you experienced the joy of being different, of being set apart from the crowd in some way? When have you experienced “the immense joy of being a member of the human race” (p. 22)? Are both forms of joy equally powerful? Do you think one or the other is more important in God’s eyes? Why or why not?
2. Do you tend to think of death as the ultimate separation or, as Nouwen suggests, the ultimate point of unity and solidarity with others (pp. 26–27)? How does your viewpoint affect the way you view death? Does reflecting on the fact that we all die affect your feelings about death at all? If so, explain.

CHAPTER 3

WE ARE PARENTS OF GENERATIONS TO COME

1. Jesus told the disciples that his dying would allow him to send the Spirit to them, and Nouwen writes that we too can send the Spirit to those we love through our deaths (pp. 37–38). How does this idea strike you? Do you believe that we too can send the Spirit through our deaths?

2. To Nouwen, the most hope-giving aspect of death is that it reveals the fruitfulness of our lives. “The great paradox of our lives is that we are often concerned about what we do or still can do, but we are most likely to be remembered for who we were” (p. 38). In what ways might your life bear fruit? What do you think others will remember about you?

CHAPTER 4

YOU ARE A CHILD OF GOD

1. Nouwen writes, “Caring is the privilege of every person and is at the heart of being human” (p. 50). Why is caring not a responsibility but a privilege? If you have cared for someone who was sick or dying, did you view your work as a privilege?
2. Nouwen tells us we can choose between seeing our decreasing abilities and weakening bodies as our becoming less capable and returning to dust or as “a gateway to God’s grace” (p. 54). What would change in your life if you made the decision to see aging as a form of grace?
3. Nouwen is careful not to sentimentalize death. He describes it as “a great struggle to surrender our lives completely” (p. 56). Our desire to cling to what we have of life explains why we suffer so much anguish when we are dying. How can we help those who are dying work through this anguish?

4. Mary cared for Jesus with her presence under the cross, but she did not do so alone; she was with John. Why is it so important to care together? How can being part of a community lead to caring, and how can caring strengthen a community?

CHAPTER 5

YOU ARE BROTHERS AND SISTERS OF EACH OTHER

1. How, if at all, do you connect with and remember loved ones who have died? Does your community promote continued connection with the dead? If so, how? Visiting nearby cemeteries, observing traditions, remembrances?
2. Nouwen believes that part of caring for the dying is gently encouraging them to die with and for others. One way, as harsh as it may sound, is to share with them news of others who are suffering and dying (p. 77). Instead, many of us do the opposite—we hide any negative news from those who are very sick or dying in an effort to protect them. Why does Nouwen consider this to be a disservice to those who are dying? Do you agree or disagree?

CHAPTER 6

YOU ARE PARENTS OF GENERATIONS TO COME

1. How can you prepare yourself to transition from an active life to a passive one, as will happen to most of us one day as we grow old or suffer from illness? How can such dependence bring our lives to fulfillment?
2. What is the difference between success and fruitfulness (pp. 85–91)? Who, among those you knew personally as well as those you did not, has been fruitful in your life through or after death?

CONCLUSION

THE GRACE OF THE RESURRECTION

1. Nouwen writes, “The resurrection does not solve our problems about dying and death. It is not the happy ending to our life’s struggle, nor is it the big surprise that God has kept in store for us. . . . The resurrection doesn’t answer any of our curious questions about life after death, such as, How will it be? How will it look? But it does reveal to us that, indeed, love is stronger than death. After that revelation, we must remain silent, leave the whys, wheres, hows, and whens behind, and simply trust” (pp. 100–101). How can you trust in Jesus regarding the details of what happens after death?

EPILOGUE

1. Nouwen describes the death of his friend and mentor Père Thomas as a loss because he would no longer be able to visit his friend, but also a gift because Père Thomas's life could now bear full fruit, and his ministry at L'Arche could now have a new beginning. Whose death have you experienced as both a loss and a gift? Did the sadness you felt at the loss make the gift all the more powerful? Explain.