

Reaching Out

by Henri J. M. Nouwen

Discussion Guide

Reaching Out, by Henri J.M. Nouwen (Image Books - Doubleday, copyright c 1975), examines three movements of spiritual development that lead toward a relationship with God. It is a book about the struggles people face in an attempt to live a life in the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Nouwen guides the reader in steps starting with reaching out to self, then to others, and ultimately to God. He shows how a person's life belongs to others just as much as it belongs to oneself. The book gets you thinking about your relationship with self, others and with God.

Permission is granted to reproduce this discussion guide.

Chapter 1

A Suffocating Loneliness

This chapter examines what it means to feel alone and lacking intimacy.

1. Share why you have selected this book to read and what you hope to learn from it.
2. What does it feel like to be lonely? List the feelings associated with being alone.
3. How does Western living and urban living contribute to loneliness?
4. List and discuss some of the roots of loneliness.
5. Discuss why one person can't really remove another person's loneliness.
6. List some ways that people falsely seek to cure loneliness.
7. Create two lists of things that are true and not true of loneliness, according to the author.

Chapter 2

A Receptive Solitude

This chapter looks at the process of converting loneliness to deep solitude.

1. Explain what solitude is and what it means to you. Why can the word be misleading?
2. What is solitude of the heart? How can you achieve it? How does it differ from physical solitude?
3. What is inner sensitivity and why is it the beginning of a spiritual life?
4. List the benefits of experiencing deep solitude.
5. How does having an inner sense of friendship and community benefit us?
6. What did Thomas Merton learn about solitude? What does he say about it?
7. How do you move from loneliness to solitude?

Chapter 3

A Creative Response

This chapter looks at how we react and respond to life situations and surroundings.

1. Why do many people live a reactionary lifestyle and how does it hinder them?
2. List some of the traits and trademarks of a real spiritual life.
3. What is meant by alertness in solitude and how can it be beneficial?
4. Name some of the positive aspects of interruptions.
5. Discuss the burdens that reality places on us. What keeps us from opening ourselves to the reality of the world?
6. What is inner solidarity? How is it connected to compassion?
7. Give a brief summary of the first movement, from loneliness to solitude.

Chapter 4

Creating Space For Strangers

This chapter looks at the movement from hostility to hospitality and the relationship between guest and host.

1. What makes people fearful of strangers?
2. Share what the word hospitality means to you. Give an example.

3. Discuss ways in which people try to limit their own hospitality to others.
 4. What lessons can we learn from biblical stories about hospitality?
 5. List some the difficulties and issues involved with creating space.
 6. When you are a stranger, how do you wish to be treated?
 7. What is often the cause of pre-occupation and why is it a stumbling block?
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Chapter 5

Forms of Hospitality

This chapter looks at hospitality by examining three types of relationships.

1. When do you feel the most and the least hospitable?
 2. Discuss the relationship between parents and children in terms of hospitality.
 3. List some of the hospitality needs of children.
 4. Discuss how hospitality can be a model for a creative exchange between people.
 5. List what Nouwen sees as problems with education.
 6. Name some of the positive traits found in a hospitable teacher.
 7. What role does listening play in healing? Why is it important?
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Chapter 6

Hospitality and the Host

This chapter looks why hospitality requires poverty, poverty of the mind, and poverty of the heart.

1. How does being lonely interfere with the act of hospitality?
2. List some qualities of a good host.
3. Discuss the connection between poverty and being a good host.
4. Explain what is meant by poverty of the mind.
5. Discuss why an inflated heart is dangerous.

6. Why does hospitality require poverty of the mind and of the heart?
7. What did you learn about reaching out to others from reading the second movement?

Chapter 7

Prayer and Mortality

This chapter examines the many illusions of life and the symptoms of sentimentality and violence.

1. When you think of reaching out to God, what comes to mind?
2. Explain the progression of how this movement is connected to the two previous movements.
3. Why is it often difficult to express and explain prayer?
4. List the illusions that people deal with as mentioned in this chapter.
5. Explain what is meant by the illusion of immortality.
6. Discuss the paradox of prayer.
7. Share your thoughts of the presence of God in prayer.

Chapter 8

The Prayer of the Heart

This chapter looks at the use of prayer to satisfy human longings as we seek to connect with God.

1. What do you think it means to take prayer seriously?
2. List some of the issues and questions that surround prayer of the heart.
3. What is needed in order to find your way to God?
4. How should a Christian prepare in order to be open to God's call?
5. What does Nouwen say about spending quiet time with God?
6. How do you know if your feelings and insights are leading you in the right direction, towards God?

7. What does the history of wisdom tell us about reaching out to God?

Chapter 9

Community and Prayer

This chapter concludes the discussion of moving from illusion to prayer and shows how the Christian community can assist in our reaching out.

1. List some signs of spiritual maturity.
2. What lessons can we learn from Jesus about prayer?
3. Prayer is far from sweet and easy, according to Nouwen. Name some prayer challenges.
4. How does the community of faith enhance our prayer life?
5. Explain what it means that the Christian community is a waiting community.
6. Discuss how prayer is the language of the Christian community.
7. Share how this book has helped you reach out to God.