

Vulnerable Embodiment:

A Critical Analysis of Henri Nouwen's Spiritual Formation Theology
and its Possible Value for the Discourse on Gender and Health

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Declaration

By presenting this thesis in electronic format, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own, original work, that I am the authorship owner thereof (unless to the extent explicitly otherwise stated) and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

Date: 1 December 2014

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Abstract

This study investigates whether the counter-cultural spiritual formation theology of Henri Nouwen could make a significant contribution to the discourse on an inclusive, gender-equitable, spirituality-based approach to holistic health. An analysis of Nouwen's literary output reveals that three main relationships feature in the majority of his works: the relationship to self, the relationship to others and the relationship to God. This foundational framework of Nouwen is then used to structure the rest of the study to get an indication of the possible enduring value of certain core concepts that Nouwen developed within his triad of "movements" toward wholeness. In his thinking about the movement of *Reaching out to our Fellow Human Beings*, the concept of *Vulnerability* emerged as a key component of his theology. This forms the focus of investigation in Chapter 3 of this study. The movement of *Reaching out to our Innermost Self* led to an evaluation of the current usefulness of Nouwen's seminal thinking on *Embodiment*, in chapter 4. In Chapter 5 the possible value of Nouwen's lifelong engagement with *Mystery* as basis for his movement of *Reaching Out to our God*, is considered. In each of these chapters Nouwen's possible contribution is brought into conversation with the current discourse in this field. This study then suggests that following the "downwardly mobile" way of Henri Nouwen's spirituality of vulnerable embodiment could add a valuable contemplative dimension to the current conversation on global health and wellness. This approach may open up a range of important questions in the areas of vulnerability, embodiment and mysticism.

Opsomming

Hierdie studie stel ondersoek in na die vraag of die kontra-kulturele spiritualiteitsvorming-teologie van Henri Nouwen 'n betekenisvolle bydrae kan lewer tot die huidige diskoers rondom 'n geslagsgelyke, spiritualiteit-gebaseerde benadering tot holistiese gesondheid. 'n Analise van Nouwen se literêre bydraes dui aan dat drie basiese verhoudinge 'n prominente rol speel in die meeste van sy werke: die verhouding tot self, die verhouding tot ander mense en die verhouding tot God. Hierdie grondliggende raamwerk van Nouwen word dan gebruik om die struktuur van die res van die studie te bepaal om daardeur 'n aanduiding te probeer kry oor die moontlike blywende waarde van sekere kernkonsepte wat Nouwen ontwikkel het binne sy drieledige stel "bewegings" na heelheid. Uit sy denke rondom die beweging wat hy *Uitreik na ons Medemense* noem, het die konsep *kwesbaarheid* na vore gekom as 'n sleutelbegrip in sy teologie. Dit is die navorsingsfokus van Hoofstuk 3 van hierdie studie. In Hoofstuk 4 word die moontlike bydrae van Nouwen se ontwikkelende denke rondom *beliggaming* ondersoek, na aanleiding van sy beskrywing van die beweging *Uitreik na ons Diepste Self*. In Hoofstuk 5 word ondersoek ingestel na die moontlike waarde wat Nouwen se lewenslange betrokkenheid by *die mistiek* mag inhou, na aanleiding van wat hy skryf oor die beweging van *Uitreik na ons God*. In elkeen van hierdie hoofstukke word Nouwen se moontlike waardetoevoeging in verband gebring met die huidige diskoers in hierdie area. Hierdie studie suggereer dan dat die "afwaartse beweging" van Henri Nouwen se spiritualiteit van kwesbare beliggaming 'n waardevolle kontemplatiewe dimensie mag toevoeg tot die huidige diskoers oor globale gesondheid en welwese. Hierdie benadering mag 'n verskeidenheid belangrike vrae na vore bring op die terreine van kwesbaarheid, beliggaming en mistiek.

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Chapter 1

Introduction - The Way of the Heart

From Measurements to Movements

*What is the value
of great theological erudition
or great pastoral adeptness
or intense but fleeting mystical experience
or social activism
when there is not a well-formed heart
to guide a well-formed life?*

(Henri Nouwen 2010: Kindle Location 169)

1.1 Motivation

1.1.1 Why this Subject?

Within the current worldwide interest in the relationship between healthy spirituality and emotional, psychological, physical and communal health, there is a growing consensus that sound spiritual formation represents an essential component of working towards holistic health.

In the current discourse on global health care there seems to be a strong movement towards recognizing and including the essential role of religion. In an important contribution, Christoph Benn, on behalf of the Global Fund to Fight Aids, TB and Malaria, writes about “The Continued Paradigm Shift in Global Health and the Role of the Faith Community”¹. In an equally significant contribution, Gillian Paterson, Research Fellow at Heythrop College, University of London, argues persuasively about “Discovering Fire: Changes in International Thinking on Health Care – The Challenges for Religion” (in Cochrane, Schmid & Cutts (eds) 2011:16). Various researchers in the fields of spirituality, psychology, and whole-person caring² also present convincing arguments concerning the vital importance of integrated body-mind-spirit healing in a whole-systems approach.

¹ Benn, C. 2011. The Continued Paradigm Shift in Global Health and the role of the Faith Community. In James Cochrane, Barbara Schmid and Theresa Cutts (eds.) *When Religion and Health Align: Mobilising Religious Health Assets for Transformation*. Dorpspruit: Cluster Publications.

² Cf. *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* (Scazzero 2006: 39); *Advances in the Conceptualization and Measurement of Religion and Spirituality: Implications for Physical and Mental Health Research* (Hill & Pargament 2008); *Whole-Person Care: An Interprofessional Model for Healing and Wellness* (Thornton, 2013: 98).

Writing about “The laws of health and wholeness” in the influential book *Transforming Health: Christian approaches to Healing and Wholeness*, the physician Paul Brand³ explains:

We are all trained in our own narrow specialization, and get used to thinking in terms of the laws that govern the aspects of health and healing that are responsive to those laws. If we are Christian physicians, we need to accept disciplines of thought which take into account the basic laws of wholeness of body, mind and spirit together (Ram ed. 1995: 40).

From an African perspective, James Cochrane, one of the three co-principals of the African Religious Health Assets Program, is very positive about the shift in theory formation that is slowly taking place away from “utilitarian, or market-based, or rational choice theories of the human good, all of which are anthropologically superficial and relevant only within strict limits”. He discerns a movement towards a slowly developing new kind of intellectual paradigm and formulates his position as follows:

... signs of a paradigm shift are now everywhere, partly impelled by the failures of current models, and partly by the collapse of the radical secularization thesis that dominated most of the scientific community, across disciplines, through the latter half of the 20th century. In the new paradigm that is emerging, we will recognize that every aspect of applied health sciences has a dynamic link to religious healthworlds and religious assets, and that every aspect of religious phenomena has a health relevance and health implication (Cochrane 2006:72).

Cochrane pointedly gives the following illustration of the typical African way of thinking about health and religion:

In Sesotho for example, as in isiXhosa, Bemba and other related African languages, there are no direct equivalents for either ‘religion’ or ‘health’, at

³ Paul Brand, F.R.C.S. (Eng.), C.B.E., pioneered research on leprosy and pain during eighteen years as a medical missionary in India. He served as chief of the Rehabilitation Branch of the United States Public Health Service Hospital, Carville Louisiana, and clinical professor of surgery and professor of orthopaedic surgery at Louisiana State University Medical School.

least not if they are understood separately from each other. The only appropriate Sesotho word is *bophelo* (*imphilo* in isiXhosa, *ubumi* in Bemba). However this word combines both our sense of what religion is and what health is, and also extends to include not just the individual body, but also the social body from which the individual's health is inseparable (Cochrane 2006:68,69).

It is clear that this wider frame of reference and more inclusive point of departure for thinking about health matters offers new momentum for broadening the understanding of the concept of what holistic health comprises, and in what ways it can be nurtured, promoted and maintained. "Healing" also takes on a whole new meaning if the very definition of what health entails is changing. The inclusion of the religious dimension as an important factor in thinking about health enriches the whole area of health research and praxis in profound ways. Among other things it means that certain aspects of religion and spirituality need to be carefully explored, weighed and researched to determine in which ways they could possibly add value to the current discourse. The innovative, counter-cultural spiritual formation theory of Henri J.M. Nouwen could represent such fertile ground from which fresh perspectives and new dimensions of praxis might arise in fields such as health, theology, development, gender and integral well-being.

1.1.2 Why Henri Nouwen?

The gradual worldwide philosophical "paradigm shift" away from an exclusively modernist scientific approach, asks for a different kind of spiritual and theological approach to issues of private and public health. Without discounting the important contributions gained from the modernist world of "scientific" calculations and measurements, and without uncritically adopting "post-modernism" as philosophical frame of reference⁴, one could argue that the more "non-dualistic" (Rohr 2009:12) approach of someone like Henri Nouwen provides an important alternative

⁴ Prof. D.J. Smit refers to "so-called postmodernism" on purpose, as he is not convinced that the term is very helpful here and now, in the South African context, to help us discern the real challenges that confront us. Smit, D.J. 2000. In diens van die tale Kanaäns: oor sistematiese teologie vandag *Inaugural Lecture*, University of Stellenbosch: 23

theological approach to life, health and well-being. A brief survey of recent literature and current opinions reveals the lasting impact of Henri Nouwen's life and writings.

Richard Rohr, in his foreword to Wil Hernandez's third book in a trilogy on the legacy of Henri Nouwen (Hernandez 2012)⁵, affirms that Nouwen's life, spirituality and theology has enduring relevance for us today as "an excellent seer, inviting us into the same seeing". He concurs with Hernandez's framing of Nouwen's thought in terms of his natural ability to be a nondualistic thinker, and his ability to hold would-be tensions in a very creative balance⁶. At the end of his third book on Nouwen, Hernandez summarises the value of Nouwen's way of thinking in the movement towards wholeness and integration as follows:

Henri Nouwen saw things differently and operated out of a different framework of thinking because he personified the nondualistic consciousness characteristic of the contemplative mystics. Ever mindful of how all of life is ultimately interconnected, Nouwen pursued all efforts at integration as a worthwhile investment and expenditure of energy (Hernandez 2012: Kindle Location 2006).

In the opinion of Michael Higgins and Kevin Burns, who in 2012 constructed a radio series and published a book on the life and legacy of Nouwen under the title *Genius Born of Anguish*, the fact that Nouwen represented "the quintessential post-modern quester" accounts for much of his continuing relevance today.

The agony of being human, the restless searchings of the heart, these are the compelling motifs of Nouwen's own writing, but laced with autobiographical insight, shifting measures of his tortured peregrination, effusive optimism, boundless energy, and enervating self-doubt: the quintessential post-modern spiritual quester" (Higgins & Burns 2012: Kindle location 117).

Michael Ford, another researcher into the life and enduring legacy of Nouwen, also describes the surprising global impact of this *Wounded Prophet*:

⁵ The three books in this trilogy underscoring the lasting legacy of Nouwen's spirituality are: Wil Hernandez 2012. *Henri Nouwen and Spiritual Polarities: a Life in Tension*; Wil Hernandez and Sue Mosteller, 2008. *Henri Nouwen and Soul Care: a Ministry of Integration*; Wil Hernandez 2006. *Henri Nouwen: A Spirituality of Imperfection*.

⁶ Ibid. 2012: Foreword.

In the time since Nouwen's death, there has been an upsurge of interest in his books, which are selling around the world in greater numbers than ever before. The Henri Nouwen Literary Centre, set up in his memory at Daybreak, deals daily with inquiries from people in many different countries and is clearly witnessing the fruits of his lifelong endeavours. Henri Nouwen Societies have been formed in North America and Holland, while retreats and conferences are doing much to evaluate his work and legacy (Ford 1999: 208).

In a recent reconstruction and publication of Henri Nouwen's unpublished class notes and other writings on spiritual formation⁷, we are presented with a fresh and creative approach to formation for whole-person health. The lasting value of Nouwen's approach is described as follows:

The fruit of Nouwen's creative and integrative work in the field of pastoral psychology is a new, transformative, nonsystematic approach to spiritual formation. Some interpreters have called Nouwen's approach a "spirituality of imperfection" (Christensen & Laird 2010: Kindle Location 2147)

Assessing the spiritual Legacy of Henri Nouwen for specifically the American society during Nouwen's time there, Deirdre LaNoue, after a brief sketch of the recent history of American spirituality, concludes:

...it is easy to surmise that America held great opportunity for Henri to express his gifts and the interests that were uniquely his. He was a psychologist and so spoke the language of typical late-twentieth-century Americans. He was also a deeply committed Christian and a pastor who longed to make a difference in the lives of those who were asking spiritual questions. As the spiritual quest of Americans grew in intensity, the simple accessibility of Nouwen's spiritual writings quenched the thirst of many a soul (LaNoue 2001:10).

⁷ HJM Nouwen, with MJ Christensen & RJ Laird 2010. *Spiritual Formation: Following the Movements of the Spirit*.

In a recent personal interview Laurent Nouwen⁸, the youngest brother of Henri Nouwen, and the director of the Dutch *Henri Nouwen Stichting*, responded to this researcher's question about the current relevance and popularity of his brother Henri Nouwen's work in the following way:

I am quite amazed by it. I cannot really say about the rest of the world, but I have a good picture of sales of his books in Holland and Germany, because I represent the estate. What I see is that book sales are still today more or less on an equal level. Even last Sunday there was a Protestant TV show about Henri, 18 years after his death. They repeat it every year. I was also interviewed on the program by Bobby Schuller. There is still this amazing interest across all denominations. I am very amazed. So it must touch a deeper cry.

Obviously Henri Nouwen still speaks the language of many people looking for integral wholeness, not just in America or Europe, but worldwide. This study hopes to make a contribution to his lasting legacy by responding to the challenge of theologically analysing one of the crucial aspects in the current discourse on holistic health, viz. the role of spirituality and specifically spiritual formation. As the most widely read author in the field of Christian spirituality at the time of his death in 1996 (Beumer 1997:13), and still one of the most influential voices in the field of spirituality and theology in recent times, Henri JM Nouwen embodied a spirituality of vulnerability and compassionate mysticism that touched and healed the lives of millions worldwide. A critical analysis of the spiritual formation aspect of Nouwen's theology within his spirituality as a whole and an evaluation of the possible contribution his approach could make in the evolving discourse on gender, health and theology might provide us with valuable conceptual and practical clues for moving towards holistic personal, local and global health and wellness.

⁸ Laurent Nouwen, June 19, 2014. Recorded Interview with AF van der Merwe, *Henri Nouwen Stichting*, Rotterdam.

1.2 Methodology

This study represents a particular kind of qualitative research, viz. the “explication and evaluation of central concepts and models” (Mouton & Marais 1985:43). In light of the fact that it is a literary study in Systematic Theology, it will have a descriptive and expository character. The basic methodology will be critical analysis and comparison of primary and secondary literature sources, with a view to finding key elements that could contribute to the enrichment of the current discourse on Religion, Health and Gender.

1.2.1 Primary Research Question

Given the context of the present study, where theological issues pertaining to health and gender are to receive special attention, the primary focus of the research can be formulated as follows:

In what ways could the counter-cultural spiritual formation theology of Henri Nouwen make a significant contribution to the discourse on an inclusive, gender-equitable, spirituality-based approach to holistic health?

1.2.2 Secondary Research Questions

The main research objective, as formulated above, can be disseminated into the following secondary research questions:

- 1.2.2.1 Could Henri Nouwen’s organic, natural approach to spiritual formation as whole-person healing, as embodied in his life story and literary output, represent a significant contribution to holistic health development theory?

- 1.2.2.2 How might Henri Nouwen's "theology of weakness" offer guidelines and impetus towards developing a counter-cultural, inclusive, health-promoting spirituality of vulnerability?
- 1.2.2.3 In what ways could Nouwen's theme of "grounding spirituality in the body" possibly contribute to a theologically integrated spirituality of embodiment that might enrich the current discourse on gender issues?
- 1.2.2.4 In what manner might the mystical dimension in the theology of Henry Nouwen contribute to the current conversation on the religious aspects of whole-person health?

1.3 The Flow of the Study

One of the remarkable features of Henri Nouwen's contribution to theology is the natural flow and accessibility of his writing. The fact that he could convey profound truths in deceptively simple language made him the spiritual companion and guide to many "ordinary" Christians across the world and something of an enigma to many of his critical theological colleagues. For this study, thorough analysis and critical evaluation of core aspects of Henri Nouwen's theology are necessary. However, if this is merely to be attempted from a modernistic epistemological framework of so-called "objective science" we would do the legacy of Henri Nouwen grave injustice. His approach to spirituality and spiritual formation does not involve minute distinctions and the construction of rigid schemes. Henri Nouwen's caustic observation in this regard was:

"Many great saints have described their religious experiences, and many lesser saints have systematized them into different phases, levels or stages. These distinctions can be helpful for those who write books and for those who use them to instruct, but it is of great importance that we leave the world of measurements behind when we speak about the life of the spirit" (Nouwen 1987: 18).

Nouwen chooses not to speak about steps or stages on the way to perfection. He prefers using the dynamic metaphor of *movements* towards full, mature humanity. In their recent reconstruction of the class notes of Nouwen's formerly unpublished course on spiritual formation when he was a professor at Yale, two of his former students recorded Nouwen's own words on this matter:

“Spiritual formation, I have come to believe, is not about steps or stages on the way to perfection. It's about the *movements* from the mind to the heart through prayer in its many forms that reunites us with God, each other, and our truest selves⁹ (Nouwen, Christenson & Laird 2012: Kindle Location 139).

Laurent Nouwen, Henry Nouwen's youngest brother, admits that he did not fully comprehend the extent and significance of his brother's work and artistry until after his death. Since then he has come to see him as a very special kind of artist, almost like Vincent van Gogh, whose true talent was only discovered after his death¹⁰.

“Henri was a little like Vincent van Gogh in the way that he taught us to *look* differently. After Van Gogh we looked at the world differently. So Henri is also a person who gave us a different view. We can look with these eyes as well. This is an alternative way of looking at reality. So I see Henri in a certain way as a theological artist. That is his sensitivity as well. And sometimes an artist is ahead of his time. But I am most interested in why he is still read so widely. So I am not so much interested in the writer as in the reader. What is the reader looking for today? Why is there such a positive response to his simple writings?”¹¹

The academic surmise upon which this study is undertaken is that the spiritual “movements” that Henri Nouwen identified might hold promise for the current

⁹ Nouwen returns to this image of a movement from the head to the heart in many of his books. Referring to the mystic Theophan the Recluse, he sees prayer as “standing in the presence of God with the mind in the heart – that is, in the point of our being where there are no divisions or distinctions and where we are totally one within ourselves, with God, and with others and the whole of creation” (Nouwen, Christiansen & Laird 2012: Kindle Location 149)

¹⁰ Throughout his life Henri Nouwen saw Vincent van Gogh as his “spiritual guide and wounded Healer” (Henri Nouwen's foreword in Edwards 1989: x).

¹¹ Recorded interview with AF van der Merwe, *Henri Nouwen Stichting*, Rotterdam, June 19, 2014.

discourse on growth, healing and holistic health. Maybe the enduring popularity of Henri Nouwen, as a “theological artist”, can be attributed to the fact that the natural, organic way in which these spiritual movements, like the movements of a symphony, flow together to express something of the beauty of wholeness, something that everybody needs before he or she can become whole, holy or healthy.

The flow of this study will therefore develop as an effort to identify, analyse and describe certain core “movements” in Nouwen’s spiritual formation theory that may be relevant and of value for the current discourse on health, gender and theology. The structure of the thesis will honour Nouwen’s way of doing theology, by following his regularly used method of describing movements from a lesser, immature state to a more spiritually mature way of being. Often Nouwen moves from a very perceptive theological analysis and description of a current situation towards a creative synthesis of seemingly contradictory poles, always coming forth from deep spiritual discernment.

From amongst the various movements colourfully described by Nouwen in a number of his books, this study identifies three as representative of his spiritual formation theory and which may be significant for today’s circumstances. They have been synthesized from various sources and renamed for the current context in a style that Henri Nouwen might possibly have employed today.

In broad terms the study is constructed to reflect a pattern that Nouwen makes use of in many of his books, in describing the “outward” movement to find God in others (Chapter 3), the “inward” movement to find God our deepest being (chapter 4), and the journey “upward” or “beyond” to find God in all things (Chapter 5).

After this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 (*The Way Of The Wounded Healer: From Upward Mobility to Broken Wholeness*) comprises a biographical overview, theological positioning and evaluation of the life story, spirituality and spiritual formation theory of Henri Nouwen within his context and in terms of our research questions.

Chapter 3 (*The Way of Vulnerability: From Hostility to Hospitality*) presents an exploration and possible integration of Nouwen’s counter-cultural concept of spiritual growth as “downward mobility” towards a different kind of vulnerable, interdependent wholeness.

Chapter 4 (The Way of Embodiment: *From Grasping to Being*) will investigate the sources of Nouwen's attitude towards the body, in the light of his lifelong struggle with his sexual identity. Nouwen's late development of the concept of "grounding spirituality in the body" and moving beyond moralism will be evaluated in terms of the emerging field of Body Theology.

Chapter 5 (The Way of Mystery: *From Illusions of the Mind to Prayer of the Heart*) deals with Nouwen's concept of Spiritual Formation as a liberating journey towards a mystical union with God, self, others and creation, and its possible value for the current discourse on gender, health and theology.

The final chapter (Conclusion: *the Downward Way Forward*) presents the results of the study in terms of the research questions posed at the beginning.

Chapter 2

The Way of the Wounded Healer

From Upward Mobility to Broken Wholeness

*The story of our salvation stands radically
over and against the philosophy of upward mobility.
The great paradox which Scripture reveals to us is
that real and total freedom is
only found through downward mobility.¹²*

(Nouwen 2007:29)

¹² Nouwen, 2007: 29

2.1 Broken Wholeness?

Henri Nouwen lived a life of paradox: thinking, writing, and living in the tension between seemingly irreconcilable polarities. A number of his biographers and interpreters see this as the underlying cause for some of the anguish that tortured much of Nouwen's life. On the other hand, it might also account in part for his continuing relevance for today's "postmodern"¹³ culture, where paradox and contradiction are embraced as part of a life paradigm. In his final interpretation of Nouwen's legacy for today, *Henri Nouwen and Spiritual Polarities: A Life of Tension*, Wil Hernandez explains:

Nouwen showed a high level of tolerance for regarding polar opposites not necessarily as conceptual "enemies" to be pitted against each other, but rather as "friends" that could complement each other" (Hernandez 2012: Kindle Location 433).

In the present study the paradoxical title of this paragraph - "broken wholeness" - is coined to try and describe Nouwen's extra-ordinary way of thinking and living. It expresses something of his counter-cultural vision of health and healing and the value that such a concept might have in the current discourse on the definitions of health and illness. True wholeness includes and embraces human fragility and brokenness.

In recent decades a debate between two conceptual polarities has been raging about the definition of health. These theories about what constitutes health find their points of departure in opposing philosophical frames of reference. The first position argues that health is a purely empirical, objectively verifiable notion. According to this

¹³ Like DJ Smit, David Tracy is not comfortable with using the term "postmodern" in a generalising way. "We live in an age that cannot name itself. For some, we are still in the age of modernity and the triumph of the bourgeois subject. For others, we are in a time of the levelling of all traditions and await the return of the repressed and communal subject. For yet others, we are in a postmodern moment where the death of the subject is now upon us as the last receding wave of the death of God" (Tracy 1994:3).

theory, originally proposed by C Boors, the concept of health is empirically descriptive and completely value-free¹⁴. Other philosophers, like Lennart Nordenfelt¹⁵, present their theory as a *Holistic Theory of Health*. Nordenfelt sets it in explicit opposition to *analytic* theories, such as that of Boors. He argues that health is by definition a value-based concept. The holistic theories refer not only to the *survival* and *reproduction* of life, but also to the *quality* of life.

Several attempts have been made to either harmonise or re-conceptualize these extreme positions so that the strengths of both can be maintained, as in the work of Kateryna Fedoryka, in her article *Health as a Normative Concept: Towards a New Conceptual Framework*¹⁶. In what follows it might become clear that Henri Nouwen's embrace of paradox and juxtaposed polarities could also play a part in moving towards a more unified approach in health theory formation, in which the phenomenological as well as the values aspects of health and illness are fully taken into account.

2.2 Henri Nouwen: A Literary Biography

Henri Nouwen was a passionate and prolific author. In his lifetime more than 40 books, a huge number of articles, of sermons and other literary contributions flowed from his pen and from his heart. More than seven million copies of his books have been sold worldwide and his work has been translated into more than thirty languages. For Nouwen writing was ministry, personal therapy, and spiritual discipline¹⁷. As his writing style was so lucid and sometimes almost uncomfortably open and honest, it could be enlightening for our study to approach Nouwen's life

¹⁴ Boors C. 1977 Health as a Theoretical Concept. *Philosophy of Sciences* 44, 542-573; Boors C. 1997. A Rebuttal on Health. In *What is Disease?* JM Huber & RF Almeder (ed), Totowa, New Jersey. Biomedical Ethics Reviews, Humana Press: 1-134.

¹⁵ Nordenfelt L 2001 *Health, Science and Ordinary Language*. Amsterdam: Rudopi Publishers

¹⁶ Kateryna Fedoryka, in her article: Health as a Normative Concept: Towards a New Conceptual Framework. *The Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 22:143-160. Kluwer Academic Publishers. Printed in the Netherlands.

¹⁷ According to Nouwen's brother, Laurent Nouwen, he was a very disciplined and conscientious worker who could spend extended periods of time alone, engaged in thorough research, meditation and writing. (Recorded interview with AF van der Merwe, *Henri Nouwen Stichting*, Rotterdam, June 19, 2014.)

story through a short biographical sketch via his literary output. Nouwen's oft-repeated conviction (originally formulated by Carl Jung) was that the most personal is also the most universal.

...it is my growing conviction that my life belongs to others just as much as it belongs to myself and that what is experienced as most unique often proves to be most solidly embedded in the common conditions of being human. (Nouwen, 1976: 16)

Henri Nouwen's honest and open sharing of his own struggles, failures, accomplishments and spiritual growth through his writings provides us with a kaleidoscopic view of the movements of his soul. Clearly his works also touched and made connections and guided the spiritual journeys of a multitude of readers across the globe. Following Nouwen's literary trail in the context of the major phases of his life might present a nuanced introduction to his very human spiritual journey and could help enlighten the context in which the themes that will be discussed in later chapters of this study might be evaluated.¹⁸

2.2.1 Early Influences (1932 -1963)

Books and literature played an important role in Henri Nouwen's life from the beginning. His formative years were spent in his reasonably well-to-do family's home in the small village of Nijkerk in the Netherlands. His father, Laurent Jean Marie Nouwen, was a tax lawyer and a professor of law. His mother, Maria Huberta Helena Ramselaar Nouwen, was a deeply religious woman with a great interest in literature and mysticism (Beumer, 1997:16). One of Nouwen's biographers, Michael O'Laughlin writes:

The atmosphere of the Nouwen home was progressive and orderly. For his part, Henri's father was an articulate intellectual. He was always pondering and discussing the great topics of the day. Henri's mother was fond of writing

¹⁸ Although Nouwen wrote many articles for journals, newspapers and magazines, this literature study focuses on Nouwen's books. Many of the articles he wrote were excerpts from his books or summaries of the themes in his books. There are no dominant themes in his articles that are not found in his books (LaNoue 2001: 56).

and literature. She read widely in several European languages. Together they created an intellectual ambience that provided endless stimulation for the young Henri Nouwen (O’Laughlin 2005:21).

Two themes that emerged early in Henri’s life are that he had always, since the time he was a baby, longed for affection and the assurance that he was loved. He wanted to be held, to be cuddled and assured that he was loved. His younger brother, Laurent, confirmed that Henri disturbingly often asked his parents whether they really loved him.¹⁹ The second theme is that he never wanted to be anything other than a priest. Nouwen played at being a priest from the age of eight, pretending to give sermons and celebrate mass. These themes, his desperate need for affirmation and love, and his relentless commitment to his vocation as priest, played a defining role throughout his life and they are clearly reflected in much of his writing.

After the Second World War, from which Henri was largely sheltered, the family moved to The Hague. In 1950, at the age of eighteen, Henri entered the minor seminary at Apeldoorn, and a year later the major seminary at Rijsenberg. On Sunday July 21, 1957 Henri Nouwen was ordained as a priest in the archdiocese of Utrecht. From 1957 until 1964 he studied psychology at Nijmegen (La Noue 2001:15). The combination of psychology and theology was viewed with some suspicion in the Catholic Church at that time in the Netherlands. Nouwen was convinced of the great value that this relatively new field of study, psychology, could have for ministry. But he was not particularly drawn to the type of psychology presented at Nijmegen, with its multitude of tests, procedures and statistics. He had a more intuitive style and was more interested in combining theology and psychology.

He was fascinated by the work of Anton Boisen, who introduced the idea of working from the “living human document”. From Boisen (and Boisen’s own broken life story) he learnt that psychological problems and needs could become a source of inspiration and a way to God. That conviction, that our wounds could become a source of healing, would become a trademark of Nouwen’s thinking and writing throughout his career. However, when he submitted the subject for his doctoral thesis as a study of Boisen and Cabot’s case study method, it was rejected. Nouwen

¹⁹ Recorded Interview with AF van der Merwe, *Henri Nouwen Stichting*, Rotterdam, June 19, 2014.

was deeply disappointed by the narrow scientific vision in the Netherlands at the time, and looked towards the wider and broader academic shores of the United States, where the *Pastoral Counseling Movement* was gaining momentum and the combination of psychology and theology opened up exciting new possibilities (O’Laughlin 2006:38- 41).

2.2.2 Pastoral Psychology and Theology (1964 -1970)

Nouwen was accepted as fellow at the Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Texas, from 1964 to 1966, working in clinical pastoral education, research and writing. He was deeply influenced by the personality and clinical approach of Karl Menninger. Menninger had a broad vision which surpassed merely the clinical aspect²⁰. Nouwen, who was at a very receptive stage of his life, eagerly absorbed Menninger’s vision of the continuity between medical science, health and a better world.

At the Menninger Foundation Nouwen met John Dos Santos, who was to set up a new psychology department at Notre Dame University, Indiana, USA. Dos Santos eventually persuaded Nouwen to join him in this venture at Notre Dame. From 1966 to 1968 Nouwen taught psychology at Notre Dame’s new psychology department. From his very popular lectures on the themes of depression, confusion, intimacy, and love, grew his first book, *Intimacy: Essays in Pastoral Psychology* (Nouwen 1969). The reaction to the creative and fresh approach of this first book was so positive that a second book, *Creative Ministry*, followed in 1971. Nouwen’s interest and passion for spiritual formation and ministry, and not just general psychology, is clear from the first sentence: “The main concern of this book is the relationship between professionalism and spirituality in the ministry” (Nouwen 1971 (b): xv). Influences in style and content from the leading figures in this field at that time can be clearly detected throughout this book: Carl Jung, the most prominent figure in the

²⁰The psychiatrist Karl Menninger, with his father and brother, who were also psychiatrists, launched the Menninger Foundation in 1925. It was widely acclaimed as the foremost training centre in the USA for psychiatrists, psychologists and other professionals in health care. They pioneered a new type of therapy which they called the “biopsychosocial” approach, a therapy that focused on the totality of the needs of the patient. This was closely related to Anton Boisen’s conviction that the “total person” deserved attention. (O’Laughlin 2006:45)

field of psychology and religion at that time; Anton Boisen, the founder of the Clinical Pastoral Counseling movement, and Seward Hiltner, to whom Nouwen dedicated the book as his “teacher and friend, who introduced me to the field of pastoral theology” (Nouwen 1971 (b) : xii).

Nouwen returned to the Netherlands in 1968 after completing his second year at Notre Dame. He then taught pastoral psychology in Amsterdam and Utrecht for three years. His plan had always been to return to the Netherlands to introduce some of the newer developments to Dutch Theology. Realising that his main interest was not only in psychology, but more in the combination of psychology and theology, he decided to formally further his studies in theology. During his third year back in the Netherlands he completed his doctoral examinations in theology with great success at the University of Nijmegen, but he did not write a dissertation. His dissertation proposal was rejected because, according to the preferences of the Dutch faculty at that time, it did not contain sufficient statistical data and was lacking in theological *gravitas*. Henri Nouwen was not well received and largely ignored by the Dutch Catholic world during this sojourn in the Netherlands and he experienced it as a dark and difficult time, feeling alienated and rejected.

However, during this time he wrote two manuscripts in Dutch. The first was *Met Open Handen* (1972), translated into English and published as *With Open Hands* in 1972. In this work the tone is much more personal than in his early works and one can already discern a movement away from strictly academic language, directing his writing (illustrated with contemporary photographs) to ordinary Christians, both Catholic and Protestant. The second book was on the life and thought of Thomas Merton, entitled *Bidden om het Leven*. It was translated into English and published as *Pray to Live* in 1972. In 1981 it appeared again as *Thomas Merton: Contemplative Critic*, and in 2009 as *Encounters with Merton: Spiritual Reflections*. In his introduction to this book on Thomas Merton, Henri Nouwen reveals much of his own mind-set at the time, and why Merton had such a deep influence on his life.

I have tried here to uncover a few main trends in Merton’s richly diverse and very productive life, in order to help people better understand his commitment to a contemplative critique of himself and his world. I hope that these short chapters will lead to an attentive meditation on Merton’s own writings and to a

continuing search for a contemplative foundation of our fragmented, restless lives... (Nouwen 2009:15).

2.2.3 Prolific Productivity (1971-1981)

When the new Dean of Yale University Divinity School, Colin Williams, read Nouwen's first book, *Intimacy*, he invited and eventually persuaded Nouwen to join the Divinity Faculty at Yale. He was convinced that Nouwen could help him establish and develop the newfound relationship between psychology and pastoral care. The time at Yale was a fruitful season in Nouwen's life. Deirdre LaNoue describes several positive aspects of these years:

He was a popular teacher and many students responded to him with enthusiasm. His classes were often filled to capacity. He made friends and his professional career flourished. He also became more and more popular as a speaker and writer. Nouwen became more assured of what he felt God had called him to do. He wanted to write books and teach ministers, and he wanted to make North America his home. Nouwen published twelve books during the ten years at Yale (Lanoué 2001:21).

Henri Nouwen's academic, professional, and personal struggles and spiritual maturing can be traced in the books that he produced during these years.

The Wounded Healer, with its memorable title, was published in 1972, and proved to be a highly significant theological contribution. It has undergone multiple printings and is still used as a textbook for ministry. Nouwen articulates and employs an approach that characterised his writing style throughout his career: "...the minister is called to recognize the sufferings of his time in his own heart and make that

recognition the starting point of his service.” In a simple, accessible yet profound way he highlights the value and effectiveness of the contemporary minister who is willing to “make his own wounds available as a source of healing” (Nouwen 1972: xv-xvi).

Out of Solitude: Three Meditations on Christian Life (1974), was the publication of three sermons that Nouwen preached at Yale. It was based on Mark 1:35, and from that text, describing Jesus withdrawing to a solitary place, Nouwen developed his thinking on solitude, a theme that featured strongly in his later work.

The second book that was published in 1974 was *Ageing: The Fulfillment of Life*. This was largely a psychology text about embracing the later years of life as a time of hope, rather than loneliness.

During sabbaticals at Yale, Nouwen embarked on two life-changing retreats, both at the Abbey of the Genesee, a Trappist monastery in Pifford, New York. He had previously met Dom John Eudes Bamberger, a psychiatrist and the abbot of the monastery, who had also been the spiritual director of Thomas Merton at the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky. An ardent admirer of Merton, Henri Nouwen requested from Bamberger, who was now the abbot of Genesee Abbey and also Nouwen’s spiritual director, the opportunity to live in the Abbey of the Genesee as a “temporary member” of the community.

His seven-month stay there resulted in the publication of two very important books: The first was *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of Spiritual Life* (Dutch: *Open Uw Hart*), published in 1975. This book represented a movement to a deeper level in Henri’s own intellectual and spiritual journey. In this book and the next one he sets the tone for the rest of his life work. His Dutch friend and first biographer, Jurjen Beumer, sees this book as the high point of all the books he wrote during his Yale period (Beumer 1997:40). A number of threads in Nouwen’s thinking, feeling and experience came together here. This was the first work where Henri introduced his pivotal concept of the spiritual life as encompassing three relationships – the relationship to self, to others and to God. Much of his theology (including his theory of spiritual formation) developed along the lines of this triad of relationships or movements; reaching out to our Innermost Self, to our Fellow Human Beings, and to our God.

It is worth noting that from now on the author himself becomes part of the story in a very personal way. From this point Nouwen kept to the practice of transparent self-revelation.

During the last few years I have read many studies about spirituality and the spiritual life; I have listened to many lectures, spoken with many spiritual guides and visited many religious communities. I have learned much, but the time has come to realize that neither parents nor teachers, nor counsellors can do much more than offer a free and friendly place where one has to discover his own lonely way” (Nouwen 1975: 15).

The other book that originated during his time at the abbey is *The Genesee Diary: Report from a Trappist Monastery*, which was published in 1976. This was the publication of the daily diary that Nouwen kept during his seven-month stay there as a “temporary monk”. More personal and self-revealing than any of his previous works, it provides insight into the honest spiritual questions with which he struggled and the understandings he gained in the monastery. Many people identified deeply with his experiences²¹. The sometimes painful transparency of his spiritual “report” of his own weaknesses and struggles invited the reader to face his or her own spiritual journey as honestly and believably as Nouwen did. Henri Nouwen managed to maintain this quality of transparency and accessibility throughout his writing career.

Nouwen spent his next sabbatical in 1976 as fellow of the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research in Collegeville, Minnesota. The lectures he prepared during this time were later (1981) published as *The Living Reminder: Service and Prayer in Memory of Jesus Christ*. The three lectures were presented at the International Conference of the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education and the Canadian Association for Pastoral Education. Deceptively simple but theologically incisive, this book challenges “the temptation of separating ministry from spirituality, service from prayer” (Nouwen 1981:12). Making use of the terms healing, sustaining and guiding, introduced by Seward Hiltner in his *Preface to Pastoral Theology* (Hiltner,1954), Nouwen demonstrated that service was prayer and prayer was service, and ministers could not afford to separate the two.

²¹ Including this researcher, at a very vulnerable season of his life.

Over the years we have developed the idea that being present to people in all their needs is our greatest and primary vocation. The Bible does not seem to support this. Jesus' primary concern was to be obedient to his Father, to live constantly in his presence. Only then did it become clear to him what his task was in his relationships with people...It seems that in fact we live as if we should give as much of our heart, soul and mind as possible to our fellow human beings, while trying hard not to forget God. (Nouwen 1981:30-31)

Clowning in Rome: Reflections on Solitude, Celibacy, Prayer and Contemplation, published in 1979, was the literary outcome of the spring semester of 1978, which Nouwen spent as scholar-in-residence at the North American College in Rome, Italy. He presented lectures there on celibacy and contemplation. He described the Christian ministers in the circus-like atmosphere of Rome as clowns, who "by their humble, saintly lives evoke a smile and awaken a hope" (Nouwen 1979:3).

Henri Nouwen's mother died in October of 1978. He experienced it as a major tragedy. She was the one person who loved him unconditionally. They were very close emotionally, regularly corresponding by letter twice a week. In his *In Memoriam*, published in 1980, he attempted to probe the spiritual mystery of life and death. He also wrote a letter of consolation to his father, once again finding solace himself in writing about this deep human experience. Eventually he asked permission from his father to have it published as *A Letter of Consolation* in 1982. In 1981 *A Cry for Mercy* appeared, containing excerpts from his prayer journal during his second stay at Genesee.

In 1981, his last year as professor at Yale Divinity School, Nouwen completed three more books. He presented a seminar at Yale on the spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers of the third and fourth centuries, in which the relevance of their spirituality for ministers of the twentieth century was explored. It was later published as *The Way of the Heart* (1981). In this book Nouwen used three phrases from a story about Abba Arsenius: *fuge, terche et quiesce* (flee, pray and be silent), as the outline of the book, encouraging ministers to practice these disciplines to transform the mind and the heart.

The words *flee*, *be silent* and *pray* summarize the spirituality of the desert. They indicate the three ways of preventing the world from shaping us in its image and are thus the three ways to life in the spirit (Nouwen 1981:15).

Making All Things New: An Invitation to the Spiritual Life, was the second book that Nouwen completed during his last year at Yale. It is a small, readable book, aimed at defining the spiritual life for those who knew and practised the Christian faith, but also those who were spiritual seekers. Nouwen used the concept of worry as point of departure and discussed some disciplines that might help put us in a place where God could “make all things new” and release the reader from the destructive effects of worry.

Another book that Nouwen worked on during his last year at Yale was *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life* (1981). The question that this book raised was how to live compassionately in an uncaring world. It explores the idea that human beings are more competitive than compassionate, while Jesus called his followers to be compassionate as his Father is compassionate (Luke 6:36).

In the last three books produced at Yale, Jurjen Beumer detects a point of saturation, where Nouwen starts repeating himself. At this stage of his life he needed a new challenge.²² Deirdre La Noue also notes that:

...Nouwen struggled with life in the academic world. Nouwen felt torn between his career and his vocation. The competitive nature of the academic setting at Yale mostly encouraged rivalry and isolation. While he was teaching about the spiritual life of prayer, meditation, contemplation, humility, intimacy, vulnerability, and gentleness, the milieu around him seemingly emphasized only the intellectual life and its competition for success and prestige (LaNoue, 2001:29).

Henri Nouwen seriously started challenging himself about his obviously “upwardly mobile” lifestyle in a very competitive and success-driven world. More and more he became aware of the radical socio-political dimensions of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In Latin-America interesting things were happening in line with Nouwen’s vision of

²² Beumer explains it well in Dutch: “Hier in Yale zal het te veel repeteren van gedachten en ideeën worden, meer van hetzelfde. Nieuwe impulsen zijn daarom nodig, anders zal zijn werk gaan kabbelen.” (Beumer 1997:56)

spirituality, so he began asking himself whether his real vocation did not lie in another kind of ministry, in South America.

2.2.4 Downward Mobility (1983 -1985)

Gracias! A Latin American Journal (1983) marks the beginning of a change of direction in Henri Nouwen's life and theology. A new dimension is added to his life: close communion with the poor and disadvantaged. If Genesee taught him to live in prayer, now he would learn to live with the poor (Beumer 1997:57). Since his arrival at Yale he had been interested in the relationship between North and South America. During that time he made a number of visits to Latin America and studied Spanish in Bolivia. All his experiences there just strengthened his belief in the potential spiritual unity between North and South America.

In 1981 Nouwen resigned from his tenured position at Yale, and after a fifteen-month stay at the Abbey of the Genesee, embarked on a six month journey of discernment to South America. This was carefully recorded in his daily diary and later published as *Gracias! A Latin American Journal* (1983), which documented his search for an answer to his deepest question: "Does God call me to live and work in Latin America in the years to come?" In this journal of his travels in Bolivia and Peru he also ponders the presence of God in the poor, the challenge of a persecuted church, and the relation between faith and justice.

Among other significant encounters in South America, Nouwen developed a close relationship with Gustavo Gutierrez, whom he greatly admired. He wrote a beautiful and insightful preface to Gutierrez's book: *We Drink from our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People* (1983), in which he strongly aligned himself with Gutierrez's emphasis on the need for attention to the spiritual aspect of liberation theology. Nouwen's own ever-deepening Christ-centered spirituality, in which he then incorporates new areas of theological development, is clear from statements like the following:

It is here that the profound importance of a liberation spirituality as an undergirding of a liberation theology becomes clear. Those who see liberation theology as a theological rationale for a class struggle in which the poor claim their rights and try to break the power of their oppressors have ignored the center of the struggle for freedom. Jesus is the center “(Nouwen, in Gutierrez, 1983: xvii).

Eventually, after much travelling and soul-searching, it became clear to Nouwen that he was not called to spend the rest of his life and ministry in Latin America. Ten years later, writing from his eventual “home”, the L’Arche community near Toronto in Canada, he explains:

I became acutely aware that my desire to live and work with the poor in Latin America was not matched with a concrete call. I knew that the university was no longer the place to live out my vocation, but I also started to see that neither God nor God’s people was asking me to make Bolivia, Peru, Guatemala, or Nicaragua my permanent home. My experiences there, exciting and rewarding as they were, never led me to that deep inner “imperative” that forms the center of a true call (Nouwen, in the preface to the 1993 edition of *Gracias:x*).

2.2.5 Falling in Love (1986 – 1988)

That “true call” came somewhat later from an unexpected source. Nouwen had returned to the USA in response to an invitation to teach at Harvard. But he soon discovered Harvard was not the place where he could live out his true vocation either. Michael Higgins agrees with the assessment of Robert Jonas, a close friend of Nouwen’s at the time:

Henri’s time at the Harvard School of Divinity was not a good time for him. He was a person who wanted to *generate community*, to stimulate and foster a deeper spirituality in his students, to talk about how one cultivates a close relationship with Jesus and he was doing this at a time when the professoriate

and most of the graduate students were keen on biblical hermeneutics, post-structuralism, feminism, and numerous other intellectual trends (Higgins 2012: Kindle location 1011).

In the pluralistic theological climate of Harvard at that time Henri Nouwen came across as a traditionalist. His Christ-centered theology in which he brought together everything he had learnt - the monastic life, politics, Latin America and much more, delivered in his characteristically charismatic, electrifying style - drew large enthusiastic audiences, but was not really acceptable to the academic elite of Harvard. In his second term there he wanted to be even more explicit about Jesus as God incarnate who identified himself with the earth and the poor. For this Nouwen chose a study on the gospel of John, in which Jesus, as the central figure, followed the downward way of incarnation and asked for the same “downward mobility” from his followers. Henri was accused of “spiritual imperialism” and of being one-sided and arrogant. He was amazed and wounded by this reaction, felt less and less at home in Harvard and became increasingly depressed (O’Laughlin 2006:94).

Henri Nouwen attended a thirty-day retreat at Trosly, France, where Jean Vanier, founder of the worldwide L’Arche communities lived. Vanier had become a friend and confidant of Nouwen, and when Nouwen ended his tenure at Harvard he went back to Trosly for a longer period. The L’Arche community, where caring assistants lived a “normal” life in homes with severely handicapped people, was a revelation to Henri. Here he found manifest what he believed theologically, that the most marginalized people in society belonged to the core of what the gospel of Jesus Christ was about.

Nouwen wrote the manuscripts of two books during his visits with Vanier in France. *Lifesigns: Intimacy, Fecundity and Ecstasy in Christian Perspective* (1983), demonstrated the movement from fear into love, based on John 15. The other book written during this period was the result of his enlightening encounters with certain icons that were placed in his room during his visits to Trosly: *Behold The Beauty Of The Lord: Praying With Icons* (1986).

As Nouwen became part of life at Trosly, living with the disabled, he, as usual, kept a journal of his experiences, which he later published as *The Road to Daybreak: A Spiritual Journey* (1988). From the prologue and epilogue of this journal it is

clear that his year-long “road to Daybreak” had not been an easy journey. From the prologue:

Many of these notes speak of confusion, fear and loneliness, because much of the journey took place in the night. But as I stand at the break of a new day, I am filled with hope. I pray that those who will read this journal will be encouraged in their own spiritual journey and discover that same hope in their own hearts (Nouwen 1989: 5).

And from the epilogue of the book, after one year at Daybreak, it is obvious that his hopeful dreams of a tranquil and peaceful new chapter of his life at his new home at Daybreak was not to be that simple. To quote from the epilogue:

When I had said “yes” to the call of Daybreak to join their community as their priest, I hadn’t realized how many painful “no’s” were included in that “yes”: “no” to choosing the kind of people you want to live with, “no” to spending quality time with people you feel very close to, “no” to a self-defined form of solitude: “no” to centering my life in the beautiful and supportive friendship with Nathan. (Nouwen 1989:222)

Nathan Ball, with whom Nouwen had developed a deep and nurturing friendship while they were together in Trosly, France, accompanied Nouwen to Daybreak. While Nouwen came as pastor, Nathan came as a part-time assistant while studying theology in Toronto. Life at Daybreak was not easy for Nouwen, a former professor, accustomed to adulation and admiration for his academic and literary skills. Now, living in a house with severely handicapped people, some of whom could not read, write or speak, he had to learn a whole new set of skills. Nouwen was extraordinarily weak in household skills, clumsy in attending to the many physical needs of the wounded “core members” he had to care for, and he also discovered he was weak in the ability to nurture intimacy, the one area in which he thought he was strong. Nouwen could no longer hide behind an intellectual façade to conceal what he genuinely felt.

By the end of 1987 Nouwen was in an emotional crisis. He experienced what he later called the most difficult period of his life. He was exhausted mentally and physically and became increasingly depressed. With the support of Daybreak he went to a retreat centre in Winnipeg, Manitoba from January to July of 1988 under the care of

two experienced spiritual directors. The trigger for the collapse was that the relationship with Nathan Ball, on which he had become very dependent, had to be interrupted. Michael Higgens explains the dynamics of this crisis as follows:

It is clear that his emotional attachment to Ball was all-consuming, that Ball was unsettled by the intensity of its expression, that the kind of reciprocity Nouwen expected could not happen. Ball felt increasingly compromised by Nouwen's possessiveness and neediness, and a strategy of distancing had to be deployed in the interests of community harmony and Ball's own psychological equilibrium. The effects of this distancing from the center of Nouwen's stability, as he at one point described Ball, meant that he was now on the fast track to a psychic collapse (Higgens & Burns 2012: Kindle location 1610) ²³.

Henri Nouwen kept on writing through all of this to help him put into words what he was learning. He felt that it was too intense and raw to be published. Some of the thoughts and experiences at this time of crisis did find their way into print four years later in the form of one of Nouwen's most influential books: *The Return of the Prodigal Son*²⁴. In typical Nouwen style the book is a deeply personal meditation on Rembrandt's painting of the Biblical story. Nouwen engages with how he could relate to each of the main figures in the painting – the prodigal son, the judgemental older brother and the loving father. His fascination with the painting, which even included a trip to St Petersburg in Russia and a moving encounter with the original painting in the Hermitage museum, played an important role in his eventual adjustment to his new role as carer and pastor at Daybreak in Canada. The depth of the emotional/spiritual crisis that Nouwen's move to Daybreak and eventual devastating breakup with Nathan Ball precipitated, can be discerned throughout the book in paragraphs like the following from the prologue:

These years at Daybreak have not been easy. There has been much inner struggle, and there has been mental, emotional and spiritual pain. Nothing,

²³ Henri Nouwen's struggles with his sexual identity and homo-erotic attachment to Nathan will form part of the exploration about embodiment in the next chapter.

²⁴ Jurjen Beumer saw the Dutch version of this book (*Eindelijk Thuis: Gedachten bij Rembrandt's 'De Terugkeer van de Verloren Zoon'*) as the summit of of Henri Nouwen's work. "Het is zijn mees uitgerijpte boek...De spirituele zoektocht van Nouwen en zijn inzichten in de Christelijke spiritualiteit bereiken hier een hoogtepunt. Het gaat in *Eindelijk Thuis* niet om een deelaspect van de spiritualiteit, maar om een spirituele totaalvisie." (Beumer 1997: 82)

absolutely nothing, had about it the quality of having arrived. However the move from Harvard to L'Arche proved to be one little step from bystander to participant, from judge to repentant sinner, from teacher about love to being loved as the beloved. I really did not have an inkling of how difficult the journey would be. I did not realize how deeply rooted my resistance was and how agonizing it would be to “come to my senses”, fall on my knees, and let my tears flow freely. I did not realize how hard it would be to become truly part of the great event that Rembrandt's painting portrays (Nouwen 1994:14).

Portions of the diary that Nouwen kept during his “dark night of the soul”, the months of deep depression, were published eight years later under the title *The Inner Voice of Love: A Journey Through Anguish To Freedom*. (1996). Ironically, this book became available on the day of Nouwen's funeral. Much editing was done, so that according to Nouwen's discretion, some portions of the journal were omitted to protect the privacy of those involved. It nevertheless presents an honest and vivid picture of Nouwen's spiritual struggle.

2.2.6 Being God's Beloved (1988- 1996)

When Nouwen returned to Daybreak after Winnipeg, resuming his work with some trepidation, the tone of his ministry changed subtly as he progressively put more emphasis on grounding one's self-identity in the love of God alone. This became the theme of much of his once again flourishing ministry at Daybreak, his writing and his speaking. In 1989 the book *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* was completed, in which Nouwen spoke from his experiences at Daybreak. The impact of a joint presentation by Nouwen and Bill, one of the disabled core members of the community at Daybreak, presented this topic together at the Centre for Human Development in Washington DC, illustrates the continuing significance the open and communal sharing of Henri Nouwen's spiritual journey for a great many people.

Beyond the Mirror: Reflections on Death and Life (1990) was a report and reflection on a near-death experience that Nouwen had when Nouwen was hit by the mirror of

a passing truck. He suffered serious injuries and had to have his spleen removed. His life was in real danger and he allowed himself to “enter into a place he had never been before: the portal of death.” What he experienced there was something he could only describe as pure, unconditional love.²⁵

Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World was written in 1992 in response to questions arising from his friendship with Fred Bratman, a young, ambitious journalist whom he had met back at Yale. Bratman, like many others, was looking for meaning and truth, but could not relate to the traditional language of the church and the Bible. Nouwen used the theme of “being the beloved” to describe spiritual life without using typical religious language. The attempt was not really successful in terms of convincing Bratman and his secularised friends, but was very well received in Christian quarters.

During 1994 Nouwen wrote three more books. *Our Greatest Gift: A Meditation on Dying and Caring* was an extended meditation on preparing ourselves for dying in the hope that fruit of one’s life lives on beyond death. *With Burning Hearts* expressed Nouwen’s thoughts on the importance and meaning of the Eucharist, which he celebrated nearly every day. Luke 24’s story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus formed the basis of this book. *Living in the Spirit* is a collection of meditations from earlier works with some new additions to provide a coherent vision of the spiritual life.

Four booklets were released in 1995. *The Path of Peace* (a) composed some of Nouwen’s previous writings and described the peace he found in working with Adam, one of the severely handicapped members of the Daybreak community. *The Path of Waiting* (b) is about an active and celebratory waiting on God and God waiting on us to share fully in his love. *The Path of Power* (c) explains Nouwen’s thoughts on a “theology of weakness” when Christians stop playing power games and look to God’s power to bring healing and freedom. *The Path to Freedom* (d) is a condensed version of his accident and near-death experience.

The film *Angels over the Net* was released in 1995. It depicted Nouwen’s fascination with the circus, and specifically the “Flying Rodleights”, a troupe of trapeze artists from South Africa. The theme of embodiment in Nouwen’s thought will receive more

²⁵ Chapter 5 of this study devotes more attention to this “mystical” encounter.

attention in the next chapter of this study, but from this film it is clear that he had started believing that “the body could teach through the actions of the trapeze artist.” He wanted to write a book on the Rodleights and was looking for a publisher at the time of his death. He felt that it was time for a complete change in style and new direction in his literary output. At the time of his death he was on his way to St Petersburg in Russia with a Dutch film crew to shoot a documentary on *The Return of The Prodigal Son*.

During a sabbatical Nouwen was granted from September 1995 to August 1996, after ten years at Daybreak, he completed a number of writing projects. *Can You Drink the Cup* used the chalice of the Eucharist as metaphor for the Christian life: holding, lifting, drinking. *Bread for the Journey: A Daybook of Wisdom and Faith* was also written during this last year of Nouwen’s life. There is general agreement that the book, comprising short reflections for every day of the year, was not a very penetrating work, with much repetition of former themes. After the death of the severely challenged Adam, his first charge at daybreak and later intimate friend and “teacher”, Henri started writing *Adam*, a touching book about their friendship. It was finished only after Nouwen’s death by his close friend Sue Mosteller, and published in 1997. During his sabbatical Nouwen also finished editing his “Private Journal” from the crisis months in 1988. *The Inner Voice of Love: A Journey Through Anguish to Freedom*, was released on the day of Henri’s funeral, the 21 September 1996 - the day that Henri Nouwen’s eventful journey in response to the inner voice of love ended.

2.3 Summary and Evaluation

In this chapter the context in which the theological and spiritual formation of Henri Nouwen took place has been sketched by means of a literary biography. By following the ebb and flow of theological emphasis through his literary output, it is possible to identify certain developments in his theology and spirituality. From Nouwen’s early very traditional Catholic formation through his further schooling in theology and psychology, leading “upward” to a very productive and outwardly successful writing and teaching career at prestigious faculties and then through the “downward

mobility” of his perigrations among the poor in South America, the mentally wounded at L’Arche and his own “dark night of the soul”, his books faithfully reflect his spiritual journey from the illusions of upward mobility to the healing paradox of a broken wholeness. His life journey as much as his writings illustrate the unique kind of wholeness and healing to which his legacy points.

In the Abbey of Genesee in 1974 Nouwen came across a reproduction of Hazard Durfee’s beautiful flute player with the well-known text by Henry David Thoreau:

“Why should we be in such desperate haste to succeed and in such desperate enterprises? If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music he hears, however measured or far away”.

For Nouwen it became a metaphor of the different way of being that he was seeking. He involuntarily linked it to the spirituality and life of his spiritual mentor, Thomas Merton:

It is quite understandable why one of the books on Thomas Merton is called *A Different Drummer*, and the longer I look at the quiet concentrated face of Durfee’s flutist, the more I realize that the contemplative life is like hearing a different drummer (Nouwen 1976:47-48).

Contemplative life is a different way of hearing, seeing and being. Many people across the world are looking for another way of living, something other than the well-trodden but meaningless path of the herdlike crowd. This might be part of the reason there is still such a positive reaction to the counter-cultural contemplative spirituality of people like Henri Nouwen and Thomas Merton²⁶. Maybe Nouwen’s life and legacy continues to intrigue researchers and seekers worldwide because he has tapped into and opened up certain areas of meaning in a way that still has relevance for the current discourse in the fields of theology, spirituality, gender and health.

An analysis of Nouwen’s literary output reveals that three main relationships feature in the majority of his works: the relationship to self, the relationship to others and the relationship to God. Jurjen Beumer (Beumer 1997:41) and Deirdre LaNoue (LaNoue

²⁶ *The Road Less Travelled*, by the psychiatrist Scott M Peck, who employed a similar metaphor for an alternate, spiritual approach to life, also reached global best-seller status.

2001:25) in two of the many books on Nouwen's life and legacy that appeared after his death²⁷, point to his early work, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, as providing us with an accurate description of the main themes that would remain central to Nouwen's thinking throughout his life.

Nouwen described it as the book in which he tried to articulate his "most personal thoughts and feelings on being a Christian". This work was his first attempt to set out a concise description of Christian spirituality, making it a pivotal work in his bibliography. *Reaching Out* was the first work where Nouwen described the spiritual life as encompassing three relationships – the relationship to self, to others and to God. This basic definition of spirituality became the foundational framework for much of the rest of his life work (LaNoue, 2001: 25).

By using Nouwen's foundational framework to structure the rest of this study we get an indication of the possible enduring value of certain of the core concepts that Nouwen developed within his triad of "movements". In his thinking about the movement of *Reaching out to our Fellow Human Beings*, the concept of *Vulnerability* emerged as a key component of his theology. That will be the focus of Chapter 3. The movement of *Reaching Out to our Innermost Self* will lead us to investigate the continuing validity of Nouwen's seminal thinking on *Embodiment* (Chapter 4). In Chapter 5 we will consider the importance of Nouwen's lifelong engagement with *Mystery*, as basis for his movement of *Reaching Out to our God* (Nouwen 1976:9).

²⁷ Other significant books on Nouwen's life and legacy include: Michael Ford, *Wounded Prophet: A Portrait of Henri JM Nouwen*, 1999; Michael O'Loughlin, *Henri Nouwen, his Life and Vision*, 2006; Michael W. Higgins & Kevin Burns, *Genius Born of Anguish: The life and Legacy of Henri Nouwen*, 2012), and Wil Hernandez, *Henri Nouwen and Spiritual Polarities: A Life of Tension*, 2012.

Chapter 3

THE WAY OF VULNERABILITY:

From Control to Surrender

(The Outward Movement to Others)

A theology of weakness challenges us to look at weakness not as a worldly weakness that allows us to be manipulated by the powerful in society and church, but as a total and unconditional dependence on God, that opens us up to be true channels of the divine power that heals the wounds of humanity and renews the face of the earth. The theology of weakness claims power, God's power, the all-transforming power of love.

(Nouwen 1995:33)

3.1 Nouwen's Theology of Weakness

At a recent seminar on *Vulnerability, Churches and HIV*, convened by the Church of Sweden's Research Department²⁸, Henri Nouwen's concept of compassion as vulnerability was pointedly used by the keynote speaker, professor Musa W Dube of Botswana University, to illustrate that the "way of vulnerability" is a vital component of the type of theology the church needs to face the challenges with which she is confronted today ²⁹. She quotes Nouwen:

Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless. Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human (Nouwen 1982:4).

²⁸ The outcome of the 2007 seminar is reflected in the Research Series no 1, edited by Goran Gunner, 2009.

²⁹ On Being an HIV-positive Church and Doing Theology in an HIV-positive World. In Gunner ed, 2009:12.

The “way of vulnerability” that Nouwen embodied and opened up for many through his writings, seems to gain in significance with the passing years after his death. Nouwen’s name came to be associated with the phrase “*The Wounded Healer*” ever since the publication of his foundational book with that title in 1979. Nouwen’s life story, literary legacy and theological contribution is very aptly summed up in this phrase. During his psychological training he picked up the words that Carl Jung had coined in his autobiographical *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* in the 1960s: “Only the wounded physician heals” (Jung, 1995:156). In his inimitable way Nouwen then popularised “The Wounded Healer” as a metaphor for ministers who are called not only to care for other people’s wounds but to make their own wounds into an important source of healing. He explains the deeper meaning of this phrase as follows:

Making one’s own wounds a source of healing, therefore, does not call for a sharing of superficial personal pains but for a constant willingness to see one’s own pain as rising from the depth of the human condition which all men (sic) share (Nouwen 1994: 88).

Nouwen uses his personal lifelong struggle with a deep feeling of loneliness to illustrate how these deep wounds can become a source of healing and growth. According to him the Christian life does not take away our loneliness, but the painful awareness of loneliness can help us to transcend our limitations and look beyond the boundaries of our existence. Nouwen clearly writes from his own deep woundedness about the futility of trying to bypass and ignore the truth of our loneliness and struggles:

We are more prone to play games with our fantasies than to face the truth of our existence. Thus we keep hoping that one day we will find the man who really understands our experiences, the woman who will bring peace to our restless life, the job where we can fulfil our potentials, the book which will explain everything and the place where we can feel at home. Such false hope leads us to make exhausting demands and prepares us for bitterness and dangerous hostility when we start discovering that nobody, and nothing, can live up to our absolutistic expectations (Nouwen, 1979: 84, 85).

Only by facing and embracing our woundedness and weakness and moving away from the illusion of being able to control life through gaining more and more power can we discover the healing potential of the way of vulnerability. According to Nouwen, a 'Theology of Weakness' is necessary to counter the lust for power that has entrapped and corrupted the human spirit in the western world. After an incisive analysis of the typical power-hungry international, interpersonal and religious power games, he asks the personal question:

Let's look into our own hearts! Aren't we constantly concerned with whether we are noticed or not, appreciated or not, rewarded or not? Aren't we always asking ourselves whether we are better or worse, stronger or weaker, faster or slower than the one who stands beside us? Haven't we, from elementary school on, experienced most of our fellow human beings as rivals in the race for success, influence and popularity? And aren't we so insecure about who we are that we will grab any, yes any, form of power that gives us a little bit of control over who we are, what we do, and where we go? (Nouwen 1995:10-11).

According to Nouwen, the response of God to this "diabolic power" was to choose powerlessness. God chose to enter human history in complete weakness. In Jesus of Nazareth the powerless God appeared among us to unmask our illusion of power. The movement from abusive power to power through powerlessness is what we are called to. A theology of weakness is a theology of divine empowering, not a theology for weaklings. It is movement from the illusion of being in control to complete surrender to the power of God.

The all-pervading conviction in western society is that power is a good thing. But more power, in the form of money, connections, fame, intellectual ability, skills, is only a way to get some sense of security and control and strengthen the illusion that life is ours to dispose of. The skilful way in which Nouwen manages to combine his psychological formation with his deep spiritual convictions about vulnerability is clear from statements like the following:

Surrounded by so much power, it is very difficult to avoid surrendering to the temptation to seek power like everyone else. But the mystery of our ministry is that we are called to serve not with our power but with our powerlessness. It is

through powerlessness that we can enter into solidarity with our fellow human beings, form a community with the weak and thus reveal the healing, guiding and sustaining mercy of God. As followers of Christ, we are sent into the world naked, vulnerable, and weak, and thus we can reach our fellow human beings in their pain and agony and reveal to them the power of God's love and empower them with the power of God's Spirit (Nouwen 2007:64).

Nouwen develops the Judeo-Christian concept of *hospitality*³⁰ as a healing ministry, because it takes away the illusion that wholeness can simply be given by one person to another. The pain and loneliness is not taken away, but when the host feels at home in his or her own house they can "create a free and fearless space" for others where they can recognize their pain on a level where it can be shared. Shared pain is no longer paralyzing but mobilizing. A true healing ministry helps to clear away the false supposition that there should be no fear or loneliness, no confusion or doubt. These sufferings can only be dealt with creatively when they are understood as wounds integral to our human condition. The wounds and pains are not necessarily cured or alleviated, but they become openings or occasions for a new vision.

In order to be a hospitable host, we need to embrace poverty. Nouwen advocates a "poverty of mind" and a "poverty of heart". In order for us to be able to really listen, to be open to discover the gift of the other, we need a spiritual attitude of growing willingness to recognize the incomprehensibility of the mystery of life. We need a *docta ignorantia*, a learned ignorance, an articulate not-knowing, so that we can mature in giving up our illusion of control in order to be controlled by God. Poverty of mind makes one able to receive the word from others and the Other with great attention.

The more mature we become the more we will become able to give up our inclination to grasp, catch and comprehend the fullness of life and the more we will be ready to let life enter into us (Nouwen 1975: 96).

God is not only greater than our mind, he is also greater than our heart. So a "poverty of the heart" is also necessary for us to be a good host and make room for

³⁰ The Greek word the New Testament used for hospitality is *philoxenia*. It refers to love for the stranger. It is the exact opposite of *xenophobia*, fear or hate of the stranger (Vosloo 2006:15).

the stranger. Just as we have to avoid the temptation to adapt God to our small concepts we have to avoid adapting God to our small feelings.

An inflated heart can make us very intolerant. But when we are willing to detach ourselves from making our own limited experience the criterion for our approach to others, we may be able to see that life is greater than our life, history is greater than our history, experience greater than our experience, God greater than our God (Nouwen 1975:98).

Nouwen appeals to what he regards as the core of the Christian message: God's self-revelation in the *kenosis* of Jesus Christ (Philippians 2:6-8). God does not reveal Godself as the powerful other, unapproachable in omniscience, omnipotence and omnipresence, but God is revealed in the incarnation. He came to us in the vulnerable way of Jesus Christ. Nouwen argues that God thereby also reveals to us the movement of our spiritual life. It is not a movement from weakness to power, but a movement in which we become less and less defensive and ever more open and vulnerable.

Part of the mystique that still surrounds the legacy of Henri Nouwen is that he not only lucidly wrote about this "downward" movement throughout his career, but that his own life story dramatically illustrates the agony and ecstasy of embarking on this "Way of Vulnerability". *The Inner Voice of Love: a Journey through Anguish to Freedom*, his very intimate "secret journal" of the year of his psychological and spiritual breakdown, contains a series of spiritual imperatives to himself. Nouwen deals with his vulnerability in a gripping reminder to himself, entitled "*Live Your Wounds Through*."

You have been wounded in many ways. The more you open yourself to being healed, the more you discover how deep your wounds are. The great challenge is *living* your wounds through instead of *thinking* them through. It is better to cry than to worry, better to feel your wounds deeply than to understand them, better to let them enter your silence than to talk about them. The choice you face constantly is whether you are taking your wounds to your head or to your heart. In your head you can analyse them, find their causes and consequences, and coin words to speak and write about them. But no final healing is likely to come from that source. You need to let your wounds

go down to your heart. Then you can live through them and discover that they will not destroy you. Your heart is greater than your wounds (Nouwen, 1997: 91).

A brief exploration of the current discourse on vulnerability could reveal fertile links to the theology of Nouwen.

3.2 The Fragile Discourse on Vulnerability

One of the major influences on Henri Nouwen's thinking and the course of his life story was Jean Vanier³¹, founder of L'Arche, the international network of communities where 'core members', people with intellectual and other disabilities, and 'assistants', people without intellectual disabilities, share life together as fellow human beings. Jean Vanier, along with the respected theologian Stanley Hauerwas, represent leading voices in the current discourse on vulnerability, disability and the Christian tradition.

In the defining book that Vanier and Hauerwas co-authored in 2008, *Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness*, the authors both take as their point of departure the fundamental gospel principle that the weakest and least presentable people are indispensable to the church (1 Corinthians 12:22). For the major paradigm shift that is implied in really taking this principle seriously, the L'Arche communities provide a much needed exemplar.

Henri Nouwen was attracted to the L'Arche ideal and was eventually convinced that this represented the type of "home" where he wanted to spend the last years of his life: not in the power-hungry, success-driven academic world where the bottom line is always achievement and competition, but in the gentle world of mutual trust and caring of La'Arche. Working as physical assistant and pastor for the Daybreak L'Arche community near Toronto, Canada, Nouwen introduced to his huge

³¹ Vanier initially, and unexpectedly, invited Nouwen to spend some time with him, his mother and the L'Arche community at Trosly in France at a time when Nouwen needed to make major decisions and life changes. They became good friends and continued to be friends until Nouwen's death in 1996. Vanier delivered a moving eulogy at the funeral.

readership the L'Arche concept of the importance of the so-called handicapped and marginalized members of society.

The L'Arche communities with their ethos of "living with" rather than "doing for", provide a unique model of profound inclusive spirituality. Jean Vanier in his gentle but convincing way explains the mystery of God's choice for the people at the bottom of society, "to shame the clever and the powerful" (1 Corinthians 1).

The mystery of people with disabilities is that they long for authentic and loving relationships more than for power. They are not obsessed with being well-situated in a group that offers acclaim and promotion. They are crying for what matters most: love. And God hears their cry because in some way they respond to the cry of God, which is to give love (Hauerwas & Vanier, 2008: 30).

Stanley Hauerwas, speaking on '*The Politics of Gentleness*', uses Vanier's example and embodiment of vulnerability and gentleness at L'Arche to develop a fiery critique of contemporary assumptions about ethics and politics.³² His main point of criticism is that liberal political theory by definition excludes people with mental disabilities. He refers to Hans Reinders to explain that liberal political theory is based on the assumption that individual persons are free to live their own lives as they prefer, provided that they allow other people equal freedom to do the same. "Persons", according to liberal democracy, are constituted by the powers of reason and free will. Only persons, in the sense of rational moral agents, can receive equal concern and respect, which causes a problem with respect to the inclusion of severely handicapped people. Martha Nussbaum, in her book *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*, wants to remedy liberal political theory to include the disabled without abandoning the fundamental tenets of liberalism. Hauerwas, however, argues for a more radical challenge to liberal political theory:

³² The toughness of Hauerwas and the gentleness of Vanier creates an interesting synergy. Hauerwas is aware of a possible rhetorical problem: "My style is polemical and many, I suspect, would not characterize my work as gentle or tender. Accordingly I worry that my attempt to argue for the significance of gentleness for Jean and L'Arche may betray what he and L'Arche are about. My only defense is that God has given us different tasks. My task has been to put Vanier's wisdom into conversation with philosophical and political positions that I fear are antithetical – if not outright threats – to the people we call 'intellectually disabled'. That means however that my writing style has been aggressive and confrontational (Hauerwas & Vanier, 2008: 78-79).

To be human is to learn that we don't get to make up our lives because we're creatures. Christians are people who recognize that we have a Father whom we can thank for our existence. Christian discipleship is about learning to receive our lives without regret. And that has the deepest political implications. Much of modern political theory and practice is about creating a society where we do not have to acknowledge that our lives are gifts we receive from one another (Hauerwas & Vanier, 2008: 93).

Vanier insists that the world of disabilities and the marginalised is not "strange", but it is the world that God chooses to inhabit. Hauerwas challenges the church's uncritical embrace of power over weakness and calls upon it to adopt a "prophetic gentleness". This will involve a major reassessment of our concepts of time, human worth and politics. Vanier and Hauerwas do not see the disabled people of L'Arche as patients who need to be healed, but rather as a microcosm of the gospel: dependent, vulnerable, loving towards each other and open towards God; a paradigm of "living gently" in a violent world.

John Swinton, who wrote the introduction to *Living Gently in a Violent World* also ends the recent major work on disability that he edited with Brian Brock, (*Disability in the Christian Tradition: a Reader, 2012*) with chapters on the contributions of Vanier and Hauerwas. He emphasises once again that according to Hauerwas the politics of modernity, based on individual rights and freedoms, cannot bring about the kinds of change that the disability studies perspective desires. This places Hauerwas in quite a different position from many other theologians writing about disability.

The counter-cultural type of disability-theology of Jean Vanier, Stanley Hauerwas and Henri Nouwen is aptly summarised by Swinton:

Within modernity, dependence is perceived to be antithesis of the good life. Individualism, with all of its accretions, is presumed to be the norm for authentic human living. That being so, the lives of people with intellectual disability stand in sharp, negative tension with cultural expectations. However the essence of the Christian tradition is that human beings are wholly dependent. Far from being a lack of human fulfilment, the lives of people with intellectual disabilities is therefore a context for learning what it means to be a creature. Learning to be a creature means that our existence and the

existence of the universe itself are gifts. And if all is gift, then dependency is our natural state. Hauerwas reminds us that the lives of people with profound intellectual disabilities, far from being problematic, marked by suffering, or raising ethical dilemmas, in fact inform us what human living is *really* like (Brock & Swinton (Eds), 2012: 519).

For a conversation on a subject like suffering and disability it would be wise to start from a humble *docta ignorantia*, an “articulate not-knowing”, like that of Henri Nouwen. Approaching the area of disability along the way of vulnerability might help us to adopt a proper mode of humility when trying to unravel aspects of inscrutable mystery. We would do well to keep in mind that we are engaging with one aspect of the matter, which does not enable us to grasp the whole.

In the evolving academic field of theological disability studies³³ there is a growing consensus about the necessity of changing the conversation on “disability” and “normalcy” away from a binary “us-them” way of thinking, especially as couched in terms of “normal” versus “abnormal”. Thomas Reynolds sees two major changes that need to happen in this discourse. The first is that we should shift away from seeing disability as a “tragic flaw”, a product of circumstances. The social construct of “normality”, which creates the difference between bodies that are “able and those that are “disabled”, should be challenged. The second is that there is a need to move away from representing disability merely as a problem to be included according to the good graces of a community.

If we grant that “normal” is a standard that is socially constructed, we are brought to recognise that it can also be critiqued and deconstructed. The basis for this, I believe, lies in something all human beings share, which undercuts the “us-them” binary: vulnerability (Reinders, in Claassens,

³³ “Over the past few decades there has been a growing interest in the relation between theology and disability in the academic literature that suggests we are witnessing the birth of a new field” (Hans Reinders, *Theology and Disability: What is the Question?* in *Searching for Dignity: Conversations on Human Dignity, Theology and Disability*, 2013: 31).

Schwartz & Hansen (Eds) *Searching for Dignity: Conversations on Human Dignity, Theology and Disability*, 2013: 20).

To change the tone and substance of the discourse on disability and vulnerability is no easy task. It requires a complete, counter-cultural change of attitude and praxis. We need “A Window of Vulnerability”. Dorothee Soelle appropriated the coldwar military phrase “A Window of Vulnerability”, and converted and used it to describe the intent of her “political spirituality”: a spirituality of vulnerability, over against the prevailing worldwide militarization of minds. “It is as if we were doing our utmost to shield ourselves from the light. Certainly, every window makes us vulnerable and is a sign of relationship, receptivity, communication...The window of vulnerability is a window toward heaven (Soelle, 1990: ix)”. Part of the enduring significance of Henri Nouwen is that his theology and life story represents such a “window of vulnerability”.

Another influential voice concerning vulnerability and dependence is that of the philosopher Alisdair MacIntyre. In his *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*, MacIntyre makes a strong case for “the virtues of acknowledged dependence” (MacIntyre 1999:119). His argument is that human beings must be understood, first as animals, but then as a special sort of animal. He discusses in detail those aspects of our nature that are shared with other intelligent species such as dolphins, particularly the dependence and vulnerability that mark every period of our life. According to MacIntyre, disability should be taken seriously as a natural fact of life from which no one is exempt. There is a scale of disability on which we all find ourselves in different periods of our life. In order to “flourish” and to protect themselves from many dangers, dolphins need each other. In order for human beings to “flourish” like dolphins, but then as independent, reasoning animals, we need certain “virtues” which we cannot acquire without the sustained help of others on whom we depend, especially, but not exclusively, our parents. We will need not only the virtues that help us grow toward independence (such as risk-taking, patience, courage and temperateness), but also the virtues of “acknowledged dependence” (such as gratitude, courtesy, and forbearance). MacIntyre asserts that human life is a life of reciprocal indebtedness. Political community exists not only to

adjust competing interests or to provide goods and services (as in liberal democracy theory). It exists to make possible the kind of community in which joint deliberation about life can take place within the framework of reciprocal indebtedness and just generosity.

In his overview of the current discourse on disability and vulnerability, Thomas Reynolds quotes Jean Vanier, Stanley Hauerwas, Michel Foucault, Jurgen Moltmann and Nancy Eiesland in support of his conviction that in the end there is no hard and fast line between ability and disability and that every life has its limitations, vulnerabilities and weaknesses.

Thus I contend that disability is both anthropologically and redemptively fundamental. It signifies vulnerability as a condition of the gift of sharing life with one another. Yet there is a need for healing, not because disability signifies “bodies gone wrong”. But because it entails real suffering, sometimes bodily, but in many cases communal in the form of alienation, exclusion and assimilation (Reynolds, *Theology and Disability: Changing the Conversation* in Claassens, Swartz & Hansen, *Searching for Dignity*, 2013: 24).

In her insightful analysis of the biblical story of Job³⁴, Juliana Claassens concludes with Reynolds that all humans are “only partially and temporarily able-bodied”. Only when we realise our own vulnerability and accept various degrees of disability as part of life will we be able to grant true hospitality to those who are equally vulnerable.

3.3 Summary and Evaluation

Henri Nouwen, suffering from a life-long loneliness and feeling of alienation because of what he saw as his own woundedness on a bodily and communal level, found that the hospitality of the community of the wounded at L’Arche offered him the home that he had been searching for all his life. The fact that he so honestly and openly shared his spiritual journey “from anguish to freedom” in his popularly accessible writings,

³⁴ Claassens, *Job, theology and disability: moving towards a new kind of speech*, in Claassens, Swartz & Hansen, *ibid*: 64).

gave his many readers (including those in the non-academic world) a liberating glimpse of the possibility of an alternative spirituality of caring vulnerability.

L'Arche, a life-giving community of healing, with people who are “wounded in their mind” at different levels, living a communal life of vulnerable interdependence, provided a necessary “window of vulnerability” that inspired Henri Nouwen and many others to investigate and embark on the less travelled “downward” journey. The current global conversation on vulnerability as evidenced in the contributions of Vanier, Hauerwas and others discussed in the previous section, received significant impetus from the investigation and popularisation of the “wounded healer” concept by Henri Nouwen.

As suggested at the beginning of this chapter, Nouwen’s embrace of polarities and paradox, as evidenced his choice of the oxymoronic phrase “Wounded Healer”, continues to be appealing to a new generation of postmodern thinkers. Philip Nolte and Yolanda Dreyer ³⁵ argue that part of the appeal that Nouwen’s theology still has today has to do with the fact that he had experienced and understood the *cognitive dissonance* that many pastors struggle with as a result of the shift from a modern to a postmodern paradigm. Referring to authors like Marcus Borg (2003) and David Tracy (1981), their conclusion is:

“It is this author’s contention that Nouwen too struggled in his life with the question of how pastors could live and minister in an authentic way within a postmodern culture that is continuously evolving. The result of his struggle with this question was the development of the metaphor of the wounded healer.” (Nolte & Dreyer, 2010:2)

Nouwen’s integration of the psychological perspective into his deeply spiritual approach broadened our understanding of the divine-human encounter. His way of intuitively and honestly exploring his own spirituality from the conviction that the most personal is also the most universal has opened ways for others to identify with him. He creates a safe space for people to become more aware of their own humanity and move towards a healing relationship with God, others and themselves.

³⁵ Nolte SP & Dreyer Y, 2010 *The Paradox of Being a Wounded Healer: Henri JM Nouwen’s Contribution to Pastoral Theology*, *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 66 (2) Art 861.

I am convinced that it is this honesty about his inner turmoil that made Nouwen's life and message(s) the gift to the world it had become. His writings on pastoral and spiritual issues have been read by a wide variety of people and are increasingly appreciated as being of great value in academic, pastoral and theological circles (Nolte & Dreyer 2010:2).

Nouwen referred to himself as a "hyphenated priest": a psychologist-priest. In an earlier article Yolanda Dreyer investigated the underlying epistemology of Nouwen's theological model to ascertain whether he was working primarily from a psychological or a theological frame of reference. This is important because of the distinctive epistemologies underlying the psychological and theological discourses. Referring to the strong influence that Heidegger had on Nouwen's thinking she observes that Nouwen's spirituality incorporates, but then goes beyond, the epistemology of psychology. Since much of psychology today is still essentialist, empiricist and positivist, Nouwen opened a way of moving beyond an empiricist epistemology that assumes the accumulation of knowledge is only gained by information gathered via the techniques and methods of the senses: objectified and empirical data.

Thus empiricists tend to adhere to a realist ontology, in Heidegger's terms *Sein*, and in Nouwen's language "being in the world". Yet, empiricists incline to disbelieve so called ungrounded "theory" such as spirituality, in Heidegger's terms "Dasein", and in Nouwen's language "a new way of being in the world without being of it (Dreyer 2003 :715-733).

As has been demonstrated in this chapter, the "way of vulnerability" that Henri Nouwen opened for many during his lifetime, has become a well-travelled pathway for a growing number of seekers. His movement away from a modernist desire to grasp, understand and control, to a more open-handed surrender to a mature *docta ignorantia*, an educated not-knowing, will continue to inform theological conversations for the foreseeable future.

Henri Nouwen's movement away from the modernist values of being an individualist, an upwardly mobile achiever at Ivy League universities, to becoming a dependent, downwardly mobile servant, at home with the mentally wounded at L'Arche, will continue to challenge prevailing attitudes and practices for a long time.

We are not alone; beyond the differences that separate us, we share one common humanity and thus, belong to each other. The mystery of life is that we discover this human togetherness not when we are powerful and strong, but when we are vulnerable and weak (Nouwen 1994:27).

Chapter 4

THE WAY OF EMBODIMENT:
From Having To Being
(The Movement towards our Innermost Self)

*You have never felt completely safe in your body.
You have come to see your body as an enemy
that has to be conquered.*

(Nouwen1996:19)³⁶

4.1 Henri Nouwen's Hidden Legacy

³⁶This statement of Nouwen, addressed to himself during the period of his deepest crisis, is communicated even more forcefully in the Dutch translation: "Je hebt je nooit helemaal thuis gevoeld in je lichaam. Maar God houdt van alles wat je bent, geest en lichaam. Jij bent je lichaam steeds meer gaan zien als een vijand die je moet verslaan. Maar God wil dat je bevriend raakt met je lichaam, zodat het uit de dood kan opstaan (Nouwen 2002: 29).

Henri Nouwen's spiritual formation theology requires both a journey outward and a journey inward. The journey inward, according to a handout that Nouwen wrote for his course on Spiritual Formation at Yale Divinity School in 1980³⁷, is the journey to find Christ dwelling within us. The journey inward calls for the disciplines of solitude, silence, prayer, meditation, contemplation and attentiveness to the movements of our heart.

The spiritual life presents opportunities to enter into the center of our existence and become familiar with the complexities of our own inner life. As soon as we feel at home in our own house – discover the dark corners as well as the light spots, the closed doors as well as the draughty rooms – our confusion will disappear, anxiety lessen, and creative work become possible. (Nouwen, in Christensen & Laird 2012:Kindle location 2015)

The dark corners that Nouwen encountered on his own journey inward, before he could eventually get back to creative work, led to a complete psychological and spiritual breakdown. When the door he had kept shut for most of his life was finally opened, the realities he had to face plunged him into deep despair. Aspects of this pilgrimage into “the dark night of the soul” are recorded in his edited “secret journal” that he initially felt was too raw and disconcerting to be published directly after his eventual return to *Daybreak*. The Dutch title of this diary: *Binnen Geroepen*³⁸ actually conveys the deep personal dimension of Nouwen's own spiritual formation process: being “called inside” to come home to his body and sexuality, something he had evaded for many years. His psychological and theological struggle with the embodiment of his spirituality might prove to be one of his lasting contributions for today's theological discourse on Body Theology, in the same way that his other shared spiritual experiences opened up a way forward for many others. But Henri Nouwen could not complete this long walk to freedom himself.

Nouwen never wrote explicitly about his own personal struggles as a priest who was gay. He first recognized his sexual orientation at the same time that he started responding to his call to the priesthood – at the age of six. For most of his life he

³⁷ Available from the Henri JM Nouwen Archives and Research Collection at the John M Kelly Library, University of St Michael's College, University of Toronto.

³⁸ The literal translation would be: “Called Inside”. The original English title is: *The Inner Voice of Love: A Journey Through Anguish to Freedom* (1996).

agonized over the inner conflict that his homosexual orientation implied for his vocation as a celibate priest within the theologically and morally conservative Catholic church of the time. Only during the last decade of his life did he slowly come to accept his sexual identity.

Michael Ford, a religious affairs journalist with the British Broadcasting Corporation, conducted extensive interviews with Henri Nouwen's friends and associates after his death (Ford 1999). In the end he concludes:

After more than a hundred encounters I came to realize just how central Nouwen's long-repressed homosexuality had been to his struggles and it had probably been the underlying stimulus for his powerful writings on loneliness, intimacy, marginality, love, and belonging.³⁹

Many of Nouwen's writings present subtle hints of someone who is struggling to integrate his gay and religious identities. He never formally announced his homosexuality outside the safety of intimate friendships. With hindsight, when his sexual orientation became publicly known after his death, there are clear indications of his longing for male intimacy in much of his writing. One poignant non-literary marker is the icon he commissioned from Father Robert Lentz, a gay artist and former Franciscan monk. This icon, called "Christ the Bridegroom" depicts an intimate pose of Jesus and his "beloved disciple" where Jesus extends his hand in a tender benediction on the head of the young man leaning over towards him. Nouwen took this icon with him on many of his journeys and often placed it so that it would be the last and first thing he would see every day, urging him to daily offer his sexuality to God.

For Nouwen, Christ the Bridegroom became lover, father, and closest friend – offering the male affection he deeply craved but was unable to experience in light of his commitment to vows of celibacy and service.⁴⁰

The Catholic Church in the Netherlands during the time of Nouwen's childhood and seminary training was very traditional, numerically strong and hermetically sealed off from modernity and all "outside" non-Catholic influences. It was strong on Thomistic

³⁹ Mike Ford, Henri Nouwen's Hidden Legacy in *Open Hands*, Fall 1999:25)

⁴⁰ Mathew Arthur, "Daddy Issues: A Post-Queer Reading of Henri Nouwen", in *Name/Unname*, November 16, 2013

thinking and very legalistic in its moral focus, so that the Nouwen's knowledge of his homosexual orientation and the idea that it might become publicly known would have caused him much inner anguish.

Father John Eudes Bamberger, the Abbot of Genesee, a psychiatrist-monk and later a spiritual father to Henri Nouwen, was convinced that much of Nouwen's "psychological self-hate" was reinforced - if not precipitated - by a deeply inculcated Jansenist idea of God. Bamberger was convinced that Nouwen's continuing spiritual trials resulted from an over-stern image of Christ. In a series of letters to Nouwen during 1977, Bamberger pointedly notes that the founder of Jansenism – the theologian Peter Jansenus – hails from Nouwen's part of the world.⁴¹

Laurent Nouwen, the youngest brother of Henri Nouwen, is convinced that, living in this restrictive religious environment, his brother's early discovery of his homosexual orientation played an important role in his constant need to be assured of the love and acceptance of those around him.

Henri was a very sensitive person and always had doubts about whether he was accepted. Later in his life we became more aware of the fact that he had a homosexual life, a tendency, although he wasn't living it, it was more of a ...*gerichtheid* ⁴². Maybe he felt that he had this "thorn in the flesh" from the very beginning of his life. Maybe he started to doubt himself about it, maybe he even started to reject himself for having these emotions or feelings or *gerichtheid*. I never knew about it, I never had an eye for it until he went to Daybreak and got into a friendship with one of the leaders there, Nathan. And that became too close for comfort, for both of them I think, that relationship. When that broke down, Henri was totally away, he was in a psychiatric hospital for six months with severe, deep depression. When later on I spoke

⁴¹ Jansenism is a form of Catholic puritanism, a severe moralism accompanied by a conception of God and God's mercy that is distinguished by its severity. The Jansenist legacy, although an admirable corrective to the laxity that diluted Catholicism's attachment to the heroism of the Gospel, was mostly deleterious in its effects: a flesh-despising asceticism that bordered on a Manichean hatred of the body, an over-reliance on self-abnegation as primary route to holiness, and a theological conceptualization of God greatly dependent on the Calvinist notion of predestination. The movement was condemned by several pontiffs, but many of its propositions survived for centuries in the religious culture of the Low Countries and in parts of France, Quebec, and Ireland. (Higgins & Burns 2012: Kindle Location 769)

⁴² Orientation.

to him and asked him why he did not come out about it, he said: “No, no, I want to be a priest. I want to be a servant for people and I want to live in Christ. And I cannot combine that. You know, I have to give my life, my desire, for the greater goal of the name of Jesus.” And I respected that.⁴³

The pressure from some of his close friends to “come out” publicly as a gay person mounted steadily. However, Henri Nouwen’s background and theology caused him to resist this route until the end of his life.

In a study about different identity strategies: *Growing up Gay and Religious: Conflict, Dialogue and Religious Identity Strategies*⁴⁴, Ganzevoort, van der Laan and Olsman identified four different strategies of negotiating the conflicting identity elements of religion and homosexuality. The first is a choice for a *religious lifestyle*, which implies the adherence to a religious group and downplaying homosexual identity elements. The second is the exact opposite, the choice for a *gay lifestyle*, in which one relinquishes his or her religious affiliation in favour of a clearly homosexual identity. In the third, these extremes are combined in what can be called a *commuter approach* to identity, where people move from one identity to the other, belonging to both mutually exclusive groups in what can be seen as parallel worlds. The fourth is a *seamless integration* of both identity elements, where these elements are no longer seen as mutually exclusive and the integrator develops an identity that includes both the religious and the homosexual elements. Clearly Henri Nouwen could not manage to accomplish a movement away from the first of these alternatives - the religious lifestyle - to any other alternative.

Nouwen’s early Harvard friend, Robert Jonas, was one of his trusted intimate friends who knew about his struggles with his identity and who encouraged him to deal with it by “coming out” as gay. In a recorded interview for the 2012 book and radio program on Nouwen’s life, *Genius Born of Anguish*, Jonas puts it baldly:

Henri was gay. I knew that from the beginning of our relationship, and though I’m heterosexual and there was never anything sexual between us, we were very close and there were many times he trusted me more than anybody. I

⁴³Recorded Interview with Laurent Nouwen by AF van der Merwe, Henri Nouwen Stichting, Rotterdam, 19 June 2014.

⁴⁴ R.R. Ganzevoort, M van der Laan & E Olsman, *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* vol 14, No 3, March 2011: 209-222

don't know if he said that to others as well, I just know that he said it to me, and that he spoke to me a lot about his sexual struggles, and sometimes I would suggest to him – tentatively, cautiously – that he might want to come out as gay. After all, many of his gay friends wanted him to self-declare, to out himself as it were, and indeed lead a movement within the Roman Catholic Church that would help to create a more gay-friendly communion. They felt he had an obligation almost to do this, because of his prominence and influence, and told him that by keeping his sexual orientation hidden, he was frustrating, hindering such a vital movement in the church.

I advised him to come out and told him many of us would support him. But he was so fully committed to his Catholic priestly identity, faithful to his celibate state, that it wasn't going to happen. The pressure peaked in the '80s, subsided briefly in the early '90s, and then returned close to his death. By 1996 he was in great anguish about the question (Higgins & Burns 2012:Kindle location 1164).

A number of triggers resulted in Nouwen's complete psychological and spiritual breakdown. His unresolved internal struggle with his sexual identity; the potential public implications if it should become widely known, his emotional dependence on the affirmation of others, his experience of God being silent and his struggle with his sense of self-worth all played a part. In the end, the key factor was what he called "the sudden interruption" of his intense friendship with Nathan Ball. His emotional attachment became so intense and all-consuming that Ball had to distance himself from Nouwen in the interests of the community at Daybreak and Ball's own psychological equilibrium. What precipitated the breakdown was that when Nouwen, with great enthusiasm, started opening up to the reality of his sexual orientation and bodily desires, he met what he had feared most: a broken heart. He experienced Nathan Ball's distancing as an act of complete rejection of the vulnerable person he was. In Nouwen's own words:

Going to L'Arche and living with very vulnerable people, I had gradually let go of my inner guards and opened my heart more fully to others. Among my many friends, one had been able to touch me in a way I have never been touched before. Our friendship encouraged me to allow myself to be loved

and cared for with greater trust and confidence. It was a totally new experience for me, and it brought me immense joy and peace. It seemed as if a door to my interior life had been opened, a door that had remained locked during my youth and most of my adult life.

But this deeply satisfying friendship became the road to my anguish, because I soon discovered that the enormous space that had been opened for me could not be filled by the one who had opened it. I became possessive, needy, and dependent and when the friendship finally had to be interrupted, I fell apart. I felt abandoned, rejected and betrayed. Indeed, the extremes touched each other (Nouwen 1997: x,xi).

Although Nouwen knew intellectually that no human friendship could fulfil the deepest longings of his heart and that only God could satisfy that need, emotionally and spiritually he could not cope with the situation. For six months he was in a community in Winnipeg where he could be cared for on a psychotherapeutic as well as spiritual level. Two “guides”, a man and a woman, visited him every day. One form of therapy involved being held physically, in a non-sexual way.

In the arms of this male therapist, in a primal state, he could be held very tightly and weep, scream, writhe and be caressed, all the things a parent does when holding an infant or small child. He was held unconditionally with an enormous amount of nurture and tenderness, which was for him very healing. (Ford 1999: 169,170)

Another form of therapy also helped Nouwen come to a place of healing. Like Vincent van Gogh, this deep period of darkness produced some of his greatest masterpieces. Not only *The Inner Voice of Love* the personal injunctions to himself that he wrote down every day after the conversation with his spiritual guides - but also what many people regard as his finest work, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, took shape during this time. Writing provided a form of self-therapy which helped Nouwen not only survive and to eventually return to his role at Daybreak, but his discipline of writing during this time of darkness also brought him to deeply illuminating insights about himself, God and his vocation on earth .

From this vulnerable period of a hesitant discovery of not only “having” a body, but of actually “being” his body; not only “grasping” certain concepts about embodiment

cognitively, but experiencing being healed by being held physically, Nouwen grew a new appreciation of what the “first love” of Jesus Christ could mean for whole-person healing. This “first love” is not displaced or forgotten because of a particular human love, but could actually become the gateway to it. The “first love” is often accessed and made real when glimpsed in the light of the beauty of human love. Nouwen wrote down this advice to himself in his “secret diary”:

The task is not to die to life-giving relationships but to realize that the love you received in them is part of a greater love. God has given you a beautiful self. There God dwells and loves you with the first love, which precedes all human love. You carry your own beautiful, deeply loved self in your heart. You can and you must hold on to the truth of the love you were given and recognize that same love in others who see your goodness and love you. So stop trying to die to the particular real love you have received. Be grateful for it and see it as what enabled you to open yourself to God’s first love (Nouwen 1998:28-29).

During the last ten years of his life “Being the Beloved of God” became a main theme of Henri Nouwen’s spiritual experience and literary output. His rediscovery and embracing of the full implications of the bodily incarnation of God in Jesus Christ might be very relevant for some aspects of the current discourse on embodiment.

4.2 Towards a Spirituality of Vulnerable Embodiment

“Body Theology”, as a theological field of study only really emerged after Henri Nouwen’s death in 1996. In his biography on Nouwen’s life and spirituality that was

published directly after Nouwen's death⁴⁵, Jurjen Beumer, his Dutch colleague and friend, indicated that he was looking forward to Nouwen's contribution to this new theological field of study⁴⁶. The present limited study of Nouwen's nascent body awareness and its possible contribution to the current discourse would not presume to try to attempt a systematic exposition of Body Theology, but hopes to suggest certain links or connections⁴⁷ that might prove to be fruitful in the ongoing debate about embodiment.

In 1998 two of the early exponents of Body Theology, Lisa Isherwood and Elizabeth Stuart, published *Introducing Body Theology*. The editor's preface states:

Body theology only surfaced recently and it is still not a well-defined area of study; like its subject matter it is difficult to pin down, departs from the ideal norm, shape-shifts and resists attempts to be systematically encoded. In view of the massive interest in health, fitness, size, ability and every aspect of bodiliness, where the provenance of received opinion about what is "good" (sporty, thin, energetic) and what "bad" (inactive, fat, quiet) escapes unquestioned, it is vital that the political/theological givens that underpins such assumptions are revealed and that alternatives are proposed and examined. (Isherwood & Stuart 1998:7)

Robert Vosloo also comments on the fact that "society is fascinated with the body, or more precisely, the perfect body". He then challenges the "Myth of the Perfect Body" by questioning the largely unexamined underlying assumptions of the way the body is portrayed in consumer culture. Referring to the work of Michel Foucault on how the body is invested with relations of power and domination as largely just a force of production, he describes the consumer culture as "an ethos of competitive, individualistic production". Within such an ethos, sick or unproductive bodies are ignored or marginalised. Vosloo then argues, in line with Dietrich Bonhoeffer's conviction that "bodiliness and being human belong indivisibly together", that society

⁴⁵ The biography had actually been completed before Nouwen's death.

⁴⁶ "Nouwen zou zijn lezers mijns insiens buitengewoon verder helpen door na te denken en te schrijven over het grote gebied (en theologisch gezien nieuw gebied) van de lichamelijkheid." (Beumer 1997:209)

⁴⁷ Inviting the reader to "make inner connections" with what he was saying was an introductory strategy that Nouwen often employed at the beginning of a book.

needs an “ethos of vulnerable interdependence”⁴⁸. Considering the previous chapter of this study, it seems clear that Henry Nouwen’s “way of vulnerability” and his budding “way of embodiment”, could provide an accessible point of entry for living into such an ethos.

James B Nelson, the “father” of Body Theology, posited an incarnational faith as the basis for Body Theology:

“An incarnational faith boldly proclaims that Christ is alive. In other words, God continues to become embodied in our common flesh in saving, healing, liberating, justice-making ways.” (Nelson 1992:10)

Henri Nouwen’s almost exclusive theological focus on God’s “first love” during his latter years suggests that his “body theology” in terms of his own sexuality could have developed along the lines that Nelson expounds. Nelson’s use of language almost sounds Nouwen-like when he explains how our body is programmed to “reach out”:

Our bodyselves are intended to express the language of love. Our sexuality is God’s way of calling us into communion with others through our need to reach out, to touch, to embrace – emotionally, intellectually, and physically. Since we have been created with the desire for communion, the positive moral claim upon us is that we become in fact what we essentially are: lovers, in the richest and deepest sense of that good word. A sexual ethic grounded in love need not be devoid of clear values and sturdy guidelines. Indeed, such norms are vitally important. (Nelson 1992:36)

Feminist theologians like Isherwood and Stuart would not frame body theology as theology about the body, but rather as theology through the body. Nouwen’s subtle and tentative challenge to the accepted way of thinking about the body is taken quite a number of steps further in their approach to body theology and the underlying masculine power play that they detect in the traditional position. They see a radical deconstruction of an essentialist concept of truth as necessary.

⁴⁸ Robert Vosloo, Body and Health in the Light of the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in *Religion and Health: A Journal of Contemporary Religious Discourse*, Vol 13 (1):31

Working through the body is a way of ensuring that theories do not get written on the bodies of “others” who then become marginalized and objects of control. It is also a way of deconstructing the concept of truth that Christianity has used to hold so many falsehoods in place. Once one moves from the concept that there is absolute truth into which the bodies of people have to fit, the way is open to begin questioning and we soon realize that truth is not the issue in relation to prescriptions about the body, but power. Christian history shows us the extent to which power has been exerted over bodies in the name of divine truth and the crippling results. If the body is given the space and power to speak what will be the consequences for both the body and theology? (Isherwood & Stuart 1998:22)

One of the things that the body might say, “if given the space and power to speak”, could be the well-known words of Henri Nouwen: “How can my wounds become a source of healing (Nouwen 1979:87)?” The real body, not the idealized, perfect body of the Greek gods, but the real, down-to-earth broken body of the Jewish incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, would probably speak of woundedness and healing.

The philosopher John D Caputo coins the concept of “Jewgreek” bodies to escape the trap of the typical idealization of the perfect body. In his *Against Ethics*, he writes:

Philosophy’s body – from Plato and Aristotle to Merleau-Ponty – is an active, athletic, healthy, erect, white male body, sexually able and unambiguously gendered, well born, well bred, and well buried, a *corpus sanum* to fit a *mens sana* in the felicity of being-in-the-world and mundane intentional life. But the bodies of the Polyneices, Isaac and Shulamith, of the lepers and the man with the withered hand, are disfigured, diseased, unburied, sacrificial and ashen bodies. These Jewgreek bodies are not quite so philosophical. A little ugly and unpleasant, they fall outside the classical paradigm of propriety and comely form. (Caputo 1993:194)

Caputo then calls for a “poetics of obligation” which sides with these broken bodies, with everything the discourse calls flesh.

The flesh is not the ear that hears but the ear in pain, that rattles with the confusion of indiscernible sounds, the site of vertigo and nausea. The flesh is the ear of the man born deaf. It is not the eye of Cezanne, but the ear of Van

Gogh, the missing one, the one he cut off – like a piece of meat – in a mad rage when all he could think to do was to turn a knife against his own flesh, to transform the hand that created haunting worlds into an instrument of his own dismemberment.(Caputo 1992:207)

Henri Nouwen, who called Vincent van Gogh his own “wounded healer” might well have made these words his own. The word he could speak in the current developing discourse on body theology would be a word from a broken, wounded body. In the foreword Nouwen wrote to Cliff Edwards’ book *Van Gogh and God: A Creative Spiritual Quest* Nouwen recounts the lasting impact that was made on himself and his students when he taught a course on the spirituality of Vincent van Gogh at Yale Divinity School while he was a professor there. The seminar consisted mainly of spending hours in silence, just looking at slides of Van Gogh’s paintings and listening to his letters to his brother Theo.

Their haunting, passionate expression of longing for a God who is tangible and alive, who truly comforts and consoles, and who truly cares for the poor and the suffering brought us in touch with the deepest yearnings of our soul. Vincent’s God, so real, so direct, so visible in nature and people, so intensely compassionate, so weak and vulnerable, and so radically loving, was a God we all wanted to come close to.

The Van Gogh seminar was born out of my own feeling of affinity with Vincent and his work. Few writers of painters have influenced me as much as Vincent. The deeply wounded and immensely gifted Dutchman brought me in touch with my own brokenness and talents in ways nobody else could. He painted what I had not before dared to look at; he questioned what I had not before dared to speak about; and he entered into spaces of the heart that I had not before dared to come close to. By doing so he brought me in touch with my many fears and gave me the courage to go further and deeper in my search for a God who lives.” (Nouwen, in Edwards 1989:x)

4.4 Summary and Evaluation: Living the Book That Nouwen Never Wrote?

Henri Nouwen's most significant contribution to the present discourse on embodiment might come from work that he never finished. He was hoping to finish a book on his friend Adam at the time of his death and he had a number of other projects in mind at that time. But the one that energised him and would have given shape to his budding spirituality of embodiment, was his planned "circus" book⁴⁹. In Jurjen Beumer's biography of Nouwen, written before his death in 1996, Beumer suggests, and expects, that in future Nouwen would bring the themes of spirituality and embodiment closer together. He emphasized that in terms of the prevalent "fitness culture", which stimulated a kind of illusion of immortality, it was vital that a cogent spirituality of the body should be developed. He was anxious for Nouwen to give focused theological attention to body theology (Beumer 1997:85). Unfortunately that did not happen.

From Nouwen's posthumously published book, *Adam, God's Beloved* (1997)⁵⁰, we do get a clear idea of the major change that was taking place in Nouwen's approach to his own and other people's bodies. Henri Nouwen's body-awareness was deeply influenced by his move away from the cerebral world of the academy at Yale and Harvard, to become part of a community of vulnerable bodies at Daybreak. When he arrived at Daybreak the community assigned him to help take care of Adam Arnett, a twenty-five-year-old man who could not speak or move without assistance, and who suffered from frequent seizures. Nouwen acknowledged that he was terrified when he was first asked to look after Adam. In the eyes of the world, Adam was a just hard- to-handle, disabled nobody. And yet, for Nouwen, Adam became "my friend, my teacher, my guide". In the book Nouwen explains how Adam changed his whole perspective on life and embodiment.

How often Jean Vanier, the founder of L'Arche, had told me, "L'Arche is not built around the word but around the body. We are so privileged to be entrusted with the body of another." My whole life had been shaped by words,

⁴⁹ The Nouwen Archives in Toronto have Nouwen's "Circus Book" outline, drafts of chapters and transcripts of oral history interviews he conducted with troupe members.

⁵⁰ The book was eventually edited and completed by Nouwen's close friend and executrix of his estate, Sue Mosteller.

ideas, books, and encyclopaedias. But now my priorities were shifting. What was becoming important for me was Adam and our privileged time together when he offered me his body in total vulnerability, when he gave me himself to be undressed, bathed, dressed, fed, and walked from place to place. Being close to Adams body brought me close to Adam. I was slowly getting to know him.

But there was more. My daily time with him had created a bond between us that was much deeper than I had originally realized. Adam was the one who was helping me to become rooted not just in Daybreak but in my own self. My closeness to him and to his body was bringing me closer to myself and to my own body. It was as if he said to me, "Not only do you *have* a body like I do, Henri, but you *are* your body. Don't let your words become separated from your flesh. Your words must become and remain flesh."

When a friend came to visit Nouwen at Daybreak and saw how much time and energy he was "wasting" on Adam, he was very disturbed and angrily questioned if someone with Henri's qualifications, talents and training should not be making better use of his time, solving the real problems facing humanity. Nouwen was shocked and did not even try to answer someone who saw Adam only as a needy "dis-abled" person, and not the Adam he had come to love.

My daily two hours with Adam were transforming me. In being present to him I was hearing an inner voice of love beyond all the activities of care. Those two hours were pure gift, a time of contemplation, during which we, together, were touching something of God. With Adam I knew a sacred presence and I "saw" the face of God.

For many years I had reserved the word "Incarnation" for the historic event of God's coming to us in Jesus. Being so close with Adam I realized that the "Christ event" is much more than something that took place long ago. It occurs every time spirit greets spirit in the body. It is a sacred event happening in the present because it is God's event among people. That is what the sacramental life is all about. It is God's ongoing incarnation whenever people meet each other "in God's name". My relationship with

Adam was giving me new eyes to see and new ears to hear. I was being changed much more than I ever anticipated (Nouwen 1997:46-54).

Henri Nouwen's feelings about his homosexual orientation were also gradually changing. When he gave the address at the closing plenary session of a major conference on HIV/Aids in 1994, it was clear from his speech that there was a new development taking place in his attitude toward his own body and sexual orientation. In the address Nouwen admitted that during the conference he had come to the realization that the body was not only a metaphor and that he knew he had to discover what it really meant to be a body, to be in a body, to be incarnated. He had to learn to be at home in his body, a temple of the Holy Spirit, where God lives. From the handwritten notes from Nouwen's talk, available at the Henri JM Nouwen Archives and Research collection in Toronto, Canada⁵¹, his growing engagement with his homosexual identity is quite clear:

We have met many very beautiful people, heard many very life-giving words, seen signs of hope and felt in our bodies the healing touch of each other. One thing has become clear to me. The pandemic is not God's punishment, nor God's blessing to us, but the way we choose to live it will determine how God will be known – as an angry vengeful God, or as a merciful, always healing, lover.

Nouwen was moving towards a "fourth discipline" of the spiritual life, the discipline of the body. Christensen and Laird (2006:147) find that in Nouwen's *Sabbatical Journey*, written during his final months, he started speaking about a new category of spiritual discipline.

In addition to the three disciplines of the spiritual life he articulated earlier – the Heart, the Book, and the Church – a fourth discipline, the discipline of the Body, can be discerned in the later Nouwen. The discipline of the body – the need to listen to the truth of the body and to "bring your body home" – challenged him to expand his notion of spiritual direction and formation and to move into a new spirituality of embodiment. We also have clues that he was struggling to find the parable and live the questions of an embodied

⁵¹ "Our Story, Our Wisdom" Seventh National Catholic HIV/AIDS Ministry Conference at Loyola University, Chicago, Illinois, USA, 12-26 July 1994. Available in the Henri JM Nouwen Archives and Research Collection, John M Kelly Library, University of St Michael's College, University of Toronto

spirituality. He wanted to write a story that would simply speak for itself. He wanted to find a life that allowed human and divine, body and spirit, to catch hands and soar (Christensen & Laird 2006:147).

Because Nouwen did not develop these thoughts systematically, Christensen and Laird find it difficult to present more than what they call the “broad strokes of Henri’s new spirituality-in-the-making.” According to them Nouwen found the image he was looking for for his new book in his meeting with the lives and artistry of a troupe of trapeze artists from South Africa, *The Flying Rodleighs*.

Higgins and Burns, in their reconstruction of the life and legacy of Henri Nouwen in word and sound, also regard his intense engagement with these trapeze artists as highly significant in terms of Nouwen’s feelings about his own body.

Nouwen had still to make peace with his body – the human body. He needed to reject the residue of a dangerous angelism, the vestigial marks of Jansenism, his perduring detestation and embarrassment over his physical awkwardness.

Then, in April of 1991, the circus came to town...

Nouwen was so taken by the team, their artistry, their unabashed physicality, that he not only befriended the Flying Rodleighs – and Rodleigh Stevens in particular – he entered their lives, their thoughts, and their dreams. He became part of them.

He began to interview the members of the troupe with the intention of writing a book – a work of fiction – that resulted in several drafts of chapters and transcriptions but was never completed. He would write in a letter to the Rodleighs dated May 14, 1991, that

[I] see in your life many images that can help me understand and explore the life of the spirit. Flying, catching, trusting and daring, discipline and cooperation, care for one another and listening to one another, all are part of not only your life, but also of the life of the spirit that I am writing about.

What the Flying Rodleights meant to Nouwen was community, aesthetic and spiritual marriage and the celebration of the body *qua* body (Higgins & Burns 2012: Kindle location 6).

Unfortunately Henri Nouwen's book was never published. But it suggests the direction in which his theology was developing. Nouwen came to realise that real spiritual life is an embodied life, calling for a new spirituality of the body. He knew that the Incarnation - God becoming flesh - means that God enters the body, so that if you touch a body, in a way you touch divine life. Nouwen knew that to be relevant in future, to be honest about what he was discovering and to live an authentic and free life, he would have to develop these insights into an integrated spirituality of the body. But he felt that he was not ready for that.

There is so much more to say about embodied spirituality and the discipline of the body, but I do not yet have the words; I have only questions and a new direction. Yet deep within myself, I feel that something new wants to be born: a book with stories, a novel, a spiritual embodiment journal – something quite different from what I have done in the past. To write about my experience with the Rodleights would require a radical new step in my life, one I'm not quite ready to take. (Christensen & Laird 2006:149)

Part of the relevance of Nouwen's nascent spirituality of vulnerable embodiment for the current discourse in body theology could be that the spiritual baton he dropped might be picked up and be taken forward into the fray of the current conversation on gender, sexuality and embodiment. Honestly "living the questions" that he was beginning to ask about the spiritual dimension of body theology and creatively "reaching out" for appropriate metaphors and spiritual disciplines of the body in the "new direction" that Nouwen was setting out to explore, might prove to be a valuable enhancement of the spiritual level of the theological conversation about embodiment.⁵²

⁵² Extensive documentation in various formats (published and unpublished material) is available at the Henri JM Nouwen Archives and Research Collection in Toronto. This includes subjects like The Flying Rodleights, Vincent van Gogh, Thomas Merton, homosexuality, etc.

When considering the possible value that the writings and theology of Nouwen might have for the current debate on body theology, one of the aspects would surely be the value of the contemplative spiritual dimension, the mystical “spaces of the heart”, that his literary artistry, providing creative metaphors and broader frames of reference, could add to the sometimes painfully strident or boringly prosaic tone of the current discourse.

For Henri Nouwen the discourse on Vulnerability and the discourse on Embodiment, would naturally lead to the discourse on Mystery, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 5

The Way of Mystery:

From Illusions of the Mind to Prayer of the Heart

(The Movement towards God)

*In the days ahead
you will either be a mystic
or nothing at all.*

Karl Rahner

5.1 Was Henri Nouwen a Mystic?

When Henri Nouwen tried to explain why the movement from illusion to prayer, the movement through which we reach out to God, is the most basic move of the spiritual life, he ran into the problem that this “first and final” movement is very hard to grasp, to get hold of, to explain.

Not because this movement is vague or unreal, but because it is so close that it hardly allows the distance needed for articulation and understanding. Maybe this is the reason why the most profound realities of life are the easiest victims of trivialization (Nouwen 1975:106).

Henri Nouwen was a mystic. But he was a unique type of mystic. The very attempt to try to describe and categorise his “type” of mysticism runs the danger of trivialising the essence of his being by trying to explain the inexplicable, by trying to “solve” mystery. To attempt to define mystery by using limited human, rational concepts, is by definition impossible. Nouwen provides an example:

Newspaper interviews with monks who have given their life to prayer in silence and solitude out of a burning love for God, usually boil down to silly stories on changes in regulations and seemingly strange customs. Questions about the “why” of love, marriage, the priesthood or any basic life decision usually lead to meaningless platitudes, a lot of stuttering and shaking of shoulders. Not that these questions are unimportant, but their answers are too deep and too close to our innermost being to be caught in human words (Nouwen 1975:106).

People who knew Nouwen well and have written about him and his legacy concur that a deep mysticism was one of his defining features, and maybe one of the factors that makes his spirituality still relevant today for many people the world over. Richard Rohr, in the introduction he wrote for Wil Hernandez’ book on Nouwen, relates the

story of a letter he received from Nouwen, congratulating him on the name of Rohr's recently opened centre: *The Centre for Action and Contemplation*. In that letter and several after that, Nouwen encouraged Rohr to consider teaching "nothing else" but this contemplative mind and heart that both the world and the church needed so much.

"Don't let anything else get in the way!" he said. He knew, and I am more convinced now myself, that contemplation is indeed the *change that changes everything*. It was that level of seeing that bore so much fruit in him for the rest of us, and made his writing so clean and clear (Rohr, in Hernandez 2012: Kindle location 147).

Almost all of Nouwen's many biographers mention this extraordinary "level of seeing", this natural mysticism. Hernandez, in his *Henri Nouwen and Spiritual Polarities: A Life of Tension*, writes:

Nouwen embodied the contemplative lifestyle of a true mystic who was able to see through spiritual realities – above, beyond, beneath, and underneath the surface of things. For him, all of life was interconnected in some mystical way. Nouwen's entire existence, though by all measures far from perfect, seemed always to be heading and gravitating toward fuller, wider, higher, and deeper aspects of integration. His constant movement in this direction appeared effortless and unforced. (Hernandez, 2012: Kindle location 219)

In his *Wounded Prophet, A Portrait of Henri JM Nouwen*, Michael Ford describes Nouwen's strong convictions about the necessity for church leaders to reclaim the mystical dimension of life:

Contemplation was at the heart of everything for Henri Nouwen. It was a discipline of dwelling in the presence of God. Through fidelity in prayer, he could awaken himself to the God within him and let God enter into his thoughts and emotions, into his hearing, seeing, touching, and tasting. Nouwen was convinced that Christian leaders need to reclaim the mystical so that every word they speak, each suggestion they make, and every strategy they develop will emerge from a heart that knows God intimately (Ford 1999:4).

George Strohmeier, a Roman Catholic diocesan priest who cofounded the L'Arche community in Erie, Pennsylvania, knew Nouwen well during the ten years that he lived in L'Arche. He wrote an insightful chapter on "Henri Nouwen as Mystic" in *Befriending Life: Encounters with Henri Nouwen*, Beth Porter's (ed) 2001 book of reminiscences about Nouwen's life and works. Strohmeier emphasises that Nouwen's mystical consciousness was his fundamental identity:

If we do not see the mystical qualities in Henri, we are left with a caricature: his words as they reflect only his rational intelligence or his uncanny talent to reveal himself so openly. If we do not permit his transformed self to invite us to greater awareness, the loss might in the end be that we would not grasp the invitation that Henri was and still is as an instrument to help us come to know and cherish our own true nature, the very identity of the Absolute Reality in me as me, in you as you, in each of us as us (Strohmeier in Porter, ed. 2001:244).

Jurjen Beumer knew Nouwen and his work well enough to point out that even in his early works, in a more academic context, Nouwen pleaded for a more spiritual approach to theology⁵³. Beumer was convinced that the "dogmatic overload" ("*dogmatische ballast*") of much theological writing and thinking stood in the way of free, mystical, spiritual experience. He pointed, for example, to Nouwen's heartfelt plea for a more spiritual approach to theological subjects in his early but incisive book *Creative Ministry*:

It is painful to realize that very few ministers are able to offer the rich mystical tradition of Christianity as a source of rebirth for the generation searching for new life in the midst of the debris of a faltering civilization. Perhaps our self-consciousness, fear of rejection, and preoccupation with church quarrels prevent us from being free to experience the transcendent Spirit of God, which can renew our hearts and our world as well. It calls for Christians who are willing to develop their sensitivity to God's presence in their own lives as well as in the lives of others, and to offer their experiences as a way of

⁵³ "Het indringend boek *Creative Ministry* is één harstochtelijk pleidooi om de praktische vakken van de theologie spiritueler te maken." (Beumer 1997:177).

recognition and liberation of their fellow men. It calls for ministers in the true sense, who lay down their own lives for their friends, helping them to distinguish between constructive and destructive spirits and making them free for the discovery of God's life-giving Spirit in the midst of this maddening world. It calls for creative weakness (Nouwen 1971:117-119).

At the core of Henri Nouwen's spiritual formation theology is his conviction that the basis of spiritual life lies in the movement of the Spirit which takes us from the rationalistic illusions of the mind to the contemplative prayer of the heart. As mentioned before, Nouwen often employs the phrase that we need to "descend with the mind into the heart". The main obstacle to this movement is our often hidden but all-pervasive illusion of immortality. We fool ourselves that we are "in control" of life. We live in the illusion that our lives belong to us.

When however, prayer makes us reach out to God, not on our own, but on his terms, then prayer pulls us away from self-preoccupations, encourages us to leave familiar ground, and challenges us to move into a new world which cannot be contained within the narrow boundaries of our mind or heart. Prayer, therefore, is a great adventure because the God with whom we enter into a relationship is greater than we are and defies all our calculations and predictions. The movement from illusion to prayer is hard to make since it leads us from false certainties to true uncertainties, from an easy support system to a risky surrender, and from the many "safe" Gods to the God whose love has no limits (Nouwen 1975:116-117).

5.2 Mystical Theology

The scope of this study does not permit an exhaustive examination of the whole field of Mystical Theology. In order to investigate the possible contribution that Henri Nouwen's approach has had and might still have in the global discourse on mysticism, this research will be limited to the works of theologians from three different continents: Jurjen Beumer of the Netherlands, Mark A. McIntosh of the United States of America, and John W. de Gruchy of South Africa.

5.2.1 Jurjen Beumer

Jurjen Beumer's main contribution to this field, an edited version of his extensive doctoral dissertation, was published in 1993 as *Intimiteit & Solidariteit: Over het evenwicht tussen dogmatiek, mystiek en ethiek*⁵⁴. Beumer attempts to provide a new position in present-day European theological thinking for mysticism. According to him the rational sciences have become so dominant that for many people the idea of paying attention to the category of mystery has become an outdated part of the Christian tradition. Church and theology have become a copy of contemporary times and have lost the ability to criticize the one-sidedness of the prevalent Western world-view.

A closer study of the mystics reveals how much they resisted this flattened and closed world-view. Speaking from the experience of a "hidden intercourse" with the Unseen, they criticised the Church which tried to capture this experience of spaciousness in dogmatics and ethics, in religious doctrine and rules of faith. Nowadays there is renewed attention for the elusive language of the mystics, a speech that goes beyond the categories of the well-known.

According to Beumer the suitable position for mysticism is between dogmatics and ethics, in the heart of theology. Without mysticism, believing and acting will not be integrated. Beumer takes the starting point of his discussion in the theologies of Karl Barth and Edward Schillebeeckx, two European theologians who have internationally influenced the study of theology. By way of a thesis in which the images "high" and

⁵⁴ *Intimacy & Solidarity: About the Balance between Dogmatics, Mysticism and Ethics*. (This researcher's translation.)

“low” are central, he explored both dogmatic models. By “high” (from above, “von Gott her”, i.e. from God,) he meant the world of belief and the gospel. By “low” (from below, “auf Gott hin”, i.e. towards God), the religious experience of people in today’s world.

According to Beumer, Barth starts “high”, (*Barth zet hoog in* - Beumer 1993:25) but then ethics threatens to dissolve into dogmatics, man threatens to be dissolved in favour of God. Schillebeeckx starts “low” (*Scillebeeckx zet laag in* - Beumer 1993:75), but then, dogmatics threatens to be completely absorbed by ethics. Beumer asserts that both Barth and Schillebeeckx escape this conundrum by placing “prayer” (Barth) and “mysticism” (Schillebeeckx) in the midst of dogmatics and ethics (underneath and between them). His thesis is then that the mystics, by their way of living, live beyond the distinction between dogmatics and ethics.

Beumer defines the mystical experience as one of passivity, where the initiative lies completely with the Other. He describes the difference between a religious and a mystical experience as follows: a religious person is searching; a mystical person feels him/herself found. Neither the mystic, nor any other human being can add or subtract from this process. God “befalls” people. This experience is called *mysticism*; the account of it, *mystical language*. Theology speaks “about”, while mysticism speaks “out of”. Beumer finds himself comfortably at home in Mommaer’s definition of mysticism, which describes a mystic as someone who has experienced, in an overwhelming way, the presence of something that transcends himself, but which is much more real than anything that was perceived as real before⁵⁵. Beumer agrees, but cautions that no definition can adequately define the mystic dimension of life (Beumer 1993:114).

Beumer describes this as a “Barthian moment” in mysticism, although Barth formally resists the idea of incorporating mysticism. By “broadening” the meaning of prayer in

⁵⁵ “Een mysticus is ‘iemand die op overweldigende wijze de tegenwoordigheid ervaart van iets dat hemzelf overstijgt en veel werkelijker is dan al hetgeen men doorgaans voor werkelijk aanziet. Heel het menselijk bestel – de wereld waarin wij leven en die zo vanzelfsprekend en solide lijkt – wordt voor de mysticus een doorzichtig décor, omdat een andere, uiteindelijke werkelijkheid zich aandient. En deze waarneming van een onvergelijkelijke tegenwoordigheid gaat gepaard met een complementair psychologisch fenomeen: de mysticus voelt zijn normale ikheid verdwijnen, Zijn persoonlijkheid – dat is de bepaalde, eigen manier waarop men zijn bestaan leidt – verliest haar contouren. De beslotenheid van de mens die “Zichzelf is” word bij hem doodbroken, zijn eenzaamheid wordt opgeheven” (Mommaers, P. in *Wat is mystiek?*: Nijmegen/Brugge: 25).

Barth's theology (from above) in order to come closer to mysticism, and extending Schillebeeckx's discussion of mysticism (from below), Beumer hopes to achieve the desired balance between dogmatics, mysticism and ethics. As illustrations of people who have moved toward this balance he then describes the integrated mysticism of K.H. Miskotte and Dag Hammarskjöld.

In terms of the research question of our present study as to the value of Henri Nouwen's "mysticism" in the ongoing theological discourse it might be significant to note that on the last page of Beumer's extensive research on mysticism he chooses to quote Nouwen as an example of someone who embodied the balanced mysticism that the title of Beumer's book suggested:

Those who have entered deeply into their hearts and found the intimate home where they encounter their Lord, come to the mysterious discovery that solidarity is the other side of intimacy. They come to the awareness that the intimacy of God's house excludes no one and includes everyone. They start to see that the home they have found in their innermost being is as wide as the whole humanity (Nouwen 1986:43).

5.2.2 Mark Allan McIntosh

Mark McIntosh, like Beumer, is aware of the growing popular fascination with "spirituality" in all its forms. There is a proliferation of different kinds of "pseudo-spirituality", a low-cost kind of piety that is part of the consumerist consciousness in much of the Western world, where people are shopping for a privatized inner world. On the other hand, it seems that the presupposition for all theology pursued in Western academic settings is the idea that theology must keep itself at arm's length from "piety" if it is to be considered scientific and academically respectable. The main challenge that McIntosh faces with in his *Mystical Theology: Challenges in Contemporary Theology*, is that spirituality is largely separated from theology. The carefully crafted argument of the book is for the reintegration of spirituality and theology. McIntosh formulates his goal as:

... to articulate the concrete particularities of Christian spirituality and theology as a basis for rediscovering their integrity, precisely because I doubt very much that there is any such thing as spirituality or theology apart from their concrete historical life (McIntosh 1998:5).

McIntosh then demonstrates the integrity of theology and spirituality by an excursion into early church history. Theology and Spirituality were originally not treated as separate entities. They share common ground: an encounter with God. Spirituality is about the *impression* this encounter makes in the life of people, while theology is the *expression* of it, as people try to understand and speak of the encounter. McIntosh points out that in early Christianity the union of mysticism (earlier called contemplation) and theology was simply assumed as a given. Today these two elements are often seen as mutually exclusive: the affective or loving impulse and the intellectual or knowing impulse. In essence it is in contemplation that theology and spirituality meet. McIntosh quotes Gregory of Nyssa (c.330-c.359), Augustine (354-430) and Julian of Norwich (c1342-1416) to illustrate that they were able to find appropriate dogmatic words in which to express their very personal experience. McIntosh uses an enlightening statement of Hans Urs von Balthasar to explain that in later eras mystical thinkers became so conditioned by the isolation of academic goals from contemplative life that they did not have the confidence to engage the theological formulation of their experience:

The Saints, intimidated by the conceptual entanglements drawn round the gospel truth, no longer dare to collaborate in the necessary work of exposition of doctrine, or think themselves qualified to do so. They leave dogma to the School, and become lyrical poets. But just as poetry has developed from an objective art interpreting reality, the conception of the Greeks and Romans, to a subjective art describing inner states, the expressionistic and impressionistic art of modern times, so also have the saints come to speak a religious language which is not dogmatic. Or else they obey instructions and respond to demands made on them, which are more and more of a subjective and psychological nature. The saints in modern times are required to describe the

way they experience God, and the accent is always on experience rather than on God (McIntosh 1999:13).

The main issues at stake for McIntosh are: that theology without spirituality becomes ever more methodologically refined but unable to speak of the very mysteries at the heart of Christianity; and on the other hand, that spirituality without theology becomes rootless and is prone to being easily infiltrated by individualistic consumerism. The mutual critical function breaks down.

McIntosh takes his mission of recovering the mystical element of theology further by bringing the theology of two influential 20th century theologians into a constructive dialogue: Karl Rahner's mystagogy and Hans Urs von Balthasar's mysticism of Trinitarian encounter. McIntosh elucidates the difference between the two in the following way:

For Rahner we come into fully personal being through our interior transcendental apprehension of being and drive towards mystery. For von Balthasar we only really become fully the persons God has created us to be insofar as we discover our true mission through participation in the mission of Christ (McIntosh 1998:93).

This is where Von Balthasar strongly complements Rahner. Rahner asserts that there is an innate, fundamental human transcendentality. Von Balthasar's contention is that all human consciousness is irreducibly interpersonal. We are "addressed" not by a divine silence but by "superabundant speech and expressivity", the very eternal relationality of the Trinitarian life (McIntosh 1998:113).

Mystical language provides lenses to view what cannot be seen. Mystical texts provide an interpretive framework through which readers of the text may come to recognise their own encounters with God. McIntosh argues for a "moment of vulnerability" when the reader becomes willing to let go of grasping for knowledge as a possession, as a means of being in control.

So the theological interpretation of mystical texts must resist the urge to trivialize the apophatic by rendering its language of paradox and play into a more “stable” statement of propositional truths or a putative account of pre-textual experience (McIntosh 1998:125).

Refusing to domesticate mystical language, refusing to engage in a discourse about a deity who is yet another object of human thought, McIntosh suggests that theology should allow mystical speech to reconfigure theological discourse around its strange silences and words, to reshape the usual patterns of thought and argument in theology.

“If theology wishes to speak truthfully of a God who is not simply the highest item of existence (who happens also to be invisible), then ultimately it can only achieve its goal by helping the community to that moment in its encounter with God when divine superabundance finally transcends all our faculties and leaves us in silence so complete that neither wonder, adoration nor despair can any longer be distinguished (McIntosh 1998:126).

McIntosh suggests that the meeting place for mystical perceptivity and Christian theology is Trinitarian speech. The Trinitarian theology of the incarnation and the cross is the matrix of mystical speech. At the end of his study McIntosh refers to the reminder of the theologian Rowan Williams that:

The fundamental basis of the human person as image of God does not lie in the comfortable closure granted by a self-sufficient mirroring of relationality within the human subject. Rather the self only comes to know and love itself truly (to *be* in more than a provisional sense), by being known and loved by God, being drawn into the deepest basis of our being within the trinitarian life of God (McIntosh 1998: 238).

McIntosh’s argument that the inter-trinitarian relations, as infinitely given love, is foundational for regaining the integrity of spirituality and theology, might also prove to be foundational for regaining integrity in all of life.

Henri Nouwen, whose passion for reintegrating spirituality, theology and ministry on an academic level was clear from his earliest years in teaching positions, also embodied in his life story McIntosh's plea for a "window of vulnerability" as point of entrance into integral spirituality. Michael Ford describes Nouwen's emphatic convictions about a spiritual approach to the art of doing and teaching theology:

Strongly influenced by Orthodox writers, Nouwen believed that prayer, community, and ministry are integral parts of true theological understanding – in other words, that the study of theology itself needs to have a prayerful quality about it. Only since the Enlightenment had "theology" developed into one academic discipline among others, increasingly involving analysis and synthesis and less and less related to the experience of union with God. But the original connection between *theologia* and prayer must never be lost – nor could theology be "done" outside a community of faith. Nouwen's vocation was to affirm students in their own sacred journeys and then, vulnerably, enter with them into the common search, allowing their questions to resound in the depths of his soul, listen to them without fear, and discover the connections with his own life history. No fresh insights, though, would ever develop unless they came from a source that transcended both pupil and teacher (Ford 1999:107-108).

5.2.3 John W de Gruchy

The questions that prompted John de Gruchy to write *Led Into Mystery: Faith Seeking Answers in Life and Death* "are not academic; they are intensely personal and theological, because they probe the mystery of life and death" (2013:19). After the death of his son, Steve, in a boating accident in 2010, De Gruchy was faced with the most basic of life's questions, "chief among them being whether I still believe in the resurrection and what this means for me today" (De Gruchy 2013:20). This led him to engage in an honest and comprehensive search into mystery, which took him to the boundaries of human knowledge and experience.

Aware of the scepticism with which such a theological quest might be met as “the art of mystification or muddled thinking”, De Gruchy explains what he understands when speaking of mystery:

I hope to show that the Christian experience and understanding of mystery is neither [mystification or muddled thinking], nor is it other-worldly or a-historical, as some forms of piety and mysticism might be; it is being encountered by and engaging reality differently. It is not a question of solving problems, but of participating in something that transcends and ultimately overwhelms us as we struggle with matters of life and death, love and justice, faith and hope. In the end, this is what it means to be “led into mystery”, and in the process to become more fully human (De Gruchy 2013:21).

De Gruchy, as a renowned Bonhoeffer scholar, throughout his book refers to Bonhoeffer’s writings, since mystery was a key element in Bonhoeffer’s theology (De Gruchy 2013:19). He does not however, start his search with theologians but first looks at the role that imagination plays by listening for “echoes of mystery” in the stories, poems and other writings of a wide variety of authors such as John Keats, William Wordsworth, and Paul Ricoeur. De Gruchy states that when we arrive at what Paul Ricoeur “so helpfully” calls a “second naïvité”, we receive a fresh, chastened ability to appreciate mystery.

We need loop-holes in ordinary life through which we can catch glimpses of something sublime amid the mundane. But our post-Enlightenment rationality often prevents our imagination from perceiving the mystery in the real, the awakening of aesthetic sensibility to grasp the actual. We need to be reminded that only those who are willing to face reality will discern mystery, and only those who are open to mystery will discover reality (De Gruchy 2013:44).

De Gruchy also discerns “echoes of mystery” in the works of theologians such as Paul Tillich, Rowan Williams, Augustine and Karl Barth, all seeking language to express the inexpressible.

In the second chapter, “Walking through the Door”, De Gruchy reflects on the Bible, the role of hermeneutics, and the value of myth. He refers to the special relationship between JRR Tolkien and CS Lewis and delineates the different questions and mystery surrounding the person of Jesus.

In the third chapter, “The God Question” De Gruchy investigates belief in God as absolute mystery. He discusses the relationship between faith and the sciences, images of God, cultural development and divine love. Richard Dawkins, Karen Armstrong, André Brink, Klaus Nurnberger, Fyodor Dostoevsky, René Descartes, Blaise Pascal, Isaac Newton, Albert Einstein, Charles Darwin, Wentzel van Huyssteen and the latest developments in quantum physics all pass the revue. In the end De Gruchy concludes that to believe in God as the ultimate mystery builds on the image which Christian tradition has constructed of God as unfathomable love and infinite beauty.

Building theology on the rapidly shifting sands of scientific discovery is not a good idea, but neither is burying one’s head in the sand as if it will all go away. On the contrary, the dethronement of inadequate theories along with questionable theologies is part of being led deeper into mystery, for each discovery teaches us that “reality far outstrips human imagination and guesswork”. There are infinite mysteries in the universe awaiting exploration (De Gruchy 2013:110).

In the next chapter, “The Human Enigma” De Gruchy, in conversation with experts in the field of neuroscience, reflects on how we should understand our humanity and the connection between the brain, thinking and personhood. Philip Clayton, Oscar Wilde, TS Eliot, Isobel de Gruchy, Paul Thagard, Keith Ward, Mark Solms and the Bible all become part of this conversation and De Gruchy comes to the conclusion that the human being, as Levinas insisted, is an enigma that cannot be reduced to any objective description. We are fragments of a much larger, cosmic mystery we call God. And being human can only be understood in relation to community.

And we have finally come to the recognition that the mystery of being human cannot be reduced to us as individuals; it has to do with us in relationship to

one another. For Christians, this refers especially to being part of a community called to embody the new humanity in Christ that anticipates the coming of a new creation (De Gruchy 2013:174).

In the last chapter, “The Hope within Us”, De Gruchy offers a positive answer to the initial question posed at the beginning of the book: whether he really believes that Jesus has conquered death. He embraces Niebuhr’s caution that such claims should be made with restraint in trying to be too explicit about what we can know about eternal life. But restraint does not mean uncertainty about the validity of Christian hope. De Gruchy formulates his answer by looking at opinions concerning life after death from the sciences, Eastern philosophies and African traditions. He makes some remarks about the way heaven and earth are understood in Western culture, and then, focusing on Jesus Christ, and referring to John Polkinghorne, NT Wright, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Reinhold Niebuhr he formulates his conviction as follows:

...the consummation of life and history is not dependent on any inherent human capacity we may have, but on a “source beyond ourselves”. Christian faith acknowledges that this source is the cosmic mystery we name God, disclosed to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ as unfathomable love and infinite beauty (De Gruchy 2013:214).

Henri Nouwen, probably would have found himself completely in agreement with a statement like this. His writings on death and life beyond death reflects the same “restrained but not uncertain” approach to mystery. When reporting on the “interruption” in his normal life when he was struck by the mirror of a passing truck, and the resulting near-death experience in hospital, Nouwen explained why he felt obliged to write about this encounter in his book, *Beyond the Mirror*:

I have written it because I had no choice. My accident brought me into the portal of death and led me to a new experience of God. Not writing about it would have been unfaithful to my vocation to proclaim the presence of God at all times and in all places. Books and articles have been important in my search for God, but it has been the interruptions to my everyday life that have most revealed to me the divine mystery of which I am part (Nouwen 1990:9).

Although De Gruchy does not want to base his convictions on life and death merely on near-death experiences, he poses the question whether the accounts of near-death experiences by people like the neurosurgeon Eben Alexander in his best-selling *Proof of Heaven*,⁵⁶ and the mystic Julian of Norwich in *Showings*⁵⁷, suggest that total “scientific” reductionism is not the whole story.

Both scientist and mystic describe their experience of “heaven” as being enfolded by love and, on “coming back to life”, declared “all is well”. If these testimonies are in any sense credible and therefore potentially true, they corroborate the conviction that we humans are connected to the ultimate mystery of the universe understood as infinite love and beauty, and not merely a machine “bound in the hard shell of the skull” (De Gruchy 2013:148).

If Henri Nouwen’s mystical experience is also “in any sense credible and therefore potentially true”, part of his legacy for today is perhaps his “restrained but not uncertain” witness about the reality of our connection to the ultimate mystery of the universe that we call God, something beyond what we have ever seen. In Nouwen’s words:

What I experienced then was something I had never experienced before: pure and unconditional love. Better still, what I experienced was an intensely personal presence, a presence that pushed all my fears aside and said, “Come, don’t be afraid. I love you.” A very gentle, non-judgemental presence; a presence that simply asked me to trust and trust completely. I hesitate to speak simply about Jesus, because of my concern that the Name of Jesus might not evoke the full divine presence that I experienced. It was not a warm light, a rainbow, or an open door that I saw, but a human, yet divine, presence that I *felt*, inviting me to come closer and to let go of all fears. (Nouwen 1990:33)

⁵⁶ Eben Alexander 2012, *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon’s Journey into the Afterlife*, New York: Simon & Schuster: 169

⁵⁷ Julian of Norwich 1978, *Showings*, New York: Paulist Press, 179-80.

5.3 Summary and Evaluation: Going Down the Way Less Travelled?

This chapter started off by ascertaining that according to most biographers the mystic dimension of Henri Nouwen's life was one of his defining characteristics. In his own unique way his relationship with God, others and himself was determined by an intimate engagement with mystery. During the course of his life he lived increasingly from a contemplative approach to all of life. The renewed interest nowadays in the field of mysticism was investigated by looking at the approaches of theologians from three different continents: Jurjen Beumer, Mark McIntosh and John de Gruchy

Perhaps Wil Hernandez's conclusion at the end of his research on Henri Nouwen's mysticism is an apt summary of the general consensus about the value of Nouwen's contribution to the current conversation in this field:

Henri Nouwen, without question, possessed a highly developed quality of mystical awareness – a keen combination of contemplative seeing and thinking that all of us are capable of cultivating as we move into a greater sense of wholeness and higher levels of integration (Hernandez 2012: Kindle Location 2002).

Chapter 6

Conclusion

The Downward Way Forward?

*The disciple is the one who follows Jesus on his downward path
and thus enters with him into a new life.*

*The gospel radically subverts
the presuppositions of our upwardly mobile society.
It is a jarring and unsettling challenge.*

(Nouwen 2007:34)

This study investigates whether Henri Nouwen's spiritual formation theology could possibly add value to the current discourse on gender and health. After this limited encounter with a particular dimension of Nouwen's theology and after following the trajectory of his life story, this researcher suspects that Nouwen might have answered the question negatively or that he may have challenged the formulation of the research question. Engaging in an academic "discourse" was part of a life he chose to leave behind.

Nouwen often tried to get to the root of a matter by looking at the meaning of the word in the language from which it originated. According to the Oxford Dictionary the word "discourse" comes from the original Latin *discursus*, which means "running to and fro" (in medieval Latin: "argument"). Nouwen increasingly avoided this type of engagement towards the end of his life. However, he was never averse to entering into conversation on any matter. According to the Oxford Dictionary, "conversation" comes from the Latin *conversari*: to "keep company with". Keeping company with others, engaging in conversation, asking questions that might open a new way of living, appealed to Nouwen's spirituality and his way of living and doing theology. Rather than formulating and dictating answers, he chose to "live the questions", which might help people live their own questions and answers and healing.

If gender, health and theology questions are approached from such a humble, open point of departure, from a "conversation" level, a level of "keeping company" with others and other ways of wisdom, open to the possibility of knowledge and insight from more than the discursive methods of modernistic science, the life and spiritual legacy of Henry might offer valuable questions,

hints and directions that may open new ways of looking at life, health and wholeness.

In Chapter One of this study the decision to follow a strategy that Nouwen often employed when constructing his books was explained. Rather than using clear divisions and categories, Nouwen preferred to speak of movements. In this concluding chapter use will be made of his strategy again. Nouwen stressed that the movements he described are not clearly separated, but should rather be listened to as the themes of symphony flowing together in harmony:

Certain themes recur in the different movements in various tonalities and often flow into one another as the different movements of a symphony. But hopefully the distinctions will help us better to recognize the different elements of the spiritual life and so encourage us to reach out to our innermost self, our fellow human beings and our God (Nouwen 1975:21).

Henri Nouwen helped people across the world to listen to the symphony of life in a fresh way. Not only listening with new ears, but also seeing life through new eyes is what he bequeathed to the world. As indicated in Chapter One, his brother, and many others, came to see him as a special kind of “theological artist” who could open the eyes of others to look at all of life differently. Michael Ford, after more than a hundred interviews with people who knew Nouwen personally, also reaches for the metaphor of an Artist, specifically the Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh, when he tries to explain the value of this different way of looking at the world that people gained from their encounter with Nouwen:

The writings of Henri J.M. Nouwen, like the paintings of fellow Dutchman Vincent van Gogh, emerged from an intense vision that captured the imagination of people the world over. Much of his genius was shaped by an ongoing loneliness and anguish of the sort that also afflicted Van Gogh, whose paintings he greatly admired. Constantly fearing solitude and rejection, especially by those they loved, both men sank at times into deep depression yet at their lowest ebb managed to create some of their most inspiring and memorable work (Ford 1999:x).

Henri Nouwen never got to write the book on Vincent van Gogh that he had planned, but from his copious notes on Van Gogh, the seminar that he taught on Van Gogh at Yale, and his foreword to the book *Van Gogh and God*, it can be deduced that looking at the artist's work brought a special type of healing to his life and the lives of many others⁵⁸. In the foreword Nouwen writes:

The Van Gogh seminar was born out of my own feeling of affinity with Vincent van Gogh and his work. This deeply wounded and immensely gifted Dutchman brought me in touch with my own brokenness and talents in a way nobody else could. The hours spent walking through the Kröller-Möller museum in the Netherlands and the days spent reading his letters were personal times of restoration and renewal. They were times of solitude in which a voice spoke that I could listen to. I experience connections between Vincent's struggles and my own, and realized more and more that Vincent was becoming my wounded healer (Edwards 1998:x).

In the other book Edwards wrote about Van Gogh (with the same foreword by Henri Nouwen), *The shoes of van Gogh: A Spiritual and Artistic Journey to the Ordinary*, Edwards described the powerful way that art can influence people's way of seeing by referring to a famous painting by Van Gogh of an empty pair of worker's shoes.

The work of art shows us a way of seeing apart from self-centered utility (Edwards 2004:52)⁵⁹.

Learning to live into such a new way of seeing all of reality, and inviting others into a new way of listening to the paradoxical symphony of life, was what Nouwen's life was all about. The questions that Nouwen's spirituality raises about necessary changes of paradigm in all areas of life, including the fields of theology, gender and health, could be his most valuable legacy.

⁵⁸ Gabrielle Earnshaw, Archivist of the Henri J.M. Nouwen Archives and Research Collection in Toronto, Canada, mentions that: "The Nouwen Archives fields more inquiries about Vincent van Gogh and Henri Nouwen than any other topic (Earnshaw 2011:27).

⁵⁹ The German philosopher Martin Heidegger saw this painting in an exhibition in Amsterdam in 1930 and was deeply moved. He used it as a demonstration of the meaning of a work of art in his essay "The origin of the work of Art". Apparently the art critic Meyer Shapiro and philosopher Jacques Derrida joined in a high-level debate about this painting of a simple pair of shoes (Edwards 2004:52).

This study identified three themes in the works of Henri Nouwen that flow together into a melody that might be required listening for those who currently engage in the conversation about health and healing. The three movements, the three images that Van Gogh tried to paint and that Nouwen tried to put into words and that both of them tried to live, may provide a valuable collage of images that could open contemporary eyes to a new vision of wholeness. In the words of Nouwen they are: the outward movement to others; the inward movement towards our innermost self; and the upward movement to God. All of these flow together in a paradoxical downward movement to wholeness. The words used in this study to suggest elements in these movements that may be of special significance in the current context are: vulnerability, embodiment and mystery.

A closer look at each of these areas from the perspective of the research questions posed at the beginning of the study could suggest certain elements of Henri Nouwen's approach that might enrich the current discourse and open up particular pathways along which we may learn to live the current questions.

6.1 Primary Research Question

The primary research question was formulated as follows:

In what ways could the counter-cultural spiritual formation theology of Henri Nouwen make a significant contribution to the discourse on an inclusive, gender-equitable, spirituality-based approach to holistic health?

This study suggests that following in the "downwardly mobile" way of Henri Nouwen's spirituality of vulnerable embodiment could add a valuable contemplative dimension to the current conversation on global health and wellness. This approach may open up a range of important questions in the areas of vulnerability, embodiment and mysticism.

6.2 Secondary Research Questions

The main research objective was then pursued along the route of the following secondary research questions:

6.2.1 Could Henri Nouwen's organic, natural approach to spiritual formation as whole-person healing, as embodied in his life story and literary output, represent a significant contribution to holistic health development theory?

Henri Nouwen was a consummate storyteller. The compelling story that unfolds when following the downward trajectory of his personal spiritual formation path, as reflected in his many books and embodied in his life story, touched the lives of millions across the world. The accessibility of his transparent style of communication appealed to a combination of psychological and spiritual needs of his generation. Nouwen succeeded in suggesting a new conceptual framework in which the juxtaposition of seeming polarities flowed together seamlessly. Perhaps one meaningful contribution from Nouwen's legacy to the current discourse on issues such as the debate on a phenomenological or values-based approach to health and gender questions, could be an engagement with and a movement into the holistic "non-dual" frame of reference which informed Nouwen's life.

6.2.2 How might Henri Nouwen's "theology of weakness" offer guidelines and impetus towards developing a counter-cultural, inclusive, health-promoting spirituality of vulnerability?

Perhaps one of the most important gifts Nouwen left behind was the popularisation of the phrase: "wounded healer". This concept, if taken seriously, could open up a

“way of vulnerability” that could change the tone and substance of the discourse on disability, health and the meaning of life and open up “window of vulnerability” that the world badly needs. The questions that a “theology of weakness” poses to a culture obsessed with power, possessions and prestige, could open up a way to a hope-filled ethic of hospitality, interdependence and caring.

6.2.3 In what ways could Nouwen’s theme of “grounding spirituality in the body” possibly contribute to a theologically integrated spirituality of embodiment that might enrich the current discourse on gender issues?

Nouwen’s struggles in terms of the embodiment of his spirituality opens up a wide field for further research. Although it is possible to discern the awakening of a new body-consciousness and the need to develop a cogent “body theology” in the later works of Henri Nouwen, these did not come to fruition during his lifetime. Perhaps the suggestion of his friend Jurjen Beumer in this regard should be followed up. Beumer feels that the extensive notes on homosexuality and his planned “trapeze book” in the Henri Nouwen Archives in Toronto could provide valuable clues for living the questions in the developing field of body theology (Beumer 1997:209).

6.2.4 In what manner might the mystical dimension in the theology of Henry Nouwen contribute to the current conversation on the religious aspects of whole-person health?

Nouwen’s contemplative “way of seeing”, his “mystical awareness” may be the most significant dimension that he could add to the tone of the current theological discourse. He was convinced that theological conversation should move from a moralistic to a mystical level. He wrote:

I have the impression that many of the debates within the church around such issues as the papacy, the ordination of women, the marriage of priests, homosexuality, birth control, abortion and euthanasia take place on a primarily moral level. On that level different parties battle about right or wrong. But that battle is often removed from the experience of God's first love which lies at the base of all human relationships. Words like right-wing, reactionary, conservative, liberal, and left-wing are used to describe people's opinion, and many discussions then seem more like political battles for power than spiritual searches for the truth (Nouwen 1989:30-31).

6.3 Vulnerable Embodiment and Broken Wholeness

In terms of the "wider frame of reference and more inclusive point of departure for thinking about health matters" that we referred to in the first chapter of this study (1.1.1), this research into aspects of the spiritual formation theology of Henri Nouwen could contribute to a new momentum for broadening the understanding of the concept of what holistic health comprises by adding the dimension of "broken wholeness". Living the questions of "a spirituality of vulnerable embodiment" may open up new pathways to broken but integral healing and health.

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