

Foreword by Sue Mosteller, O.S.F.

Learning from
Henri Nouwen
&
Vincent van Gogh

A Portrait of the
Compassionate Life

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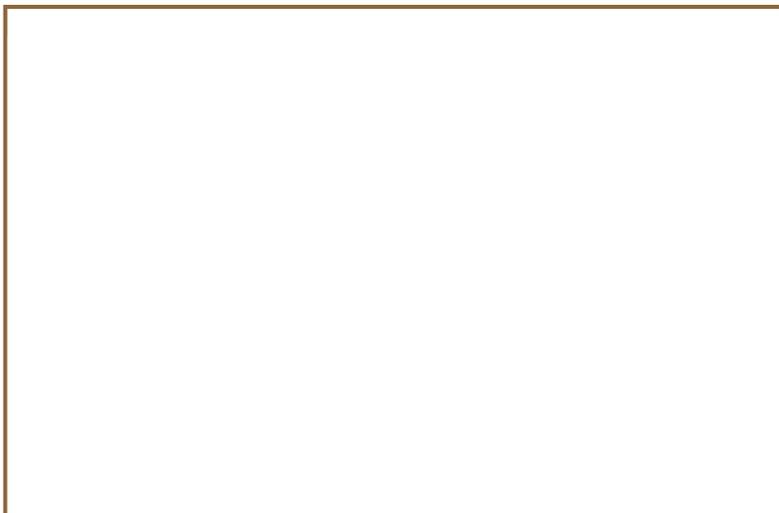
Carol A. Berry

Taken from *Learning from Henri Nouwen and Vincent van Gogh:*
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enter into the experience and the condition of those he served just as Jesus had done. He aimed to authentically embrace those who suffered, to live among them, endure their experiences, and work as hard as they did. He believed in living in an integrated manner rather than remaining separated by the dictates of social standing. But such intimate involvements with his parishioners, he would come to find, brought about great suffering and often loneliness, and in his case, rejection by the institution he served.

In one of his earliest classes, Henri showed us a slide of a drawing by Vincent of a landscape with pollard birch trees that had been stunted (pollarded) in order to produce new, straight branches; such trees grow along many of the alleys throughout Holland. It was a sketch Vincent had made early in his artist's vocation. The rows of pollarded birch trees, their bare new-growth branches reaching skyward, stand on ground that is covered with tufts of dry reed-like weeds. The trees form a barrier separating two dark peasant figures partly silhouetted against the light background of the sky. They both seem to walk away from the viewer, one herding his sheep before him.

It is a bleak image of loneliness. Henri showed it to illustrate that a compassionate and involved ministry can be a lonely venture. He told us that we would often suffer from isolation in our future ministries



despite being surrounded by human beings, human beings often desperately seeking a comforting relationship. It is often enormously difficult to reach a level of solidarity where trust and intimacy lead to such a relationship. By drawing our attention to this sketch, Henri introduced us to Vincent's ability to do drawings that related feelings and emotions. Through such drawing Vincent could express a universal kind of loneliness that he experienced. Henri called it "cosmic loneliness."

To add to our understanding of Vincent's narrative language, Henri used the artist's descriptions of this kind of isolation taken from one of his early letters. At the time when Vincent wrote these thoughts, he was living among destitute miners in an impoverished mining district of the Borinage in Belgium. After having failed in his attempt to study theology and become a pastor like his father, Vincent had nevertheless found a way to minister and preach the gospel to the poor, namely, by becoming an evangelist missionary instead. This is what led him to the miners in the Borinage. Out of his desperate struggle to effectively find ways to connect with them, he wrote,

Someone may have a great fire in his soul, yet no one ever comes to warm himself at it, and the passers-by see but a little smoke coming out the chimney, and continue on their way. Look here, now, what must be done, tend that inner fire, have salt in oneself, wait patiently yet with how much impatience? Wait for the hour, I say, until someone will come and sit down, to stay?¹

Henri had experienced this sense of difficulty in achieving intimacy and solidarity many times throughout the course of his own life. It was a quote that meant a lot to him since he could identify with the "desire to embrace the world" and yet "the passers-by see only smoke coming out of the chimney." In time, Henri learned that the effort to reach out in a compassionate way would first require a level of oneness with the passersby where the barriers of defensiveness and mistrust had to be dissolved. The solidarity Henri was talking about

had to grow “mature by waiting patiently and by faithful adherence to the great call to be the same, yes, more of the same. And that’s the first step of compassion.” Vincent’s time in the Borinage could teach us about responding to the call of a solidarity needed in order to connect with the passersby.

SUFFERING SERVICE

During the first weeks of our course we discovered that Vincent had always been drawn to people who suffered. Even as a young boy, he was deeply moved when he accompanied his father to the homes of parishioners and saw people living in poverty and misery. When he was a missionary-in-training in the Belgian mining district, he went a step further than his father had. In the Borinage, Vincent put himself deliberately in a position of sharing in the miners’ hardships by rejecting the privileges afforded him as an evangelist; he gave up his comfortable housing, adequate clothing, and nutritious food. He felt that in order to understand his role as minister of the gospel to the poor, he had to endure the same deprivations and circumstances as his parishioners. Only out of his own familiarity with anguish and pain could he find ways to respond to the needs of those who suffered such hardships. Only by experiencing the basic living conditions could he realize what his parishioners lacked.

With such experiential understanding, he could attempt to “do unto others as you would have others do unto you” (Matthew 7:12; Luke 6:31 paraphrase). Henri emphasized that in Vincent’s life, suffering with the other had specificity. One heard a great deal about entering into the pain of others, but this was ephemeral and somewhat dreamy and unreal. Vincent’s response wasn’t a vague suffering with all humanity or joining into the suffering conditions of a hurting world. Rather, Vincent’s experiences and Henri’s teachings were aimed and focused on the needs of those in our immediate surrounding. Henri hoped to show us with the example of Vincent’s life a real and specific way of

entering into the human condition of a person in need. Henri wanted to make the truth of compassionate living tangible and doable.

Henri affirmed that “when you realize that you share the basic human traits with all humanity, when you are not afraid of defining yourself as being the same and not different,” you have reached a place of commonality, a place where the burdens of life can be shared. The word *compassion* means “to suffer with.” “Compassionate persons, therefore, are, first of all, persons who confess their part in the suffering human condition and are willing to recognize that the anchor hold of their identity is in the common experience of being human.”² Vincent searched for that solidarity, that common experience, when he lived among the poor, be it in rural or in urban environments. It demanded his all; it brought him through great deprivation, loneliness, and suffering, but it led him to an honest and deep solidarity.

Henri had used the Scripture passage from Paul’s letter to the church at Philippi in his previous class on compassion to affirm the call for this type of solidarity:

If our life in Christ means anything to you, if love can persuade at all, or the Spirit that we have in common, or any tenderness and sympathy, then be united in your convictions and united in your love, with a common purpose and a common mind. That is the one thing that would make me completely happy. There must be no competition among you, no conceit; but everybody is to be self-effacing. (Philippians 2:1-3 JB)

In Vincent’s vocation as minister of the gospel to the poor, Henri found him to indeed take literally the words of Paul: “Always consider the other person to be better than yourself, so nobody thinks of his own interests first but everyone thinks of the other people’s interests instead. In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:3-5 JB).

Years after his missionary work with the Belgian miners, when Vincent made the transition from missionary to artist, he still sought the

same kind of close relationships that he had experienced in the Borinage. He still hoped that passersby would see the “little smoke coming out the chimney” but then “come and sit down, to stay.” One way he could ensure that people would come and sit down near him was to invite those he shared his life with to become the models for his studies of the human figure.

Vincent asked the peasants in the countryside and the poor of the city almshouses to pause a while, to spend some time with him while he sketched them. The effort of observing and drawing them connected him to his subjects and allowed him to experience kinship and companionship.

Henri showed us examples of figure sketches as a visual proof of his strong desire to share his inner fire with the passersby. Vincent had hoped that one day he would be able to express in his work the sincere feelings his subjects elicited in him, which was not an easy task. While mastering the skill of drawing from observation was accomplished through persistent practice, imbuing those outlines and shapes with personal feelings and the subjective expression of the sitter was a whole other dimension of art that did not only depend on correct rendering.

At the beginning of his artist's path, when Vincent asked himself, *What is drawing?* he used a metaphor to explain the difficulty of achieving an art of solidarity that would convey more than an observed fact. He wrote that drawing is working oneself through an invisible iron wall that seems to stand between what one feels and what one can do.³ Henri said that for Vincent, and anyone trying to reach compassionate solidarity, it was also “like breaking through an iron wall. This was excruciatingly difficult, but also exhilaratingly beautiful when one succeeded.”⁴

HENRI AT L'ARCHE

Throughout his career, Henri spoke about his own difficulty of breaking through that iron wall. Such a breakthrough was an ongoing struggle. Years after teaching his course on compassion and Vincent, and after he had spent time in South America and had been a professor at

Harvard, Henri traveled to Canada, where he was invited by Jean Vanier to visit L'Arche Daybreak in Richmond Hill, Ontario. Jean Vanier is the founder of the L'Arche communities worldwide, which are dedicated to welcoming and caring for people with intellectual and physical disabilities.

Henri had longed for a place he could call home, and he finally put down his roots in the L'Arche Daybreak community of Richmond Hill. He became the spiritual director, ministering to the staff and the core members. In this community Henri could leave behind the stressful, competitive academic atmosphere and live unencumbered by worldly achievements and expectations. His accomplishments in life, his degrees, his ordination, and his authorship meant little to the people he had come to live with and care for. To his new family he was simply *Henri*.

The men and women of the L'Arche community recognized and responded to Henri's love, which came from a place of solidarity and trust. Just like Vincent in the Borinage, Henri lived among the men and women at L'Arche; he ate with them, fed them, dressed them, and comforted them. In his new home Henri was willing to let go of all that had defined him in the past and simply become a family member. This is how Henri came to experience a most intimate solidarity—years after he had revealed such solidarity with his students through the life of Vincent. While living among the most broken in society at L'Arche, Henri received, just like Vincent had, unique offerings of wisdom and valuable lessons. Henri found deep friendships, unconditional love, and acceptance. Once Henri had worked himself through that iron wall of initial separation, he had become a comforting, enriching presence. Henri expressed what it felt like to break through that iron wall—to go from detachment to solidarity—in *Bread for the Journey*, published in 1997, twenty years after teaching his Compassion class at Yale:

Joy is hidden in compassion. The word *compassion* literally means “to suffer with.” It seems quite unlikely that suffering with another person would bring joy. Yet being with a person in pain, offering

simple presence to someone in despair, sharing with a friend times of confusion and uncertainty . . . such experiences can bring us deep joy. Not happiness, not excitement, not great satisfaction, but the quiet joy of being there for someone else and living in deep solidarity with our brothers and sisters in this human family. Often this is a solidarity in weakness, in brokenness, in woundedness, but it leads us to the center of joy, which is sharing our humanity with others.⁵

Henri understood that the solidarity ministers need to seek is the solidarity Vincent sought. “And here there really is no difference between the minister and the painter. Both want to touch people and both feel the pain of the distance that often is so hard to bridge” in the beginning.⁶ Henri recognized that Vincent was breaking down walls of separation because he was following the way of Jesus. He was not concerned with doctrine or dogma or theocratic correctness but simply with responding immediately, lovingly, and caringly to the predicament of another human being. This too is the way that Henri embraced his life and ministry.

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