

Learning from Henri Nouwen and Vincent Van Gogh A Portrait of the Compassionate Life

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Carol A. Berry is an artist, art educator, and lecturer. She is also the author of *Vincent Van Gogh: His Spiritual Vision in Life and Art*. She has been studying Vincent van Gogh since 1979 and spent years under the instruction of Henri J. M. Nouwen. She has traveled throughout Europe retracing van Gogh's life, visiting the towns and villages in The Netherlands, Belgium, and France, where van Gogh lived and worked.

Becoming Present, Compassionate People

Including unpublished material recorded from Henri Nouwen's lectures, this book comes at the request of Henri Nouwen's literary estate from someone who knew him as a teacher and friend. Carol Berry brings her own experience in both ministry and art education to bear as she unpacks the much misunderstood spiritual context of Vincent van Gogh's work, and reinterprets van Gogh's art in light of Nouwen's lectures.

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Henri stressed that to become compassionate people, we had to recognize and admit "our intimate solidarity with the human condition." We had to give up our desire to be different, exceptional, or better than the others in order to become a consoling presence. "Consolation demands that we be *cum solus* with [alone with] the lonely other, and with him or her exactly there where he or she is lonely and where he or she hurts and nowhere else. Consolation is . . . not the avoidance of pain, but, paradoxically, the deepening of a pain to a level where it can be shared." This was a hard concept to grasp and Henri knew that. And here we could see why Henri had chosen Vincent van Gogh as his case study. Through Vincent's story, through the parable of his life, we were to come closer to an understanding of what it meant to be a consoling presence.

After leaving the Borinage, Vincent consciously made the choice to stay close to the suffering of others. He kept going to unpopular places to draw and paint people who most others did not consider worth paying attention to, reminding us that this was living according to the example of Jesus. Emerging from his isolation and time of transformation in the Borinage, Vincent moved back with his parents, who now lived in the small Brabant parish of Etten. He was not free from worries or from parental expectations. He still had no guarantee of a gainful occupation and was therefore still dependent on familial support and very vulnerable. Yet he had attained the freedom of self-determination—the relief of giving in to his vocation at last. Having a place to live for a while enabled Vincent to devote himself entirely to practicing the skills he needed in order to express graphically what he saw and felt. He was now given the chance "to struggle as hard as he wanted to in order to come in touch with the heart of life as he saw it in the poor of spirit," said Henri. He lived close to the people he drew and felt their existence from within his own experience. This way he was able to see beyond the surface of poverty and depravity and connect with life on a more truthful and intimate basis.

Continuing on his path to unpopular places, when Vincent left Etten he moved to a poor district of The Hague, where he invited one of his models, Sien, to live with him, a poor worn-out prostitute who had a young child and was pregnant with another. He cared for her and her child, and gave her a safe place to stay while she awaited the delivery of her second child.

Henri cited the example of the choices Vincent made in The Hague as the time when he not only shared in the pain and suffering of a destitute woman but also increased his own pain. Vincent was suffering from his own deteriorating health and from his lack of recognition and inability to sell his work. The commitment Vincent made to Sien would make him

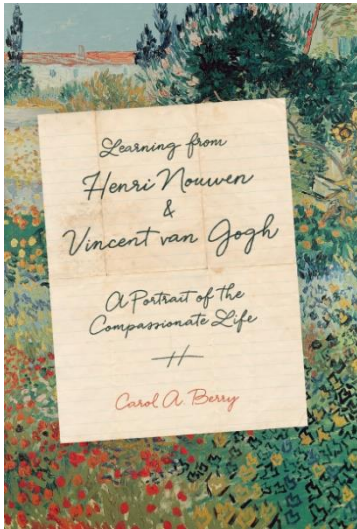


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share what meager resources he had and therefore sacrifice his own comfort and well-being. Vincent endured his own suffering and Sien's destitution together with her, and this was, according to Henri, a most moving portrait of consolation.

Henri elaborated that

when we say to a suffering person, "don't cry" or "things will be better tomorrow" or "don't worry," we really try to move that person to a place where he or she is not. But to console means first of all to be with someone where it hurts. And that's not very easy because how can you be with someone who hurts if you don't want to be here with your own pain. And therefore we run away from the pain instead of deepening it. We want to avoid it and cover it up.

Our culture prefers to deaden pain rather than deal with its reality. Henri urged against the avoidance of pain. He was rather warning people to be more human, and pain is part of that, just as is joy. Henri emphatically added, "To say that I too am in pain, that I too am part of that human condition, that's a very hard thing to say and to feel. And still that's what I think consolation is."

Vincent installed himself in a studio that became, as he saw it, a shelter for the poor who came to model for him. Just like in the Borinage, he was so radical in his convictions that he not only came close to their misery but became a part of. And as he had done in Etten, he struggled through hundreds of drawings of these models in order to reach the depth of their human condition—"the heart of life as he saw it in the poor of spirit," according to Henri. Being as poor as they were, he identified with their wounds of life and would rather go without a meal himself than not pay them a modest few coins for their modeling. Bringing them into his apartment satisfied the longing he had always felt to be of use and to help forsaken creatures: "When one lives with others and is bound by a feeling of affection, then one is conscious of a reason for being, that one might not be entirely worthless and superfluous but perhaps is good for one thing or another."

One of the images Henri wanted us to spend a considerable amount of time with was a drawing of Sien called *Sorrow*. This simple drawing expresses a universally understood and deeply felt emotion. Vincent, as expressed to Theo in one of his letters, could not have created this expressive image if he hadn't felt this kind of sorrow himself. He had spent time *cum solus* with Sien and her children and without pretense entered into their pain. By feeling the wounds of her life, he understood her predicament and became a consoling presence. This straightforward sketch epitomized his ability to feel deeply the wounds of another human being. Accepting and even welcoming the risk of his own discomfort and alienation from his family he wrote to Theo: "for a moment I may feel rising within me the desire for a care-free life, for success—each time I go fondly back to the trouble, the cares, to a difficult life—and think, it is better this way, I learn more from it; it does not debase me. It is not on this road one perishes."

On this level of existence there was nothing hypocritical, artificial, or superficial. There was nothing false in the struggle to survive. Drawings based on such circumstances would be honest descriptions of a slice of reality. Such images could lead to the recognition and admittance of a shared human condition and reciprocal consoling relationships. To justify his relationship with Sien, Vincent added that living with her would make him a better artist and a better person, rather than

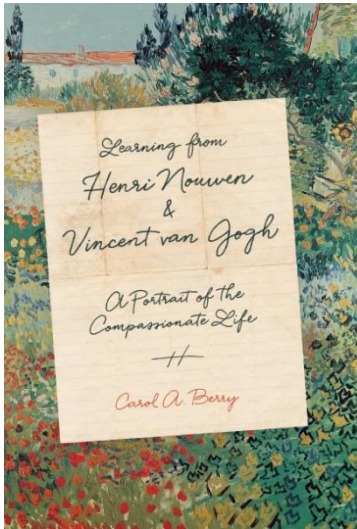


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if he had remained in the respectable social circle of his family. This then had become more significant to him than to aim at a sense of societal respectability.

Henri concluded his talks about consolation with these words,

No one wants to increase his or her own pain, but rather invite the hurting person to come to a place, our own place, where the pain is less. For going down into the deep pain of another is like jumping into a bottomless abyss—not knowing if or where one will land. To grasp another's pain means letting go of our own safety limb and falling down to an unknown place. In this place we maybe won't have the answers that will help or alleviate the pain or explain it. We have to be willing to admit, then and there, down in the pit, that we too are helpless and weak and powerless. And who wants to do that, or be there?

Vincent did that and was there with Sien and the people of the almshouses and soup kitchens. And Henri added, "For most often, we won't have the answers." More importantly we would have a presence.

Vincent did not have the answers for Sien. But by treating her with tenderness and esteem, he believed he could change her own perception of herself. She had never known goodness, how then could she be good and lead a wholesome life?

I must also change so much in myself, so that in me she has an example of diligent work and patience, and that is damned difficult, brother, to behave in such a way that one can model behavior for someone; I often also fall short. I have to improve myself to become something better in order to awaken in her the desire to do the same.

He was not acting in a superior way but exposed his own vulnerability to her. Writing to Theo he assured that they both needed each other.

We began to understand. Not only would we not have the answers, it was precisely when we stopped looking for answers that we could become an unconditional consoling presence. The paradox of not offering advice in a situation where the need of it was perceived was almost unfathomable, but Henri kept reassuring us that this was getting closer to the dynamics of compassion. When we were willing, through a shared vulnerability, to admit that we were not coming to the hurting person from a place of superiority but were on equal footing, then we could begin to console.

—Taken from chapter four, "Henri: Vincent Feels Deeply the Wounds of Life"



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