

# PARADOX AS PARADIGM

Examining Henri J. M. Nouwen's Paradigmatic Method.

For DMN 911  
Assignment #2  
Bill Versteeg

Henri J. M. Nouwen's book "Reaching Out" is, simply said, an exploration of truth by paradox<sup>1</sup>. His entire paradigm is a journey between opposites, a reaching out from the outer to the inner which finds its foundation in the journey from the refuge of illusion to the vocation of reaching out to God in the gift of prayer, from the dense entangling bramble of loneliness to reaching out to the open-skied prairie of solitude within, from closed self destructive hostility and fear-filled violence to reaching out with the receptive poverty of enriching hospitality. As this paradox filled one sentence summary of Nouwen's perspective illustrates, a certain way of "seeing" reality is required to understand what appears on the surface nonsense. Nouwen's paradigmatic method uses paradox to synthesize variegates of experience and story into a meaningful unified paradoxical whole. As such, his linguistic and paradigmatic strategy is very similar to Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5. I appreciate Henri Nouwen's paradigmatic method for the following reasons:

1. In modern society, truth has often been seen as linear, logic and propositional. The modernization of theology has simply made theology boring and all too often apparently irrelevant. Paradox takes theology out of the lingual logical realm and places theological truth in the ocular realm. It is only by "seeing" the truth of a paradox that we can understand it. A propositional statement regarding the paradox is contradictory. By using paradox extensively, Nouwen pushes his system of spiritual formation into paradigm as a "way of viewing... and sense – making,"

---

<sup>1</sup> Henri uses the word "paradox" to define truths within his system a number of times (page 3 of his introduction, p 59, 61, 71, 72, 103, 123, 126). At other times, his writing is nothing less than paradox after paradox.

2. Henri Nouwen's paradigm is especially appropriate in our post modern society where we have lost confidence in the modern project<sup>2</sup> and are looking for ways of assimilating in a new paradigm<sup>3</sup> the plurality of truths we are faced with every day.
3. Henri's approach to spiritual formation is fundamentally paradigmatic, that is, it does not focus on "doing" or "being," rather it focuses on "seeing." As I noted in my last paper, my approach to spiritual formation has a lot to do with "seeing" or "construing" our "selves" in Christ.

Clearly, the most helpful part of a paradigmatic approach is the aspect of "seeing" as the instrument toward personal formation and growth. "Seeing" involves far more than logic, proposition and linear thought. "Seeing" does not involve control, mastery, or violence. On the contrary, "seeing" is the seeing of self in a new light, a seeing of self as object rather than subject, of beneficiary rather than benefactor, an observer rather than a dominator. "Seeing" also involves contrast. Just as any picture lacks definition without contrast, so paradox becomes truth in stark relief. "Seeing" involves the colour of nuance. Paradox communicates truth when the nuances of the paradox are understood rightly. To be blind to the nuance is to be blind to the truth of a paradox. "Seeing" also involves such aesthetic attributes as beauty, harmony, symmetry, form, emotion, story

---

<sup>2</sup> "The project of modernity, formulated in the eighteenth century by the Enlightenment *philosophes*, consists of a relentless development of the objectivating sciences, the universalistic bases of morality and law, and autonomous art in accordance with their internal logic but at the same time a release of the cognitive potentials thus accumulated from their esoteric high forms and their utilisation in praxis; that is, in the rational organisation of living conditions and social relations. Proponents of the Enlightenment . . . still held the extravagant expectation that the arts and sciences would further not only the control of the forces of nature but also the understanding of self and world, moral progress, justice in social institutions, and even human happiness." Jurgen Habermas, "Modernity: An Unfinished Project," in *The Post-Modern Reader*, ed. Charles Jencks (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), pp. 162-63. Taken from Grenz, Stanley. *Primer on Postmoderism*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 20 In contrast to modernism, Michael Foucault's paradigm seems to be called "heterotopia." The very word pictures a paradise of pluralities.

and mystery, all of which have the power to arrest attention. My attention was certainly arrested as I read Nouwen's perspective on the absence and abandonment of God as the time and place where God is especially present to redeem.<sup>4</sup> The 'visible' element of a paradigm is essential to its effectiveness in capturing the imagination and assimilating or constellating the aggregate of our experiences into a more meaningful whole. Without the truth of paradox, faith has little room for mystery. The modern mind sees mystery as only another puzzle to solve. Paradox as paradigm celebrates the beauty of mystery.

Paradigms are given to us by the dominant influences in our formation. Culture, media, education, parenting, and for those who participate, church shape the way we see reality. North America is presently going through a seachange in paradigms. 9-11 was the cataclysm that began the destruction of many of our illusions. We are coming face to face with our mortality and powerlessness. With these profound changes, not only is a paradigm shift happening, it is inevitable.

The project of this course is to formulate a paradigm for spiritual formation. Such a formulation ought to be "visible" in the sense that it can be seen by mind and heart. It must be comprehensive in assimilating or making sense out of the large variety of truths, experiences and stories that affect each of us. It must be communicable in the sense that the vision of the paradigm is transferable from person to person and contagious in that it arrests the attention of the beholder. A paradigm must be "doable." The paradigm should make spiritual formation available for young and old, uneducated and PHD, simple and profound. Finally, as a paradigm it should also work on the subconscious

---

<sup>4</sup> Nouwen, Henri J.M. *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*. New York: Bantam Double Day. 1975. pp. 106, 126-127.

level. People should be able to live out the paradigm, put it into practice. without deeply understanding it.