

# To be wounded and yet heal. How two wounded healers helped Henri Nouwen find solitude

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This article explored Henri Nouwen's well-known concept, the wounded healer. After investigating its origins, Henri Nouwen's use of the term was examined. The article proposed that Henri Nouwen was mainly influenced by Anton Boisen and Vincent van Gogh in his use of the concept of the wounded healer. Nouwen's interest in these persons was considered to glean how they shaped his thoughts before focusing on he used a model of pastoral analysis, the living document model to autobiographically explore his own wounds, to access them, and to offer what he learned as a means of healing for his audiences. Nouwen recognised himself as wounded and became for his readers a wounded healer. Nolte and Dreyer's view that the wounded healer concept was a welcome corrective to prevailing models of pastoral care, and De Jong's view that the wounded healer is a pathway to self-actualisation were used as a bridge to Nouwen's views on personal spiritual transformation. Finally, Nouwen's thoughts on transformation involving a movement from loneliness to solitude were investigated, showing that the outcome was a move towards a considered and deeper interaction with the world.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** This article contributed to scholarship in Christian spirituality by considering the work of Henri J. M. Nouwen and the sources of his concept, the wounded healer. It also considered connections with and implications for pastoral psychology and practical theology.

**Keywords:** Anton Boisen; Henri Nouwen; spirituality; spiritual transformation; Vincent van Gogh; wounded healer.

## Introduction

The spiritual theme most closely linked with the person and writing of Henri J.M. Nouwen must surely be the wounded healer. After more than 50 years of his published material, it remains the most engaging and well-remembered concept. 'Wounded healer' was the title of one of his early books, published in 1972. In it, Nouwen popularised the concept even if he did not invent it. The book does not set out to develop the concept greatly but rather uses it to describe the role of the priest or minister 'in a dislocated world' (1972:5), 'for a rootless generation' (1972:27), and 'to a hopeless man' (1972:53). The basic notion is that a caregiver, a person providing counsel or assisting somebody in some aspect of the healing process, need not themselves be completely whole, strong or 'together', but might use even their 'wounds' as a means of healing, their empathy as a tool of care. The wounded healer concept was revolutionary in the American psycho-spiritual world of the 1970s, which typically conceived of caregivers as a 'strong' party helping care-receivers who were characterised as the 'weak' party.

Nouwen did not invent the term; he likely discovered it in the writing of C.F. Jung<sup>1</sup> during his psychological training. Several authors including Ford (1999:44), Nolte and Dreyer (2010:3) and Penkett (2019:30), make this connection, quoting Jung's autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (Jung 1963:134): "The doctor is effective only when he himself is affected. Only the "wounded physician" heals. But when the doctor wears his personality like a coat of armour, he has no effect'.

There are also concepts and archetypes in the Judeo-Christian scriptures in which one can see connections with the concept of the wounded healer. The Hebrew sacrificial system required a person to make a sacrifice to obtain atonement from sin and guilt, which facilitated healing and

1. Nolte and Dreyer (2010:2-3) trace the origins of this concept to the Asclepius myth in Greek mythology. In one of the versions, it is Chiron, a centaur who was famous for his healing powers but suffering from a wound that did not heal. Chiron, therefore embodies the 'paradoxical irony' that 'although he was a godlike figure, he could not heal himself'.

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wholeness.<sup>2</sup> The Christian concept of atonement involved the wounding, and the sacrificial death, of the Messiah on behalf of humanity and the created cosmos to atone for sin, and ultimately healing and fullness of life for the entire created order. This concept is exemplified in the image of the 'Lamb, looking as if it had been slain' (Rv 5:6 NIV), who is considered 'worthy' (Rv 5:12 NIV). The wounded healer concept connected Nouwen's theological training, his beliefs about how contemporary priests and ministers could serve the needs of the world, and his training in psychology.

This article will argue that the wounded healer concept became more compelling for Nouwen when he discovered it in the lives of two mentors who he became interested in. These two became sources of inspiration for Nouwen, motivating him to use this concept in his teaching and writing. The concept of the wounded healer became a guiding orientation, key to his thinking on the spiritual process of personal transformation for himself and his readers.

## Anton Boisen: A first portrait of a wounded healer

When Nouwen chose a subject for his doctoral research in Psychology at the Catholic University of Nijmegen in 1963-64, he chose Anton Boisen, a Presbyterian minister and the founder of the Pastoral Clinical Education movement (2004:46). While Boisen's work was groundbreaking, he had his own mental health struggles,<sup>3</sup> but these played an important part in shaping his research and assisted Boisen to understand pastoral care differently. The autobiographical approach (Higgins & Burns 2012:kindle location 374), with which he approached his patients as 'Living human documents' influenced Nouwen.

Notwithstanding the fact that Nouwen never called Boisen a wounded healer,<sup>4</sup> for Nouwen, finding Anton Boisen was a very important development because Boisen was a real-life example of what the concept was all about (Mwangala 2022:88).

### Who was Anton Boisen?<sup>5</sup>

Born in Bloomington, Indiana, in 1876, Boisen initially trained as a linguist at the University of Indiana and a forester at Yale, before graduating in theology from Union Theological Seminary in New York City, and being ordained

2. See Leviticus 7:1-10 [NIV] as an example of the sacrificial system which expresses a pattern of a wounded (and slaughtered) animal providing access to healing, forgiveness and newness of life.

3. O'Laughlin describes Boisen's struggle to recover from a 'mental breakdown' 'back to health' (2004:46). 'In the process, he realised that his experiences, his friends and his loved ones, even his education, were the basis for his recovery.' (2004:46)

4. Christopher DeBono has carefully studied and documented the Boisen-Nouwen relationship. In a conclusion to his study DeBono notes: 'There is simply no published or unpublished reference which I have been able to locate where Nouwen calls Boisen a "wounded healer"; Significantly, Boisen is not referenced by Nouwen in this 1972 work "Wounded Healer", which addressed ministry in a contemporary setting' (2012:160) but many writers such as Mwangala assume it: 'Although nowhere in his writings does Nouwen state it, it seems most likely that he adopted the phrase "wounded healer" from Boisen' (2022:89).

5. Mwangala (2022:104-116) and DeBono (2012:103-170) have both given detailed biographical information on Anton Boisen as well as well-considered opinions about the ways in which Boisen influenced Nouwen.

a Presbyterian minister in 1912 (De Bono 2012:41; Nouwen 1968a:53-55). Even in the process of writing his statement of faith, which was part of the process of seeking a call through the Presbytery of New York, Boisen became overwhelmed by delusional fantasies and had a mental breakdown necessitating his being hospitalised at the Boston Psychiatric Hospital. Later, he was treated for schizophrenia at Westboro State Hospital.

As Boisen sought to understand his own situation, he began to see connections between his illness and certain types of religious experiences. He concluded that both were the mind's attempts at reorganisation (Higgins & Burns 2012:kindle location 374). He noticed that typically, after a crisis which could involve rather dramatic symptoms, there was a moment of transformation or integration which could be interpreted in either psychological or spiritual terms.

This was not the only time Boisen suffered a mental breakdown for which he was institutionalised.<sup>6</sup> On each occasion Boisen concluded that he was involved in a search for meaning, understanding, and validation of his own experience. This led him to develop an approach to theological education (for Seminary students) that was autobiographical in nature (Higgins & Burns):

In his 1960 autobiography, *Out of the Depths*, Boisen was even more direct about his numerous hospitalizations; his effort to draw on his own experience to devise a therapeutic alliance among clergy, health professionals, and patients; and his realization that the struggle for wholeness through one's vulnerabilities and wounds and not despite them is a mode of spiritual wisdom. (p. 387)

### Nouwen and Boisen

Nouwen only met Boisen once, towards the end of Boisen's life, in August 1964, at Elgin State Hospital (De Bono 2012:155-158), where Boisen was hospitalised after suffering another psychotic episode. Although it is not clear exactly when and by whom Nouwen was first introduced to Boisen's work,<sup>7</sup> Nouwen was clearly interested in what Boisen was doing. Nouwen chose Boisen as the subject of both of his doctoral dissertations (incomplete), the first in psychology and the second in theology, both at Nijmegen. Thus, he spent considerable time and effort researching Boisen, as evidenced by the amount of material he collected during his research.<sup>8</sup> Between 1968 and 1977, Nouwen wrote two articles focussed on Boisen and his work. In addition, he made four explicit references to him in his books

6. In his 1968 Article on Boisen, Nouwen traces various influences on Boisen including a description of his parents and, notably, a story of unrequited love between Boisen and Alice Batchelder and the consequence of this for Boisen's state of wellbeing (1968:55-57).

7. Ford believes it was Professor Han Fortmann who recommended Boisen as a research subject to Nouwen but it could just as easily have been the psychologist Gordon Allport (Harvard) or the pastoral theologian Seward Hiltner (Princeton) (2019:88-89).

8. According to DeBono, this material constitutes more than one linear metre of archived files. Previously at Yale, these documents were donated to the University of St Michael's College in Toronto in the year 2000, making this new collection the definitive archive site for Nouwen's life and work (2012:127).

published during this same period (Nouwen 1968b; De Bono 2012: 114).

In a chapter of his doctoral dissertation presented to the University of St. Michael's College, Toronto, Christopher De Bono examined the Nouwen–Boisen connection. His work was the first detailed and intentional study of this relationship. DeBono (2012) discussed how biographies on Nouwen had dealt with the Nouwen–Boisen connection, concluding that, the existing biographical literature:

[L]acks depth and analysis of any relevance that this Nouwen–Boisen connection might have, both in terms of its importance in Nouwen's early formation and in regards to its contribution to his ideas about pastoral ministry. (p. 103)

In Nouwen's first article on Boisen, 'Anton T. Boisen and theology through living human documents', published in *Pastoral Psychology* in 1968, he focussed on the development of clinical pastoral education, where Boisen made his most important contribution. The article highlighted Boisen's attempt to bring ministers and priests in training into psychiatric hospitals to serve collegially alongside medical doctors, psychologists, and other healthcare professionals. They were members of a caring team who were trained to consider people who were grappling with the challenges of life as 'living human documents'. Boisen sought to show how real-life people could be the focus of pastoral academic studies in the same way as books. The study of 'Living human documents' was, at its core, a rigorous empirical study of the human condition.

In this article, Nouwen argued that it was impossible to understand Anton Boisen's innovation of the clinical case method without consideration of Boisen's personal case, using his own autobiographical approach. Nouwen concluded Boisen himself was a 'document' who brought revealed truth and understanding. He was, as such, an ideal illustration of the case method. 'Chaplain and patient, two identities which seem so different to be together in one man, formed exactly the basis of Boisen's peculiar personality' (Nouwen 1968a:50). In effect, a person could be both wounded and still a healer.

Higgins and Burns highlight two aspects of Boisen's approach that were an influence on Nouwen. The first was the realisation of the usefulness of a study of personal experience in a 'living human document' for the study of spirituality. The second and consequent influence was that a person's wounds were revealing of the state of one's inner being and thus might assist a caregiver in facilitating healing and integration in the subject (2012:Kindle location 387). Boisen became Nouwen's first real-life wounded healer and Boisen's phenomenological approach became his primary method of pastoral interaction in his years of teaching at Notre Dame and Yale.

The 'wounded healer' became one of the most important concepts in Nouwen's thinking. 'He would refine it, reapply

it, and carefully explore the implications for psychology and spirituality' (Higgins & Burns 2012:kindle location 446–462). Nouwen developed his model for spiritual transformation by listening to the human subjects he encountered (including his own self) and employing Boisen's methodology.

DeBono's research also showed how Nouwen's second article, *Boisen and the Case Method*, published in 1977, focussed on Boisen and how his books, *Intimacy* (1969), *Creative Ministry* (1971) and *The Living Reminder* (1977) make specific reference to Boisen (2012:114). The last book (chronologically) to mention Boisen, *The Living Reminder*, makes reference to Boisen only once, but in a critical way.

Although Nouwen invested considerable time and effort in researching Boisen, in the end, he used very little of what he gathered in his published works. Higgins and Burns (2012: 416) believed that the few references to Boisen in Nouwen's published materials showed that 'Nouwen didn't just read about Boisen; he read Boisen as a living human document' and integrated Boisen and his methods into Nouwen's own contemplation and research. He was able to apply Boisen's case method in a way that corresponded to his phenomenological approach (Higgins & Burns 2012):

[O]f inserting himself into the experience of others, attending to the living human documents in a way that brought into a creative symbiosis the psychological needs and the spiritual needs of his clients. (p. 401)

The influence of Boisen on Nouwen's life and methodology is clear. This article hence asserts that Boisen was Nouwen's first wounded healer: troubled, and broken, yet able to use his wounds to facilitate the healing of many. Boisen also schooled Nouwen in a somewhat unique methodology, in which Nouwen could read even himself as a living document. What he found, he then expressed in his lectures, his interactions with people, and his books. As a wounded healer himself, Nouwen ministered to people who had obvious physical, psychological, social, and spiritual struggles. In them, Nouwen began to see not only their brokenness and struggles, but also their beauty and belovedness as God's children. By drawing close to them, Nouwen was able to derive inspiration and strength to address his own wounds. Boisen's example in attending to his mental illness and using the 'living human document' method on himself had an influence on Nouwen's vision of suffering, healing, and spiritual growth. Michael O'Laughlin (2004) summarised Boisen's influence on Nouwen like this:

[Boisen] was a passionate, troubled individual who made a great impact on the world, not despite his problems, but because of his troubled perspective. He was a wounded healer whose own woundedness was a personal source of divine knowledge. From Anton Boisen, Henri Nouwen drew direct inspiration for his own ministry. He learned from Boisen that one's own psychological troubles and weakness could be a source of inspiration and a path to God, something that would become a hallmark of his spiritual writing and speaking. (p. 50)

## Vincent van Gogh: A second portrait of a wounded healer

One of Nouwen's most popular classes at Yale involved his reflection on a fellow Dutchman, the artist Vincent van Gogh. In her book, *Learning from Henri Nouwen & Vincent van Gogh*, Carol A. Berry recounted how Nouwen used the life story and artworks of Van Gogh to teach a course on the spiritual concept of compassion (Berry 2019:7). When Luke Penkett traced the 'mentors' who deeply influenced Nouwen, he identified Vincent van Gogh as Nouwen's wounded healer (Penkett 2019:29). Nouwen (1989) himself wrote:

I experienced connections between Vincent's struggle and my own, and realized more and more that Vincent was becoming my wounded healer. 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 the spaces of my heart that I had not dared to come close to. By so doing he brought me in touch with many of my fears and gave me the courage to go further and deeper in my search for a God who loves. (p. x)

### Who was Vincent van Gogh?

Vincent van Gogh was born in Zundert, the Netherlands, on 30 March 1853. His father was a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church (Berry 2019:27) and Van Gogh showed promise as an artist from an early age and eventually worked for an art dealing company in the Hague and in London. He became interested in the Christian faith in England, serving as a Sunday school teacher and lay preacher in Methodist and Congregational churches. He wanted to train as a minister but was refused admission at the seminary in Amsterdam (Penkett 2019:36). He joined the Belgian Missionary Society and was sent on a mission to the poor in the Borinage, south of Belgium in 1878-79. He began to live among people in great poverty as one of them.

His painting, *The Potato Eaters*, exemplifies Van Gogh's incarnational evangelism and his compassion. It shows the people to whom he was sent, exposing their tremendous poverty, gathering in community, and sharing what they had. 'One must paint the peasants as being one of them, as feeling, thinking as they do' (Penkett 2019:41).

Through his art and letters, Van Gogh spoke to Nouwen at a profound level. In the same Foreword to Edward's book on Van Gogh, Nouwen reflected on the seminars he taught on Van Gogh at Yale. Nouwen (1989:x) wrote, 'After such seminars it seemed that we all had been touched in places that no spiritual writer had been able to reach'. Perhaps it was Van Gogh's expression of solidarity with suffering people and his determination to share their experiences which attracted Nouwen to his work. Penkett believed that in Van Gogh, Nouwen found 'a kindred spirit, a spiritual brother, whose own brokenness and suffering was to prove an astonishing source from which Nouwen also drew on' (2019:29).

Like Boisen, Van Gogh also had his wounds: loneliness, anguish, depression, and even psychotic episodes and delusions (Ford 2019:xi; Penkett 2019:39). I believe that he

was another example for Nouwen of a wounded healer. His artwork became the instrument of his healing.

Nouwen himself admitted that few writers or painters had influenced him as greatly as Van Gogh did. He believed that the reason Van Gogh facilitated such healing of his own brokenness was likely because Van Gogh himself was so deeply wounded (and gifted) (Nouwen 1989:ix), but Penkett also sees many 'resonances' between Van Gogh and Nouwen, especially Nouwen's interest in compassion. Nouwen was moved by Van Gogh's ability to express the compassion of God in his art. Nouwen found in Van Gogh a similar focus and meditative spirit to his own, and through his influence, Nouwen's understanding of compassion became something more than intellectual. Nouwen was able to engage compassionately at a deep spiritual level (Penkett 2019:42).

Chris Glaser (2018), a student of Nouwen who attended some of the Van Gogh seminars, also discerned a connection between Nouwen and van Gogh: 'I believe that Henri was drawn to Van Gogh because they shared a profound sense of loneliness', he told me.

Loneliness is the wilderness for the writer, the artist, and the contemplative. Writing, creativity, and prayer are not ways out of the wilderness, but a way to make the wilderness blossom, to turn the ache of feeling lonely to a fulfilling solitude, transforming 'lone' to 'alone,' which is derived from joining the words 'all-one. (p. 141)

While Van Gogh was a kindred spirit to Nouwen and a fellow Dutchman, he also served as a sort of spiritual guide to him (Ford 1999:109). In her book on Nouwen and Van Gogh, Berry identifies compassion as the unifying theme between the two. In the mid-1970s, Nouwen began to research van Gogh at the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo, the Netherlands, and to read the extensive correspondence between Van Gogh and his brother Theo (Penkett 2019:35). This made a profound impact on his understanding of compassion.

To his students at Yale, Nouwen revealed that the closeness he felt with Van Gogh was because he saw in Van Gogh a person who had struggled with deep spiritual questions and consequently, Nouwen believed that Van Gogh could guide people on their spiritual journey. The art and the letters of Van Gogh, even his life story, influenced Nouwen, as he confronted his own struggles. He felt he could trust this wounded healer. Van Gogh became Nouwen's companion in the same way as in the Roman Catholic tradition, the Saints were considered companions to the faithful (Penkett 2019:36).

This article proposes that having discovered the wounded healer concept in his initial research on Anton Boisen and the case study method while a student in psychology at Nijmegen in the early 1960s, and having explored this concept further as an intern at the Menninger Institute in the USA from 1964 to 1966, Nouwen encountered another example of a wounded healer in van Gogh. When Nouwen explored Van Gogh as a 'living human document', Van Gogh became the focus for one of his most popular courses at Yale in the 1970s. Nouwen was

still developing the concept and his most persuasive work on this theme was yet to be fully shaped. Nouwen's most vulnerable project was to explore his own life and come to the conclusion that he too was a wounded healer.

## Nouwen himself: A third portrait of a wounded healer

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? (Laurent Nouwen quoted in Van der Merwe 2015:16).

It is no secret that Henri Nouwen had 'wounds'. These included restlessness, a seemingly constant need for affirmation, and a self-confessed loneliness. Whether these 'wounds' resulted from his awkward and sometimes strained relationship with his father in early life, or his repressed homosexuality, or the effects of the Jansenist flavour of the Catholicism<sup>9</sup> in which he grew up is unknown.<sup>10</sup> Nouwen's book, *The Inner Voice of Love. A Journey through Anguish to Freedom*, is a rather stark and emotionally raw series of prayers and affirmations which emerged from the painful breakdown Nouwen experienced after he reached out to a fellow worker romantically but his 'advances' were not reciprocated.

It is not surprising to see how Nouwen was so fascinated with Boisen and Van Gogh with whom he had much in common. Each was 'wounded' and yet able to make positive and healing contributions to the people who came into contact with them or their work.<sup>11</sup> The way Nouwen was able to use the inspiration and skills they each gave him to minister to his own self and then, on the basis of that introspective contemplation, to help countless readers and correspondents is however truly remarkable.

## How the wounded healer can facilitate transformation

### The wounded healer as a corrective

In their 2010 article, Nolte and Dreyer delve into the dynamics at play in the wounded healer motif to illustrate how it may

9. Higgins and Burns refer to correspondence between Nouwen and John Eudes Bamberger who wondered about the influence of the theologian Peter Jansenus on Nouwen. '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 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'. (2012: Kindle Location 721-734 of 2617)

10. I have written about Nouwen's constant need for affirmation in (Marchinkowski 2021:11-12) as well as his psychological breakdown in 1987 when his friendship and romantic interest in Nathan Ball ran aground.

11. See the helpful caution given by Nouwen, '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 and suffering as rising from the depth of the human condition that we all share.' (Nouwen 1972:95)

facilitate transformation (2010:3). Citing C.F. Jung, they point to how the concept, which is seemingly paradoxical, results in the healer's wound facilitating a healing. They then relate the concept to priests, pastors and ministers (as Nouwen did), showing how these 'helpers' with all the complexity of their own personalities, relationships and situations, are 'influenced by their own woundedness' (2010:3). Helpers should be aware of this 'and should utilise it to benefit their relationships with others. It is important for pastors to take their woundedness seriously and to consider how it influences specific situations' (2010:3).

Nolte and Dreyer (2010) express the belief that the wounded healer concept may provide a welcome corrective to more assertive and authoritarian models, based on a positivistic epistemology:

[I]n terms of which the end result (already decided upon by the pastor) is manipulated through the use of certain methods. The consequence is that people's life stories are not taken seriously, and only the information that reinforces the pastor's 'diagnoses' and 'prescriptions' is selected. (p. 3)

What is most compelling, however, is the way one can observe Nouwen (through his writing) using the 'living documents' phenomenological method together with the wounded healer concept in his own life in the seventies and early eighties. Nouwen reflects on his life and struggles, reading himself as a living document and believing that his wounds can be healing for others.<sup>12</sup>

### The wounded healer concept as a gateway to self-realisation

In a paper on the influence of C.F. Jung on Nouwen, de Jong argues that Nouwen's training in psychology at Nijmegen and at the Menninger Institute would have introduced him to Jung's writings, and that his notion of swinging between polarities was in fact built on Jung's psychology (2012:2). In his early book, *Intimacy*, Nouwen (1968b) seems to validate this claim:

Perhaps no psychologist has stressed the need of self-acceptance as the way to self realization so much as Carl Jung. For Jung, self-realization meant the integration of the shadow. It is the growing ability to allow the dark side of our personality to enter into our awareness and thus prevent a one-sided life in which only that which is presentable to the outside world is considered as a real part of ourselves. To come to an inner unity, totality and wholeness, every part of our self should be accepted and integrated. (p. 15)

Jung's self-realisation involved some hard psychological work, discovering archetypes in the unconscious and the subsequent interpretation of these archetypes (De Jong 2012:5) including the persona, the anima and animus, and the

12. In numerous books, Nouwen writes about his belief that what is most personal is found to be most universal, which causes him to feel free to write about his personal struggles, believing that they may be a source of healing to others. In *Wounded Healer*, he credits Carl Rogers with this idea: '... I have found that the very feeling which has seemed to me most private, most personal and hence the most incomprehensible by others, has turned out to be an expression for which there is resonance in many other people. It has led me to believe that what is most personal and unique in each one of us is probably the very element which would, if it were shared or expressed, speak most deeply to others' (Rogers 1961:26 quoted in Nouwen 1972:79)

shadow. The point of contact between Nouwen's theory of spiritual polarities and Jung's psychology is the *shadow*. 'The shadow is the inferior being in ourselves, the one who wants to do all the things that we do not allow ourselves to do, who is everything we are not, the Mr. Hyde to our Dr. Jekyll' (Fordham 1968:24). In addition to the shadow, the psyche is home to a dynamic and self-regulating energy Jung calls libido. 'The libido flows between two opposing poles' much like 'the positive and negative poles of an electric circuit' (De Jong 2012:9).

Here one discovers a connection between the psychology of Jung and Nouwen's unique metaphor of spiritual transformation as a movement between (opposing) poles. At first, a person is unable to relate to more than one pole at a time. They identify with one of the poles and turn away from the other which does not fit with the image of themselves (De Jong 2012:9). As one does the hard emotional work of identifying with even the darkness in oneself, healing and wholeness can result. The self can now transcend the opposites (De Jong 2012:10) by first meeting her shadow and learning to live with this daunting and often fear-evoking aspect of herself. Wholeness can only be found when there is a recognition of the opposites. (De Jong 2012:11)

Nouwen's terminology is different from traditional models, especially those in the classic spiritual tradition, which considered the spiritual life a journey through stages or steps, preferring the model of an ongoing movement,<sup>13</sup> 'swinging between poles' which could be positive or negative (Marchinkowski 2022:256; De Jong 2012:11). Nouwen (1975) explains:

In the middle of all our worries and concerns, often disturbingly similar over the years, we become more aware of the different poles between which our lives vacillate and are held in tension. (p.18)

While the default experience of individuals living in the world today may be loneliness,<sup>14</sup> hostility and illusion (1968b:13), it would be a mistake to bypass these poles because they may be the very path to solitude, hospitality, and prayer. To use Jung's terms, 'by embracing our shadows can be become fully integrated and authentic spiritual pilgrims' (Ford 2006:25). The psycho-spiritual work of embrace involves accepting the 'negative' pole and understand it as an inner conflict so that the understanding enables it to become a source of growth towards wholeness (Nouwen 1968b:13–14). Nouwen (1996) recognised that the aim was not to dispel darkness but to rejoice in what little of the 'light' one still experienced:

The spiritual task is not to escape your loneliness, not to let yourself drown it, but to find its source. This is not easy to do, but when you can somehow identify the place from which these feelings emerge, they will lose of their power over you. (p. 36)

13. For a more in-depth discussion on Nouwen's model as compared to a linear staged approach to spiritual transformation (cf. Marchinkowski 2022:251, 256).

14. In describing the wounds that a wounded healer might have and use as a source of 'healing power', Nouwen identifies loneliness as a word which best describes the prevailing experience of ministers (1972:89).

Nouwen was influenced by Jung in his articulation of the process of spiritual transformation, not as a series of stages or levels but as a process of swings between seemingly opposing poles wherein the shadow is integrated and the challenging experiences of our lives are continually processed (De Jong 2012:21). Nouwen showed a high level of tolerance for paradox by describing polar opposites not as conceptual 'enemies' that need be placed over against each other, but rather as 'friends' that could complement each other and lead to spiritual and psychological growth (Hernandez 2012:kindle location 433).

### Nouwen's first pole for personal transformation: Loneliness

Every person has surely experienced feeling lonely; it is one of the most universal human experiences. Nouwen believed that Western culture had heightened the awareness of human loneliness mainly because western culture creates mechanisms to avoid pain—physical, emotional and psychological (Nouwen 1975:27). One sure sign of human loneliness that could be experienced in everyday life was that conversation often degraded into 'small talk'. Instead of avoiding loneliness or denying it, Nouwen believed it should be protected and turned into solitude, a positive aloneness that could bear fruit. By doing so, one could "enter into the desert of our loneliness and change it by gentle and persistent efforts into a garden of solitude" (1975:34). In his landmark book on spiritual transformation, *Reaching out*, Nouwen pointed out an opportunity for personal spiritual transformation in which an individual might move from loneliness, taking a 'swing' from this default fearful and disconnected state towards the other pole of solitude. This, he believed, was (Nouwen 1975):

[T]he beginning of any spiritual life because it is the movement from restless senses to the restless spirit, from the outward-reaching cravings to the inward-reaching search, from the fearful clinging to the fearless play. (p. 34–35)

Nouwen believed that this 'swing' or movement was intuitive for mystics because they had not only experienced the terrible loneliness of the Dark Night of the soul<sup>15</sup> but also because they knew God as their spiritual home. Ford pointed out that for Nouwen (and for the mystics), loneliness could be equated with homesickness. Mystics were able to identify loneliness as a disconnection from God, an illusion which was to be acknowledged, seen for what it was and embraced as 'a necessary experience this side of heaven' (Ford 2018:43). Much has been written on how Nouwen articulated the process of spiritual transformation, as a series of swings between poles. The swings were neither stages for Nouwen nor were the negative poles to be permanently transcended. The spiritual seeker would return periodically to the same experience and challenge implicit in that 'negative' pole (such as loneliness). The swing or movement most closely related to personal transformation<sup>16</sup> was the swing between loneliness to solitude (Ford 2018:82). This swing was not intended as a denial of

15. The intention here is not to conflate loneliness (as disconnection with others) with the concept of the Dark Night of the soul (cf. John of the Cross), but rather to point out that the feeling of loneliness is also part of the Dark Night experience.

16. Personal transformation may be described as a process within a person's spiritual journey in which the ego and personas are integrated in a search for True Self. The aim is to move towards wholeness so that an integrated Self may continue the spiritual journey to its ultimate goal which is unification with the Divine.

loneliness but a decision for it not to overwhelm the spiritual seeker, to seek to find its cause and in so doing, loneliness will lose its power over them (Nouwen 1996b:36).

Nouwen (1996:36) believed that loneliness could be addressed in many ways, both negative (such as addictions) or positive (such as therapy), but finding solitude was a deeply personal and spiritual journey. Many of his books warn against the fallacy that loneliness can be cured by filling our lives with people or things (Beumer 1997):

When our loneliness drives us away from ourselves into the arms of our companions in life, we are in fact, driving ourselves into excruciating relationships, tiring friendships and suffocating embraces... No friend or lover, no husband or wife, no community or commune will be able to put to rest our deepest cravings for unity and wholeness. (p. 87–88; cf. Nouwen 1972:90)

### The other pole, solitude

By creating the pole of solitude, Nouwen was envisaging a still place in the heart. He was not creating the impression that there was a geographical place to which one might flee, and there retreat into solitude. He had tried on many occasions to seek solace in places like the Genesee monastery in Kentucky, discovering to his dismay that his heart was not still. The only solitude that was possible, was a solitude of the heart, an inner disposition or attitude which did not depend on seclusion (Nouwen 1975:37). The road to solitude might begin with a spiritual seeker adopting practices of mindfulness, contemplation, and a kind of paying attention to the ebb and flow of our hearts. In practising these, a seeker could be present in their own loneliness so that they could then be present in their solitude. Nouwen believed that an attitude of solitude in the heart would facilitate the ability of a person to attentively listen to the stories of others. Alternatively, when people were driven by loneliness, listening became a challenge and people were inclined to select the remarks and events that address the wants and needs of the listener (Nouwen 1975:38).

This mindfulness or contemplation would facilitate the swing, in a process of converting the loneliness of a spiritual seeker into a deep solitude and, a sacred space in which a person's true vocation would emerge and God could speak to them about their true vocation. Remaining in a state of disconnected loneliness would result in impatience with self and others, and hence an inability to do the spiritual work of transformation; but in solitude, seekers could listen to their inner selves, becoming truly present to who they really were (Nouwen 1975:40–41). In addition, solitude prepared a person for another step, a step towards the other, our fellow human beings. Indeed, another spiritual swing awaited; the seeker could move from personal transformation to interpersonal transformation.

### Taking the swing: Personal transformation

In articulating the spiritual movement from loneliness to solitude, Nouwen was blending his learning and experience of Roman Catholic mystical theology that understood spiritual formation as a process of employing spiritual

practices so that one might journey through progressive stages eventually leading to spiritual union with 'a more psychodynamic understanding of the inner polarities of the human psyche (soul)' (Christensen 2010:viii; Ford 2018:47). Nouwen believed that a person's core self or spiritual centre was in the heart, which is where one could ultimately be held safe in the embrace of God. As the polarities were better understood and orientated towards God, a transformative movement took place.

For Nouwen, the process of personal spiritual transformation could be characterised as a movement from loneliness to solitude. It was a personal and spiritual journey involving spiritual practices such as contemplation and prayer. He characterised the result of such a process as a gradual conversion from 'an anxious reaction to a loving response' (Nouwen 1975:50). The discovery of solitude would also change a person's attitude towards the people they met and the challenges they faced each day (Nouwen 1975):

Then we can look for hope in the middle of crying cities, burning hospitals and desperate parents and children. Then we can cast off the temptation of despair and speak about the fertile tree while witnessing the dying of the seed. Then indeed we can break out of the prison of an anonymous series of events and listen to the God of history who speaks to us in the centre of our solitude and respond to his ever new call for conversion. (p. 51)

The movement to solitude did not cause a person to withdraw from everyday life or from interaction with fellow human beings as might have been assumed. Indeed, in solitude, one could listen to and empathise with the great suffering of the world because it was there that Nouwen believed one could recognise them not as strange and unfamiliar challenges, but as struggles similar to our own. The movement from loneliness to solitude, therefore, was not a movement of growing withdrawal from the world, but rather a movement towards and a deeper engagement in the burning issues of our time. The same movement allows spiritual seekers to perceive the various events and interactions of their lives as an opportunity for a positive interaction with the world in which responsibilities become occasions for compassion and service. There is in such a movement a chance for a person's innermost self to reach out and effect healing, as a wounded healer perhaps, in our realm of influence and among our fellow human beings (Nouwen 1975:61–62). These psychological and spiritual polarities, Nouwen believed, are catalysts for transformation within the spiritual journey. By identifying a particular quality of inner life, Nouwen was able to articulate a corresponding spiritual practice and movement in spiritual development –'from this quality to that, from something enslaving and destructive to something liberating and life giving' (Nouwen 2010:viii).

### Conclusion

It might have been possible for an objective bystander or even a serious student of psychology to have dismissed Anton Boisen as a damaged man whose thoughts on psychotherapy or clinical pastoral education should be held in suspicion because of his obvious wounds. In a similar way,

the powerful influence of the artist Vincent van Gogh may have been overlooked by those intimidated by his erratic behaviour or unpopular choices. In both cases, Henri Nouwen chose to delve more deeply into the lives of these two men and, in the process, he was rewarded with the lessons that these two wounded healers could teach. From Boisen, Nouwen received the idea that even a wounded person could be part of someone's healing process and he also learned a new methodology with which he could read living documents, not least himself. From Van Gogh, his fellow Dutchman, Nouwen received the gift of compassion, an incarnational kind of living among the people you seek to understand.

In the process, Nouwen himself became a wounded healer, offering the reading of his own inner life for the benefit of many. The way of spiritual transformation Nouwen charted for himself and for his readers was not a staged or levelled approach but a series of movements between spiritual poles. On the personal level, a spiritual seeker would have to swing (or move) between loneliness and solitude ever holding onto, understanding and accepting their own loneliness, while exploring and eventually operating out of the garden of their solitude. Living into the identity of a wounded healer is the bridge between the poles, and personal spiritual transformation is the goal. Solitude is not seclusion but the first step in a process of engaging the world and ultimately finding the heart's true home in the endless embrace of love at the centre of all things.

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