

Henri Nouwen

A Letter of Consolation

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Notes by Alison Morgan

Letter written to his father 6 months after the death of his mother. Nouwen was writing from New York to his father in Holland. Italics – my summary. Regular print – extracts.

The advantages of distance

The paradox of it all is that the distance between us may prove after all to be a blessing in disguise. If I were still living in Holland and were able to visit you every weekend and call you every day, I should probably never have been able to let you know my deeper feelings about mother and you. Isn't it true that it is much harder to say deep things to each other than to write them?... Physical and spiritual closeness are two quite different things, and they can – although they do not always – inhibit each other. The great distance between us may be enabling us to develop a relationship that you might not be able to develop with your other children and their families who live so close to you.

The harvest of death

When Jesus said that if a grain of wheat dies it will yield a rich harvest, he not only spoke about his own death but indicated the new meaning he would give to our death. So we have to ask ourselves, 'Where do we see the harvest of mother's death?' .. Before anything else, we have to come into touch with – yes, even claim – the mysterious reality of new life in ourselves. .. We may help each other to see this new life. That would be true consolation. It would make us experience in the centre of our beings that the pain mother's death caused us has led us to a new way of being, in which the distance between mother, father, or child slowly dissolves. Thus our separation from mother brings us to a new inner unity and invites us to make that new unity a source of joy and hope for each other and for others as well.

We need to face death before we are dying

Mother's death has made us raise more directly and explicitly the question of death itself. The question about death, however, is mostly asked by someone who is himself not dying... You reminded me how much mother spoke about her death when there was no real danger and yet hardly mentioned it at all when she was actually dying. It seems indeed important that we face death before we are in any real danger of dying and reflect on our mortality before all our conscious and unconscious energy is directed to the struggle to survive. It is important to be prepared for death, very important; but if we start thinking about it only when we are terminally ill, our reflections will not give us the support we need. We enjoy good health now. We are asking about death, mother's death and our own, not because we are dying but because we feel strong enough to raise the question about our most basic human infirmity.

Befriending death

I want to take up the challenge of this question. This indeed seems to be the opportune time not only for you, but also for me. We both have to ask ourselves what mother's death means, and we both are confronted in a new way with our own deaths. The fact that you are 'already' seventy-six and I am 'only' forty-seven is not a real hindrance to a common meditation on death. I think, in fact, that mother's death has taken away much of the age difference between us, so that the prospect of dying and death is not really different for you and for me. Once you have reached the top of the mountain, it does not make much difference at which point on the way down you take a picture of the valley - as long as you are not in the valley itself.

I think, then, that our first task is to befriend death. I like that expression 'to befriend': I first heard it used by Jungian analyst James Hillman when he attended a seminar I taught on Christian Spirituality at Yale Divinity School. He emphasized the importance of 'befriending': befriend your dreams, befriend your shadow, befriend your unconscious. He made it convincingly dear that in order to become full human beings we have to claim the totality of our experience; we come to maturity by integrating not only the light but also the dark side of our story into our selfhood. ...

But how do we befriend death? During the last few years you have seen many deaths – even of people you knew quite well. They have touched you, shocked you, surprised you, and even caused you grief, but when mother died it seemed as if death came to you for the first time. Why? I think because love – deep, human love, does not know death. .. Love comes from that place within us where death cannot enter. Love does not accept the limits of hours, days, weeks, months, years, or centuries. Love is not willing to be imprisoned by time....

That is why mother's death was such a totally different experience for you from the deaths of so many other people you have known. In the core of your being, you - your love - could not accept her leaving you so drastically, so radically, so totally, and so irretrievably. Her death went directly against your most profound intuitions. ..Only her death could really make you protest in your innermost being and make you cry out, 'Why could our love not prevent her from dying?'

Yet, the same love that reveals the absurdity of death also allows us to befriend death. The same love that forms the basis of our grief is also the basis of our hope; the same love that makes us cry out in pain also must enable us to develop a liberating intimacy with our own most basic brokenness. Without faith, this must sound like a contradiction. But our faith in Him whose love overcame death and who rose from the grave on the third day converts this contradiction into a paradox, the most healing paradox of our existence. Floris Bakels .. came to see and feel that the power of love is stronger than the power of death and that it is indeed true that 'God is love.'.. He found in the core of his being a love so strong and so profound that the fear of death lost its power over him... The more deeply and fully he experienced Christ's love, the more he came to see that the many loves in his life – the love of his parents, his brothers and sisters, his wife, and his friends – were reflections of the great 'first' love of God.'

Many people seem never to befriend death and die as if they were losing a hopeless battle. But we do not have to share that sad fate. Mother's death.. can make us .. deeply aware that her love was a reflection of a love that does not and cannot die – the love that we both will affirm again on Easter Sunday.

Death lays bare what matters

What did mother's death do to you? I do not know and cannot know... But if your experience of her death is in any way close to mine, you were 'invited' - as I was – to re-evaluate your whole life. ... Mother's death made you stop and look back in a way you had not done before. Suddenly you entered into a situation that made you see your many years of life - your life as a student, a young professional, a successful lawyer, a well-known professor - with a bird's-eye view. I remember your telling me how you could capture your long and complex history in one clear picture, and how from the point of view of mother's death, your life lost much of its complexity and summarized itself in a few basic lines. In that way her death gave you new eyes with which to see your own life and helped you to distinguish between the many accidental aspects and the few essential elements. Death indeed simplifies; death does not tolerate endless shadings and nuances. Death lays bare what really matters, and in this way becomes your judge.

All living is dying

I think that from the point of view of mother's death and our own mortality, we can now see our lives as a long process of mortification. You are familiar with that word. Priests use it a lot during Lent. They say, 'You have to mortify yourself.' It sounds unpleasant and harsh and moralistic. But mortification - literally, 'making death' - is what life is all about, a slow discovery of the mortality of all that is created so that we can appreciate its beauty without dinging to it as if it were a lasting possession. Our lives can indeed be seen as a process of becoming familiar with death, as a school in the art of dying. I do not mean this in a morbid way. On the contrary, when we see life constantly relativized by death we can enjoy it for what it is: a free gift. The pictures, letters, and books of the past reveal life to us as a constant saying of farewell to beautiful places, good people, and wonderful experiences. Look at the pictures of your children when you could play with them on the floor of the living room. How quickly you had to say goodbye to them! Look at the snapshots of your bike trips with mother in Brittany in the mid-thirties. How few were the summers in which those trips were possible! ... All these times have passed by like friendly visitors, leaving you with dear memories but also with the sad recognition of the shortness of life. In every arrival there is a leave-taking; in every reunion there is a separation; in each one's growing up there is a growing old; in every smile there is a tear; and in every success there is a loss. All living is dying and all celebration is mortification too.

Her death was a definitive end, a total break that presented itself with a finality unlike any other. For a while, we kept living as if she were only gone for a time and could return at any moment. We even kept doing things as if we were preparing for the moment when she would appear again on our doorsteps. But as the days passed, our hearts came to know that she was gone, never to return. And it was then that real grief began to invade us. It was then that we turned to the past and saw that death had been present in our lives all along and that the many farewells and goodbyes had been pointing to this dark hour. And it was then that we raised in a whole new way the question of the meaning of death.

The meaning of death

Mother's life opened up for you a dimension of life in which the key word is not autonomy, but surrender.

There is a much more human option. It is the option to re-evaluate the past as a continuing challenge to surrender ourselves to an unknown future. .. Do not forget that only after Jesus's death could his disciples fulfil their vocation. I am

constantly struck by the fact that those who are most detached from life, those who have learned through living that there is nothing and nobody in this life to cling to, are the really creative people. They are free to move away from the familiar, safe places and can keep moving forward to new, unexplored areas of life... Mother's death encourages us to give up the illusions of immortality we might still have and to experience in a new way our total dependence on God's love, a dependence that does not take away our free selfhood but purifies and ennobles it.

The meaning of death is not so much the meaning our death has for us as the meaning it has for others... I have grown painfully aware of how accustomed I had become to her unceasing interest in all that I did, felt, thought or wrote, and how much I had taken it for granted that, even if nobody else cared, she certainly did. The absence of that caring attention often gives me a deep feeling of loneliness.

Death brings life to others

If mother's life was indeed a life lived for us, we must be willing to accept her death as a death for us, a death that is not meant to paralyse us, make us totally dependent, or provide an excuse for all sorts of complaints, but a death that should make us stronger, freer and more mature. .. We must have the courage to believe that her death was good for us and that she died so that we might live.

What makes you and me Christians is not only our belief that He who was without sin died for our sake on the cross and thus opened for us the way to His heavenly Father, but also that through His death our death is transformed from a totally absurd end of all that gives life its meaning into an event that liberates us and those whom we love...

Each of our deaths can become a death for others. I think that we need to start seeing the profound meaning of this dying for each other in and through the death of Christ in order to catch a glimpse of what eternal life might mean. Eternity is born in time, and every time someone dies whom we have loved early, eternity can break into our mortal existence a little bit more.

Celebrating life

Death does not belong to God. God did not create death. God does not want death. God does not desire death for us. In God there is no death. God is a God of life. He is the God of the living and not of the dead. Therefore people who live a deeply spiritual life, a life of real intimacy with God, must feel the pain of death in a particularly acute way. A life with God opens us to all that is alive. It makes us celebrate life; it enables us to see the beauty of all that is created; it makes us desire to always be where life is. Death, therefore, must be experienced by a really religious person neither as a release from the tension of life nor as an occasion for rest and peace, but as an absurd, ungodly, dark nothingness. Now I see why it is false to say that a religious person should find death easy and acceptable. Now I understand why it is wrong to think that a death without struggle and agony is a sign of great faith. These ideas do not make much sense once we realize that faith opens us to the full affirmation of life and gives us an intense desire to live more fully, more vibrantly, and more vigorously. If anyone should protest against death it is the religious person, the person who has indeed come to know God as the God of the living.

I write this to you not to upset you but to console you in your grief. The Lord who died, died for us – for you, for me, for mother, and for all people. He died not because of any death or darkness in Him, but only to free us from the death and darkness in us. If the God who revealed life to us, and whose only desire is to bring us to life, loved us so much that He wanted to experience with us the total absurdity of death, then - yes, then there must be hope; then there must be something more than death; then there must be a promise that is not fulfilled in our short existence in this world; then leaving behind the ones you love, the flowers and the trees, the mountains and the oceans, the beauty of art and music, and all the exuberant gifts of life cannot be just the destruction and cruel end of all things; then indeed we have to wait for the third day.

Facing the future

At times, we wish to die and join her in death, but we know that we are called to live and to work on this earth. Our quiet, joyful waiting is much deeper than wishful thinking. It is waiting with the knowledge that love is stronger than death and that this truth will become visible to us. ... No longer do we have to cry; no longer do we have to feel the painful tearing away. Now we can wait, silencing all our wishes and fantasies about what will be, and simply hope in joy.

I have a strong sense that mother's death has been, and still is, a painful but very blessed purification that will enable us to hear a voice and see a face we had not seen or heard as clearly before.

The best way I can express to you the meaning death receives in the light of the resurrection of Jesus is: to say that the love that causes us so much grief and makes us feel so fully the absurdity of death is stronger than death itself. Love is stronger than death.' This sentence summarizes better than any other the meaning of the resurrection and therefore also

the meaning of death. I have mentioned this earlier in this letter, but now you may better see its full meaning. Why has mother's death caused you so much suffering? Because you loved her so much. Why has your own death become such an urgent question for you? Because YOU love life, you love your children and your grandchildren, you love nature, you love art and music, you love horses, and you love all that is alive and beautiful. Death is absurd and cannot be meaningful for someone who loves so much. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the glorious manifestation of the victory of love over death.

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