

Henri Nouwen

The Wounded Healer - ministry in contemporary society

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Notes by Alison Morgan, August 2000

Introduction

Nothing can be written about ministry without a deeper understanding of the ways in which the minister can make his wounds available as a source of healing - not just personal wounds, for the minister is called to recognize the sufferings of his time and make that recognition the starting point of his service.

1. Ministry in a dislocated world

The predicament of nuclear man

Lost faith in the possibilities of technology and aware that these same powers carry potential for self-destruction. Nuclear man is the man who realises that his creative powers hold the potential for self-destruction.

He sees that in this nuclear age vast new industrial complexes enable man to produce in one hour that which he labored over for years in the past, but he also realizes that these same industries have disturbed the ecological balance and, through air and noise pollution, have contaminated his own milieu. He drives in cars, listens to the radio and watches TV, but has lost his ability to understand the workings of the instruments he uses. He sees such an abundance of material commodities around him that scarcity no longer motivates his life, but at the same time he is groping for a direction and asking for meaning and purpose. In all this he suffers from the inevitable knowledge that his time is a time in which it has become possible for man to destroy not only life but also the possibility of rebirth, not only man but also mankind, not only periods of existence but also history itself. For nuclear man the future has become an option.

Lifton: nuclear man characterised by:

-  a historical dislocation
-  a fragmented ideology
-  a search for immortality

'When we wonder why the language of traditional Christianity has lost its liberating power for nuclear man, we have to realize that most Christian preaching is still based on the presupposition that man sees himself as meaningfully integrated with a history in which God came to us in the past, is living under us in the present, and will come to liberate us in the future. But when man's historical consciousness is broken, the whole Christian message seems like a lecture about the great pioneers to a boy on an acid trip' 9.

Nuclear man no longer believes in anything that is always and everywhere true and valid. Nothing seems urgent or even important enough to become involved in.

Nuclear man's way to liberation

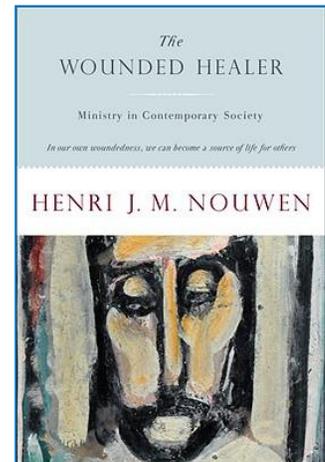
2 ways out: the mystical way and the revolutionary way.

 *The mystical way.* This is the inner way. No reality outside, so he looks for it inside. Tries to find a connection with a source of being. He discovers that what is most personal is most universal. Meditation, contemplation, Zen, Yoga - nuclear man is trying to reach a moment in which the distinction between life and death can be transcended and in which a deep connection with all of nature and all of history can be experienced; trying to move away from the unreality of his daily existence to a more encompassing view which enables him to experience what is real.

 *The revolutionary way.* Rejects liberal and progressive answers; only a new world order will do

 *the Christian way.* In Jesus the mystical and revolutionary ways are 2 sides of same mode of experiential transcendence, 2 sides of same attempt to bring about radical change. Conversion is the individual equiv of revolution.

2. Ministry for a rootless generation



It is an inward generation, looking not outwards or upwards but inwards. No authority, institution, outer concrete reality has the power to relieve them of their anxiety and loneliness and make them free; the only way is the inward way. Snag: self-centred. Authority is suspect; so it is a generation without fathers. Replaced with tyranny of peers. Result is a shift from a guilt culture (disobedience to authority) to shame culture (fear of non-conformity to peers).

What kind of leadership should the minister now provide?

 The minister as the articulator of inner events. Since the God out/up there is dissolved, the God within asks questions as never before; and he can bring a new creative life or a chaotic confusion. Experimentation with the inner life can be dangerous - drugs, spirits. On the other hand, those who avoid the painful encounter with the unseen are doomed to live a supercilious, boring and superficial life. First task of minister is thus to clarify the confusion which arises when people enter this new internal world. So Christian leadership isn't about structures or events; it's about guidance for the deep movts of the spirit. Means we must do it ourselves first, not be afraid of the complexities of our inner lives; only then will darkness go, anxiety diminish, and we become capable of creative work. 'The man who can articulate the movements of his inner life, who can give names to his varied experiences, need no longer be a victim of himself, but is able slowly and consistently to remove the obstacles that prevent the spirit from etnering.' 38. Key word is articulation. So pastoral conversation becomes a deep human encounter in which a man is willing to put his own faith and doubt, hope and depsair, light and darkness at the disposal of others who want to find a way through their confusion and touch the solid core of life. Only then can the Word of God be received.

 People are looking for a new kind of authority. Its nature must be compassion. Through it we recognise that the craving for love that men feel resides in us too, and that the cruelty the world knows is rooted in our own impulses too. The task is to bring out the best in man and lead him forward to a more human community; the danger of distant analysis rather than compassion and partnership.

 The minister as contemplative man - an active, engaged contemplation, guided by a vision of what he has seen beyond the trivial concerns of a possessive world, not afraid to die, looking for signs of hope and promise in the situation in which he finds himself.

3. Ministry to a hopeless man

An encounter between 2 people, one facing death, one listening. What is it for? What is leadership in this encounter? What does the dying man need?

1. He needs a personal response. A brother, a person who calls him by name.
2. He needs someone who is there waiting for him. We can keep our sanity and stay alive as long as there is at least one person who is waiting for us. A life-saving relationship can develop in an hour; one eye movt or one handshake can replace years of friendship when man is in agony. *Love not only lasts forever, it needs only a second to come about.* 67
3. He needs to face death; the encounter needs to be between 2 people who reawaken in each other the deepest human intuition, that life is eternal and cannot be made futile by a biological process, that there is a tomorrow even if tomorrow brings death.

So there are 3 principles of ministry:

 personal concern. No one can help anyone without becoming involved, without entering with his whole person into the painful situation, without taking the risk of becoming hurt, wounded or even destroyed in the process. The beginning and end of all Christian leadership is to give your life for others, and the illusion is to think that man can be led out of the desert by someone who has never been there. When you speak to one, you speak to many, when you enter where life is private, you touch the soul of the community. Carl Rogers: 'I have found that the very feeling which has seemed to me most private, most personal and hence most incomprehensible by otehers, has turned out to be an expression for which there is a resonance in many other people. It has led me to believe that wha tis 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. This has helped me to understand artists and poets who have dared to express the unique in themselves' 74. It is the same for the minister.

 Faith in the value and meaning of life. A Christian leader is not a leader because he announces a new idea and tries to convince others of its worth; he is a leader because he faces the world with eyes full of expectation, with the expertise to take away the veil that covers its hidden potential.

 Hope. A vision beyond suffering; hope based on a promise given. Hope isn't optimism; it is grounding in a historic event.

4. Ministry by a lonely minister

'We live in a society in which loneliness has become one of the most painful human wounds. The growing competition and rivalry which pervade our lives from birth have created in us an acute awareness of our isolation. This awareness has in turn left many with a heightened anxiety and an intense search for the experience of unity and community. It has also led people to ask anew how love, friendship, brotherhood and sisterhood can free them from isolation and offer them a sense of intimacy and belonging. All around us we see the many ways by which the people of the western world are trying to escape this loneliness.... But the more I think about loneliness, the more I think that the wound of loneliness is like the Grand Canyon - a deep incision in the surface of our existence which has become an inexhaustible source of beauty and self-understanding.. The Christian way of life does not take away our loneliness; it protects and cherishes it as a precious gift. Sometimes it seems as if we do everything possible to avoid the painful confrontation with our basic human loneliness, and allow ourselves to be trapped by false gods promising immediate satisfaction and quick relief. But perhaps the painful awareness of loneliness is an invitation to transcend our limitations and look beyond the boundaries of our existence. The awareness of loneliness might be a gift we must protect and guard, because our loneliness reveals to us an inner emptiness that can be destructive when misunderstood, but filled with promise for him who can tolerate its sweet pain... We easily relate to our human world with devastating expectations. We ignore what we already know... that no love or friendship, no intimate embrace or tender kiss, no community, commune or collective, no man or woman, will ever be able to satisfy our desire to be released from our lonely condition. This truth is so disconcerting and painful that we are more prone to play games with our fantasies than to face the truth of our existence.' 84. So; false hopes, illusory goals, dashed expectations. Marriages are ruined because neither partner was able to fulfil the hidden hope that the other would take his/her loneliness away. Celibates live in the dream of the intimacy of marriage.

The healing minister. Making one's own wounds a source of healing 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 which all men share. Need:

1. Concentration - the ability to pay attention, withdrawing to make room for the person. 'When we are not afraid to enter into our own centre and to concentrate on the stirrings of our own soul, we come to know that being alive means being loved.' And so we make space for others.
2. Community. It is a false illusion that wholeness can be given by one to another. A minister is not a doctor to take away pain, but to deepen it to the level where it can be shared. Many people suffer because of the false supposition on which they have based their lives - that there should be no fear or loneliness, no confusion or doubt. But these sufferings can only be dealt with creatively when they are understood as wounds integral to our human condition. So ministry does not allow people to live with illusions of immortality and wholeness, but reminds them that they are mortal and broken, and that with recognition of this, liberation starts.

Conclusion

The minister is the one who can make the search for authenticity possible, by putting his own search at the disposal of others.

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