

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

Discernment

by

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Discernment is the third volume in the posthumous Henri Nouwen series that includes *Spiritual Direction* and *Spiritual Formation*. It seeks to help us read the signs of daily life so that we can better see the interconnectedness of all things and understand what God is trying to say.

CHAPTER 1

1. How does Henri Nouwen define “discernment” (p. 3)? Do you feel you are easily able to discern God’s love and direction in daily life? Why or why not?
2. Nouwen describes three characteristics of being spiritually deaf: not being aware that anything important is happening in our lives, running away from the present moment, and trying to create experiences that make our lives worthwhile (p. 5). What, if anything, do you

recognize of yourself in these characteristics? Explain. In what ways do you listen to God?

3. “To want to know God’s plan and purpose without regular prayer and regular engagement with Scripture and God’s people is like trying to bake a cake without assembling the various ingredients” (p. 16). Which of these three ingredients—prayer, study, community—do you need more of in your “cake”?
4. Discernment changes us. “Our desire to be successful, well liked, and influential becomes increasingly less important as we come closer to God’s heart” (p. 17). How have you seen this happen in your life?

CHAPTER 2

1. “*Discernment* . . . is both a gift and a spiritual discipline” (p. 23). What does Nouwen mean by this statement?
2. Like the desert fathers, Nouwen suggests that we not directly confront darkness but instead focus on the Lord of light (p. 26). Why does Nouwen believe it is better to indirectly thwart evil in this way? Do you agree?
3. Who are the friends and saints (living or otherwise) you can call upon to pray for you and help you practice discernment? Who are some of the “neighbors” who can guide you through tough times, whether with their written words or the power of their stories?

CHAPTER 3

1. What is the difference between reading and *spiritual* reading?
2. Nouwen describes how Thomas Merton grew spiritually by reading the words of great Christian writers, including the desert fathers, who showed him asceticism; Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, who showed him everyday spirituality; and Ignatius of Loyola, who led him deeper into contemplative prayer. What writer or writers have greatly influenced your spiritual journey, and what lessons have you learned from them? (If you have completed the Exercises for Deeper Discernment found at the end of this chapter on page 52, you might want to reference your answer there.)
3. How can spiritual reading not only allow God to reveal the contents of our hearts but also enable us to be more fully known by God (p. 52)?

CHAPTER 4

1. Nouwen confesses that it is easier for him to see God in words on a page than in the natural world (p. 53). Where do you best see God?
2. Recall a specific event or memory in which you most clearly saw or felt God's presence in the natural world. What happened?

3. How might one's contemplation practice differ in nature as opposed to indoors?
4. What does Nouwen mean by using nature as a “means of discernment” (p. 56)?

CHAPTER 5

1. When has God spoken to you through another person, the way Mother Teresa did for Nouwen?
2. When have you felt that a primary relationship (one with your parents, peers, or those with whom you live) was helping to lead you into a more intimate relationship with God? When did you feel a primary relationship was *not* leading you closer to God? How can you focus on the way each relationship reflects an aspect of God's love rather than concentrating on problems with the relationship?
3. Nouwen describes several people that God provided as “living signs” to guide and help him in his life, in ways both painful and wonderful (p. 69). What people have served as “living signs” pointing to God in your life?

CHAPTER 6

1. What is the difference between *chronos* and *kairos*? How can viewing the world through *kairos* change our perspective?

2. Why is it so important to remember the past, as the people of Israel did when they reflected on their history?
3. When you look back at unexpected events that occurred in your life and some of the things you thought would happen that didn't, what can you discern about God's will and calling in your life?

CHAPTER 7

1. When asked about vocation, Nouwen responded, "God has a very special role for you to fulfill. God wants you to stay close to his heart and to let him guide you. You will know what you are called to do when you have to know it" (p. 99). Does that answer fit with your experience? Does it encourage you? Frustrate you?
2. What are some ways Nouwen suggests testing a call to see if it is something to pursue or just a diversion (p. 100)? Have you ever attempted to test a call? If so, what was the result?
3. Nouwen writes, "The question of where to live and what to do is really insignificant compared to the question of how to keep the eyes of my heart focused on the Lord. . . . There is no such thing as the right place or the right job" (p. 107). Do you agree? How do his words fit with your understanding of vocation and calling? How far have you gotten in discerning the "who," "what," and "where" of your vocation?

CHAPTER 8

1. Nouwen writes that when he misses his daily hour with God, his life “loses its coherence” (p. 113), yet he also confesses that this daily hour is “full of distractions, inner restlessness, confusion, and boredom” (p. 114). Do you spend daily time with God? If so, what does it look like for you?
2. As the disciples were walking to Emmaus and mourning the loss of Jesus, Jesus himself joined them. They did not recognize him, however, until much later, when he blessed and broke bread at their shared meal. What meaning does this story have for you?
3. What does it mean to Nouwen to remember Christ (p. 123ff)? How is this enacted in the Eucharist?

CHAPTER 9

1. Why do we have so much trouble believing the statement “You are the beloved daughter or son of God” (p. 133)? How could truly believing in this statement change you?
2. Nouwen shares his experience of giving a special blessing to Janet (pp. 135–36). He writes, “To give a blessing is to affirm another’s core identity, to say yes to a person’s belovedness” (p. 136). Who has given you a meaningful blessing? Who might need to receive one from you now?

3. What or who does the world say you are? How does this differ from your true identity in Christ? How can you better live out your true identity?
4. Nouwen points out that “the awareness of human sinfulness is often diminished in the West. Many people feel they are good enough and have no need for God” (p. 141). How can we balance awareness of our sinfulness with the knowledge that we are God’s beloved?

CHAPTER 10

1. Think of a time when you struggled to know whether it was time to take action or time to wait. What was the result?
2. Why is it important for us to learn to wait? What is the difference between “active waiting” (p. 150) and the way we usually think of waiting?
3. Jesus said to Peter, “When you grow old you will stretch out your hands and somebody else will put a belt around you and take you where you would rather not go” (p. 158), which is an example of how the way of Jesus differs from the way of the world. Do you agree with Nouwen that the ability to be led is a measure of spiritual maturity? In what ways can we discern where we are being led (p. 161)?
4. What is the main lesson about discernment that you will take away from this book? How will it change the way you follow your individual calling?