



# **The Way of the Heart: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers**

*Henri J.M. Nouwen*

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## **The Way of the Heart: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers** Henri J.M. Nouwen

Henry J.M. Nouwen, one of the greatest of all spiritual writers, invites us to search deeply for the well-springs that nourish true ministry in his classic *The Way of the Heart*. Interweaving the solitude, silence, and prayer of the fifth-century Egyptian Desert Fathers and Mothers with our contemporary search for an authentic spirituality, *The Way of the Heart* not only leads us to a fuller encounter with God, but to a more creative ministry with our fellow human beings. Here is one of the most profound works from a writer known for his fresh and perceptive insights—and who stands alongside C.S. Lewis and Thomas Merton as an essential Christian scholar and thinker.

## **The Way of the Heart: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers Details**

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# **From Reader Review The Way of the Heart: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers for online ebook**

## **Lori Neff says**

This was my second time reading this. I read it 15 years ago, so I read it this time with very different eyes. Loved it - it's a short, rich book.

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## **Kathleen Kurlin says**

This book promises (from the book jacket) "Within this one small book lies the most relevant and inspiring challenge that we shall ever face: to surrender the compulsive noise of the world for the way of the heart that leads us to God." This book delivered on what was written in the book jacket! I read this book very quickly and found myself wanting to withdraw from my daily life to a secluded spot somewhere so I could truly seek God with the hopes of hearing His words for me and my life. I would highly recommend this book to anyone who is seeking a deeper experience with God. Great book!

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## **Aaron W. Matthews says**

Admittedly I have been distracted in my Ministry because of the pressures and demands of all areas of my life. It is so easy to fall prey to the busy-ness of life. But, as Nouwen suggests, we have to find a way to swim from the shipwreck or we will drown with it. Through three simple ideals - solitude, silence, and prayer - this book teaches the value of living with not only the mind of Christ, but also letting his heart become our heartbeat so that we can find health in our own lives...and lead others to health in Him as well. I read this book in about an hour. Actually I devoured it. I needed it. It was worth losing sleep over. Now I'll chew on its teaching for awhile.

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## **Susie says**

Once again, a little 95 page book from Henri Nouwen finds a way to powerfully penetrate my heart and requires months of soaking, processing, and re-reading to reach the end. This little quirk of Nouwen's, by the way, is not at all a bad thing. In fact, it is the mark for me of a truly amazing, insightful book.

Compiled from a lecture series Nouwen taught regarding the Desert Mothers and Fathers, \_The Way of the Heart\_ describes in detail three qualities often lacking in modern Christian spirituality--solitude, silence, and prayer. Nouwen delves deeply into each, using stories of the Desert Fathers to elucidate each quality and reveal it anew. Solitude, he says, is not simply the state of being alone, but a solitude of the heart in which a man is able to know himself completely in his suffering and through his suffering minister to his fellow man. Silence, like solitude, is not simply "not speaking," but, as Nouwen puts it, "listening to God." And lastly, in "hesychastic prayer" solitude and silence become not the "selfish asceticism" they would be if practice for their own sake, but a very real way to live.

Prayer itself, Nouwen writes, hesychastic prayer, moves beyond the common understanding of prayer as "talking to God" or "thinking about God," where prayer is an exercise of the mind designed to meet a human need. It is instead, the "prayer of the heart," simple, unceasing, and all-inclusive. It is to descend to the place at which we lay ourself and our souls bare before God and come not with expectations or lofty exultations, but instead to "stand before the face of the Lord, all-seeing within us." It is, as Nouwen writes, "the prayer of truth. It unmask the many illusions about ourselves and about God and leads us into the true relationship...." And then, ironically I think, this prayer of truth becomes a "prayer of rest," as when we are exposed we are both most free to simply be ourselves before our Lord and are also less inclined to distraction as we have disclosed the thing we want to be distracted from.

In all, Nouwen's books always come back to one main point: live in truth, walk in truth, pray in truth, speak the truth. This book, too, carries out that theme.

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### **Ronald Abreu says**

#### **Best book of prayer ever**

This is a great book and help us to understand the way our life and prayer life should be, it comes with great principles to apply in a busy world

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### **Jasonlyescampbell says**

Once there was a culture so malicious, yet banal that Christians felt they were drowning. The culture embraced them, persecution ended, but the violence of propaganda and the pagan way of life constantly assailed them. Many were sinking deeper and deeper into this poison culture. The spirit of the age was seductive and constant with its promises of happiness and material success. The constant refrain could be summed up as: "Keep your spirituality, that is something you enjoy ... just join us in every other way." And so the church became wealthy and sick. One famous story describes Christians walking through a Roman church. One comments to the other, "Have you ever seen such riches?" The other sadly references the story in Acts; "Silver and gold we have in abundance, but the power to raise the sick is gone from us." So some of the saints decided to flee from this shipwreck in search of find land on which to stand. They ran to the desert.

Without effort, Nouwen convinces us that we face much of the same tribulation today that Christians faced in 4th century Rome. And so we have much to learn from the desert fathers. Specifically we must learn the value of fleeing (solitude), silence and prayer. Each of these can pull us away from the seductive spirit that speaks loud as ever ... so we can truly live in the Kingdom of God.

This is a book on the heart. The heart is the center of every person and the seat of the will. Yet, I find it hard to really know my own heart. These exercises that Nouwen gives to us land us face to face with what is in our heart. It is there we will find the Presence of God ready to work. Bonhoeffer once wrote that the kingdom of God is wider than the human heart, "it is as wide as the earth." He is certainly right, nevertheless, the kingdom must be in the heart before it can make its way out into the rest of the world. And that is the story of the desert fathers as Nouwen tells it. In the desert they found life boats so they might pull the whole

world after them. You can't really reach out if your own feet are sinking ... you must find firmament on which to stand.

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## **Ron says**

(Upon my second reading)

“Arsenius, flee, be silent, pray always, for these for these are the sources of sinlessness.”

A valuable retrospective on the prayer life of the Desert Fathers, and Eastern Orthodox Christians. Drawing on the main themes of solitude, silence and prayer, Nouwen offers an alternative to the western church's going-through-the-motions approach to following Christ.

“Only in the context of grace can we face our sin; only in the place of healing can we show our wounds; only with a single-minded attention to Christ can we give up our clinging fears and face our true nature.”

The most jarring note is Nouwen's 1981 malaise. All right-thinking folks of that era were full bore gloom and doom. Mankind was doomed; the only way out of the Cold War was a civilization, if not planet-ending global nuclear war. Remember Jimmy Carter donning a wool sweater and turning down the White House heat? And Reagan? All right-thinking folks were sure we'd just elected an idiot who would only hasten the apocalypse. Only, it didn't turn out that way, did it? Thirty years later much has changed and much hasn't.

“I have often repented of having spoken, but never of having remained silent.” Arsenius

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## **Tricia Culp says**

This is a short, understandable guide to the principles of contemplation- solitude, silence, and constant prayer. Really helpful.

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## **Neil Coulter says**

Over the past month, I've been doing some fasting, seeking clarity of God's leading in upcoming decisions. When I fast, I like to focus on devotional reading. In previous times of fasting, I've worked through Richard Foster's excellent edited volumes, *Spiritual Classics* and *Devotional Classics*. This time, I looked at my bookshelf and found this small book by Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*.

Originally published in 1981, *The Way of the Heart* presents a few key insights from the Desert Fathers-- Christian pilgrims in the 4th and 5th centuries who exiled themselves to the deserts of Egypt, seeking a deeper relationship with and understanding of God. Nouwen writes in with a caring, pastoral voice, especially for ministry leaders; but the content is really for any Christian.

The three topics Nouwen focuses on are solitude, silence, and prayer. (I read one of these sections each day that I fasted.) I was particularly challenged by the section on silence. I am a relatively silent person in

everyday life, but I understand that this is not necessarily a choice: it's just how I am. Nouwen challenged me to move from "The Way of the Personality," which is not something I've intentionally chosen for myself, to "The Way of the Heart"--deliberate, purposeful, and a different kind of silence. Nouwen writes:

[S]ilence is above all a quality of the heart that can stay with us even in our conversation with others. It is a portable [monk's] cell that we carry with us wherever we go. From it we speak to those in need and to it we return after our words have borne fruit. . . . Words are the instrument of the present world, but silence is the mystery of the future world." (59-60)

I want to pursue that deeper, more mysterious and future-oriented silence in my life, that the words I say will bring with them the fragrance of the future world as a comfort to people struggling in this one.

*The Way of the Heart* is a short book and a quick read. I enjoyed the genuine, compassionate tone, and the lessons from the Desert Fathers are always welcome and needed.

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### **Keith says**

An excellent introduction into the meaning and purpose of ancient desert monasticism and the practice of solitude, silence and contemplative prayer.

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### **Chris says**

I've had this book on my shelf for quite awhile but had not gotten around to reading it. A couple of weekends ago I was scheduled to take a "personal retreat" which I try to do 3 or 4 times per year. As I perused my two shelves worth of Christian spirituality, formation, etc...the title caught my eye so I stuffed it in my bag with 2 or 3 other books for the weekend.

It only took a few pages to realize Nouwen was going to nail me. He identifies greed and anger as two critical sins which tend to plague people in ministry (professional/vocational/pastoral ministry). Basically, we are all faced with the decision to live out our false identity as we're victimized by the world's compulsions or to discover our true selves...and live/lean into our identity in Christ.

In the same way which the ascetic 3rd and 4th century desert fathers utilized solitude, silence, and prayer we must learn to incorporate these spiritual disciplines in our own contemporary culture and context of ministry. So not only was I challenged to be honest about some of the struggles in my heart, I was given some great tools by Nouwen to pursue a more contemplative life of prayer.

As I was headed out that weekend, someone commented "Oh, I could never do that" referring to my plan to spend a couple of days in complete solitude. Thankfully, we don't actually have to experience physical solitude in order to carve out time and space with God or learn the lessons Nouwen presents. But for many of us, the occasional ascetic experience of some sort of deprivation disrupts our system and routine just enough to realign our hearts and minds with Father, Son, & Spirit.

If greed (materialism, coveting, money, etc) or anger (frustration, resentment, disillusionment, etc) are becoming part of your default posture I would recommend you spend some time with this text. Or if you're looking for a good read during a spiritual retreat of some sort, "The Way of the Heart" could be a great

addition to your reading agenda.

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## LaRae says

This little book packs a powerful punch as Nouwen discusses the disciplines of solitude, silence, and prayer.

Solitude and silence are difficult to achieve in this world where we are continually bombarded by words, images, and noise in general. The book has given me much to ponder from its few pages, and the following quote sums its point up nicely:

"Solitude and silence can never be separated from the call to unceasing prayer. If solitude were primarily an escape from a busy job, and silence primarily an escape from a noisy milieu, they could easily become very self-centered forms of asceticism. But solitude and silence are for prayer. The Desert Fathers did not think of solitude as being alone, but as being alone with God. They did not think of silence as not speaking, but as listening to God. Solitude and silence are the context within which prayer is practiced."

He goes on to say, "Prayer is standing in the presence of God with the mind in the heart; that is, at the point of our being where there are no divisions or distinctions and where we are totally one."

And then, "We have to realize that here the word heart is used in its full biblical meaning. In our milieu the word heart has become a soft word. It refers to the seat of the sentimental life. Expressions such as "heartbroken" and "heartfelt" show that we often think of the heart as the warm place where the emotions are located in contrast to the cool intellect where our thoughts find their home. But the word heart in the Jewish-Christian tradition refers to the source of all physical, emotional, intellectual, volitional, and moral energies."

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## Sarah M. Adly says

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## Nadine says

anything about the desert fathers & early christian ascetic practices is a must read. this is a topic that needs to be known more in Christianity, especially the West.

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## **Jeff Lochhead says**

Finding solitude and silence is a struggle, one which never seems to be adequate. I could use constant reminders at this point to practice praying without ceasing. All good and worthy ideas, but I feel a bit stymied by total inadequacy.

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## **Stan says**

Nouwen examined what the Desert Fathers and Mothers have to say to ministers in our time. He sought to answer the question: "What is required of a man or a woman who is called to enter fully into the turmoil and agony of the times and speak a word of hope? (2)." In the teachings of the desert fathers and mothers, Nouwen discovered the wisdom to be attained through the spiritual practices of solitude, silence, and prayer. In solitude, focused time with God alone and no distractions, we come face-to-face with our own nothingness which forces us to surrender ourselves totally and unconditionally to Christ alone. This solitude is vital because, "ministry can be fruitful only if it grows out of a direct and intimate encounter with our Lord (21)." Solitude breeds compassion for others. "Silence completes and intensifies solitude (35)." In silence, we learn to speak only words that have true value. Silence breeds an ever-growing charity from which we minister to others. "Solitude and silence can never be separated from the call to unceasing prayer (63)." Nouwen distinguishes between the prayer of the mind and the prayer of the heart. "The crisis of our prayer life is that our mind may be filled with ideas of God while our heart remains far from him. Real prayer comes from the heart (71)." The prayer of the heart breeds unconditional surrender to the mercy of God. This develops Christ-likeness. One "should strive to let his prayer remodel the whole of his person (75)." Nouwen was a Roman Catholic priest, professor, writer, and theologian. The Way of the Heart is almost uncanny in that Roman Catholicism is not obvious. There is no Mariology and no mention of the Sacraments. Rather, the work points to Christ and to Scripture. Thereby, it is suitable for all Christians. Nouwen focuses on spirituality for ministers because, "The discipline of leading all our people with their struggles into the gentle and humble heart of God is the discipline of prayer as well as the discipline of ministry (87)."

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## **Joshua Ray says**

Good insights but mostly a collection of stories about the desert fathers. Solitude, silence, and prayer are indeed important. But more emphasis on Scripture (especially Christ's example in this) would have drastically improved this short volume.

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## **Jason Kanz says**

Flee, be silent, pray always, for these are the sources of sinlessness.-Abba Arsenius

The Way of the Heart: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers (1981) by Henri Nouwen is a short book with deep impact. At just 96 short pages, Nouwen provides much to think about. In essence, Nouwen examined the importance of solitude, silence, and prayer through the lenses of the desert fathers, Christians



who lived in the Egyptian desert during the 4th and 5th centuries.

**Flee--**In the first section, where Nouwen addressed the importance of solitude, he began by telling of St. Anthony who apparently lived in complete solitude in the desert for 20 years. Nouwen uses Anthony's experience as a call to solitude for the modern Christian. He contends that solitude is a direct key to developing compassion.

**Be silent--**Silence often goes hand in hand with solitude. Living in the 21st century, we are bombarded with noise, and sounds, and words. In our loquaciousness, words have been drained of their power. The person who practices silence guards his tongue and also learns to speak with meaning. Nouwen writes, "It is a good discipline in each new situation if people wouldn't be better served by our silence than by our words" (p. 65).

**Pray always--**In the final section, Nouwen addresses the pray of the heart, which he differentiates from prayers of the mind that dominate many of our prayer lives. Learning to enter the presence of God, to pray with our whole lives, flows from solitude and silence.

On the whole, I liked this book. I think there is a lot of wisdom to glean from this book. However, though I agree that there is much benefit to the practice of solitude, I do not believe that living in complete isolation, such as St. Anthony did for decades, is as God intended. We were created to relate, so seeking long term isolation seems contrary to God's Word. With that modest caution, reading this book is definitely worthwhile.

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### **Elizabeth S. Matheson says**

Everything I fear about silence and solitude, Nouwen explains thoroughly and beautifully so as to cast out all fear and inspire a deeper prayer life. He gives specific guidance and speaks to the mistakes I make when trying to pray and maintain a consistent and effective prayer life. Would recommend to anyone seeking to grow in relationship with God while living in the world and seeking to serve Christ's body while feeling that one can't find a great way to create space for God in a hectic life.

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### **Gregory says**

The best book for blogging.  
from *Stuff Christians Like* by Prodigal Jon

Sometimes people ask me for tips about blogging. I don't feel particularly qualified to answer that question even though I do blog a lot. What I can tell you though is the name of the best book ever written about blogging:

"The Way of the Heart" by Henri Nouwen.

Here are three things I can tell you about this book:

1. It is only 84 pages long.
2. It only costs \$9.31 on Amazon so it's super cheap.
3. I underlined almost every line on every page.

The challenge with a blog is that it tends to make your life loud. It's easy to put this blog filter on everything you do or experience and I sometimes catch myself with this running, babbling conversation in my head, "Should this go on the blog? Maybe this should? Should it? Is this blog worthy?" You might not experience that but this book's focus on seeking solitude with Christ really challenges me to put Him first and not my blog.

If you're going to start a blog. Get this book. If you want to grow a blog, get this book. Bottom line, I heart this book.

p.s. It was written in 1981 so it doesn't use the word "blog" in it at all but that's what books written before their time do. Twenty eight years later this book rocks a medium that didn't even exist when it was published.

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