



SOUL CARE

CHRISTIAN COUNSELING • SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

On entering loneliness [or any pain] - Henri Nouwen

"I decided to make a life in the US, and I experienced pain and felt a deep absence of friendship, but then I started to slowly realize that maybe the experience of loneliness and the experience of separation might not be a negative thing. It might, I thought, bring me more in touch with other people's experience of loneliness. If I would not run away from it, but feel it through all the way, it might become fruitful.

Then suddenly I had this idea that loneliness, which is pain, when you do not run away from it but feel it through and stand up in it and look it right in the face, that there is something there that can be a source of hope, in the middle of the pain there is some hidden gift. I, more and more in my life, have discovered that the gifts of life are often hidden in the places that hurt the most. I am saying that you can stand the pain. I think one of the great challenges of life is to dare to stand in your pain, and to trust that there is something beyond that which is safe. What begins to happen is something like the experience that there is safety beyond the pain, that if you enter into it, it's not so frightening as you thought it was, and that underneath your loneliness, there is an experience of being held safe...

I know it for myself so much that if I experience loneliness or anguish, I distract myself. I go do something so that I don't feel it. But it is always a disappointment, and I am more lonely; I am more anguished. Then I discovered that if I just stay with it, and live with it to the fullest. Not just accept it, but taste it, chew on it. I would nearly say to myself "I am lonely, yes, and let me feel it."

I've discovered that there's much more strength in me than I realized and, in a way, the strength is not coming from me, but it is coming indeed from someone who holds me, who loved me long before I came into life, from someone who will love me long after I have died. It is not an intellectual thing. Jesus for me is the center of it. Jesus for me is the one who helps me discover that God had loved me before I even was born, and will still love me after I die. The love of God is a love that is there before and after any other human being has touched me. The mystery of knowing Jesus is the mystery of knowing God who embraces me much in a wider and deeper way, more than any human being can do.

It sounds quite theoretical, but I have only discovered this gradually in life through much of my own pain, and through much of my own disappointment, and through much of my own running away to other places."

Henri Nouwen quoted in *Nouwen Then* by Christopher de Vinck