

In the grip of grace. Henri Nouwen's perspectives on the unitive stage of the mystical path

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Abstract

This article will consider the unitive stage in the mystical path Henri Nouwen lived and wrote about. It will begin by characterising the mystical way, together with its journey motif. Then, it will place Nouwen's spirituality within the context of his life and writing, and finally, it will outline three events which led Nouwen to describe the unitive stage of the mystical journey, tentatively. The first "mystical moment" emerges from Nouwen's contemplation of the divine/human embrace in Rembrandt's painting, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. The second occurs because of his reflection on the spiritual significance of attending to the practical needs of a severely disabled man, and the third from his contemplation on a flying trapeze performance at a circus. The article proposes that these encounters were mystical, came as a result of Nouwen's contemplative practice, and shaped Nouwen's perception of the unitive stage in his mystical journey.

Keywords

Henri Nouwen; mysticism; mystical experience; spirituality; unitive stage

1. Introduction

In the twenty-five years since Henri Nouwen's death, many have documented his life in biographical articles and books. Most have done so with a special interest in his spiritual journey. There have been books and articles collating his unpublished lecture notes and some authors have attempted to write about the subjects Nouwen was still planning to write about. Increasingly, writers have focussed on his spirituality, showcasing the important themes in his writing, and thought. The theme of "imperfection" is a favourite and his characteristic struggles with loneliness and restlessness are referenced.

A phrase Nouwen coined, “the Wounded healer”, is often explored.¹ There have even been a few considerations of whether Nouwen could be considered a mystic in the same way as St. Teresa of Avila or St. John of the Cross were.² His contributions to the academic study of pastoral theology and pastoral psychology have also been considered.³

In the context of all this literary attention, this article has something to offer. It seeks to consider the unitive stage in the mystical path Nouwen lived and wrote about. This article will outline this after briefly characterising the mystical way together with its journey motif. Then, it will place Nouwen’s spirituality within the context of his life and writing and finally, it will outline three events which led Nouwen to describe the unitive stage of the mystical journey, tentatively. The events, gleaned from his writing during the L’Arche years, are the embrace portrayed in Rembrandt’s *The return of the Prodigal Son*, Nouwen’s contemplation on attending to the primal body-needs of a disabled man (Adam Arnett), and his contemplation on the spectacular performance of the flying trapeze act, the *Flying Rodleights*.

Nouwen believed that his vocation was to articulate and describe his mystical journey as best he could to whatever audience he was fortunate enough to receive:⁴ students in a Divinity School, groups of people he was invited to address, or the readers of his books. This was his life’s work, and to accomplish it, he searched, read, contemplated, and prayed. The fruit of his labour is displayed in many books, lecture notes, video recordings, and in his friends’ perceptions of him. The ultimate goal of the journey, as Nouwen well knew, would be realised in his death. Perhaps then he

1 See Nolte & Dreyer (2010) and Van der Merwe (2016) for South African examples of this. Michael Ford alludes to the importance of this theme by naming his first Nouwen biography *Wounded Prophet* (1999).

2 See Ford (1999:208–214); (2018:113,134,140 & 168); Strohmeyer (2001:241–244); Van der Merwe (2015:75).

3 See the article of Dreyer (2003) and Nolte & Dreyer (2010) which relate specifically to Nouwen’s contributions to redefining the study of pastoral theology.

4 “I am grateful as well for the new place that has been opened up for me through all the inner pain. I have a new vocation now. It is the vocation to speak and write from that place back into the many places of my own and other people’s restless lives. I have to kneel before the Father, put my ear against his chest and listen, without interruption, to the heartbeat of God. Then, and only then, can I say carefully and very gently what I hear” (Nouwen 1992b:15).

experienced the eternal loving embrace for which he searched, and which would answer his deepest longing and restlessness?

2. The mystical way

A mystic is one who lives with a keen perception⁵ of the Divine⁶ and who may have experienced or continues to experience mystical encounters of the Divine. These mystical encounters are transformative of the mystic's worldview and practice. Experience⁷ is a key feature of this definition and a category about which my own Reformed theological background is dubious. The mystic “experiences” (or is conscious of) “first-hand” the presence of God and therefore, their faith (or spirituality) does not rely on book knowledge or mechanical ritualistic practices (Rohr 2009:29), but on real-life experiences of the Divine.⁸ Underhill explains that this “experience” may come not only in grand visions or states of consciousness but also in simpler, more modest experiences – as in prayer, in which the mystic “feels” the presence of God (1912:10).⁹ Richard Rohr labels this “experience” as “third eye” (not the two physical eyes) type of seeing:

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- 5 For a contemporary discussion of this definition see “The Practice of Paying Attention. Reverence” in Brown Taylor (2009:17–34).
 - 6 Evelyn Underhill defined mysticism as “the direct intuition or experience of God” and went on to describe a mystic as “a person who has, to a greater or less degree, such a direct experience – one whose religion and life are centred, not merely on an accepted belief or practice, but on that which he regards as first-hand personal knowledge” (1921:9–10).
 - 7 Bernard McGinn cautions that “the word *consciousness* is preferred to *experience* ... the term *experience*, although it seems so clear and obvious, is actually a highly complex notion when one begins to analyse it” (2006:xv).
 - 8 “The Christian mystic therefore is one for whom God and Christ are not merely objects of belief, but living facts experimentally known at first-hand; and mysticism for him becomes, in so far as he responds to its demands, a life based on this conscious communion with God” (Underhill 1921:10).
 - 9 For Ursula King, the “feeling” is better described as an “awareness” of “the powerful presence of the divine Spirit” and the mystic therefore “experiences to an extraordinary degree the profoundly personal encounter with the energy of divine life.” (2001:3). McGinn puts it this way: “mysticism (as the mystics have insisted) is more than a matter of unusual sensations, but essentially comprises new ways of knowing and loving based on states of awareness in which God becomes present in our inner acts, not as an object to be grasped, but as the direct and transforming centre of life” (2006:xvi).

I like to call it presence. It is experienced as a moment of deep inner connection, and it always pulls you, intensely satisfied, into the naked and undefended now, which can involve both profound joy and profound sadness. At that point, you either want to write poetry, pray, or be utterly silent (2009:28).

When the mystic “sees” God, this new consciousness transforms¹⁰ the mystic who then seeks to share this knowledge with others (Underhill 1921:12–13). In his own characteristically modest way, Nouwen defines a mystic as “a person whose identity is deeply rooted in God’s first love” (1989:28).

McGinn wrote that the vocation of the mystic is to call readers and hearers to “imagine” and “explore” the inner transformation of the self, grounded in a new understanding of how human beings relate to God (2006:xiii). This exploration is a process or a journey but must not be confused with the end point, or mystical union¹¹ (2006:xiv) which is but a stage in this journey. There is a seeking, perhaps even a restless seeking, that characterises the mystical path. In his phenomenological consideration of mystical experience, Waaijman proposed that mystical experience leaves a permanent and indelible trace of itself in the mystic (2003:57). He identifies ten characteristics of mystical experience including prayerful longing (*biddend verlangen*), ecstasy (*extase*), contemplation (*schouwen*) and union (*vereniging*) (2003:60–68). These characteristics are helpful since one can discern some of them in Nouwen’s own spiritual journey. King suggests that the seeking is a quest for “participation in the divine life” (King 2001:4) and ultimately union with God¹². The search is fuelled by God’s own love which lures the mystic closer by guiding her/him through a journey which is difficult and self-revealing. The journey inevitably confronts the mystic with their own false self and the artificial, life-denying practices of the

10 “Some call this movement *conversion*, some call it *enlightenment*, some *transformation*, and some *holiness*” (Rohr 2006:30).

11 “(T)he notion of *presence* provides a more inclusive and supple term than *union* for encompassing the variety of ways that mystics have expressed how God comes to transform their minds and lives” (McGinn 2006:xv).

12 For a fuller discussion of Mystical union in the historical tradition and especially the role of love and knowledge in proceeding towards Mystical union see McGinn (1987).

world. This mission and its destination are points of connection between Nouwen and the great mystical tradition.¹³

While there is no uniformity in descriptions of the mystical path, one can discern at least three stages in the writings of many of the mystics. These stages are neither necessarily linear nor sequential. They can appear in any order and even as part of a longer series of stages.¹⁴ Notwithstanding, King describes an early “stage” of the journey as the *purgative stage*,¹⁵ “the way of purification, understood as detachment, renunciation and asceticism, to move away from the world of the senses and ego to the higher, eternally abiding reality of God.” (2001:19–20). She writes about an intermediate stage as the *illuminative stage*, in which “the mystic draws nearer to divine unity, reaching the heights of loving contemplation” (2001:20) and, finally, the mystic may experience a *unitive stage*, and it is here that the mystic enters loving union with God, which may include “an ecstatic experience of overwhelming joy” (2001:20).¹⁶ While much has been written about Nouwen’s spiritual journey,¹⁷ this article will not survey or critically consider any but the unitive stage.

There is evidence in Nouwen’s writing that he perceived a “unitive stage” in his spiritual journey on at least three occasions. Each of these involved him

13 “The unending quest for loving union and communion with God runs like a golden thread throughout the Christian centuries.” “Mystic experience lies at the very depth of human consciousness” (King 2001:5).

14 In Waaijman’s “Mystieke ervaring en mystieke weg”, the Unitive stage of the mystical way is one of ten ‘characteristics’ of mystical experience, and he does not even place it last. Instead, he places it sixth, followed by contemplation (Schouwen), Divine indwelling (Inwoning van God), Mutuality (Wederkerigheid) and Lasting effect (Doorwerking) (2003:64–68).

15 McGinn (2006:365) describes the ‘dark night of the Spirit’ in Teresa of Avila (her Purgative stage) as: “a mystery that induces both awe that attracts, as well as fear and trembling ... This basic religious attitude is heightened in many mystical accounts exploring the fear and distress that the overwhelming majesty of God brings to those humans who draw near to Him.”

16 In the writings of Teresa of Avila, in the Seventh Mansion, the innermost chamber has been reached, the centre in which God makes God’s permanent home. God invites the person into this mansion (Boyce 1984:59).

17 Perhaps the plural, “journeys”, would be a better description since Nouwen made several attempts to describe his spiritual journey. See Hernandez (2006) and the collections by Durback (published as (Nouwen 1989)) and Christensen and Laird (published as (Nouwen 2010)) are essentially descriptions of Nouwen’s spiritual journey.

engaging in the spiritual practice of contemplation:¹⁸ first on a painting, then, on his intimate practical care of another human being, and, finally, on the performance of a flying trapeze act at the circus. Each of these will be considered in this article.

3. Contemplation on *The Return of the Prodigal Son* as gateway to the Unitive stage

In a lecture given to the Colledgeville Institute in 2012, Sue Mosteller told a story about visiting an Art Gallery with Henri Nouwen in Ottawa, Canada. Upon entering the art gallery, Nouwen said that there was a painting he wanted to see. They found the painting and sat on a bench in the middle of the room, opposite the painting. Nouwen was quiet and focussed on the painting (by van Gogh), hanging on the opposite wall. He gazed at the painting for a long time, maybe fifteen or twenty minutes. Mosteller was surprised and confused, thinking that they might have discussed the painting, and so she asked him, “What are you doing? Explain it to me. What do you see?” Nouwen looked at her and replied: “Are you in the picture?” Mosteller replied: “No”. Nouwen then said: “Step into the picture and walk around, then you will begin to see” (Mosteller 2012 video clip).¹⁹

This was Nouwen’s methodology, a kind of visual contemplation.²⁰ He treated a painting like an icon: a visible object, created to offer access to the mystery of the invisible (1987:14). This was how he approached Rembrandt

18 “Contemplation” is one of the basic words in the field of spirituality, indicating spirituality’s more inward area. Mostly identified with mysticism in modern times, contemplation is a rich and multifaceted phenomenon” (Waaajman 2020:336).

19 Michael Ford makes a similar observation about Nouwen’s method referring to the Isenheim Altarpiece near Colmar, France, where a series of panels were painted for victims of the plague between 1513 and 1515: “By entering into the picture, then, Henri received something of a mystical insight into the fulfilment of his vocation. He entered the mind, not only of the painter, but also the patients who would have originally reflected on the panels and understood that God was with them in their trials” (2018: Kindle location 141).

20 Nouwen, responding to a question of Michael Ford about his method, said: “I think indeed a painting allows me to project a lot of things there, to come in touch with things in myself. I am not suggesting that Rembrandt expected anybody to use the painting the way I did. But I have that wonderful freedom to look at a painting and let the painting become an icon that brings me in touch with my deepest self” (2018: Kindle location 142–143).

van Rijn's *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. He stepped into the painting and walked around in it, expecting God to use the painting to communicate truth to him.

4. An experience of prayerful longing which led toward the unitive stage

While Nouwen's first encounter with Rembrandt's painting took place in the Autumn of 1983, it took nine years before his book was published. His experience of prayerful longing²¹ was nonetheless immediate:

As we spoke, my eyes fell on a large poster pinned on her door. I saw a man in a great red cloak tenderly touching the shoulders of a dishevelled boy kneeling before him. I could not take my eyes away. I felt drawn by the intimacy between the two figures, the warm red of the man's cloak, the golden yellow of the boy's tunic, and the mysterious light engulfing them both. But, most of all, it was the hands – the old man's hands – as they touched the boy's shoulders that reached me in a place where I had never been reached before (Nouwen 1992b:4).

The sixteenth century painting, the original of which is displayed at the Hermitage in Saint Petersburg in Russia, became the focus of Nouwen's study and contemplation for the next few years.

4.1. Nouwen invites his readers into the mystical way

Nouwen was captivated by this painting, especially by the embrace between the two characters on the left.²² The initial encounter with the

21 Waaijman describes prayerful longing as a characteristic of mystical experience. Referencing Guigo the Carthusian, he describes the reciprocal process as follows: "Als de genadige keerzijde van dit bidden tekent de mystieke ervaring zich af: 'De Heer nu, wiens ogen de gerechtigten zien en wiens oren niet slechts naar hun bidden, maar in hun bidden hoort, wacht niet tot de aanspraak ten einde is, maar, terwijl Hij het bidden midden in zijn loop onderbreekt, begeeft Hij zich haastig naar bidden en komt haastig de verlangende ziel tegemoet'" (2003:60).

22 "I was stunned by its majestic beauty. Its size, larger than life; its abundant reds, browns, and yellows; its shadowy recesses and bright foreground, but most of all the light-enveloped embrace of father and son surrounded by four mysterious bystanders, all of this gripped me with an intensity far beyond anticipation" (Nouwen 1992b:7).

painting precipitated a detailed study and an in-depth contemplation (O’Laughlin 2004:144) but also motivated Nouwen to invite his readers into the contemplation and the mystical experience. Nouwen researched the painting and its Dutch artist. He wanted to know all he could about its background and the life story of the celebrated artist. He researched the parable in Luke 15. Most importantly, Nouwen sought an opportunity to contemplate, to gaze, on the painting. He was able to do this in July 1986 when he spent several hours over a few days in front of the painting in the Hermitage (Nouwen 1996b:7–10).

In his book, *The return of the Prodigal Son*, Nouwen documents his contemplative exegesis of the painting,²³ using the biblical parable as a secondary source. He “walked around the painting”, trying on the characters one by one: first, the bystanders; then, the younger son; then, the older son and finally, the father. As Nouwen “tried on” each character, spiritual truth emerged. Each character revealed something of the spiritual path Nouwen had and would still need to walk before he could allow himself to be taken into the embrace. Nouwen became aware of the places of connection between his own life and the younger son. The process called for extreme honesty and vulnerability. Then, he saw himself in the life and character of the elder son. More layers were added as Nouwen told Rembrandt’s story through the lens of each character before inviting his readers to “try on the characters” for themselves. Beumer commented on Nouwen’s hermeneutical method, calling it “meditative Bible Reading”, and remarking that, “it is very characteristic of writers inclined toward mysticism” (1997:156). Nouwen encouraged his readers to find the spiritual points of connection between the characters and their own stories. Finally, Jesus was presented as the fulfilment (true example) of each of the main characters. Nouwen himself had explained his hermeneutical method: “The purpose of spiritual reading, however, is not to master knowledge or information, but to let God’s Spirit master us. Strange as it may sound, spiritual reading means to let ourselves be read by God!” (Nouwen 1994:72).²⁴

23 “In his study of this beautiful painting, Henri’s meditative approach to theology and his own particular kind of artistic and spiritual seeing are exemplified most clearly” (O’Laughlin 2004:144).

24 For other examples of similar hermeneutical methods, see Peterson (1987; 1988) or Schneiders (1999).

4.2. The mystical embrace is the unitive stage

In the “centre” of the painting, the embrace beckoned²⁵ but, while it held what Nouwen had always longed for, he could not give himself completely to the Divine leading, despite admitting that he was being led to this place.²⁶ It was only later, after he had left the academy and settled in Daybreak, a community for disabled people in Toronto, Canada, that Nouwen was able to write:

I have been led to an inner place where I had not been before. It is the place within me where God has chosen to dwell. It is the place where I am held safe in the embrace of an all-loving Father who calls me by name and says, “You are my beloved son, on you my favour rests” (1992b:14).

In his interpretation of the embrace, Nouwen described the unitive stage of the spiritual journey.²⁷ He had taken a lifetime to get to this place, and his journey had included much suffering and loneliness. He had to trust in the love of the compassionate father, which he discovered was unconditional, devoid of judgement, and offered equally to both sons. What Nouwen seems to have expected was a parent who required obedience and who he had to try to impress with the achievements of his life. This was not what he found in the mystical embrace. The embrace was a place devoid of comparison, rivalry, and competition. It was a safe space of hospitality and welcome. All he had to do was allow himself to be welcomed, and thereby enter the eternal embrace where he would be healed by the love of God. While this breakthrough was highly significant for Nouwen and elicited a profoundly emotional response, Nouwen struggled to relinquish himself to the experience. The embrace seemed to offer what Nouwen most longed for and what he had been reaching out for all his life and yet he prevaricated.

25 “(H)e envisioned what he most yearned for – a homecoming, an experience of belonging, a moment of safety, an embrace of love” (Ford 2018: Kindle location 142)

26 “I am still not free enough to let myself be held completely in the safe embrace of the Father. In many ways I am still moving toward the centre” (Nouwen 1992b:13).

27 “(B)y “union” is meant that perfect and self-forgetting harmony of the regenerate will with God which makes the full-grown mystic capable of “being to the Eternal Goodness what his own hand is to man.” Whereas in the earlier stages he saw and moved towards the life of Spirit, now he finds himself to be immersed in it, inspired and directed in all his actions by the indwelling love of God” (Underhill 1921:27).

4.3. Humanity as God's Beloved

As Nouwen reflected on the *agapē* love of God encapsulated in the mystical embrace, his thoughts connected with a number of other strands of his spiritual thinking²⁸ that would illuminate the unitive stage. This reflection also highlighted the fact that his understanding of the mystical path was communal and not individualistic. The mystical path was intended for the community of faith, indeed the whole human family, transcending all boundaries such as gender or race.

In 1989, Nouwen published a series of addresses about Christian Leadership in the twenty first century entitled, *In the name of Jesus* showing, two years before the publication of his *Prodigal Son* book, that the core of human identity was “belovedness”. This was God’s ultimate evaluation of humanity. In these addresses, Nouwen focussed on the interaction between Jesus and the devil in the wilderness (Mt 4:1–11) which was preceded by the divine declaration: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” (Mt 3:17b NRSV). Nouwen proposed that the declaration made about Christ was also a declaration about all humanity. In his address, Nouwen sees Christ is led by the Spirit into the wilderness to test if he believed what the Father had publicly said about him, that he is the Beloved (1989b).

Nouwen published another book, *Life of the Beloved*, in the same year as *The return of the Prodigal son*. In this book, Nouwen explained the same spiritual truth to a secular Jewish friend. He used the four actions of the eucharist to explain the ultimate dealings of God with humanity, all the while identifying his friend Fred, and the whole humanity, as God’s Beloved and as such, “blessed” (1992a:55,61). The enormous breadth and depth of the Father’s love was enough to overcome any barrier between humanity and God and invite Nouwen himself, and every person, into the eternal mystical embrace as the “Beloved of God” (O’Laughlin 2004:152).

28 Van der Merwe confirms this conclusion, “During the last ten years of his life “Being the Beloved of God” became a main theme of Henri Nouwen’s spiritual experience and literary output” (2015:63).

4.4. The Father's love beckons toward unity

Nouwen gradually saw that it was in the nature of the Father, whose “grief is so great because his heart is so pure” (1992b:90), to reach out to his children with a touch that healed. It became clear that the mystical way was initiated and led by the gracious Father whose grace was given unconditionally to humanity, and who ultimately transformed Nouwen’s brokenness in the process. The father’s hands blessed, welcomed, held, guided, and protected. In his contemplation on the painting, it became apparent that Rembrandt had painted each hand of the father differently, one looked masculine and the other, feminine. One symbolised the firm and grasping hand of a father and the other, the gentle, caressing hand of a mother (1992:93). This enabled Nouwen to contemplate the masculine and feminine expressions of “belovedness” and see that ultimately gender is encompassed and united in the mystical embrace of a God. Enriched by this insight, the embrace became a source of great healing and transformation, giving Nouwen a taste of the Divine. It was enchanting:

The embrace between father and son signified everything he wanted, both at that moment and in the years ahead. It was an image of homecoming ... Every time he looked at the depicted embrace between father and son, he saw something new. For years he had instructed students on the different aspects of the spiritual life, trying to help them see the importance of living it. But had he himself really ever dared to step into the centre, kneel down, and let himself be held by a forgiving God? (1999:173).

4.5. Nouwen’s longing is intensified as he approaches the unitive stage

Nouwen’s response to this embrace in Rembrandt’s painting was so intense and he responded to it, according to his writing, from such a deep emotional place. Some authors believe that there was something lacking in Nouwen’s psychological development that caused a longing for what he saw. Several of his biographers record that as a small child, he constantly reached out²⁹ of his crib, wanting to be held. Some of his first words to his parents

29 “Chris Glasser told me, “I don’t believe that it’s a coincidence that one of his own personal favourites among his books on the spiritual life was the one titled *Reaching*

were: “Do you really love me?” (Ford 1999:72; 2018: Kindle location 18; O’Laughlin 2004:82). His need for affection, affirmation and reassurance seemed boundless. Ford believes that this need for affirmation could be explained by John Bowlby’s attachment theory (2018: Kindle location 21) while O’Laughlin suggests that Nouwen must have been a hypersensitive ENFP on the Myers Briggs scale (2004:83). The perception that Nouwen was needy and insecure was common to many of his friends. This may have been a characteristic Nouwen shared with many of the ancient mystics.³⁰

Nouwen suffered an emotional “breakdown” in 1987, after his friendship with Nathan Ball, a friend and fellow L’Arche colleague, ran aground. Nouwen had become emotionally dependent on Ball, expecting him to meet many deep-seated needs he had always had. The relational breakdown brought Nouwen face to face with his repressed homosexuality and lifelong craving for love and affection. The consequence was an extended period of depression and psychological breakdown during which time he received many forms of therapy. Interestingly, one form Nouwen received during this time involved being held physically in a nonsexual way for long periods of time. “The sessions took place fully clothed on a bed for comfort’s sake, but in the context of an office. There, in the arms of this male therapist, in a primal state, he could be held very tightly and weep, scream, writhe, and be caressed, all the things a parent does when holding an infant or small child.” (Ford 1999:169–170; 2018: Kindle location 98). The break down and physical therapy may have shaped Nouwen’s perception of the mystical embrace.³¹

Out. Reaching out is what Henri did as a toddler and as an adult” (Ford 2018: Kindle location 20).

- 30 “If you look at the lives of some of the great mystics, they had that same kind of intense, erotic need which was not met anywhere, was sublimated, and was part of their search for God” (Ford 2018: Kindle location 55).
- 31 LaNoüe responded to this critique: “It is logical to think that being the beloved was an important theme for Nouwen because he longed to be beloved to someone, but such psychoanalysis, as accurate as it may or may not be, does not negate the truth of the concept that God created human beings to live in relationship with him who is the perfect and loving father” (2000:108).

4.6. Transformation in the embrace

Waaïjman described the effect of unity with God in terms of the mystic becoming part of God's working and sharing in God's unity as God takes over all control. The separation between object and subject is transcended in the mystic as she/he is incorporated into God's singularity, transcending the dichotomy subject-object (2003:64–65).

Contemplating the painting put Nouwen in touch with his deepest self and became an invitation for him to become something new³² (1999:173). Nouwen experienced the unitive stage as transformative. It left him changed, bolder, more intent to communicate spiritual truth without concern about how his words may be received. From this point on, readers noticed a change in Nouwen's writing style. He became more directed at describing the mystical path in emotional and embodied terms. "It was Sister Sue Mosteller who told him, 'Whether you are the younger son or the elder son, you have to realize that you are called to become the father'" (Ford 1999:173).

The transformation Nouwen experienced brought clarity about his "new vocation". This was, after all, his role as Pastor of L'Arche Daybreak and, he saw that his ultimate life's work was to express, in his writing, the readiness to welcome home the lost children of God. This welcome could only happen when as the father, he could love in a manner that expected nothing in return. The task would not be easy. There was no power, popularity or influence to be gained as a reward. He would need to cultivate the "discipline of being at home", a discipline for which he was not well suited (1992b:128–129). L'Arche provided a fitting space for Nouwen to practice his calling. Residents of this community did not interact on an artificial or abstract level. They were not impressed or intimidated by his achievements. Here he could be "the father", a designation his ordination had given him years before. Here, Nouwen was able to repeatedly welcome God's lost children by sharing God's non-demanding love. He could experience the mystical embrace from the other side, exchanging his position of being blessed for the place of "doing the blessing" within the immensity of God's love. This reorientation of Nouwen's vocation, as a result of the unitive embrace, was

32 "The painting became the summary of my whole life but also a call for me to become something new" (Nouwen quoted in Ford (2018: Kindle location 142)).

evidence of the indelible trace (*onuitwisbaar spoor*) of mystical experience that is evident in the life of the mystic (Waaijman 2003:57).

Another example of Nouwen's perception of the Unitive stage can be analysed by looking closely at his contemplation on the act of caring for a disabled man, Adam Arnett.

5. Helping Adam: An embodied embrace

In 1986, Nouwen, now resident at the Daybreak L'Arche community in Toronto, Canada, was given the responsibility of looking after part of the daily routine of a profoundly disabled man, Adam Arnett. When one reads the story of Nouwen and Adam, what is striking is that their interaction was so practical, so tangible and physical. What Nouwen had to do for Adam was basic: wash and shave him, brush his teeth and comb his hair, dress and feed him. Nouwen had to make a significant transition here, between the world of the academy, which was based on words and knowledge, to the L'Arche world which was based on the human body.³³

O'Laughlin wondered whether "(b)y bathing and caring for Adam, by holding him in his arms and feeding him, Henri experienced some of the physical intimacy he had craved all his life. He did something essential and physical that involved the body of another person." (2004:159) Finding spiritual meaning in such a simple practice is reminiscent of the form of contemplation exemplified by Brother Lawrence in his *The practice of the presence of God*.³⁴

5.1. Adam becomes a spiritual guide

As much as Nouwen was assisting Adam with the practical tasks Adam could not do for himself, Adam was also becoming a spiritual guide to him, leading him toward the unitive embrace. This was where the interaction

33 See Nouwen's remarks on this transition in his article, "To meet the Body is to meet the Word" (*Nouwen 1987:3–7*): "At L'Arche the body is the place where the Word is met. It is in relationship to the wounded body of the handicapped person that I must learn to discover God. Not until after I have helped put the handicapped person to bed am I free to study or write."

34 Waaijman relates that Lawrence "distanced himself from the mainstream sophisticated spirituality and dedicated himself totally to God in a simple act of presence." (2020:450). Thus, Waaijman identifies this dimension as "Contemplation in presence" (2020:450).

became mystical.³⁵ From Adam, Nouwen learned the meaning of spiritual poverty and that God’s love could not possibly be dependent on how the object of that love (Adam or Nouwen) could reciprocate. Nouwen saw parallels between the life of Christ and Adam’s life (1997:3,4). Adam’s handicap and epileptic seizures caused him to have a “hidden life”. Jesus was also incarnated into weakness and Nouwen believed Adam’s hidden life was an unseen preparation for the opportunity he would later have to minister to people. Adam’s vulnerability had great spiritual significance; through it he was a witness to God’s love. While his limitedness and suffering were real, Adam became an instrument of God’s grace. He had an inner light that was radiant. In a similar way to Jesus, Adam’s “belovedness” or “likeness to God” would only be acknowledged by those who were willing to receive him as one sent by God (Nouwen 1997:31).

After overcoming his initial frustration³⁶ about nursing Adam, Nouwen and Adam became friends. At first Nouwen talked to Adam about ordinary things such as what he was doing but slowly, he started learning from Adam. Adam was becoming his teacher, guiding him through the transition from a life built around achievement and popularity to a “homecoming” among people who had no grasp of his fame. Adam’s whole self was communicating with Nouwen and teaching him about the meaning of love.

Adam was not able to reflect on love, on the heart as the centre of our being, the core of our humanity where we give and receive love. He could not talk with me about the movements of his heart or my heart or the heart of God. He could explain nothing to me in words. But his heart was there, totally alive, full of love which he could both give and receive (Nouwen 1997:37).

Nouwen began to experience the caring for Adam as a time of receiving grace from him. Adam’s ministry was about being fully present, offering himself in vulnerability in a kenotic way. His message to those who met

35 “Adam became for me a sacred person, a holy man, an image of the living God” (Nouwen 1997:4). “With Adam I knew a sacred presence and I ‘saw’ the face of God” (1997:41).

36 This frustration came from two sources. First, Nouwen wondered whether he was wasting his time and whether he should not be doing more relevant things like writing or teaching and second, Nouwen was not skilful when it came to manual or practical tasks (See 1997:29–31).

him communicated peace, courage, joy and freedom, so that they felt like God's beloved child³⁷ (1997:52; O'Laughlin 2004:155). Adam helped Nouwen to believe in his own "belovedness".

5.2. Contemplating the encounter

In Nouwen's reflection on the significance of this mystical encounter, he came to appreciate that human beings are all broken and loved in some way. Adam became the living image of Christ (O'Laughlin 2004:155) for Nouwen, his friend, teacher, healer, and guide. Seeing Adam through the lens of Christ, Nouwen understood his life, death, and resurrection as a means of recognizing God's story in the midst of humanity. Caring for Adam also rooted Nouwen in his own physicality, anchoring him in the L'Arche community and gave him a glimpse into God's presence in their life together.³⁸ This was the "home" he had been yearning for, "not just a home with good people but a home in my own body, in the body of my community, in the body of the church, yes, in the body of God" (1997:113).

5.3. The spiritual legacy of Adam's life

Adam Arnett died in February 1996. Nouwen saw his death as leaving his spiritual work undiminished. His death became fruitful in disseminating his message so that it could touch people who had never met him personally but who had heard his story (1997:109) and those who read about him in the books Nouwen wrote.

The book, *Adam. God's Beloved*, was a tender and emotional narrative but also a type of personal confession. Connections between its conclusions and those of *The return of the Prodigal Son* are undeniable. In both, Nouwen perceived himself and every human being as God's beloved (LaNoue

37 In his book, *Adam. God's Beloved*, Nouwen relates that story of a friend called Murray, a businessman, who had to step in to assist Adam one morning at the breakfast table when Nouwen was suddenly called away. Murray experienced transformation through this event. "The day that followed was a truly new day for Murray. He told me later how he went about with a new feeling of being accepted, loved, and appreciated – not just by Adam but by all the people in the New House" (1997:50).

38 "(B)ecause of holding Adam in my arms and touching him in complete purity and complete freedom. Adam gave me a sense of belonging. He rooted me in the truth of my physical being, anchored me in my community, and gave me a deep experience of God's presence in our life together. Without having touched Adam, I don't know where I would be today" (1997:112–113).

2000:105). The embodied interaction between Nouwen and Adam (Ford 2018: Kindle location 64) brought him to the same place as the painting had, the unitive stage of the spiritual journey, where Nouwen was invited into the eternal embrace of Father and Son. It was there that Nouwen could feel at home, unconditionally loved in a manner unrelated to his achievements or obedience. In the embrace he could be loved fully, with all his wounds and restlessness, and even despite (or including) his hidden, suppressed sexuality. Here he could be at home with himself, in the grip of the Divine, and his restlessness could finally find its rest.

The Adam experience was so significant that he wrote, in his Sabbatical year, less than two months before his own death:

But I want to go back to Adam. It is such an important story. I feel I am saying something fresh and original. The vision that the story of Jesus allows me to understand Adam while Adam's story makes me understand Jesus keeps fascinating me. Adam is a sacrament, a sacred place where God spoke to me. Remembering Adam is more than thinking about him and praying for him. It is enabling me to keep close to the Jesus I met in and through him. Adam became real to me because Jesus was real to me, and Jesus became real to me because Adam was real to me. Somewhere, somehow, Adam and Jesus are one (Nouwen 1998:206–207).

The last example of a mystical experience to be explored in this article is Nouwen's perception of the unitive stage in the performance of the Flying Rodleighs.

6. A spectacular ecstatic embrace

In the summer of 1998, I visited Rodleigh and Jennie Stevens at their home in Monte Vista, near Cape Town, South Africa. They were part of a trapeze troupe who had completed their final contract with Circus Barum in Germany. I wanted to hear their impressions about why Nouwen had been so captivated by their performance and why he had interpreted it, in his writing, as a mystical experience. They told me about their numerous meetings with Nouwen and confessed to being themselves mystified by his fascination with their trapeze routine and his linking it with the spiritual

life (Stevens 2001:146,153). We shared a meal and watched the documentary, *Angels over the net*.³⁹ The Rodleights twice gave Nouwen an opportunity to swing on the trapeze bar high over the net and then to hang down, held by strong grip of the catcher. He found it exhilarating and became almost childlike in his delight (Nouwen 1998:195–196; Stevens 2001:149; Ford 2018: Kindle location 152).

6.1. A mystical encounter at the Circus

Nouwen saw the Flying Rodleights act for the first time in April 1991, while attending a show in Freiburg, Germany with his father (Stevens 2001:144; Nouwen 1993a). He was so taken by their performance that he returned to the circus later that week and on several further occasions over the years until the last time in July 1996, just a few weeks before he died (Ford 2018: kindle location 150). He published two articles in the *New Oxford Review*,⁴⁰ offering a simple yet moving account of his observations over several days in May 1992. Nouwen described his first impressions:

Then I was “hooked” by the flying Rodleights and felt nearly driven to see them again and again and enter deeply into their world ...

Then I saw something that opened me to a new inner place ... Then I experienced a personal transformation. (1998:74–75)

It took him a while to unravel what moved him so about the performance, and after a careful study of his published reflections on the subject, it seems he was never able to capture it completely. Nouwen had seen several flying trapeze acts other than the Rodleights but had never experienced such a profound emotional response. In his diary, recorded while visiting the troupe in May 1992, he struggled with this question, but concluded that the Rodleights had been “given” (by God) to him just as the print of Rembrandt’s painting was “given” (1993b). He felt compelled to write about

39 In the short documentary film made by Bart Gavigan, one sees Nouwen being given an opportunity to swing on the trapeze bar and then Jonathon, the catcher, held him by the wrists while he hung high over the net (*Angels over the net* 1995). Nouwen relates the experience in his *Sabbatical Journey* (1998:195–196).

40 See Nouwen (1993a; 1993b).

them, but he could not find the words to explain why he experienced their act as mystical (1993b)⁴¹. On 9 July 1996, Nouwen wrote:

I hadn't expected that I would be so moved seeing the Rodleights again, but I found myself crying as I watched them flying and catching under the big top. As I watched them in the air, I felt some of the same emotion as when I saw them for the first time with my father in 1991. It is hard to describe, but it is the emotion coming from the experience of an enfleshed spirituality. Body and spirit are fully united. The body in its beauty and elegance expresses the spirit of love, friendship, family, and community, and the spirit never leaves the here and now of the body (1998:194–195).

6.2. Trusting the catcher

While Nouwen did not publish his final thoughts on the mystical moment he so clearly responded to in the performance, he developed the spiritual theme of “trusting the catcher” in his book, *Our greatest gift* (Stevens 2001:150). Mosteller sums up the importance of this theme:

Much of Henri's attraction to the trapeze performance had to do with the special relationship between the flyer and the catcher. The daredevil flyer swinging high above the crowd lets go of the trapeze to simply stretch out his arms and wait to feel the strong hands of the catcher pluck him out of the air. “The flyer must never catch the catcher,” Rodleigh had told him. “He must wait in absolute trust.” This relationship spoke to the inner aspirations of Henri's heart and to his yearning to fly in the spiritual life, but only in relationship with and yielding more and more into the loving hands of the Eternal Catcher (in Nouwen 1998:viii–ix).

41 Reading Nouwen's descriptions of what he feels when watching the Rodleights, one cannot help wondering whether this is not the “Extase” Waaijan identifies as one of the ten characteristics of mystical experience. This ecstasy happens when the mystic cannot comprehend the Divine presence when she/he is gripped in the embrace: “allemaal tekenen die erop wijzen dat het menselijk bevattingsvermogen voor het goddelijke ontoereikend is en derhalve door de goddelijke Presentie wordt ontregeld ... Wanneer wij hier over extase spreken, bedoelen wij het uittreden van de men suit zichzelf, gegrepen als deze is door de goddelijke Aanwezigheid” (2003:61–62).

6.3. An “embodied” spirituality

Jurjen Beumer recorded his disappointment: “I was looking forward to his “circus book” with great anticipation. I believe that Nouwen could have helped his readers in an extraordinary way by reflecting on and writing about physicality, a wide-open field, and a very new one for theology ... What can be said about the body from a spiritual point of view?” (1997:168). At the time of Nouwen’s death, embodiment was a relatively unexplored theme.

If one takes the three experiences considered in this article together, all of which took place in the L’Arche years, there are many similarities. All of them involve the body, physicality, touch, and yet all of them elicit a profound emotional response, perhaps a prayerful longing, in Nouwen. He felt compelled to write about each of them. The sales of his books about these experiences testify to a wide sense of connection on the part of his readers with these mystical themes. All three communicate “belovedness” as key to understanding the relationship of God to humanity. All three, as expressions of the unitive stage, stand at the end of a long process of purgation and self-discovery.

7. Conclusion

This article highlighted Henri Nouwen’s attempts to describe the unitive stage of the mystical path, firstly by describing the understandings of this path by Underhill, King and McGinn and by placing Nouwen within this genre. While the article touched on the journey motif and while Nouwen has written much on this, it was outside the article’s purview to survey his entire spiritual journey. Finally, the article considered three experiences, the embrace portrayed in Rembrandt’s *The return of the Prodigal Son*, Nouwen’s contemplation on attending to the physical needs of Adam Arnett, and the performance of the Flying Rodleighs. The article identified points of connection with Kees Waaijman’s ideas about the characteristics of mystical experience. The three mystical experiences mentioned led Nouwen to describe the unitive stage as he perceived it. Ford believed that “Henri’s book *Adam* might have been the closest he came to testifying to the ‘union’ because in it he writes with extraordinary mystical insight” (Ford 2018: Kindle location 163). But it is significant that Nouwen’s project

on the Flying Rodleighs, “who came to represent complete union with God” (Ford 2018: Kindle location 164) was left incomplete at his death. Perhaps this is a helpful reminder that all we might ever say, or write, about the mystical union will inevitably be incomplete?

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