

Foreword by Sue Mosteller, O.S.F.

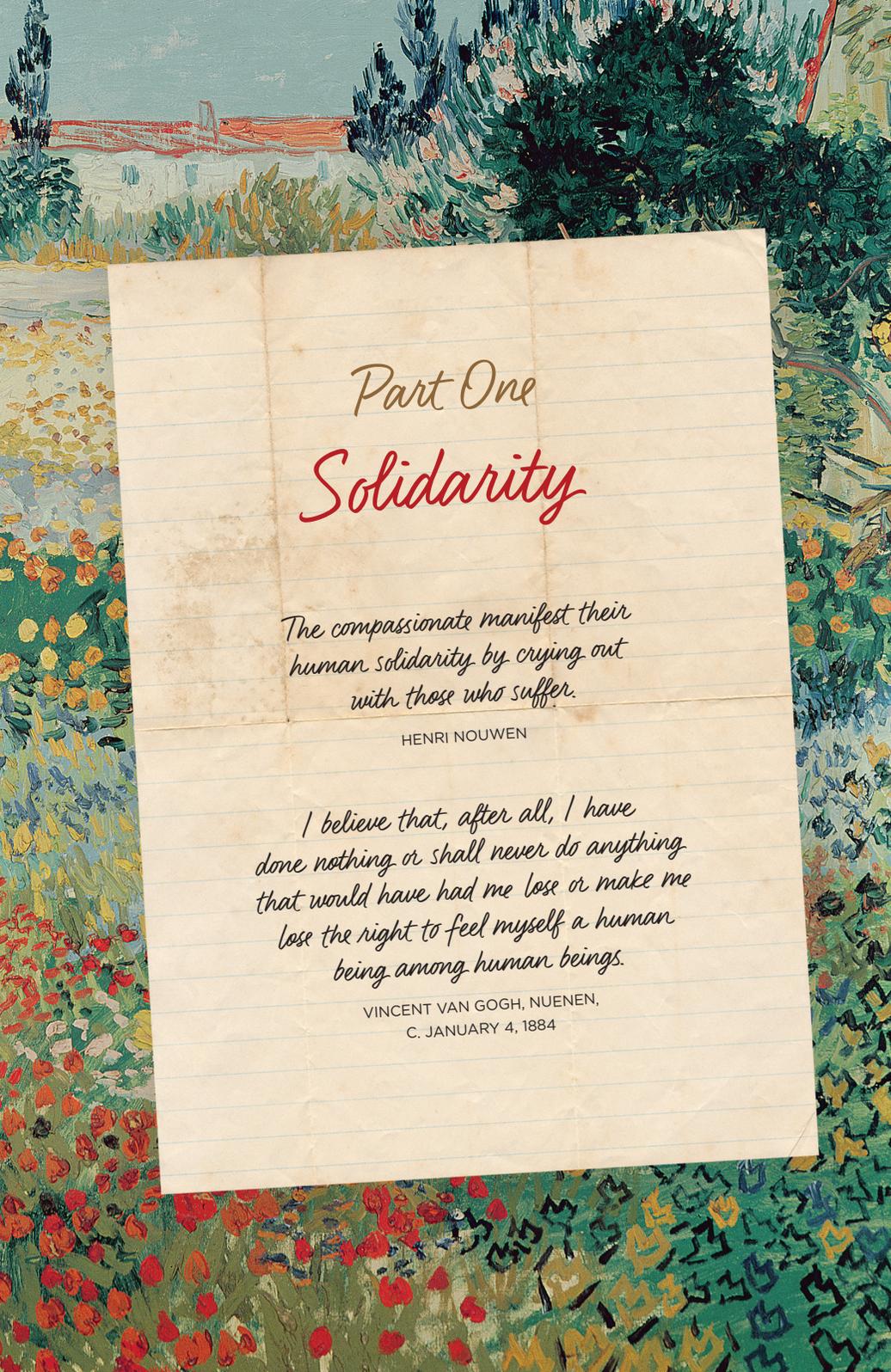
Learning from
Henri Nouwen
&
Vincent van Gogh

A Portrait of the
Compassionate Life

—

Carol A. Berry

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Part One
Solidarity

*The compassionate manifest their
human solidarity by crying out
with those who suffer.*

HENRI NOUWEN

*I believe that, after all, I have
done nothing or shall never do anything
that would have had me lose or make me
lose the right to feel myself a human
being among human beings.*

VINCENT VAN GOGH, NUENEN,
C. JANUARY 4, 1884

Vincent Cries Out with Those Who Suffer



Henri's classes were not so much presented to us as lectures but as opportunities to gain insight into our own selves, our own struggles, through the channel of a life fully revealed through art and letters—through the life of Vincent van Gogh. Henri believed that the intensity of Vincent's struggles as expressed in his letters and paintings could offer a unique case for reflection and discourse. No one had studied Vincent from the perspective of art as ministry. And yet Vincent addressed questions in his letters and through his paintings that are centered on ministry—questions about suffering and death, about immortality, forgiveness, and redemption; questions about poverty, loneliness, and despair, as well as about conscience, compassion, and hope. Vincent strove for a greater understanding of the spiritual dimension in life. He wanted to have a clearer view of how art and religion both had the power to console. And he hoped to reveal how the creative experience can lead to a greater love for creation and each other.

Henri did not expect us to become van Gogh experts but to remain in a receiving mode while contemplating Vincent's life and art. Our receiving mode was to be a truth-searching approach rather than a curiosity approach to Vincent's life. We were invited to see Vincent in such a way that his life and work would be windows through which we could see a glimpse of truth. We were to apply a particular way of knowing: knowledge of the heart. We had to learn Vincent by heart. This, Henri

believed, would allow us to see Vincent in a new light and be less disturbed by his failings and unconventional behavior. With the insights gained from Vincent's life, Henri hoped we could acknowledge our own needs and use our own weaknesses and failings to become more creative and effective communicators, comforters, and healers. As the course progressed, we did become increasingly inspired by Vincent, who made us realize that precisely through understanding our own inadequacies and vulnerabilities we could identify and connect with others.

Henri asked us to read selected letters from the more than nine hundred Vincent had written, most of them to his brother Theo. In these letters we discovered a man who was far different from the image we had previously formed of him. As we read his personal reflections, we were immediately drawn into his expressions of passion and honesty; we were affected by his wisdom and his frailties, and above all, by his longing to love and be loved. Despite his excitable, moody, and complex character, we realized that Vincent had been a man with deep and tender feelings. And we realized this is precisely what Vincent wanted us to understand.

Through over a hundred slides we became familiar with Vincent's early drawings and then were captivated by the vitality of his brush strokes and vibrant colors of his paintings done toward the end of his life. The visual language Vincent had worked so hard to develop became another expressive dimension of his writing. Vincent's motivation to create art stemmed from his personal needs for love and hope and connectedness. Henri was driven to write and teach by the same desires. Both Vincent and Henri recognized these identical yearnings in others. Henri had been drawn to Vincent because he recognized the same life struggles and questions in himself and in the students he taught. Henri also found that Vincent did not run away from his own painful condition or avoid looking at and confronting his own self. Out of the awareness of his own suffering and deep longing for love and comfort, Vincent sought to reach out and alleviate the suffering he witnessed in those around him. Discovering this reality about Vincent

brought Henri to recognize Vincent's compassionate nature. To us it would become clear that Vincent had become a guide and teacher to Henri and that Henri's class was fueled by his intimate knowledge of this artist's life. In Henri's course, the artist became simply *Vincent* to us too—a friend who felt deeply and tenderly, who revealed the same struggles, searched like us for meaning and purpose in life, and taught us so much about living compassionately.

Henri, with his Dutch accent and his impassioned manner of engaging us, almost began to take on the temperament of Vincent for us. Not that he intended to, but as he spoke to us by quoting Vincent's letter, the two voices often became one and the same. Everything in that course—Vincent's paintings, Vincent's letter dialogues with his brother Theo, and Henri's fervent teaching—reverberated with the same passion, honesty, and urgency. It all touched us deeply, emotionally and spiritually. Had I just continued looking at van Gogh's art in museums on my own, it would have never led me to discover the artist's soul in such depth. Henri offered us a unique opportunity to engage and become familiar with Vincent in a much more intimate and personal way.

PASTORAL BEGINNINGS OF SOLIDARITY

Henri disclosed to us that Vincent's initial fervent desire had been to become a pastor, not an artist. After failing in the career chosen for him by his family, an art dealer, he decided to follow his father's footsteps. His father was a respectable Calvinist parson of small country churches in the south of Holland. He fulfilled the role of a traditional parish cleric, somewhat segregated and limited by expectations and religious customs of his day. The parsonage physically set the parson's family apart from the common life of the villagers. But Vincent didn't want to be that kind of pastor or do that kind of pastoring from the vantage point of privilege.

Vincent rejected being set apart, something that generally comes with ordination to the priesthood or ministry. Instead, he wanted to

enter into the experience and the condition of those he served just as Jesus had done. He aimed to authentically embrace those who suffered, to live among them, endure their experiences, and work as hard as they did. He believed in living in an integrated manner rather than remaining separated by the dictates of social standing. But such intimate involvements with his parishioners, he would come to find, brought about great suffering and often loneliness, and in his case, rejection by the institution he served.

In one of his earliest classes, Henri showed us a slide of a drawing by Vincent of a landscape with pollard birch trees that had been stunted (pollarded) in order to produce new, straight branches; such trees grow along many of the alleys throughout Holland. It was a sketch Vincent had made early in his artist's vocation. The rows of pollarded birch trees, their bare new-growth branches reaching skyward, stand on ground that is covered with tufts of dry reed-like weeds. The trees form a barrier separating two dark peasant figures partly silhouetted against the light background of the sky. They both seem to walk away from the viewer, one herding his sheep before him.

It is a bleak image of loneliness. Henri showed it to illustrate that a compassionate and involved ministry can be a lonely venture. He told us that we would often suffer from isolation in our future ministries

VINCENT VAN GOGH, *POLLARD BIRCHES*, NUENEN, 1884



despite being surrounded by human beings, human beings often desperately seeking a comforting relationship. It is often enormously difficult to reach a level of solidarity where trust and intimacy lead to such a relationship. By drawing our attention to this sketch, Henri introduced us to Vincent's ability to do drawings that related feelings and emotions. Through such drawing Vincent could express a universal kind of loneliness that he experienced. Henri called it "cosmic loneliness."

To add to our understanding of Vincent's narrative language, Henri used the artist's descriptions of this kind of isolation taken from one of his early letters. At the time when Vincent wrote these thoughts, he was living among destitute miners in an impoverished mining district of the Borinage in Belgium. After having failed in his attempt to study theology and become a pastor like his father, Vincent had nevertheless found a way to minister and preach the gospel to the poor, namely, by becoming an evangelist missionary instead. This is what led him to the miners in the Borinage. Out of his desperate struggle to effectively find ways to connect with them, he wrote,

Someone may have a great fire in his soul, yet no one ever comes to warm himself at it, and the passers-by see but a little smoke coming out the chimney, and continue on their way. Look here, now, what must be done, tend that inner fire, have salt in oneself, wait patiently yet with how much impatience? Wait for the hour, I say, until someone will come and sit down, to stay?¹

Henri had experienced this sense of difficulty in achieving intimacy and solidarity many times throughout the course of his own life. It was a quote that meant a lot to him since he could identify with the "desire to embrace the world" and yet "the passers-by see only smoke coming out of the chimney." In time, Henri learned that the effort to reach out in a compassionate way would first require a level of oneness with the passersby where the barriers of defensiveness and mistrust had to be dissolved. The solidarity Henri was talking about

had to grow “mature by waiting patiently and by faithful adherence to the great call to be the same, yes, more of the same. And that’s the first step of compassion.” Vincent’s time in the Borinage could teach us about responding to the call of a solidarity needed in order to connect with the passersby.

SUFFERING SERVICE

During the first weeks of our course we discovered that Vincent had always been drawn to people who suffered. Even as a young boy, he was deeply moved when he accompanied his father to the homes of parishioners and saw people living in poverty and misery. When he was a missionary-in-training in the Belgian mining district, he went a step further than his father had. In the Borinage, Vincent put himself deliberately in a position of sharing in the miners’ hardships by rejecting the privileges afforded him as an evangelist; he gave up his comfortable housing, adequate clothing, and nutritious food. He felt that in order to understand his role as minister of the gospel to the poor, he had to endure the same deprivations and circumstances as his parishioners. Only out of his own familiarity with anguish and pain could he find ways to respond to the needs of those who suffered such hardships. Only by experiencing the basic living conditions could he realize what his parishioners lacked.

With such experiential understanding, he could attempt to “do unto others as you would have others do unto you” (Matthew 7:12; Luke 6:31 paraphrase). Henri emphasized that in Vincent’s life, suffering with the other had specificity. One heard a great deal about entering into the pain of others, but this was ephemeral and somewhat dreamy and unreal. Vincent’s response wasn’t a vague suffering with all humanity or joining into the suffering conditions of a hurting world. Rather, Vincent’s experiences and Henri’s teachings were aimed and focused on the needs of those in our immediate surrounding. Henri hoped to show us with the example of Vincent’s life a real and specific way of

entering into the human condition of a person in need. Henri wanted to make the truth of compassionate living tangible and doable.

Henri affirmed that “when you realize that you share the basic human traits with all humanity, when you are not afraid of defining yourself as being the same and not different,” you have reached a place of commonality, a place where the burdens of life can be shared. The word *compassion* means “to suffer with.” “Compassionate persons, therefore, are, first of all, persons who confess their part in the suffering human condition and are willing to recognize that the anchor hold of their identity is in the common experience of being human.”² Vincent searched for that solidarity, that common experience, when he lived among the poor, be it in rural or in urban environments. It demanded his all; it brought him through great deprivation, loneliness, and suffering, but it led him to an honest and deep solidarity.

Henri had used the Scripture passage from Paul’s letter to the church at Philippi in his previous class on compassion to affirm the call for this type of solidarity:

If our life in Christ means anything to you, if love can persuade at all, or the Spirit that we have in common, or any tenderness and sympathy, then be united in your convictions and united in your love, with a common purpose and a common mind. That is the one thing that would make me completely happy. There must be no competition among you, no conceit; but everybody is to be self-effacing. (Philippians 2:1-3 JB)

In Vincent’s vocation as minister of the gospel to the poor, Henri found him to indeed take literally the words of Paul: “Always consider the other person to be better than yourself, so nobody thinks of his own interests first but everyone thinks of the other people’s interests instead. In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:3-5 JB).

Years after his missionary work with the Belgian miners, when Vincent made the transition from missionary to artist, he still sought the

same kind of close relationships that he had experienced in the Borinage. He still hoped that passersby would see the “little smoke coming out the chimney” but then “come and sit down, to stay.” One way he could ensure that people would come and sit down near him was to invite those he shared his life with to become the models for his studies of the human figure.

Vincent asked the peasants in the countryside and the poor of the city almshouses to pause a while, to spend some time with him while he sketched them. The effort of observing and drawing them connected him to his subjects and allowed him to experience kinship and companionship.

Henri showed us examples of figure sketches as a visual proof of his strong desire to share his inner fire with the passersby. Vincent had hoped that one day he would be able to express in his work the sincere feelings his subjects elicited in him, which was not an easy task. While mastering the skill of drawing from observation was accomplished through persistent practice, imbuing those outlines and shapes with personal feelings and the subjective expression of the sitter was a whole other dimension of art that did not only depend on correct rendering.

At the beginning of his artist's path, when Vincent asked himself, *What is drawing?* he used a metaphor to explain the difficulty of achieving an art of solidarity that would convey more than an observed fact. He wrote that drawing is working oneself through an invisible iron wall that seems to stand between what one feels and what one can do.³ Henri said that for Vincent, and anyone trying to reach compassionate solidarity, it was also “like breaking through an iron wall. This was excruciatingly difficult, but also exhilaratingly beautiful when one succeeded.”⁴

HENRI AT L'ARCHE

Throughout his career, Henri spoke about his own difficulty of breaking through that iron wall. Such a breakthrough was an ongoing struggle. Years after teaching his course on compassion and Vincent, and after he had spent time in South America and had been a professor at

Harvard, Henri traveled to Canada, where he was invited by Jean Vanier to visit L'Arche Daybreak in Richmond Hill, Ontario. Jean Vanier is the founder of the L'Arche communities worldwide, which are dedicated to welcoming and caring for people with intellectual and physical disabilities.

Henri had longed for a place he could call home, and he finally put down his roots in the L'Arche Daybreak community of Richmond Hill. He became the spiritual director, ministering to the staff and the core members. In this community Henri could leave behind the stressful, competitive academic atmosphere and live unencumbered by worldly achievements and expectations. His accomplishments in life, his degrees, his ordination, and his authorship meant little to the people he had come to live with and care for. To his new family he was simply *Henri*.

The men and women of the L'Arche community recognized and responded to Henri's love, which came from a place of solidarity and trust. Just like Vincent in the Borinage, Henri lived among the men and women at L'Arche; he ate with them, fed them, dressed them, and comforted them. In his new home Henri was willing to let go of all that had defined him in the past and simply become a family member. This is how Henri came to experience a most intimate solidarity—years after he had revealed such solidarity with his students through the life of Vincent. While living among the most broken in society at L'Arche, Henri received, just like Vincent had, unique offerings of wisdom and valuable lessons. Henri found deep friendships, unconditional love, and acceptance. Once Henri had worked himself through that iron wall of initial separation, he had become a comforting, enriching presence. Henri expressed what it felt like to break through that iron wall—to go from detachment to solidarity—in *Bread for the Journey*, published in 1997, twenty years after teaching his Compassion class at Yale:

Joy is hidden in compassion. The word *compassion* literally means “to suffer with.” It seems quite unlikely that suffering with another person would bring joy. Yet being with a person in pain, offering

simple presence to someone in despair, sharing with a friend times of confusion and uncertainty . . . such experiences can bring us deep joy. Not happiness, not excitement, not great satisfaction, but the quiet joy of being there for someone else and living in deep solidarity with our brothers and sisters in this human family. Often this is a solidarity in weakness, in brokenness, in woundedness, but it leads us to the center of joy, which is sharing our humanity with others.⁵

Henri understood that the solidarity ministers need to seek is the solidarity Vincent sought. “And here there really is no difference between the minister and the painter. Both want to touch people and both feel the pain of the distance that often is so hard to bridge” in the beginning.⁶ Henri recognized that Vincent was breaking down walls of separation because he was following the way of Jesus. He was not concerned with doctrine or dogma or theocratic correctness but simply with responding immediately, lovingly, and caringly to the predicament of another human being. This too is the way that Henri embraced his life and ministry.

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