Beyond the Wounded Healer: Henri Nouwen, Mental Health, and the Journey to Spiritual Resilience

Michael Hryniuk, PhD
The Catholic Health Association of BC
September 19, 2019
An Overview of the Core Questions

- How are we called to be present to intense human suffering in ourselves and in others?

- What can we learn from the journeys of great caregivers such as Henri Nouwen?

- A Renewed Spirituality of Caregiving: How do we apply these learnings personally and professionally in our own context of caregiving?
A Topical Itinerary

1. A Spiritual Recovery: Reflections on Henri Nouwen’s journey of healing and ministry

2. Our Current Context: Facing Intense Caregiver Stress

3. From Spiritual Recovery to Spiritual Resilience: Lessons from Nouwen’s Journey
My Own Context as a Caregiver

- Spiritual Care Supervisor at a Catholic Child Welfare agency in the heart of Hamilton, Ontario
- Registered psychotherapist and spiritual director in faith-based group practice in Toronto
- Forty years of engagement with the communities of l’Arche as an assistant, community leader and researcher
- Educator and consultant to churches, schools and denominational bodies in ministry leadership development and spiritual formation
My Theoretical Sources

- Formed in the Trinitarian theology of the Ukrainian-Greek Catholic Church and its spirituality of deification

- Influenced heavily by the works of Jean Vanier, Henri Nouwen, and Thomas Merton

- Research in the dynamics of psycho-spiritual transformation with particular attention to the experience of caregivers.
Henri Nouwen (1932-1996): Priest, Pastor and Spiritual Guide
Nouwen’s Journey of Healing

- The Clinical Years – Pastoral Psychology and the “Wounded Healer”

- The Academic Years – Authorial “Superstar” in Christian spirituality, Anguish and Alienation

- The l’Arche Years – Caring for Adam, Christian Community and awakening to the life of the “Beloved”
“Ministry can indeed be a witness to the living truth that the wound that causes us to suffer now, will be revealed to us later as the place where God intimated his new creation.” – p.96
The Context of the “Wounded Healer”

- **Secularization** of American culture and healthcare

- **Marginalization** of religion and the pastoral role - the “loneliness of the minister”

- **Clericalization** – the hiding of the wound behind the vestments and distancing of the pastor from people

- **Professionalization** of pastoral care through the “triumph of the therapeutic”
The Great Awakening: Henri Nouwen and Adam Arnett
Henri Nouwen’s Awakening to His “Belovedness”

“Adam’s wonderful presence and his incredible worth would enlighten us to comprehend that we, like him, are also precious, graced, and beloved children of God, whether we see ourselves as rich or poor, intelligent or disabled, good looking or unattractive…In relationship with him we would discover our deeper, truer identity.”

– Adam: God’s Beloved, 31.
Henri’s Breakdown

- Extreme anxiety and disorientation in his first year at l’Arche Daybreak
- Confusion and insecurity as Adam’s care-giver
- A painful “interruption” in his relationship to a close friend triggers profound anxiety, shame, grief and depression
- A progressive loss of his capacity to cope in community life leads to a period of intensive treatment
“What is your pain? It is the experience of not receiving what you most need. It is the place of emptiness where you feel sharply the absence of the love you most desire. To go back to that place is hard because you are confronted there with your wounds as well as your powerlessness to heal yourself. You are so afraid of that place that you think of it as a place of death.”

Spiritual Recovery:  
From Brokenness to Radical Self-Embrace in God

“God has given you a beautiful self. There God dwells and loves you with the first love, which precedes all human love. You carry your own beautiful, deeply loved self in your heart. You can and must hold on to the truth of the love you were given and recognize that same love in others who see your goodness and love you.” – Inner Voice of Love, 29.
“Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the "Beloved". Being the Beloved expresses the core truth of our existence.”

— Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World, 28.
Henri Nouwen on “Being Beloved”

➤ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SFWfYpd0F18
Nouwen’s Spiritual Recovery: Tracing the Movements

- Resting humbly in the field of contemplative awareness of and trust in God’s love
- Opening to and allowing the feelings of pain and brokenness to emerge
- Responding freely to those feelings with self-compassion, self-embrace and self-nurture
From Spiritual Recovery to Spiritual Resilience:

Clinical and Pastoral Implications for Caregivers
Surveying Caregiver Stress

- **Personal stress** – home, family, and social life
- **Professional stress** - Emotional labour and empathic strain
- **Workplace stress** – ordinary and extreme
- **Systemic stress** – barriers, dysfunction, moral injury, “compliance trauma”
- **Technological stress** – digital overload and adaptive challenges
- **Political and economic stress** – austerity, indifference, policy failures
Signs of Intense Caregiver Stress

- The case of Gayle
- Overwhelm
- Helplessnessness
- Powerlessness
- Sadness and Grief
- Anger and frustration
- Fatigue
- Numbing
Common Mental Health Risks for Caregivers

- **Burnout** – “A persistent state of exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy as a result of work-related stress.”

- **Compassion Fatigue** – “Empathic strain and general exhaustion resulting from caring for persons in distress.”

- **Vicarious or Secondary Trauma** - “Negative changes in the clinician’s view of self, others, and the worlds resulting from repeated empathic engagement with patients’ trauma-related thoughts, memories and emotions.”

(Quitlangon, *Psychiatric Times*, July 2019)
Risk Factors for CF and Vicarious Trauma

- Past history of trauma
- Overwork
- Poor sense of limits and boundaries
- Too high caseload of trauma survivors (especially children)
- Too much exposure
- Too many negative outcomes
- Less experience of adapting and coping
Addiction and Mental Health Care: Risk Assessment

- Assessing the “burden of care” through the Zarit Caregiver Burden Interview (ZCBI)

- Assessing secondary traumatic stress in caregivers through the Secondary Traumatic Stress Scale (STSS) or

- The Professional Quality of Life Scale (ProQOL)
Thought Experiment:
How would Nouwen respond?

- Imagining his response to the extreme conditions of caring for victims of the fentanyl crisis or opioid addiction
- To the alarming increase in depression, anxiety, and developmental trauma especially among the young
- To the mounting challenging of coping with the increasing demands and pressures as care-givers in the face of extreme suffering
Learning from Nouwen: Self-Care and “Spiritual Resilience”

- Moving from compulsion to contemplation and mindfulness
- Becoming “high-receivers” instead of “high-achievers”
- Moving from the “wounded healer” to the “beloved healer”
- “Re-Sourcing” compassion for others in compassion for self
The First Discipline of Spiritual Resilience: Contemplative Prayer

“To live a life that is not dominated by the desire to be relevant but is instead safely anchored in the knowledge of God’s first love, we have to be mystics. A mystic is a person whose identity is deeply rooted in God’s first love.” – In the Name of Jesus, p.28
Receiving The Fruits of Contemplative Prayer

- Grounding in receptivity to God’s presence and love

- Discovering and humbly claiming our woundedness as a source of healing for others and ourselves

- Rediscovering our identity - Coming to know and receive ourselves radically as God’s “beloved”
The Second Discipline of Spiritual Resilience: Community Support

- “In this world, so many people live with the burden of self-rejection: “I’m not good. I’m useless. People don’t really care for me…” Underneath a successful and highly praised career can live a fearful person who doesn’t think much of himself or herself. In a community comes that mutual vulnerability in which we forgive each other and celebrate each other’s gifts.”

- Leadership Magazine, Spring 1995
The Fruits of Community Support

- Receiving the “second love” that names and claims us as beloved
- Receiving the emotional support, care and healing that we need to embody compassionate presence – no more “lone-ranger” care
- Receiving the professional support that we need to remain competent and to develop as caregivers
The Third Discipline of Spiritual Resilience: Self-Compassion

“The change of which I speak is the change from living life as a painful test to prove that you deserve to be loved, to living it as an unceasing “Yes” to the truth of that Belovedness.”

– Life of the Beloved, 106.
The Fruits of Self-Compassion

- Awakening to our “enoughness”

- Receiving the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience and kindness to self and others…(Galatians 5:22-23)

- Receiving the inner freedom to discern what is right and good for us and those in our care (Romans 12)

- Receiving the capacity to extend compassion to others from a deeper source (Luke 6:36-38)
Self-Compassion: The Source of Contemporary Mindfulness-Based Therapeutic Interventions

- MB-CBT – Mindfulness-based Cognitive Behavioral Therapy
- MBCT – Mindfulness-based Compassion Therapy
- Focusing and Somatically-oriented Trauma Therapy
- ACT – Acceptance and Commitment Therapy
- AEDP – Accelerated Experiential Dynamic Psychotherapy
What would Henri say about caregiving under intense stress?

It’s about becoming the beloved...
Maintaining Compassionate Presence in the Face of Caregiver Stress

Henri Nouwen would point to Jesus as the Wounded and Beloved Healer whose compassionate presence always flows from His rootedness in the First Love of the Father. He would encourage us first and foremost to

1. Rest continually in and receive the Divine presence of God’s First Love in prayer naming and claiming us as Beloved.

2. Allow that Love to free us gradually from our own fear and suffering and to become present to and extend that Love to ourselves first.

3. Become present to the suffering of others with the compassion and mercy of Christ.
Belovedness:
The Ultimate Source of our Strength and Resilience

Listening to that voice with great inner attentiveness, I hear at my center words that say:

I have called you by name, from the very beginning. You are mine and I am yours. You are my beloved. On you my favor rests…

I look at you with infinite tenderness and care for you with a care more intimate than that of a mother for her child…Wherever you go, I go with you, and wherever you rest, I keep watch.

I will give you food that will satisfy all of your hunger and drink that will quench all of your thirst…Nothing will ever separate us. We are one.”