



HENRI NOUWEN AND SPIRITUAL COMPANIONSHIP

by Matt Whitney

I recently took a short backpacking trip in the North Cascades of Washington State. I like to have an author accompany me while sipping my instant coffee in the morning or curling up in my sleeping bag at night. This trip, I brought with me Henri Nouwen's *The Inner Voice of Love*, described on the back cover as his "secret journal" – written during a period of intense doubt, low self-esteem, anguish, and despair. Nouwen writes with great clarity and purpose, and I was moved reading his intimate sharing.

In one entry, he writes of our need to share our struggles, pain, and anguish with others, so that need may be affirmed and acknowledged. Indeed, Nouwen continues, our suffering can be of service to others, when shared judiciously, and with caution.

Nouwen says, "*You will always need people who do not need you but who can receive you and give you back to yourself.*" I was struck – what a beautiful description of spiritual companionship, encapsulating the essence, calling, and profound gifts of spiritual companionship!

I'm in my sixth year working for SDI. During this time, I've had countless conversations with folks about our work as spiritual directors and companions. Sometimes these discussions are easy, but more often context is necessary for those unfamiliar with our modalities. So, I describe our practices of deep listening, contemplation, and compassionate service, in service to helping others on their own unique

spiritual journeys. These approaches help us all to recall and behold our deep, and innate, connection with God, The Divine, The Universe, or however we might each name The Ground of All Being.

Let's contemplate this together - how are each of us received by someone "who does not need us," and who "gives us back to ourselves?"

What does it mean that someone needs nothing from us? Let's start with the fact that we have many relationships in life, with varying degrees of responsibilities and obligations. As a partner and a parent, I have a responsibility to be loving and caring to my spouse, and my son. If we are friends, it's important that we find fun things to do together, as well as help each other out in our struggles, or even with more mundane tasks such as moving or working on a house project. Professional colleagues pool their efforts in common causes and purposes. And so on. All of these relationships can blossom as we get to know one another, and become more intimate over time. Perhaps eventually to the point of finding safety and comfort in sharing our spirituality with each other. After all, mutuality and reciprocity are the most precious gifts of our relationships. We give as much as we get.

One question I often hear in response to my own descriptions of a spiritual companion is: "why can't that person just be an intimate partner, or a good friend?" To which I re-

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HENRI NOUWEN AND SPIRITUAL COMPANIONSHIP (CONT'D)

spond, "On occasion, they can be!" But what I have found, and I imagine you may have as well, is that our sufferings and longings are too intimate, too delicate, and too easily misunderstood by even our partners and closest friends. Within us may be truths so hidden that we don't know how to properly speak of them. This can become problematic if we are tempted to overshare, as it may confuse or even become a burden to those whom we live and work with. As it turns out, our colleagues, friends, and partners actually need quite a bit from us – as does every good relationship.

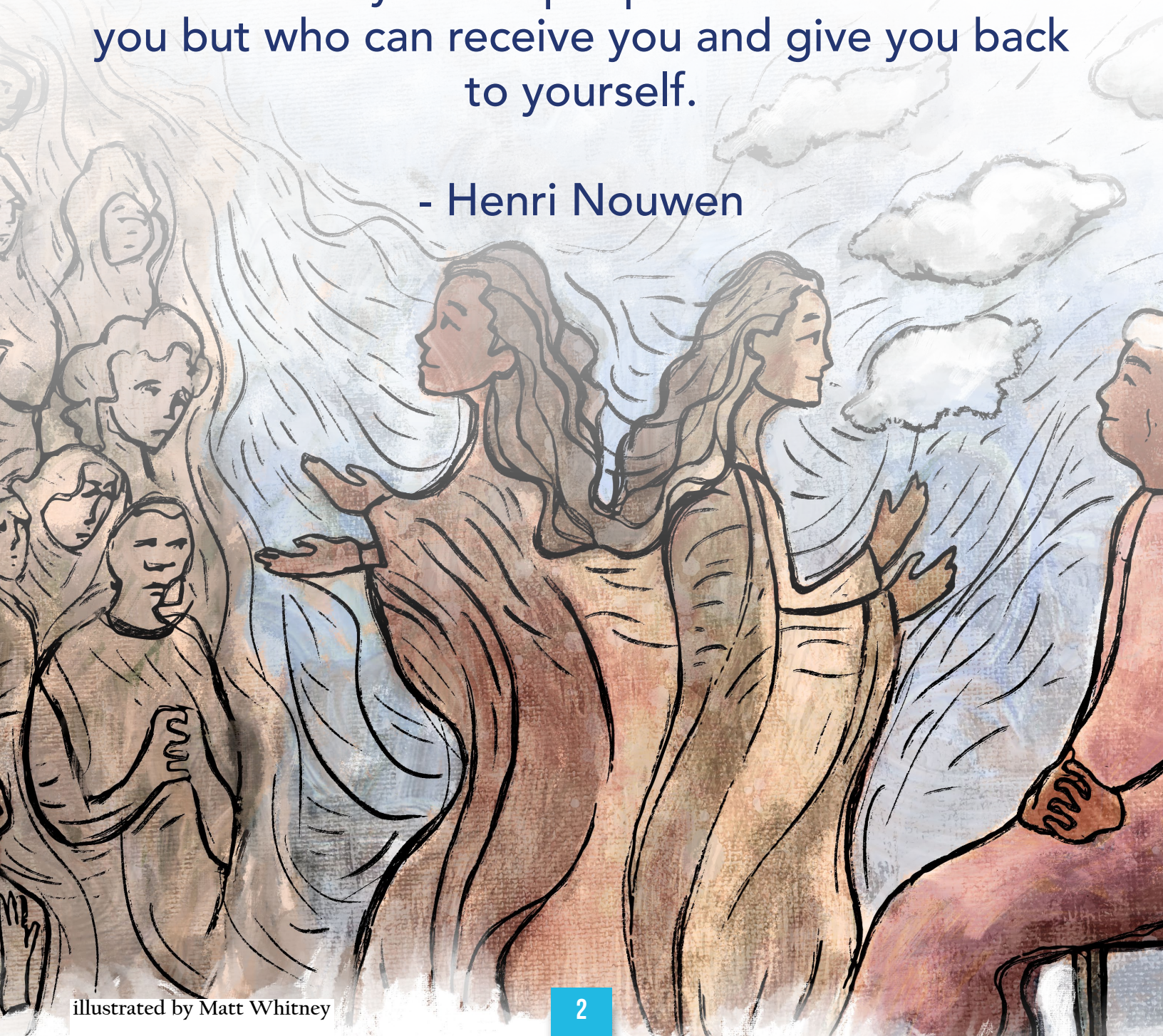
This includes the inevitable need to be selective, and even guarded, in sharing our most intimate spiritual selves.

Conversely, though a partner or friend might mean well, they are likely not attuned to the deep listening that would be most helpful to us. They may want to correct us, solve our problems, and make us feel better. The intentions are good, but these responses can be awkward, even harmful, to understanding our unique journeys.

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You will always need people who do not need you but who can receive you and give you back to yourself.

- Henri Nouwen



A spiritual companion can give us uninhibited safe space to untangle and declutter the surface of our lives, such that the depths within us can be excavated. Much like clearing weeds from a garden, these depths are given air to breathe and light to reveal.

This is what Nouwen means by “need.” Our partners need us to be loving, contributing partners. Our colleagues need us to be productive and helpful. Our friends need us to be... friends. They also need us to be complete and caring people in their lives.

On the other hand, a spiritual companion doesn't *need* us at all in these ways. They don't require our service or assistance. When I meet with mine, I don't need to dress nicely, or pretend that I'm in a good mood. I arrive just as I am, with all my “baggage.” This is a great gift and a huge relief!

Nouwen adds that a spiritual companion “gives us back to ourselves.” As we all notice the tangles of our busy lives, and the anxieties and fears we carry, we eventually realize there are things deep within us that yearn and long in ways we may not be able to properly name. A spiritual companion can give us uninhibited safe space to untangle and declutter the surface of our lives, such that the depths within us can be excavated. Much like clearing weeds from a garden, these depths are given air to breathe and light to reveal.

Many of the world's spiritual traditions speak of the True Self. This True Self is our Spiritual Essence, the Child of God, Transcendent Awareness, the Eternal Self, The Ground of Our Being. This depth is you – the real *You* that spiritual companionship gives back to us!

There is much work we must all do to discover our True Nature: learning to integrate our pain, understanding our suffering, and alchemizing these into the living wisdom that weaves itself through all of us eternally.

Though my descriptions of spiritual companionship change depending on the conversation, I always say: “Everyone should work with a spiritual companion.” This includes you! If spiritual companionship is not part of your routine of care, I encourage you to check out our [Find a Spiritual Companion Directory](#). Spend some time researching potential Spiritual Directors, Companions, and Guides to work with, and connect with a few. They are the kindest folks I know and typically offer free introductory sessions if you ask.

And may you find a person who needs nothing from you, but can receive you, and give you back to yourself.



Matt Whitney

SDI Creative Director

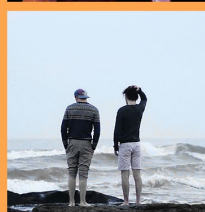
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A photograph of two women sitting and talking. The woman on the left is wearing a black hijab and a black long-sleeved top. The woman on the right has blonde hair and is wearing a white ribbed sweater. They are both gesturing with their hands as they speak. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

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PRAYER TO GANESH

You finally came to me at thirty-eight,
not at twenty.

In college, those weighty vedas, those
lavender-faced deities with too many
arms,
had seemed too exotic and remote.
I'd wanted only poems then, feathery
volumes I could lift with a finger
and consume easily.
I had no interest in India.

So you waited beneath your ginkgo tree,
chuckling.

Ganesh, Lord Destroyer of Obstacles,
elephant-headed son of Parvati.
You drank your brown water in another
land, standing in your power,
Knowing the exact moment of my life

to lumber through me, weighted with
brilliance.

One-tusked, bejeweled, massive,
deliberate, incorruptible;
holding a crook to goad the future to
a rightful place, and a noose to snare
illusions.

I dropped everything, and prayed.

Your steady gait mesmerizes your
faithful. We stand in the blistering sun,
stuttering praise, craving the very brush
of your hide
to split us open, scattering our bitterness
like a thousand moths,
leaving only sugar, a sweet trace at the
bottom of your cup.

I know I am a lotus flower, a white
bloom floating on water.

I tell myself that is all I am.

Laugh at my ignorance, Lord. Open my
eye. Let me see
that I am the mud as well as the bloom.

Standing on your back, let me finally see
over that damned wall to Love, limitless
Love.

Jennifer Revill is a poet, spiritual director, entrepreneur and leader at her Unitarian Universalist church in Massachusetts. She received a Master of Arts in spirituality from Merrimack College, where she serves as an academic development consultant. Her company, The Mobile Mystic, creates opportunities for engagement and dialogue about contemporary spirituality. You can reach her at revillj@merrimack.edu.

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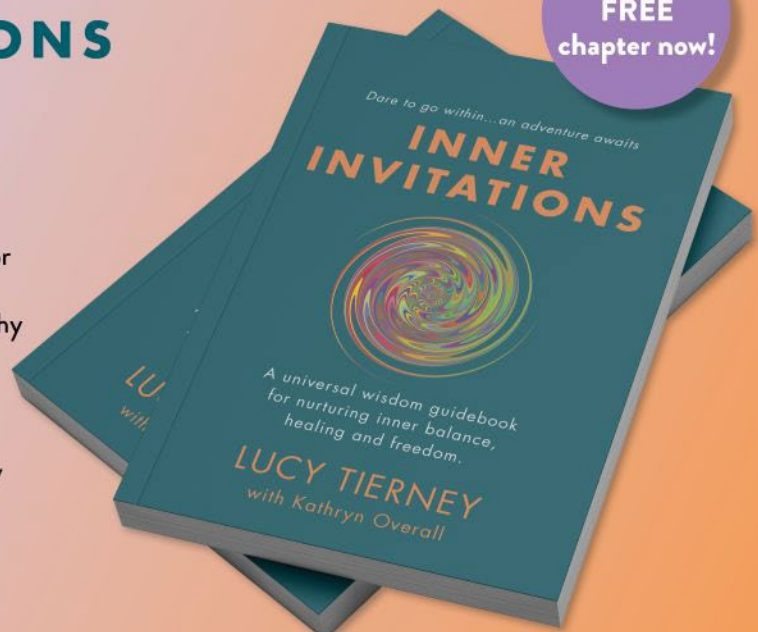
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The practice?
Shut up,
get out of the way,
receive,
open my eyes
with Holy humility
to Christ incarnate.
Who's the minister?
Who's the teacher?
Who's the director?
Spirit flowing.
God sits back and chuckles
a joyous grin.

Greg Mellor is Catholic Chaplain at California State Prison, Sacramento in Folsom, California. He is a spiritual director and a member of the 2017 SDI New Contemplatives Initiative cohort. This poem is inspired by one of many cell-side conversations during which he encounters an abundance of divine wonder. You can reach him at gjmellor@gmail.com.

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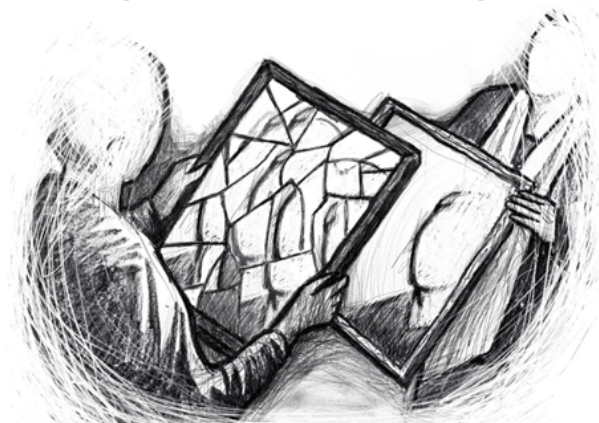
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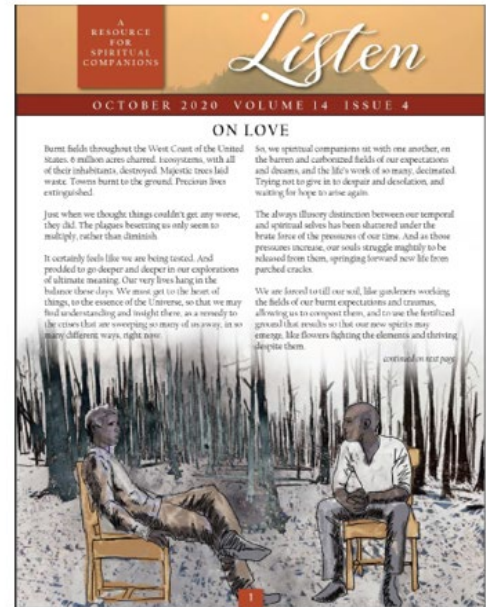
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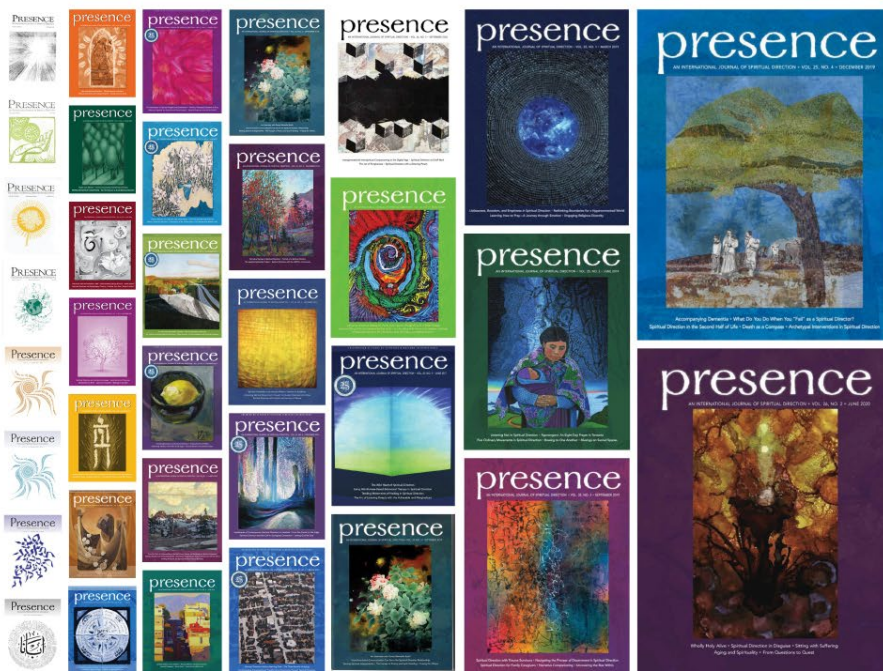
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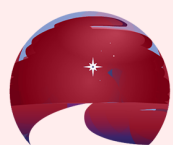
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- Henri Nouwen





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