

**Reading Group With Walter Gaffney, Co-author with Henri Nouwen of Aging  
January 23, 2007 at North Haven Congregational Church**

Henri was born in Holland 1/24/32. His father was a lawyer. He was the oldest of 4 children, 3 boys and 1 girl. He knew from childhood he wanted to be a priest and irritated his brothers by insisting that they act as altar boys for him, the priest, as they played together.

Ordained in 1957, he studied psychology rather than theology per se in Holland. He studied clinical pastoral education at the Menninger Clinic in Kansas from 1964-66. He was invited by one of his Menninger colleagues to teach at Notre Dame, which he did for two years, before returning to Holland to teach pastoral psychology. Dean Colin Williams at Yale was instrumental in getting Henri to teach at Yale for ten years starting in 1971, during which time he wrote 10-11 books, taking semesters off several times. He went to the Abbey of the Genesee, a Trappist monastery in New York State, and wrote of that experience in The Genesee Diary. Walter reported that as he left Yale, he asked that his friends respect his quiet time there by not being in touch, but later related that he was desolate, not hearing from them, indicative of his constant searching for friendship and affirmation.

Walter was a teaching assistant priest to Henri at Yale Divinity School; he wrote the draft on Aging as a speech for Henri to give at Notre Dame. On his return from Chicago he told Walter, "I think we have a book here." Together they refined it; Henri put his stamp on it as they completed it during a week at Mercy Center in Madison, CT. Doubleday accepted it for publication. Henri's hope, humor and vision made it work. Photography was done by a friend of Henri's who was given free reign to picture the elderly throughout two continents.

Upon leaving Yale, he spent time in South America, working with missionaries in the slums of Lima, Peru. He was invited to teach at Harvard Divinity School from 1983-85, but was not "fulfilled" in that venue. He returned to South America and visited with priests working in several countries. Jean Vanier, a layman who had started communities for severely handicapped adults, enlisted him to work at his community called L'Arche in France. Henri needed the community setting to feel at home, needed it as his vocation. Eventually this led to his work at a similar home in Canada, Daybreak. It was here that Henri discovered his final call and true vocation – caring for the needy men and women,

Broken in body but filled with the spirit of God, he became their chaplain for a decade. It was on a break from that calling when he was in Holland awaiting transport to Russia to film a documentary on Rembrandt's painting, "The Return of the Prodigal Son," when he suffered two heart attacks and left us to "go to the loving hands of God." He was a restless son, who felt spiritually exiled at times, but became a "father" to many,

He was a great observer of human events: the circus interested him, especially the high wire act of the Rodleigh family, a group he had met in Germany. People (on the wire and in routine life experiences) hurl through their lives and are caught by the most important member of the act—the catcher, a perfect parallel to Jesus, always there for us.

He thought, wrote and spoke in triads—felt that the interior of his and our lives were of utmost importance. The most personal ideas were also the most universal.

Quote from Henri: "Humor is knowledge with a sweet smile."

Quote from Walter: "Henri has gone to the loving, open hands of God."

**A conference at the Yale Divinity School on Henri Nouwen is coming up on March 1 and 2, 2007.**