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# THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL SON

A STORY OF HOMECOMING



HENRI J. M. NOUWEN

*Author of The Wounded Healer*

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*To my father*  
**Laurent Jean Marie Nouwen**  
*for his ninetieth birthday*

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# T H E S T O R Y O F T W O S O N S A N D T H E I R F A T H E R

■

**T** here was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, “Father, let me have the share of the estate that will come to me.” So the father divided the property between them. A few days later, the younger son got together everything he had and left for a distant country where he squandered his money on a life of debauchery.

When he had spent it all, that country experienced a severe famine, and now he began to feel the pinch so he hired himself out to one of the local inhabitants who put him on his farm to feed the pigs. And he would willingly have filled himself with the husks the pigs were eating but no one would let him have them. Then he came to his senses and said, “How many of my father’s hired men have all the food they want and more, and here am I dying of hunger! I will leave this place and go to my father and say: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired men. ...” So he left the place and went back to his father.

While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with pity. He ran to the boy, clasped him in his arms and kissed him. Then his son said, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son.” But the father said to his servants, “Quick! Bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the calf we have been fattening, and kill it; we will celebrate by having a feast, because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found.” And they began to celebrate.

Now the elder son was out in the fields, and on his way back, as he drew near the house, he could hear music and dancing. Calling one of the servants he asked what it was all about. The servant told him, “Your brother has come, and your father has killed the calf we had been fattening because he has got him back safe and sound.” He was angry then and refused to go in, and his father came out and began to urge him to come in; but he retorted to his father, “All these years I have slaved for you and never once disobeyed any orders of yours, yet you never offered me so much as a kid

for me to celebrate with my friends. But, for this son of yours, when he comes back after swallowing up your property—he and his loose women—you kill the calf we had been fattening.”

The father said, “My son, you are with me always, and all I have is yours. But it was only right we should celebrate and rejoice, because your brother here was dead and has come to life; he was lost and is found.”

# P ROLOGUE: E NCOUNTER WITH A P AINTING

## ■ *The Poster*

A seemingly insignificant encounter with a poster presenting a detail of Rembrandt's *The Return of the Prodigal Son* set in motion a long spiritual adventure that brought me to a new understanding of my vocation and offered me new strength to live it. At the heart of this adventure is a seventeenth-century painting and its artist, a first-century parable and its author, and a twentieth-century person in search of life's meaning.

The story begins in the fall of 1983 in the village of Trosly, France, where I was spending a few months at L'Arche, a community that offers a home to people with mental handicaps. Founded in 1964 by a Canadian, Jean Vanier, the Trosly community is the first of more than ninety L'Arche communities spread throughout the world.

One day I went to visit my friend Simone Landrien in the community's small documentation center. 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 disheveled 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.

Realizing that I was no longer paying much attention to the conversation, I said to Simone, "Tell me about that poster." She said, "Oh, that's a reproduction of Rembrandt's *Prodigal Son*. Do you like it?" I kept staring at the poster and finally stuttered, "It's beautiful, more than beautiful ... it makes me want to cry and laugh at the same time ... I can't tell you what I feel as I look at it, but it touches me deeply." Simone said, "Maybe you should have your own copy. You can buy it in Paris." "Yes," I said, "I must have a copy."

When I first saw the *Prodigal Son*, I had just finished an exhausting six-week lecturing trip through the United States, calling Christian communities to do anything they possibly could to prevent violence and war in Central America. I was dead tired, so much so that I could barely



walk. I was anxious, lonely, restless, and very needy. During the trip I had felt like a strong fighter for justice and peace, able to face the dark world without fear. But after it was all over I felt like a vulnerable little child who wanted to crawl onto its mother's lap and cry. As soon as the cheering or cursing crowds were gone, I experienced a devastating loneliness and could easily have surrendered myself to the seductive voices that promised emotional and physical rest.

It was in this condition that I first encountered Rembrandt's *Prodigal Son* on the door of Simone's office. My heart leapt when I saw it. After my long self-exposing journey, the tender embrace of father and son expressed everything I desired at that moment. I was, indeed, the son exhausted from long travels; I wanted to be embraced; I was looking for a home where I could feel safe. The son-come-home was all I was and all that I wanted to be. For so long I had been going from place to place: confronting, beseeching, admonishing, and consoling. Now I desired only to rest safely in a place where I could feel a sense of belonging, a place where I could feel at home.

Much happened in the months and years that followed. Even though the extreme fatigue left me and I returned to a life of teaching and traveling, Rembrandt's embrace remained imprinted on my soul far more profoundly than any temporary expression of emotional support. It had brought me into touch with something within me that lies far beyond the ups and downs of a busy life, something that represents the ongoing yearning of the human spirit, the yearning for a final return, an unambiguous sense of safety, a lasting home. While busy with many people, involved in many issues, and quite visible in many places, the homecoming of the prodigal son stayed with me and continued to take on even greater significance in my spiritual life. The yearning for a lasting home, brought to consciousness by Rembrandt's painting, grew deeper and stronger, somehow making the painter himself into a faithful companion and guide.

Two years after first seeing the Rembrandt poster, I resigned from my teaching position at Harvard University and returned to L'Arche in Trosly, there to spend a full year. The purpose of this move was to determine whether or not I was called to live a life with mentally handicapped people in one of the L'Arche communities. During that year of transition, I felt especially close to Rembrandt and his *Prodigal Son*. After all, I was looking for a new home. It seemed as though my fellow Dutchman had been given

to me as a special companion. Before the year was over, I had made the decision to make L'Arche my new home and to join Daybreak, the L'Arche community in Toronto.

### *The Painting*

Just before leaving Trosly, I was invited by my friends Bobby Massie and his wife, Dana Robert, to join them on a trip to the Soviet Union. My immediate reaction was: "Now I can see the real painting." Ever since becoming interested in this great work, I had known that the original had been acquired in 1766 by Catherine the Great for the Hermitage in Saint Petersburg (which after the revolution was given the name of Leningrad, and which has recently reclaimed its original name of Saint Petersburg) and was still there. I never dreamt that I would have a chance to see it so soon. Although I was very eager to get firsthand knowledge of a country that had so strongly influenced my thoughts, emotions, and feelings during most of my life, this became almost trivial when compared with the opportunity to sit before the painting that had revealed to me the deepest yearnings of my heart.

From the moment of my departure, I knew that my decision to join L'Arche on a permanent basis and my visit to the Soviet Union were closely linked. The link—I was sure—was Rembrandt's *Prodigal Son*. Somehow, I sensed that seeing this painting would allow me to enter into the mystery of homecoming in a way I never had before.

Returning from an exhausting lecture tour to a safe place had been a homecoming; leaving the world of teachers and students to live in a community for mentally handicapped men and women felt like returning home; meeting the people of a country which had separated itself from the rest of the world by walls and heavily guarded borders, that, too, was, in its own way, a manner of going home. But, beneath or beyond all that, "coming home" meant, for me, walking step by step toward the One who awaits me with open arms and wants to hold me in an eternal embrace. I knew that Rembrandt deeply understood this spiritual homecoming. I knew that, when Rembrandt painted his *Prodigal Son*, he had lived a life that had left him with no doubt about his true and final home. I felt that, if I could meet Rembrandt right where he had painted father and son, God and humanity, compassion and misery, in one circle of love, I would come to know as much as I ever would about death and life. I also sensed the hope

that through Rembrandt's masterpiece I would one day be able to express what I most wanted to say about love.

Being in Saint Petersburg is one thing. Having the opportunity to quietly reflect upon the *Prodigal Son* in the Hermitage is quite something else. When I saw the mile-long line of people waiting to enter the museum, I wondered anxiously how and for how long I would be able to see what I most wanted to see.

My anxiety, however, was relieved. In Saint Petersburg our official tour ended, and most members of the group returned home. But Bobby's mother, Suzanne Massie, who was in the Soviet Union during our trip, invited us to stay a few days with her. Suzanne is an expert in Russian culture and art, and her book *The Land of the Firebird* had greatly helped me to get ready for our trip. I asked Suzanne, "How do I ever get close to the *Prodigal Son*?" She said, "Now, Henri, don't worry. I'll see to it that you have all the time you want and need with your favorite painting."

During our second day in Saint Petersburg, Suzanne gave me a telephone number and said, "This is the office number of Alexei Briantsev. He is a good friend of mine. Call him, and he will help you to get to your *Prodigal Son*." I dialed the number immediately and was surprised to hear Alexei, in his gently accented English, promise to meet me at a side door, away from the tourist entrance.

On Saturday, July 26, 1986, at 2:30 P.M., I went to the Hermitage, walked along the Neva River past the main entrance, and found the door Alexei had directed me to. I entered, and someone behind a large desk let me use the house phone to call Alexei. After a few minutes, he appeared and welcomed me with great kindness. He led me along splendid corridors and elegant staircases to an out-of-the-way place not on the tourists' itinerary. It was a long room with high ceilings and looked like an old artist's studio. Paintings were stacked everywhere. In the middle there were large tables and chairs covered with papers and objects of all sorts. As we sat down for a moment, it soon became clear to me that Alexei was the head of the Hermitage's restoration department. With great gentleness and obvious interest in my desire to spend time with Rembrandt's painting, he offered me all the help I wanted. Then he took me straight to the *Prodigal Son*, told the guard not to bother me, and left me there.

And so there I was; facing the painting that had been on my mind and in my heart for nearly three years. 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 my anticipation. There had been moments in which I had wondered whether the real painting might disappoint me. The opposite was true. Its grandeur and splendor made everything recede into the background and held me completely captivated. Coming here was indeed a homecoming.

While many tourist groups with their guides came and left in rapid succession, I sat on one of the red velvet chairs in front of the painting and just looked. Now I was seeing the real thing! Not only the father embracing his child-come-home, but also the elder son and the three other figures. It is a huge work in oil on canvas, eight feet high by six feet wide. It took me a while to simply *be* there, simply absorbing that I was truly in the presence of what I had so long hoped to see, simply enjoying the fact that I was all by myself sitting in the Hermitage in Saint Petersburg looking at the *Prodigal Son* for as long as I wanted.

The painting was exposed in the most favorable way, on a wall that received plenty of natural light through a large nearby window at an eighty-degree angle. Sitting there, I realized that the light became fuller and more intense as the afternoon progressed. At four o'clock the sun covered the painting with a new brightness, and the background figures—which had remained quite vague in the early hours—seemed to step out of their dark corners. As the evening drew near, the sunlight grew more crisp and tingling. The embrace of the father and son became stronger and deeper, and the bystanders participated more directly in this mysterious event of reconciliation, forgiveness, and inner healing. Gradually I realized that there were as many paintings of the *Prodigal Son* as there were changes in the light, and, for a long time, I was held spellbound by this gracious dance of nature and art.

Without my realizing it, more than two hours had gone by when Alexei reappeared. With a compassionate smile and a supportive gesture, he suggested that I needed a break and invited me for coffee. He led me through the majestic halls of the museum—the larger part of which was the old winter palace of the tsars—back to the work space where we had been before. Alexei and his colleague had set out a large spread of breads, cheeses, and sweets, and encouraged me to enjoy it all. Having afternoon

coffee with the art restorers of the Hermitage was certainly not what I had dreamt about when I was hoping to spend some quiet time with the *Prodigal Son*. Both Alexei and his colleague shared with me all they knew about Rembrandt's painting and were very eager to know why I was so taken by it. They seemed surprised and even a bit perplexed by my spiritual observations and reflections. They listened attentively and urged me to tell more.

After coffee, I returned to the painting for another hour until the guard and the cleaning lady let me know, in no uncertain terms, that the museum was closing and that I had been there long enough.

Four days later, I returned for another visit to the painting. During that session, something amusing happened, something that I should not leave untold. Because of the angle from which the morning sun hit the painting, the varnish gave off a distracting glare. So I took one of the red velvet chairs and moved it to a place from which the glare was cut and I could once again see clearly the figures in the painting. As soon as the guard—a serious young man with cap and military-type uniform—saw what I was doing, he became very upset at my audacity in picking up my chair and putting it somewhere else. Walking up to me, he ordered me, with an outpouring of Russian words and universal gestures, to put the chair back in its place. In response, I pointed to the sun and the canvas, trying to explain to him why I had moved the chair. My efforts had absolutely no success. So I returned the chair to its place and sat on the floor instead. But that only disturbed the guard even more. After some further animated attempts to win the sympathy of the guard for my problem, he told me to sit on the radiator below the window, from where I could have a good view. However, the first Intourist guide passing by with a large group marched up to me and told me sternly to get off the radiator and sit on one of the velvet chairs. At that, the guard became very angry at the guide and told her with a profusion of words and gestures that it was he who had let me sit on the radiator. The guide did not seem satisfied but decided to return her attention to the tourists, who were looking at the Rembrandt and wondering about the size of the figures. A few minutes later, Alexei came to see how I was doing. Immediately, the guard walked up to him and both of them entered into a long conversation. The guard was obviously trying to explain what had happened, but the discussion lasted so long that I wondered somewhat anxiously where it all would lead. Then, quite suddenly, Alexei left. For a

moment, I felt quite guilty at having caused such a stir and thought that I had made Alexei angry with me. Ten minutes later, however, Alexei returned carrying a large comfortable armchair with red velvet upholstery and gold-painted legs. All for me! With a big grin, he put the chair in front of the painting and bade me sit in it. Alexei, the guard, and I all smiled. I had my own chair, and nobody objected any longer. Suddenly it all seemed very comical. Three empty chairs that could not be touched and a luxurious armchair brought in from some other room in the winter palace, offered to me to be freely moved around. Elegant bureaucracy! I wondered if any of the figures in the painting, who had been witnesses to the whole scene, were smiling along with us. I will never know.

Altogether, I spent more than four hours with the *Prodigal Son*, making notes about what I heard the guides and the tourists say, about what I saw as the sun grew stronger and faded away, and about what I experienced in my innermost being as I became more and more part of the story that Jesus once told and Rembrandt once painted. I wondered whether and how these precious hours in the Hermitage would ever bear fruit.

When I left the painting, I walked up to the young guard and tried to express my gratitude for his putting up with me for so long. As I looked into his eyes under the large Russian cap, I saw a man like myself: afraid, but with a great desire to be forgiven. From his beardless young face came a very gentle smile. I smiled too, and the two of us felt safe.

#### *The Event*

A few weeks after visiting the Hermitage in Saint Petersburg, I arrived at L'Arche Daybreak in Toronto to live and work as the pastor of the community. Although I had taken a full year to sort out my vocation and to discern whether God was calling me to a life with mentally handicapped people, I still felt very apprehensive and anxious about my ability to live it well. I had never before given much attention to people with a mental handicap. Much to the contrary, I had focused increasingly on university students and their problems. I learned how to give lectures and write books, how to explain things systematically, how to make titles and subtitles, how to argue and how to analyze. So I had little idea as to how to communicate with men and women who hardly speak and, if they do speak, are not interested in logical arguments or well-reasoned opinions. I knew even less about announcing the Gospel of Jesus to people who listened more with

their hearts than with their minds and who were far more sensitive to what I lived than to what I said.

I came to Daybreak in August 1986, with the conviction that I had made the right choice, but with a heart still full of trepidation about what lay ahead of me. Despite this I was convinced that, after more than twenty years in the classroom, the time had come to trust that God loves the poor in spirit in a very special way and that—even though I may have had little to offer them—they had a lot to offer me.

One of the first things I did after my arrival was to look for a good place to hang my poster of the *Prodigal Son*. The work space that was given to me proved ideal. Whenever I sat down to read, write, or talk to someone, I could see that mysterious embrace of father and son that had become such an intimate part of my spiritual journey.

Since my visit to the Hermitage, I had become more aware of the four figures, two women and two men, who stood around the luminous space where the father welcomed his returning son. Their way of looking leaves you wondering how they think or feel about what they are watching. These bystanders, or observers, allow for all sorts of interpretations. As I reflect on my own journey, I become more and more aware of how long I have played the role of observer. For years I had instructed students on the different aspects of the spiritual life, trying to help them see the importance of living it. But had I, myself, really ever dared to step into the center, kneel down, and let myself be held by a forgiving God?

The simple fact of being able to express an opinion, to set up an argument, to defend a position, and to clarify a vision has given me, and gives me still, a sense of control. And, generally, I feel much safer in experiencing a sense of control over an undefinable situation than in taking the risk of letting that situation control me.

Certainly there were many hours of prayer, many days and months of retreat, and countless conversations with spiritual directors, but I had never fully given up the role of bystander. Even though there has been in me a lifelong desire to be an insider looking out, I nevertheless kept choosing over and over again the position of the outsider looking in. Sometimes this looking-in was a curious looking-in, sometimes a jealous looking-in, sometimes an anxious looking-in, and, once in a while, even a loving looking-in. But giving up the somewhat safe position of the critical observer seemed like a great leap into totally unknown territory. I so much

wanted to keep some control over my spiritual journey, to remain able to predict at least a part of the outcome, that relinquishing the security of the observer for the vulnerability of the returning son seemed close to impossible. Teaching students, passing on the many explanations given over the centuries to the words and actions of Jesus, and showing them the many spiritual journeys that people have chosen in the past seemed very much like taking the position of one of the four figures surrounding the divine embrace. The two women standing behind the father at different distances, the seated man staring into space and looking at no one in particular, and the tall man standing erect and looking critically at the event on the platform in front of him—they all represent different ways of not getting involved. There is indifference, curiosity, daydreaming, and attentive observation; there is staring, gazing, watching, and looking; there is standing in the background, leaning against an arch, sitting with arms crossed, and standing with hands gripping each other. Every one of these inner and outer postures is all too familiar to me. Some are more comfortable than others, but all of them are ways of not getting directly involved.

Moving from teaching university students to living with mentally handicapped people was, for me at least, a step toward the platform where the father embraces his kneeling son. It is the place of light, the place of truth, the place of love. It is the place where I so much want to be, but am so fearful of being. It is the place where I will receive all I desire, all that I ever hoped for, all that I will ever need, but it is also the place where I have to let go of all I most want to hold on to. It is the place that confronts me with the fact that truly accepting love, forgiveness, and healing is often much harder than giving it. It is the place beyond earning, deserving, and rewarding. It is the place of surrender and complete trust.

Soon after I came to Daybreak, Linda, a beautiful young woman with Down's syndrome, put her arms around me and said: "Welcome." She does that to every newcomer, and every time she does it, she does it with unreserved conviction and love. But how to receive such an embrace? Linda had never met me. She had no understanding at all of what I had lived before coming to Daybreak. She had never had the chance to encounter my dark side, nor to discover my corners of light. She had never read any of my books, heard me speak, or even had a decent conversation with me.



So, should I just smile, call her cute, and walk on as if nothing had happened? Or was Linda standing somewhere on the platform and saying with her gesture, “Come on up, don’t be so bashful, your Father wants to hold you too!” It seems that every time—be it Linda’s welcome, Bill’s handshake, Gregory’s smile, Adam’s silence, or Raymond’s words—I have to make a choice between “explaining” these gestures or simply accepting them as invitations to come higher up and closer by.

These years at Daybreak have not been easy. There has been much inner struggle, and there has been mental, emotional, and spiritual pain. Nothing, absolutely nothing, had about it the quality of having arrived. However, the move from Harvard to L’Arche proved to be but one little step from bystander to participant, from judge to repentant sinner, from teacher about love to being loved as the beloved. I really did not have an inkling of how difficult the journey would be. I did not realize how deeply rooted my resistance was and how agonizing it would be to “come to my senses,” fall on my knees, and let my tears flow freely. I did not realize how hard it would be to become truly part of the great event that Rembrandt’s painting portrays.

Each little step toward the center seemed like an impossible demand, a demand requiring me to let go one more time from wanting to be in control, to give up one more time the desire to predict life, to die one more time to the fear of not knowing where it all will lead, and to surrender one more time to a love that knows no limits. And still, I knew that I would never be able to live the great commandment to love without allowing myself to be loved without conditions or prerequisites. The journey from teaching about love to allowing myself to be loved proved much longer than I realized.

### *The Vision*

Much of what has happened since my arrival at Daybreak is written down in diaries and notebooks, but, as it stands, little of it is fit to share with others. The words are too raw, too noisy, too “bloody,” and too naked. But now a time has come when it is possible to look back on those years of turmoil and to describe, with more objectivity than was possible before, the place to which all of that struggle has brought me. 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 center. I am still like the prodigal: traveling, preparing speeches, anticipating how it will be when I finally reach my Father’s house. But I am, indeed, on my way home. I have left the

distant country and come to feel the nearness of love. And so, I am ready now to share my story. There is some hope, some light, some consolation to be found in it. Much of what I have lived in the past few years will be part of this story, not as an expression of confusion or despair, but as moments in my journey toward the light.

Rembrandt's painting has remained very close to me throughout this time. I have moved it around many times: from my office to the chapel, from the chapel to the living room of the Dayspring (the house of prayer at Daybreak), and from the living room of the Dayspring back to the chapel. I have spoken about it many times inside and outside of the Daybreak community: to handicapped people and their assistants, to ministers and priests, and to men and women from diverse walks of life. The more I spoke of the *Prodigal Son*, the more I came to see it as, somehow, my personal painting, the painting that contained not only the heart of the story that God wants to tell me, but also the heart of the story that I want to tell to God and God's people. All of the Gospel is there. All of my life is there. All of the lives of my friends is there. The painting has become a mysterious window through which I can step into the Kingdom of God. It is like a huge gate that allows me to move to the other side of existence and look from there back into the odd assortment of people and events that make up my daily life.

For many years I tried to get a glimpse of God by looking carefully at the varieties of human experience: loneliness and love, sorrow and joy, resentment and gratitude, war and peace. I sought to understand the ups and downs of the human soul, to discern there a hunger and thirst that only a God whose name is Love could satisfy. I tried to discover the lasting beyond the passing, the eternal beyond the temporal, the perfect love beyond all paralyzing fears, and the divine consolation beyond the desolation of human anguish and agony. I tried constantly to point beyond the mortal quality of our existence to a presence larger, deeper, wider, and more beautiful than we can imagine, and to speak about that presence as a presence that can already now be seen, heard, and touched by those who are willing to believe.

However, during my time here at Daybreak, 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 favor rests.” It is the place where I can taste the joy and the peace that are not of this world.

This place had always been there. I had always been aware of it as the source of grace. But I had not been able to enter it and truly live there. Jesus says, “Anyone who loves me will keep my word and my Father will love him, and we shall come to him and make our home in him.” These words have always impressed me deeply. I am God’s home!

But it had always been very hard to experience the truth of these words. Yes, God dwells in my innermost being, but how could I accept Jesus’ call: “Make your home in me as I make mine in you”? The invitation is clear and unambiguous. To make my home where God had made his, this is the great spiritual challenge. It seemed an impossible task.

With my thoughts, feelings, emotions, and passions, I was constantly away from the place where God had chosen to make home. Coming home and staying there where God dwells, listening to the voice of truth and love, that was, indeed, the journey I most feared because I knew that God was a jealous lover who wanted every part of me all the time. When would I be ready to accept that kind of love?

God himself showed me the way. The emotional and physical crises that interrupted my busy life at Daybreak compelled me—with violent force—to return home and to look for God where God can be found—in my own inner sanctuary. I am unable to say that I have arrived; I never will in this life, because the way to God reaches far beyond the boundary of death. While it is a long and very demanding journey, it is also one full of wonderful surprises, often offering us a taste of the ultimate goal.

When I first saw Rembrandt’s painting, I was not as familiar with the home of God within me as I am now. Nevertheless, my intense response to the father’s embrace of his son told me that I was desperately searching for that inner place where I too could be held as safely as the young man in the painting. At the time, I did not foresee what it would take to come a few steps closer to that place. I am grateful for not having known in advance what God was planning for me. But I am grateful as well for the new place that has been opened in 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. I know now that I have to speak from eternity into time, from the lasting joy into the passing realities of our short existence in this world, from the house of love into the houses of fear, from God's abode into the dwellings of human beings. I am well aware of the enormity of this vocation. Still, I am confident that it is the only way for me. One could call it the "prophetic" vision: looking at people and this world through the eyes of God.

Is this a realistic possibility for a human being? More important: Is it a true option for me? This is not an intellectual question. It is a question of vocation. I am called to enter into the inner sanctuary of my own being where God has chosen to dwell. The only way to that place is prayer, unceasing prayer. Many struggles and much pain can clear the way, but I am certain that only unceasing prayer can let me enter it.

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