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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 A I N T I N G

## ■ *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