



## The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life

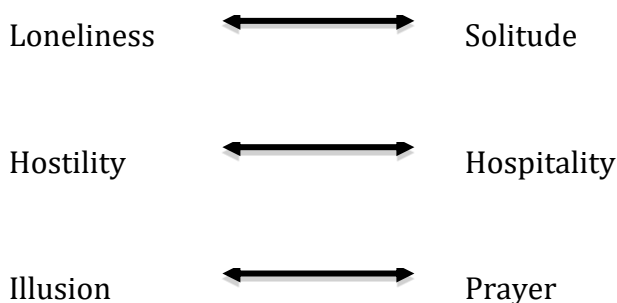
In *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, Henri Nouwen offers a model for understanding a central dynamic in the spiritual life. The quotes in this reading are from *Reaching Out* unless otherwise noted.

Our shorthand for understanding what he's getting at is this: Loneliness and illusion will bring hostility; solitude and prayer will bring hospitality.

Let's look at Father Nouwen's three movements of the spiritual life. We're going to come at this by emphasizing what we see as those aspects of his thinking most helpful in creating a model that we can recall and make use of.

### The movement between poles

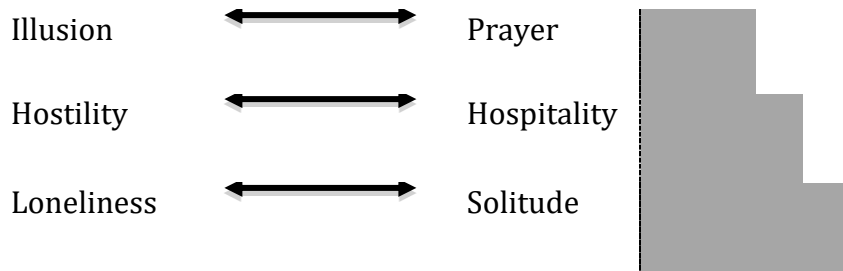
*The spiritual life is that constant movement between the poles of loneliness and solitude, hostility and hospitality, illusion and prayer. The more we come to the painful confession of our loneliness, hostility and illusions, the more we are able to see solitude, hospitality and prayer as part of the vision of our life.*



### The movement toward growth

One way of conceptualizing spiritual growth is to see it as building blocks.

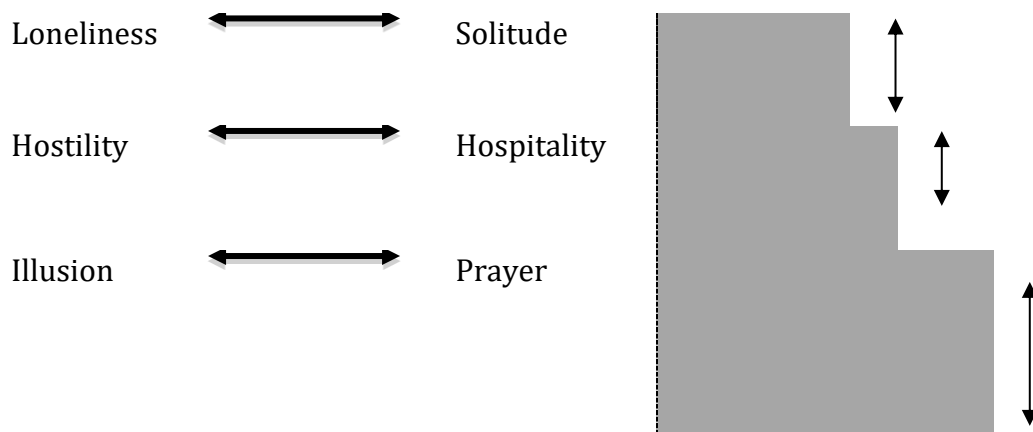
As the person, or parish, increases a capacity for solitude, what Kenneth Leech called "an inner core of silence," that provides a base for growth in hospitality. And as our hospitality increases, that provides a base for deeper prayer (and connection with more reality). That foundation allows for our encounter with "Reality." It is the path to our deepest self and our most profound connection with God in community.



*To live a spiritual life we must first find the courage to enter into the desert of our loneliness and to change it by gentle and persistent efforts into a garden of solitude...The movement from loneliness to solitude, however, is the beginning of any spiritual life because it is the movement from the restless senses to the restful spirit, from the outward-reaching cravings to the inward-reaching search, from the fearful clinging to the fearless play.*

In Nouwen’s discussion on prayer he brings forward another image.

*The movement from illusion to prayer undergirds and makes possible the movements from loneliness to solitude and from hostility to hospitality and leads us to the core of the spiritual life...When we do not enter into that inner field of tension where the movement from illusion to prayer takes place, our solitude and our hospitality easily lose their depth.*



There is movement up and down the map as well as between the poles.

*The paradox of prayer is that we have to learn how to pray while we can only receive it as a gift.*

If we are to grow, we need to place ourselves in the pathways of grace. We need to develop a spiritual discipline, a Rule of Prayer. As we do that, we will experience that relationship with God (Prayer) is a gift to us. It comes by God’s initiative into our longing heart.

## Creating a space

Nouwen uses the phrase "creating a space for strangers" to capture what he means by hospitality.

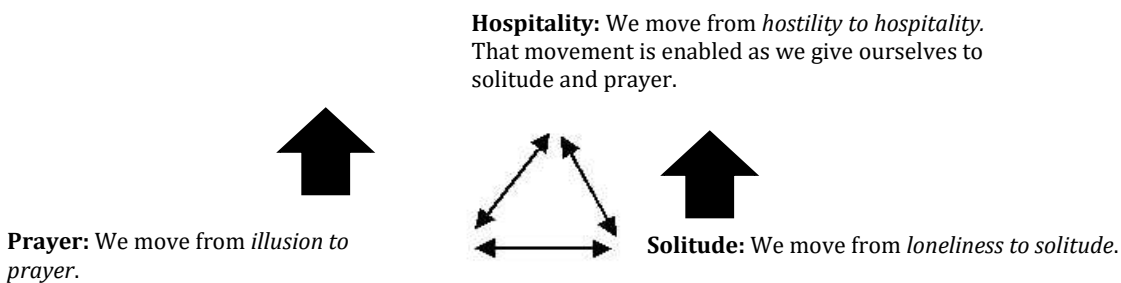
*In our world full of strangers, estranged from their own past, culture and country, from their neighbors, friends and family, from their deepest self and their God, we witness a painful search for a hospitable place where life can be lived without fear and where community can be found.*

*That is our vocation: to convert the 'hostis' into a 'hospes', the enemy into a guest and to create the free and fearless space where brotherhood and sisterhood can be formed and fully experienced.*

*To convert hostility into hospitality requires the creation of the friendly empty space where we can reach out to our fellow human beings and invite them to a new relationship. This conversion is an inner event that cannot be manipulated but must develop from within. Just as we cannot force a plant to grow but can take away the weeds and stones which prevent its development, so we cannot force anyone to such a personal and intimate change of heart, but we can offer the space where such a change can take place.*

## Faithful action rises from faithful prayer

This is yet another way of placing Nouwen's ideas in a framework.



This way of diagramming Nouwen's model offers us the understanding that faithful action rises from faithful prayer. It shows an interdependence, a synergy, among solitude, prayer and hospitality. Growth in one may activate growth in the others. And, it also demonstrates the traditional understanding of the relationship between prayer and action.

We are fond of Evelyn Underhill's way of expressing it:

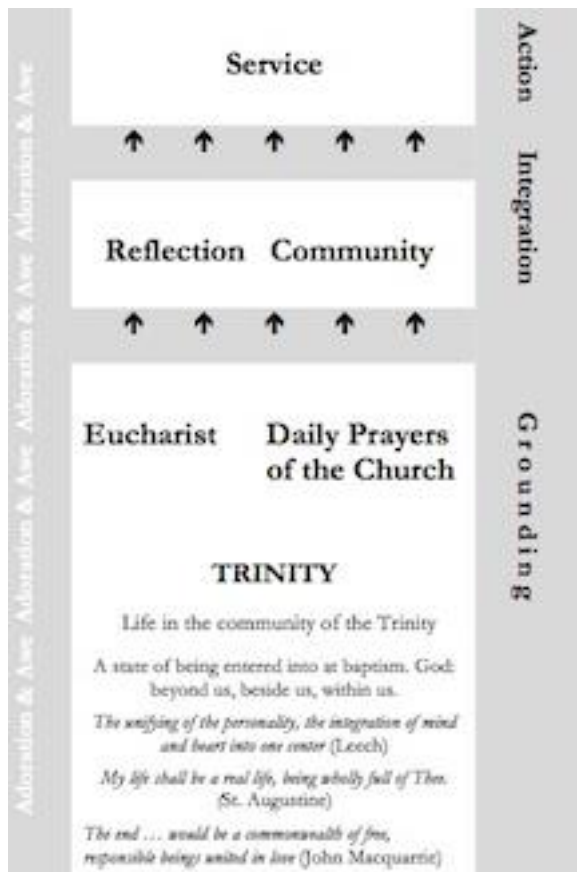
*One's first duty is adoration, and one's second duty is awe and only one's third duty is service. And that for those three things and nothing else, addressed to God and no one else, you and I and all other countless human creatures evolved upon the surface of this planet were created. We observe then that two of the three things for which our souls were made are matters of attitude, of relation: adoration and awe. Unless these two are right, the last of the triad, service, won't be right. Unless the whole of your...life is a movement of praise and adoration, unless it is instinct with awe, the work which the life produces won't be much good.*

Saint John of the Cross made the same point this way:

*But without prayer, all they do amounts to nothing more than noise and uproar; it is like a hammer banging on an anvil and echoing all over the neighborhood. They accomplish a little more than nothing, sometimes absolutely nothing at all, and sometimes downright evil.*

Martin Thornton points to it in *The Rock and the River* and in his description offers a process and systems perspective: "Moral action only flows from doctrinal truth by grace and faith, that is through prayer." Thornton describes the organic nature of the spiritual life with an image—"divine transcendence which bubbles over into life." He describes Holy Fear as "the joyous expression of an habitual recognition of divine transcendence which bubbles over into life as that exciting awe and reverence so aptly described...as 'numinous'...It is that exhilarating, terrifying, dynamic insight into the glory and majesty of God which inspires a sense of wonder in all creation together with a calm recollection and faith in Providence.

### *In Your Holy Spirit*



We have incorporated the same view as the others in the "In Your Holy Spirit model."<sup>1</sup>

The "map" we offer includes five elements. At the base there are two practices: one weekly, one daily; a rhythm common to many religious and spiritual traditions. These elements have to do with living in the habits and ways that keep us grounded in what is most real. In Anglicanism they take form as the Holy Eucharist and Daily Office.

On that base there are two more elements standing side-by-side—Community and Reflection.

The final element is Service. We are called to serve in ways that fit our gifts, personality and circumstances.

We ground ourselves in the Blessed Trinity in Eucharist and Office. We integrate and deepen life through community and reflection. And all that shapes the service we offer the world. The Holiness "bubbles over into life."

<sup>1</sup> See the In Your Holy Spirit books. Michelle Heyne's *In Your Holy Spirit: Traditional Spiritual Practices in Today's Christian Life* and Robert Gallagher's *In Your Holy Spirit: Shaping the Parish through Spiritual Practice*. Ascension Press, 2008.