

Henri J.M. Nouwen

### finding a New Way to Get a Glimpse of God

**Ed. Note:** *Fr. Nouwen here continues the chronicle of the time he spent in Germany in 1992 largely with the traveling Circus Barum, in particular with the trapeze group the “Flying Rodleighs,” composed of four South Africans: Rodleigh, his wife, Jenny, his sister, Karlene, and Joe; and one American, Jon. Fr. Nouwen expects to write a book based on this diary.*

#### Wednesday May 13 — Kamen

The trip on the German roads from Dateln to Kamen last night was short but, again, very tricky for me. At one point I realized I had forgotten to push back my camper’s doorstep. Since I was afraid that this piece of metal sticking out was a hazard, I had to stop, walk around the camper, and push it in. Jon, driving behind me, and seeing what was happening, talked by radio to Rodleigh at the front of the convoy, and brought the whole circus troupe to a standstill. At first I couldn’t get my camper to start again, but finally I got back on

the road, and everyone started to move again. I felt embarrassed by my clumsiness, but realized that I had to accept it with a smile.

Mud, mud, mud. Mud was everywhere at the Kamen fairgrounds. I walked over to Karlene’s place, and we had some coffee. She was very open with me and spoke about all the “mood swings” of the troupe. “Rodleigh can be so critical of me. Sometimes I get so fed up with all his remarks about the way I keep my trailer, the way I am with my daughter, Karlene, the way I do my act. A few weeks ago I was about ready to quit...but I have to confess...what makes him so critical is also what makes him such a good artist. He is a real perfectionist. You have to be a perfectionist when you want to be a good aerial acrobat. You not only have to do good tricks, but you have to do them with perfect style. A difficult trick, sloppily executed, does not make a good show. Well, his perfectionism comes through in all things. I guess I have to learn not to take his criticisms too personally.”

Karlene also spoke about Jenny, Joe, and Jon. She spoke of them with great love and respect, but also letting me know that living so closely together, day in day out, with no outside friends, is far from easy. “You really have to give each other space. I need my own space, and I can’t deal with people just walking in and out of my trailer all the time.”

---

The Rev. Henri J.M. Nouwen is a writer and lecturer, a priest-in-residence at Daybreak in Toronto (a Catholic/ecumenical l’Arche community serving disabled persons), and a Contributing Editor of the NOR. The first installment in this two-part circus diary appeared in our June issue.



ly I have to remind myself that I cannot go everywhere, cannot speak to everyone, cannot be part of everything.

The Rodleights give me a good focus. Whatever I can learn from them, I really want to take in. But the rest — the clowns, the magic boys, the animal trainers, the Moroccan workers, and the Polish musicians — must remain on the periphery of my vision. Otherwise everything starts spinning, and writing becomes impossible.

Why should I write about a trapeze act? I have no answers. The trapeze act was “given” to me last year, just as the print of Rembrandt’s “The Return of the Prodigal Son” was “given” to me in 1983. [Ed. Note: Fr. Nouwen’s *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Meditation on Fathers, Brothers, and Sons* was published by Doubleday in 1992.]

There is a strange “must” to my writing about the trapeze act. I still do not know precisely why the Flying Rodleights are so important for me. I still cannot articulate fully the meaning of their show. But I know with great inner certainty that they hold an important secret for me that will reveal itself little by little if I remain faithful to my intuition.

I am convinced that I have been sent to the Rodleights to discover something new about life and death, love and fear, peace and conflict, heaven and hell, something I can’t get to know and write about in any other way. Often I think: “How could I have ever imagined, even a few years ago, that I would sit for a few weeks writing in a camper in the midst of a circus in Germany?” But here I am, and it feels like the only good place to be right now. What tomorrow will bring, I will find out tomorrow. I am happy that I don’t have to know that today.

During the afternoon show, just after Karlene had explained to me about the socks filled with magnesium-carbonate powder to dry the hands of the flyers and catchers, Joe’s sock came loose and fell from the catch bar into the net. Rodleigh pointed to it, but nothing could be done, since the act was in full swing. The Moroccan ringman smiled at me when he noticed that I had seen it happen.

The act went on as usual, but during the evaluation Karlene told me that it had scared her. “Joe sweats a lot, and he needs it to keep his hands dry in order to hold on to us.”

The evening show went badly for Rodleigh. He missed the full-twist somersault and on his return he hit his calves at the pedestal

board. After the act he was limping badly, but Jenny didn’t make a big drama of it. “It is a strange place to get hurt,” she said. “That has never happened before.”

## Friday May 15 — Wuppertal

We made it all right to the fairgrounds in the center of Wuppertal, despite my missing the exit to the freeway and Jon’s having to go after me and bring me back to the convoy, and even despite Rodleigh’s turning off the freeway too early and having the whole convoy wandering back and forth at the wrong end of town. When, by midnight, all our trailers were neatly lined up, we felt some real excitement about our new location. “I saw a large supermarket just before we entered the grounds,” said Karlene. Joe exclaimed: “Finally, a place we can stay a while.” Jenny remarked: “Except for not having grass, we call this an ideal place,” and Rodleigh added: “Nice and close to the tent so we can hear the music and know when our time in the show is coming.” Jon was in an especially good mood because his parents were arriving the following day from Detroit for a week.

This morning I decided to take the afternoon train to Freiburg to visit friends. I felt a certain sadness about leaving, but was glad to know that I would be back within a week and still be able to spend a few days with the circus in Wuppertal. As Jenny drove me to the station I realized how similar to Freiburg the circus set-up here was. Being in a city really feels different from being on the outskirts of one of those small towns. Jenny said: “In those little towns people often look at you as if you are a bunch of strangers doing crazy things, but in a place like this you feel welcome, and there is more excitement about your being there.”

At 3:20 my train rolled into the station. A four-and-a-half-hour trip lay ahead of me.

## Saturday, May 16 — Freiburg

Because of computer problems, the train arrived nearly two hours late at the station in Freiburg. But Franz Johna was there to welcome me, and took me to his home, where his wife, Reny, received me warmly. It feels good to see good old friends again and be able to hear from them about their work in book publishing.

This morning, to celebrate the Eucharist, we all drove to the “Maria chapel” in Giersberg, a small village in the Black Forest. It was

a splendid sunny spring morning. Chestnut trees were blooming with their white candles along the city streets. There were goldenrod and azaleas in carefully groomed front gardens, and white and purple lilacs beside the yellow and brown houses. As we drove into the valley there was field after field covered with yellow blankets of dandelions and hills decorated with blooming apple trees.

When we arrived at the chapel, overlooking the valleys, the view was even more splendid. I kept looking at nature's show of beauty and grace.

Hermann and Mechtild Herder, Ulrich Schuetz, and Edgar Huber with his wife and mother-in-law and two friends were all there waiting for us. The Eucharist was simple as well as festive. From the altar I could look over the sun-covered valley through the open doors of the chapel. The songs, the readings, and the eucharistic prayer were all like an invitation to praise and give thanks.

I kept thinking about my friends in the circus and my friends at l'Arche. I needed so much to have them all with me, to see what I could see. God's breathtaking splendor in front of me seemed too much for one person to receive.

After breakfast in the little restaurant beside the chapel, Franz and Reny took me on a little trip to the baroque churches of St. Peter, Lindenberg, and St. Maergen. I was in a mood to admire them all, even though the twirling and whirling white and gold plaster saints and paintings that suggest heavens filled with well-fed angels aren't necessarily great artistic achievements. But the landscape, the churches, the blossoms and flowers, and all the kindness of my hosts and their friends came together in a wonderful harmony of happiness and peace.

### Sunday May 17

I sense that Franz still has some problems with my enthusiasm for the circus. In his presence, I feel as though I should choose a more serious subject. He finds it hard to see how this could lead to a spiritual book. But as we spoke, and as I explained that I wasn't thinking of using the Rodleighs as illustrations for great spiritual truths, but was simply trying to write a good story about good people who are doing good things, Franz began to warm up and even got excited.

It is important for me to be away from the circus and to be invited to "defend" my project. The more I talk about it, the more I

realize that, first of all, I want to write a good story and that I have to trust that the story, alone, will carry within itself Good News.

### Monday May 18

Walking through downtown Freiburg, buying a few new van Gogh prints, observing the many students with their briefcases going to and coming from the various university buildings: Just being here! Freiburg has become for me like a second home town. I feel loved by this city. Its beautiful *Muenster*, its cozy downtown, its bookstores and poster shops, its little stone brooks in the city streets, its beautiful gates and the streetcars always ready to take you from one corner of town to the other — they all give me a sense of well-being that no other city can offer.

At Herder Verlag I spent a good hour with Franz. We spoke mostly about writing a book with meditations for every day. Franz had already published such a book with daily readings by Carlo Martini, Carlo Caretto, and Heinrich Spaemann — compilations of excerpts from their earlier writings. I wasn't too excited about doing another anthology. Many of my books no longer express my spiritual vision and, although I am not dismissing my earlier writing as no longer valid, I feel that something radically different is being asked of me. My many encounters with people who have no contact with any church, my contact with AIDS patients, my experience in the circus, and the many socio-political events of the past few years all ask for a new way to speak about God. This new way includes not only content but form. Not only what I say, but also how I say it should be different. What mostly comes to mind is stories. I know I have to write stories. Not essays with arguments, quotes, and analyses, but stories which are short and simple and give us a glimpse of God in the midst of our multifaceted lives.

But writing stories, real stories, human stories, God-given stories, will ask the most of me.

### Tuesday May 19

I spent the whole day sitting behind my desk in the comfortable apartment on the third floor of Fran and Reny Johna's house. As I gradually slow down, writing becomes easier. But I feel a certain inner resistance to working on the circus book: as if the project is too big for me and I still do not have enough knowledge about the trapeze to write it easily. I am

still not fully capable of writing from within. I still feel too much like an observer. But I know there is no end to this process of becoming part of one's subject. So, I had better just start writing, trusting that something will emerge.

One thing I have to learn is to write dialogue. It's not as easy as it seems. I realize that I have to listen more carefully to how people do in fact talk with one another. I want to steal little fragments of conversation from real life. That's new for me.

### Wednesday, May 20

Tonight Franz and Reny took me to a friend's home to celebrate the Eucharist and have supper. There were nine people. We reflected on John 15, where Jesus says: "I am the vine, you are the branches...when you remain in me, you will bear much fruit." What is a fruitful life? It struck me that in order to be fruitful, the vine has to be pruned, to be cut back.

I am more and more aware of how much I want to go in many directions, do many things, meet many people, be involved in many situations. But to be fruitful I have to stay close to the source of life and allow myself to be cut back.

This is something I cannot do for myself; it must be done by the Word of God. It's the Word that tells me that the grain of wheat has to die in order to bear fruit. Maybe it's first of all a question of becoming attentive to when and where the cutting is taking place, and recognizing these times and places as times and places of fruitfulness.

### Thursday May 21 — Wuppertal

This morning Franz took me to the railroad station. At 7:56 the train rolled in. I thanked Franz for his and Reny's wonderful hospitality, said good-bye, and found my seat for the ride to Wuppertal.

At 1:30 I was back at the circus. I had been wondering on the train how the week had been going for the Flying Rodleights. Was Rodleigh's leg healed? Had there been a good audience during this long stay in one place? Would I find everyone in good spirits, less tired and frazzled than when I had left?

I soon discovered that it hadn't been an easy week at all. Rodleigh's injury still looked bad. Karlene had some internal bleeding in her stomach area, spent hours at the doctor's office, and was finally told that it was impossible to do any trapeze work as long as there was pain. Jenny had an extended medical

checkup because of her heart murmur. The German clown collapsed in the ring as a result of a dust allergy and was taken to the hospital. Mrs. Kaminski fell from the Russian bar when she came down from her final trick; she hurt her leg badly. Peter, the Englishman with his dog act, had a real setback. The clown's dog got loose and went after Peter's little circus dog and bit him so badly that Peter had to keep him out of the ring for nearly a week. And all the Hassani tumbling boys seem to have pain in their wrists and ankles!

Somewhat apprehensive, I went to the afternoon show, wondering how the trapeze act would go with two wounded artists. At first, nothing seemed too different. But when Rodleigh worked with Jon and wanted to make a front somersault from Jon to Joe, he failed to reach Joe's hands and came down into the net. Since he had planned to return from Joe to Jon and do some more tricks from Jon's hands, his fall forced him to cut all of that out and let Jenny continue the act from the pedestal board.

But the evening performance was completely different. Was it the simple determination to work well together in hard circumstances? Was it the large and enthusiastic audience? I don't know, and the Rodleights probably didn't know



either, but the show was superb. Rodleigh flew to and from Jon and Joe with great ease and was caught without any visible strain. He made his somersaults and twists with tremendous grace and moved through the air as if the air was his. Jenny too went from the board and returned to it with much elegance, and when Jenny and Rodleigh concluded the act with their spectacular passage over the flying bar from and into the hands of Joe, the audience exploded in a burst of applause and foot stomping that made Gerd Siemoneit send the whole troupe back into the ring for another **bow**.

The whole group was excited, they had felt the electricity in the air. Even Joe, who is usually quite reserved, didn't hide his enthusiasm. "It went really well," he said.

### Friday May 22

Joe and I had lunch together in a pizzeria across from the circus. The more I come to know Joe, the more I am moved by his warmth and kindness. The one who at first seemed so shy and off by himself reveals himself increasingly as a very caring person.

Joe asked me how my writing was going. When I told him that I still felt too much of a stranger in the circus to feel able to truly write "from within," he came up with many helpful suggestions.

Joe himself is an avid reader. "Do you find any time to read here in the circus?" I asked. "Yes, sure," he said, "at night when it's dark and quiet I can read until the early hours of the day. I only watch TV when I have no books to read."

Just before leaving the pizzeria, I asked Joe a question to which I knew the answer, but wanted to hear it again. "Do you love your work as a catcher?" Without hesitation he said: "Oh yes. I love it. You have to love it to do it well. If you do it for the money, you will quickly lose not only your interest, but also your skill." He added: "We don't *have* to do what we do. We all could easily find other jobs. We really have to love what we are doing to keep doing what we are doing!"

### Saturday, May 23 — Geysteren

Last night, during the intermission, I didn't join the Rodleighs for their evaluation, but spoke instead with Jon's sister Kristen, who has been going to every show since she arrived here with her parents from Detroit. Kristen loves the circus and can't get enough

of it.

For a woman with Down's syndrome, she is very independent and quite articulate. The clowns, with their "boxing act" full of heavy sounding blows, were her favorites. She told me all about her family, her work, and her role in the Special Olympics, where she won two medals and a ribbon.

As we spoke I realized that the circus speaks not only to the young as well as to the old, but also to mentally handicapped people as well as to the sophisticated. Indeed, the circus has found a universal language that bridges many differences among people.

I also had a chance to speak at length with Mrs. Siemoneit, the wife of Circus Barum's director. We compared life in the circus with life at l'Arche. There are many similarities. Both are international communities, and both offer protected space. Mrs. Siemoneit told me about her son. "I don't worry when Max runs around the circus with all the animals and heavy equipment. But I do worry when he wants to go for an ice cream to the store down the road. It seems safer here than over there on the street where nobody knows him. For children the circus is a paradise...."

On this, my last day in the circus, I saw many connections between my l'Arche community in Toronto and this circus community. From a distance they seem so different, but looking at them closely they are quite similar. They are both communities for special people.

Saying good-bye wasn't easy after so many good days with such good people. But I felt ready to move on. I know the Rodleighs will be my friends for life. They might not yet know this, but leaving them last night didn't seem to be a leaving for very long. Just a time to gather up all my new impressions and find the story that lies beneath them.

At 6 o'clock this morning, I left the fairgrounds in Wuppertal. An hour-and-a-half later I crossed the border into the Netherlands and at 8:30 I was home with my father in Geysteren. He was very happy to see me and wanted to know all about the circus.

### Conclusion

The diary I kept during my 16 days in Germany captures only a very small part of what I have experienced there. The elaborate notes I wrote about particulars of the trapeze act, the rigging, and the costumes, but which are not part of this diary, prove how limited these daily reflections are. But I am glad I kept

this record because I have come to understand that those events that seem rather trivial or ordinary in the context of a life in the circus are much less trivial and ordinary when looked at in retrospect. Most of all, I know how little I still know about the trapeze act and how much I still want to know.

It's also good that, after telling my story to my father and friends, I now have something

they can read. Their response will help me discover the real surprises of those wonderful days, and will probably give me enough new questions to make me go back soon. But whether or not I need to go back for more learning, I certainly will go back simply to visit those five beautiful circus friends who taught me so much of what it means to be a flyer and a catcher.