

Befriending Life, edited by Beth Porter, with Susan Brown and Philip Coulter

reviewed by [Wayne A. Holst](#) in the [October 24, 2001](#) issue

His primary expectation was that you keep your heart open to life," writes Fred Bratman of his friend Henri Nouwen. That Bratman, who is a marketing executive at a New York investment bank and Jewish, is one of the 47 contributors to this expansive and diverse collection shows something of the range of the Roman Catholic Nouwen's spiritual influence.

Peter Naus, a fellow Dutch academic who followed Nouwen to America, provides background on Nouwen's life. Early on, Nouwen was envied by his compatriots for standing out. He was hesitant to criticize the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, and his spirituality was considered overly simplistic and pious. Although he wrote much about downward mobility, he was--especially in his early years--quite a self seeker. In time, he learned to understand his own flaws and vulnerabilities and sought to live with them constructively and creatively.

Nathan Ball, Nouwen's colleague at L'Arche Daybreak, the community for mentally challenged people where Nouwen worked at the end of his life, integrates the impact of Nouwen's life, friendship and death. Ball does not romanticize their relationship but respects Nouwen as a suffering servant who helped many like him to struggle and grow in their vocations.

Jean Vanier introduced Nouwen to L'Arche and saw him as one who was always available to people, fully and freely, and whose own pain helped him identify with others. Nouwen's anguish became an incredible source of energy. "He knew how to describe his own mess as well as the mess of the world," Vanier writes.

Michael Ford presents a more critical picture. Though Nouwen wrote about issues with which he had personally struggled, he was inclined to seek the limelight and to engineer situations to suit his own needs. He tended to do his own thing in the

institutions where he worked, and his greatest fear was that he would be unloved and unrecognized. He was a prodigious figure in modern spirituality, writes Ford, "but I hope people will now examine his work more critically in light of his own life story."