

## **The Wounded Healer and the Singularity**

### Introduction

*The Wounded Healer* by Henri Nouwen was originally published in 1972, and is broadly considered a modern spiritual classic. Flowing from his belief that what is most personal is also most universal, the book is subdivided into four chapters that deal with themes in doing ministry. These themes are 1) Ministry in a Dislocated World, 2) Ministry for a Rootless Generation, 3) Ministry to a Hopeless Man, and 4) Ministry by a Lonely Minister. For the purposes of this paper I will focus on the first section, and how it connects to a technological transformation of human life known as the Singularity.

### Ministry in a Dislocated World

Nouwen begins the first chapter by embarking on a search for *nuclear man*. By this he means someone who realizes that the same powers which enable us to create new lifestyles can just as easily contribute to self-destruction. Accordingly, nuclear man has lost naïve faith in the possibilities of technology (Nouwen 1972, 27). Situated in what at that time was called the “nuclear age,” the nuclear man realizes that while new technology enables us to produce in an hour (or less) what could have previously taken years, he also understands that industrialization has significantly contributed to ecological imbalance (Nouwen 1972, 27). This not only brings destructive pollution, but also a loss in our ability to understand the instruments we use in spite of our increasing dependence on them.

Substitute the term “nuclear age” for *information age*, and we are left with an enhanced version of the same problem. Now more than ever, while no longer necessarily

motivated by scarcity, what we lack is a tangible sense of “meaning and purpose” (Nouwen 1972, 31). Hence we are dislocated from the world, even though weapons exist that could destroy the conditions for human life. Our dislocation is grounded in the fact that the meaningful symbols that bind society together no longer have the integrating and unifying power they once had, and we respond to this reality with a stunted emotional range comprised not of “anxiety and joy,” but “apathy and boredom” (Nouwen 1972, 34-35). Our very ideologies have become mere ideological fragments, and while there are those who will find fulfillment in Christianity as both “mystical and revolutionary,” some will find meaning in non-Christian mystical experience, or revolutionary fulfillment through social transformation (Nouwen 1972, 59). There are even other people who will dare to “search for a new immortality” (Nouwen 1972, 45)!

This is a radical proposition, which Nouwen develops through observing how nuclear man has lost the sense of immortality that is his source of creativity. When people can no longer look beyond their own death and orient themselves beyond their lifespans, they lose both the desire to create, as well as “the excitement of being human” (Nouwen 1972, 48). The belief that we are searching for a new immortality is bolstered by Nouwen’s sense that: 1) contemporary life has simply become too relativized to sustain belief in a “hereafter” when scarcely any belief in the “here” remains; and 2) “a life after death can only be thought of in terms of life before it, and nobody can dream of a new earth when there is no old earth to hold any promises” (Nouwen 1972, 49-50).

The following passage articulates the vast extent of our dilemma:

No form of immortality – neither the immortality through children nor the immortality through works, neither the immortality through nature nor the immortality in heaven – is able to help nuclear man project himself beyond the limitations of his human existence. It is therefore certainly not

surprising that nuclear man cannot find an adequate expression of his experience in symbols such as Hell, Purgatory, Heaven, Hereafter, Resurrection, Paradise, and the Kingdom of God. (Nouwen 1972, 50)

Nouwen's speculations present a foreboding landscape, and he is certain that any "preaching and teaching still based on the assumption" that we are on our way to a promised land, or that our creative faculties are the first signs of what we will experience in the hereafter, can no longer "find a sounding board" in nuclear man (Nouwen 1972, 50-51). However disquieting this may be, *unforeseen* possibilities for immortality may yet be at hand.

The hindsight of our current perspective reveals Nouwen to have been prophetic, and the exploding bombshell of our search for a new immortality presents staggering potentialities. Could he have foreseen a Singularity that would in effect likewise discern the connection between the personal and universal, only to address the matter with such revolutionary divergence? As seen in the following example, though familiar sounding boards have become insufficient, perhaps an unprecedentedly new *circuit* board can revivify humanity.

### The Singularity

According to Ray Kurzweil, the best-known proponent of this paradigm shift and author of *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*, the Singularity is "a future period during which the pace of technological change will be so rapid, its impact so deep, that human life will be irreversibly transformed" (Kurzweil 2005, 69). On its face this might not seem necessarily controversial, as people living in countries with state-of-the-art technology are already accustomed to incredibly sophisticated personal computers, medical machines, e-commerce, the Internet and iPhones, and

clearly technological progress is irreversible. Presenting the Singularity as the next phase in *human evolution*, however, is where for many people the road gets extremely narrow.

The Singularity will allow us to transcend these limitations of our biological bodies and brains. We will gain power over our fates. Our mortality will be in our own hands. We will be able to live as long as we want (a subtly different statement from saying we will live forever). We will fully understand human thinking and will vastly extend and expand its reach. By the end of this century, the nonbiological portion of our intelligence will be trillions of trillions of times more powerful than unaided human intelligence. (Kurzweil 2005, 75-76)

Lest there be any doubt about the unprecedented reach of this claim, Kurzweil drives his argument home to the hilt:

The Singularity will represent the culmination of the merger of our biological thinking and existence with our technology, resulting in a world that is still human but that transcends our biological roots. There will be no distinction, post-Singularity, between human and machine or between physical and virtual reality. If you wonder what will remain unequivocally human in such a world, it's simply this quality: ours is the species that inherently seeks to extend its physical and mental reach beyond current limitations. (Kurzweil 2005, 77)

What Henri Nouwen perceived as a definitive move away from traditional beliefs in what he called a dislocated world that populates a rootless generation, wherein which hope is lacking and loneliness is abundant, arises a thesis of Singularity that is absolutely certain of itself, re-contextualizing the whole of human experience as one vast move toward self-transcendence that would understand such perturbations as mere growing pains on the path to none of it even mattering anymore, for we will arguably become gods!

#### Concluding Analysis

The Singularity is undoubtedly a position to wrestle with, and admittedly it would be difficult to imagine such a world still having use for antiquities such as God and the church. Though I would stop short of encouraging people to attempt physical

immortality in machine bodies, I cannot disagree with scientific progress doing whatever possible to improve the human condition. If the onus is on Catholics to find new pathways to relevance in this paradigm, at least we will have something fascinating to do. I would even argue that superior technology, and exponentially increased health and intelligence, would ultimately help us to seek and find God all the more effectively. Whether or not future wounded healers are apt to find and offer healing in such a scenario is a question the Singularity is certain to ask time and again; and with the help of God and perhaps even the intercession of Henri Nouwen, we shall answer it.

## Reference List

Kurzweil, Ray. 2005. *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*. New York: Penguin Books. Apple Book.

Nouwen, Henri J.M. 1972. *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society*. New York: Doubleday. Apple Book.