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## INTRODUCTION

As a Baptist minister, pastoral theologian and “spiritual father” of the American Civil Rights Movement, Howard Thurman (1900-1981) made significant contributions to the religious and ethical life of twentieth-century America. He began his career serving in various pastoral and academic posts at Spelman College, Morehouse College and Howard University between 1929 and 1943. During these tenures, Thurman began a lifelong friendship with Mohandas Gandhi and the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore in addition to studying under the Quaker mystic-philosopher Rufus Jones. As a member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, Thurman helped establish the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco in 1944, serving as its first pastor. “Fellowship Church” was one of the first racially integrated, intercultural churches in the United States. From 1953 to 1965 Thurman served as professor of spiritual disciplines and dean of Marsh Chapel at Boston University, the first black man to serve as dean of chapel at a traditionally white American university.

Thurman authored more than 24 books of cultural criticism and pastoral meditations and over 50 articles on religious life and mystical experience. The most famous of his works, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949), deeply influenced the thought of Martin Luther King, Jr. and other black leaders were particularly interested in Thurman’s treatment of nonviolence within a Christian perspective.

Thurman wrestled throughout his career with the nonviolent imperative he understood as emerging from mystical experience. His unique spiritual “idiom” was heavily influenced by Gandhi’s program of *satyagrahi*, Quaker pacifism, Eastern philosophy and religion, and the black church. For Thurman, mystical experience encouraged a profound unity that he

termed “community” at both the intrapersonal and interpersonal level. Maintaining that *social* violence and chaos could be overcome only through mystical experience of Divine Love at the *personal* level, he encouraged “community” through the cultivation of mystical consciousness in the lives of his students and parishioners. For Thurman such consciousness may allow individuals to become “apostles of sensitiveness”—agents of radical change in their social contexts.

The year 1981 witnessed both Thurman’s death and the publication of Luther Smith’s *Howard Thurman: The Mystic as Prophet*. In this seminal text Smith argued that Thurman’s greatest contribution to religious life and thought lay in his analysis of the transformative effects of mystical experience. While many of Thurman’s contemporaries within the Civil Rights Movement dismissed his growing emphasis on the inner life with such comments as “he has gone ‘mystic’ on us,” Smith contends that Thurman’s mysticism, which he [Smith] terms “critical monistic realism,” allowed Thurman to develop a critical understanding of the relationships between mystical consciousness and life in the world.

Claiming Thurman as a “holy man for the new millennium,” Martin Marty has recently suggested that Thurman’s unique ability to tutor the “religious quest for freedom” demands that scholars afford his efforts at spiritual and societal reconciliation the same consideration as those of his better-known contemporaries Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day and Evelyn Underhill. Thurman’s work on the “whole-making” tendency of mystical experience in which an individual, through surrender to God, reorients and reintegrates innate spiritual energy within her/his personality merits further study. Akin to the writings of Merton and, more recently, the feminist theologian Dorothee Sölle, Thurman’s voice may rightly be considered as a neglected source of Christian pacifism promoting, to borrow from Sölle,

“resistance” to any personal or social relations that are not ultimately rooted in and incarnating Divine Love.

Since Marty’s call to scholars in 1996, significant events and developments in American and global culture and the academic study of religion and theology have made his call that scholars better attend to Thurman’s life, thought and ministry all the more relevant. Three vital signs of the times that first emerged within the general culture of Thurman’s later years and have continued into the present are: 1) increased interest and participation in interreligious encounter and community; 2) a growing spiritual and ethical awareness of the natural world as vital to humanity’s relationship with and responsibility to the Divine; 3) a serious return by many individuals and faith-based organizations to the mystical and contemplative roots of religion.

As the academic discipline of spirituality gains greater purchase in religious studies and formal theology, many scholars in this field thinking on issues of peace are working to recover and re-present spiritual wisdom and practices from our axial faiths in their work of diagnosing contemporary social ills and offering vital insights concerning the place of religion and spirituality in our postmodern, multilingual polis and global village.<sup>1</sup> I believe that a fresh assessment of Thurman’s contributions to religion and public life can greatly enrich not only current Thurman scholarship but also add much to the larger conversations concerning spirituality and social transformation.

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<sup>1</sup> Here I am particularly thinking of the scholarship, teaching and political and social activism of more recent public theologians such as Joan Chittister, Parker Palmer, Richard Rohr, John Dear, Mary Evelyn Jegen, Dwight Hopkins and Jim Wallis, among others.

## **Thesis Statement**

In this dissertation I will analyze and interpret the interrelations of mysticism, peace and reconciliation in the life and thought of Howard Thurman.

## **Methodology**

The dissertation is performed in five chapters. In the first chapter I situate Thurman in his socio-cultural context, both as a black American and a mystic-theologian and pastor. Emphasis is given to the particular experiences and relationships (“Sources” and “Forces”) that tutored the components of Thurman’s mystical consciousness and mystical theology specifically related to the issues of peace, peacemaking and Christian pacifism. In the second chapter I recover Thurman’s theology of peace as it evolves from his more established concept of “community” and was more fully articulated in his interest in the solitary individual’s sense of personal peace and correlative treatment of five primary “signs” of collective chaos—racism and segregation, war, poverty and materialism, religious intolerance and conflict and environmental degradation.

In the third chapter I present Thurman’s mystical spirituality of reconciliation as a means of articulating his understanding of how mystical encounter reorients the individual toward wholeness within her/himself and also in her/his relationship with other individuals, social collectives and the natural world. Vital elements of this chapter are detailed analyses of Thurman’s concept of reconciliation, the essential transformative elements he argues as inherent within mystical experience and a recovery of his concept of the religious individual as an “apostle of sensitiveness” effecting positive change in her/his social context. In the

fourth chapter I explore Thurman's "spiritual idiom" as a means of integrating his theology of peace and spirituality of reconciliation with his pastoral rhetoric evident in his speaking and writing. I present Thurman's notion of language, explore the form and content of his "idiom" and examine three of his pastoral texts in detail as case-studies.

In the fifth and final chapter I integrate findings from the previous chapters, first by using the paradigm of "whole-making" to identify certain strengths and weaknesses of Thurman's witness, and then via consideration of Thurman as a "peacemaker." I conclude this chapter and the dissertation through a brief consideration of potential new avenues of research related to Thurman, peace and mysticism, and spirituality more generally construed.

### **Originality and Contribution**

Previous scholars (Luther E. Smith Jr., Mozella Mitchell, Walter E. Fluker and Alton B. Pollard) have considered Thurman's life and thought in relation to social transformation and activism, and literature and theology in general. Yet there has been no thoroughgoing examination of Thurman's life and thought concerning his emphasis on the interrelations of mysticism, nonviolence and peacemaking—particularly at the individual level. Sufficient thought has not been given to how Thurman's pastoral praxis illumines the role language and spiritual disciplines play in the vital work of individual and congregational transformation as a prelude to social change. By focusing on Thurman's theology of peace and mystical theology of reconciliation, and their practical implications for his pastoral ministry in this context, my study more explicitly demonstrates his contributions to peacemaking, nonviolence and spirituality particularly within a Christian context.

## **THURMAN DISSERTATION: CHAPTER ONE**

A man's life is a single statement. This does not seem to be the case because we measure our lives episodically, in terms of events, particular circumstances, and experiences. But every incident is but a partial rendering of the total life. Some events are marked by dramatic intervals, by pain or joy which may cause us to mark the place and to memorialize it for all our days. They are watershed moments. At such intervals the whole life is seen as a single entity in time. There is the special role of the moment that becomes *the* moment—a current of energy, power, illumination—there are many names for it. But life takes on a “whiff” of density—a moment of raw sanction given to the very idiom of the life itself.

Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart*

There must be a relation between the way I journey to my goal, under the aegis of my commitment to it, and the goal itself. But I must not make the mistake of subjecting the technique of my journeying, or the means of getting to my goal, to a kind of rigor which I refuse to apply to the goal itself.

Howard Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit*

### **I. BIOGRAPHY AND THEOLOGY**

“Because he [Thurman] talks to us about our lives.”<sup>1</sup> Such was the response of the late attorney, civil-rights activist and Congresswoman Barbara Jordan when asked why she, along with many of her classmates, faculty and staff and related others, frequented the classroom and school chapel to hear Howard Thurman during her collegiate tenure at Boston University in the late 1950s. Born of her own experience, Jordan's words speak to and for the experience of many others from a variety of social, spiritual, ethnic and political backgrounds who were and are drawn to Thurman on account of the biographical method of his pastoral theology and spiritual rhetoric.

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<sup>1</sup> George K. Makechnie, interviewed by author, tape recording, Boston, Mass., 24 September 2002. Makechnie's recollection of Barbara Jordan's impressions noted above are validated in Jordan's autobiography, *Barbara Jordan: Speaking the Truth with Eloquent Thunder* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007).

This method was intentional. Thurman consistently employed the concept of an individual's "working paper" throughout his career in reference to a person's life narrative. He argued that each individual's "paper" revealed the unique "creative synthesis of what the man is in all his parts and how he reacts to the living processes."<sup>2</sup> Further, Thurman frequently integrated autobiographical episodes from his own lived experience into his sermons, lectures, poetry and other elements of his pastoral corpus. Enabling the introduction of practical object lessons and an invitation to greater rhetorical intimacy to his audience, this device also rendered Thurman's ministry of the word an ever-ready vehicle of self confrontation, discovery, and growth.<sup>3</sup>

Critics of Thurman's self-storied means of performing theology criticize its confessional nature as too often wandering into sentimentality, just as many narrative theorists and theologians within the Church seem to support such autobiography.<sup>4</sup> Writing at the dawn of

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<sup>2</sup> Howard Thurman, *Deep is the Hunger: Meditations for Apostles of Sensitiveness* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951; reprint, Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 2000), 64-65. Here Thurman writes, "For every man, there is a necessity to establish as securely as possible the lines along which he proposes to live his life. In developing his life's working paper, he must take into account many factors, in his reaction to which he may seem to throw them out of line with their true significance. As a man, he did not happen. He was born, he has a name, he has forebears, he is the product of a particular culture, he has a mother tongue, he belongs to a nation, he is born into some kind of faith. In addition to all of these, he exists, in some curious way, as a person independent of all other facts. There is an intensely private world, all his own; it is intimate, exclusive, sealed. The life working paper of the individual is made up of a creative synthesis of what the man is in all his parts and how he reacts to the living processes. It is wide of the mark to say that a man's working paper is ever wrong; it may not be fruitful, it may be negative, but it is never wrong. For such a judgment would imply that the synthesis is guaranteed to be of a certain kind, of a specific character, resulting in a foreordained end. It can never be determined just what a man will fashion." For related treatments of an individual's "working paper" also see Thurman, *Deep Is the Hunger*, 62 and Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1949; reprint, Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press, 1981), 110-112.

<sup>3</sup> Luther E. Smith, Jr., interview by author, phone call, 14 July 2002. For more on Thurman's "autobiographical" approach see Luther Smith, *Howard Thurman: The Mystic as Prophet* (Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press, 1992), chapter 3, especially pp. 45-48 and Mozella G. Mitchell, *The Spiritual Dynamics of Howard Thurman's Theology* (Bristol, Ind.: Wyndham Hall Press, 1985), 51. Greater attention is given to Mitchell's description of Thurman's "literary" and "biographical" theological method in chapter 4's analysis of Thurman's spiritual idiom.

<sup>4</sup> James W. McClendon, Jr. *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 25. For a more extensive treatment of McClendon's source above see chapter 4, "Biography as Theology" and chapter 7, "Toward a Theology of Life" in his *Biography as Theology*.



the modern narrative theology movement, the late Baptist theologian James McClendon argued that the only relevant critical theology is that which begins and ends in “attending to lived lives.”<sup>5</sup> This belief stems from McClendon’s view that Christian beliefs are “living convictions which give shape to actual lives and actual communities” rather than “‘propositions’ to be catalogued...like truth-functions in a computer.”<sup>6</sup> Solidly in McClendon’s corner, I believe that exploring the logic of peace and mysticism in Thurman’s personal and professional life is the best first step in more clearly defining how these issues animated his pastoral praxis, particularly his religious thought and spiritual idiom. This is especially important considering my interest in contributing to the growing discipline of spirituality with its own focus on the lived, practical, and often pastoral elements of theology in general and discipleship in particular.

What place did the issues of peace and mysticism have in Thurman’s own personal “working paper?” What particular historical, relational, intellectual and spiritual sources and forces affected his reading of them? My primary work in this chapter is to explore various periods of his life history, highlighting the significant “sources and forces” that informed his concern for peace and mysticism. Specifically, I want to consider his childhood and early adolescence; his student years; his professional career as a minister and educator; and his final years including his struggle with cancer. During these various stages of Thurman’s life he lived and worked in diverse cultural settings and witnessed great change in the import of his role as an African American, a clergy and a mystic concerned with both the spiritual and

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<sup>5</sup> McClendon, *Biography as Theology*, 22. More comprehensively here McClendon argues, “Christian beliefs are not so many ‘propositions’ to be catalogued or juggled like truth-functions in a computer, but are living convictions which give shape to actual lives and actual communities.” Consequently, he contends that the only “critical, relevant examination of beliefs (i.e. theologies)” is one that begins by “attending to lived lives.”

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 22-23.

social aspects of peace. I conclude with an integrated assessment of my findings in light of my concern for Thurman's identity as a "peacemaker" and his self-ascribed endeavor to become a "religious man."

## II. PEACE AND MYSTICISM: THURMAN'S "WORKING PAPER"

A common element in the lives of the most influential mystics and physicians of the soul within Christianity as well as other axial faiths is the presence, whether rhythmic or episodic, of particular seasons of suffering. Mystics often emerge from them citing heightened sensitivities to God, self, others, Nature and life in general, describing such periods as not only highly traumatic but deeply intimate rites of passage. Thurman's personal friend and colleague and the former director of the Howard Thurman Trust, Marvin Chandler, believes this trace element of anguish ran deep within Thurman's mystical becoming, noting that Thurman's "hungry spirit was very much that of a joyous man in love with life," but also that from an early age he [Thurman] "suffered much and had learned through his suffering."<sup>7</sup> Thurman's own hopeful interpretation of suffering as integral rather than alien to the fabric of life and meaning of God invites further inquiry into how his particular experiences of pain and violence nuanced his search for "the things that make for peace."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Marvin Chandler, "In Love with Life: The Hungry Spirit of Howard Thurman," *Sojourners*, December 1993, 12.

<sup>8</sup> Howard Thurman, *The Inward Journey* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961; Reprint, Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press, 2000), 41. Taken from Thurman's centering piece, "The Necessities of Our Peace."

## Homeland

Howard Washington Thurman was born Sunday, November 18, 1900 into a family living the life of the black working poor in Waycross, a ghetto just outside of Daytona, Florida. His father Saul's work laying track for the Florida East Coast Railroad kept him away from home for weeks on end, leaving Thurman and his sisters, Henrietta and Madaline, in the care of their mother Alice and maternal grandmother Nancy Ambrose.<sup>9</sup> Saul died of tuberculosis in 1907, necessitating Alice's fiscal support of the family through cleaning and cooking for white families in Daytona and Ambrose's role as the children's primary caregiver.

During his Waycross years Thurman leveraged the fusion of awe, welcome and love gained through family, nature and religion against the chronic despair of his social status as a "black." The limits on African Americans' social mobility under Jim Crow, evinced in their ghettoization, saw Thurman, like his peers, grow up largely numb to white people, neither "loving nor hating them."<sup>10</sup> The few times family errands or his part-time jobs placed Thurman in "white Daytona" most of his interactions with whites were void of "fellowship"—a term he later identified with interpersonal intimacy and mutual understanding. "Whites" had little presence in Thurman's early moral reality; as he later wrote, "they were simply out of bounds."<sup>11</sup>

Thurman's recollections of the regular interracial contact that did occur, both in his autobiography *With Head and Heart* and his analysis of Jim Crow culture, *The Luminous*

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<sup>9</sup> Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1979), 254. Henrietta's avoidance of her "little brother" during his early life, coupled with her departure for a church school for young black women across the state in her mid-teens—during which time Howard suspected "we might have grown closer"—disallowed them true kinship.

<sup>10</sup> Howard Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness: A Personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965; reprint, Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press, 1999), 3.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-4.

*Darkness: An Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope*, reveal the extent to which the trials of his childhood imprinted themselves upon his adult psyche. His memory of an afternoon raking leaves for a white couple, while well known, is particularly telling. Each leaf-pile Thurman raked together was immediately scattered by the couple's five-year old daughter, who was oblivious of Thurman in her search for the yard's brightest leaf.

Each time she [the couple's daughter] did this, I [Thurman] would have to rake the leaves into a pile again. This grew tiresome, and it doubled my work. Finally, I said to her in some desperation, "Don't do that anymore because I don't have time." She became very angry and continued to scatter the leaves. "I'm going to tell your father about this when he comes home," I said. With that, she lost her temper completely and, taking a straight pin out of her pinafore, jabbed me in the hand. I drew back in pain, "Have you lost your mind?" I asked. And she answered, "Oh, Howard, that didn't hurt you! You can't feel!"<sup>12</sup>

This temporary prick-wound, though painful in and of itself, only scratched the surface of segregation's chronic violence enacted upon an African-American boy in the Jim Crow South. Thurman deduced the toxic nature of segregation in his childhood, naming it as "...an attitude, a disease, which destroys the society in which it exists" and perplexes the oppressed unto self-rejection. "What does it mean to grow up with a cheap self-estimate? There is a sentence I copied many years ago, the source of which I have forgotten: 'We were despised so long at last we despised ourselves.'"<sup>13</sup>

Countering the violence of segregation Thurman encountered in childhood, his earliest experiences of family, nature and "Church" provided him nurture, stability and strength but also exposed him to their own peculiar turbulences and shadows.

While Thurman's relationship with his grandmother Nancy Ambrose anchored his early notion of family, built around this dyad was a vibrant and complex household. Along with Ambrose, he credits his mother with nurturing his initial positive awareness of the

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<sup>12</sup> Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 11-12.

<sup>13</sup> Thurman, *Luminous Darkness*, 24.

person of Jesus and the Christian Gospel and with exemplifying the essentials of discipleship, which for her consisted triadically of daily prayer and Scripture reading, generously mediated reconciling love, and proactive participation in the local church.<sup>14</sup> Freely and regularly conversant concerning her spirituality and inner life with Ambrose, Alice by and large kept the secrets of her soul and early life from her children. Praising her kindness, Thurman also read in his mother a chronic “deep inner sadness” that baffled him as a boy.<sup>15</sup> Thurman’s father Saul also was greatly removed from his son, due both to his railroad job and his death when Thurman was seven.<sup>16</sup> Disfavoring formal religion, Saul transmitted a deep spiritual benevolence within his family and community that was particularly palpable to his son.<sup>17</sup> Recent scholarship arguing that Saul was not Thurman’s biological father raises important questions concerning his early development as well as his views on how this issue impacted his later personal and professional concerns.<sup>18</sup>

Rounding out his elemental sense of family were Thurman’s relationships with his sisters Henrietta and Madaline and their participation in Waycross’s “extended family” network. Henrietta was two years older than Thurman, which fed into her keeping “little brother” at a distance socially through their early adolescence, at the end of which she left home to attend a church school for young black women across the state—where she later died of typhoid during Thurman’s early teens. Thurman was much closer to his sister

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<sup>14</sup> Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 16. Watching his mother and grandmother at home in prayer and sitting with them in church Howard learned, “what could not be told to me.” Also see pp. 12-13.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 12. Here Thurman writes, “My mother was a very sympathetic and compassionate woman. There was about her a deep inner sadness that I could not, as a boy, understand. It was not gloom, but a quiet overcast of feeling. She had a shy sense of humor, yet was never a spontaneously joyous person.”

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 4-5.

<sup>18</sup> While Smith argues that Thurman held this truth in confidence largely to respect and protect the dignity of his mother, Alice Ambrose Thurman, it would stand to reason that the paternal actualities of his birth at least marginally affected his socialization. Luther Smith shared with me during a phone interview in July 2002 that this was a secret that Thurman kept to himself throughout the majority of his life.

Madaline, six years his junior, largely due to his ad-hoc role as her nanny, which he gladly assumed while an early adolescent in Waycross.<sup>19</sup> Finally, all three of the Thurman children and their peers were looked after, morally instructed by and participants in Waycross's trans-family social fabric which, though theologically divided primarily between Methodists and Baptists, always moved as one organism to protect and nurture the young and support all individuals and families both in joy and crisis.<sup>20</sup>

### **Thurman's Childhood and Early Adolescence: Primary Sources and Forces**

Time and again Thurman insisted on the vital import of childhood and early adolescence as developmental seasons in which the trust, hope, creativity, curiosity and mutual understanding needed for a healthy adult life with others should be nurtured and protected. Nancy Ambrose, the natural world and the local church provided Thurman, as a young person, opportunities to learn the powerful lessons of trust, love and hope.

#### *Nancy Ambrose*

The child of an African-slave mother and Florida Seminole Indian father, and an ex-slave herself who spent her growing years on a plantation, Grandma Nancy<sup>21</sup> incarnated a generous, holy love for her grandchildren. Beyond the immediate Thurman household Ambrose functioned as a literal and spiritual mid-wife, delivering children and dispensing sage advice to families and individuals in and beyond Waycross. She was a woman of deep

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<sup>19</sup> Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 253.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 13. "Lady Nancy" was the sobriquet given to Nancy Ambrose by the Waycross community due in part as Thurman relates to, "...the black taffeta Sunday dress she always wore to church. It rustled elegantly as she moved down the aisle. I loved burying my head in that taffeta lap during the endless hours of the Sunday worship service."

Christian faith and contagious ethical integrity. Though she herself couldn't read or write, Ambrose was possessed by a determined belief in the merit and "magic"<sup>22</sup> of education for her grandchildren as necessary and self-transformative leverage against segregation's socioeconomic strictures—particularly in Florida where the typical cutoff of state-offered public education for African-Americans was after seventh grade.

For various reasons, but perhaps mainly because he was the oldest child and the only boy in a house full of females, Ambrose took a special interest in Thurman from his earliest years—a posture he reciprocated throughout his grandmother's life, citing her as one of the most significant and perhaps the superlative of his life-mentors. Within the many positive contours of Ambrose's personality and relationship with Thurman, four critical elements stand out. First and most fundamentally, Thurman gained deep experiential and practical knowledge of God's love for him particularly relative to the person and event of Jesus Christ as incarnate in his grandmother's affections, specifically her spiritual ability to uplift his and his sisters' at times waning "sense of self." Ambrose often nurtured them in this way by recounting stories from her childhood as a slave.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Mary Goodwin, "Racial Roots and Religion: An Interview with Howard Thurman," *The Christian Century*, 9 May 1973, 533. Also see Smith, *Mystic as Prophet*, 38-39. Here Smith writes, "[S]he [Ambrose] pushed him to achieve, to reach his potential, to *acquire the magic*." Smith interprets Ambrose as Thurman's primary intellectual mentor. I prefer to read her as the chief educational activist and advocate in his life and believe George Cross and Rufus Jones were on par with one another as Thurman's primary intellectual mentors.

<sup>23</sup> Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 21. Thurman's recollection of Ambrose's sharing stories from her childhood living as a plantation slave as presented in his autobiography is presented in more complete form here: A slave preacher was allowed to preach to the plantation workers once or twice a year: "...When the slave preacher told the Calvary narrative to my grandmother and the other slaves, it had the same effect on them as it would later have on their descendants. But this preacher, when he had finished, would pause, his eyes scrutinizing every face in the congregation, and then he would tell them, "You are not niggers! You are not slaves! You are God's children!"... When my grandmother got to that part of her story, there would be a slight stiffening in her spine as we sucked in our breath. When she had finished, our spirits were restored." Also see Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 12. Particularly insightful here is Thurman's confession that "She [Ambrose] was the receptacle for the little frustrations and hurts I brought to her." Also see Goodwin, 533. Thurman's testimony in this article-interview is so telling that it is documented here for emphasis. He contends, "You felt that she [Ambrose] contained and honored all of your feelings and all of hers, but they didn't spill over. I got a certain kind of strength from her. That was very fortunate for me, because my father died when I was seven years old. When I was at Earlham College, one of the professors there, a counselor and a psychologist, heard me

Second, as a child and throughout his formal education and esteemed life of learning and teaching Thurman was awed by the honesty, simplicity, depth and the integrity of Ambrose's Christian faith, which he aspired to appropriate into his own unique personal and professional spirituality. As he noted in a sermon, "she [Ambrose] couldn't read her name if it was big as this chapel—but she had stood inside of life with Jesus—and looked out on the world through his eyes and she knew by heart what I could never know."<sup>24</sup> Ambrose's deep and practical religious faith "transmitted an idiom" to Thurman.<sup>25</sup>

The things that came to me directly from my grandmother are very important. In the first place, she was a strong, positive, self-contained human being. Her life was full of tragedies—hunger, cold, [slavery], the death of some of her children. *But she had built in controls...*<sup>26</sup>

Certainly inspiring Thurman's personal and professional search through mysticism as a means of self-affirmation for himself, his fellow African-Americans and other minority and socially ostracized groups, Ambrose's religious faith also highlighted the import of spiritual disciplines, particularly daily prayer and scripture reading; regular, active and informed formal participation in the local church; Gospel-inspired social activism both within and beyond the local community; and also the ability to find levity as well as what Thurman termed a "sense of leisure,"<sup>27</sup> amidst daily life's chores and challenges. These practices were vital to Ambrose not as ethical or religious ends in themselves, but as means through which to source, serve and share (in the graces) of God.

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say that I had been reared without a father. So he said: 'Oh, then I have to revise my tests, because none of the things that go with a male child reared in a home with women apply to you.' Well, now, that proves this indomitable quality in my grandmother."

<sup>24</sup> Howard Thurman, "Standing Inside with Jesus Christ." Audio-tape Cassette, Thurman Papers, Special Collection, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston, MA.

<sup>25</sup> Goodwin, 533-34.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 534.

<sup>27</sup> Thurman, *Deep is the Hunger*, 151.



### *Nature*

Akin to the companionship Thurman shared with his grandmother, as a child and early adolescent he also discovered a sense of communion with and in nature so strong that its intimacy, revelation and empowerment are comparable with his connection to Ambrose. Like his relations with Ambrose, Thurman's bond with nature provided him firsthand experience of unconditional love, creative potentiality and the deeper unity of life grounded in a Creator God. As he related:

When I was young, I found more companionship in nature than I did among people. The woods befriended me. In the long summer days, most of my time was divided between fishing in the Halifax River and exploring the woods, where I picked huckleberries and gathered orange blossoms from abandoned orange groves. The quiet, even the danger, of the woods provided my rather lonely spirit with a sense of belonging that did not depend on human relationships. I was usually with a group of boys as we explored the woods, but I tended to wander away to be alone for a time, for in that way I could sense the strength of the quiet and the aliveness of the woods.<sup>28</sup>

To sentimentalize either the younger Thurman's experience of the larger Creation or his pastoral treatment or autobiographical reporting of it is to discount the unquestionable psychic, spiritual and somatic welcome and community he realized within the natural world. For the acceptance and belonging of, to and with nature both subverted his segregation-fueled self-rejection and also helped him come to terms with certain dimensions of his physicality that set him apart amongst other children in Waycross.<sup>29</sup>

Finally, a nascent experience of the holy was central to Thurman's first experiences of the natural world. Expanding his notion of God beyond the local church congregation, it also

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<sup>28</sup> Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 7.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 10. Like other African-American children growing up in Waycross, Thurman had to embrace what this study, following his own autobiography, refers to as Thurman's own "black fact." It is particularly interesting to note, however, that Thurman's "blackness" was especially pronounced due to the deep pigmentation of his skin. This combined with his pigeon-toed walk and other unique physical characteristics, certainly played into his early socialization. For more on this see Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 252.

influenced the import of the environment in his later work concerning mysticism and social change. Such encounter also likely impacted his later interest in the lives and work of what today we might term “green” mystics—both in and beyond the Church.<sup>30</sup>

### *“Church”*

Thurman’s first tastes of the local institutional church in Waycross at Mt. Bethel Baptist further informed his notion of the spiritual ground of life. These early congregational moments also introduced him to a language of creed, ritual, organizational polity and scripture through which he began to make theological sense of his initial spiritual experience. His childhood experience of the “primary community” of weekly worship at Mt. Bethel convinced Thurman that “more than all other communal ties,” church membership encouraged a proper sense of self relative to God and family as well as the congregational fellowship and larger social fabric.<sup>31</sup> Alongside the import of personal spirituality given witness by his mother and grandmother at home, corporate worship introduced Thurman to the communally redemptive potentials of religion within and beyond the local congregation. The evidence of Waycross Baptists and Methodists putting their persistent doctrinal debates aside to respond as a common group of believers to individuals and families in crisis hinted to him that just like human need, Christian love and God’s grace transcended any one particular creedal interpretation.<sup>32</sup>

Yet Thurman’s childhood experiences of “church” also revealed the divisive tendencies of certain types of Christian thought and practice which prioritized creed, judgment and

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<sup>30</sup> Including Francis of Assisi, Meister Eckhart, Hopi and Sioux cosmologies and the agrarian parables and paradigms attributed to the historical Jesus in the canonical Christian Gospels.

<sup>31</sup> Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 9-10. On page 17 Thurman refers to his earliest experience of corporate worship as a sense of sharing in “primary community.”

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 11.

manipulation over person, justice and mercy.<sup>33</sup> Two particular instances deserve mention. When Saul Thurman died, Mt. Bethel's pastor declined to preach the funeral because Saul was not a church member and therefore technically not a Christian. At Ambrose's insistence the pastor did allow Saul to be buried "from the church," which necessitated Alice hiring Sam Cromarte, a "jackleg preacher,"<sup>34</sup> to conduct the service. Cromarte used the pastoral eulogy as an evangelical opportunity to preach Saul into hell for dying "outside of Christ," and consequently injected anger and confusion into Thurman's and his mother's already heavy grief.<sup>35</sup>

This was his [Cromarte's] chance to illustrate what would happen to "sinners" who died "out of Christ," as my father had done. And he did not waste it. Under my breath I kept whispering to Mamma, "He didn't know Papa, did he? Did he?" Out of her own pain, conflict, and compassionate love, she reached over and gripped my bare knees with her hand, giving a gentle but firm, comforting squeeze. It was sufficient to restrain for the moment my bewildered and outraged spirit.

Thurman's words paint a painful picture. Following Saul's funeral he resolved never again to enter a church.

Yet later, when in his early teens Thurman's anger with the church had softened as his spiritual life had matured, he sought full membership at Mt. Bethel as a disciple of Jesus. When he was examined by the deacon board, Thurman's statement of why he desired to become a Christian, because it did not provide a certain account of his personal conversion to

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<sup>33</sup> Alton Pollard, *Mysticism and Social Change: The Social Witness of Howard Thurman* (Boston: Peter Lang Publishing, 1992), 18. See also Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 6. Not all of Thurman's initial experiences of institutional religion, however, were so idyllic. As sociologist of religion and Thurman scholar Alton Pollard relates, Mt. Bethel forced Thurman to "come to terms with what was at times a parochial and even hypocritical church."

<sup>34</sup> Thurman uses this term in his autobiography to reference a traveling evangelist who made his living filling congregational pulpits as well as setting up revival services in various towns.

<sup>35</sup> Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 6. Saul Thurman's funeral has become a classic case-study of the negative influences of formal Christianity and religion in general in Thurman's early life.

Christ was found unorthodox, and he himself wanting.<sup>36</sup> Ambrose again intervened, scolding the elders with her argument that if not in “words,” surely in “heart” Thurman had long been a Christian. Straightaway her grandson was coupled with two older church members who, besides instructing him further in scripture and church polity, provided intangible spiritual mentoring and presence to Thurman up to and through his baptism in the Halifax River in 1913.<sup>37</sup>

### **Mysticism and Childhood: Deciphering the Waycross Years**

It is hard to underestimate the ways in which Thurman’s childhood and early adolescence, as briefly outlined here, colored the subsequent chapters of his adult life. He later wrote of his belief that for a child to grow into an adult with a secure sense of self and a healthy worldview, s/he needed the sanctuary of an imaginative, gentle childhood spent playing within the Eden-like “peace of innocence”<sup>38</sup> in which “everything is perfect and there is no tension.”<sup>39</sup> Innocence is vital in childhood, as Thurman argued:

It is not accidental, it is not due merely to undernourishment that children who have never had the opportunity to be children seem to make up the rank and file of the so-called delinquent. Apparently such children have a nervous system and a body that is *angry*. With what approximates blindness, they strike against all manifestations of authority. I think that this is true because the growing child needs all its inner creative resources to lay a sound

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<sup>36</sup> Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 18-19. Thurman's own remembrance of this experience bears repeating. He writes, "When they had finished, the chairman asked, 'Howard, why do you come before us?' I said, 'I want to be a Christian.' Then the chairman said, 'But you must come before us after you have been converted and have already become a Christian. Come back when you can tell us of your conversion.'"

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 17-20, especially p. 18.

<sup>38</sup> Howard Thurman. *The Growing Edge* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956; reprint, Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press, 1998), 88-89. Thurman develops his seminal thinking on "peace" and "innocence" within this text specifically in his sermon "Peace in Our Lives," 85-93. Subsequent treatment of what this author refers to as Thurman's understanding of the "peace of innocence" is dealt with in the second chapter in the section, "The Origins and Absence of Peace" and again discussed in the third chapter's section "The Mystical Dynamics of Peacemaking under the subheading "fontal unity."

<sup>39</sup> Howard Thurman, "Peace in Our Lives," read by the author. 1941, cassette, Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University. In this sermon, delivered at Howard University's Rankin Chapel, Thurman equates the "peace of innocence" with the idyllic vision of Eden in which "everything is perfect and there is no tension."

and orderly foundation of bodily and nervous functioning against the stresses and strains of the maturing years. Innocence makes that possible. This is the period of the windbreak, behind which the quiet inner process may build, grow, deepen, and provide for the long pull of the later years. If there is no windbreak, if the child does not have the privilege of innocence...then the creative and redemptive work of childhood is defeated. How fortunate is the human being whose life has been blessed with the privilege of the innocence of childhood!<sup>40</sup>

Thurman's intimate and affirming exchanges with Grandma Nancy and other family, the Atlantic Ocean and his oak tree, and Mt. Bethel's congregation and the larger Waycross family system helped him tend his own "quiet inner process" as a means of resistance against the demeaning forces of racism. In both conscious and unconscious ways he worked to reconcile the difficulties inherent in life, most notably the evils of segregation, with the nascent quality of unity and belonging so central to his earliest feelings concerning the nature and purposes of God.

Considering the relationship between mysticism and childhood shortly before her death in 2003, the late feminist theologian Dorothee Sölle argued that our modern rational-professional culture tends to devalue the import of childhood in spiritual development.<sup>41</sup> Her claim that childhood and adolescence are vital seedbeds and germination periods of mystical consciousness finds many for-instances<sup>42</sup> both in Thurman's early years and his later recollection of them as illustrations in his analytical and devotional writings. The further Thurman's life and work took him from his childhood territory "bounded by the river and the

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<sup>40</sup> Howard Thurman, *The Growing Edge*, 88-89.

<sup>41</sup> Dorothee Sölle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis, Minn: Fortress Press, 2001), 11. My use of the term "homeland" was influenced by Sölle's expositions on mysticism and childhood as set forth in her work *The Silent Cry*. Her own use of this metaphor to describe the primordial, even at times "Utopian" spiritual qualities of childhood were themselves seeded by Ernst Bloch's related conception of "homeland" as it appears in his text *The Principle of Hope*. For more of Sölle's own thinking on this metaphor (which I have applied herein to Thurman), see *The Silent Cry*, 9-14.

<sup>42</sup> Thurman was fond of using the related expressions "(a) for-instance," or "for-instancing" when speaking of an event which or person who embodied an idea or theory he was referencing. He frequently spoke of Mohandas Gandhi, his grandmother Nancy Ambrose, and the historical Jesus as providing a "for-instance" of God's love and truth.

oak-tree,”<sup>43</sup> the greater prominence his primal Waycross took on as his spiritual “homeland.”<sup>44</sup>

## Years in Training

### *Nancy Ambrose and the “Magic”*

Paralleling his spiritual development, Thurman's intellectual taproot was nurtured early on by his grandmother. Alongside the college and seminary professors as well as other more "traditional" academics who were his mentors, Nancy Ambrose figured vitally into Howard's intellectual foundation. During her childhood as a former slave she was a frequent playmate of her master's daughter, who soon began teaching Nancy how to read and write. When the plantation mistress realized this, she brought the lessons to an abrupt end, which caused Ambrose to attribute a certain "magic" power to education (particularly reading and writing).<sup>45</sup> Even though Nancy Ambrose couldn't "read her name if it was as big as a chapel,"<sup>46</sup> her influence on Howard went far beyond reading and writing. As Smith writes, "she [Ambrose] pushed him to achieve, to reach his potential, to *acquire the magic*." <sup>47</sup>

Ambrose's persnickety persistence paid off for Thurman. As he completed the seventh grade (the extent of Florida's compulsory education for black youth at the time), his grandmother recruited his grade school principal, Professor Howard, to ready him for the eighth-grade entrance exam.

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<sup>43</sup> Elizabeth Yates, *Howard Thurman: Portrait of a Practical Dreamer* (New York: The John Day Co., 1964), 17. Yates' text was the first significant albeit non-scholarly biographical work concerning Thurman to be published.

<sup>44</sup> Sölle, *The Silent Cry*, 11.

<sup>45</sup> Goodwin, 533.

<sup>46</sup> Thurman, "Standing Inside with Jesus Christ."

<sup>47</sup> Smith, *Mystic as Prophet*, 39.

### *Florida Baptist Academy*

Passing the exam, Thurman continued his education at Jacksonville's Florida Baptist Academy, a secondary school for African-American students in 1914 —the same year Thurman's former school in Daytona extended its curriculum through eighth grade.<sup>48</sup> While the Academy provided promise for Thurman, his family's financial struggles made daily life outside of class during his initial years there very lean, as evidenced in his often going without food as in periods of his earlier years in Waycross. His industry at seeking and securing scholarship support, part-time work during school semesters and more significant internships during the summers provided Thurman both the extra funding he needed and a strengthened belief in his growing ability to care for himself and find his own way through the completion of his studies in Jacksonville.<sup>49</sup>

Though Thurman proved himself early on in life to be a capable and creative intellect, he could not have achieved such an extensive formal education without the support of his earliest educational mentors, including his grandmother Nancy Ambrose, Professor Howard, and, less directly, Dr. Stocking and the African-American educational pioneer and civil rights activist Mary McLeod Bethune,<sup>50</sup> with whom, up until her death in 1955, Thurman, along with his second wife Sue Bailey, shared intimate friendship and active support of her pioneering work.

Thurman's high school training was a pivotal period of preparation following what were, in many ways, his insular Waycross years. Fluker contends that Howard's Jacksonville

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<sup>48</sup> Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 24.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 24-29. During his high-school studies Thurman supported himself through winning an academic (Gamble) scholarship, working with a local Jacksonville judge, staying with relatives, representing his Academy at the annual military-training summer program at Howard University. After leaving Waycross, he was only able to get back to visit his mother, grandmother and others once or twice per calendar year.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 23. Mary Jane McLeod Bethune (July 10, 1875 – May 18, 1955) was an American educator and civil rights leader best known for starting a school for black students in Daytona Beach, Florida that eventually became Bethune-Cookman University and for being an advisor to President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

tenure allowed him opportunities to develop his leadership skills and meet new mentors, most notably Dr. Mordecai Johnson, under whom he would later serve at Howard University. Graduating Jacksonville Academy as class valedictorian, Thurman earned a tuition scholarship to Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia where he began his undergraduate experience in 1919.

### *Morehouse College*

Thurman's student years at Morehouse provided him an academic, social and spiritual laboratory in which to experiment with his own thoughts and life direction. While earning an economics degree and excelling at debate, he also came to a stronger "sense of self," at the center of which was his growing vocational inclination toward professional ministry. Of the many stories he and his chroniclers have told of his college days, including his successful endeavor of having read every volume in the school library before commencement, several aspects deserve specific mention.

More than anything else, Morehouse's holistic approach to education—which encouraged "excellence" in and out of the classroom and preached the importance of life-long learning and progressive, prophetic religion—deeply affected Thurman.<sup>51</sup> In the classroom, weekly chapel services, and debate team practice as well as at lecture-series and informal campus socials then President John Hope, Dean Samuel Archer and other standout black educators, the majority of whom were churchmen, modeled the life-giving power of

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<sup>51</sup> Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 33-45. Also see Thurman's concern with the notion of "Morehouse men," pp. 35-36. For particular insight into Thurman and his relationship to spiritual leadership, especially within the black church see Fluker's *They Looked for a City* as well as a more recent work he edited, *The Stones that the Builders Rejected: The Development of Ethical Leadership from the Black Church Tradition* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998).



self-respect and service to others for Howard and his classmates. Addressing his students as “young gentlemen,” Hope “crowned” them with profound dignity.

Our manhood, and that of our fathers, was denied on all levels by white society, a fact that insidiously expressed the way black men were addressed. No matter what his age, whether he was in his burgeoning twenties, or full of years, the black man was never referred to as “mister,” nor even by his surname. No. To the end of his days, he had to absorb the indignity of being called “boy,” or “nigger,” or “uncle.” No wonder then that every time Dr. Hope addressed us as “young gentlemen,” the seeds of self-worth and confidence, long dormant, began to germinate and sprout. The attitudes we developed toward ourselves, as a result of this influence, set Morehouse men apart. It was not unusual, for example, to be identified as a Morehouse man by complete strangers, because of this subtle but dramatic sense of self.<sup>52</sup>

Such nurturing rhetoric did more than allow Thurman to simply or momentarily “feel good” about himself. It deepened his sense of self-affirmation, a task which he and his classmates continued to struggle with in and around Atlanta during this time. I interpret Thurman’s positive reception of the Morehouse men’s embrace of him as a sacramental act of resistance against the racism of his earlier years.

As a case in point, during his senior year Howard accompanied President Hope to an interracial meeting of local black academics and southern white liberals at Atlanta’s Butler “colored” YMCA designed to further racial reconciliation and political equality in the region. Disgusted by the noxious rhetoric of one particular white participant, Howard walked out of the meeting. He returned only at Hope’s insistence that “...these are the best and most liberal men in the entire South. We must work with them. There *is* no one else. Remember.”<sup>53</sup> This incident provided invaluable practical training in the foundational virtue of patience that allowed Thurman to unanxiously wait out the many long seasons between sowing and reaping in his lifelong efforts toward reconciliatory social regeneration.

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<sup>52</sup> Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 36.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 37.

After graduating Morehouse as class valedictorian, Howard could have easily followed one of the many career paths charted out for him by various mentors, including staying on at Morehouse as an economics professor or attending medical school with all expenses paid by a Waycross benefactor.<sup>54</sup> Acutely tuned to his strong and steady desire to offer his gifts in pastoral service to the spiritual needs of his community and the greater social matrix, Thurman instead turned his attention to the formal study of theology to further prepare for and better discern his long sensed religious calling.<sup>55</sup>

### *Colgate Rochester Seminary*

Thurman's search for the ideal environment in which to prepare for Christian ministry further revealed the sad extent to which the institutional Church was entrenched in the segregated fabric of early twentieth-century America. His first choice of schools, Andover-Newton Seminary in Massachusetts, did not accept black students. On the advisement of his former Morehouse professor Charles Hubert and Mordecai Johnson, Thurman enrolled in New York's Colgate Rochester Seminary in the fall of 1923, filling one of the two spots allocated for African Americans in each incoming class.<sup>56</sup>

Transplanted from the deep American Southland into what Pollard terms "the white northern world,"<sup>57</sup> Thurman described his Rochester years as "the most radical period of adjustment in my life up to that moment."<sup>58</sup> Over against his Morehouse mentors, his new faculty were hyper-formal, stereotypical "professors." Thurman soon grew, however, to

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<sup>54</sup> Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 22-23, 44-45, 60-61. Although he ultimately moved toward the vocation of ministry, it seems Thurman also was steadily encouraged to pursue other professions including economics, military service, "academic" theology, and medicine.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 46. Both Hubert and Johnson were Rochester alumni.

<sup>57</sup> Pollard, *Mysticism and Social Change*, 20.

<sup>58</sup> Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 46.

know and admire certain of his instructors as vital intellectual and spiritual guides. Most notable was his relationship with his systematics teacher George Cross, a Canadian with whom he shared weekly private tutorials. Initially enamored by Thurman's serious interest in religion and ministry, Cross also early on discerned Thurman's innate gifts and strong potential for a career in academic theology.<sup>59</sup> Together with his faculty colleagues Henry Burke Robbins and Conrad Moehlman,<sup>60</sup> Cross catechized Thurman in the historical development of Christian doctrine and ecclesial practice and from this vantage Thurman quickly began to carve out his own theological identity within the broader stream of evangelical liberalism. This branch was a growing sub-current within progressive Protestant theology which deemphasized biblical Christianity while preaching practical means of salvation from "social sin."

As he had done at Morehouse, Thurman learned additional lessons beyond the classroom. His frustration with the seminary's segregated residential hall rubric, which he and two white students transcended in rooming together, taken together with his continued work as a guest speaker and preacher at primarily "white" churches in the area, where on at least one occasion he exchanged views with members of the Ku Klux Klan, challenged Thurman's ability as a clergyman to respond quickly and proactively to unanticipated racial conflict. Positively, these experiences strengthened his belief in the value and necessity of regular and sustained interracial fellowship and dialogue.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> A native Canadian with a doctorate from the University of Chicago in systematics Cross taught Thurman during the second half of his seminary education from 1925-1926.

<sup>60</sup> Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 54. Concerning Moehlman's impact in terms of his historical/traditional conception of Christianity Thurman writes, "... [he] introduced me to the vast perspective of the Christian movement through the centuries, and the struggle for survival of the essential religion of Jesus. He exposed me to the issues surrounding the great creedal battles of the church. His acute observations, massive scholarship, and authentic sense of humor made movements seem contemporary, as very often they were."

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 51-53.

Close upon graduation, and following two stints of summer parish ministry between his first and "middler" years at Rochester and his growing affinity for preaching (for which he was first licensed in 1924), Thurman accepted a call to the pastorate of Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Oberlin, Ohio.<sup>62</sup>

Sharing the news with Cross during what was to be their final conference in the spring of 1926, Thurman was surprised at his mentor's resistance to the news. Believing that Thurman's "superior gifts" would allow him to make a significant original contribution to the "spiritual life of the times,"<sup>63</sup> Cross had envisioned his protégé as a creative, dynamic scholar. Practical ministry, for Cross, seemed a diminishment of Thurman's true potential. Getting to the "heart" of his concern, the theologian responded:

You are a very sensitive Negro man, and doubtless feel under great obligation to put all the weight of your mind and spirit at the disposal of the struggle of your own people for full citizenship. But let me remind you that all social questions are transitory in nature and it would be a terrible waste for you to limit your creative energy to the solution of the race problem, however insistent its nature. Give yourself to the timeless issues of the human spirit.<sup>64</sup>

Perplexed, Thurman sat in silence as Cross added, "Perhaps I have no right to say this to you because as a white man I can never know what it is to be in your situation."<sup>65</sup> Cross had already initiated a search for another teacher to prepare Thurman for work as a formal theologian, yet it was clear to Thurman that his cherished mentor "did not know that a man and his black skin must face the 'timeless issues of the human spirit' together."<sup>66</sup> Although in

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<sup>62</sup> Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 56-58.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 60.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 60.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 60.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 60-61.

a subsequent letter Cross spoke of finding Thurman's new mentor, the plans dissolved with Cross's death in spring 1929.<sup>67</sup>

Academically, while at Rochester Thurman found his niche in the liberal Protestant tradition. Among his seminary instructors, George Cross, Conrad Moehlman, and Henry (Burke) Robbins were "profoundly influential" in Thurman's intellectual and spiritual formation. Of the three, Cross stands out, for better and worse, as having the greatest impact, for as Thurman recalls, "Everything about me came alive when I came into his presence. He was all stimulus and I was all response."<sup>68</sup>

Both in regular classroom sessions as well as in the informal Saturday morning tete-a-tete tutorials begun at Thurman's request, education *happened*. Says Thurman, "...he [Cross] took my little orthodoxies and reduced them to whited ash...he...challenged every concept that I ever had and patiently taught me."<sup>69</sup> Thurman was especially interested in his professor's insight into the "essence" of Christian doctrine and faith.<sup>70</sup> Smith provides an excellent overview of Cross's theological paradigm in considering the import of Cross's theology on Thurman's keen attention to the "kernel" of Christianity. Placing Cross solidly within the tradition of evangelical liberalism, Smith writes:

This tradition [evangelical liberalism] stresses a personality-centered Christianity, reason and experience, witness to moral and social issues, theological personalism, and an evolutionary revelation of the faith. Within this theological understanding, Cross emboldened Howard Thurman to look to Howard Thurman for the answers to his (Thurman's) religious questions. He encouraged Thurman to trust and value the insights of his own personality, such that it serves as the interpreter of religion that provides new meanings and directions for the faith.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 61. Concerning this Thurman writes, "He [Cross] had not shared his plan for me with anyone. I have often wondered where and with whom he had arranged for me to study, but the answer to my question died with him. What difference would it have made? I wonder, but can never know."

<sup>68</sup> Luther E. Smith, Jr. interview with Howard Thurman, Howard Thurman Educational Trust Office, San Francisco, California, 13 June 1977. As quoted from by Smith, *Mystic as Prophet*, 22.

<sup>69</sup> Smith, interview with Thurman, 13 June 1977. As quoted by Smith, *Mystic as Prophet*, 22. Also see Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 53-54.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Smith, *Mystic as Prophet*, 27-28.

The "silver-haired and somber" Henry Robins also encouraged Thurman's pursuit of Christian "essence." Through his philosophy of religion course and especially his chapel meditations, Robins invited Thurman to "listen to the movement of the springs of his [Robins'] own spiritual landscape" which communicated "the awe, the mystery, and the glory of the Presence."<sup>72</sup>

### **Years in Training: Sources and Forces**

In departing Waycross to further his education, Thurman came to a better understanding of himself, his academic gifts, and his religious calling. And though faced with new challenges during his years in training, he found fresh sources of inspiration in the Morehouse Men, Olive Schreiner, and the Fellowship of Reconciliation.

#### *Morehouse Men*

Thurman's treatment of the benediction set upon him through the mentoring relationships he shared with his professors and administrators as an undergraduate at Morehouse speaks to the importance of the life lessons and spiritual kinship transmitted between them, which nourished his private and public spiritual journey through his final days. Beyond offering him resources through which he could "feel good about himself," their lives, which merged intellectual vigor, deep religious commitment and political smarts and activism with daily community service and honest enjoyment of life's pleasures, affirmed and encouraged Thurman's own desire to live an integrated life fusing head and heart; service and study; religion and life; and faith, art and politics. Upon graduation Thurman's

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<sup>72</sup> Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 54.

student-teacher relationship with his mentors morphed into ties of personal and professional collegiality which tied him further to the networking community of African-American intellectuals and clergy, many of whom went on to key leadership positions within movements for civil rights, running progressive churches and schools and spearheading other related projects of social justice. Of particular note within this circle were Thurman's relationships with Benjamin Mays, James Lawson, and Mordecai Johnson. Mays taught Thurman as a young professor at Morehouse. Their relationship later deepened as fellow faculty at Howard University from 1930-1942 and also through their nonviolent pedagogies and commitment to the mission of the American Civil Rights Movement.

### *Olive Schreiner*

Taking her place alongside the other influential women in his life, the white South African poet, writer and social critic Olive Schreiner's works and life significantly influenced Thurman's hermeneutic of peace and mysticism, particularly concerning life's organic unity and the role of the individual to protect, cultivate, and further nurture it. Concerning his experience of hearing Schreiner's poem "The Dream of the Hunter" during a group reflection while on a Rochester seminary student retreat in 1925, Thurman posited, "It seemed that all my life I was being readied for such an encounter."<sup>73</sup> Schreiner's poesy so impacted Thurman that he spent the late 1920s and much of the 1930s collecting and studying her writings and biography, eventually compiling and editing a Schreiner reader, *Track to the Water's Edge*, published in 1973.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 59. See also Howard Thurman, ed., *A Track to the Water's Edge: The Olive Schreiner Reader* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1973), x.

<sup>74</sup> Thurman, *A Track to the Water's Edge*, xi. Here Thurman reveals the particularities of his fascination with Schreiner who influenced him in "strange and defiant ways." *A Track* represents his belated and more formal

Schreiner's writings most influenced two primary areas of Thurman's life and work: his theophilosophical views on the "unity of life" and "universality of truth," and his literary method/spiritual idiom. Her philosophical sketches, set in both prose and poetry, functioned as a cathartic lens providing the first and most pronounced "external confirmation" of his own felt experience of life's wholeness:

As a boy in Florida, I walked along the beach of the Atlantic in the quiet stillness that can only be completely felt when the murmur of the ocean is stilled, and the tides move stealthily along the shore. I held my breath against the night and watched the stars etch their brightness on the face of the darkened canopy of the heavens. I had the sense that all things, the sand, the sea, the stars, the night and I were one lung through which all of life breathed. Not only was I aware of a vast rhythm enveloping all, but I was a part of it and it was a part of me. *It was not until I read Olive Schreiner that I was able to establish sufficient psychological distance to make the experience itself an object of thought.* Thus, it became possible for me to move from primary experience, to conceptualizing that experience, to a vision inclusive of all of life. The resulting creative synthesis was to me *religious* rather than *metaphysical*, as seems to have been true in Olive Schreiner's case.<sup>75</sup>

Bridging the theological divide between Schreiner's and Thurman's cosmologies was their common belief in and highlighting of the redemptive work of the individual person intrinsically charged to set the foundation for the positive future of the human family. They agreed that "life" supported the individual who worked toward personal, social and cosmic reconciliation.<sup>76</sup> A literary correspondence to this metaphysical congruence is the way Schreiner's "prose-pictures" form inspired Thurman's parallel genre—the "meditation" or

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appreciation for Schreiner's vision as "a particular gift of grace" (*Head and Heart*, 225) which influenced him in "strange and defiant ways." (*Track to the Water's Edge*, xi).

<sup>75</sup> Thurman, *A Track to the Water's Edge*, xxviii. Italics mine.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, xxvii-xxviii. This sentence (above) indicates a primary point of departure in Schreiner and Thurman's overall cosmology. Nevertheless, following Mitchell, the author contends that as Schreiner's work continued to influence Thurman in his personal life and his own philosophical treatises, this difference becomes less significant. This is due in large part to their mutual belief in Nature's *divine* prerogative toward "oneness" or "community"; Thurman was insistent that the God of "religion" is also the God of "life." Fluker, *They Looked for A City*, 66-68.



“centering piece” particularly, again as both never narrated the individual’s perennial search for meaning apart from her/his relationship with others or the natural world.<sup>77</sup>

Beyond her literary vision and craft Thurman was also interested in Schreiner’s social engagement. The daughter of English missionaries to South Africa, she advocated for the women’s labor movement as well as pacifism. Concerning the poet’s tendencies to racially identify more with the Africans themselves than with their political situation, Thurman read her as “acutely involved” in their [the African’s] plight as “that rare person who was able to project herself into the life of the individual, locate him securely, and then inform herself as to how it felt to see the view from the other side.”<sup>78</sup> Yet Thurman did not romanticize Schreiner; in fact, he noted that while championing the politics of women’s rights, she did not speak against Britain’s colonial hold in South Africa on the indigenous Africans. Thurman worked through his frustration with Schreiner’s ethic, realizing that, much like his professor Cross, she too was a “child of her times.”<sup>79</sup>

### *The Fellowship of Reconciliation*

Inspired by an ecumenical meeting of Christian leaders working to prevent the outbreak of war in Switzerland in 1914, the Fellowship of Reconciliation was founded in 1915 by the English Quaker Henry Hodgkin and the German Lutheran Sigmund Schultze, who pledged “to find a way of working for peace” when their countries were at war.<sup>80</sup> By the time Thurman joined the Fellowship as a college sophomore in 1922, its import as a global,

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<sup>77</sup> For the original use of the term “prose-pictures,” see Mitchell, “Post-Modern Marriage Post-Mortem.” Mitchell contends that Thurman improvised on the framework of Schreiner’s “prose-pictures” in developing his parallel genre—the “meditation” or “centering piece.”

<sup>78</sup> Thurman, *A Track to the Water’s Edge*, xx, xxv.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, xx.

<sup>80</sup> The Fellowship of Reconciliation, “Fellowship of Reconciliation, About the F.O.R., History,” <http://www.forusa.org/about/history.html> (accessed July 23, 2010).

multidenominational Christian community preaching, advocating and organizing for non-violent resolution of international and domestic conflict was well established in the United States, where many of the country's politically progressive professional theologians and activist clergy and lay leaders were among its ranks.

The Fellowship's reconciliatory work at the international level inspired Thurman's earliest conscious personal experiments with nonviolence.<sup>81</sup> As he wrote:

I was trying to find a way to live in the social climate of Georgia, without giving myself over to the hostility and evil in my environment. For me, it was not a question of deciding not to bear arms, but it was a question of confirming my faith in the creative possibilities of reconciliation at the grim level of my context in my immediate environment.<sup>82</sup>

First introduced to the existence and work of the FOR through his interactions with Shorty Collins and other Morehouse colleagues, Thurman's participation in the group was, for his theological, racial and vocational position, quite atypical. A.J. Muste, the Presbyterian professor and minister Alfred Frisk, Bennie Mays, Martin King, Jr, and others, to varying degrees publically organized, explicitly preached the Fellowship's agenda from their pulpits and regularly contributed essays and op-ed pieces for its publications. Thurman occasionally sat on various advisory boards, serving as informal advisor to core members and, as oft as requested, gave consent for various excerpts of his published writings to be used in the organization's fundraising and soft advocacy materials, perhaps most famously its annual Christmas card.

Though Thurman was not an "activist" Christian clergyman or intellectual as many of his fellow members were, there is no question he saw and deeply appreciated the need for the Fellowship's existence and prophetic Gospel tactics as it responded to the manifold military,

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<sup>81</sup> Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 37.

<sup>82</sup> Howard Thurman, Boston, Letter to [James Best, New York], 8 October 1957, carbon copy, Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston.

ethnic and religious conflicts of the twentieth century. Similarly, the Fellowship leadership over the years both understood and affirmed Thurman's pastoral and contemplative advocacy toward its core mission and values. In particular his devotional texts proved reliable sources of insight and energy for their work in building a political collective which illuminated the peace of Christ's Gospel within the United States and world culture. Richard Deats, Thurman's former student at Boston University and recently retired senior administrator and publications editor for the FOR, theologian and author, conveys his own appreciation for his mentor and friend:

In the peace movement there is a creative tension between the inward witness that produces the concern to make it a better, peaceful world and the outer witness where you are marching, going to rallies, signing petitions and going to meetings and there should always be a creative tension between these two things. It is difficult—people are pulled in one way or the other. Thurman had the basic commitment against racism, against war clear from the Sermon on the Mount. When Gandhi read the New Testament (the Sermon on the Mount) it went straight to his heart. This is true here also for Thurman. A reflective, brooding person, he joined FOR, served on advisory councils, was accessible and very generous in letting the Fellowship use his writings in Christmas cards...He gave his basic commitment and yet he was not out there marching as much as saying this is my basic commitment—writer, preacher, thinker. This is how I see him.<sup>83</sup>

## **Finding His Voice: Early Parish Ministry and Teaching**

### *Oberlin Parish and Haverford Sabbatical*

Thurman graduated from Rochester Seminary, again as class valedictorian, in June 1926. Just days after commencement exercises Thurman began a new chapter in his life, marrying his first wife, Kate Kelley of Lagrange, Georgia, and assuming his first solo pastorate at Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Oberlin, Ohio. The parish's college-town setting afforded Thurman a unique ministry to both "town and gown," a clerical groove that especially suited his pastoral and intellectual gifts and interests and subsequently became his primary mission field.

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<sup>83</sup> Author interview with Richard Deats, August 27, 2003, audio cassette.

The Oberlin pastorate provided Thurman a liturgical laboratory in which he learned, first anxiously and then with growing confidence and enjoyment, to integrate the nurture of his own spiritual life into his pastoral charge for others. Through his experiments with creative sermon series and meditatively flavored observances of the Lord's Supper, he created a positive name for himself as an informed, relevant, capable and engaging preacher equipped with a unique pastoral imagination.<sup>84</sup> Thurman's Oberlin tenure also marks Thurman's introduction to the life and thought of the Quaker mystic-philosopher Rufus Jones (1863-1948), with whom he later studied as a special student in philosophy for a brief period at Haverford.<sup>85</sup>

Changes came to Thurman's family life too during this time. He and Kate welcomed their first and only daughter, Olive Katherine, named after Thurman's spiritual-literary mentor Olive Schreiner. Shortly after Olive's birth, however, Kate's health worsened due to the exacerbation of a previous illness she contracted during her years as a social worker. As medically advised, she and Olive Katherine returned to her family home in Georgia for treatment and rest.<sup>86</sup> Though his ministry was growing and his family was geographically divided, Thurman resigned his Mt. Zion pastorate and relocated to Haverford, eager to begin his studies with Jones.

### *Morehouse and Spelman Colleges*

Following his studies with Jones Thurman relocated to Atlanta, Georgia in fall 1929 and returned to his alma mater, Morehouse College, as a religion and philosophy professor, while also serving as Bible professor and religious advisor to campus life at Morehouse's

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<sup>84</sup> Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 68-69.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 74.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 75.

sister institution, Spelman College. Through integrating his many roles Thurman developed a teaching ministry which spoke to and encouraged his students to nurture their spiritual lives in tandem to their intellectual, social and ethical development.

A regular feature of his campus involvement was the informal weekly gatherings he hosted for his young Morehouse students where they spoke together about creative ways to positively engage their segregated world.<sup>87</sup>

During his second year at Morehouse, while bearing the added responsibility of overseeing the school's daily chapel services, Thurman watched his wife Kate's tuberculosis worsen, leading to her death in December 1931. After struggling through his various spring semester charges in the context of his deepening grief over Kate's passing, Howard sought leave from Morehouse during summer 1932 to travel to Europe alone. The slow passing of time in new lands proved a needed salve, and eventually Howard found peace beyond his situational depression. As he wrote:

...without knowing when or how, I moved into profound focus; the direction of the future opened wide its doors. My life seemed whole again and the strains of an unknown melody healed my inmost center.<sup>88</sup>

Possessed by a growing awareness that "God was not yet done with me," Thurman returned to the United States in fall 1932.

### *New Partnerships: Howard University and Sue Bailey*

His European sabbatical behind him, Howard found himself in the midst of positive change signaling new personal and professional beginnings. In June 1932 he married longtime friend Sue Bailey, with whom he and Kate had spent much time during

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<sup>87</sup> Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 89.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 83.

college.<sup>89</sup> A month later this “dynamic and creative partnership” arrived at Howard University in Washington, DC, where Thurman began a professorship in the School of Religion at the invitation of then-president Mordecai Johnson.

Paralleling his Morehouse career, during Thurman’s twelve-year tenure at Howard (1932-1944) he took on additional appointments, chairing the university Committee on Religious Life and subsequently filling the pulpit as Dean of Rankin Chapel. And once more he took advantage of the demands and opportunities of his integrated role as a campus-based teaching theologian to further refine his pastoral craft, especially his liturgical *modus*.<sup>90</sup> Amplifying the generative genius of African-American spirituality in chapel, Thurman also promulgated the wisdom of other ethnic and religious traditions.<sup>91</sup>

Finally, while keeping a healthy schedule of regional and national speaking engagements, together with Sue he continued regularly to host students for informal dialogue. He was especially alert to the specific needs of both international students and young black veterans resuming post-war duty studies.<sup>92</sup>

### **Finding His Voice: Sources and Forces**

Thurman’s initial foray into full-time ministry was a time of significant spiritual investigation, experimentation, and discovery. As he learned to integrate his personal

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<sup>89</sup> Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 84-85.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 89-91. Fluker and Pollard concur that it was during his twelve-year tenure at Howard (1932-1944) that Thurman significantly deepened his commitment to the particular content and style of ministry he perceived his unique vocation to demand.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 87.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 90-93. See also Howard Thurman, San Francisco, Letter to [Mordecai Johnson, Washington, DC], 4 March 1946, carbon copy, Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston.

spirituality into his pastoral work Thurman made the most of his new responsibilities as a churchman, seeing them as opportunities for personal growth.

*Liturgical Action: Oberlin, Morehouse, Howard*

Breaking with tradition, Thurman gradually incorporated special music, liturgical dance, meditative readings (poetry and prose), and extended periods of meditation into his weekly chapel services. Ever the popular preacher, Thurman also was the inclusive homilist, frequently opening his pulpit with great benevolence to a wide range of speakers.<sup>93</sup> As he notes, the Sunday morning service at Rankin Chapel gradually became a "watering place" where together the growing number of worshippers experienced "a time and place where race, sex, culture, material belongings, and earlier religious orientation became undifferentiated in the presence of God."<sup>94</sup>

*Rufus Jones and the Society of Friends*

The sabbatical Thurman spent studying at Haverford College with Rufus Jones in 1928 proved foundational for his personal spirituality and professional trajectory. Though cut short by the rapid decline of his first wife Kate's health and her subsequent death from tuberculosis, Thurman's time with the Quaker sage was highly fruitful as it refined his understanding and approach to mysticism in the context of historical Christian theology, social change and the witness of the peace churches. It was also during this time that, for

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<sup>93</sup> Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 90. Thurman goes into some detail here stressing the point that while he worked to bring diverse personalities, philosophies, and political horizons to bear on the congregation at Rankin Chapel, he also refused to invite speakers from schools that were not working to integrate their classrooms and further harmonious race relations. One notable exception that he indicates to this standard was Patrick Malin from Swarthmore of whom he writes on p. 90, "Malin taught economics at Swarthmore College and was working almost single-handedly to change the racial policy of that Quaker institution."

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 90.

better or worse, Thurman ultimately decided against pursuing research-intensive doctoral studies in religion or theology.

A stale regional church-development conference Thurman attended during 1928 is responsible for his first introduction to Jones' life and thought. Perusing books for sale by a conference vendor in lieu of sitting through yet another bland, rote training session, Thurman was drawn to two particular works: Mary Baker Eddy's autobiography and Jones' *Finding the Trail of Life*, which he purchased. After completing the latter in one sitting on the steps of the sponsoring church building, Thurman resolved to learn as much as he could about Jones in the hope of studying with him. Though doubtful Haverford accepted blacks, Thurman shared his interest in Jones with his Quaker friend Dick Edwards, who also knew Jones, and then wrote the mystic-philosopher himself outlining a potential plan of study. Despite having no previous experience overseeing such a unique directed study, Jones was intrigued and welcomed Thurman as a special student in philosophy.

Besides private weekly conferences with Jones, Thurman also attended his graduate seminar on Meister Eckhart and had complete access to his personal library while researching and writing papers on the Christian mystics.<sup>95</sup> Akin to his appreciation of Robbins, Thurman viewed Jones as a "prolific writer, an inspiring teacher, an engaging preacher" who possessed a rare intimacy which enabled him to reference his own personal experience without "causing embarrassment to his listener or himself."<sup>96</sup> Whereas Cross certainly pointed and may at times have pushed Thurman toward certain theological and vocational ends, the more prudent pedagogue Jones "invited" rather than "urged" his student

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<sup>95</sup> Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 76-77.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid*, 77.



to consider new intellectual and spiritual pathways.<sup>97</sup> Heuristically, Smith argues that whereas Robins and Cross emphasized the experiential core of religion, Jones stressed that at its most profound level religious experience is mystical experience.<sup>98</sup> Jones defines mysticism as:

...the type of religion which puts the emphasis on immediate awareness of relation with God, on direct and intimate consciousness of the Divine presence. It is religion in its most acute, intense and living stage.<sup>99</sup>

What is more, in highlighting the intimate intrapersonal dimensions of this encounter, Jones also argued that mysticism is a vital catalyst for social change in light of Jesus' proclamation of the *basileia tou theou*. Jones cited John Woolman, John Bunyan and Francis of Assisi, among others, as "affirmation mystics"—individuals who channel the energies of their mystical trysts into their work of reconciliation and transformation within the church and society.<sup>100</sup>

The affirmation mystic's experience, according to Jones, heightens her/his confidence that "...[T]he eternal Heart of the universe backs his moral endeavors and that in the long run—the run is sometimes very long—in the long run what ought to be is what will be."<sup>101</sup> Herein Jones widened mysticism's frame of reference for Thurman, particularly its pneumatic enrichment of dynamic patience and faithful endurance as vital resources for those involved in lasting works of social change.<sup>Relatedly, Jones' personal</sup> peacemaking efforts as co-founder in 1934 of the American Friends Service Committee and in protest of the First and

<sup>97</sup> Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 76. Jones's discourses during their weekly conferences sought to open before Thurman's mind "a stretch of road down which I was invited but never urged to travel."

<sup>98</sup> Smith, *Mystic as Prophet*, 33.

<sup>99</sup> Rufus Jones, *Studies in Mystical Religion* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1909), xv.

<sup>100</sup> See Pollard, 33-35 for a more detailed treatment of Jones' influence on Thurman vis-a-vis the latter's notion of "affirmation mystics."

<sup>101</sup> Rufus Jones, *The Testimony of the Soul* (New York, N.Y.: Macmillan Co, 1936), 400.

Second World Wars deepened Thurman's appreciation for his teacher's wisdom and its application to his own life and ministry.<sup>102</sup>

Yet certain tensions persisted between the two, at least from Thurman's side.

Consonant with prevailing Quaker tendencies of the 1930s, Jones' ethical application of mysticism focused on large-scale, primarily international issues (i.e. war, poverty, hunger), leaving him silent concerning racism and related other systemic evils as well as more commonplace injustice.<sup>103</sup> It is therefore surprising and perhaps even troubling that the issue of race never arose in their conversations. Thurman's "black fact" seemed extraneous for Jones. Concerning this Thurman wrote:

During the entire time with Rufus, issues of racial conflicts never arose, for the fact of racial differences was never dealt with at the conscious level. The ethical emphasis in his interpretations of mystical religion dealt primarily with war and peace, the poverty and hunger of whole populations, and the issues arising from the conflict between nations. Paradoxically, in his presence, the specific issues of race with which I had been confronted all my life as a black man in America seemed strangely irrelevant. I felt somehow he transcended race; I did so, too, temporarily, and, in retrospect, this aspect of my time with him remains an enigma.<sup>104</sup>

Two final elements of Thurman's sabbatical under Jones deserve mention. First, Thurman's direct experience while at Haverford of the demands of full-time theological study and writing firmly settled his decision to forego a terminal academic degree in religion. Despite his intellectual gifts he felt the "academic strictures" of such a program would usurp the mental force he preferred to focus toward his own internal spiritual

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<sup>102</sup> Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 78. Jones's integration of service and scholarship deepened Thurman's belief that, "the religion of the inner life could deal with the empirical demands of man without retreating from the demands of such experience."

<sup>103</sup> Thurman, "Mysticism and Social Change," 25 July 1978, 16, Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston. Here Thurman relates, "The thing that has puzzled me about which only once did I talk to Rufus, was the way in which the witness of which he spoke so often, growing out of his experience with the inner light, the way that that witness concerned itself to meeting the needs of the desperate, of the destitute, of the whole the things that came about from the ravages of war and pestilence and the guidance about the whole peace testimony. But I felt that in this emphasis it had no witness for the less dramatic, less obvious sufferings of mankind."

<sup>104</sup> Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 77.

development.<sup>105</sup> Finally, beyond his relationship with Jones, Thurman was greatly affected by the larger Quaker ethos. As his former faculty colleague from Howard University Calvin Keene conveyed:

Howard felt a close relationship with (the) Friends for various reasons, one of which was that for him the experience of the inner Christ was central. As did George Fox, he [Thurman] sought for the deep meaning and experiences contained in the New Testament and sought to make these come to life in the lives of his hearers and readers.<sup>106</sup>

The Friends' seamless integration of the contemplative and activist dimensions of Christian discipleship, particularly their sustained practice of silent prayer, profoundly intrigued Thurman. The covered meeting strengthened his emphasis on meditation and similar contemplative disciplines, an emphasis often in stark contrast with that of many of his contemporaries caught up in the euphoric activism often manifest in the American Civil Rights Movement and other spiritual and political fruits of the "Social Gospel."<sup>107</sup> The Friends never laid formal claim to Thurman, insisting that "he belonged to everyone." Yet their brand of evangelical pacifism imprinted him in such a way that "in a real sense," Sam Keene testified, "he [Thurman] might be termed a Quaker minister par excellence."<sup>108</sup>

### *The Black Church*

Thurman's personal and professional experiments in spirituality, inasmuch as they often led him beyond the Christian frame of reference, can easily raise questions concerning his place within the Church and, more pointedly, his relationship with the

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<sup>105</sup> Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 76.

<sup>106</sup> Henry J. Young, ed. *God and Human Freedom: A Festschrift in Honor of Howard Thurman* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1983), xi.

<sup>107</sup> Young, *God and Human Freedom*, xii.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, xii.

black church and the general “Negro” idiom. Yet Thurman made clear in both his written and spoken word his intimate and at times ineffable appreciation for his ancestry. Perhaps his most well known confession of such rings clear:

The fact that the first twenty-three years of my life were spent in Florida and in Georgia has left its scars deep in my spirit and has rendered me terribly sensitive to the churning abyss separating white from black...My roots are deep in the throbbing reality of the Negro idiom and from it I draw a full measure of inspiration and vitality.<sup>109</sup>

Thurman honored his “black fact” and perhaps in no better way than refusing to be limited by it in any way.<sup>110</sup> His decisions to study at Rochester and at Haverford, to lead a delegation to Asia, to explore relationships with the American and Canadian Indians and, later in his career, to guide interracial religious communities in San Francisco and Boston are clear evidence of this fact, which stemmed more from his sincere interest to explore the diversity of the human family than from Thurman’s insistence that as an African-American he should have the rights and privileges afforded to others. Correspondingly, while Thurman affirmed the black church as the original epicenter of the American Civil Rights Movement, he also encouraged and built collaborative bridges of support for the “black cause” beyond the black church both within the larger Christian church and American society.

A particular case in point is Thurman’s interpretation of what he terms the “deep genius” of the Negro Spirituals, first in a series of lectures given at Morehouse in 1929-30 and later his Ingersoll Lecture given in 1947 at Harvard University.<sup>111</sup> Later published as the double-work *Deep River* and *The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*, Thurman’s research and

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<sup>109</sup> Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness*, x.

<sup>110</sup> This view in many ways parallels Thurman’s feeling about his personal Christian faith and professional identity as a churchman ordained within the Baptist tradition.

<sup>111</sup> Fluker notes it was during his professional tenure at Morehouse that Thurman first began deciphering the religious vision of the Negro Spirituals. Walter E. Fluker, *They Looked for A City: A Comparative Analysis of the Ideal of Community in the Thought of Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Lanham, MD: University Press, 1989), 14.

recasting of the slave songs highlighted the original intent of the spirituals as creative theological works of religious confession and devotion, racial affirmation and social resistance, yet did so as a means of reopening them as resources of spiritual solidarity and renewal for his multiracial contemporaries, especially those active in works of social justice and change.<sup>112</sup> As he wrote in the first edition of this paired text:

The reprinting of *Deep River* and *The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death* in a single volume at this time may call for an explanation. All through the intervening years since the mid-forties when they first appeared, there has been an intermittent but consistent demand for them. This demand was greatly intensified during the period marked by a fresh sense of root or collective self-awareness brought into sharp focus by the tempests of the Civil Rights Movement. Despite the primary secular and political character of the movement it found sources of inspiration and courage in the spiritual insights that had provided a windbreak for our forefathers against the brutalities of slavery and the establishing of a ground of hope undimmed by the contradictions which held them in tight embrace. Often those who were most involved in the throes of the struggle were not aware of the dimension of this flow of courage from the past; nevertheless, it was a brooding presence in myriad rallies in a thousand churches which gave refuge and support to young and old in the heights and depths of the agonies of the '60s.<sup>113</sup>

Finally, there is the fact that Thurman's personal and pastoral expression of spirituality, frequently described as contemplative, reflective and mystical, diverged from the more boisterous, outwardly celebratory and rhythmic worship parameters of the American black church. Though as a preacher Thurman was not himself a "whooper," he did not critique the inherent worth of this preaching tradition.<sup>114</sup> Nor did he wish to incorporate it in his own homiletic.

Following the logic of his belief that one should "remain true to the grain in her/his own wood," Thurman taught that each individual had her/his own unique way of responding to God in personal devotion and public worship. And while recognizing that

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<sup>112</sup> Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness*, x-xi. Also see *Deep River and The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death* (Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1975), introduction.

<sup>113</sup> Howard Thurman, *Deep River and The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*, introduction.

<sup>114</sup> Reginald Van Stephens, "The Preaching of Howard Thurman, William A. Jones, Jr., William Watley, and Jeremiah Wright, Jr.: A Comparison of Distinctive Styles in Black Preaching." (D. Min. diss., United Theological Seminary, 1992), 84.

certain particular liturgical patterns were encouraged within specific church bodies, he argued that authentic human response to God transcended the limits of one universal worship style or action.

### **Deepening Vocation**

In the context of the pronounced flourishing of his professional and personal life at Howard University, Thurman was presented by the Y.M.C.A. and Y.W.C.A. with a unique, fortuitous opportunity—to lead a small delegation of African-Americans, including Sue, on a “pilgrimage of friendship” to South Asia under the auspices of the World Christian Federation.<sup>115</sup>

I read this venture as the first step in the expansion of Thurman’s pastoral and educational ministry beyond almost exclusively black institutions focused on regional social change to other more diverse ecclesial, para-church and academic institutions capable of influencing political, cultural and spiritual transformation at not only the campus and regional but also the national and international levels. I believe that in saying yes to the India project, more than simply enlarging his life and work’s geographical boundaries, Thurman even more significantly transcended his primary cultural, ecclesial and spiritual horizons—which up to then had, with the exception of his studies at Rochester and at Haverford, almost exclusively been Afro-centric.

### *India*

Given the profound impact Thurman’s South Asian sojourn had on his life and work’s trajectory, it is important to remember that he initially declined the venture, citing his refusal

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<sup>115</sup> Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 103-136.

to travel to India “as an apologist for a segregated American Christianity.” In turn the trip sponsors explained that in fact it was his very careful critique of the American Church as an African-American working within it that spurred their confidence in his spearheading the mission. Thus assured, Thurman enthusiastically accepted the challenge.<sup>116</sup> After preparation in America, he and Sue, along with Edward G. Carroll and his wife began their odyssey in the spring of 1935.

Thurman’s experience in India of the Hindu Untouchable brought the reality of black consciousness in American into sharp relief, particularly how the respective dominant national religion not only tolerated but prescribed both groups’ subordinate status. Seeing the pervasive shadow British imperialism cast over India’s geographical and psychological landscape firsthand further informed Thurman’s empathy for and interest in the Indian pursuit of dignity amid their fight for self-rule. These topics were central to conversations the delegation members shared with their hosts at Ibadan, Visvabharati and other schools where Thurman lectured, in particular Oriental scholar Dr. Singh,<sup>117</sup> Christian intellectual, missionary and missiologist Stanley E. Jones<sup>118</sup> and India’s poet-laureate and holistic educational pioneer Rabindranath Tagore.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 103-105.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid, 129. Concerning his meeting with Singh Thurman writes, “That afternoon I had the most primary, naked fusing of total religious experience with another human being of which I have ever been capable. It was as if we had stepped out of social, political, cultural frames of reference, and allowed two human spirits to unite on a ground of reality that was unmarked by separateness and differences. This was a watershed experience in my life. We had become a part of each other as we remained essentially individual. I was able to stand secure in my place and enter into his place without diminishing myself or threatening him.” Also see Thurman, *The Inward Journey* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1961; reprint, Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press, 1999), 19. He writes, “It is the claim of religion that the need for a sense of peace beyond all conflict is only found in God. The pathways vary but the goal is One.”

<sup>118</sup> Ibid, 116, 119-120. Jones was a Christian intellectual and creative missionary to India. Perhaps his most well-known text is *Christ of the Indian Road* (1924). He was also known for his ashram-spiritual camps of “creative religion.”

<sup>119</sup> Ibid, 130. Thurman relates, “We took seats in front of his chair. He sat looking at us, but also through and beyond us, and then he would make some statement, as he focused his mind, his eyes, on our faces; then he would take off again. I felt his mind was going through cycles as if we were not even present. Then he would

Still the most significant occurrences of the pilgrimage for Thurman came at the end of their four-month campaign. Despite erratic communication and scheduling difficulties the delegation met with Mohandas K. Gandhi in Bardoli. This brief conference—which lasted only four hours due to the pilgrimage’s preset departure itinerary, and in which Gandhi asked most of the questions—was thick with hurried conversation regarding racial identity, social oppression, and strategies for political and spiritual reconciliation shared in a spirit of mutual understanding.

Immediately after their brief conference with Gandhi the delegation began its homeward journey. As they navigated the heights of the Khyber Pass by caravan, Thurman experienced a spiritual opening which he described as “as close to a vision as I have ever had.”<sup>120</sup> As he wrote:

It was an experience of vision. We stood looking at a distance into Afghanistan, while to our right, and close at hand, passed a long camel train bringing goods and ideas to the bazaars of North India. Here was the gateway through which Roman and Mogul conquerors had come in other days bringing with them goods, new concepts, and the violence of armed might. All that we had seen and felt in India seemed to be brought miraculously into focus. We saw clearly what we must do somehow when we returned to America. We knew that we must test whether a religious fellowship could be developed in America that was capable of cutting across all racial barriers with a carry-over into the common life, a fellowship that would alter the behavior patterns of those involved.<sup>121</sup>

Although Thurman never detailed any more of the phenomenological content of this “experience of vision” in his personal or professional writings, the “feel” of it remained strong within him as the delegation returned to the United States in 1943 and he to his work

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swing back from that orbit, settle in, taken us into account again, and sweep out. It was not necessary to have an exchange of questions. It was as if we were there and being initiated into the secret working of a great mind and a giant spirit. But there was no point at which I felt the kind of identity with him that I later felt in Gandhi's presence.”

<sup>120</sup> Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 136.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid, 136. Here Thurman writes, “Among the many gifts of the spirit I was bringing back with me was the ‘feel’ of a moment of vision standing in Khyber Pass looking down into Afghanistan as the slow camel train ambled by en route to India—it was there that I knew a way must be found to answer the persistent query of the Indian students about Christianity and the color bar.”



at Howard University. As with his 1932 homecoming from Europe where he had mourned Kate's death, Thurman returned to a racially bifurcated America recommitted to, reenergized for, and with a more acute discernment of the particulars of his life's central calling.<sup>122</sup>

### *Fellowship Church*

As he was settling back into regular duties at Howard, Thurman received the first in a series of letters from Alfred G. Fisk, a white Presbyterian practicing minister and philosophy professor at San Francisco State College.<sup>123</sup> Dr. Fisk was spearheading the creation of a new interracial church with the backing of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and asked Thurman to recommend a recent black seminary graduate to serve as co-pastor alongside Fisk.

Thurman nominated a qualified individual who ultimately declined the post, yet Fisk was not to be disappointed. After prayerful discernment and lengthy family discussions Thurman vacated his tenured post at Howard and gambled on the Californian "adventure"<sup>124</sup> by accepting the call himself, feeling the new initiative was "at one with the creative encounter" of India.<sup>125</sup>

Though initially underpaid and overqualified for the original job description, Thurman arrived in San Francisco with his family in May 1943 and began zealously co-pastoring Fellowship Church with Fisk until the latter resigned in 1946. Thence, as the

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<sup>122</sup> Pollard, *Mysticism and Social Change*, 23. As Pollard notes, "the litmus test" for realizing such a dream was even then on the rise.

<sup>123</sup> Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 142-143. Here Thurman describes Fisk as, "a voting socialist, a confirmed pacifist, an ordained Presbyterian clergyman, a devoted follower of Jesus Christ, a social activist; the Great War was the catalyst that precipitated his emergence in a leadership role at that particular moment in American history."

<sup>124</sup> Thurman titles the chapter in *Head and Heart* in which he details the San Francisco period as, "*The Bold Adventure*."

<sup>125</sup> Pollard, *Mysticism and Social Change*, 24. Pollard writes, "For Thurman, this [the San Francisco "experiment"] was the chance to conclusively determine whether institutional religion could develop a model which annealed separations rooted in socio-economic standing, gender, age, denomination, and faith. He was particularly hopeful for the dissolution of barriers of race and culture within Fellowship church."

church's senior minister and chief visionary, Thurman led the congregation to extend its inclusive mission beyond the racial divide, signaling Fellowship Church as a place of worship and spiritual growth not only for Christians but for Buddhists, Jews, Humanists and agnostics as well. Building on his liturgical experiments at Howard and Morehouse, Thurman continued to integrate the arts and periods of meditation with his weekly sermons and other more traditional forms of worship in San Francisco. And while the weekly Sunday morning worship service persisted as the primary common well experience, other vital hallmarks of Fellowship Church's spiritual community and social witness were weekly and monthly cultural diversity workshops, lecture series, art exhibitions and discussion groups.

### *Boston University*

As Fellowship Church's experiment in inclusive religious community continued to break new ground and challenge old paradigms racially, theologically and politically, Thurman's prominence as a caring, creative pastor and prophetic cultural critic also grew. In May 1952 he was invited by Boston University's then President Harold Case to come to the school as Dean of Marsh Chapel and professor in the School of Theology. Thurman discerned the significant potential of Case's offer. After nearly a decade of his careful nurture, Fellowship Church had developed from an interracial ideal into a nationally recognized, self-sustaining spiritual institution with both local and international membership ready to stand on its own apart from his official tutelage. The unique teaching theologian position at Boston University would allow Thurman to further his message of racially inclusive, politically engaged and contemplatively centered religion through preaching to and teaching domestic and international students from a variety of cultural, religious and racial

backgrounds and to do so as the first black man appointed to any deanship at a major white American university.

Related to this, Case hoped that Thurman would be able to develop in Boston University's Marsh Chapel the kind of inclusive, innovative religious experience and community he had seeded and cultivated in San Francisco. Thurman would assume complete creative control over all chapel life, enabling him to construct the exact "worship structure and organism" he desired.<sup>126</sup> Believing Boston represented the greatest opportunity to continue to build inclusive socio-spiritual community, Thurman resigned his ten-year pastorate at Fellowship Church in 1953 and relocated both his family and focus to New England.<sup>127</sup>

The pastoral exhilaration Thurman found in his new post at Boston University came commingled with various frustrations concerning his fit as a contemplative, person-centered pastoral innovator serving as spiritual guide of a large, well-established, heady, primarily white mainline Protestant university. His pioneering sermons and the extended periods of silent meditation at the heart of his Sunday morning services at Marsh Chapel discomfited those more familiar with and theologically confident in the School's traditional Methodist liturgy. Certain theology faculty members dismissed Thurman's pedagogy as "unorthodox," even anti-intellectual.<sup>128</sup> Yet through his chapel work, his singular theology course on Spiritual Resources and Disciplines, his constant attention to the intellectual and ethical questions and spiritual needs of his students and colleagues, and his involvement with local

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<sup>126</sup> Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 167.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid, 168.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 175-178.

social action groups, Thurman succeeded in furthering his own holistic vision of ministry, rooted as it was in his still evolving contemplative-prophetic Gospel hermeneutic.<sup>129</sup>

### **Deepening Vocation: Sources and Forces**

Thurman's decision to lead the friendship delegation's international travels and refine his pastoral craft through accepting new ministry and teaching roles in San Francisco and Boston deepened his commitment to provide spiritual resources for all those involved in social change. Thurman's time with Gandhi, study and preaching concerning the satyagraha campaign and participation in many of America's mid-century peace and justice movements were central to his growing reputation as the "spiritual architect of the American Civil Rights Movement.

#### *Mohandas Gandhi and Satyagraha*

Thurman's interest in Gandhi stemmed back to his days as an undergraduate at Morehouse. In the months prior to the delegation's departure from America he and the others did a great deal of study and preparation, including Thurman's meeting with two female English pacifists, Miriam Slade and Muriel Lester.<sup>130</sup> Born of affluence, Slade had gradually committed herself to Gandhi's nonviolent program and the cause of India's political autonomy, eventually living as a member of his own ashram community. Lester's work in the London slums and her friendship with Gandhi were common knowledge among

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<sup>129</sup> Pollard, *Mysticism and Social Change*, 25. Pollard notes that by this time Thurman's reputation as dynamic preaching theologian had begun to drown out his "exceptional social witness."

<sup>130</sup> Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 105-106.

social activists and liberal religious leaders. She tutored Thurman on the Anglo-Indian mentality; Slade arranged for the delegation's audience with Gandhi.<sup>131</sup>

Their Bardoli summit represented Gandhi's first dialogue with African American religious leaders. Discussing the various merits of his liberation campaign in India, Gandhi also spoke candidly concerning his belief that it was likely through the efforts of the African Americans in the United States that "the unadulterated message of nonviolence could be delivered to men everywhere."<sup>132</sup> Thurman's question as to why the satyagraha movement had failed to completely nullify England's political hold on India was met with Gandhi's insistence that ahimsa could succeed only as it grew beyond an ideal practiced by an elite few and became operative in the totality of an entire people's existence. He continued:

It [*ahimsa*, nonviolence] cannot be the unique property or experience of their leaders; it has to be rooted in the mass assent and creative push. The result is that when we first began our movement, it failed, and it will continue to fail until it is embraced by the masses of the people. I felt that they could not sustain this ethical ideal long enough for it to be effective because they did not have enough vitality.<sup>133</sup>

This particular issue of the spiritual verve both of those wanting to believe in and those already working for nonviolent social change was central to Thurman's interest in the general theology and spiritual disciplines essential to the Mahatma's

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<sup>131</sup> Thurman was especially impressed with the way these women embodied the nonviolent rhetoric they communicated in their own social stances and, more importantly, their nonviolent lifestyles. For survey of Lester see Richard Deat's *Ambassador of Reconciliation: A Muriel Lester Reader* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1991).

<sup>132</sup> Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 131-135.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid, 133. For Thurman's own thoughts along this line specifically related to the American Civil Rights Movement see *Deep is the Hunger*, ix and x, wherein Thurman mentions prayer and other "spiritual resources" necessary to the preservation of nonviolence as the most "creative ethical ideal." While Thurman was certainly concerned about the political and social aspects of *satyagraha*, Gandhi's words profoundly speak, at least implicitly, to his [Thurman's] understanding of the vital necessity of spiritually based moral discipline and preparation for any individual aspiring to become a "satyagrahi."

*satyagraha* campaign.<sup>134</sup> Along with many of his American Christian contemporaries, Thurman made careful study of Gandhi's translation of Hinduism's spiritual metaphysics into a practical technique for social change, particularly the paradox of self-mastery and self-surrender a person must achieve to become a true *satyagrahi*.<sup>135</sup> Gandhi taught that for anyone to effectively engage in acts of social resistance s/he must first cultivate absolute tolerance and empathy grounded in a love of God, neighbor/enemy and self. Through meditation and prayer, fasting and extended study of the spiritual and moral teachings of the Axial faiths, Gandhi developed these virtues within himself and asked the same of those who sought formally to participate in his cause.

The radical and at the same time practical nature of Gandhi's personal religious faith, combined with his belief in the universality of truth and advocacy of spiritual disciplines, deepened Thurman's personal endeavors at pacifism and his pastoral work as a purveyor of God's reconciliatory justice and love which he associated with Jesus' love-ethic. The spiritual rootedness and social activism of Gandhi's *satyagraha* deepened Thurman's insight into what, for both men, was the inextricable link between religion and society. Gandhi's emphasis on spiritual disciplines deeply influenced Thurman's personal pacifism as well as his work as "spiritual architect" of the Civil Rights Movement. Their primary point of divergence centers around Gandhi's more *active* (and Thurman's *more pastoral*) engagement in nonviolent works of civil disobedience.

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<sup>134</sup> Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Nonviolent Resistance* (New York, N.Y.: Schocken Books, 1951; reprint, 1961), 58. Here Gandhi argues, "Non-violence means reliance on God, the Rock of Ages. If we would seek His aid, we must approach Him with a humble and a contrite heart."

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid*, 68. Gandhi also cautions, "...a man cannot become a non-cooperator by merely wishing to be one."

Differences in leadership styles aside, one final commonality between Thurman and Gandhi was their mutual appreciation for Jesus' "love-ethic,"<sup>136</sup> particularly the nonviolent principles central to his proclamation of the Realm of God in the "Sermon on the Mount."<sup>137</sup> While developing his own creative Christology in *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949), Thurman was particularly impressed with Gandhi's ability to saturate himself in the Nazarene's ethos without feeling the demand to become a Christian—an aptitude Thurman later described as "no ordinary achievement."<sup>138</sup> The Hindu's life and work gave dynamic witness to the liberating truths Thurman believed the "religion of Jesus" spoke to those "with their backs against the wall."

Gandhi also asked his guests if they would do something "very special" for him—sing the spiritual "Were You There (When They Crucified My Lord)?" They consented and found within their singing what Thurman terms a "moment above moments" in which

...all differentiation melted away, when the context by which each of us defined the meaning of our faith seemed like some empty echo among barren hills and we were human spirits stripped to whatever is most real and irreducible in the presence of the creator of life.<sup>139</sup>

In sum, Thurman was profoundly influenced by Gandhi's public campaign, personal spirituality, writings, and especially with the Mahatma's resiliency in his

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<sup>136</sup> Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1949; reprint, Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1981), 21-35.

<sup>137</sup> For Thurman's creative exposition of this familiar pericope see *Deep is the Hunger*, the epilogue entitled "For the Quiet Time," especially 185-191.

<sup>138</sup> Thurman, "Talk concerning Gandhi," n.d. Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston, 7. Thurman continues, "Only a free spirit and an authentic seeker after truth and a believer in the quest would have been able for instance to gather from the life and the teachings and the work of Jesus as Gandhi did without ever feeling that in so doing there was placed upon him the demand to become a Christian. And this has affected me profoundly. Stand in your own streams and gather unto yourself all of the grades of life wherever they turn up without feeling in so doing you must dry up the spring that waters your own roots."

<sup>139</sup> Ibid, 9. See also Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 134. Here Thurman relates a quote from Gandhi, "I [Gandhi] feel that this song gets to the root of the experience of the entire human race under the spread of the healing wings of suffering."

efforts for peace. Thurman himself consistently struggled to incarnate the central commitments to love and truth he encountered in Gandhi.<sup>140</sup>

So when I think about him [Gandhi], I am inspired and I am humiliated because I have not yet come to that place yet in which for the sake of the truth that opens itself in my mind and heart I am willing to yield everything. I have a series of reservations that I juggle and as long as that is true, the light can only dimly shine in my mind and my heart.

In him we see something about the nature of life and the kind of dependability that there is in the experience of living when a man is able to place at the disposal of his commitment to truth, his total life. The winnowing process through which a man goes as more and more he becomes involved in his commitment. Now this is what he [Gandhi] demonstrates and to the degree a man is able to do that he becomes the "for instance" of his dedication. The "for instance" and in the presence of that kind of creative energy—what is an empire? What are guns? <sup>141</sup>

### *Peace and Justice in America: Movements and Meanings*

Along with Benjamin Mays, James Lawson, Shorty Collins and others of his contemporaries, Thurman was deeply interested and heavily invested in the day-to-day events and overall outcome of the American Civil Rights Movement. Yet rather than taking on formal leadership roles in political debate, marches, sit-ins and related forms of nonviolent direct action or speaking at rallies, Thurman's primary contribution to the cause would be to remain true to furthering his gifts as an author, preacher and advisor—offering interpretations of a Christian spirituality of nonviolence for the dispossessed, providing resources for spiritual renewal for activists as well as the general public, and counseling the Movement's leadership on issues of social ethics while sharing his concern for their personal moral and spiritual conditions and basic overall health.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> For more on the genesis of these particular Thurman terms see *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 7-17.

<sup>141</sup> Thurman, "Talk Concerning Gandhi," 8-9.

<sup>142</sup> Thurman's relationship with Martin King, Jr. was not that of either a fully developed or regular collegiality or friendship. However, both men were always interested in the other's work, insights and families. Thurman records recollections of visiting King in New York City during the latter's convalescence following a stabbing attempt on his life; Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 254-55. Here Thurman writes, "while he was recovering in the Harlem hospital when we were alone, I ask, 'What do the doctors say about the length of your convalescence



Though Benjamin Mays defended Thurman's decision "not to march" (i.e., to provide support for the direct leadership rather than to directly lead), Thurman did in fact participate in and even initiated public acts of social protest, though always from the margins.

Participating in the August 1963 march on Washington, he was primarily taken with the student participants and how they were excited and hopeful, particularly in singing the religious songs interspersed within the various rally speeches. The week after seeing a street front window installation denigrating African Americans as "cotton-people" at a major retail store in San Francisco during his Fellowship Church pastorate, Thurman referred to the ill taste of the display in his sermon as a means of encouraging his congregants to see and then potentially act against the portrayal themselves. Within two days the installation was removed.<sup>143</sup>

## Twilight

The final twenty years of Thurman's life (1962-1981) advanced his understanding of and influence on the American church, the American Civil Rights Movement and related peace

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before they will okay the resumption of your work?" When he told me I urged him to ask them to extend the period by an additional two weeks. This would give him time away from the immediate pressure of the movement to reassess himself in relation to the cause, to rest his body and mind with healing detachment, and to take a long look that only solitary brooding can provide. The movement had become more than an organization; it had become an organism with a life of its own to which he must relate in fresh and extraordinary ways or be swallowed up by it."

<sup>143</sup> Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 160-161. Here he writes, "The result of this attitude exposed us to much criticism because we did not fit the limited definition of an 'activist' group. It was my conviction and determination that the church would be a resource for activists—a mission fundamentally perceived. To me it was important that individuals who were in the thick of the struggle for social change would be able to find renewal and fresh courage in the spiritual resources of the church. There must be provided a place, a moment, when a person could declare, 'I choose!'/ A minor incident illustrates this point. One evening I walked past one of the most elegant department stores in the city. There was a window display of a black woman and several children, the stereotypical 'Black Mammy and Pickaninnies.' I was shocked and angered. The following Sunday morning, I invited my entire congregation to go by this store to see the 'interesting' window display and react to it in their own way. I was careful not to say what it was, nor why I wanted them to see it. By noon on Monday, the whole display had been removed. There are times when guidance as to techniques and strategy is urgent, when counsel, support, and collective direct action are mandatory. But there can never be a substitute for taking *personal responsibility* for social change."

and justice movements, and the larger global community, all the while bringing into profound focus the purpose of his life and ministry and the world which he, as a child of Waycross come to bloom as a well known, even if enigmatic black American religious intellectual, had inherited. Prior to his formal retirement from Boston University in 1965, Thurman enjoyed a three-year leave of absence during which, while remaining university minister-at-large, he and Sue launched their “wider ministry,” traveling to such places as Hawaii, Japan, Egypt, Israel, and Nigeria, among others. The Middle East visit enriched his appreciation for Judaism as a singular “living tradition” and taproot of Christianity and Islam; his African experience deepened his ties with his ancestral heritage—setting its inherently spiritual and communal native dynamic and tragic exploitation through slave culture in stark relief.<sup>144</sup>

When the Thurmans returned to San Francisco in 1965 Howard established the Thurman Educational Trust as a dually purposed non-profit. Providing scholarships to minority students from the deep American South pursuing college and university degrees, the Trust also disseminated his worldview and teachings through opening “listening rooms,” both domestically and internationally, where people could have easy access to his published texts but even more to his recorded lectures, sermons and related addresses.<sup>145</sup> Concurrent to his work with the Trust, Thurman also took on an adjunct professorship at Haverford, consulted with the State Department in the promotion of agents to the Foreign Service, and while not formally on staff, continued his pastoral investment in Fellowship Church. During the late 1970s Thurman developed cancer, with which he continued to struggle until it took his life.

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<sup>144</sup> Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 193-194.

<sup>145</sup> Howard Thurman “Listening Rooms” are still open in various locations across the United States and continental Europe including the United Kingdom. In Washington, DC Howard University Divinity School has the most accessible collection of audio-resources of Thurman’s sermons, lectures and addresses.

Surrounded by Sue and his extended family, Thurman died at home in San Francisco on April 10, 1981.

What little Thurman wrote of his final years has not been published nor have any scholars closely examined this period in his life in any significant detail. This dearth has allowed two elements to remain as open-ended questions. First, there are the particulars of Thurman's relationship with his cancer. Archival sources clearly suggest he faced the disease head on and quite privately, and that he fought aggressively through much of his illness.<sup>146</sup> What were Thurman's last days like with his final teacher? Second, there is the issue of Thurman's life-encompassing God experience during a hospital stay toward the end of his life which, while well known among scholars, remains nebulous due, as I read it, to lack of adequate research. In this introspective incident Thurman imagined himself back at a hospital in Daytona, Florida adjacent to the Waycross ghetto wherein he had begun his search through life for meaning and the God of meaning and life eight decades earlier. An archival tape recording of Thurman's recollection of this episode reveals that he (Thurman)challenged God as to whether He (God) was the supreme God of all of life or simply the Creator of life. Thurman demanded to know from the true God of life why people were created in various races and with various pigments and body types if there was no fundamental difference in worth or divinity among them.

I wanted to know from him [God]—of—was there ultimately any difference between the colors of people—because this was my concern of how do you deal with the question of a black person as over against white person. Are there elements known only to you [God] by which you judge and if that is the case—then the whole scheme of creation is evil...<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Lack of scholarly attention to his final season of life begs important questions. How did Thurman who earlier on consistently met personal challenges directly with deep resiliency while counseling countless others to appreciate the purposefulness, even at times the necessity, of suffering, traverse his own illness and death? What was his dialogue like with his final teacher?

<sup>147</sup> Thurman, "Hospital Experience," 8 April 1981, audio cassette, Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston. It is interesting to cross reference this comment with attention to statements Thurman makes concerning his belief in the ultimacy of the Divine mandate of harmony and wholeness for life.

This passage makes clear that Thurman, throughout his life-cycle, struggled with his “black fact” in a largely “white” national, Christian and political landscape—a struggle that was greatly exacerbated through what I read as his traumatic and rather terrifying dialogue with cancer.

### III. SUMMING UP A LIFE: FOUR QUESTIONS

Having briefly sketched the four primary stages of Thurman’s “working paper” and considered in some detail the primary influences in each which shaped his interests in peace and mysticism, I can now attend to the general substance, primary elements and vital shifts in Thurman’s life experience. Herein I make use of a set of questions Thurman himself regularly put to individuals seeking his pastoral counsel: “Who am I? What do I want? How do I plan to get it? And who will go with me?”<sup>148</sup> How does Thurman’s narrative parsed above answer? What does it say concerning his identity as a minister and a mystic?

#### Who am I?

Howard Thurman was a particular African-American, a philosopher-artist, and a Christian. Front and center, Howard Thurman was a particular African-American—one who, born and raised in the American South in fiscal poverty under the crippling sociopolitical and psycho-spiritual ethos of Jim Crow, also chose to venture beyond the perceived boundaries of his familial and ethnic territories in the southeastern United States,

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<sup>148</sup> For more treatment of these questions as central to Thurman’s pastoral method and personal life see Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, 26 and Yates, 231. These two sources treat the first three of the four questions. In conversations with Walter Fluker I was made aware of the fourth question which Thurman also offered to those individuals and groups seeking his counsel relative to their life-plans.

the black church and academy and the traditional Christianity of his day. By first crossing and subsequently softening these boundaries, Thurman achieved a prophetic, compassionate life, both personally and professionally, that was uniquely his own. Yet in doing so he paid particular, sometimes significant costs.<sup>149</sup>

Pairing Thurman's original social location together with his desire not to be limited by it—even while owning it—made for a double-edged sword that over time seems to have cut Thurman both ways. Thurman's primal wound—his experience particularly as a child and adolescent of racism and segregation in the Deep South—has been well established. It pained him as a child in Waycross and as a high-schooler in Jacksonville. In his continued experience of racism while studying, ministering and growing his family in the northeast and western United States, Thurman found racism a persistent toxin. Writing in *The Luminous Darkness* about his encounter with “‘whites’ from the South” well after his college years at Morehouse, Thurman lamented a persistent riddle:

Times without number I have encountered persons from the South who, stranger though they were, presumed to cast themselves in a role of utter familiarity by word, manner, and deed. Their attitude seemed to say, “We have a secret, you and I. We won't tell.”<sup>150</sup>

This passage speaks of an all too easily discarded secret that his own religious, ethical and racial sensibilities, his rhetorical flourishes, particular timbre, pastoral optimism and his primarily peaceful and often joyous disposition, working together, can diminish. For all his honest work toward, words about and prayers for reconciliation

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<sup>149</sup> Thurman's innovative, and for a black Baptist preacher rather untraditional, liturgical method, homiletical style, interest in more contemplative approaches to Christian discipleship, and his concern to expand his ministry beyond the Church to a more inclusive “spiritual” community of individual believers and seekers found him many critics within the black church of his day. Similarly, his participation with the FOR, both formally as a board member and informally as pastoral counsel and ambassador, was atypical amongst the many other mostly activist-minded, protest-happy and anti-war focused key FOR staff and lay members.

<sup>150</sup> Thurman, *Luminous Darkness*, 67.

amongst the races—particularly black and white—Howard Thurman suffered greatly throughout his life at the hands of racist, segregated culture.

The second cut into this wound Thurman experienced came as a result of the innate tendencies toward a larger frame of cultural reference that was inherent in his religious vision and accessible in the professional opportunities offered him beyond the black church and academy. While never cut off or away from his African-American culture, Thurman did experience a particular heavy solitude apart from particular segments of black culture, which tended to interpret his self-understanding and life-work as counter to what someone with his gifts, talents and ethnicity, in his day and age, should be about. Lauded for his push toward racial and religious inclusion by some, Thurman was simultaneously misunderstood and criticized in this very work throughout his life, not only by his lifelong critics but, more disturbingly for him, by persons and groups who had previously understood, welcomed and honored him as one of their own.

A particular African-American, Thurman was also at root a philosopher-artist drawn to the numinous. His creative, capable intellect was well-established in his formal academic achievements, publications and his reputation amongst his peers and congregants. Thurman's choice against a traditional academic career in theology or economics, the practice of medicine or business; and choice for pastoral and teaching ministries, speaks to his personal sense of religious calling and long-term vocational fit employing his cognitive, psychological and spiritual gifts in the service of souls, (though in a non-traditional way). Thurman's theological method, evident in his spoken and written word and approach to pastoral care and counseling, appears to be that of a

spiritual philosophy in search of the foundational principles operative in life, rather than a doctrinally, scripturally, or ecclesially based pastoral theology.

Like Paul Tillich, John MacMurray, Karl Rahner, Martin Luther King, Jr. and other existentialist and personalist Christian thinkers of his time, Thurman's theological investigations led him to the Divine as the ground of being which animated every individual's state of ultimate concern. In philosophizing about his particular life, work and times, Thurman naturally gravitated to the creative thinkers and cerebral poets, musicians, thinkers and artists who understood the soulful aspects of human existence as central to but not bound by religious sensibilities and schema. Thurman's vocational integrity resulted from his lack of interest in working as a pure academic, pure therapist, pure preacher or pure poet. His unique voice sounded from the fusion of his strongest natural talents with his life's innate tendency toward ordained service to humanity and the sacred, both through and beyond the Church. He was a teaching theologian with the heart of a philosopher-artist whose deepest self, personally and professionally, was animated by a Christian spirituality born of his own significant experience of the person and event of Jesus Christ, his pastoral career given to ecclesial and social reform and his academic life of study and teaching concerning the cruciform core of Jesus' "love-ethic."<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 89-109. Thurman's familiar phrase, "Jesus 'love-ethic,'" is best understood in relation to Thurman's Christology as developed in his seminal text *Jesus and the Disinherited*. In this text, considered by many well-established black liberation theologians including James Cone, Deotis Roberts and Cornell West as an early work of black American liberation Christology, Thurman develops the import of Jesus' life and message for the socially and politically oppressed. Locating Jesus as a fiscally poor first-century messianic Jewish preacher, Thurman interprets Jesus' message as one of inclusive, nonviolent love and truth which challenged both the theological exclusivity of the Jewish covenant and the sociopolitical exclusivity of the Roman Empire. Jesus, for Thurman, taught and ministered in the name of a Divine Reality who was God of all people. Beyond racial, creedal, political or cultural differences he believed Jesus called people to a new reality of relationship born through mutual understanding, reconciliatory justice and inclusive hospitality. Thurman argued the welfare of the poor and dispossessed, rather than the pursuit of political and

## What Do I Want?

Howard Thurman wanted an ever-widening frame of personal and professional reference commensurate with his desire to know and cultivate peace through practicing and refining a creation and history affirming mysticism. A religious pluralist, Thurman himself felt called to and knew God's intentions for the unity of all life best, first and foremost in the person and teachings of Jesus Christ.

In his chapter on "Commitment" in *Disciplines of the Spirit*, Thurman related his experience of watching a road crew dig a large hole in his street in Oberlin, Ohio in an attempt to solve a sewage problem. Peering into the opening beneath the concrete, he saw that the roots of a tree planted across his yard had grown around, inside and through the large sewer pipe under the street in their search for nutrients. He noted:

The roots of trees spread out in many directions—seeking, always seeking the ground of existence for themselves...[T]he tree was more than four hundred yards to the other side of the house, but this did not matter to the roots. They were on the hunt for life.<sup>152</sup>

This story is parabolic of Thurman's own life, for from his very first days in Waycross Thurman lived life in search of a wider frame of reference. His earliest investigations into the sacred taught him that familial and ethnic community, the Christian church and the natural world were all vital crucibles for the sacred. In college Thurman read his way through every volume in Morehouse's library and spent a summer in New York City taking a course on the reflective aspects of critical thought. At Colgate-Rochester he reset expectations for an African American student rooming with

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economic power, as the central driving forces in this new community. For Thurman then Jesus' "love-ethic" was the spirit of love, truth and reconciliation taught by the Nazarene which his followers were to incarnate in their own spiritual, political and ethical agency.

<sup>152</sup> Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, 13.



two white classmates and becoming George Cross's Saturday morning theological other and unlikely scholarly protégé.

Raised a Baptist, trained at Baptist supported schools through seminary, and ordained a Baptist, Thurman went on to study and pray with the Quakers and American and Canadian Indians and forge substantial relationships with individuals and collectives representing the widest array of religious and cultural backgrounds. Thurman's drive to find, live from and widen the center of a boundless socio-spiritual territory, while vital to his ministerial aspirations, was within him as a child of life long before he became a careful and often critical son of the Church. Exploring life's social categories and ethnic boundaries as "swinging doors"<sup>153</sup> was something Thurman was about long before developing his reputation as an astute preacher and public intellectual during the 1940s and 50s.

Thurman's desire for an ever widening framing of reference in his own life and religion and more generally for human culture and life's larger ethos is at one with his desire for "peace." At base Thurman interpreted peace as a dynamic sense of wholeness, interdependence and belonging which he concurrently termed "community." Akin to his early feelings of being held and understood, rather than minimized or ostracized, by the Presence he sensed in his earliest experiences of the natural world and in positive experiences of religious worship, Thurman's pursuit of a larger frame of meaning

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<sup>153</sup> Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, 127. Here he writes in the conclusion of this seminal text, "The experience of love is either a necessity or a luxury. If it be a luxury, it is expendable; if it be a necessity, then to deny it is to perish. So simple is the reality, and so terrifying. Ultimately there is only one place of refuge on this planet for any man—that is in another man's heart. To love is to make of one's heart a swinging door."

validated the belief grounding his religious faith and personal life: that beyond all apparent contradictions, ultimately life is one.<sup>154</sup>

Thurman's way of experiencing and understanding existence's unity was primarily through mysticism, in the sense of experiential knowledge of Divine Presence in relation to life's concrescence. Mysticism was also the personal and theological language through which he felt most invited to speak about such wholeness. Where his early Waycross years provided him nascent seeds of religious experience, in reading Schreiner and studying with Jones Thurman discovered a philosophical, theological and poetic lexicon of mystical sensibilities which he adopted and adapted for his own personal and professional use. An experience, mysticism was also a horizon and language Thurman felt could speak authentically, redemptively and prophetically to the manifold difficulties which plagued and the concurrent opportunities that challenged the individual and society of his time.

One of the most fundamental hopes of Thurman's professional life was, through his localized congregational ministry and his preaching and writing ministries, to reform the church spiritually from within by pointing to the ways in which much of the social-justice and peace movement, itself on the whole largely read as a secular enterprise, better represented the inclusive, restorative justice and reconciliation-based community Jesus initiated and imagined than the mainstream of American Christianity. The cruciform pattern of redemption the Nazarene preached, if returned to the center of the church's being, would reopen the church as a fellowship worthy of its call as broadcaster of, through its life as witness to, the salvation of living the Christian Gospel. As Thurman wrote:

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<sup>154</sup> Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 269.

Under such a circumstance, the whole missionary-conversion process would be reversed—men would knock at the door of the church to find out what they need to do to become what, in evidence, the Christian is. The life that the church lives in the world would ‘bring the world to Christ.’<sup>155</sup>

Pursuing such ends, Thurman worked to overcome various obstacles. His most prominent struggles were, first, coming to terms with his inability always to provide a complete solution or cure for those in his care, and secondly, performing the hard work of genuine forgiveness when friends or colleagues wronged him.<sup>156</sup> As his second wife Sue related to Thurman biographer Elizabeth Yates, there was...

...only one occasion during the years she had known him, when he had seemed to fall apart. It was at a time when someone close to him faced an illness for which there was no cure. ‘He had to accept the fact that he could do nothing.’ This was what caused him anguish, for it was his nature always to be positive and creative.<sup>157</sup>

### **How Do I Plan to Get It?**

Thurman’s path toward his ultimate personal and professional objectives was one he largely blazed himself. An innovative Christian thinker, a contemplative preacher and an African-American theologian with a rarely paralleled universal appeal, Thurman had deep roots in black culture, the Christian church and liberal Protestant academe. Building on rather than boxed in by these associations, he largely went his own way. Bringing the various sources and forces explored above to bear on his inherent spiritual tendencies and natural gifts, Thurman spent his life refining a path of discipleship which I read as a practical, pastoral Christian mysticism. As a pastor and teaching theologian Thurman highlighted the “essence” of the Christian Gospel as he read it in both the New Testament and the history of the Church. Thurman’s personal recognition and professional reading of Jesus as “Christ”

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<sup>155</sup> Thurman, *Luminous Darkness*, 107-108.

<sup>156</sup> Yates, 226. Here Thurman’s wife Sue related, according to Yates Thurman’s words, “I [Thurman] worked at it all night...and I have forgiven him.”

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid*, 226.

was deeply influenced by his appropriation of Jesus' Jewish heritage and sociopolitical posture, his own African-American lineage and historical location, and how he read both of these against the life and times of other mystics of the Church<sup>158</sup> and luminary teachers from other faith traditions.

Using an adaptive sourcing method which Thurman scholar and womanist theologian Mozella Mitchell terms "pastiche,"<sup>159</sup> Thurman folded primary insights from these various witnesses into the raw wisdom of his own experience to produce the unique spiritual idiom synonymous with his ministry. Capable of speaking to suffering through his familiarity with suffering, Thurman's idiom voiced through his life, spoken and written rhetoric was that of a critical realist who had touched the vulnerable and violent within himself, his church, his people and his world and retained prophetic hope in spirituality as a means of healing both his own life's struggles and the thick political, military, economic and social trauma undergirding the reputation of the twentieth as human history's most violent century.

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<sup>158</sup> Through his formal and informal self-developed study after his Haverford sabbatical Thurman became very familiar with many of the classic thinkers and mystics within Christian spirituality and the primary religious guides within other axial faith traditions. In particular Thurman was familiar with Anthony of the Desert, Simeon Stylites, Suso, Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhart, Bernard of Clairvaux, Francis of Assisi, Martin Luther, John Bunyan, the African-Plantation slaves as well as his contemporaries including Evelyn Underhill, Rufus Jones and Elton Trueblood.

<sup>159</sup> Mozella Mitchell, "Howard Thurman and Olive Schreiner: Post-Modern Marriage Post-Mortem" *Journal of Religious Thought*, 38 (1981):63. In her article, Mitchell uses pastiche to refer to Thurman's selection of individual poems, stories and excerpts from Schreiner's works which he brought together in an edited volume, *A Track to the Water's Edge: The Olive Schreiner Reader* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973). Here Mitchell uses pastiche to note Thurman's Schreiner reader as a literary hodgepodge collection of some of his favored of her writings. While acknowledging Mitchell's initial use of the term, I also seek to extend it. Thurman's literary style, like his oratory, is a product of his assimilation of the ideas, symbols, rhetorical styles and personal experiences that most shaped his personal spiritual life, his understanding of his pastoral role and his assessment of the spiritual conditions of the times in which he lived. Thurman commented on this adaptive process himself in lecture no. 5 of his Redlands mysticism lectures (Howard Thurman, Redlands Mysticism Series, spring 1973, Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston). Here he related, "As if there is any such thing as an original concept. The only thing that the mind does, what we mean by originality, the mind takes a concept and passes it through itself. To use a phrase, I take a creative idea and I Thurmanize it. Now when I Thurmanize it then I am being creative, but I did not generate it."

## Who Will Go With Me?

Though often seen as a visionary, solitary contemplative leading those he loved and taught to reimagine religion and in so doing to receive more of God's peace, Thurman's life path was that of one among many. Strangely shy at his core, Thurman's introspection and contemplative tendencies could never betray his love for people and his delight in sharing life and work with others. At the center of Thurman's fellowship were the primary women in his life: Alice, his mother; Nancy Ambrose, his grandmother and greatest mentor; Olive Schreiner, his literary sister and guide; his first wife Kate and second wife and "partner at the gate" Sue Bailey, and finally his two daughters Olive and Anne.

Also walking alongside Thurman were those with whom he studied, worked and worshipped—the Morehouse Men, Alfred Fisk, Richard Deats, Rufus Jones, the North American Indians and many others from the progressive wings of the church, various peace movements and other areas of society. Thurman also carried along within him his studies of the life and works of Beethoven, Rodin, Langston Hughes, T.S. Eliot, Leslie, Oswald McCall and other artistic and intellectual companions. Finally, both in memory and through walking excursions Thurman regularly communed throughout his life with the dynamic sacred Presence he experienced within the natural world.

Regarding his identity as a teacher, Thurman regularly stated that while drawn to mysticism as a way of life and a theological method he resisted the label of mystic not only for himself but for anyone, as it tended to shift the focus away from the individual's "experience" itself onto the person or her/his "path" or "teaching."<sup>160</sup> And similarly, as others lauded and debated his significance as a twentieth-century American religious figure,

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<sup>160</sup> Howard Thurman, "Mysticism and Social Change, Lecture 2," 7/6/78, 10. Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston.

Thurman preferred to stay focused on what he perceived as the general imperative of his life's work:

I'm still struggling...I have always felt that a word was being spoken through me, and three-fourths of the time I didn't get it right. I am, simply, a man who is earnestly engaged in an effort, an exercise, a commitment to become a religious man.<sup>161</sup>

The foundational work of reviewing Thurman's life story and recovering particular sources and forces impacting his interest in peace and mysticism is accomplished. Building on this data, in the next chapter I explore Thurman's religious thought in reference to his theology of peace.

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<sup>161</sup> Lerone Bennet, Jr. "Howard Thurman: Twentieth Century Holy Man," *Ebony* (February 1978), 17.

## **CHAPTER 2: THE QUEST FOR PEACE**

Our Father, fresh from the world with the smell of life upon us, we make an act of prayer in the silence of this place. Our minds are troubled because the anxieties of our hearts are deep and searching. We are stifled by the odor of death which envelopes the earth because in so many places brother fights against brother. The panic of fear, the torture of insecurity, the ache of hunger—all have fed and rekindled ancient hatreds and long-forgotten memories of old struggles when the world was young and Thy children were but dimly aware of Thy Presence in the midst. For all this we seek forgiveness. There is no one of us without guilt, and before Thee we confess our sins; we are proud and arrogant; we are selfish and greedy; we have harbored in our hearts and minds much that make for bitterness, hatred, and revenge.

Howard Thurman, "A Prayer for Peace" from *The Inward Journey*

### **I. THURMAN AND "PEACE"**

Following an examination of Thurman's "working paper" in rather significant detail in the previous chapter, Luther Smith's contention that, for many, Thurman illuminated the "joy and peace of the mystic way" should come as little surprise. Despite the harsh experience of racism and segregation and the vocational struggle to find his own way pastorally and academically as a seeker in a world of denominations and institutional strictures, Thurman found much personal peace and joy in his "religious" quest.

Through personal interaction, his readings and writings, and his speaking engagements, he readily transmitted a sense of peace and belief in the possibilities of reconciliation to others. While most scholars would concur with Smith's contention that Thurman emanated the "'peace' of the 'mystic' way", many questions remain unanswered concerning the particulars of Thurman's concern with "peace." How did he imagine peace—in primarily spiritual or political terms? What of the personal and social dimensions of peace—were they contingent in his thought and if so, in what ways? Finally, how might

Thurman's treatment of peace impact his more well-known thought on social change, especially his concern for interracial and interfaith relations?

While focused on Thurman, these questions more generally speak to primary issues currently being debated within the fields of peace studies and Christian spirituality. Within scholarship written at the intersection of these fields treatment of Thurman's life, thought and ministry are strangely absent, a curious void considering his pastoral interest in providing spiritual resources for those involved in personal, political, racial and theological works of reconciliation and peacemaking. Before delving into the specifics of Thurman's anatomy of peace, an initial foreshadowing of the nature of Thurman's interest seems in order.

Although Thurman was deeply concerned with peace, his writings hardly represent "peace literature" as the genre has been traditionally construed. This is due in large part to the fact that unlike Walter Wink, and more recently John Dear, he did not formally articulate a "theology of peace." Rather, like every other aspect of his thought, Thurman's conception of peace emanates from his more foundational treatment of "community." In fact, as I will argue, community serves as Thurman's ultimate paradigm for absolute peace. Bearing these things in mind, this section explores his conception of peace in terms of community, the origins and absence of peace, and the primacy of "person-al" peace in his analysis. Particular consideration is also given to the ways in which Thurman's treatment may be interpreted as not only a religious, but even more particularly, a specifically Christian vision of peace.



## II. COMMUNITY: THURMAN'S FOUNDATIONAL MOTIF

### Community Overview

The fact that Thurman never organized his thought into a true "systematic" has been previously established. Had he done so, however, there is little doubt that the first and last word of that creative multivolume work would have been "community." The foundational motif for his formal thought and ministry, "community" also represents the ultimate "quest" of his personal life.<sup>1</sup> Thurman's vision of community particularly informs his thinking on peace. Generally speaking, Thurman equated community with wholeness, harmony, and integration. This view stemmed from his awareness that life itself is "alive," and that "life feeds on life...life is nourished by life."<sup>2</sup> He believed this "elemental" fact is often overlooked precisely because it is a part of life's "givenness." Within its aliveness life ever seeks to "realize" itself (i.e. "actualize" its own potential). This perpetual dynamism is central to Thurman's notion of community as representing existence's non-static, ever-active quality.

To seek nourishment is a built-in urge, an ingredient of life in its simplest or most complex manifestations. The creative push that expresses itself in this way is the manner by which life realizes itself. The descriptive term that characterizes such behavior is "actualizing potential." Wherever life is observed this is its primary activity or business. In this sense all life is engaged in goal-seeking.<sup>3</sup>

Contending that life comes to itself everywhere and at all times through the process of seeking its own wholeness, Thurman affirmed life in toto as seeking community.<sup>4</sup> Taking the "inner creative activity of living substances" as his "clue," Thurman maintained that this

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<sup>1</sup> Howard Thurman, *The Search for Common Ground: An Inquiry into The Basis of Man's Experience of Community* (Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1986), 4. Well documented by scholars, the centrality of community for his life and thought is testified to quite extensively by Thurman himself. For example, as he writes on p. xiii in *The Search for Common Ground*, "From my childhood I have been on the scent of the tie that binds life at a level so deep that the final privacy of the individual would be reinforced rather than threatened. I have always wanted to be me without making it difficult for you to be you. When I completed this manuscript, I was struck by the feeling that here I had set down the case in rather formal terms, for what reveals itself is my lifelong working paper."

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 29-30.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 4.

search for wholeness obtains at two levels. As each particular form of life seeks to "actualize its own potential," the larger bio-matrices wherein component organisms are rooted are also seeking self-realization.<sup>5</sup> While the impulse toward "self-actualization" occurs on both levels, community most truly represents their fundamental symbiosis, which he interpreted as the primary sign of life's unity.<sup>6</sup>

Further revelation of this organic unity is seen in the fact that life lives by "constantly seeking to realize itself in established rhythms, patterns, and units." The more highly developed the organism, the more "plainly manifest" these characteristics.<sup>7</sup> Thurman was especially interested in the coherence between the human "mind" and all external "forms," which makes an understanding of the world possible for the mind.<sup>8</sup> Despite its establishment via "forms," life is not static but was instead understood by Thurman as potential—"that which has not yet come to pass but which is always coming to pass."<sup>9</sup>

I find it difficult to think of life apart from the notion of potential; indeed, they seem synonymous. To be sure, life is not finished yet; creation is still going on, not only in the spinning of new worlds, systems, nebulae, and galaxies in the infinitude of space, not only in the invisible world where chemical elements are born and nourished to support conglomerates of matter yet to appear at some far-off moment in time, but also in the human body, which is still evolving, in the human mind, which so slowly loosens its

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<sup>5</sup> Thurman, *The Search*, 4. In this analysis I use the terms "particular" and "ecologic" to clarify Thurman's observance of life's search for community as it persists on both levels. These terms help differentiate, theoretically speaking, between each particular form of life (i.e. single cell, jellyfish, or planet) and the more comprehensive or ecologic "bio-matrix" each organism inhabits (i.e. bodily organ, Atlantic Ocean, or the "Milky Way"). While the term bio-matrix does not appear in any of Thurman's writings, I developed it from his treatment of life's origins narrated in the Hopi creation myth of the "Spider Woman" in chapter two of *The Search for Common Ground*.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 4. Here Thurman also writes, "The clue to community can be found in the inner creative activity of living substances. The more highly developed the organism, the more pronounced seems to be the manifestation of the clue. Cells and organisms always show certain characteristics of direction, persistence, and adaptability in their efforts to realize themselves, to round themselves out, to fulfill themselves, to become, to ripen in integration—in fine, to experience community. The more highly developed the organism, the more plainly manifest are these characteristics."

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 5. Fluker provides an excellent analysis of Thurman's conception of "mind" in relation to human reason and the individual's interpretation of the "outer world" (i.e. culture, relationality). See Fluker, *They Looked for a City*, 34-42.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 4-5.

corporal bonds, and in the human spirit, which forever drives to know the truth of itself and of its fellows.<sup>10</sup>

Life's movement toward community is anything but a cosmic happenstance for Thurman. The various patterns through which life obtains he interprets as "the Mind of God coming to Itself in space and time," going on to imagine existence itself as "divine activity." Without divine orchestration, not only would there be no life for Thurman, there also would be no ultimate basis in life for the hope of community. God "inspires" the quest for community. Hence, community is the will of the Creator-God for Creation.<sup>11</sup>

### *God*

Thurman primarily understood God as (the) "Bottomer of existence"; this formulation essentially parallels Paul Tillich's conception of God as primordial "ground of being." He conceived the Divine "bottoming" existence as Mind, Presence, and Love. Similar to *Rta*—the Hindu conception of God often interpreted as "order" or "ordering principle," Thurman imagined God as the rational principle/from which life emanates, through which life is sustained, and to which life ultimately returns. "God is the goal of man's life, the end of all his seeking, the meaning of all his striving... the timeless frame of reference."<sup>12</sup> God then, for Thurman, is the procreative metaphysical foundation of all existence.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Thurman, *The Search*, 4-5.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 5. Readers interested in similar appreciation of this aspect of Thurman's construct of community from the perspective of philosophical theology may wish to investigate Carlyle Stewart's argument that Thurman primarily conceives God as "complete actualizing synthesis," rather than "unrealized evolutionary principle." For more on this see Stewart's *God, Being, and Liberation: A Comparative Analysis of the Theologies and Ethics of James H. Cone and Howard Thurman* (Lanham, MD.: University Press of America, 1989), particularly pp. 90-97.

<sup>12</sup> Thurman, *Deep River and The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death* (Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press, 1975; reissue, 1999), 77.

<sup>13</sup> Carlyle Stewart, *God, Being, and Liberation: A Comparative Analysis of the Theologies and Ethics of James H. Cone and Howard Thurman* (Lanham, MD.: University Press of America, 1989), 91. Thurman's notion of the Divine as "Mind" finds many parallels in the French Jesuit priest-geologist-theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's understanding of God as interpreted in the latter's seminal text, *The Divine Milieu*. Commenting on

As Presence God is the ultimate essence of life.<sup>14</sup> While advocating the need for a creative philosophy of religion, Thurman knew that the truest "proof" of God is the personal experience of God as immanent within history and nature.<sup>15</sup> The Divine indwells every facet of human experience. This belief is central to his mystical theology, for while philosophers and select mystics may meet God in academic abstraction, ecstatic trance, or other "rarified atmosphere[s]," the average seeker wonders "whether He [God] is present in the commonplace experiences of ordinary living, available to ordinary people under the most garden variety of circumstances."<sup>16</sup> Following Eckhart, Thurman affirmed the presence of a "divine spark" within each individual which he alternately referred to as "the "soul,"<sup>17</sup> "inner temple,"<sup>18</sup> "the very citadel itself," and the "nerve center of [personal] consent."<sup>19</sup>

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similarities in their thinking, Thurman scholar Carlyle Fielding Stewart maintains, "[For Thurman]...the divine milieu pervades every aspect of life. It is the ground, substance, impetus, and goal of all life, ineffable and transcendent, graceful instead of abrupt, flowing rather than hesitant, the pulling and ordering power of the universe."

<sup>14</sup> Howard Thurman, *Deep is the Hunger: Meditations for Apostles of Sensitiveness* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951; reprint, Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press, 1991,) 144. Thurman further contends, "[F]inally, there must be a matured and maturing sense of Presence. This sense of Presence must be a reality at the personal level as well as on the social, naturalistic, and cosmic levels. To state it in the simplest language of religion, modern man must know that he is a child of God and that the God of life in all its parts and the God of the human heart are one and the same."

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 145.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 147. Similarly Thurman writes on pp. 147-48, "Very often, we find it difficult to think of God as a part of life because we associate Him rather exclusively with the supernatural, the miraculous, the unusual. He [God] belongs in the special services division of human life, where only the rare and extraordinary aspects of life are to be found. It was this conception that Jesus sought to undermine in his day. If God be far away, then He comes to us only on rare occasions and in rare situations. Of course, there is a sense in which this is true; the high moment, the great experience, the supreme challenge, the poignant sense of great contrition, all these may mark a sense of special Presence. But we do not live in such rarified atmospheres."

<sup>17</sup> For a more particular understanding of Thurman's treatment of the human "soul," see his sermon, "The Mystery of the Soul," audiocassette The Howard Thurman Center, Boston University.

<sup>18</sup> Thurman, *The Creative Encounter* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954; reprint, Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press, 1997), 39. Thurman borrows this term from an anonymous friend who sent him the following written meditation, "The Secret Temple is the place of meditation. There is need for such a temple in every man's soul and need for the setting apart of some portion of each day that we may enter the sacred edifice and, in that holy place, undefiled by the intrusion of the world, may renew our ideals, make clear our purposes and enlighten our wills by the religious vision. Even though the form of our prayer be petition, at least one of its functions is the defining of our ideals in the light of the widest perspectives available to us, and our voluntary alliance with purposes of the highest worth. It is only in the Secret Temple or in the presence of our God that we discover and strengthen our truest selves."

<sup>19</sup> Thurman borrowed the phrase "nerve center of consent" from his Quaker mentor Rufus Jones.

This "bit of God" is the primary arena of divine tryst. In the soul-encounter with God an individual realizes that "the God of life in all its parts and the God of the human heart are one and the same."<sup>20</sup> More intimately for Thurman, s/he recognizes her/himself as a unique Divine offspring, such that her/his sense of self and history are illuminated with the "warmth of a great confidence."<sup>21</sup>

Finally, for Thurman, God is Love. He defined love most generally as the experience in which two principals relate to one another at a point within each other "beyond good and evil."<sup>22</sup> Though adamant that "the only one place of refuge on this planet for any man...is in another man's heart," Thurman posited that only through Divine Love can a person make her/his heart a "swinging door" for others.<sup>23</sup> In experiencing the flush of God's love the individual has a sense of being touched at her/his "deepest center and all other experiences of love are but intimations of this great experience."<sup>24</sup> Thus Fluker concludes, "[For Thurman] the love of God is the basis and the assurance of the actualization of community in the individual and society."<sup>25</sup>

In sum, Thurman's worldview is essentially theocentric.<sup>26</sup> Believing that something "is true not because it is in a certain religion but rather it is in that religion because it is true," he gladly and creatively incorporated a wide array of non-Christian sources into his "searching" spirituality. Over-amplification of this point, however, often causes scholars and

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<sup>20</sup> Thurman, *Deep is the Hunger*, 144.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 144. Thurman continues on p. 146, "All of us want the assurance of not being deserted by life nor deserted in life."

<sup>22</sup> Howard Thurman, "Love and Imagination," audio-tape cassette, November 27, 1959, Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Howard University Divinity School, Washington, DC.

<sup>23</sup> Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951; reprint, Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press, 1999), 127.

<sup>24</sup> Thurman, *Creative Encounter*, 115.

<sup>25</sup> Fluker, *They Looked for A City*, 39. Fluker is careful to point out how Thurman detected a "rational" element in love which in essence allows Thurman to equate "love" with "truth."

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 40-42.

devotees to under-appreciate the profound and personal ways in which his theology is deeply rooted in the Christian faith, especially his interpretation of the "historical Jesus." While preaching the wisdom of Buddha, Lao-Tse, and Zoroaster, this Baptist mystic experienced Jesus as the prime "for instancing" of the Divine presence in human history.<sup>27</sup>

### *Jesus Christ*

As Stewart notes Thurman posited the experiential and historical Jesus.<sup>28</sup> The latter Jesus expounded a technique of survival through which his Jewish kin achieved liberation within their experience of Roman oppression. Through his parabolic preaching and lifestyle Jesus championed the need for an "inner strength of resistance" toward external controls and limitations which delimited "total realization and actualization of self as free being."<sup>29</sup> The Nazarene's "love-ethic" exploded the despair of his people as Thurman related in *Jesus and the Disinherited*:

He [Jesus] knew that the goals of religion as he understood them could never be worked out within the then-established order. Deep from within that order he projected a dream, the logic of which would give to all the needful security. There would be room for all, and no man would be a threat to his brother. By inference he [Jesus] says, "You must not indulge in any deception or dishonesty, even to save your lives. Your words must be Yea-Nay; anything else is evil. Hatred is destructive to hated and hater alike. Love your enemy, that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven."<sup>30</sup>

Though arguing against his divine pre-existence, Thurman cited the advent of God's incarnation in Jesus as a paradigm shift in spiritual-ethical relations. Says Stewart, "[It]

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<sup>27</sup> Readers particularly interested in Thurman's treatment of significant religious visionaries and prophets other than Jesus should consult the audio cassettes of his sermon series, "Men Who Have Walked with God."

<sup>28</sup> Stewart, *God, Being, and Liberation*, 129-132.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 130.

<sup>30</sup> Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1949; reprint, Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press, 1981), 35.

signalizes [for Thurman] the end of impersonal moral systems invading man from without, and establishes the basis of morality as intrinsic to all human being."<sup>31</sup>

The experiential Jesus, for Thurman, transcended the dualism and time-space ordering of human history. Yet his [Jesus'] spirit rides the horizon of daily life like some "fleeting ghost."<sup>32</sup> The transparency of the historical Jesus' relationship with all of life allows the thrust of his mind and the urgency of his message to concurrently redeem and stand in judgment over all human relations. Jesus "saves" humanity not only through modeling redemptive suffering in his own life and death but more importantly by awakening the individual to her/his direct access and responsibility to the true Redeemer—God.

Thurman's theology of the cross, particularly his view of the salvific dimensions of Jesus' death, anticipated much of the soteriology of the Christian liberation theology movement as the latter initially developed in the 1970-80s. Viewing Jesus' entire life, rather than just his death, as revelatory of God's love and justice, he argued a direct correlation between Christ's program of inclusive community, restorative justice and solidarity with the socially and politically disinherited and his death as a theo-political anarchist. In his sermon "The Crucifixion" Thurman argued:

Whatever may be said about all the significance of the theological drama that is being celebrated during this season in the Christian calendar, the elemental and basic fact remains: That there was a man who in the relentless pursuit of the light as he saw it found himself outside of a city wall nailed to a cross between two thieves... now the living of his life led him to this.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Stewart, *God, Being, and Liberation*, 130.

<sup>32</sup> Howard Thurman, *The Centering Moment* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969; reprint, Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press, 2000), 30. This quote comes from Thurman's centering piece, "Jesus of Nazareth I."

<sup>33</sup> Howard Thurman, "The Crucifixion," sound cassette, n.d. Special Collections, Howard University Divinity School Library, Washington, DC.

Whereas traditional Christian soteriology ascribed saving power to the cross in terms of ransom or substitution theologies, both of which viewed the cross as a necessity and inscribed Jesus vicariously suffering the punishment assigned to humanity because of “original sin,” Thurman posited an alternative view akin to the moral influence theory. For him Jesus’ vicarious suffering signaled his [Jesus’] willingness to follow the theological and ethical tenets of his preaching of God’s Kingdom to their ultimate end: complete self-surrender and vicarious participation in the world’s suffering as an act of solidarity that revealed God’s own empathetic redemption of human brokenness. Thurman taught that Jesus’ action on the cross was commensurate with the larger testimony of his earlier life, preaching, and teaching. Here Thurman’s soteriology hinges on his Christology. In living a cruciform lifestyle, by which I mean one of free and consistent self-surrender, spiritually and ethically speaking, to God and others in order to affect and further redemptive solidarity, Jesus, for Thurman, revealed God’s love, saved history and opened a channel of active nonviolence in which others could follow. In “Jesus and the Shadow of Death, I,” Thurman asserted:

Here is one thing, very simple, very untheological that stands out against the drama of the mystery of all the magic of all the things that will be left during these coming weeks. And it is that what Jesus discovered in his death is something which we may all discover as we move through the rugged character of experiences that lay waste to the spirit and do violence to the mind and the body: that there are things worse than death. That there is a spirit in life, available to man as a living part of the possibilities and potential of his life upon which he may draw with such full-orbed intensity and meaning that he will be able to stand...to stand... to abide anything, anything that life can do to him. And he who has made this discovery knows what it means to be one with that spirit...one with the spirit of the living God.<sup>34</sup>

### *Humanity: The Formal Dawning of Divine Intent*

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<sup>34</sup> Howard Thurman, “Jesus and the Shadow of Death, I” sound cassette, n.d. Special Collections, Howard University Divinity School Library, Washington, DC.



While all life participates in community, Thurman believed the human organism plays a uniquely "creative" role in cultivating the Divine intent. Much of his theological anthropology derives from his treatment of human origins, specifically the Judeo-Christian Eden narrative and the Hopi Indian account of the "First People."<sup>35</sup> Both creation myths express Divine "intent," yet he insisted this intent does not "become [formally] apparent until, in the sequence of creation, man appears."<sup>36</sup> "At that moment," he wrote, "the organic harmony in the interrelatedness of all creation becomes a part of the experienced intent of all living things...It reaches its most impressive articulation in the behavior of human beings."<sup>37</sup> By "humanity" Thurman means *Homo sapiens*. He equated the emergence of rational thought and free will in the human organism with the evolutionary season in which mind as "mind" appeared within the individual. Prior to this period "the mind was bodybound but mind as such was not."<sup>38</sup> Thurman imaginatively related this shift in his extended prose poem "The Great Incarnate Words":

Through slimy, oozes of primeval beds,  
Man's body, a living thing,

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<sup>35</sup> Thurman, *The Search*, 13. Thurman wrote that he chose the "creation myth" as a vital genre in this text based on his belief that as "a part of our religious heritage," the question it tries to answer is universal. He identified those questions subsequently as, "How did the world get started; how did it come into being in the first instance? How was man born originally when there were no parents? How did man and all his difficulties start to evolve?"

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 12-13. Here Thurman writes, "It is in many of these accounts that the concept of intent appears. In practically every recorded instance the Creator—or, in some instances, the Creators—has something in mind that he seeks to bring to pass in the act of creation." While admitting the deeply personal quality of his analysis here, Thurman was at the same time convinced that "contemplation concerning origins" was an inherent human question. An avid student of the "life" sciences, Thurman believed the creation stories yielded insights that stretched beyond the parameters of formal logic. For more on his notion of the interplay of "hard" science and the creation myths, see pp. 8-13.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 12-13.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 79. Thurman believed it "too static and mechanical" to try to pinpoint the exact moment in which this shift occurred; hence my use of the term "season." Though Thurman does not use this term himself, he seems to imply it on pp. 79-80 of *The Search* where he writes, "Of course we do not know when mind, as such, appeared. It is too static and mechanical, in my view, to assume that at some point in time, by some act, decree or fiat, mind, appeared in man. Of course, no one knows what the fact is. Generations of men have accommodated themselves to the notion that seemed to belong best to the necessities of their thought and life. It has been most helpful to me in my search to think of a time when mind as a separate and conscious entity did not formally exist in the body."

Climbed slowly up the years.  
 By fitful steps it made its way:  
     Swimming, crawling, climbing,  
     No stage was skipped.  
 At last, held taut twixt earth and sky,  
 It stood upright to shout defiance to the hills...  
 The body was mature,  
 All vital organs seem as one  
 Without consent of mind.  
 The mind was there; mind it was not:  
 Taxed to the limit of its power  
 It kept the body safe, alive from every harm.  
 With life more friendly, mind released,  
 Thus man a living spirit, awoke.<sup>39</sup>

The emergence of *Homo sapiens* on the planet added a new variable to life's tendencies toward wholeness. While other<sup>40</sup> forms of life remained oriented toward harmony merely by instinct, the human organism could not only experience community but also reflect upon such experience. Further, the human capacity for self-determination allows personal intent to function alongside instinctual orientation towards community.<sup>41</sup> Mind as "mind" renders humanity a true co-creator of harmony.

Crucial to Thurman's concept of human "mind" was its fundamental rootedness in the human body. Through her/his body a person experiences "creatureliness"<sup>42</sup> and is reminded that s/he is a "participant in the life process" rather than "an isolate within it." In seeking to actualize itself "as a body," the human organism shares in life's more comprehensive quest for community.<sup>43</sup>

...[M]y body participates completely in the life process and it is nourished and sustained by ancient processes as old as life, and set in motion before any awareness of or knowledge about them was in evidence. As a creature, I am the inheritor of age-old wisdom.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Thurman, *The Search*, 79-80.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 80. Here Thurman warns his reader about the moral implications of considering other forms of life as "sub-human."

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 78. Here, Thurman credits Meister Eckhart with the concept of "creatureliness."

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 78.

Because of its fundamental rootedness in life via body, the mind's tendency for "seeing whole" is *sui generis*.<sup>45</sup> Thus, an individual's task of realizing community within her/himself at the "self-conscious" level parallels "what happens instinctually in so-called subhuman forms of life." The desire for wholeness, then, comes "naturally."

These aspects of Thurman's anthropology point to his conception of the organic quality of love. He saw the human need to create and sustain loving relationships—that is, relationships rooted in a mutuality of inclusive understanding--as the key to personal fulfillment and "the essential stuff of community among men."<sup>46</sup> His primary bio-logic of human relations was that "individuals nourish one another with one another." Failure to keep the love dynamic alive results in marasmus.<sup>47</sup> Citing the family as the primary unit responsible for bringing love's energies to bear on the socialization process, Thurman also believed that for community to obtain among the various races, governments, and nations of the world, all parties must deal with each other through concretion rather than abstraction. Lasting world peace depends more on the members of the United Nations being able to sit around "talking, laughing, and sharing smiles with one another" than on the political etiquette<sup>48</sup> of power struggles.<sup>49</sup>

Implicit in Thurman's analysis is his belief that the human organism's ability "self-consciously" to experience community deepens its "enjoyment" of life's harmony so that it

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<sup>45</sup> Thurman, *The Search*, 79.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 80.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

<sup>48</sup> Howard Thurman, "The Quest for Peace II," (May 13, 1962), Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, 3. Continuing on Thurman argues that the collective "dreams and hopes" of the state, "...are derivatives, initially, from the individuals who are strategically placed at fateful moments in the development of the states, but the etiquette and the morality of the states is so often not a reflection of the private dream and the great and far-reaching hope that first sent the state on its journey."

<sup>49</sup> Howard Thurman, "Notes on Vietnam, War, Racism," n.d. Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, 1.

will more deeply yearn for and more ardently work toward ever-present becoming.

Implications of this statement will be taken up in later sections of this chapter.

### **"Community" Summary**

Prior to considering Thurman's notion of peace in terms of community, it is helpful to review the basics of his view of community. For Thurman community denoted a dynamic of wholeness, harmony, operative in all life. His treatment resulted from awareness that life constantly seeks to "realize" itself through deeper patterns of synthesis and complexity at both the particular and ecologic level. He interpreted this progression as the Divine Mind coming to itself in space and time; therefore, community is God's will for Creation.

Rooted in life as a "creature," the human organism is oriented to wholeness both through instinct and personal intent. Because of this a person plays a uniquely "creative" role in life's harmonic dance. Thurman pointed to an individual's need to cultivate, maintain, and enjoy loving relationships with her-/himself, other individuals, other forms of life, and God as the ultimate expression of humanity's urge for community. These fundamentals of community can now be used to delineate Thurman's notion of peace.

### **III. "PEACE" IN TERMS OF "COMMUNITY"**

Though, as noted, Thurman did not construct a formal "theology of peace," he dealt with the specific issue of peace in many of his writings, sermons, and lectures. Detailed analysis of these sources, many of them unpublished (which from this point on will be referred to as Thurman's "peace literature"), in light of his primary texts evinces a developing typology of peace which imagines community as the highest (i.e. most "positive") form. This

section outlines Thurman's typology by exploring his notion of community as ultimate peace and introducing his treatment of subsequent forms.

In his sermon "Quest for Peace," Thurman described peace as:

...a sense of well-being, a sense of being at one within oneself, a sense of being in active and creative correspondence with one's environment...it is a sense of inner togetherness, it is a sense of tranquility, a sense of being whole.<sup>50</sup>

Thurman's talk of peace here echoes much of his more formal and sustained treatment of community. Having parsed his general notion of community, we can explore his more particular treatment of "peace" in terms of community. Such analysis is best achieved through the heuristic "peace is/as community." This paradigm is especially useful in its ability to detail the various ways Thurman's concept of community grounds his notion of absolute peace in regard to both content and form. Correlative to peace is/as community, Thurman also considered several types of limited and negative peace from a variety of personal, social, political and religious perspectives.

### **Peace Is/As Community**

Most generally, Thurman's notion of community as "harmony, wholeness, integration" is echoed in his articulation of peace as "[a sense of]...well-being... inner-togetherness... tranquility...wholeness." That these concepts are equivalent in terms of content seems rather basic: peace is community. However, any reader who is completely satisfied with this first point should return to Thurman's description of peace and re-read it slowly. It is suggested that he not only describes what peace is ("well-being, inner-

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<sup>50</sup> Howard Thurman, "Quest for Peace," audiocassette, Marsh Chapel, Boston University, 6 May 1962, Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston, MA.

togetherness, etc.") but also how peace happens. And how does peace "happen" for Thurman? As community. This is true in three primary ways.<sup>51</sup>

Thurman's concomitant use of the phrases "inner togetherness...being at one within oneself" and "being in active and creative correspondence with one's environment" provides the first clue to peace as community. While he certainly preached the primacy of intrapersonal peace (as will be treated shortly), in qualifying peace as "being in active and creative correspondence with one's environment" Thurman argued that legitimate inner peace derives from deep contact with rather than escape from one's surroundings.<sup>52</sup> This notion of peace mirrors community in that each individual organism attains wholeness as part of rather than apart from the manifold theatres of existence.

A second clue to peace as community is contained in Thurman's description of peace. His consistent characterization of peace as a sense rather than a state of "well-being" and "tranquility" implied peace as an intuited experience (or felt awareness) of wholeness which, while immersed in gradations of harmony, does not represent wholeness in its final or complete form. This reading draws on his conception of community as the dynamism by which life constantly obtains through deeper patterns of interrelatedness. Rather than endpoint, peace as community is process.

Thurman's notion of peace as community takes on its most vital meaning, however, when these first two points are explored in terms of community as Divine intent.<sup>53</sup> Three crucial implications arise. First and most fundamental for him, God is the ultimate author of

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<sup>51</sup> While three are noted here as primary, the author realizes that there are many other inroads between peace and community in Thurman's life and thought than those conveyed in this chapter or dissertation.

<sup>52</sup> Quite often when speaking of peace individuals, especially if they are involved in meditation or a similar religious or spiritual discipline, will speak of an "inner" or "personal" sense of peace. As expressed in this sentence, Thurman's "peace" sharply contrasts such individualistic or self-limited notions of "inner" or "personal" peace.

<sup>53</sup> Howard Thurman, "Intentional Living: Peace," audiocassette, n.d. Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University.

peace. Though the individual can co-intend harmony, s/he cannot will "real" peace. Rather, peace as community is always a consequence of God's relationship with the individual who, while being a "child of Nature," is also Divine offspring. The individual need not be conscious of Divine action for this to be true.<sup>54</sup>

Secondly, for Thurman it follows that because God wills peace (to obtain) as community, all personal and/or social attempts at peacemaking must incarnate the quality of love evinced in his paradigm of "mutual understanding." This point underscores Thurman's claim that legitimate peace is a result of personal and social righteousness:

It is the thesis of the Christian religion that peace is a by-product of social justice and social righteousness. The quest for peace can only be realized when it is built upon justice, mutuality and a relaxation of the will to domination. "The work of righteousness shall be peace and the effect of righteousness, quietness and confidence forever." There can be no peace in the world as long as men are held under the domination of dictators who recognize no social responsibility beyond the guaranteeing of their own security. There can be no peace possible as long as millions of people are hungry and naked. There can be no peace as long as one nation, or two nations, have in their hands the knowledge and the skills for the widespread use of atomic energy for destruction. In other words, religion insists that peace is the indirect result of widespread social weal.<sup>55</sup>

As this passage suggests, Thurman argued that true justice and righteousness are ultimately grounded in love. Though love and justice are necessary partners in the ethical tango, Thurman believed the redemptive logic of love transcended traditional forms of justice<sup>56</sup> aimed at "the artificial equalization of unequals in a situation where the balance has been upset."<sup>57</sup> Such justice pretends a context of equality of will and is therefore external to the individuals involved, whereas love as justice obtains between two parties unequal in power.

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<sup>54</sup> Thurman, *Creative Encounter*, 32-33. It is important to note Thurman's treatment of the apophatic nature of the Divine. Concerning this he writes, "God comes in—and here, even sometimes, only by disguise."

<sup>55</sup> Howard Thurman, "The Quest for Peace Unwon," audiocassette, n.d. Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University. Herein Thurman references Isaiah 32:17.

<sup>56</sup> Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 83. Thurman references "lex talionis" as "traditional" justice.

<sup>57</sup> Fluker, *They Looked for A City*, 57. Fluker notes that for Thurman, "love is always seasoned with intelligence and understanding."

Love's redemptive logic is realized for Thurman, according to Fluker, when the "power-full" party acts with compassion toward the other based on their common status as Divine offspring rather than brandishing her/his advantage for selfish gain.<sup>58</sup> In offering the mercy of understanding an individual takes the other into her/his own "inner temple" that justice may function internally between spirit and spirit. Love as justice is risky; it redefines power as the discipline of vulnerability and the potential of woundedness. Still, Fluker maintains, "it is only through our willingness to risk suffering that redemption of the other is achieved."<sup>59</sup> Implicit in Thurman's treatment of suffering love is the fact of life's moral integrity.<sup>60</sup> Existence's initial manifestation as community and desire to further cultivate this was for him an ultimate clue to valuing restorative and reconciliatory justice over retribution and democratic culture over dictatorial empire.

There is a judgment which presides over the private and collective destiny of man. It is a judgment that establishes itself in human history as well as in human character. God is the Creator of life, and the ultimate responsibility of life is to God. If there be any government or social institution...that operates among men in a manner that makes for human misery...to the extent that it is so, it cannot survive, because it is against life and carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction.<sup>61</sup>

Finally, in order for the individual to co-cultivate peace is/as community with the Divine, s/he must have "free and easy [personal] access" to God.<sup>62</sup> Such entree, as recalled, was achieved for Thurman via soul—that "bit of God" within each person. Through soul the individual personally discovers Divine Love as the essential means of sharing in and creating ultimate value.

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<sup>58</sup> Fluker, *They Looked for A City*, 59.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 59. Thurman's insistence that "the moral law is binding," is central to his belief in the power of love as "redemptive suffering."

<sup>60</sup> Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 108.

<sup>61</sup> Howard Thurman, "Freedom under God," Washington University, Second Century Convocation, (February 1955), Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston, MA, 3.

<sup>62</sup> Thurman, *Creative Encounter*, 118-119.



This is a part of the meaning of the large place that the will of God has in the warp and woof of Christian thought. In the experience of religion I may learn somewhat of the will of God and yield my own private, personal will to His will and thereby gain insight into purposes that transcend my little purposes and meanings that transcend or extend far beyond the reach of my own little meanings.<sup>63</sup>

While citing Gautama Buddha, Lao-Tzu and Francis of Assisi among others as exemplary individuals who have trued themselves through such soul-connection with the Divine, Thurman consistently returned to Jesus as the chief exemplar of the individual's struggle to ground her/his self and (its) creative potential in(to) the arms and aims of God.<sup>64</sup> His treatment of the mystical dynamics of such divine "tryst" is thoroughly detailed in chapter three. As articulated in this section both in terms of content and form, peace is/as community represents Thurman's paradigm of ultimate peace.

### **Subsequent Notions of Peace**

While positing ultimate peace is/as community, Thurman delineated at least five more modalities of peace in his working typology: the "peace of innocence" the "peace of violence," the "peace of exhaustion" the "peace of cowardice,"<sup>65</sup> and the "peace of God."<sup>66</sup> Though these forms do not measure up to his normative construct of peace is/as community, they also do not all represent entirely negative types of peace. This will become increasingly

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<sup>63</sup> Thurman, *Creative Encounter*, 44. Continuing this line on thinking he writes on p. 45, "In the living of my life I establish more and more levels of understanding of the Creator as I achieve in fact what I see in vision."

<sup>64</sup> Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 110-112. Also see Thurman's sermon "Standing Inside with Jesus Christ."

<sup>65</sup> Howard Thurman, "The Quest for Peace I," Marsh Chapel, Boston University (6 May 1962), 4-5. He writes, "There is the peace that comes from conformity. It is the peace of cowardice. You know peace, peace is the wrong word but I think it is the right word here. The peace that is maintained all the time because you fear to do anything that affirms. You don't want to make an enemy. You don't want to disturb. You don't want to perturb. So you stretch yourself out of shape, and do all kinds of internal violence to your spirit to maintain external harmony. While deep within you have lost respect for yourself." Thurman also refers to this elsewhere as the "peace of apathy."

<sup>66</sup> Howard Thurman, "The Peace of God," n.d. Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University.

clear as each of these lesser forms of peace are considered in the following section's investigation of Thurman's treatment of the origins and absence of peace is/as community.

### **The Origins and Absence of Peace**

While construing peace is/as community in terms of Divine intent, Thurman also believed such radical community to represent the human ideal of cosmic harmony envisioned in the racial "dream(s)" of the "peaceable kingdom."<sup>67</sup> He suggested, "It is something on the horizon out there, of which while we ask questions, we almost always give our assent."<sup>68</sup> Who wouldn't want such peace? Yet, herein lies the ultimate paradox: while peace is/as community has been dreamed of and worked for by countless generations, Thurman contended that it has never been experienced in human history. Ultimately this conundrum means one of two things for him—that peace is at one with the "intimate processes" of life and the human spirit or...

... [T]here is something so utterly demonic about the nature of life—something so demonic that it fills the brains and the emotions of men with an insatiable longing which has no basis in fact in order that this demonic force that presides over the destiny of man may chortle and chuckle as generation after generation rises and falls in the midst of their moment. And I don't believe the latter.<sup>69</sup>

Doggedly sure that God wills peace is/as community, Thurman wondered greatly about the cause of its absence in human history. "How did man and all of

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<sup>67</sup> Thurman, *The Search*, 23. As he writes, "The racial memory troubles man's sleep and grieves his waking hours, making him dream of peace even in the midst of war."

<sup>68</sup> Howard Thurman, "Intentional Living: Peace," audiocassette, n.d. Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University.

<sup>69</sup> Howard Thurman, "Quest for Peace," Fellowship Church, San Francisco, 24 July 1949. Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University.

his difficulties start to evolve?<sup>70</sup> How can the cruel vicissitudes of disharmony, discord, disorder be tolerated without a sense of ultimate despair?"<sup>71</sup>

### *The "Peace of Innocence"*

In tackling these questions, Thurman returned to the Judeo-Christian and Hopi creation narratives.<sup>72</sup> He believed both stories suggest that human life emerged within "a climate of community" yet neither tale explicates this primal peace.<sup>73</sup> The Edenic ethos is simply wrapped within the "givenness" of the Creative act "as if the Creator wanted man to know what his [the Creator's] true intent was in bringing life into being."<sup>74</sup> Both harmony and disharmony resided as equal potentials in the human organism, yet during this time, as Thurman noted, "the things that work against community" were dormant.<sup>75</sup> Hence, the "sample" humanity experiences in its creation is a particular peace he describes as "[the] peace of innocence."<sup>76</sup> Such peace "has never been involved in the fundamental and often ruthless conflict between that which is good and that which is evil...[it is] the peace that is peaceful because that is all it knows."<sup>77</sup>

Whereas individuals and institutions chock full of "studied arrogance"<sup>78</sup> look down on innocence as mere naïveté, Thurman deemed it fundamental to the pursuit of absolute peace. The innocence of childhood operates on a personal level as a "windbreak" against the

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<sup>70</sup> Thurman, *The Search*, 13.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>72</sup> Thurman, *The Search*, 12-13.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 13, 24.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 78-80.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>77</sup> Howard Thurman, "Inner Peace," audiocassette, Marsh Chapel, Boston University, 6 May 1960, Thurman Papers, Boston University. Boston, MA.

<sup>78</sup> Thurman, *The Growing Edge*, 88.

dualities of life that "the quiet inner process may build, grow, deepen, and provide for the long pull of the later years."<sup>79</sup> Wherever it is void, the "creative and redemptive work of childhood" is defeated.<sup>80</sup> The dream of innocence also haunts the myths, literature and art of human cultures as a hopeful specter, inspiring (the) social zeal that in the midst of disorder the "quality of the idyllic moment" may be recaptured in art.<sup>81</sup>

Thurman traced the demise of innocence back to the flowering of mind as "mind" in the human organism. Both myths narrate this occurrence as the moment in which humanity comes to itself as true co-cultivator of life as peace, while also foreshadowing that the Creator's awakening of human potential toward cosmic harmony translated into dire straits for Creation. The peace of innocence was breached by humanity's choice against "community."

Thurman noted the presence in both myths of a shadowy character who precipitates the primal breach by luring the "First People[s]" toward disharmony.<sup>82</sup> This chaotic agent takes the form in Hopi culture of the bird Mochni, also known as "the Talker."<sup>83</sup> Kin to the "crafty" serpent in Genesis, Mochni spins the tale of existence as divided against itself.

He [Mochni] kept talking among them [the First People], always making the same point that the people and the animals were fundamentally different and that the same was true of the people whose colors and languages varied. Accordingly, the differences were absolute and made a true distinction between peoples and between people and animals. Differences now become not merely apparent but dramatic. The animals began to draw away from man,

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<sup>79</sup> Thurman, *The Search*, 81. Thurman continues on this page, "For the child, very important things are happening in his organism, for the track is being laid for the life journey of the body. In terms of community, this means that if the child is forced by the circumstances of his life to cope with his environment as if he were an adult, his very nervous system becomes enraged and an utter sense of alienation is apt to become the style of his life. Because he is rejected by life he begins to reject himself." Also see pp. 87-88 for Thurman's idea of innocence as a protective hovel or "nest" for the young human organism, particularly his referencing Oswald McCall's meditation "Nests."

<sup>80</sup> Thurman, *The Growing Edge*, 89.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 89-90.

<sup>82</sup> Thurman, *The Search*, 14-15.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 22.

and men began drawing away from one another. Fear, the great enemy of community, appeared.<sup>84</sup>

And the serpent said—to paraphrase—How stupid can you be? Don't you know why God told you this? He knows that if you eat the fruit of the tree you will become just as He is. And then you will be autonomous. He will not be able to control you.<sup>85</sup>

These passages profoundly illustrate one of Thurman's primary moral maxims—failure to see life "whole" always precipitates disharmonious (i.e. immoral) action. Though potential disharmony is "triggered" by individual choice, human agency is ultimately contingent upon moral vision. How this insight factors into Thurman's view of mysticism's role in peacemaking is given greater attention in chapter three. Now consideration shifts to his formulation of peace beyond the experience of innocence.

Thurman's awareness of four tears in the general fabric of life wrought by human choice for disharmony makes such prospects appear slim. Though a creature, the individual now stands proudly (albeit falsely) over against creation and separate from her/his human family. Worst of all, Thurman noted "something in him is broken down; the individual has lost community with her/his self and the Creator."<sup>86</sup> Farewell to innocence.

### *The Project of "Goodness" and The "Problem" of Evil*

Though innocence is lost, Thurman believed that peace can still be found. He further argued that only through embracing the "fall" (i.e. the release of disharmony into existence) can the most genuine meaning of peace is/as community be achieved. In teasing out the

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<sup>84</sup> Thurman, *The Search*, 22.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 14-15.

<sup>86</sup> Thurman, *The Search*, 25-26. Thurman posits earlier on p. 23, "This creation myth repeats the primordial theme that dramatizes the ancient hunger of the spirit of man for a spiritual order that is never quite completely his but is an integral part of a reality that nourishes in him the "memory of a lost harmony," a memory latent in the soul and not distilled from the changing things of mere physical observation. In this way the inner unity of the known and the knower may be preserved, and the almost mythic intuition of reality thereby related to its conceptual and rational forms of expression."

implications of this claim it is necessary to unpack Thurman's understanding of "goodness" in light of his treatment of "innocence."

As will be recalled, within the peace of innocence Thurman argued community's actualization as "instant fact" because the potential for disharmony lay dormant.<sup>87</sup> Although pleasant, he conceded innocence is ultimately naïve, or incomplete<sup>88</sup> in that absolute peace necessitates human freedom. Freedom is intelligible for Thurman only in terms of limits; therefore, while certain freedom lingers in innocence (i.e. the freedom of "abandonment"), it is not absolute.<sup>89</sup> The advent of reason and will in the human organism allowed the potential for disharmony to be roused through choice.

Thurman understood human choice as delimited by the cosmic law of interdependence (i.e. "community"). As the organism goes against this Divine norm, the dynamic of innocence gives way to the project of "goodness," which he interpreted as the "creative synthesis" of the potentials for cosmos and chaos.<sup>90</sup> Speaking developmentally, Thurman contended here that as a child is innocent, only that person who has learned to "winnow beauty out of ugliness, purity out of stain, tranquility out of tempest, joy out of sorrow, [and] life out of death" may be rightly understood as "good."<sup>91</sup>

Thurman's construct of "goodness" nuanced his notion of peace is/as community in that such peace is not the absence of discord but rather the successful management of chaos

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<sup>87</sup> Thurman, *The Search*, 25.

<sup>88</sup> The "peace of innocence" is naïve for Thurman in that it is incomplete.

<sup>89</sup> Thurman, *The Search*, 25. He writes, "Freedom has meaning only in reference to limitations in some form. The fact that Adam and Eve were not permitted to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge gave meaning to the experience of freedom. They also lacked responsibility in all aspects of their life except with reference to eating the forbidden fruit. Where there is prohibition, there is cost or penalty; hence responsibility is inevitable." For more on Thurman's notion of responsibility and freedom, see Fluker, *They Looked for A City*, 35-38.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 27. Thurman paints a redemptive picture of the necessary loss of innocence as it gives way to realizing the deeper horizon of goodness as he writes, "When the quality of goodness has been reestablished, a great change has taken place. Eyes are opened, knowledge is defined, and what results is the triumph of the quality of innocence over the quality of discord; a new synthesis is achieved that has in it the element of triumph."

and harmony which yields dynamic equilibrium.<sup>92</sup> Corollary to this construct is his take on evil as "upender."<sup>93</sup> Evil is not "foreign" to life but rather resides deeply within the very fiber of existence. Thurman insisted life is "good" only because it contains both good and evil.<sup>94</sup> In constantly upsetting life's equilibrium evil guarantees the dynamic of existence; therefore it figures vitally into Divine intent.<sup>95</sup>

Fluker points out that it is precisely at this point that Thurman's solution to the "problem" of evil departs from traditional theodicy.<sup>96</sup> Insofar as evil is native to life it cannot (and should not) be entirely eradicated, yet in order for God's dream of peace is/as community to be realized (i.e. the problem of evil to be "solved") individuals must work consistently and creatively to resist (the manifestation of) evil at every level of existence. Of course such resistance was possible, according to Thurman, because the harmonization of good and evil is Divine intent and therefore God conspires with humanity to harness evil. Because evil is ordered into life, it evinces a rationale of "cause and effect."<sup>97</sup> "If this rationale can be tracked down and understood," he writes, "then the living experience, however terrible, makes sense."<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Howard Thurman, "What Can I Believe In?" Type-written manuscript, Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston, MA, 8.

<sup>93</sup> Thurman, "What Can I Believe In?," 8.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>95</sup> Thurman, "What Can I Believe In?," 5.

<sup>96</sup> Fluker, *They Looked for A City*, 52. See also Henry James Young, "Howard Thurman's Vision of Wholeness," *Debate and Understanding*, 1-6. Writing on p. 3 Young notes, "The world then is not split into a metaphysical dualism consisting of the good and the bad; the potential for disharmony, despair, brokenness, pain, hate, bitterness, chaos, disorder, and violence was triggered by our exercise of free choice. Once we executed the freedom of choice, we were no longer innocent. Although what we experience in actualized community reflects disharmony, disorder, brokenness, and chaos, there is always the drawing urge in the human psyche toward harmony, and creative synthesis."

<sup>97</sup> Howard Thurman, "Exposition to the Book of Habbakuk," *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 6, George A. Buttrick et al eds. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1956), 980. Here Thurman writes, "Things do not merely happen, they are part of some kind of rationale. If this rationale can be tracked down and understood, then the living experience, however terrible, makes sense."

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 980. For Thurman evil is potentially redemptive in that it is through the experience of suffering that an individual has a chance to learn more of what and how it is to will the "good."

### III. PEACE AS A PERSONAL AND SOCIAL PROJECT

While taking what some may interpret as a "soft" approach to evil, Thurman removed his kid gloves in touching on the individual's response to the problem of sin. Whereas evil is part of the mystery of life that must be accepted, sin is a problem which must continually be solved. Furthermore, though sin is socially contingent for Thurman, it is primarily a personal dilemma defined as "active cooperation with/failure to resist evil."<sup>99</sup>

#### Aggression and Violence

The differential Thurman posited between "aggression" and "violence" sheds important light on his notion of sin. Aggression is the very pulse of life's search for community, evidenced for him in the human will to live life meaningfully yet even more concretely in a cell, "seeking its own nourishment and rejecting, by an uncanny directed spontaneity, any intruder that is sensed as a threat to the inner cohesiveness of the structure of the cell."<sup>100</sup> Indeed, aggression is life's "growing edge."

Whereas aggression manifests the positive dynamic of life's struggle to live, Thurman associated violence with the shadow<sup>101</sup>-side of aggression. Most basically, violence is the "practice of an individual to use negative force to impose his will on another"<sup>102</sup> which he viewed as resultant of the "desperate need of the human spirit when it is driven to find a solid

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<sup>99</sup> Fluker, *They Looked for A City*, 52. Fluker writes, "Thurman's basic concern with evil is where it 'touches' the individual. This does not mean that the complex social implications of evil are not important. His emphasis, however, is on the individual because he believed that the will is the seat of pride or the ground for creative and constructive transformation of the self and society. Thurman insists that the barrier erected by pride in the individual's personal center must be the point of departure for the actualization of community."

<sup>100</sup> Thurman, *The Search*, 90.

<sup>101</sup> I derive my use of the term "shadow" at this point from reading Mozella Mitchell's comparison of Thurman and Carl Jung in the final section of her text, *The Spiritual Dynamics of Howard Thurman's Theology*.

<sup>102</sup> Howard Thurman, "No One Ever Wins A Fight," n.d., audiocassette, Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston, MA, 1.



way to guarantee itself."<sup>103</sup> Aware that physical force stereotypically represents the most extreme mode of violence, Thurman delineated other forms of violence as well—verbal, emotional/psychological, political and military violence—and insisted that even the threat of violence connotes violence.<sup>104</sup> Despite its inebriant masquerading(s) as a "quick, effective, and very often efficient" way to resolve problems, Thurman believed "violence does not convince the will."<sup>105</sup> Rather, violence tends to harden the will and resistance, often driving the will underground until it can rise to the surface and assert itself. In human life very rarely does violence precipitate a change of mind or heart.<sup>106</sup>

However spectacular, violence never fully convinces; deep within the perpetrator's heart, her/his violence is finally unmasked for what it truly represents—her/his naked need to be "cared for and understood." Recalling Thurman's claim that this need cannot be met apart from the experience of community with others, the tragic paradox of violence as a cry for community is its tendency (via its logic offered) to conjure a dynamic of fear and distrust among individuals and groups, which sadistically perpetuates their mutual sense of separation rather than evoking harmony and understanding.

When violence is met with violence, the citadel of the spirit is not invaded. The most that is accomplished is a limited truce—a standoff, a stalemate. The fact of isolation becomes a way of life. All communication breaks down, and slowly the spirits of men

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<sup>103</sup> Howard Thurman, "Man and Social Change: Violence-Nonviolence." Long Beach State College, 18-20 March 1969, Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston, MA, 1. After spending a good bit of time looking over this and related documents, I am still not entirely clear as to just how Thurman seems to equate the onset of this obsessive shift toward self-centeredness with the emergence or eruption of "violence" onto the human evolutionary scene.

<sup>104</sup> Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness*, 25. Concerning the sinister quality of the threat of violence Thurman continues on p. 25, "It would seem that the threat of violence can create fear that paralyzes and freezes. Thus there has to be in the ground of one's thinking the subtle but pervasive distinction between the fact of violence and the threat of violence. The threat of violence opens up the Pandora's box of the imagination and may be far more deleterious than violence itself. Even the promise of violence postponed is apt to be more unmanageable than violence itself. It was harder for me to manage the promise of a whipping by my mother than the whipping itself when it came along."

<sup>105</sup> Thurman, "No One Ever Wins A Fight," Thurman Papers, Special Collection, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston, MA, 1.

<sup>106</sup> Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, 112-113.

become asphyxiated. For this reason, the only thing that can maintain the mood of violence between men beyond the heat and excitement of direct encounter is hatred. Hate is the great insulator, making it possible for one man to deny the existence of another or to will his nonexistence.<sup>107</sup>

Believing or living as if one had nothing in common with other people, cultures, living things or the Divine was for Thurman the ultimate deception upon which all violence is based. Thus understood, the principle of violence particularizes his general notion of sin as failure to live according to the moral vision that (all) life is One.

### **Internal "Scandalons"<sup>108</sup>**

Thurman's particular treatment of hatred in the previous passage reflects his belief that violence seems most dangerous in its propensity to spawn within and among individuals attitudes that are antithetical to the actualization of peace is/as community. He was especially concerned with the way deception, fear, hatred, and guilt plagued the human pursuit of peace.

Fear is the first fruit of separateness—that "great enemy of community...as old as the life of man on the planet."<sup>109</sup> Citing a surfeit of phobias, "fear of objects, fear of people, fear of the future, fear of nature, fear of the unknown, fear of death... and fear of life itself," Thurman admits that fear in itself is not exclusively negative.<sup>110</sup> Indeed, fear can function positively as a protective device for weak and powerless organisms against forces that threaten their well-being or mere existence.<sup>111</sup> His particular concern was how fear functions as a coping mechanism for the socially and economically underprivileged within the "various

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<sup>107</sup> Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, 112.

<sup>108</sup> Thurman originally refers to deception, fear, and hatred as significant "hounds of hell" which constantly threaten the "disinherited" (i.e. oppressed, downtrodden). Fluker categorizes these three as "internal barriers" to the actualization of community in Thurman's thought. I have adopted the New Testament concept of "scandalon."

<sup>109</sup> Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 36.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 36.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, 40-41.

dimensions of violence" to which they are constantly exposed.<sup>112</sup> Physical violence oftentimes seems the most belittling, yet he reckons that such violence...

...is often devoid of the element of contest. It is what is feared by the rabbit that cannot ultimately escape the hounds. One can almost see the desperation creep into the quivering, pulsing body of the frightened animal. It is one-sided violence.<sup>113</sup>

In his own analysis Fluker contends that in their attempt to retain a sense of self-worth, individuals "develop behavior patterns that minimize the onslaught of violence."<sup>114</sup> Thus internalized, fear becomes toxic, no longer serving to defend or preserve the individual but instead opening its fingers to strangle her/his spirit.<sup>115</sup> Thurman insisted, "The power that saves [fear] becomes (the) executioner."<sup>116</sup> Fear's morbid logic also applies to the social sphere for him, in that the acuteness of fear obtaining between parties increases exponentially in proportion to the frequency of times they share "contact without fellowship."<sup>117</sup>

Such disconnection allows hatred to emerge as another "hound of hell" further threatening peace is/as community. Thurman believed hatred could not be defined, only described.<sup>118</sup> It initially presents as "the active functioning of ill will" within an individual toward another person s/he interprets as a threat to her/his well-being or existence. However, when cultivated by fear and unchecked by truth, the early sprouts of enmity bloom into hatred as the individual's "willing the non-existence of another."<sup>119</sup> Whereas traditional analyses deem hatred the disposition of the "strong towards the weak," Thurman felt that no

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<sup>112</sup> Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 37.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>114</sup> Fluker, *They Looked for A City*, 63.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>117</sup> Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 49-55.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 78. Continuing this thought Thurman argues, "Ill will, when dramatized in a human being, becomes hatred walking on the earth. The outline is now complete and simple—contacts without fellowship developing hatred and expressing themselves in unsympathetic understanding; an unsympathetic understanding tending to express itself in the exercise of ill will; and ill will, dramatized in a man or woman, becoming hatred walking the face of the earth."

person is beyond its spell. More precisely, he considered the prevailing notion of his day that whites were the "haters" and blacks "merely the victims," simply "ridiculous." A personal anecdote vivifies his point:

I was once seated in a Jim Crow car which extended across the highway at a railway station in Texas. Two Negro girls of about fourteen or fifteen sat behind me. One of them looked out of the window and said, "Look at those kids." She referred to two little white girls who were skating towards the train. "Wouldn't it be funny if they fell and spattered their brains all over the pavement!" I looked at them. Through what torture chambers had they come—torture chambers that had so attacked the grounds of humaneness in them that there was nothing capable of calling forth any appreciation or understanding of white persons? There was something that made me shiver.<sup>120</sup>

Initially providing the hater a positive sense of personal vitality so that "while it lasts, burning in white heat, its effect seems positive and dynamic," hatred, Thurman argued, ultimately "turns to ash...guaranteeing a final isolation from one's fellows."<sup>121</sup> Usually channeled only toward those individuals responsible for the situations that inspire resentment, he noted that when hatred is released it "cannot be confined to the offenders alone."<sup>122</sup> Accordingly, hatred means chaos to the human spirit and anarchy to the project of ethics.

Finally, guilt can also function as a demonic disabler of personal peace.<sup>123</sup> Thurman equated guilt with an individual's felt sense of personal responsibility for her/his cooperation with evil, and suggested that all guilt derives from a personal awareness of God and the fact of violating the Divine law of community. Hence, while sin devastates self and neighbor, the

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<sup>120</sup> Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 78-79.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid, 86.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid, 86.

<sup>123</sup> Thurman, *The Search*, 26. Linking his contemporary analysis of guilt with the Hopi creation myth on p. 21 Thurman notes the primal value on the heart, "Here was the center of feeling, in which he experienced the good of life so long as he was of one heart; but when evil feelings entered he became of two hearts. It is in this center that he sensed the purpose of life."

sinner's lament ultimately becomes that of the Psalmist, "against you and you alone have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight."<sup>124</sup>

As with other scandalons, guilt carries both positive and negative energy, the latter of which must be purged before a person can "triumph in goodness."<sup>125</sup> Inspiring an individual to take responsibility for her/his actions and seek forgiveness from those affected by her/his sin (i.e. others, self, God), guilt portends reconciliation. Conversely, in situations where self-judgment usurps the transformative "judgment" of Divine love, the person may perceive her/himself as unfit for the forgiveness of understanding; s/he remains lost in the thanatotic ego-thicket—alienated from self, others, and God.

Transcending such narcissistic guilt, Thurman also detected a "general" sense of guilt which, as it floats through culture, promotes a sense of anxious despair in persons.<sup>126</sup> In lieu of emerging from individual consciousness of a specific sin, such guilt (i.e. a "First People" or "Adam and Eve" complex) pervades the common life as part of the "givenness" of existence in a broken world. Precisely because it is hard to qualify, such guilt often appears untenable and can easily become adopted as the common cultural mood. Yet Thurman contended that when spiritually discerned as a periodic rather than permanent event, even this general guilt can further the true quest for peace.

### **Disavowing "War and Affliction"**<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Thurman was partial to the Hebrew Psalms in his personal devotional life and his vocation as spiritual guide, especially Psalm 139 and Psalm 51.

<sup>125</sup> Thurman, *The Search*, 26.

<sup>126</sup> Thurman, *The Inward Journey*, 41. Taken from centering piece no. 23, "The Necessities of our Peace."

<sup>127</sup> Ibid, 77-78. Following Thomas a Kempis, Thurman continues on noting, "'For whatsoever plans I shall devise for my own peace, my life cannot be without war and affliction.'... This is not a note of pessimism—it is rather a recognition that conflict is a part of the life process. Whatever may be the plan which one has for one's life, one must win the right to achieve it."

While deception, fear, hatred, and guilt are formidable threats to peace is/as community, Thurman saw the "blind spot" most individuals develop concerning their own internal struggles with these scandalons as the greatest barrier to such peace.<sup>128</sup> The masses typically hide out within an eminence front of wholeness in a desperate attempt to convince themselves and others that they can self-manage life. Yet the individual's refusal to first recognize and secondly to own and positively transform her/his own internal dis-ease and conflict, Thurman argued, only deepened the struggle. He maintained that the violence within individuals always obtained from a lack of "mutual understanding" among individuals.

The need to be cared for is fundamental to human life and psychic and spiritual health and well-being. When this need is not met, the individual is thrown into conflict, an inner conflict that can only be resolved when the need is honored. The conflict expresses itself in many ways, from profound mental disturbance to the complete projection upon others of the hate and violence the person himself is feeling.<sup>129</sup>

Thurman believed that before an individual could contribute positively to the recovery of peace is/as community at the interpersonal, societal, international, and cosmic levels, s/he must first cultivate what this study terms "'intrapersonal' peace" by coming to terms with her/his own aggressiveness, propensity for violence, internal brokenness, and need for healing.

Concern for this personal sense of peace is/as community pervades Thurman's "peace literature." For example, he redirected his listener's thoughts on peace from the universal/international back to the personal plane in the following passage from his sermon "The Search for Peace":

When we hear the word "peace" our minds turn first to those expectations of our common aspirations, collective hopes, and fears which have to do with the nations of the

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<sup>128</sup> My analysis of Thurman's view of these spiritual scandalons is grounded in his observation that although most peoples' lives are full of deep inner conflict they often attempt to masquerade behind a false sense of togetherness and wholeness.

<sup>129</sup> Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, 111.

earth, including our own. At such moments, we dream of the fulfillment of the prophecy that men will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. It is well that we should think and dream in this way.

I am thinking now, however, about peace in a more intimate and personal dimension. I am thinking of peace in terms of the strivings and realities of our private worlds.<sup>130</sup>

Similarly, within his sermon "Levels of Peace," Thurman encouraged his congregation to "think quietly" with him of peace not in terms of "clashing armies or airplanes dropping their bombs," but peace in terms of "our personal, private needs."<sup>131</sup> Finally, admitting in a pre-Memorial Day sermon that the holiday will bring "much talk about peace and the sacrifice men have made on the battlefields of the world," he wanted to meditate on another facet of peace—"as a quality of the inner life...and the internal aspect of one's being."<sup>132</sup>

Thurman drew heavily on modern psychology as well as personalist philosophy in his analysis of the centrality of the individual to the recovery of peace is/as community.<sup>133</sup> Following a 1951 White House study, he argues that the "thinking, feeling, acting human being" does not merely "have" a personality but (rather) "is" a personality.<sup>134</sup> Though each person(ality) yearns to be "unanimous within," Thurman agreed with Quaker philosophical theologian Douglas Steere that "most of us are not integrated selves but... a whole committee

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<sup>130</sup> Thurman, *The Growing Edge*, 88. From his sermon, "Peace in Our Lives."

<sup>131</sup> Thurman, "Levels of Peace," n.p., n.d. Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston, MA, 2.

<sup>132</sup> Thurman, "Inner Peace," May 6, 1950. Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston, MA.

<sup>133</sup> Thurman's interest in modern psychology and personalist philosophy is widely apparent in his entire published and archival corpus of sermons, essays, centering pieces, lecture-notes, and books. Gaining a strong foundation in personalism from a theological perspective through his study of liberal Protestantism under Cross, Robins and others at Rochester, he persisted to source personalist thought and mid-century psychology. Along with well-worn volumes by Schreiner and Jones Thurman also regularly read Protestant theologian John MacMurray, Bernard of Clairvaux, Jane Steger (*Leaves from a Secret Journal*), and Leslie Paul (*The Meaning of Human Existence*). For additional insight into Thurman's integration of personalist psychology and philosophy in his own work see the following: *Creative Encounter*, 125-137; *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 110-111; *Deep is the Hunger*, 63-64, 120-121, 185-203; Howard Thurman, "My Dear Ego," n.d., Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Howard University Divinity School, Washington, DC; Howard Thurman, "Man and the Moral Struggle," January 23, 1955, Marsh Chapel, Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston; Howard Thurman, "The Basic Needs to Which Religion Addresses Itself," n.d., Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston.

<sup>134</sup> Thurman, *The Creative Encounter*, 94-95. Here Thurman sources the White House Study, "A Healthy Personality for Every Child," MidCentury White House Conference on Children and Youth, 1951, p. 3.

of selves," making decisions by majority vote.<sup>135</sup> Hence the import of his pastoral focus on peace in terms of "the strivings and realities of our private worlds," rather than "clashing armies...battlefields and bombs."<sup>136</sup>

### **Toward a Proper "Sense of Self"**<sup>137</sup>

This pastoral focus underscored Thurman's contention that an individual can only come to intrapersonal peace by negotiating a proper "sense of self through harmonizing her/his "self-fact" and "self-image."<sup>138</sup> He understood self-fact as the individual's identity as both Divine offspring and vital part of Creation—her/his "true self." Contrarily, self-image denotes the "identity mask" the individual fashions for her/himself based on interactions with self and others. This facade often determines one's personal destiny, yet Fluker argues that for Thurman, "the individual's case must ultimately rest with her/his self-fact of intrinsic worth."<sup>139</sup> Whereas these facets of personality achieved congruency within innocence, Thurman suggested egologic violence produced their eventual bifurcation, and as a result the forces of deception, fear, hatred, and guilt frustrate God's attempt to order an individual's internal and external relations.

When the individual reinvests in her/his self-fact, Divine Love reveals these four vices as misappropriated cries "to be cared for, to be held, [and] honored in one's own life and in the lives of others."<sup>140</sup> The individual who reconciles her/his self-fact with her/his self-

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<sup>135</sup> Thurman, *Deep is the Hunger*, 68-70.

<sup>136</sup> Thurman, "Levels of Peace," 2.

<sup>137</sup> Thurman, *Deep is the Hunger*, 69-70.

<sup>138</sup> Thurman, *The Creative Encounter*, 19.

<sup>139</sup> Fluker, *They Looked for a City*, 34.

<sup>140</sup> Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, 117-18.



image moves closer to proper "self-love"—the passkey to true love with and for others. For Thurman, self-love is "the kind of activity having as its purpose the maintenance and furtherance of one's own life at its highest level."<sup>141</sup> In differentiating self-love from "selfishness," Thurman posited that all love emerges from a "qualitative regard" for the self as vital to the life process.<sup>142</sup> Smith argues that for Thurman:

Self-love, while affirming the individual life, is also the source which points the individual away from a narcissistic self-centeredness. It is the source for ethics and morality, it is the source for wider expressions of love, it manifests the spiritual life, and it witnesses to the presence and activity of God in life. Self-love is the experience which permits inclusive living. It permits the individual to move "from self to God."<sup>143</sup>

Smith's use of the term "inclusive living" reiterates Thurman's teaching that self-love is essential to the recovery of peace is/as community not only at the intrapersonal but also the interpersonal, social, and cosmic levels of existence. Thurman held that proper self-love explodes the ego, opening the way for the individual to experience her/him-self as an active element in the generosity of life. Correlative to Thurman's take on proper self-love was his concern with the demonic and often paradoxical quality of "selfishness." Whereas proper self-love enables a person to affirm her/his self in concert with all life, within selfishness personal ego constitutes the boundary of ultimacy. The individual desires to stand alone and experience the triumph of personality in saying, "I did it!," yet Thurman contended, "such a moment in honesty a man never knows."<sup>144</sup>

In all his deeds are many, many dreams that started on their way long before man was man. The very words he uses—are they ever his words? Through countless years of use and

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<sup>141</sup> Thurman, *Deep is the Hunger*, 109. Thurman builds this out of an exposition of Jesus relating the two great commandments to his audience.

<sup>142</sup> Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, 109. Continuing on, Thurman posits, "All love grows basically out of a qualitative self-regard and is in essence the exercise of that which is spiritual. If we accept the basic proposition that all life is one, arising out of a common center—God, all expressions of love are acts of God. Hate, then, becomes a form of annihilation of self and others; in short—suicide...If we accept the basic proposition that all life is one, arising out of a common center—God, all expressions of love are acts of God."

<sup>143</sup> Smith, *Mystic as Prophet*, 56.

<sup>144</sup> Howard Thurman, "My Dear Ego," audiocassette, n.d. Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston, MA.

misuse, through searching experiences, deep and wide—his words now familiar in their setting have gathered into themselves the marks of many minds and many, many climbs. A man's words are never his—alone. How can he, he ever truly say—I speak?<sup>145</sup>

This passage exemplifies Thurman's insistence that the individual's "unique" sense of self so crucial to peace is/as community can never be authentically pursued (let alone adequately accomplished) apart from her/his working knowledge of life as dynamic symbiosis. Even well-intentioned selfishness failed to serve a person, for Thurman, because all selfishness imagines the individual psyche as separate from, rather than in harmony with, other forms of life. Further, while all egologic urging is unhealthy, selfishness cloaked in the "garb of utter selflessness and humility" is especially toxic in that it ultimately represents "a subtle but not less intense self-centeredness."<sup>146</sup> Thurman argued that such misuse of "love" represents the greatest violence individuals enact upon themselves and one another. Love is exploited whenever its energy is used by one individual to gain power or control over another person.

All of these forms of selfishness result from life in a broken world where damage has been done to the proper sense of self. In relationship with God an individual is encouraged to recover a proper sense of "self-love," which can be forgotten or misshapen when an individual bases her/his identity too strongly in her/his relationship with self and others.

Through incarnating the divine love at the root of her/his self-fact in relationship with others, a person functions as the Thurmanian "apostle of sensitiveness"—reorienting the lives

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<sup>145</sup> Howard Thurman, "My Dear Ego."

<sup>146</sup> Thurman, *Deep is the Hunger*, 108-109. He writes, "It is small wonder that all religions that are ethically sensitive place a great emphasis upon the corrosive effects of pride upon the human spirit. There is something very subtle about pride and arrogance of spirit. Often it assumes the garb of utter selflessness and humility. It expresses itself in pointed and dramatic self-effacement and very articulate modesty."

of everyone s/he comes into contact with from chaos to peace is/as community. Thus, as Thurman put it, "self-love is the contagion."<sup>147</sup>

#### IV. "SIGNS" OF THE TIMES: READING THE SOCIAL IMAGES OF RUPTURE

Granting Fluker's maxim that Thurman's basic concern with evil is where it "touches" the individual, it is also true that he was deeply concerned with evil as it invaded and took up residence in various social structures perpetuating deception, fear, hatred, and guilt among individuals, social groups, and nations. His hopes for peaceful relations among individuals were often trumped by the realization that "the ultimate fate of the relationship seems to be in the hands of the wider social context."<sup>148</sup>

We are mindful of the agonies that are sweeping over our world. Suffering, hunger, disaster falling upon whole communities and generations; fears that drive nations to put their organized might against other nations' organized weakness; the utter loneliness of those whose dwelling place is the solitude of vast havoc; the anguish of sensitive spirits that find no windbreak against the impact of so much human misery. From all this there is no escape.

As if this were not enough. We are immobilized by our private world of frustration and inner chaos, of needs unfulfilled, of dreams that leave us bereft of even the hope of fulfillment.<sup>149</sup>

Through my research I have identified Thurman's concern with five primary "signs" of collective chaos—racism and segregation, war, poverty and materialism, religious intolerance and conflict, and environmental degradation.<sup>150</sup> An overview of how he saw these

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<sup>147</sup> Howard Thurman, "Mysticism and Social Change," 20 July 1978, Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston, MA, 16.

<sup>148</sup> Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 97.

<sup>149</sup> Thurman, *The Centering Moment*, 43.

<sup>150</sup> The reader should be made aware that these five issues—racism/segregation, poverty/materialism, war, religious intolerance and environmental degradation were not catalogued or formalized by Thurman as his

social images of rupture provides needed nuance to the relationship among the personal, social, and systemic dimensions of peace is/as community.

### **Racism and Segregation**

It seems only proper to begin with what clearly were Thurman's principal social concern(s)—racism and segregation. Though his social critique was not limited to these issues, their import for his life and thought cannot be overstated.<sup>223</sup> Thurman's experience of these evils influenced his stance on them as well as related issues.

Citing "community" as the normative pattern for human relations, Thurman viewed racism as an "internal attitude" which admits a racial "exception" to this norm stemming from a distortion of what he calls the "ethic of respect for personality." While all people are "enjoined to love God and to love one another," Thurman readily acknowledged that the individual's commitment to this truth is threatened in that "he still admits categories of exception and extenuating circumstances which amend and sometimes nullify his respect for human life."<sup>151</sup> Such omission can obtain in individuals, groups, and institutions either consciously or subconsciously; however, once an "exception" is allowed, a malicious social shift occurs: the individual or group to which the omission applies is "written out of the human race," thus nullifying standard ethical praxis.<sup>152</sup> Thus, racism as violent mindset begets racism as violent action.

Thurman understood violence as the use of oppressive force by one party to impose its will on another. For him racism presented in a wide spectrum of violence from hostile attitudes, physical avoidance, and humiliation tactics to the physical violence of rape,

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primary socio-spiritual concerns. Rather, through my research and analysis, I have lifted them up as key interests of his fundamental to his overarching concern with the pursuit of peace is/as community.

<sup>151</sup> Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965; reprint, Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press, 1999), 2.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 1, 3-4.

beatings, even murder. While each of these particular acts imperils the Divine imperative of community, Thurman viewed segregation as an even more sinister threat to peace, for as a politically legislated social matrix, it not only tolerates but seeks to normalize and perpetuate racial inequity both at the social level of cultural ideal and at the personal level of moral intent.<sup>153</sup> Encouraging "contacts without fellowship" among individuals and groups of different ethnicities, segregation emerges as a cancer corroding not only the social strata of the body politic but also the soul of the oppressed and oppressor alike.<sup>154</sup> Minority individuals are especially affected. Ensnared in a system that "despises" them and thus causes them to "despise themselves," they must carry on an "energy-consuming inner struggle" to retain a healthy sense of self or else yield to feelings of amorality or hatred toward their oppressors. As Thurman declared:

Such persons tend to be emotionally exhausted as a chronic state of being. There is the barest margin for creativity and growth. It is impossible even to hazard the loss to American life that has resulted from the waste in energy and creativity in the desperate necessity to find a way to survive against such overwhelming odds.<sup>155</sup>

For such individuals, peace is/as community seems only a dream. Thurman believed the only peace they seem to find is the "peace of exhaustion."<sup>156</sup> In his sermon, "Levels of Peace," Thurman observed how the "muted vitality" of this lesser peace is embodied via St. Gaudens's statue which stands over Marian "Clover" Adams' grave in Washington D.C.'s Rock Creek Cemetery.

The figure of a woman is seated in a huge chair at the center of a crescent-shaped marble bench. The whole body is draped in a tremendous piece of bronze which ends in a cowl over her head, leaving only her face exposed. The elbow is resting on the arm of her chair, and her face is supported by her fingers and thumb. The look is straight ahead. There is no

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<sup>153</sup> Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness*, 13-14. Here Thurman also relates the story of southern Christian clergyman whose own limited vision of social justice and action illustrates the hypocrisy of Christian social resistance Thurman often experienced in during the mid-twentieth century in the American South.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>156</sup> Thurman, *The Growing Edge*, 90-91.

manifestation of any emotion in her face; one is struck by the fact that her countenance is devoid of any recognizable qualities. It is as if the eyes have cried themselves out so that there are no more tears left. She has moved beyond all temptations and all tensions and has been exhausted by living. Such is the peace of exhaustion! Have you ever experienced it? Have you ever felt that the experience through which you have passed has drained you of everything so that there is nothing left? There are times when a human being may be so hurt and cast down to such a depth that he cannot be hurt anymore. This is exhaustion that has some of the quality of—but minus the dynamics of—the stillness of absolute motion.<sup>157</sup>

Thurman maintained that over time exhaustion and decay also affect the perpetrator of racial violence. Because segregation counters the organic dynamic of community, it invites multiple delusions of moral and spiritual pre-eminence. As Thurman related, "May it be remembered that the cost to the perpetrator of segregation is the corrosion of the spirit and the slow deadly corruption of the soul. It is to be overcome by evil."<sup>158</sup>

### **War: "The Great Irrationality"**

Whereas Thurman's treatments of racism/segregation and poverty have received much attention, his sketch of military conflict as yet another sign of social rupture remains relatively unexplored. Though the merger of several scholarly variables persist in perpetuating this oversight (i.e. the belief that because Thurman was not an anti-war "theologian-activist" in the traditional sense, he was ill-equipped and/or unconcerned to tender any sort of "war witness"), my archival research and interviews clearly demonstrate the veracity of Thurman's war resistance. Couched in timely sermons, lectures, and devotional writings, his analysis of war centers on four primary points.

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<sup>157</sup> Thurman, *The Growing Edge*, 90-91. He also reckons the peace of exhaustion in terms of "hell" as the place/space of continuing on throughout eternity perpetually performing the sin or vice that keeps one from peace is/as community.

<sup>158</sup> Thurman, *Luminous Darkness*, 26. He goes on to write on p. 27, "The cost of the corrosion of the spirit, which is slow and imperceptible—but its effect is sure and relentless."

Thurman firstly conceived war as "the great irrationality"<sup>159</sup> because it represented a dramatic attempt to bring peace through violence.<sup>160</sup> Despite its default status within international and interethnic conflict, he argued, "no one can really make a rational case of the destruction of his fellows."<sup>161</sup> Thurman believed war's faulty logic is most blatantly manifest in the stockpiling of weapons as a means of deterrence. Regardless of the aggressor's wager that adversaries will back down so as to "not unduly expose themselves to destruction," the likely result is a mutual increase in armaments which only escalates the probability of war."<sup>162</sup> From that moment he noted, "the [arms] race is on."<sup>163</sup> War's ludicrous cry for peace through violence takes an "insidious, curious hold on the human imagination" for Thurman:

It [war] causes the relational pattern of daily living to be faced at once with the tremendous irrationality and as it faces that irrationality it throws the relational pattern of living out of line and men begin to become aware of aspects of their existence of which they were not aware as long as they were submerged under the relational pattern of daily life.<sup>164</sup>

This statement leads into Thurman's second point—the need for nationalistic zeal and propaganda required to "sell the drama" of war. Should one nation desire moral justification for enacting violence on another country, "all it need do," he suggested, "is teach its people to hate the people of the other nation."<sup>165</sup> A national citizenry, catechized in ill-will toward other politically sovereign states or nations, can so focus its desire to conquer or control the

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<sup>159</sup> Howard Thurman, "Quest for Peace," Fellowship Church, San Francisco, 24 July 1949, typewritten manuscript, Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston, MA, 1. Thurman writes, "No person who is interested either in peace or in war knows that he can deal with the issue of war on a basis of rationality."

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>161</sup> Thurman, "The Quest for Peace Unwon," 1.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-2.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>164</sup> Thurman, "Quest for Peace," 4.

<sup>165</sup> Thurman, "The Quest for Peace Unwon," 3. Thurman contends, "Hatred thus becomes a device by which a self-righteous nation protects its morality while it engages in immoral behavior with reference to other nations."

prescribed enemy actor that it loses perspective (or loosens standards) on the means its own government employs in manipulating conflict.

Though every citizen cannot be soldier and many individuals and groups of an aggressor nation realize the inherent brutality of war, Thurman acknowledged that when the nation is at war, "some tremendous thing takes possession of the common life so that all of the monotonous chores of ordinary life are quickened."<sup>166</sup> Individuals and corporations become highly valued not in terms of their own self-worth, but in terms of their service to the state via the specific "contributions" they make to the war effort.<sup>167</sup> Manufacturing hatred as patriotic commodity, the insufferable "war machine" translates the relational pattern between individuals and governments from concretion to abstraction, as evidenced in Thurman's remembrance from *The Luminous Darkness*:

During World War II I lived in California. It was not infrequent that one saw billboard caricatures of the Japanese: grotesque faces, huge buck teeth, large dark-rimmed thick-lensed eyeglasses. The point was in effect to read the Japanese out of the human race; they were construed as monsters and as such stood in immediate candidacy for destruction. They were so defined as to be placed in a category to which ordinary decent behavior did not apply. Without any apparent wrench of conscience or violation of due process, it was possible for the entire Japanese-American community to be removed from the West Coast and placed in relocation camps in the center of the country. It was open season for their potential extermination, thus providing immunity from guilt feelings. During World War I the same behavior was directed toward the Germans and people of German descent.<sup>168</sup>

While such propaganda is employed prior to and during particular military campaigns, Thurman argued that trace elements of hatred toward citizens of the "enemy" nations

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<sup>166</sup> Thurman, "Quest for Peace," 4.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid, 5. Thurman continues, "...[M]en who often find themselves deeply opposed to war and to the war-machine; they know that it brutalizes life and wounds all sorts of things; but when the nation is "at war," some chores of ordinary life are quickened. And we have to deal with that if we want to quarantine the formal manipulators—political and economic—who finally set the stage for war."

<sup>168</sup> Thurman, *Luminous Darkness*, 2-3.



continue to subtly inhabit a country's social strata well beyond the cessation of formal conflict.<sup>169</sup>

Thirdly, Thurman noted how the seemingly constant fact of military conflict (or threat of such) in human history normalizes war, thereby depreciating individual, national, and global conceptions of "peace" and "peacetime." Regretfully he admitted, "[t]he standing peacetime army is more and more taken for granted as the common experience of the modern nation."<sup>170</sup> Whereas diplomats and generals interpret "peace" as the product of "limited armaments or balance of power and political arrangements," Thurman saw "no virtue or validity in these mechanical arrangements."<sup>171</sup>

Such "mechanical" constructions of peace naturally stand in stark contrast to Thurman's more organic paradigm of peace is/as community.<sup>172</sup> Because he construed peace is/as community as Divine initiative, Thurman was highly critical of the religious sector, especially the Christian Church, for its failure to speak a prophetic word of resistance against these anomic notions of peace. Claiming it is the thesis of the Christian religion that peace "is the byproduct of social justice and social righteousness," he believed peace can be realized only when built upon "justice, mutuality, and a relaxation of the will to domination."<sup>173</sup>

The work of righteousness shall be peace and the effect of righteousness, quietness, and confidence forever. There can be no peace in the world as long as men are held under the domination of dictators who recognize no social responsibility beyond the guaranteeing of their own security. There can be no peace possible as long as millions of people are hungry and naked. There can be no peace as long as one nation or two nations have in their hands the knowledge and the skills for the widespread use of atomic energy for destruction.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid, 2-3.

<sup>170</sup> Thurman, *The Inward Journey*, 41.

<sup>171</sup> Thurman, "The Quest for Peace Unwon," 4.

<sup>172</sup> Writing in "The Quest for Peace Unwon," Thurman contends on pp. 1-2, "Hatred is used as an instrument for peace by suggesting negotiation as an alternative for the threat of violence itself. It provides an atmosphere for the justification of all forms of preparation for war. The obvious fallacy in this process needs no further comment."

<sup>173</sup> Thurman, "The Quest for Peace Unwon," 2.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid, 1-2.

In other words, religion insists that peace is the indirect result of widespread social welfare. Thurman was adamant that until the church realizes its sin of co-nourishing the very insecurity and fear "out of which war and the threat of war are derived," it cannot be efficient in "pointing the way to peace."<sup>175</sup>

Fourthly and finally, Thurman contended that every individual who opposes war for whatever reason must cultivate her/his unique war resistance. As with other social ills (i.e. segregation, etc.), he believed that while the average citizen knew war to be wrong, s/he felt powerless to further peaceful conflict resolution. This is especially true for individuals and groups who want to protest military conflict yet are unsympathetic to traditional means of resistance (i.e. picketing, sit-ins, demonstrations, etc.). Rather than creating their own anti-war witness, Thurman observed, he and others in this group are apt to sit in judgment over the witness of banner-waving peaceniks.

... [W]e for philosophical or political reasons may not identify with those individuals who perhaps are in our view holding vigils down in maylenae or in the other places where this experimental work is going on, we may laugh at the kind of ridiculous view of the ones in Scotland—offered some puny registration of judgment on the submarines based here.<sup>176</sup>

Freely admitting such actions portend a "sentimentality with which we may not identify," Thurman nevertheless preached that all opponents of war are under "very serious and critical obligations" to do several things.<sup>177</sup> First, individuals and groups must work "as much as possible" to develop a "sense of fact" concerning military conflict. Secondly, he

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<sup>175</sup> Thurman, "The Quest for Peace Unwon," 2.

<sup>176</sup> Howard Thurman, "Community of Fear, part 2," Marsh Chapel, Boston University, 7 May 1961, audiocassette, Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University.

<sup>177</sup> Howard Thurman, "The Way of Peace," 16 November 1969, n.p., typewritten manuscript, Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston, MA, 2. Addressing this point in the context of his exposition of Matthew 5:21-26 Thurman notes, "The handles of power are so far removed, again and again, from where the little man stands, or where the little man sits, or the ordinary man stands or sits or functions or operates. So that it is easy to be deluded into thinking that what I can do where I am is not a part of the reality. And my word to myself, and I share it with you, is that this is also a part of the reality."

advocated that every citizen become aware of the political decisions that are made by her/his elected leaders because every vote "commits every man, woman, boy, and girl in the country."<sup>178</sup> Finally, each individual must also find her/his own "little way" to search through the world religions, philosophies, and other "utilities of the past" for viable alternatives to war.<sup>179</sup>

While noting that these tasks are often relegated to the altruistic scholar, ambassador, contemporary saint, or other "professional" peacemaker, Thurman assigned them to every individual—"saint or sinner, good man or bad man, educated or uneducated, wise man or stupid."<sup>180</sup> Writing in his 1961 sermon, "The Community of Fear":

We are all under obligation to seek as best we may some other possibility. We do not know what the alternative is, we do not know if there is enough wisdom in man to create a way that will be the source of redemption. We do not know if there is enough moral maturity culminated in man's long journey on the planet to give him the kind of wisdom and character that can float a sense of almost absolute power but we've got to make soundings of every kind...<sup>181</sup>

As a last entry in this brief overview of Thurman's "war witness," he readily admitted that the most paralyzing barrier to personal and collective activism against war in the United States may not be the hypnotic politico spin of the war machine but rather the vast and overwhelming sense of fear and "searching guilt" unleashed throughout the global landscape through America's initial development and use of nuclear weaponry.<sup>182</sup> While this national act awakened various pacifists to deeper protest, the anxiety and despair it birthed also debilitated the moral fiber of many others.

There is also the subtle fear spreading like a "pea-soup" fog over the entire landscape of our personalities because of the naked power made available by the unlocking of the prison

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<sup>178</sup> Thurman, "The Way of Peace."

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Howard Thurman, "The Way of Peace II," n.p., n.d. Vertical File on Howard Thurman, Special Collections, Founders Library, Howard University, Washington, DC, 5.

<sup>181</sup> Thurman, "Community of Fear, pt. 6."

<sup>182</sup> Thurman, *Inward Journey*, 41.

house of the atom. Suddenly there is an awareness that no one anywhere is safe, that there is no protection for man against what man can do to man and all that he holds dear. For us in America there is the searching guilt because, alone of the nations of the earth, we have introduced atomic warfare into the organized life of man. It is true that we say again and again that the irony of a fateful extenuating circumstance forced the choice upon us. But the fact remains that the choice was ours. How can so great a stain be purged? How can there be quiet in the heart that remembers Hiroshima?<sup>183</sup>

Subsequent chapters will provide deeper analysis of Thurman's pacifist rhetoric and personal war resistance.

### Poverty and Materialism

Thurman's consideration of poverty is best understood as an implicit component of his treatment of racism and segregation. And like the latter, his analysis of poverty was impacted by his personal experience of being poor, especially during his early years.<sup>184</sup> Thurman's mention in *With Head and Heart* of the local stranger who paid a portion of his travel and luggage fees from Daytona to Jacksonville where he attended high school is often romanticized. The lesser known reality is that while at the Academy Thurman had difficulty finding employment sufficient to his fiscal needs and his health often suffered from an inadequate diet.<sup>185</sup> And while his college and seminary educational expenses were largely covered by merit scholarships, Thurman always struggled to acquire the bare essentials of his personal and professional life up through his late twenties.<sup>186</sup>

Thurman's most developed analysis of poverty and related thoughts on materialism are found in *Jesus and the Disinherited* and *The Luminous Darkness*. Both texts reveal his concern for the economic, socio-political, and psycho-spiritual aspects of fiscal lack.

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<sup>183</sup> Thurman, *Inward Journey*, 41.

<sup>184</sup> Matthews Allen, "Howard Thurman: Paradoxical Pavior," *Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 77, No. 2 (Spring 1992), 94.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid, 88.

<sup>186</sup> Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 4-6, 24-29, 32-35.

Essential elements of his treatment are: 1) causes of poverty; 2) evils of poverty; 3) dangers of materialism; 4) voluntary/evangelical poverty.

Cognizant as to how various natural disasters, drought, famine, illness and disease often exacerbate cultural, familial and personal conditions which can lead to poverty, Thurman by and large focused on unjust social structures as the *prima facie* reason people are poor. All socially oppressed individuals and groups, he argued, were both politically and economically disinherited. Focusing his analysis on the plight of blacks in America during the twentieth-century, Thurman highlighted lack of individual and racial group self-esteem related to being at the bottom of the capitalism-driven social ladder as a significant wound of the poor. He specifically lamented how the struggle to acquire the basic needs disallowed African Americans and other disinherited groups to enjoy and develop themselves through regular leisure, the intellectual and imaginative merits of culture and future oriented long-term life planning.<sup>187</sup> Thurman especially highlighted how very often children raised in such systemic poverty unknowingly forfeit the many needful psychological and spiritual resources a more carefree existence yields:

The doom of the children is the greatest tragedy of the disinherited. They are robbed of much of the careless rapture and spontaneous joy of merely being alive. Through their environment they are plunged into the midst of overwhelming pressures for which there can be no possible preparation. So many tender, joyous things in them are nipped and killed without their even knowing the true nature of their loss. The normal for them is abnormal. Youth is a time of soaring hopes, when dreams are first given wings and, as reconnoitering begins, explore unknown landscapes...But the child of the disinherited is likely to live a heavy life. A ceiling is placed on his dreaming by the counsel of despair coming from his elders, whom experience has taught to expect little and to hope for less.<sup>188</sup>

Thurman's focus on the case of blacks in the United States enriched rather than limited his understanding of the plight of the other socially oppressed poor who composed the

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<sup>187</sup> Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 52-55.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid*, 54-55.

majority of the global population. His treatment of the fiscal dearth of most African Americans in America also factored into his lesser but important thought on materialism and voluntary or evangelical poverty. It is unclear if Thurman, as an advocate of political democracy, preferred a socialist over a capitalist based American economy. His warning concerning the idolatry of fiscal wealth and possessions, especially the pattern of African Americans adopting the materialist tendencies of white middle and upper class culture, were well-established. Calling his fellow black clergy to action regarding this issue he wrote:

Negro(e)s are poor...as a result of a period of extended crisis, Negroes have discovered that a rare spiritual beauty and insight are much more possible if the thing that gives meaning to one's life is not grounded in economic power. (relates that the slave worked for the owner but himself was not responsible for the owner's economic success)...It is at this point that the task of the Negro minister becomes very clear. He must interpret the deadening effect upon American life of the growing dependence upon things and what they may accomplish. He must lay bare the awful truth that where the highest premium is put upon the possession of things, human life is relatively cheapened. And where life is cheap, ideals languish and the souls of men slowly die.<sup>189</sup>

Beyond Thurman's professional decree of the dangers of materialism, in his personal life he practiced what may be viewed as an informal rule of practical, evangelical simplicity which allowed greater freedom in his commitments and deeper enjoyment of life's simple pleasures. He saw the positive personal, political and prophetic merits of intentional vows, lives and communities given to voluntary poverty in Francis of Assisi and the Franciscans, Mohandas Gandhi and Muriel Lester and the *satyagraha* campaign, Albert Schweitzer and others, yet he never formalized like practices for himself or his congregants. Yet as highlighted in his tenure at Fellowship Church, Thurman did programmatically call individual Christians and the larger Church to account concerning Christianity's reticence to deal radically with the twin issues of poverty and materialism particularly in America.

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<sup>189</sup> Thurman, "The Task of the Negro Ministry," *The Southern Workman*, vol. 57, No. 10 (October 1928), 1-2.

## **Religious Intolerance and Conflict**

Central to Thurman's popularity as a twentieth-century American minister and public intellectual was his ability to speak not only to various racial and ethnic groups within the Church but also to individuals and groups rooted in other faith traditions as well as the secular-minded citizenry's search for meaning. His infamy as a "mystic" grew from his contemplative, experientially based spiritual idiom and liturgical style, both of which he utilized to cultivate greater inclusivity of religious expression and creedal identity among his congregants. This aspect of his personal and professional spirituality also unfortunately led to questions concerning the legitimacy of his self-understanding as a Christian and a minister of Christ's Church. Thurman's personal and professional Christian identity is fundamental to his legacy as a religious pioneer in America, not only in his resistance to racism and segregation, but also related to his efforts in the areas of interreligious dialogue and community.

Thurman's work of ecumenical and interreligious community building is best summarized through noting his views on: 1) the tragedy of conflict amongst the religions; 2) the causes of religious and theological conflict; 3) the importance of regular encounter amongst the religions including Thurman himself as an exemplar of such; 4) the logic of religious pluralism.

The tragedy of the many forms of conflict and violence among the world's different religions for Thurman rested in his belief that these traditions, in serving as cultural conduits to the Divine, were intended to provide spiritual wisdom, ethical guidance and model ideal community in society yet were also responsible for instigating, normalizing and perpetuating conflict at nearly all levels of society. During his childhood he and other Baptist kids

frequently argued with their Methodist playmates concerning which baptismal method was more biblical. While innocent enough on its own Thurman correspondingly noted how many adult Methodists and Baptists in Waycross furthered the playtime rhetoric drawing deep divisions between themselves as Christians.

Recall it was also during this time Thurman had negative encounters with the institutional church related to Saul Thurman's funeral and, several years later, his own interest in church membership. On a larger scale Thurman deeply regretted the Church's sins of commission and omission relative to the institutions of slavery, racism and segregation as well as the various ways religion throughout history had contributed to the promulgation of war. The juxtaposition of these events with the many positive, even redemptive elements of religion he experienced throughout his life inside and outside of the Church and formal religion fueled Thurman's desire to shape his ministry as one which fostered not only interracial but also inter-religious community.

Thurman seems to have focused his interreligious efforts to positively transform what he understood as the primary causes of religious and theological conflict: 1) a desire for socio-spiritual monopoly; 2) confusion as to the nature of religious language relative to religious experience; and 3) religious institutions partnering with sociopolitical powers in order to gain cultural advantage or dominance. In the first instance religious groups were in conflict over their conflicting truth claims relative to the nature of life, the attainment of salvation or both. This was particularly evident for Thurman in Christianity and Islam's missionary impulse and conversely in what he read as the dramatic "exclusivity" of Judaism's covenant.<sup>190</sup> He believed the root problem lay in a reified, legalistic and exclusive interpretation of religious language (i.e. doctrine, scripture, liturgy, mystical treatise, etc.) rather than an intellectually

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<sup>190</sup> Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 44, 90.



informed, culturally nuanced read of theological language as primarily metaphorical, context-driven, and tradition-specific.<sup>191</sup>

Generally speaking Thurman believed that the core element of all religious experience was the same, that difference and diversity only emerged as individuals and groups sought to give expression to their experience.<sup>192</sup> A third root cause of conflict among religions Thurman claimed was the cooperation of religious institutions or movements with political, ethnic and economic seats of power intending that the religious body, other principle, or both have majority or absolute sway concerning societal governance.<sup>193</sup>

Thurman's greatest contribution to fostering reconciliation and mutual understanding amongst religions was his facilitation of interreligious encounter. As previously established, in seeking fellowship and knowledge in his own life Thurman regularly ventured beyond his African American and Christian paradigm. A well-read student of many of the Axial faiths, he also fostered significant personal and professional relationships with individuals and groups practicing Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Catholicism, earth-based spiritualities and also among the secular-minded.<sup>194</sup> Thurman's pastoral desire to create

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<sup>191</sup> Howard Thurman, *Mysticism and Symbolism*, 10. Also see Thurman's *Creative Encounter*, 20-21.

<sup>192</sup> Howard Thurman, *Temptations of Jesus*, San Francisco: Lawton, Kennedy, 1962; reprint, Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, (DATE), 15. Here Thurman writes, "When this [religious] experience becomes an object of thought and reflection, it is then that my mind creates dogmas, creeds, and doctrines. These are the creations of the mind and are therefore always after the fact of the religious experience." Richard Rose provides helpful insight into Thurman's interpretation of religious experience in the context of interreligious dialogue and comparative theology in his dissertation, Richard Rose, "Howard Thurman's Life and Thought: Implications for Religious Pluralism and Interfaith Dialogue" Ph.D. diss., Claremont Graduate School, 1995. Writing on p. 83 Rose argues, "Thurman suggests that modern man must become aware of the relative nature of both doctrine and tradition, learn to conceptualize their functional roles, and then seek to live in harmony with those whose beliefs are in some ways different."

<sup>193</sup> In this vein, Thurman was especially concerned with the white American church's baptizing of racism and segregation as well as its lack of resistance to the racial caricature, rounding up and sequestering of Japanese-Americans in prison-camps during World War II.

<sup>194</sup> Thurman's entire published corpus is full of his recollections of long-term relationships, project-based relationships and one-time encounters with a diverse cadre of individuals and groups including Hindus, Buddhists, American and Canadian Indians, Muslims, secular peace and justice activists as well as Christians from many branches of the larger universal Church.

worship experiences and religious communities where individuals from diverse faith backgrounds could pray, learn and work as one common fellowship provided many individuals a welcome experience of reconciliatory community particularly during times of domestic and international conflict. A Chinese Buddhist related his experience of sharing in regular worship as a part of Thurman's Oberlin congregation, "When I close my eyes and listen with my spirit I am in my Buddhist temple experiencing the renewing of my own spirit."<sup>195</sup>

While not developed in any of Thurman's writing as a formal theory, Thurman scholar Richard Rose suggests that the idea of "religious pluralism" exudes from Thurman's work and is wholly in line with his cosmology. Rose uses the concept of "function" to illustrate his understanding of Thurman's religious pluralism.<sup>196</sup> I agree in general with his analysis that for Thurman religious experience functioned to reveal the ultimate nature, purpose and means of reality which I further contend he [Thurman] understood respectively as unity, dynamic community, and love and truth. However, Thurman's subsequent view of the various world religions as expressions of this universal religious truth developed within particular contexts betrays an analytically naïve pastoral heuristic.

### **Environmental Degradation: "A Pillaged Nature"**

Like his analysis of war, Thurman's deep concern for the natural world has gone largely untapped in scholarly treatments both of his life and thought. This is troubling considering his prioritization of nature and his experiences in the natural world within his autobiography, *The Search for Common Ground*, and also much of his devotional literature.

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<sup>195</sup> Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 73.

<sup>196</sup> Rose, 79.

Thurman's treatment of environmental abuse as yet another "sign" of rupture cannot be understood apart from recollection of the fact that, much like Francis of Assisi and Henry David Thoreau before him (as well as his Catholic contemporary Thomas Merton), Thurman's psyche was deeply impacted by the wonder of Creation. His experience of community with(in) nature sharpened his perception of the many ways humanity's disregard for the environment has manifested itself, especially in modernity.

In line with his more specific concern with military conflict, Thurman believed the violence of war caused deep rupture between humanity and the environment. Yet violence done to the earth through military conflict was simply one of a number of signs for him that the human organism, over the long pull of "advancing" civilizations, had forgotten its primal rootedness within Creation so richly witnessed to in the creation myths and oral histories of earlier cultures. Lauding the magnificence of the human mind, Thurman also reckoned one of its most deceptive aspects is the illusion of the individual (in particular and humanity in general) as not only distinct from but even more stridently "over against" nature. From such a domineering consciousness, he wrote, "...it is but a single leap thus to regard nature as being so completely other than himself that he may exploit it, plunder it, and rape it with impunity."<sup>197</sup> Thurman was especially aware of how modern industrial society furthered this divorce.

Our atmosphere is polluted, our streams are poisoned, our hills are denuded, wild life is increasingly exterminated, while more and more man becomes an alien on the earth and a fouler of his own nest.<sup>198</sup>

Beyond his more formal thought on nature, Thurman's own life, in many ways similar to the life-testimony of Native Americans, provides living witness to the nourishing communion

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<sup>197</sup> Thurman, *The Search*, 83-84.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid*, 83.

possible between humanity and plant and animal life. Autobiographical recollections of intimate encounters with his dog Kropotkin, his childhood oak tree, and his household plants reveal his practical lifestyle assent to the interdependency of all living things.<sup>199</sup>

Thurman argued that humanity's lack of proper stewardship of Creation caused two wounds. As a consequence of its desecrating effect on the natural aesthetic of the natural world and the extermination of vital animal and plant life, such anthropocentrism also furthered the human organism's sense of isolation in the midst of a creation intended by a Creator-God to foster co-existence and belonging. While previous scholarship has largely focused on Thurman's analysis of the negative social and psychological effects of segregation, he also maintained that human separation from nature and its "will to dominate" rather than cultivate life increased mental and emotional sickness more than any particular economic, social, or political ill.<sup>200</sup> "The collective psyche," he noted, "shrieks with the agony that it feels as a part of the death cry of a pillaged nature."<sup>201</sup> Thurman's paradigm of peace is/as community shows clearly how the peace of both individual and society are inseparable from the peace of the earth and cosmos.

## V. SUMMARY AND A GLIMPSE AHEAD

In this chapter I presented an overview of Thurman's thought related to the issue of peace. Rooted in his primary motif of "community," Thurman's rather substantial treatment of peace had until this project been neglected in previous scholarship. Postulating Thurman's notion of peace as "peace is/as community," I argued that he understood peace as a dynamic "sense" of wholeness manifest in all life both at the level of individual organisms and

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<sup>199</sup> Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, 105-106.

<sup>200</sup> Thurman, *The Search*, 82-83.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, 83-84.

amongst them in the larger bio-matrix. As it obtains, Thurman viewed such peace as the mind of God coming to itself in space and time. Humanity plays a unique co-creative role in such peace with freedom to co-create or disrupt life's search for community.

In recovering Thurman's notion of peace, I laid out his informal typology of peace as developed in what I termed his "peace literature"—the sermons, full books and chapters, centering pieces and personal correspondence in which Thurman specifically treats peace. The sum of these materials reveals the manifold ways Thurman considered the personal, social, political, religious, ecological and cosmic aspects of peace and his insistence that social and political peace were ultimately dependent upon a cadre of individuals working together for social weal from a common vantage of mutual understanding, reconciliatory justice and inclusive fellowship. Positing fear, hatred, guilt and deception as inner-personal obstacles resulting from inter-personal conflict, he argued that the individual's successful transformation of these blocks must be accomplished before s/he could honestly and positively contribute to social and political works of peace.

I next provided a fresh assessment of Thurman's exploration of racism/segregation, war, poverty, religious intolerance and conflict, and environmental degradation as primary images of social rupture. Though not developing Thurman's foray into any of these five issues fully, I believe my original research detailing his concern for war, poverty, and ecological dilapidation reveals how his peace witness, while focused on transforming racial injustice, extended to other vital, and often quite related areas of social and spiritual concern unconsidered in previous scholarship.

Finally, where appropriate in this chapter I have also highlighted the Christian foundations of Thurman's treatment of peace. In exploring his theology of the cross,

introducing new archival excerpts from his preaching and writing, and particularizing his criticisms of the institutional Church, I believe I have reinforced, rather than reinvented, Thurman's ministerial identity. I have done so in response to what I, over the years, have perceived as a tendency, among both scholarly and popular interpreters, to underplay the primacy of the person of Jesus, the nonviolent and justice-based teachings of the Gospel, the Christian mystical tradition, and the sociopolitical activism of the more progressive elements of the American and global Church, particularly during the twentieth-century. Yes, Thurman was at heart a religious pluralist; this is clearly evident in his writings, ministry and personal life. Yet it is equally true that it was from within his own interdependent personal identity as a disciple of the Master and professional work as a churchman extending into his roles as an educator, public theologian, and spiritual advisor that Thurman discerned his call, as a Christian, to forge a ministry reconciling race, creed, and culture. Deeply influenced by the mystic-activism of Rufus Jones, Thurman was even more persuaded of the power of individual and collective nonviolence to affect social change by Mohandas Gandhi.

Still, beyond these two contemporary teachers Thurman's focus remained on the Nazarene and his masterful integration of contemplative spirituality, prayerful disciplines, political resistance, inclusive community, and solidarity with the poor. The essential elements of the Christian teaching and praxis concerning justice and peace as articulated today, these were also the foundations of Thurman's program for peace. Arguing these core peacemaking elements as the essence of discipleship, contemporary Catholic peace theologian Mary Evelyn Jegen has written:

Such spirituality has to do equally with contemplation and interpersonal relationships, and with social and political behavior. It looks not for salvation of souls rescued from the world but to the salvation of the world; it sees in bread, fruit of the earth, and work of human hands, the body of the risen Christ. This implies that we will look not for a set of principles rooted in scriptural texts, which can then be applied to problems, but that we

locate ourselves as participants in the life of the risen Lord continuing in history. Disciples learn by sharing the life and craft, the art of the guru. The mode of appropriation is not primarily through instruction but through participation.<sup>202</sup>

It is not only we who are disciples, Jesus, too, was a disciple of God, known by God and knowing God with such intimacy that he chose the title “abba” to express the relationship in human language.<sup>203</sup>

Jegen’s concern to recover a cruciform spirituality of peacemaking and reconciliation as the essence of Christian discipleship finds much correspondence with Thurman’s theology of peace.

Deeper consideration can now be given in the next chapter to Thurman’s claims concerning the mystical dynamics of reconciliation inherent in his theology of peace.

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<sup>202</sup> Mary Evelyn Jegen, “Theology and Spirituality of Nonviolence,” *Worship* (Mar 1986), 126.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid*, 127.

### **CHAPTER 3: CREATIVE ENCOUNTER(S): THURMAN'S SPIRITUALITY OF RECONCILIATION**

The discipline of reconciliation for the religious man cannot be separated from the discipline of religious experience. In religious experience a man has a sense of being touched at his inmost center, at his very core, and this awareness sets in motion the process that makes for his integration, his wholeness. It is as if he saw into himself, beyond all fragmentation, conflicts and divisiveness, and recognized his true self. The experience of the prodigal son is underscored in the religious experience of the race—when he came to himself, he came to his father's house and dwelling place. The experience of God reconciles all the warring parts that are ultimately involved in the life of every man as against whatever keeps alive the conflict, and its work is healing and ever redemptive. Therefore there is laid upon the individual the need to keep the way open so that he and his Father may have free and easy access to each other. Such is the ethical imperative of religious experience.

Howard Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit*

#### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The previous chapter demonstrated that while Howard Thurman was not a systematic theological or scholarly specialist, he certainly had a hold on the various dimensions of the human desire for peace as well as the things that make for peace and also frustrate that search both from an intellectual and pastoral standpoint. Thus when Coretta Scott King was seeking a presenter in the area of “A Theology of Nonviolence: Applied” for the King Center for Social Change's Inaugural 1976 Summer Institute on Nonviolence, it certainly made sense that she would invite Thurman to the task. No surprise here, yet what perhaps is surprising is his response. In a telegram to King in which he notes his doctor's concern for his better self-care relative to his struggle with cancer, Thurman goes on to say:

The one engagement that I am permitting myself for the month of July is a three-day retreat at Santa Barbara. The dates fall within the time of your Institute. I am sorry about this because I am curious to know what I would say about a “Theology of Nonviolence.”



Sue and I think of you and the children very often and have not abandoned the hope that sometime it will be possible for us to have a quiet day to talk.<sup>1</sup>

Well into his seventy-sixth year and in light of his wavering health, Thurman's concern for a restricted schedule seems reasonable; what sense, however, are we to make of his curiosity as to what he—the Movement's spiritual architect and author of *Jesus and the Disinherited*—would say about a 'Theology of Nonviolence?'" While certainly witness to his self-stated desire to keep his religious thought dynamic and open to change and evolution, his response may also confirm what my research suggests: that while deeply interested and invested in understanding nonviolence as it stood front and center in the social resistance and revolution rhetoric of his day, Thurman primarily interpreted nonviolence, particularly from a religious perspective, as a specific component of his more systematic and extensive treatment of reconciliation.

Previous scholarship limited to rather narrow considerations of his concept of nonviolence solely through situational or case-study methodology fails to understand that while as a practical theologian Thurman certainly developed both a "theology of nonviolence" and an "ethic of social change" both of these are sublated by his larger pastoral concern to illustrate and cultivate a "spirituality of reconciliation."<sup>2</sup> Recovering this spirituality, far from obscuring these specific concerns of his political, ecclesial and personal life, facilitates a more holistic understanding of his treatment of nonviolence, most notably his reading of mysticism as the central crucible of "creative encounter" empowering

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<sup>1</sup> Howard Thurman, Telegram to Coretta Scott King, 2 April 1976, Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston.

<sup>2</sup> Previous scholarship on Thurman's life and thought, especially that set forth by Luther Smith, Mozella Mitchell, Walter Fluker and Alton Pollard, has certainly provided an important springboard for my original work in this dissertation. Yet while each of these individuals has provided important insight into particular dimensions of Thurman's life and thought, I am surprised that until my own research and writing, no serious academic attention has been given to the way Thurman's concern for social transformation, nonviolence and particularly the sociospiritual plight of African-Americans and other 'disinherited' groups are situated in his broader religious thought and pastoral concern for the specific concepts of peace and reconciliation.

nonviolence not solely as a vehicle of social change but more foundationally as the lifestyle and linchpin of peace.

These things in mind, in this chapter I recover what I've termed Thurman's spirituality of reconciliation through respective consideration of: 1) his concept of reconciliation; 2) the vehicle of nonviolence and his notion of "sensitiveness"; and 3) reconciliation's mystical dynamics as a means of further developing the mystic intrapersonal "whole-making" dynamic of nonviolence which, again, I believe represents the heart of his spirituality.

## II. "WHOLE-MAKING": THURMAN'S SPIRITUALITY OF RECONCILIATION

Reconciliation is an ancient word full of ambiguous intention. While perhaps not as taboo as repentance, it nevertheless continues to take a back seat to more contemporary and therefore perhaps also more comfortable or popular jargon at the heart of modern peace-studies parlance.<sup>3</sup> This tendency is curious considering the ways many of these more "popular" idioms derive from the dynamic progressive experience I and many other theologians, including Thurman, believe reconciliation invites and entails.<sup>4</sup> And while certainly not as systemic or analytically comprehensive as theologian Scott Appleby and others in his treatment, Thurman shares concern for its spiritual and political aspects, its realistic hopes and also the particular nuances of reconciliation within a Christian perspective.

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<sup>3</sup> More recent standard or popular terms include "social change," "social transformation," "redemptive justice," "nonviolence," and Thich Nhat Hahn's "Interbeing."

<sup>4</sup> For a brief overview of the various academic and pastoral definitions of reconciliation within the Christian tradition and questions concerning the legitimacy of understanding reconciliation as a valid heuristic for Christian engagement in the work of social justice, see Scott Appleby's article "Toward a Theology and Praxis of Reconciliation," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, vol. 39, no. 1-2 (Winter-Spring 2002), 132-140.

In lieu of a particular definition, Thurman's treatment presents a rich imagining of reconciliation in terms of restoring the 'hidden wholeness' he believed present as potential to be actualized in every dimension of life by particularly focusing on four primary points of origin and action, respectively: 1) its roots in life's emergent unity; 2) the preeminent integrity of the individual; 3) reconciliation as both gift and discipline; and finally, 4) its conduit relationship with nonviolence.

### **Life's Emergent Unity**

Following countless others before him, Thurman anchored his concept of reconciliation in his principal belief in life's emergent and "binding" unity, which also grounds his concept of peace. Dictating the thrust of human culture, the search for community also transcends it by pointing individuals and groups beyond the social strata to life's larger eco-logic as the primary sign and seal of reconciliation as "process."<sup>5</sup> Sustained reflection on the Creation as multilayered cosmos convinced Thurman that despite "any particular conscious tendency toward fragmentation," Life always "lives" through synergy.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, in priming the natural order as a vital, perhaps even his most centric symbol of whole-making, Thurman also consistently modeled and advocated relationship with Creation as a more intuitive and visceral means of discerning the subtleties of community encoded within life's elemental fabric.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Howard Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977; reprint, Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1999) 104-105.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 104.

<sup>7</sup> While familiar to scholars and lay devotees of Thurman's life and thought, I believe his accounts of time spent in nature throughout his life, but particularly in his childhood and adolescence, have yet to be mined as a particular paradigm through which to better understand his highly ecological model of community and reconciliation.

The centrality of nature as a harmonizing lens in Thurman's spirituality of reconciliation is vital to recover for many reasons. First, it highlights the tension between his prescription of reconciliation as primarily a cultural process in his more established texts and the varied ways his peace literature, personal narrative and other archival sources consistently point to life's eco-logic at the heart of all human conciliation.<sup>8</sup> In my mind, this tension speaks to Thurman's desire to examine and illustrate for modern societies so easily panicked and/or numbed by the plethoric social images of rupture the intimate, infallible ways the Divine persists in weaving Nature and culture into one in the dynamic spirit of peace *is/as community*.<sup>9</sup> Secondly, similar to many contemporary eco-theologians, particularly those who build their work upon principles of "deep ecology," Thurman's desire for communion rather than conquest-based relativity to the biosphere inspired his concern for the organic and mystic dimensions of nonviolence.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Heart's Swinging Door**

Designating both the Cosmological quest for community just discussed as the ultimate seal of reconciliation and the interpersonal search for "mutual understanding" as its ultimate climax, Thurman additionally posited the human heart as the ultimate stage where

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<sup>8</sup> Arguably Thurman's most analytical view of this subject is found in "Reconciliation," the fifth and final chapter of *Disciplines of the Spirit*.

<sup>9</sup> Howard Thurman, "Violence: Mysticism and Social Change," Pacific School of Religion Lecture Series, Lecture 9, 19 July 1978, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston, 9.

<sup>10</sup> For more on this in terms of Thurman's process-theology and creation see Thurman's *The Search for Common Ground* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973; reprint, Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1986), 67-71. Particularly interesting in these pages are his accounts of the various narratives (i.e. "A Sermon for Wart Hogs," hagiographic recollections of Francis of Assisi's relationship with animals) he weaves into his analysis of the unity of consciousness not only among human individuals and groups but also as shared with other forms of life. As he writes on pp. 67-68, "There seems to be a difference in confirming the unity of life among one's own kind and confirming the unity of life across kingdoms or species. In the latter instance the mind temporarily gives up its sense of individuality and drops back into an original creative continuum in which boundaries of the human self are temporarily transcended. The awareness of conscious meaning is not lost; it is merely enlarged."

the practical dynamics of reconciliation are worked out emphasizing his concern for reconciliation not solely in terms of “ruptured human relations” but perhaps more importantly as applied to “disharmony within oneself created by inner conflict.”<sup>11</sup> Here, he contended, the dynamic tension of affirmation of and resistance to reconciliation can be most clearly “felt,” and therefore most intelligibly discerned. Because this inner citadel was the only arena in which an individual always had the potential to fully affirm and hence work toward the unity of life even and perhaps especially if s/he was not always able to experience (existential) unity in toto because of internal and/or cultural conflict, deciphering the subtle clues to community laced into Life itself aided the diagnosis, prognosis and resolution of “disharmony within oneself created by inner conflict”<sup>12</sup> which Thurman asserted as the foundation for healing any and all other relations.

### **Native and Nurtured**

Just as greenness transmits deeply from the core of every blade of grass, Thurman maintained that the onus of oneness treated above and understood here as the implicit grace in his natural theology stirred in every aspect of life, nowhere more noticeably than in the heart of individuals and human culture. He suspected that though a universal given the “talent for reconciliation” may be more innate to certain individuals and people-groups based on genetic conditioning and/or spiritual proclivity citing such developed faculty in Nancy Ambrose, Ma Walker, Mohandas Gandhi, Jesus, Bernard of Clairvaux, Henry B. Robins and the American and Canadian Indians among others. Their “actively healing disposition”

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<sup>11</sup> Thurman, *Disciplines*, 104-105.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 105.

emanated, he argued, from their own capacity for and consistency of inner reconciliation.<sup>13</sup>

Studying their lives, Thurman argued that each of these individuals and groups maintained a consistent yet steadily evolving form of reconciliatory practice strengthening the import of his own concept of reconciliation as a discipline that must be cultivated—not only by administrators and seminal activists fronting social justice campaigns but also by the common individual as s/he seeks to live and transmit an integrated life.

The first component of such discipline, Thurman insisted, was intention; “the individual must want to do it.”<sup>14</sup> A climate must then be generated further enabling the individual to assert reconciliation in every facet of her/his life.<sup>15</sup> “The mood that induces trust,” he writes, “has to be developed and projected,” while it “may begin with simple interest in (and)...identification with others in their need, anguish, or distress,” yet to become mature and withstand life’s destructive tendencies such ethos must be consistently examined, understood and increased.<sup>16</sup> Believing such practice was “especially binding upon the Christian who undertakes by commitment and intention to follow the teaching of his Master,” Thurman continually charged the individual believer and the Church at large to keep reconciliation front and center in all socio-spiritual teaching and training.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, in terms of Thurman’s treatment of reconciliation as discipline were his concerns for the mutual disciplines of commitment, growth, suffering and prayer and what he

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<sup>13</sup> Thurman, *Disciplines*, 108.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 108-09. Thurman continues in this line of thinking on p. 109 where he writes, “There is the intent, the desire, the decision—all must become central in the individual’s awareness of what he means by himself.” Many comparisons abound in this area of Thurman’s thought in relation to contemporary social theologian Miraslov Volf’s notion of the “will to embrace” as developed in his seminal text, *Exclusion and Embrace : A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* (Nashville : Abingdon Press, 1996).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 108-09.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 109.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 109. There is a potential for further scholarship to be done concerning Thurman’s ‘theology of peace’ and pastoral praxis of reconciliation in light of the historical peace witness of the Baptist Church, Protestantism and the larger Christian community of churches and faith communities.

terms the corollary “senses”<sup>18</sup> of leisure, history, self, fact and future. In short, both individually and as a whole, they speak to Thurman’s concern for individuals and groups to develop a very dedicated and intense—while at the same time detached and malleable—approach to the work of reconciliation. Rather than detailing them in a separate section, and in order to provide the most holistic view of his spirituality of reconciliation, I believe they are best understood and appreciated when interpreted in the context of Thurman’s thinking on the interplay of reconciliation and nonviolence.

### **Nonviolence—“the Great Vehicle of Reconciliation”**

Thurman’s concern for nonviolence may have been in continual development throughout his life; however his interest in nonviolence remained a constant even from its implicit development during his earliest formative years in Waycross. Keeping company with many of his peers in prioritizing nonviolence as an essential if not central aspect of his socio-spiritual vision, Thurman also separated himself from them in the unique aspects of his treatment—particularly his concern for the contemplative and intrapersonal dimensions of nonviolence. His treatment of nonviolence as the “great vehicle of reconciliation” reveals a holistic reading of nonviolence as vision, action and lifestyle relative to his constructive spiritual and ethical virtue of “sensitiveness.”

#### *Nonviolence as Vision*

Thurman’s triadic concept of nonviolence emerged from his concern for nonviolence as vision—a “way of seeing” or “posture toward” the world through community’s primary

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<sup>18</sup> “Senses” is Thurman’s particular term which, from my read, denotes a dynamic grasp of various ethical and spiritual qualities as those listed above. For example, to have a “sense” of leisure for Thurman meant to always have an attitudinal posture of openness and space, even in the midst of the busiest personal and social schedule.

paradigm of “mutual understanding.”<sup>19</sup> Setting love and truth as the horizon against which an individual’s actions are ultimately judged, nonviolence as a whole-seeing of life inspires “the mood of reconciliation” thereby creating or reasserting and maintaining “a *climate* in which the need to be cared for and understood can be effectively dealt with.”<sup>20</sup> While Thurman cited many illustrations of nonviolent community in both his written and spoken word, certainly the most radical imaging of nonviolent community for him was the historical Jesus’ depiction of the “Kingdom of God” not only based on Jesus’ understanding of community as the initial gift and ultimate goal of life in God chiefly known to him through his exposure to the Divine but also because of the social techniques Jesus cultivated himself and taught to others which, if followed, would allow all people, regardless of ethnic or religious difference, to live in harmony with neighbor and “enemy” as well as the inclusion of animals and plants along with the lepers, Jews and other disinherited in his recapitulation of God’s Reign.<sup>21</sup>

Living in a climate of deep insecurity, Jesus, faced with so narrow a margin of civil guarantees, had to find some other basis upon which to establish a sense of well-being. He knew that the goals of religion as he understood them could never be worked out within the

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<sup>19</sup> My treatment of the “visionary” aspects of Thurman’s analysis of nonviolence was greatly enhanced by my study of the more recent work of Craig Dykstra, Iris Murdoch, Alasdair McIntyre and related others concerning visional ethics and character development.

<sup>20</sup> Thurman, *Disciplines*, 114. *Italics mine*. I was particularly impressed, throughout Thurman’s treatment of reconciliation, but particularly at this point—with the language he uses to describe the relational and spiritual qualities of reconciliation not only as a “climate,” but also as a “mood” and “discipline.” Quoting him at length from p. 114, Thurman writes, “It (nonviolence) creates and maintains a climate in which the need to be cared for and understood can be honored and effectively dealt with. The mood of nonviolence is that of reconciliation. It engenders in the individual an attitude that inspires wholeness and integration within. It provides the climate in which the things that are needed for peace, or for one’s own peace, may be sensed, disclosed, and developed. It presupposes that the desire to be cared for and to care for others is one with the very essence of all one’s meaning and significance. It thus provides a working atmosphere in which mutual desiring may be normal, reasonable, and accepted.”

<sup>21</sup> Howard Thurman, *The Search for Common Ground* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973; reprint, Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1986), xv-xvi. While this initial text reference points to an image from Olive Schreiner, Thurman more fundamentally builds his understanding of nonviolence, including its ‘seeing of life’ from his interpretation of the life and ministry of the historical Jesus as set forth in *Jesus and the Disinherited*, (New York: Abingdon Press, 1949; reprint, Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1981) and his lesser known sermon, “Standing Inside with Jesus Christ,” sound cassette, 21 April 1970, Boston University, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston, analyzed later in the third section of this chapter. What is stressed and thoroughly adopted by Thurman in these writings is the reality that life is one and that each individual, as a child of God, has a significant role of gift and responsibility for life as such. He also cites the Jains as the first group to bring up the notion of “reverence for life.”



then-established order. Deep from within that order he projected a dream, the logic of which would give to all the needful security. There would be room for all, and no man would be a threat to his brother. “The Kingdom of God is within.” “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor.”<sup>22</sup>

### *Nonviolence as Action*

Following from such vision, Thurman also understood nonviolence as a “technique and, in and of itself—a discipline” which manifests in/as a certain way of acting in and engaging the world, particularly as redemptive response to violence.<sup>23</sup> Negatively, authentic nonviolent action entails a rejection of both the “physical and psychological tools of violence” he respectively named as the use of physical force, hostile or abusive language or systemic force with the intention of using force to impose one’s will and relatedly the thoughts, intentions and impulses driving such behavior; positively, nonviolence is the recovery of community through love and truth.<sup>24</sup> Thurman is specifically interested in three forms of nonviolent action: 1) formalized collective campaigns, 2) individual agency and, more proactively, 3) the ethical stance of *ahimsa*.<sup>25</sup>

Before an individual could readily commit her/himself to any or all of these forms of nonviolence, Thurman argued that s/he must develop a solid working knowledge of what he termed the “nonphysical tools of nonviolence”—a refining process constituting nothing less than a “graphic reconditioning of an ancient behavior pattern on the basis of which the

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<sup>22</sup> Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1949; reprint, Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1981), 35.

<sup>23</sup> Thurman, *Disciplines*, 115.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 114-121; particularly pp. 114-115. Thurman writes on p. 115, “It (nonviolence) is a technique and, in and of itself, a discipline. In the first place, it is a rejection of physical force, a renunciation of the tools of physical violence...in the second place, nonviolence may be a rejection not merely of the physical tools of violence—since their use is aimed at the destruction of human life, which is the ultimate denial of the need to be cared for—but also of the psychological tools of violence as well. Here we assume that, even if the tools of physical violence were available and could be of tactical significance, their use would be renounced because their purpose is to kill—to make good the will for the nonexistence of another human being.” For related treatment of this aspect of Thurman’s thought see Fluker, *They Looked for a City*, pp. 56-75 and Pollard, *Mysticism and Social Change*, pp. 99-115.

<sup>25</sup> Howard Thurman, “Albert Schweitzer,” 14 January 1962, Marsh Chapel, Boston University, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston.

survival of the species has been possible.”<sup>26</sup> This required that reconciliation become the primary mandate in the individual’s own spirit before s/he could “be at one with the technique of nonviolence” employed for social change.<sup>27</sup> In practical terms both the tandem instincts to “flee” and the spirit of retaliation must be “relaxed and overcome” through a “deliberate training of the nervous patterns” empowering the individual to discern the general atmosphere and specific threat of violence yet still act to “absorb violence rather than to counteract it in kind.”<sup>28</sup> Believing that through such process the individual may experience naked fear for the first time, Thurman posited:

He (the individual) is threatened below the threshold of all his inherited defenses, and for a timeless moment is completely vulnerable and exposed. There is rioting in the streets of the soul and the price of tranquility comes terribly high. Order and reconciliation must be restored within—here the major conquest must be achieved. At such a moment one is not dealing with a perpetrator of violence, a violent man, but with the stark fact of violence itself.<sup>29</sup>

This passage sheds important light on Thurman’s interpretation of hatred and fear as “great insulators” and their misanthropic work of protecting individuals from violence through reacting to it in kind as well as his interpretation of Jesus’ tutelage of nonviolent action. He contended that an individual confronting violence can decide either to respond to the violent act itself or the violent person. Dealing with the act dehumanizes the violence because it is solely interpreted as an intent to injure the victim and instinctually when faced with such, the individual filled with fear, hatred or rage responds with her/his own act of violence. Such choice, for Thurman, perpetuated the radical addiction to violence:

If I identify with the deed of violence, then I organize the resources of my life to deal with the violence as an end in itself. I meet violence with violence if I identify with the violence. When I identify with violence, I am engaged in an endless procedure. It may be all that I can do but I must understand quite realistically that when I commit myself to this,

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<sup>26</sup> Thurman, *Disciplines*, 116.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 117.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 116-117.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 116.

there is no end, there is no resting place, there is no point at which I can say, Q.E.D. Until all life stops, until there is no more, there is no alternative.<sup>30</sup>

Contrarily, engaging with the perpetrator for Thurman allowed the potential that the dynamic of violence might be transformed: no longer controlled by the other's violence thereby reaffirming her/his own humanity, the 'victim' chances to see beyond the act itself into the life-context of the perpetrator thereby re-humanizing and calling her/him to justify her/his action.<sup>31</sup> Cognizant that the abstraction of a dissertation project may render such encounter too easily idealized, I resound Thurman's caution that in nonviolence there is no "tiddily-winking"<sup>32</sup> with love; instead a full-tilt awareness of and participation in humanity as a socio-spiritual project in life and death.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, Thurman blanketed his entire treatment of nonviolent action in his concern with intentionality; more specifically his insistence that for an act to be truly nonviolent, it must

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<sup>30</sup> Thurman, "The Other Cheek," 6 May 1956, Marsh Chapel, Boston University, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston, 5.

<sup>31</sup> Thurman, *Disciplines*, 119. As Thurman writes, on p. 119, "Unless the actual status of a human being as such is denied, reconciliation between people always has a chance to be effective. But when this status is denied, a major reappraisal or reassessment must take place before the work of reconciliation—which is the logic of nonviolence—can become effective."

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 115. As Thurman writes on p. 120, "Once this has happened, the grounds of reconciliation are established. Courage is only one of them. Experiences of meaning which people share are more compelling than the barriers that separate them. If such experiences can be multiplied over a time interval of sufficient duration, then any barrier between men, of whatever kind, can be undermined. Thus the way of reconciliation is opened."

<sup>32</sup> Howard Thurman, "Mysticism and Ethics," Lecture 8, Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston, 14-15.

<sup>33</sup> Howard Thurman, "The Crucifixion," sound cassette, n.d. Special Collections, Howard University Divinity School Library, Washington, DC. Here Thurman writes, "That death, first, is not the worst thing in the world. Do you think it is? I wonder. If a man places a maximum, premium upon his own life, upon his physical existence and if to continue his physical existence is the most important thing in the world to him—then all you have to do to control him is threaten to take it. Dictators learn this very clearly. They surround all of their people with an atmosphere of this sort. One thing worse than death is to dishonor the integrity of one's self that one loses the right to regard oneself as a man. If this happens, then one may go on eating, sleeping, breathing, but one is dead." See also Thurman's sermon, "The Experience of Love," n.d. sound cassette, Special Collections, Howard University Divinity School Library, Washington, DC. As I've transcribed it, he argues—"There is always something—something in the quality of the relationship that tends to drain the poison out of the deed. Therefore when we love—we are released rather than being bound for we are able to dip into our very center, the very core of our being where we are without pretension...then our love is like God!"

emerge from an honest sense of fellow-feeling for the proponent of violence.<sup>34</sup> Otherwise, “If I turn the cheek because of my own self-righteousness and pride and arrogance,” he contended, “I participate in the violence.”<sup>35</sup> The arduous psychic struggle Thurman associated with purifying both the act and intention of nonviolent resistance to injustice convinced him that ultimately it is “only out of some profound connection with the meaning of religion and the religious experience” that an individual could garner resources sufficient to the demands of nonviolent action.<sup>36</sup>

### *Nonviolence as Lifestyle*

Finally, through persisting in the diligent, creative praxis of nonviolent action inspired by the vision of peace *is/as community* an individual could grow to engage nonviolence as lifestyle, which I argue was for Thurman the ultimate telos of nonviolent pursuit. Living nonviolence, particularly from a religious or spiritual foundation, is a sacramental witness to the Divine will of community and its cultivation through the vehicles of love, truth, imagination, redemptive suffering, patience and trust. Thurman insisted that those individuals who through their daily experiments with truth are able to “true their lives by the highest”<sup>37</sup> reap the benefits of whole-living so that more and more their lives are illuminated by and incarnate life’s own search for wholeness. Theirs is the contentment of commitment to community Thurman detailed:

Commitment means that it is possible for a man to yield the nerve center of his consent to a purpose or cause, a movement or ideal, which may be more important to him than whether he lives or dies. The commitment itself is a self-conscious act of will by which he

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<sup>34</sup> Thurman, “Standing Inside with Jesus Christ.” Here he writes, “And there can be no forgiveness if I don’t love because in order for me to forgive I must go past the thing that blocks, stand on the other side in me and look out on what I have been doing and what has been done to me through your eyes; I am loving you.”

<sup>35</sup> Howard Thurman, “The Other Cheek,” 6.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.

<sup>37</sup> Howard Thurman, “The Inner Life,” January 18, 1952, Marsh Chapel, Boston University, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston, MA, 2.

affirms his identification with what he is committed to. The character of his commitment is determined by that to which the center or core of his consent is given.<sup>38</sup>

The more deeply an individual inherits nonviolence as lifestyle, the less anxious and self-conscious s/he is in navigating the ethical landscape of daily life while growing more convinced that both social campaigns and individual characters of reconciliation are necessary in cultivating cultures of peace. And whereas Thurman often lifted up Mohandas Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, Albert Schweitzer and many other paramount personalities of nonviolent lifestyle<sup>39</sup> he never ceased championing the potential or the prerogative of the common individual to stand as pedestrian prophet of reconciliation by claiming her/his own apostolate of nonviolence.<sup>40</sup> Such lifestyle as initiated by the historical Jesus and garnered through like-minded community, spiritual disciplines and a realistic season of development and training was available to all.

In sum, Thurman's concern for nonviolence as demonstrated in my triadic analysis represents a thoroughly holistic and deeply spiritual whole-making project. Projecting the

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<sup>38</sup> Thurman, *Disciplines*, 17. Similarly, Thurman argues in his sermon "The Crucifixion," that "The second thing he (Jesus) discovered here is that there is an important distinction...how to say this...to being mistaken and having failed. He may fail again and again and it may be due to forces beyond him, these mistakes. He is powerless in the presence of these. Or his failure may be due to something else that is not central to the integrity of his commitment. And he may fail then...and yet at the same time know that the thing he is undertaking, the thing to which he has given the nerve center of his consent—this thing is right. And there may not be any pragmatic or existential relationship between his success and the integrity of his commitment."

<sup>39</sup> Other peacemaking personalities Thurman either personally knew or frequently turned to as practical exemplars of reconciliation include Henry Robins, Miriam Slade, Muriel Lester, Martin L. King, Jr., Nancy Ambrose and Mary McLeod Bethune.

<sup>40</sup> Thurman, "Intentional Living: Peace," 12 October 1958, Marsh Chapel, Boston University, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston, 3. Here he writes, "Now, what can you do? Who will pay attention to you? This is what you ask yourselves if you are seriously considering this, don't you? Now there are several things that we may do. One, of course—is that we can practice peace at close range. Is that a part of your intention? Or do you have so much private hostility that you are a warrior on the warpath?...You can practice as an American a self-searching exercise—first off putting yourself in other nations, places or in a nation's place...Then, those of us who are religious, we can pray (And don't chuckle, those of you who are not religious). We can pray for the Secretary of State...Finally, we can take our stand; this has to come first. For psychological reasons it comes last. We can take our own stand. We can express in that area in which we do have freedom of movement, thought and deed, we can express our commitment. There is something very dramatic and touching and symbolic and endearing and disturbing about the little boat, The Golden Rule, going out across the Pacific with three or four men in it to put themselves where the nuclear tests are being made."

“mood” of reconciliation, interrupting the spin-cycle of violence and extending reconciliation’s rhythms into every aspect of daily life, nonviolence is profound in its simplicity. And while, as I’ve shown, nonviolence is certainly central to Thurman’s spirituality of reconciliation, another final and often forgotten vital component remains to be considered—his concern for “sensitiveness.”

### **“Sensitiveness”—Recovering a Reconciliatory Apostolate**

Though largely ignored in previous scholarship, Thurman’s concept of “sensitiveness” and his tandem phrase “apostles of sensitiveness” represent two of his most creative paradigms. Most commonly associated with his 1956 Ware Lecture “Apostles of Sensitiveness,” Thurman first explored these concepts ten years earlier in an address under the same title concerning interracial fellowship.<sup>41</sup> Archival research also led me to “The Spiritual and Cultural Prospects of a Nation Emerging from Total War,”<sup>42</sup> an undated Thurman manuscript which reads in many places as a sister document to his Ware Lecture. Yet Thurman’s most concise commentary on “sensitiveness” is given in his preface to *Deep Is the Hunger*, a collection of his original “centering pieces” first published in 1951. Joining his voice with that of the Apostle Paul, Thurman writes:

“And it is my prayer that your love may be more and more rich in knowledge and all manner of insight, enabling you to have a sense of what is vital...”; thus writes the Apostle Paul to the Church at Philippi. To have a sense of what is vital, a basic and underlying awareness of life and its potentialities at every level of experience, this is to be an Apostle

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<sup>41</sup> Thurman, *Deep is the Hunger*, ix-x. Here he writes, “The title, *Apostles of Sensitiveness*, was used as the subject of an address which I gave at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City in February, 1946, under the auspices of the Interracial Fellowship of Greater New York. I am deeply of the mind that there is a need for materials of refreshment, challenge and renewal for those who are intent upon establishing islands of fellowship in a sea of racial, religious and national tensions. My experiences in sharing in the development of a church dedicated to so crucial an undertaking underscore very simply the character of the desperate need for resource materials; that is the demand which called into being these paragraphs.”

<sup>42</sup> Thurman, “The Spiritual and Cultural Prospects of a Nation Emerging from Total War,” n.d. Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston.

of Sensitiveness.<sup>43</sup>

Thurman's rhetoric here is vital. Beyond his dedicating *Deep is the Hunger* to the resident members and members-at-large of Fellowship Church—whom he often referred to as “apostles of sensitiveness”—Thurman points to the reconciliatory fundamentals of “sensitiveness” revealed in a careful cross-reading of his primary “sensitiveness” documents mentioned above in the context of his more general pastoral corpus. Generally speaking, Thurman's notion of sensitiveness bespeaks a whole-making virtue perhaps best equated with “compassionate mindfulness.” And while heuristically important in and of itself, he is primarily concerned in both his 1956 “Apostles of Sensitiveness” and “The Spiritual and Cultural Prospects of a Nation Emerging from Total War” with its incarnation in the lives of those individuals and groups he names as its “apostles.”

Wrestling throughout both texts with the question of how America as a seminal nation dedicated to cultivating, preserving and furthering democracy, pluralism, religious freedom, artistic and economic creativity and other humanistic principles could resurrect itself and guide the global community out of its fragmented life evinced in the twentieth century's images of rupture—xenophobia, dehumanizing political structures, widespread poverty and “total war”—Thurman posited the need for “apostles of sensitiveness,” individuals dedicated to the recovery and perpetuation of peace *is/as community* at the level of their daily lives, group organizing and political reform.<sup>44</sup> Rooted in and winged by love and truth, they aspire toward a deeper apprehension of community through further developing their sense(s) of

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<sup>43</sup> Thurman, *Deep is the Hunger*, fly page note.

<sup>44</sup> Thurman, “Prospects,” 3.

“fact,”<sup>45</sup> “self,” “leisure,” “history” and “presence” as well as the disciplines of “commitment,” “growth in wisdom and stature,” “suffering” and imagination.<sup>46</sup> Without discounting the important reconciliatory action of political debate, diplomatic courage, organized social action and other macrocultural machinery, Thurman’s political personalism inspired his demand that these qualities of “sensitiveness,” nascent within every person, be fervently developed and transmitted as contagion by individuals who

—are willing to be apostles of sensitiveness for the whole nation...by their ability and skill will be as wards in various areas of the national life, doing their jobs but who at the same time are ever on the alert to preserve those ideals and ideas of democracy which are being directly threatened at the point where they themselves have force and can exert telling influence.<sup>47</sup>

Aware of the many humanistic motivations including a sense of civic duty, national pride or adherence to particular political-philosophical convictions inspiring individuals to become such wards, Thurman believed the most resilient perpetrators of sensitiveness possessed at least a marginal understanding that their work of furthering human rights and multiculturalism in the United States and various global theatres was ultimately rooted in their more fundamental identity as delegates and stewards of the sacred gift and responsibility of community established by the Creator. Training their allegiances, purifying their intent and energizing their efforts, the recall of reconciliation’s divine impetus was especially vital for these apostles, he argued, not only in the thickest moments of political and military conflict but even more so during the transitional “recovery” periods following

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<sup>45</sup> Howard Thurman, “Mysticism and Social Change: Mysticism—An Interpretation,” n.d. Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston, 1. Here Thurman writes, “The sense of fact is very slow to develop, and its complete development means perhaps the very pinnacle of civilization.”

<sup>46</sup> Wayne Teasdale also wrote about similar spiritual and ethical qualities needed for the contemporary work of personal, communal and ecologic reconciliation in the “The Interspiritual Age: Practical Mysticism for the Third Millennium,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 34:1 (Winter 1997), 74-92.

<sup>47</sup> Thurman, “Prospects,” 3.



the cessation of violence when the foundations of community must, beyond wartime ideologue, become intra-cultural intention.<sup>48</sup> Thurman writes:

Small groups that during more normal times have worked on behalf of tolerance, single human service to others in need, a spiritual interpretation of life which ascribes to each individual a basic dignity and worth as a person—these must intensify their concerns as their efforts that during this dark Age, the flickering torch may be unquenched that it may light the way through the long post-war dawn that is to come. A high place among such groups belongs to the national conference under whose auspices we meet today. There the dangers for all such groups is that they may seem to themselves to be wasting their time and energies as they look out upon the destruction of much of what they intend; it is important to note that in focusing whatever the world of the future will be like depends in no small part upon the spearhead that will be provided by those who have worked out in a thousand social laboratories techniques and methods for implementing these ideas which are so seriously being threatened at home and abroad. Yea, the validity of such ideals can best be determined by the extent to which they can be believed and practiced at times when they seem most irrational and fanciful.<sup>49</sup>

Thurman contended that coupling their individual daily witness to “tolerance, courtesy, and the three freedoms” with a corporate insistence that these principles be realized as universal standards, such persons serve as “the sensitive nerve ends for the body politic” especially minority individuals and groups who are uniquely positioned as “apostles...being alive to” and therefore able to elucidate to others “the true tension of the democratic challenge.”<sup>50</sup> Recalling my earlier introduction of Thurman’s telegraphic teaser I contend that Thurman’s “theology of nonviolence: applied” would have certainly looked and sounded a good deal like the spirituality of his “apostles of sensitiveness.”

### **Summarizing Thurman’s “Spirituality of Reconciliation”**

Catholic moral theologian James Hanigan has argued that whereas theology and ethics are invaluable in foundational and dialectical analysis of social justice, a spirituality of justice and reconciliation is what is most needed by those practically engaged in peace and justice

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<sup>48</sup> Thurman, “Prospects,” 5.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 5.

movements. Moral theology expounds the virtues, the priority of conscience and the norms for responsible decision making, yet Hanigan notes, “it cannot tell me how to do any of these things concretely. For this I need a spirituality.”<sup>51</sup> He views Christian spirituality as a means to union with God and right relations with self and others through the praxis of reconciling love and justice. “To commit oneself to a spirituality,” Hanigan posits, “is to commit oneself to a method or a means, to a process, to a way of life.”<sup>52</sup>

I believe Thurman’s treatment of reconciliation set forth in this section represents such a spirituality, one that instructs the individual how to engage and commit her/himself to reconciliation as “a method or a means, a process, a way of life.”<sup>53</sup> Thurman certainly could have constructed an academic theology of nonviolence, yet his primary aim in writing and speaking on these issues was to direct and inspire movement leaders and individual activists in the “seeing” and “doing” of justice and reconciliation particularly from the vantage point of the contemplative vision.

As with standard reconciliation thought, unity is key for Thurman and the human heart and desire for “mutual understanding” are at the center of his model. He separates himself from his contemporaries focused on social action and contemplation as starting points through his emphasis on Creation as both the prime model of community and vital sensitizing “other.” His concern for “whole-making” as life’s inherent dynamism and also moral intent that must be “worked at” demonstrates his heuristic creativity and awareness of the fractious impulses and will at play in the individual and collective psyche. Couching his significant concern for nonviolence in his overarching treatment of reconciliation as “whole-making,”

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<sup>51</sup> James Hanigan, “Militant Nonviolence: A Spirituality for the Pursuit of Social Justice,” *Horizons* 9, no. 1 (Spring 1982), 13-14.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

Thurman was able to link nonviolence as action and lifestyle with the contemplative vision, thus providing a robust theological foundation of unity and active praxis of community.

Individually and in concert with others, the “apostle of sensitiveness” must work to make reconciliation the intent of her/his life and the normative ethos of the body politic, not simply because it is an ethical ideal, but more fundamentally because it is the Divine intent for life at every level.

### III. MYSTICISM: RECONCILIATION’S ROOTS

#### **An Enigmatic Tether**

Introducing a lecture in from his series “Mysticism and Social Change,” Thurman recounts the following dialogue between two students waiting outside a classroom one evening to hear him speak:

“I wonder if that man has come yet?”

“What man?”

“You know that man (the mystic) who is going to talk tonight. I understand that he is going to take rabbits out of a hat.”<sup>54</sup>

This pericope exposed the former student’s naïve, misguided notion of “what mysticism was about”<sup>55</sup> for Thurman. Thurman’s recall of this experience still resonates quite well in countless third millennium classrooms and chapels when he writes, “The voices are many and the confusion widespread and rampant as to what is meant by mystical experience.”<sup>56</sup> Even in our interdisciplinary, hyper-hermeneutical postmodern polis perhaps more often than we’d likely admit, mysticism remains an enigma.

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<sup>54</sup> Thurman, “Mysticism and Social Change” Pacific School of Religion (PSR) Lecture Series, 5 July 1978, Lecture 5, Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston, MA, 1.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>56</sup> Thurman, “Mysticism and Social Change: Mysticism—An Interpretation,” 1.

This especially seems the case for scholars seriously considering Thurman's own vested interest in mysticism, certainly one of the most inscrutable areas of his personal and professional life.<sup>57</sup> And while Thurman kept things confusing at times with his "pastiche" theoliterary method and curious resistance to the "formal" face of theology, even mystical theology, many of his critics and devotees have also furthered this "cloud of unknowing" by distorting or underreporting, beyond its primary facts and features, the serious fabric of Thurman's theo-philosophical and practical concerns with mysticism. Consistently disavowing his own identity as either "mystic" or "theologian" in the legal sense neither is Thurman technically speaking a "mystical theologian." Rather, akin to his contemporaries Thomas Merton and Dorothee Sölle, he is a pastor-poet-writer continually sourcing his own religious experience and his Christian tradition in building a particular bridge between his two primary concerns—mysticism and culture.

Touching on both issues in practically all of his writings, the bulk of Thurman's most analytic treatment of mysticism is found in *The Creative Encounter*, his various lecture-series on mysticism and his pamphlet, "Mysticism and the Experience of Love." These texts reveal Thurman's great interest in what I've termed the mystical dynamics of reconciliation, especially its "intrapersonal" elements, an essential area of his thought and ministry that until now has largely gone unnoticed. My previous sketch of his "spirituality of reconciliation" now in hand, in this section I explore Thurman's understanding of how mysticism inspires the individual toward reconciliation in terms of achieving community in all her/his relations, with particular focus on how the mystical encounter invites the process of intrapersonal

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<sup>57</sup> I initially began using the concept of 'enigma' to analyze Thurman's place as a 'mystic' and 'theologian' of peace and reconciliation in a conference paper entitled, "A Call to Center from the Margins: The Confluence of Peace and Nonviolence in Howard Thurman's Mystical Theology," originally presented to the American Academy of Religion's Mysticism Study Group at their 2003 National Meeting in Atlanta, Georgia.

community which Thurman posited as a prerequisite for anyone engaging the work of social change. Following a prefatory overview of Thurman's general concept of mysticism, my analysis centers on six primary elements of his treatment: 1) Fontal Unity, 2) "Gentling," 3) Sin and Purgation, 4) "Whole-Making Energies," 5) Social Agency and 6) "The Peace of God."

### **Coming to Terms: The Creative Encounter**

At its most general, mysticism for Thurman represented the concern for, cultivation of and conversation about the numinous experience of God and the manifold ways the Divine can be experientially engaged by the individual in nature and culture. He defined "mystical experience"<sup>58</sup> as the individual's conscious, intuitive first-hand<sup>59</sup> exposure<sup>60</sup> to God available through the existence within the human organism of what, following Eckhart,<sup>61</sup> he termed the "uncreated element" or "divine spark" which is not imitation, intimation or reflection of the Divine, but rather fundamental Divinity.<sup>62</sup> As such, mysticism is the ultimate "creative encounter" of two principals, the individual and God, engaged in a process of

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<sup>58</sup> Thurman, *The Creative Encounter* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954; reprint, Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1997), 20. Here Thurman writes, "Religious experience is interpreted to mean the conscious and direct exposure of the individual to God. Such an experience seems to the individual to be inclusive of all the meaning of his life—there is nothing that is not involved."<sup>58</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Thurman, "Mysticism and Social Change: Mysticism—An Interpretation," 7. Similarly, Thurman relates in *Creative Encounter*, p. 20, "It is immediate experience and yet experience that is purely immediate is not quite possible. The individual is never an isolated, independent unity. He brings to his religious experience certain structural and ideological equipment or tools. This equipment is apt to be very determinative in how he interprets the significance not only of his religious experience but also the significance of experience itself."

<sup>60</sup> Thurman also notes that mystical experience can also be read as various metaphors. He writes on pp. 23-24 of *The Creative Encounter*, "The terms used are varied: sometimes it is called an encounter; sometimes, a confrontation; and sometimes, a sense of Presence."

<sup>61</sup> Howard Thurman, "Mysticism and Social Change Lecture Series," Spring 1973, Lecture 10, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston, 1.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 1. Also see Thurman, "Mysticism and Social Change: Mysticism—An Interpretation," 4, where he writes, "Fundamentally, the mystic rests his case upon the meaning of a primary contractual experience of God. It is first hand. He considers himself as standing within the experience itself...to use a figure, there is in the life of man an 'apex,' 'an uncreated element,' 'a door that cannot be shut.'"

mutual understanding which provides the individual a vitalizing, noumenal triadically respective knowledge<sup>63</sup>—of “ultimate reality” rooted in fundamental awareness: that God exists as the Creator and Sustainer of Life and of her/his own identity as a child of Life loved and affirmed by God.<sup>64</sup> Following the early twentieth-century theologian Charles Bennett’s<sup>65</sup> notion of such revelation as “the knowledge of the subject of all predicates,”<sup>66</sup> Thurman argued that synoptically the individual possesses what s/he knew all along suggesting what is new “is the realization.”<sup>67</sup> Luther Smith interprets “Thurmanized” mysticism as an exercise in “critical monistic realism” and argues that Thurman knew purely “immediate experience” is never possible because “identity and interpretation are integral,”<sup>68</sup> yet he never relented in pointing to the encounter as an intuitively direct source of ultimate meaning.<sup>69</sup>

While primarily an intimate inner experience for the individual, Thurman believed there are no true limits for mysticism’s manifestation—solitary or social, religious or secular, within culture or the natural world—everywhere and anytime such experience finds an arena. The context may be “casual or even random,” he insisted, but “the experience itself is not.”<sup>70</sup> A vital distinction for Thurman who while affirming certain parallels between the mystic encounter and various other “peak” experiences and moments or modes of perception,

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<sup>63</sup> Howard Thurman, “Mysticism—An Interpretation,” Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston, 9. Here Thurman writes, “If it is true that there is a predominately feeling element in the mystic’s experience and that the total personality is more deeply implicated than may be involved in the process of intellection, we can understand the meaning of the mystic’s claim to knowledge of ultimate reality.”

<sup>64</sup> Thurman, *Creative Encounter*, 39, 45-46.

<sup>65</sup> Bennett’s primary contribution to Thurman’s interpretation of mysticism stems from the former’s primary text, *A Philosophical Study of Mysticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1923).

<sup>66</sup> Thurman, *Creative Encounter*, 24.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 24. See also Thurman, “Mysticism and Social Change,” Redlands Lecture, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston, 8.

<sup>68</sup> Luther Smith, *Howard Thurman: The Mystic as Prophet* (Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1991), 77-78.

<sup>69</sup> Here Thurman terms ‘ultimate meaning’ as essentially parallel to Bennet’s concept of the noetic gift of mystical experience which Thurman understands as—“the knowledge of the subject of all predicates,” *Creative Encounter*, 24.

<sup>70</sup> Thurman, *Creative Encounter*, 32-33.

preserved mysticism's uniqueness in the spectrum of human experience. Closely related to "religious experience" as both point to the fundamental soul-encounter with God, mysticism denoted a more volitional receptivity and response to the tryst, making it truly inter-active. Still, both instances are directly related to "the experience of love" and its multiple interfaces within life which stand as sentries of the ultimacy of mystical love.<sup>71</sup>

### **The Mystical Dynamics of Peace and Reconciliation**

#### *Fontal Unity*

Front and center in the mystical dynamics of reconciliation for Thurman was his concern for "fontal unity."<sup>72</sup> Building on primary points from traditional analyses in exploring how mysticism serves to concurrently affirm the dynamic unity of both the individual and the Cosmos, he argued that the fundamental experience is that of "unity—not identity." More specifically, the mystic's intuitive sense of unity "penetrates through all the levels of consciousness" such that all tensions and divisions, internal and cosmic, are resolved allowing the experience of her/his "self" as the originating center and embracing circumference of all things. While such experience often seems to the individual to be the only "reality," Thurman interpreted the experience of fontal unity as a breakdown of awareness that transcends normal experience.<sup>73</sup>

In a sense all of life is one and yet it seems always to move in very intimate circles of awful individuality. There is a core of aloneness at the heart of living. There are thresholds before which all men stop; only God may tread and even He in disguise... Ultimately, I am

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<sup>71</sup> Thurman, "Mysticism and Social Change," Redlands Lecture, Lecture 1, 10.

<sup>72</sup> Thurman, "Mysticism and Social Change: Violence and Nonviolence," California State College, Long Beach California, 28 March 1961. Lecture 1, Thurman Papers, Special Collection, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston, 6. Here he writes, "It was not until I read Olive Schreiner that I was able to make the kind of experience that I have been describing an object of thought."

<sup>73</sup> Howard Thurman, "Mysticism and Ethics," *The News* (Howard University School of Religion Journal), vol. 17, no. 4 (May-July 1941), 42.

alone; so vastly alone that in my aloneness is all the life of the universe. In such moments of profound awareness, I seem to be all that there is in the universe and all that there is seems to be I.<sup>74</sup>

Such fontal unity seemed especially reconciliatory for Thurman in its ability to provide the individual, beyond the more “normative” sense of being a part of community, the reality of being community itself.<sup>75</sup> As the passage indicates, the experience holds and all dualisms are dissolved so that even God, the ultimate “Other,” is no longer a separate principle within the creative encounter but instead pulses along with all Creation in the mystic’s singularly principled self in which ultimately even the ego gives way allowing a visceral grasp of community. Jesus’ own experience of fontal unity, Thurman insisted, was the cipher which allowed his prophetic insight into the inclusivity of God’s Reign.<sup>76</sup>

Thurman nevertheless contended that even for Jesus and other well-seasoned mystics this self-less, other-less sense of unity eventually fades and while not the actualized end of reconciliation in and of itself, it is vitally instructive in its work of providing the individual, a divided self navigating a divided world, the “ground for the creative synthesis s/he seeks to achieve in experience”<sup>77</sup> in order that all tensions dissolved in vision may eventually be “resolved in function.”<sup>78</sup> Practically speaking this requires the person to progressively fashion her/his own unique identity through relationship with multiple others (i.e. people, social structures, Nature and God) against the mystical horizon of fontal unity signifying reconciliation as their perennial end. Aside from his Christological meditations, perhaps

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<sup>74</sup> Thurman, “Mysticism and Ethics,” 41-42.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 42. Here Thurman writes, “In his worship, the mystic achieves a transcending unity. His self-centeredness is resolved in a higher synthesis...that is, the awareness of God is realized inclusively.”

<sup>76</sup> Thurman, “When I Awake,” 3 March 1961, n.p. Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston.

<sup>77</sup> Howard Thurman, “Mysticism and Ethics,” 41.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 41.



nowhere else does Thurman better illustrate life's emergent, mystical unity than in his following "Thurmanized" exposition of Rodin:

Mystical experience may be characterized as being monistic-dualistic. A very excellent art form expressive of my idea is Rodin's *Hand of God*—a large hand with palm exposed yet with the fingers extended so as to form a balanced boundary for what the artist conceives as protruding creatively from the life of God. The fingers may be thought of as the boundaries of finitude; within the hand, there is a conglomerate of chaotic stuff of life and coming up out of it with increasing differentiation are the shapes of human beings. Thus it is seen that there is no thorough-going dichotomy between the created forms themselves and between the created forms and the Creator.<sup>79</sup>

### *Awareness of Sin and the Purgation Process*

Within the experience of fontal unity, Thurman contended that the individual also is awakened, very often quite painfully so, to the fact of her/his own sinfulness defined as the particular thoughts, impulses and actions that frustrate her/his search for community.<sup>80</sup> The mystic primarily experiences her/his sin in a feeling continuum of shame, guilt, hostility, bitterness and/or pride which ultimately betrays her/his fundamental sense of "unworthiness of the right to experience the Divine Presence."<sup>81</sup> This initial distortion of the individual's sense of self-worth emerges from her/his mystical awareness of judgment which, according to Thurman, s/he primarily experiences as an expanded self-consciousness from the Divine vantage. As he writes:

He (the mystic) has in him all his errors and blindness, his raw conscience and his scar tissues, all his loves and hates. In fact, all that he is as he lives life is with him in this experience. It is in his regular experience that he sees himself from another point of view. In

<sup>79</sup> Thurman, "Mysticism and Social Change: Mysticism—An Interpretation," 12.

<sup>80</sup> Thurman, "The Basic Needs to Which Religions Addresses Itself," n.d. Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston, 1. Thurman more fully develops his corollary concept of sin and salvation here on p. 1 when he writes, "The word 'sin' is particular to religion. It means running counter to or going against the supernatural—God. It has to do always with some form of violation. Often it is intimately connected with suffering and pain. Man feels a stranger in the world and some form of society in social relations is a necessity to his security...In terms of religious experience what is salvation? It is the experience of being in harmony with one's self and at peace with God. It means having a deep sense of emotional security—one cannot sense basic emotional stability unless there is something about which to be stable."

<sup>81</sup> Howard Thurman, "Mysticism and Social Change," 15-part series, Pacific School of Religion, 5-28 July 1978, Lecture 5, Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston, 2-3.

a very real sense he is stripped of everything and stands with no possible protection from the countenance of the Other.<sup>82</sup>

Stripped of all façade within the mystical exposure to God, the individual is surprised that Divine judgment<sup>83</sup> actually occurs not through a complete or partial rejection but rather through a thoroughly unconditional acceptance of her/him as s/he is. This inclusivity of Divine insight affords the mystic a realistic estimate of her/himself thus enabling any requisite feelings of inadequacy or shame to be potentially transformed through a progressive repentance for particular acts and attitudes which delimit her/his essential wholeness.<sup>84</sup> Thurman readily admitted struggling to overcome the “roadblock of (his) personal and private guilt” for many deliberate and unconscious injuries to others which while relative to his own “sense of hurt”<sup>85</sup> also only found remedy through his own confessional surrender to God. And because continued discipline in mystical encounter, he insists, allows a greater discernment of one’s own sense of sin. All road-blocks to union with God, (in order) to be authentically purged, must be “brought in” to the Divine exposure.<sup>86</sup>

### *Gentling Qualities of Divine Love*

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<sup>82</sup> Thurman, *Creative Encounter*, 40. My parentheticals for clarification.

<sup>83</sup> Howard Thurman, *The Inward Journey* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961; reprint, Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press), 90-91.

<sup>84</sup> Howard Thurman, “Mysticism and Social Change,” 4.

<sup>85</sup> Thurman, “Mysticism and Social Change,” Lecture 5, 2-3. Thurman’s fuller quote is especially informative at this point. As he writes, “It is important in the process of clearing the way, of detaching myself from the things that cloy and divert my spirit from the integrity of the search and the question. And one of the most critical ones is my own sense of guilt and personal limitations which I designate as sin. For one of the serious handicaps, roadblocks (that is the word I want) to a sense of coming home to your center, which is for me coming to God, is my sense of private and personal guilt for injuries that I have perpetrated, sometimes deliberately, sometimes without awareness of others for reasons that are private, that have to do with my own hurt. So that guilt and hatred and bitterness become, generate—a climate, an atmosphere, a thickness by which I am surrounded psychically so that I don’t know where I am in terms of—No that’s wrong—something deep within me feels that I don’t have the right to experience the Presence.”

<sup>86</sup> Howard Thurman, “Mysticism and Social Change,” PSR Lectures series, Lecture 4, 11 July 1978, 13. See also Thurman, *Inward Journey*, 40 and *The Growing Edge*, 29-31

Corollary to fontal unity and the contextualization of sin, Divine Love is another primary “mark” of mystical experience Thurman explored especially in terms of its “gentling”<sup>87</sup> qualities.<sup>88</sup> Adapting this metaphor from a research study<sup>89</sup> detailing various stress tests performed on baby rats in which a lab technician “gentled” rats from one test-set by “holding the rat in his hand close to his chest and stroking its back from the head to the base of the tail,”<sup>90</sup> an operation repeated at regular intervals which induced their overall wellness and resistance to stress, Thurman contended a similar process and effect manifests in the mystic exposure to God’s love energies.<sup>91</sup> The parallel begins in awareness that individuals continually experience and accumulate trauma in their relational lives that is compounded by an inner, often anxious, awareness of this suffering as well as their own sinful tendencies toward dis-ease similar to the processes provoked in laboratory rats.

In mysticism, God “gentles” the anxious dis-eased soul; Thurman emphasizes the intimate relationality of mystic encounter. A unique personality ripe in all her/his potentialities for good and evil and Promethean posture toward love, the individual is taken *in toto* into the bosom of God in deep, pacifying embrace.

Here the individual is laid bare, stripped of all façade—what I am in and of myself is finally dealt with. The person has a sense of being touched at his deepest center, at his very core, and all the other experiences of love are but intimations of this great experience. All other experiences of love at the other levels are what may be regarded as “readying” experiences for the great and tremendous experience which is the significant element in the religious experience itself. This is the essence of the meaning of the love of God. In the presence of God, at last, a man is relieved of all necessity for pretending. He can stand clean in the sense of being undisguised and utterly without shame. This does not mean that limitations are overlooked, that sins are no longer sins, but it does mean that anything less than the very core of one’s being is not quite relevant. To be touched *there* is to be placed in

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<sup>87</sup> Thurman, *Creative Encounter*, 92-93.

<sup>88</sup> Thurman, *Inward Journey*, 35. This is the centering piece “The Experience of Love.”

<sup>89</sup> Thurman, *Creative Encounter*, 92-93.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*, 93.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, 92-93. Original article citation: “Gentled Baby Rats Stand Stress Better,” *Science Newsletter*, 2 January 1954.

a position to have one's life thoroughly examined, thoroughly explored, but from the center, the ultimate point of reference within the individual.<sup>92</sup>

Additionally, Thurman argued the mystic experience of God's "gentling" embrace contains certain facets of "mother love"<sup>93</sup>—a term signifying the nurturing, protective and empathetic aspects, physiologically speaking, of "mother" as archetypal procreative agent essential, he insists, both to the personality of God as "Mother"<sup>94</sup> and actual mothers "at a point that is more profound than that which is merely voluntary or volitional."<sup>95</sup>

Finally, reasserting a foundational point in traditional analysis, Thurman maintained that mystic exposure to God's Love while redemptively transformative is at times also a psychologically "agonizing" encounter which "wounds" the mystic through the noumenal righteousness and understanding of Divine feeling.<sup>96</sup> Still, as mentioned above, the enrapture of divine amour is for him the definitive "creativity" in mysticism as creative encounter in that through it the individual *as persona* knows and therefore can through spiritual disciplines reclaim the ultimate triptych vibe of peace *is/as community*—love, God as the Ground of love and God's love itself as the primary contextualizing dynamic of her/his self-understanding and relationships.<sup>97</sup> "Creating an unfolding of the self that redefines, reshapes, and makes all things new,"<sup>98</sup> it provides the rationale and context for all other "marks" of mystical encounter.

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<sup>92</sup> Thurman, *Creative Encounter*, 115-116.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 101. Here he then goes onto briefly explore the study by Eugene Marais, *The Soul of the White Ant* (New York: Dodd and Mead, 1937).

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 107-08.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, 101.

<sup>96</sup> Thurman, "Newman's Dream of Gerontius," Redlands Lecture Series, Lecture 5 at Redlands, page 4.

<sup>97</sup> Thurman, *Inward Journey*, 36.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 35-36.

### *Whole-Making Energies*

While Thurman certainly asserted a traditional “passivity” to the individual in terms of the elements of mysticism discussed above, as they deepen they also effect for him a more active engagement of encounter through the release of what he terms “whole-making energies” within the mystic producing change in her/his psyche and body.<sup>99</sup> Following Eckhart’s maxim that when a person is emptied of “creatureliness,” God floods her/his being,<sup>100</sup> Thurman equated this transmission with the power of the Godhead as “community” reincarnating in the depths of the individual. For as he notes:

His (the individual’s)<sup>101</sup> life is given back to him at another level. Literally he loses his life and finds it. In the surrender to God in the religious experience there is no loss of being but rather an irradiation of the self that makes it alive with ‘Godness’ and in various ways. There is the awakened desire to be Godlike. This is no vague pious wish, no moist-eyed sentimentality, but rather a robust affirmation of the whole spirit of the man.<sup>102</sup> ... This means goodness not in contrast with evil, but goodness in terms of wholeness, or for lack of a better term, of integration. Or again perhaps more crucially in terms of creative synthesis. There must be about God an ‘altogetherness’ in which all conflict is resolved and all tensions merge into a single integration.<sup>103</sup>

As this passage indicates, this diffusion for Thurman denoted more a reawakening of the individual’s whole-making dynamic intrinsic to her/his identity as both a “child of Life and God” which compels a recalibration of her/his inner sense of peace *is/as community* rather than a transplant of love energies from God into the mystic. Furthermore, he contended that especially over regular intervals this release causes somatic change through the emergence of “new neurological patterns” which over regular intervals of mystical engagement supplant

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<sup>99</sup> Thurman, “The Quiet Turbulence,” Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Founders Library, Howard University, 2. Here he writes, “Now, once this is attained once this feeling is present...there does come a sense of quiet and also an immensity of new energy, new resoluteness which generates their own powers and their own enthusiasm this sense of power over one’s limitations is always an act of God for the religious man.”

<sup>100</sup> Thurman, *Disciplines*, 17.

<sup>101</sup> My parenthesis here.

<sup>102</sup> Thurman, *Creative Encounter*, 75.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid*, 76.

established psychic matrixes allowing greater enjoyment of and propensity for wholeness.<sup>104</sup> Mysticism thus energizes reconciliation through an empowered and empowering experience of Divine unity which in recentring the individual and propelling repentance,<sup>105</sup> allows her/him amplified vision and virility as reconciler of the chaos within her/his own heart and the relationships and systems s/he navigates in her/his world.<sup>106</sup>

### *Social Agency*

Though Thurman himself was more an active contemplative than the typical “Movement man,” he argued that the individual must always attempt to realize the unity s/he experiences in the mystic encounter as the ground of her/his relationship with others as well as the various cultural contexts in which s/he exists. He believed mysticism provided the individual not only with the impetus but also the cosmic vision, moral sensitivity, psychic energy, patience and faith required to positively affect social transformation through daily discipleship and organized group action.

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<sup>104</sup> Thurman, *Creative Encounter*, 84. Here he writes, “Certain other things begin to happen. In the sheer repetition of the religious experience, certain organic changes begin to take place in the very structure of the nervous system itself. This alteration results from the positive nervous response to the experience itself. Literally a new neurological pattern begins to emerge, which pattern slowly begins to supplant and then to undermine other established behavior patterns; thus, in time, giving to the total nervous system an altered neurological structure.”

<sup>105</sup> Thurman, “Mysticism and Ethics,” 45. Here he writes, “But there is something more, there is strength, power released in the life of man here—a kind of concomitant overflowing of creative energies which demand that he true himself by the highest. This he seeks to do through discipline with unrelenting austerity; he must bring himself, his will, his feelings, his very thoughts and impulses under the synthesizing scrutiny of God.”

<sup>106</sup> Thurman, “Violence: Mysticism and Social Change,” Pacific School of Religion Lecture Series, 19 July 1978, 7-9. Thurman speaks at great length in this lecture of his experience of the spiritual intellect and energy of Mohandas Gandhi and even more particularly about Gandhi’s realization that deep physical and psychic energy was necessary for the Indian people before they could take on, let alone succeed, in the work of social nonviolence. Thurman directly quotes Gandhi from their earlier meetings in India on p. 9 of his lecture notes, “Gandhi says, ‘I discovered that the masses of Indians simply would not deal with any notions such as nonviolent direct action. And when I raise the question as to why since its effectiveness would be contingent upon the involvement of the masses of the people whose destiny were wrapped up in this, I discovered that they were unable to do it because they did not have enough energy.’ Now this was the first time in my life that I have ever associated physical energy with a spiritual anything. And so I asked him what did you do about that?’” See also Thurman, “Mysticism and Social Change: Mysticism—An Interpretation,” 11.

Mysticism positively spiritualizes political, ethical, economic and aesthetic notions of justice thus rescripting war, systemic xenophobia, fiscal inequality, environmental degradation and other corporate ills not only as violating democratic principles but more fundamentally as sins against God's telos of community. Aware that s/he shares in a fundamental humanity that transcends her/his political, religious or ethnic identity, the "mystic-activist,"<sup>107</sup> while standing with oppressed populations, maintains an ethic of compassionate confrontation in relation to the perpetrating powers.<sup>108</sup> Mysticism's whole-making energies strengthened this gospel resolve of truth and reconciliation for Thurman while its gentling aspects inspired a calm, patient trust fueling the resilience of seasoned activists cognizant that significant cultural change resulted more from sustained campaigns of consistently creative and righteous advocacy than intermittent picket-line bravado.<sup>109</sup> Therefore while urgent, the social mystic's entrée into the justice fray for Thurman was never desperate.

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<sup>107</sup> This is Pollard's term as developed in his text *Mysticism and Social Change: The Social Witness of Howard Thurman*.

<sup>108</sup> Thurman, "Quest for Peace," 24 July 1949, Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston, 6.

<sup>109</sup> Thurman, *Disciplines*, 127. Here he writes, "...there must be a sense of leisure out of which we relate to others. The sense of it is far more important than the fact of leisure itself. Somehow it must be conveyed to the other person that our effort to respond to his need to be cared for is one with our concern to be cared for ourselves. Despite the pressures under which we live, it is entirely possible to develop some sense of leisure as the climate in which we function. We cannot be in a hurry in matters of the heart. The human spirit has to be explored gently and with unhurried tenderness. Very often this demands a reconditioning of our nervous responses to life, a profound alteration in the tempo of our behavior pattern. Whatever we learn of leisure in the discipline of silence, in meditation, in prayer, bears rich, ripe fruit in preparing the way for love..." See also Thurman, *Disciplines*, p. 117 where he relays testimony from a young female university student concerning her first experience participating in a sit-in demonstration in Greensboro, North Carolina.

*The Peace of God*

Finally, for Thurman, mysticism provides exposure for the individual to what he specifically termed “the Peace of God.”<sup>110</sup> This aspect initially presents as counter-complementary to those previously discussed because of how it engenders reconciliation not through arousing the intention to combat or transform disharmony within self or culture but instead via acceptance of and fearless rest in life as it is for Thurman even in times of dire straits. Often interpreted as an ethically anemic, culturally disengaged quietism, his advocacy for this “Peace” stems from a well-seasoned awareness that despite the best intentions of an individual or group toward community certain situations could neither at that time nor over an extended season be pacifically transformed; furthermore that to obstinately persist through them often antithetically resulted in despair and frustration at best and worse an over-complication and subsequent escalation of the original conflict. Perpetuating such frenzied engagement with particular situations Thurman noted a demonic distrust of life and subsequently of God and desire to control them both. Even within himself, he admitted:

I am overcome again and again with the tendency that I recognize in myself to grab at life, a sense of tension, often something escapes me; a kind of fever that tends to make the days frantic and the nights feverish and churning. But this temper does not describe it adequately. It is the living of life in a manner that suggests that life has to be fought against, that life dare not be accepted, that the universe, that life itself, is always trying to put something over on me. I myself must be alert all the time so that I can catch life cold and call it to terms...<sup>111</sup>

Thurman contended that rather than trying harder, seeking a different angle or raising hyper-anxious hands in despair, the best and at times the only reconciling response to such circumstance is complete acceptance—facing up the particular reality

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<sup>110</sup> Howard Thurman, “The Peace of God,” n.d. Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston, 1.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, 2.



in its entirety and “call(ing) it by its right name, for better or worse.”<sup>112</sup> Such facility is, for him, *Pax Dei*—perennially associated by Thurman, his grandmother and countless other Christian mystics with “the peace that passeth all human understanding”<sup>113</sup> manifest through mystic

disclosure, a discovery which the human spirit makes, a gift that comes when the individual is able to let himself down in life, down into life; when he is able to make himself available to life. When it becomes possible for him to unglue himself from the vents or events of his life or from anything that places upon his life a closed ceiling...the individual has to accept his life; he has to accept life and his place in it, so that whatever richness, meaning, energy, power, vitality, and resourcefulness that are the ingredients of his life will become available to him at the point of his living and his demand.<sup>114</sup>

Integral to any “whole-making” spirituality, this revelation was particularly vital for marginalized individuals and groups who, beyond the commonplace struggles inherent in life, were born into and challenged to grow into a healthy “sense of self” in sociopolitical contexts full of “closed ceilings.”<sup>115</sup> His awareness of the devastatingly significant import of their leadership also led Thurman, in season and out of season, to preach the peace of God to Martin Luther King, Jr.,<sup>116</sup> Jesse Jackson, James Farmer, Richard Deats and other primary guides of the Movement and other social resistance and reform movements of the twentieth-century so that in their rush to effect change, they would not become deaf to nor led astray from the Divine stirrings toward peace upon which their “success” was ultimately built.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Thurman, “*The Peace of God*,” 1.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>115</sup> Here, Thurman speaks expressly about the disinherited in terms of the African-Americans during the founding and evolution of the United States, Asian-Americans during their domestic imprisonment in war-camps during the war and also American Indians dispossessed of their land (and hence culture and ritual) especially during the onset of the Reservation Movement.

<sup>116</sup> Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1979), 222-224, 254-55.

<sup>117</sup> Howard Thurman, “Inner Peace,” 6 May 1960, Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston, 1.

Here again the tuning and deepening of religious discernment through spiritual disciplines comes into play for all those seeking this final mystic mark which “must be cultivated”<sup>118</sup> ...it comes not easily at first without encouragement...later, it seeks one out ...the moment that corrects and counteracts our moments that become destructive to us, snatching us away, as they do, breaking the divine accord.”<sup>119</sup>

### **Mystical Dynamics: At-One-Ment**

Having examined the six primary characteristics Thurman assigned to mystical experience, some concluding thoughts are in order. First, we do well to remember that Thurman himself did not argue a particular sequencing of these marks; rather he interpreted them, within the divine encounter, as mutually convergent. My specific ordering was intended to clarify Thurman’s interpretation of their concrescence. Second, it is clear that, beyond his own religious experience and despite being an African-American from the Free Church tradition, Thurman was extremely knowledgeable concerning mysticism as a theological and philosophical phenomenon, the psychosocial nature of mysticism and the history of Christian mysticism in particular. Blending insights from his own pastoral praxis, social witness and study of developmental psychology with the most basic fundamentals of Christian mystical theology, he developed a theory of practical mysticism geared toward personal, social and ecological reconciliation hinged on six essential aspects of mystic encounter: fontal unity, “gentling,” purgation, “whole-making energies,” social agency and “the peace of God.”

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<sup>118</sup> Thurman, “The Peace of God,” 3.

<sup>119</sup> Thurman, *Growing Edge*, 47.

Thurman maintained these were universal facets of mysticism while also arguing that the mystic's cultural and religious context greatly influenced the symbology, ethical relevance and revelatory authority s/he assigned to them. Their sum dynamic however was ever the same—to clear consciousness, revitalize the self, activate love and inspire community especially in those who regularly practiced the presence of God through spiritual disciplines.

As he writes:

The world, the cosmos, my little life, are contained in God, and if I keep the roadway open, even as I live, doing my things in the world of things, I can keep journeying back home to be recentered, renewed, recreated, redeemed, over and over again, as long as I live and beyond.<sup>120</sup>

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Howard Thurman may not have articulated a formal theology of nonviolence; however, as I have argued in this chapter, he did devote much of his thought, pastoral ministry and writing to a considerable treatment of the sociospiritual work of reconciliation, in particular its relationship to mysticism. Baptist church historian Bill Leonard argued that Protestant mysticism waned in America between the two world wars because “The American obsessions with activism, as well as the developing secularism and materialism created, ‘an atmosphere in which the mystic cannot breathe.’”<sup>121</sup> Thurman's pastoral concern and personal bent for the religious and contemplative dimensions of nonviolent social action, while frequently challenged and misunderstood during this period, piloted a generation of social activists from a variety of creedal and cultural backgrounds toward mysticism as a

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<sup>120</sup> Howard Thurman, *The Centering Moment* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969; reprint, Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 2000), 23. This quote is from his devotional piece entitled, “Plotinus.”

<sup>121</sup> Bill Leonard, “American Mysticism: The Inner Authority,” *Review & Expositor*, vol. no. 2 (Spring 1978), 276. Here Leonard rounds out the previous quote by arguing, “Only with the disillusionment of the 60's, the increased concern for eastern mystical tendencies, and growing interest in drug or spirit-induced experience did mysticism gain new momentum.”

radical and inevitable engine of social justice that informed and empowered even as it pacified their individual and collective agency.

Teaching the import of prayer, meditation and related spiritual disciplines necessary to cultivate mystical consciousness, Thurman consequently stressed the individual's need for constant self-scrutiny to ensure that her/his work for truth and justice was firmly grounded in reconciliatory love and Gospel hope. He believed immediate or fabricated reconciliation amongst estranged individuals, groups or institutions was neither wise nor desirable yet also argued that for religious agents, especially the individual Christian and the collective Church, full "community" must eventually become sole and ultimate intention. While pointing to an interreligious pantheon of individuals and movements incarnating this initiative, Thurman remained fixed on the historical Jesus' personal spirituality, social vision and nonviolent praxis as the ultimate "for instance" of such mystical activism. All those engaged with the Christ in such cruciform work ranked among the "apostles of sensitiveness"—a universal cadre of individuals who channeled reconciliation both through political advocacy and daily witness. The primary thrust of their work was not will, guilt, fear of judgment or desire for control for Thurman but rather the intimate mystic call to a sensitized love-ethic of community which was at great risk of being lost in the noise of the turbulent social campaigns and wartime anxiety of twentieth-century America and which he helped to introduce, invite, amplify and inform.<sup>122</sup>

In the next chapter I will explore Thurman's spiritual idiom in order to better understand his work as a preacher-writer effecting such mystical formation.

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<sup>122</sup> Thurman, *Disciplines*, 124-25.

## CHAPTER 4: “THE WORD”—THURMAN’S SPIRITUAL IDIOM

Most obviously, although not exclusively, the spiritual father heals by his *words*, by his advice or counsel. In the *ANAME* what the disciple or visitor says to the abba is commonly, ‘Speak a word to me’ (eipe moi rhema), or else, more specifically, ‘Speak a word to us, how can we be saved?’ The word of the spiritual father is a word of power, saving and regenerating. Accordingly Climacus in the letter To the Shepherd describes the spiritual father as a ‘teacher’ (didaskalos) who heals through his *logos*.

Irénée Hausherr, *Spiritual Direction in the Early Christian East*

### I. INTRODUCTION

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.” Like many other Jewish and Christian clergy, Howard Thurman regularly spoke these lines from Psalm 19 in worship as a prayer prior to his preaching. Taken together, Thurman’s preaching and contemplative writing represent one of his most vital contributions to American spirituality. First formally recognized in 1953 when he was named by *Life Magazine* as one of America’s most notable preachers, Thurman’s rhetoric continues to be discussed today.

In this chapter I explore Thurman’s “spiritual idiom” as a means of integrating his theology of peace and spirituality of reconciliation with the pastoral rhetoric evident in his speaking and writing. Thurman primarily employed his idiom as a means to develop community with his congregants and readers, cultivate their mystical consciousness and reconciliatory agency, as well as nurture his own spirituality. In my analysis I : 1) present Thurman’s philosophy of language, 2) explore the intent, form and content of his “spiritual idiom,” and 3) examine three of his pastoral texts in detail (his centering piece “The Necessities of Our Peace,” poetic interpretation of Psalm 139, and sermon “Standing Inside with Jesus Christ”) before adding a brief conclusion.

## II. THURMAN AND THE “WORD”

Given that Thurman’s gifts of rhetoric are well-established components of his legacy, familiar to scholar and devotee alike, in offering my own “reading” I want to raise and then work to correct what I deem two common missteps in previous evaluations of his spiritual idiom. First, rather than viewing Thurman’s concern for rhetoric as a related, yet still essentially marginal issue *alongside* his more established interests in social justice and mysticism, I believe his ability and interest in language, so central to his self-understanding as a practical theologian, are best understood as an integral component of his ministry in these two areas. Author of *Jesus and the Disinherited*, mystical guide, wordsmith—these were integrally concurrent, not consecutive, monikers of Thurman’s vocational identity.

Second, while agreeing wholeheartedly with Edward Kaplan that when entering the world of wordplay Thurman was “first and foremost a poet awed by the possibilities of language,”<sup>1</sup> I would insist that Thurman also was a philosopher of rhetoric in his own right. His studied interest in linguistics, coupled with his ministerial praxis and research and study of social change, theology and mysticism, not only colored his particular idiom. These factors also greatly influenced Thurman’s notions of the origins, purposes and general rubrics of language especially for social leaders and writers, specifically the preacher and the mystic.

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Edward K. Kaplan, “Howard Thurman: Meditation, Mysticism, and Life’s Contradictions,” *Debate and Understanding Special Edition: Simmering on the Calm Presence and Profound Wisdom of Howard Thurman* (Spring 1982), 22.

### Wor(l)d-Play: The Origins, Roles and Rules of Language

Thurman's philosophy of language and appreciation for the creative task of *homo loquens*<sup>2</sup> were grounded in his conception of language's primal origins and purposes. He insisted that the earlier human organism communicated out of an intuitively common "continuum that is deeper than all concepts and ideas."<sup>3</sup> Over time, language emerged out of this field as a means to distinguish, cultivate and maintain a "community of meaning."<sup>4</sup> Evolving through various cultural epochs, language has preserved this primary function in modernity. Because language is born of, lives, and grows within multiplex human culture, it can never be solely possessed by any one person or group, regardless of their political, artistic or religious position. Convinced of language as ultimately a social endeavor, Thurman wondered "How dare a man say I—I speak?"<sup>5</sup>

Thurman's guidelines for working with language flow from his ontology of the Word. He contended that everyone is responsible to use language intelligently, compassionately and creatively, especially civic authorities, educators and writers in virtue of their culture-making

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<sup>2</sup> I initially came upon this term in Dennis Fry's *Homo Loquens: Man as a Talking Animal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

<sup>3</sup> Howard Thurman, "Standing Inside with Jesus Christ," 12 April 1970, Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston. From this point forward I will reference this text in citation notes as "Standing Inside."

<sup>4</sup> Howard Thurman, "The Word," Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston, 3. This archival document, "The Word," represents unused sections of Thurman's autobiography *With Head and Heart* that likely were worked up to be integrated with the published Chapter 7, "The Written Word." In "The Word" Thurman deals extensively with the origins and purpose of language, the particular importance of language to religious revelation and the relationship between the minister-preacher and language. He expounds his notion of the "community of meaning," in writing on p. 3, "There can be no communication between people through the device of language if the agendas are not the same...the assumption in our religion is that the religious experience is the essence of the common aegis out of which the words are spoken and by which the listeners listen."

<sup>5</sup> Howard Thurman, *The Inward Journey* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961; reprint, Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press), 96. Italics mine.

socio-rhetorical powers.<sup>6</sup> Thurman was even more concerned with the rhetoric of religious leaders, particularly the preacher and the mystic.

### **Rubrics for the Preacher and Mystic**

Thurman's concern for the preacher and mystic's relationship with language stemmed from his belief that while filling unique and, historically, at times seemingly contradictory offices, they fundamentally speak from and about a single, shared authority—religious experience. The mystic is typically more disposed to “super-symbolic” language, tradition-transcending imagery and silence to broadcast Divine presence and intent, whereas the preacher traditionally exposit scripture, doctrine and theology to proclaim practical religious truth to her/his fold. Thurman understood both, as authoritative members of their respective faith communities, to be charged with the same task: voicing or pointing to/ward that which is ineffable. In this work the mystic and preacher use, nuance and expand the “highly suggestive symbolism” of religious language which requires and especially invites the “intuitive understanding of the listener.”<sup>7</sup> Both through his personal experience and his study of the mystics, particularly Eckhart, Thurman understood the compromise the mystic made in turning to words as a means of proclaiming the ineffable Divine, a Presence s/he could sometimes encounter only beyond language.

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<sup>6</sup> Howard Thurman, “Super Symbolic Use of Language in Religion,” n.d. Thurman Papers, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston, 1. The main challenge in using language in this way is his contention that “ultimate language must be expressed in non-ultimate symbolism.”

<sup>7</sup> Howard Thurman, “The Language of Religion,” n.d. Thurman Papers, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston, 1. Here Thurman is speaking about the creative parley of interacting with language as ‘other’ than logical or straightforward thinking. He ties this premise together in this document with an understanding of the imaginative, visional and auditory symbols of traditional religious liturgy—particularly the Latin Catholic Mass, Scriptural motifs, theological mythology and ritual.

Thurman's treatment of the rhetorical demands of the preacher and mystic are primarily evident in his texts “The Mystic as Artist,” “Mysticism and Symbolism,” “The Word,” Howard Thurman, “Mysticism and Social Change,” Redlands Lecture, Lecture 10 “Eckhart.” and pp. 213-228 in *With Head and Heart*.



*The Preacher's Task and Equipment*

A ministerial discipline intimately familiar to Thurman, preaching shaped his life from early childhood and evolved through his ministry to become, paradoxically, the chief medium through which he shaped the lives of others.<sup>8</sup> Though hesitant to teach it--believing its true craft could not really be taught<sup>9</sup>-- Thurman wrote a good bit on preaching. Most pertinent here is his commentary on the sermon's liturgical locus and utility and the requisite resourcefulness of the "preacher."

Thurman argued the sermon is a high and perhaps even the most central moment in communal worship. Though central, the sermon was not a unique element, apart from other liturgical action functioning to prioritize the spoken word or preacher, but instead represented "the lung through which the worship service breathes one breath."<sup>10</sup> He argued:

The sermon is not a lecture; it is not merely an academic or intellectual exercise for the mind. It is not a commonplace homily that lulls into quiescence or sedation. *No, the sermon must always have the smell of ammonia about it. It must be vital and contagious.* It is the voice of man and the voice of God!<sup>11</sup> In the work of the preacher at such moments of output in the pulpit the words (of the preacher) become flesh and he shares with God in the great work of healing and redeeming and blessing.<sup>12</sup>

Consequently Thurman maintained that while s/he may not always deliver a great sermon, the preacher must always grapple with great ideas. S/he must regularly withdraw from the faith community to "think, read, observe and meditate," to gain the long view and

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<sup>8</sup> Here reference is made to early preaching-recollections from Thurman's childhood in Florida: 1) the 'slave-preacher' testimonials recounted by his maternal grandmother, 2) the description of the pastor-preachers who guided the churches in Waycross, his neighborhood and finally 3) the traveling preacher Sam Cromarte who 'preached his father into hell' at his father's funeral at which time Thurman recalled promising himself that he would never have anything to do with the organized church again. Also important to recall here are the inspiring preachers at Morehouse, his own trial by fire preaching in his hometown for his preaching license and lastly Dr. Henry Robins, his contemplative and poetic seminary professor from Rochester whom Thurman delighted in hearing speak at regular chapel services.

<sup>9</sup> Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1979), 179-182.

<sup>10</sup> Thurman, "The Word," 49.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 52.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 48. My italics.

harvest the “authentic words” which kindle her/his mind, “inform even as he kindles the emotions, and inspire his fellows to live the good life responsibly.”<sup>13</sup> To be successful Thurman believed preachers needed certain “equipment”— a morally-charged familiarity with words, a disciplined imagination, a strong sense of fact and a capacity for intimacy.<sup>14</sup> As a transition to examining Thurman’s own idiom let us briefly consider these in turn.

Convinced that the “spoken word” is the preacher’s “most critical tool,” Thurman argued that s/he must cultivate and maintain an organic kinship with language, especially the most unappreciated, anathematized and perplexing words within her/his own tradition and mind, in order to relish their moral, spiritual, poetic and noetic “flavor.”<sup>15</sup> Careful preachers remember that language both conveys and restricts meaning, especially in faith communities prone to reifying theo-logos.<sup>16</sup> Thurman also insisted discerning imagination must be well-established in the preacher’s persona. Deftly wielding image and metaphor, s/he opens new “windows for the mind and spirit” to see and know God in history.<sup>17</sup> Such imagination should never be used to “extend the preacher’s ego” but always to extend humanity’s embrace with God.

To affect, this imagination must be tied to what Thurman termed the preacher’s “sense of fact”: her/his critical understanding of the world as a complex, mediated by meaning, that required a cogent hermeneutic particularly with reference to government, politics, war and

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<sup>13</sup> Thurman, “The Word,” 4-5.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 2. Particularly interesting at this point in Thurman’s analysis is his appreciation for Herman Melville’s metaphor of “cascade eagles” in the latter’s novel *Moby Dick*.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 2. Here Thurman speaks about not only the limitations of words in present context but also the fluctuation of meaning and interpretative audiences throughout an individual’s personal history as well as larger human history itself. There also, however, seems some residue of meaning even in such times. As he writes, “There may be times when the preacher, under the inspiration of a high moment, may give utterance to a transparent word through which vast meaning leaps into the mind of the hearer. So satisfying may be such an experience that the phrase continues to be a part of his working verbal equipment even though it is no longer transparently symbolic of great insights.”

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 3. Speaking of imagination Thurman denotes the great communicative resources of Jesus. As he writes, “Our Master had this gift in its most supreme dimension.”

peace.<sup>18</sup> Contemporary society must be addressed “under the aspect of the Eternal” through intellect rather than sacralizing exposé.<sup>19</sup> The preacher must also radiate an earthy intimacy in her/his preaching, counseling and teaching; all ideas, ethics, administrations and mysticisms must be grounded in a just and evolving discipline of servant leadership.<sup>20</sup>

### *The Mystic as Preacher*

Much of Thurman’s estimate of the preacher’s task resounds in his view of the mystic as God’s messenger. Both individuals use religious language to translate God, offer insight into practical spirituality, and nurture mystical consciousness, and therefore both answer to authority—primarily God and conscience and secondarily their respective faith traditions. Yet in attempting to qualify her/his experience of God, the mystic often plays with established terminology in ways that extend or subvert articles of belief. The genuine mystic doesn’t intend heresy but faithful witness to Divine profundity, which can only be transmitted through yet always transcends language. Nevertheless, the mystic is relentless in her/his rhetorical task: God must be communicated, Thurman argued, in “live seeing, not dead seeing.”<sup>21</sup> Like the artist, the mystic works to re-present her/his vision in tangible imagery and, like Eckhart in “the moment of incarnation,” often “gets drunk on words.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Thurman, “The Word,” 4.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>21</sup> Thurman, “The Mystic as Artist,” n.d. Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston, 2.

<sup>22</sup> Howard Thurman, “Mysticism and Social Change,” Redlands Lecture, Lecture 10 “Eckhart.” Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston, 10. Thurman’s appreciation for Eckhart’s own struggle with communicating God through language in this lecture is particularly endearing—especially concerning Thurman’s own reputation as a mystical homilist. Concerning this Thurman writes on p. 10-11, “And Eckhart gets drunk with the words: the nameless nothing. Oh, I just love him because he just gets too tied up in knots that he can’t say it—the nameless nothing, the absolute non-being, the great naught. I mean he just grabs everything he can to say that “I can’t!”...Now watch him, watch what he does—The Godhead, this nameless nothing this naught becomes self conscious. He is trying to find out—how did the infinite ever make contact

Yet where the seasoned artist eventually succeeds in objectifying her/his internal vision, Thurman claimed the mystic never does, because even if her/his technique is sincere her/his standard is always the vision itself.<sup>23</sup>

Having articulated Thurman's understanding of language, particularly his concern with the work of the sermon and the task and credentials of the preacher and the mystic, we can now turn full attention to his spiritual idiom.

### III. THURMAN'S "SPIRITUAL IDIOM"

"Tonight...I would like to think and feel with you...about Jesus Christ."<sup>24</sup> These opening words from Thurman's sermon "Standing Inside with Jesus Christ" speak to the heart of his unique spiritual idiom. Building on previous scholarship, most notably that of Mozella Mitchell and Edward Kaplan, I will explore the essence, purposes and components of Thurman's idiom and their integrated functioning in his ministry of the Word.

#### Thurman's Idiom: Essence and Primary Purposes

Whatever Thurman's reasons for speaking and writing as he did, it is clear that his language was evocative and engaging. Confirming various notions of Thurman as "an imaginative-penetrating thinker and depth-motivational proclaimer of the Word,"<sup>25</sup> "modern sophisticated shaman"<sup>26</sup> and a teacher who spoke "not as guru but deep companion,"<sup>27</sup> black

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with the finite."For more on Thurman's treatment of the relationship between the mystic and artist, see "Mystic as Artist," particularly p. 1.

<sup>23</sup> Howard Thurman, "Mysticism and Social Change," 1-2.

<sup>24</sup> Howard Thurman, "Standing Inside with Jesus Christ," 21 April 1970, sound cassette, Boston University, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, Boston.

<sup>25</sup> Samuel Gandy, editor, *Common Ground: Essays in Honor of Howard Thurman on the Occasion of His Seventy-Fifth Birthday*, November 18, 1975 (Washington, DC: Hoffman Press, 1976), xiii.

<sup>26</sup> Mozella Mitchell, *Spiritual Dynamics of Howard Thurman's Theology* (Bristol, Indiana: Wyndham Hall Press, 1985), 7.

theologian Marcus Boulware notes, “Thurman’s is a language of power” that does not “entertain” but “feeds men with solid speculation in the realm of theology.”<sup>28</sup> Sydna Altschuler Byrne, Thurman’s former student, personal secretary, editor and longtime family friend, argues there was little difference in Thurman’s writing and speaking style, so that in reading his texts “you can hear his voice.” She adds:

He [Dr. Thurman] had the rare quality of authenticity in both his writing and his speaking... (and)... the ability to communicate both a love of language and a love of the congregation to those with whom he shared his thinking.<sup>29</sup>

Taken together, these interpretations speak to the essential purpose Thurman sought to accomplish in employing his idiom—to create a sense of spiritual community and mutual understanding through which he and others could reflect on their lives, genuinely envision and engage their personal and cultural challenges, and reenergize and re-center themselves through experiencing God’s love and guidance within the faith community. Mindful of the organic unity of Thurman’s idiom, for analytical purposes I will review three particular aspects of his agenda: 1) his ability to cultivate a prayerful atmosphere of worship, 2) his desire to encourage his congregant-readers’ engagement in religious experience, and 3) his understanding of the import of ethical agency as an element of worship and mysticism.

### *A Community of Prayer and Presence*

The superlative paradigm of his life, *community* also stood as the overarching concern of Thurman’s idiom, nowhere more notably than in his facilitation of worship, which he

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<sup>27</sup> Sam Keene, interview by author, tape recording of phone conversation, April 13, 2002.

<sup>28</sup> Marcus Boulware, *The Oratory of Negro Leaders (1900-1968)* (Westport, Conn.: Negro Univ. Press, 1969), 185-86. Boulware compares Thurman’s rhetorical style and prowess to lecturing poets-artists James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, and Melvin Tolson.

<sup>29</sup> Sydna Altschuler Byrne, interview by author, electronic mail transcript, January 18, 2004, 2-3.

viewed as the premier “celebratory act of the human spirit.”<sup>30</sup> Opening individual worshippers to one another and the whole assembly to God, Thurman worked to conjure a “tidal wave of communal fellowship” which cast the individual, riding its zenith, into the solitude of God.<sup>31</sup> Dialectically, he used congregational immersion to baptize each individual into profound awareness of her/his relationality with others so that he could speak not to an amorphous crowd or disparate psyches, but to interwoven people.<sup>32</sup> He was convinced that primary connection came most authentically via the “common aegis of religious experience”<sup>33</sup> from and to which, even at his most political, he always spoke. Thurman, by detailing much of his own spiritual search, readily included himself as a member-facilitator of the liturgical body. For Mitchell this connotes that “he [Thurman] not only has the ability to describe religious ideas, but to bring them [his audience] to participate in a religious journey...which yields religious experience.”<sup>34</sup>

Thurman’s primary intent in cultivating such community with his congregants and readers was to encourage a prayerful mood of “recollection”<sup>35</sup>—pressurizing them to

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<sup>30</sup> Thurman, “The Word,” 4-5.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 4-5.

<sup>32</sup> Here we come again face to face with Thurman’s concern for the individual in culture and the personality as the primary organism through which religious experience can be perceived, received and resourced so that its love energies gain positive release.

<sup>33</sup> Thurman, “The Word,” 3.

<sup>34</sup> Mozella Mitchell, *Spiritual Dynamics*, 51. Also see Luther Smith, *Howard Thurman: The Mystic as Prophet* (Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1991), 97-98. Here I submit that Thurman is inviting his ‘audience’ to engage in the work of community and thus, even more intimately engage him as member-facilitator. Such engagement calls for response, at least of some sort. As literary theorist George Steiner has written on p. 8 of his text *Real Presences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), “[T]he primary act of human interpretation is always performance; ‘understanding’ is action and immediacy...The authentic experience of understanding, when we are spoken to by another human being or by a poem, is one of responding responsibility [answerability]. We are answerable to the text, to the work of art, to the musical offering, in a very specific sense, at once moral, spiritual and psychological.”

<sup>35</sup> Howard Thurman, *The Growing Edge*, (New York: Harper, 1956; reprint, Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1998), 50, 52. *The Growing Edge* is a collection of some of Thurman’s sermons. This reference is taken from his sermon “Prayer and Pressure.” Here Thurman goes into particular detail of his notion of recollection. He writes, “Now, this we cannot do unless we practice the habit of focusing our lives, somewhat according to the principle of recollection emphasized in historical Catholicism. There must be a conscious awareness of God in the shadow of our minds, day by day, as we handle our affairs, perform our tasks, fulfill our duties. We are

dynamic openness to God and the brooding work of the Spirit in their lives. Here pressure was not to be put upon God, for Thurman, but rather on him and the assembly to “work ourselves from the periphery, from the outside of ourselves, on the long journey to the floodgate within ourselves”<sup>36</sup> toward the “altar of the inner temple.”<sup>37</sup> He argued such prayer is also the “chief responsibility of the human spirit.”<sup>38</sup>

*Encouraging Vision, Touching Crises, Inviting Surrender*

As a mystic-preacher, Thurman sought to connect with his congregant-readers beneath the surface discourse of religion and culture and to provoke the primary feelings, sensations and thoughts at the depths of their individual and collective spiritualities, a depth which chiefly manifested itself for him in terms of “vision.”<sup>39</sup> Painting images of contemporary life and the Kingdom of God in hues of emotive realism,<sup>40</sup> Thurman challenged people to realize that all agency perpetuating decisive division within and among individuals, collectives, and nature emerged from a view of life divided; therefore its

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not pursuing something esoteric and aesthetic... We are developing the habit of holding in mind that our primary relationship and our primary loyalty, our ultimate commitment, is to God. The radical result of the conversion of the human spirit to God is that there is this riding point of referral that is always present in the things that we do, in the decisions we make.”

<sup>36</sup> Thurman, *Growing Edge*, 40. This reference is taken from his sermon “Prayer and Silence.”

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 43-44. This reference is taken from his sermon “Prayer and Silence.”

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 52. This reference is taken from his sermon “Prayer and Pressure.”

<sup>39</sup> Essential to Thurman’s appreciation for the importance of “vision” in the work of the spiritual life in general but particularly spiritualities of reconciliation and nonviolence is his concern for the interrelations between feeling, thought and action but particularly between feeling and thought. As he writes on p. 226 of *Head and Heart*, “After all, it may be true that what is called ‘thought’ is a function of feeling, reduced to slow motion. This book [*The Creative Encounter*] interprets the meaning of religious experience as it involves the individually totally, inclusive of feelings and emotions. It examines, in a limited way, the effect of the sense of Presence upon the total life of the individual, both as a private person and as a member of society.” Similarly, see also his appreciation for Robert Browning’s “Paracelsus” peppered throughout his published texts yet perhaps best commented on by Thurman on p. 227 of *Head and Heart*.

<sup>40</sup> In linking Thurman’s imagery with “emotive realism,” I contend that he is attempting to convey various realities of God’s Reign in history in ways that engage his readers and listeners with the reality of the situation he points to (i.e. racism/slavery; polluting the environment; religiously-inspired xenophobia; preemptive war; etc. ) as well as inviting them to accept or reject the moral judgment implicit in the emotional response with which he meets the particular situation he names. Related to this, I concur with Kaplan on this point as he writes on p. 21 that Thurman’s “poetic grace insinuates harsh facts into our dream of the ideal.”

transformation depends on thorough reconciliatory re-imaging<sup>41</sup> of life and one's place in it vis-à-vis the Kingdom view.<sup>42</sup> He made conscious the gnawing suspicion that real moral, psychological and spiritual growth required a fundamental re-textualizing of life from a script of contagious cynicism, self-centeredness and chronic fear to one of careful sanguinity, community-centeredness and matured love, a process which brought people to the crisis of decision.<sup>43</sup> In giving her/his entire self over to God through spiritual disciplines of active surrender, Thurman contended, the individual enabled the transformation of all raw materials of her/his life, suffering and crises included, into regenerative power.<sup>44</sup>

*Recentered and Revitalized Engagement with the World*

Finally, Thurman also hoped that his worship services, lectures and texts equipped individuals to reengage life with a matured sense of self, history, presence and future and the gospel resiliency sufficient to imagine, initiate, persist in and achieve redemptive personal and social change. Peace demanded cultivation, and whether through the vote, creative social advocacy, educational and economic development, or the staple commitment to love self, family, neighbor and enemy, every individual must build the earth. Thurman's greatest contribution was his offer of a contemplative spirituality of love and truth to his congregants

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<sup>41</sup> I was particularly helped in outlining and writing this section of the chapter by Walter Brueggemann's significant and creative analysis preaching, imagination and revelation. Especially helpful was his short article "Preaching as Reimagination," *Theology Today* vol. 52 no. 3 (1995), 320-322.

<sup>42</sup> Kaplan, "Howard Thurman: Meditation, Mysticism and Life's Contradictions," 22. Here Kaplan writes, "Howard Thurman's purpose is 'openness to reality' and 'expansion of consciousness' is a prelude. We must accept ourselves before we can welcome others. However, this moral lesson is not the finale. Its goal is to transform vision, to restructure our way of perceiving reality and taking it within ourselves. The goal is to convert our feelings from conflict to complementarity." For another helpful analysis of Thurman's use of rhetoric and contemplative theology in generating his specific religious vision see Clarence E. Hardy's, "Imagine a World," *Journal of Religion* 81, no 1 (Ja 2001): 78-97.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

<sup>44</sup> Here I am building on previous treatment of this dimension of Thurman's use of vision and surrender by both Hardy, "Imagine a World," 85 and Kaplan, "Howard Thurman: Meditation, Mysticism and Life's Contradictions," 20.



and readers that sharpened their minds, invigorated their prayer, rekindled their resolve and deepened their understanding of Divine action in history such that their activism was neither heedless nor anxious but centered, joyful and strong.<sup>45</sup> What is more, this spirituality emanated from Thurman's life experience not as a reclusive quietist but as a driven African American minister and public theologian who worked long hours as an educator and chaplain, counseled a generation of sociopolitical leaders, served on countless regional and national boards, lectured and wrote constantly, and along with his wife Sue regularly hosted individuals and groups from campus and across the world in their university residence or manse. As Matthews Allen noted, "Thurman was indefatigable, a trait that he certainly was helped to develop in life by his grandmother. He goes on because he must."<sup>46</sup>

Through his idiom Thurman articulated the restorative fonts of prayer essential to his own life and primed them for others to mine for themselves. For his former student and friend the spiritual philosopher Sam Keen this meant Thurman "was more 'deep companion' than 'guru.'"<sup>47</sup> I've consulted many individuals who, like Keen, knew Thurman.

### **Primary Components/Elements of Thurman's Idiom**

Thurman employed a rich variety of rhetorical devices which incarnate the texture and trajectory of his personal and pastoral spirituality. While this fact certainly contributed to the transparent, intimately conversational tone so often associated with his rhetoric, it must

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<sup>45</sup> Matthews Allen, Allen, "Howard Thurman: Paradoxical Pavior?," *The Journal of Negro History*, 72 (Spring 1992): 84-96, 92. Here Allen writes, "Often heedless activism is almost endemic in American society. Howard Thurman was one of few in Western culture who have devoted the full resources of their lives to ways of strengthening the inner life."

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 92. Similarly, Altschuler Byrne expressed on p. 3 of her interview notes that, "Dr. Thurman greeted people who waited in long lines at the coffee hour following the services. He would talk personally with each person, often greeting each with a handshake or hug. His ability to lift the spirits of people was not only limited to Sunday morning but throughout the week... recalled a friend who, 'felt renewed and could walk again with his head up. He said he would never forget the power of that experience.'"

<sup>47</sup> Sam Keen, interview by author.

also be remembered that though the core of Thurman's idiom came naturally to him, he worked throughout his life to refine his word-craft through prayer, study, relationships and reflection. Analyzing his craft, four primary elements emerge: 1) silence, 2) words, images and texts, 3) vocal acoustics and gesture and 4) the larger liturgy.

### *Silence*

Thurman knew and held silence as the "symbol par excellence of the mystic experience," one that was never passive but ever rich in creative commerce between the individual and her/himself, others and God.<sup>48</sup> He knew many strained with or, worse, distrusted it, yet as with other places in his life Thurman welcomed silence in his preaching—as first-step, creative ground, climax and denouement.<sup>49</sup> He regularly held a devotional silence of "waiting" when beginning sermons<sup>50</sup> to settle himself in fluid relationality with God and the congregation. During these moments, Altschuler Byrne contends, Thurman "waited on" rather than "reached for" the "right" word or image to come.<sup>51</sup> Congregants waiting with him came to relish the unhurried, open-spaces of silence

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<sup>48</sup> Howard Thurman, "Mysticism and Symbolism," 14.

<sup>49</sup> Thurman, "The Word," 1. Here Thurman writes that "we must lose our fear of rest, fear of serenity...this is not all, but this is the point at which to begin." In referencing the three moments or stages of silence Thurman follows Rudolf Otto's triadic notion of 'devotional silence': numinous silence of sacrament, silence of waiting, silence of union or fellowship.

<sup>50</sup> Thurman also regularly read short passages of literature, poetry or Scripture before entering into the silence of "waiting" and believed that this practice helped to make the initial silence of which he described as "noisy silence", come undone and open into a more relaxed and open posture to self and God. Specifically on p. 15 of "Mysticism and Symbolism" he writes, "It is in this area (the calming down of the 'noisy silence' that much of the tortures of the soul in prayer is located." See also, Thurman, *Growing Edge*, 41.

<sup>51</sup> Altschuler Byrne, 5. Here Altschuler Byrne comments in full, "Thurman's use of silence was organic. He genuinely was not reaching for but rather waiting for the right word. In that silence the congregation waited with him—not for a specific word and not for a possible choice. Instead, he waited for the right word to come. That sense of waiting was for most people an unusual experience, one that was relished and not hurried. When the word was finally spoken, there was sometimes laughter, a release." Similarly, Deats suggested in his interview that in Thurman's homiletical method, "...it is like he is creating the sermon as he speaks."

as sacramental<sup>52</sup> channels to tender fear and reclaim openness to Spirit while they thought and felt their way with Thurman through to the deeper, climactic silence of intrapersonal communion with God—for him the heart of prayer.<sup>53</sup> Beyond formal worship, Thurman also incorporated silence into his teaching, counseling and speaking engagements, primarily as a means of cultivating awareness, deepening relationality and centering himself and others in the matters at hand.<sup>54</sup>

### *Words, Images and Texts*

Born from and riding Thurman's silences were the primary words, images and texts of his idiom. While quite compact, his spiritual lexicon seems to gain certain extension both through the diversity of its source materials and Thurman's integration of them in practice.<sup>55</sup> Drawing heavily on his own Christian tradition, most notably the Bible (the Psalms, especially 139; the Hebrew Prophets; Christian Gospels, particularly Mark and Luke; I Corinthians, especially chapters 10-14), the slave Spirituals, and his favorite Church teachers and mystics (Augustine of Hippo, Meister Eckhart, Francis of Assisi, Francis Fenelon and

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<sup>52</sup> Thurman, "Mysticism and Symbolism," 14. Thurman writes, "To me it [silence in the context of the worship of God] is capable of sacramental significance partaking sometimes of the very essence as a means of grace." Similarly he notes on p. 42 of *The Growing Edge* that, "The moment this takes place... becomes a sacramental moment, a moment that marks the step between the final act of meditation and the awareness of prayer. It is a moment when God appears."

<sup>53</sup> Concerning the climactic moment of the silence of communion (or 'union') with God, Thurman himself mentions on pp. 15-16 of "Mysticism and Symbolism" that not only is it the telos of both the waiting and sacramental silence, but more importantly in terms of ethics—the "experience of fellowship with God on the pinnacle of ineffable experience," is the ultimate "key to his participation in the ethical struggles of his kind."

<sup>54</sup> In terms of his classroom use of silence, Thurman often began his courses, particularly those on Spiritual Disciplines or relating Religion and Literature, with a 15-20 minute session of silence out of which he often encouraged students to write on a particular topic or simply to write from their own consciousness. As a pastoral counselor, while incorporating a centering-down time with those who sought his guidance, Thurman also was known to not take a fee for his services but instead ask that while in his care individuals make regular participation in Sunday worship services he facilitated a priority.

<sup>55</sup> I use the term 'lexicon' advisedly at this point. Thurman certainly kept regular journals, specifically books in which he would copy down words, phrases and poetry for personal inspiration but he did not, to my knowledge, keep a formal preaching source-book in his study.

John Macmurray in particular) and also other axial faiths and philosophies (explicitly Hindu mysticism, Buddhism, Taoism, Native American spirituality and process philosophy), Thurman also mined the natural world (specifically images of rivers, the ocean, the night sky and the life cycle), his favorite texts (Oswald McCall's "The Hand of God"; Olive Schreiner's *Dreams*, and *Dream Life and Real Life*; Hermann Hagedorn's *Poems and Ballads*; Jane Steger's *Leaves from a Secret Journal* among others) as well as archetypal moments in his personal mythology (trysts with nature, experiences with Nancy Ambrose, cross-cultural relationships and international travels, encounters with his and other children) and contemporary domestic and international affairs (wars, political and social movements, debates in science) interweaving them into a highly original *theopoetic*.<sup>56</sup>

I use this term advisedly to depict Thurman's ability to produce and offer his audience a mythology emerging from the space between their daily life and doctrinal-scriptural script through which they could more deeply imagine and thus better interpret and more authentically react to the Divine Presence in their individual contexts.<sup>57</sup> He both invited and demanded his audience to re-sound, re-hear and thus re-set the primordial words of religion and life—"God," "Love," "Spirit," "Self," "Presence" and "Community"—at the heart of their own lived experience. Thurman also allayed their resistance by consistently narrating his own efforts at personalizing these terms.

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<sup>56</sup> My conception of "theopoetics" here is greatly influenced by Nathan Mitchell's analysis in his article "Toward a Poetics of Gesture," *Worship* vol. 75 no. 4 (July 2001), 361. As he writes, "To understand what is meant by 'poetics,' consider this: Our human cognition is a complex, richly layered reality. We 'know' not only with our intellects, but also with our imaginations, our bodies, our hearts and souls, our feelings and emotions, our dreams and fantasies. A poetics deals with the myriad ways our artful, embodied imaginations 'know.' Similarly, a poetics of gesture deals with the limitlessly imaginative ways our bodily movements, positions, and postures read reality, read the world. For classical Western thought has always regarded the world as 'sayable' and 'readable'—though one must read it aloud (like a poem) rather than skim it silently (like an 'owner's manual')."'

<sup>57</sup> For another analysis of 'myth' as central to Thurman's literary-theological dynamic see Mitchell's *The Spiritual Dynamics of Howard Thurman's Theology*.

### *Voice, Gesture and Writing Style*

Having explored the primary silences, words, images and texts of Thurman's idiom for analysis sake, we can now consider how he voiced and activated them in both his speaking and writing, which Altschuler Byrne argues manifest a singular tenor.<sup>58</sup> Still, let us look at them in turn. Thurman's oratory was marked by the deep, warm and intelligent timbre of his voice, his precise rhythmic elocution and the deliberate, contemplative pace at which he wed words and thoughts.

Considered by some as cosmetically affected, Thurman's delivery actually derives from his favored compositional method. He rarely used completed manuscripts, preferring to read and reflect rigorously on a topic, prepare mental drafts and finalize each address while imbibing the spirit of each live context as he spoke.<sup>59</sup> Along with minimalist gesture—"open palms and slightly-curved fingers" as if fingering words, and his benevolent, brooding gaze, Thurman also employed inflection and repetition to emphasize key words and concepts and diminished cadence in concluding sermons and spiritual talks.<sup>60</sup>

As Maestro of the spoken word, Thurman, as noted, was also an astute enthusiast of the performing arts. However, previous analysts have completely failed to report his deep

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<sup>58</sup> Altschuler Byrne, 5.

<sup>59</sup> Thurman, *Head and Heart*, 215-227. Thurman's preference for traveling by train or by ship, rather than plane, over long distances was rooted in his general lifestyle of taking time to think over the work he would be engaging in upon reaching his destination. This also applied to the various lectures, sermon series and related addresses he gave during his lifetime throughout the United States and internationally. Concerning this Luther Smith has directly suggested to me that this seemed important, in his mind, not only because Thurman was thinking of what he was saying to the congregation or audience but also, always—learning and reclaiming things for himself who while speaking is also a receptive listener. Richard Deats, in our interview, referred to this as Thurman's "creative process."

<sup>60</sup> Reginald Van Stephens, "The Preaching of Howard Thurman, William A. Jones, Jr., William Watley, and Jeremiah Wright, Jr.: A Comparison of Distinctive Styles in Black Preaching." D. Min., United Theological Seminary (Dayton, OH), 1992, 104. Here Stephens notes, "Thurman's tone of voice was reminiscent of one who had a New England accent...Rather than concluding the sermon with accelerated cadence, Thurman's rate slowed considerably in which he created a poetic-like, quiet atmosphere conducive for introspection."

desire to gain significant proficiency through experiments with the clarinet, oil painting and singing.<sup>61</sup> Thurman's inability to master music or painting truly frustrated him, yet also fed his rhetorical desire to paint rich images and phrases "rhythmed"<sup>62</sup> through words so lyrically evident in his audio recordings. These acoustics also manifested themselves in Thurman's writing style; his published texts transmit the complete mood and much of the meter of his speech.<sup>63</sup> Moving from Thurman's oratory to his written word, certain shifts are evident. The pithy disclosure of spiritual concepts framed in tales and images from daily life, while void of actual oratorical silence, concurrently slow the mind, conjure the passions and invoke the fact of Divine Love centering and tendering the reader. Perhaps most present in Thurman's centering pieces and poetry, this effect also appears in his collection of sermons *The Growing Edge* and his seminal Christology *Jesus and the Disinherited*.

### **The Larger Liturgy**

In vetting the intent, content and effect of Thurman's spiritual idiom, consideration must also be given to the primary contexts in which he engaged his listeners and readers. The most common and vital setting was the communal worship services in which Thurman presided over liturgy and preached, especially the Sunday morning liturgies. His meticulous sermon preparation was always anchored in a larger, more fundamental concern for the

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<sup>61</sup> Altschuler Byrne notes on p. 3, "He [Thurman] liked to try to play the clarinet when he was alone with his wife who accompanied him on the piano. He said doing this would 'get the knots out of his spirit.' He did not have a good singing voice and sometimes amused those of us who heard it and he laughed as much with us as at himself." And Thurman himself writes on p. 248 of *Head and Heart*, "If I could share the mystery of the lonely giant Beethoven I would have the clue to my own solitariness. This can never be done, alas, because I have no active companionship with the tools he used."

<sup>62</sup> I borrow the term "rhythmed" from Miller's article in *Theology Today*, p. 311 where he describes the poetic voice as "...the vision of ordinary things seen more deeply, etched, imaged and 'rhythmed' rather than argued or exegeted." For Thurman's own thought concerning the lyrical and poetic dimensions of his writing style see *Head and Heart*, p. 239-240, 246-248.

<sup>63</sup> Altschuler Byrne, 5.

overall spiritual quality of the entire service and the daily and weekly life of the Chapel or church's general ministry.<sup>64</sup> Although non-denominational in character and built around universal ethical or religious themes, Thurman's services were anything but generic. Sometimes on his own, but primarily in concert with a worship team, Thurman developed contemplative and invigorating liturgies rich with instrumental and choral music, congregational singing, antiphonal litany, periods of silent reflection, liturgical dance and art installations that witnessed to the holistic, multicultural nature of the religious quest yet preserved a Christian core.<sup>65</sup>

Thurman initially wrote his devotional "working papers" to be read and reflected on silently by individual worshippers during a meditation period prior to regular Sunday worship.<sup>66</sup> Thurman hoped the texts would provide vital "refreshment, challenge and renewal" for those engaged in various peace and justice apostolates.<sup>67</sup>

The practical mystagogy of Thurman's worship leadership also translated into his classroom pedagogy. Engaging his university and seminary students in a healthy curriculum of critical reading and writing, silent meditation, journaling and interactive lectures, he

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<sup>64</sup> Howard Thurman, "Letter to Mordecai Johnson," n.d. Thurman Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Library, Boston University, MA. Thurman was concerned throughout his professional career with not only the 'liturgical architecture' but also, more formatively the actual architectural design and spirit of the place of worship and religious teaching. Concerning Howard University's situation during his tenure, Thurman noted in a memo to the University President, "In the first place, it [the Chapel architecture and décor] gives the students a completely secular feeling with reference to the Chapel. As freshmen, their basic contractual relationship with the Chapel is as a classroom rather than a place for religious worship or for formal assembly. This is a psychological handicap for the work that is being undertaken as a part of the Chapel ministry."

<sup>65</sup> Altschuler Byrne, 2.

<sup>66</sup> Now collected and published in a three volume set, *The Inward Journey, The Centering Moment and Deep is the Hunger*. Thurman also, as noted in his autobiography, integrated moments of meditation and reflection into the flow of his academic and seminar teaching-style. As one of his unnamed students at Boston University wrote in her/his journal entry on March 10, 1955, "The session began with a twenty-five minute period of a medley of tunes that ran the gamut of certain symbols and emotions. The purpose of this was to suggest a sense of the different moods created by the various levels of the personal struggle with values at the point of his living. And the end of this period the various verses from Romans were read, verses which highlighted the conflict in the mind of the Apostle."

<sup>67</sup> Thurman, *Deep is the Hunger*, entire preface, particularly page ix.

encouraged academics as a pursuit of intellectual knowledge, vocational craft and self- and world-awareness.

### **The Dynamics of Thurman's Idiom: Summary Thoughts**

Building off of Pollard's espousal of Thurman as a "mystic-activist," I believe that through his spiritual idiom Thurman aimed to awaken and nurture a holistic active mysticism in his congregants and readers. Such spirituality yields greater consciousness of and participation with God not only in private devotion and corporate worship but also through personal relationships, career life and social activism. Thurman nurtured transformation of the individual's horizon so that s/he could recognize, access, and sustain the "Peace of God" experienced in personal or corporate prayer in the flow of daily life and intently live all of life with others in God. His texts offered the activist cathartic engagement with silence, stimulated the quietist's ethical agency and awakened them both to the Spirit's integrating presence in history and the human heart and their constant task of response.

We make no demands upon Thy spirit; we ask nothing; we are in Thy presence as we are. O Love of God, love of God, do with us in this waiting moment what Thou wouldst do with us. We trust Thee, our Father, as best we can, and beyond that we yield to Thy grace, O God, our Father.<sup>68</sup>

With this overview of Thurman's foundational concerns with language and many of the creative elements that gave life to his spiritual idiom in hand, we can now shift our attention more directly to his words themselves.

## **IV. THURMAN'S VOICE: CASE STUDIES**

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<sup>68</sup> Howard Thurman, *The Centering Moment* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969; reprint, Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 2000), 113. From devotional no. 84, "We Come as We Are."



In this section I will analyze three texts from Thurman's pastoral corpus (his centering piece "The Necessities of Our Peace," his prose poem meditation on Psalm 139 and an audio recording of his sermon "Standing Inside with Jesus Christ ) in order to highlight and concretize vital aspects of his spiritual idiom as they appear in specific texts. I chose these particular pieces from among Thurman's vast corpus of written works and audio recordings of his sermons and related addresses because in each he treats central issues relative to his concern for peace and mysticism, and also because of their different genres (meditative essay, poetry and a preached sermon).

### **"The Necessities of Our Peace"**

I begin these case-studies with analysis of Thurman's centering piece "The Necessities of our Peace" for a few reasons. First, as a centering piece, it represents the primary genre in his written corpus. Second, in "Necessities" Thurman more explicitly treats war, wartime, peace, and peacemaking than in the other two texts considered in this section. Though published in *The Inward Journey*, a collection of Thurman's centering pieces and related meditative writing, "Necessities" originated as a single meditation printed in the weekly Sunday morning worship bulletin. It was provided as a focusing text during the thirty-minute period of prayerful silence prior to the corporate service. Thurman maintained that the pieces collected in *The Inward Journey* were written "without many windows." He felt the lack of particular illustrations allowed each individual to more naturally focus on her/his "spiritual quest" and on God as the "Eternal Source and Goal of Life...[and as] Companion and Presence."<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Thurman, *Inward Journey*, 7. Here Thurman wrote in the foreword, "This fact has influenced the character of the meditations. For the most part, they are addressed to the deepest needs and aspirations of the human spirit. Their purpose is to make articulate the authentic lines along which the individual's

“Necessities” is unique amongst the handful of Thurman’s centering pieces given to his consideration of issues and times of war, social unrest and conflict, and isolated acts of violence. Whereas most of his other violent-conflict focused centering pieces are given to prayerful naming of particular people groups (often non-combatants), opposing governments and regimes, and geographical areas of armed conflict, “Necessities” is a plain-worded contemplative diagnosis of the fear and despair of wartime which resolves in a straightforward prognosis and plan of treatment for peace. The opening thematic epigram and concluding prayer of surrender and trust that frame many of Thurman’s centering pieces are absent here. So too, are Thurman’s direct engagement with the reader through his use of the first- or second- person singular. Using the nominative plural in “Necessities,” he speaks for and to the collective from within it. Thus positioned Thurman narrates his congregant-reader through the mood of a specific wartime immediately after the official “end” of World War II which ensued from the United States dropping two atomic bombs on Japan in 1945.

Turning to the text itself, it is composed of three paragraphs. In the first two Thurman respectively treats the despair and fear let loose across the American landscape related to the six-years of total war, and most particularly America’s bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki signaling the advent of nuclear war in human history. He opens “Necessities” with this first line, “There is a widespread feeling of despair and feeling of futility not only about the present times but also about the future.”<sup>70</sup> Spending the remainder of the first paragraph matter-of-factly naming the reasons for this outlook (i.e. the cumulative anxiety of two world

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spiritual quest has led him through the years...There are not many windows in these meditations; they are as the title indicates, an Inward Journey. It may be that if there were more illustrations, the meaning could be more quickly grasped. The choice here is deliberate. It is my hope that they will make reading and rereading rewarding and sustaining. The purpose remains ever the same: to focus the mind and the heart upon God as the Eternal Source and Goal of Life. To find Him as Companion and Presence is ‘to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly’ with Him.”

<sup>70</sup> Thurman, *Inward Journey*, 41.

wars, the injuries and deaths of many numerous non-combatants, particularly children, as well as military lives lost; and the routinized “standing peacetime army”),<sup>71</sup> Thurman seems content to open the piece without much spiritual rhetoric or political fanfare, and with no direct challenge to or call for response from his audience. This opening induces the congregant-reader’s self-inventory of thoughts and feelings related to her/his general experience of wartime amongst modern nations at the midpoint of the twentieth century. In naming both the prevailing despondency blanketing the planet and its lamentable causal factors, one wonders if Thurman intended to help his congregant-readers feel more or less overwhelmed within their individual and collective recent post-war experience. (In identifying the particular calamities he did, did his logic proffer stability or deepen pathos?) Either way, in “Necessities”’s first paragraph Thurman gathers himself together with his congregant-readers in an initial unpacking of the collective emotions consistent with 1945 post-war world culture.

With this foundation laid, in the second paragraph Thurman invites more exact consideration on a particular military theatre and specific act of aggression: the dropping of “Little Boy” and “Fat Man” on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan by the United States of America on August 6 and 9, 1945. Here he writes:

There is also the subtle fear spreading like a “pea-soup” fog over the entire landscape of our personalities because of the naked power...of the atom.<sup>72</sup>

Thurman’s “there is also...” entrée into the second paragraph, at least for me, is pregnant with implication. In these three words one can almost hear him saying to himself and his fellows, “As if these things (i.e. two world wars, children and other non-combatants among

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<sup>71</sup> Thurman, *Inward Journey*, 41.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 41.

the thousands injured and killed, the standing peacetime armies, the political machinery which depersonalizes the “other” making her/him (the) “Enemy”) didn’t cause enough panic and effect a new norm of “safety” through “negative peace,” now the nuclear possibility in all its darkness has been realized—“the naked power of the atom!” Years of slavery and more recent civil upheaval and formal protest had shown Americans that the potential for violence, even in their Promised Land, was always just around the corner. The nuclear bomb exponentially increased that potential due to the enormity and efficiency of its violence as well as its long-term health effects, and the seeming anonymity of the perpetrator and victims. For Thurman this resulted more from the desire for power than the progression of hard science and technology. He then places both the responsibility and corollary guilt squarely on the United States (seemingly) as a whole:

For us in America there is the searching guilt because, alone of the nations of the earth, we have introduced atomic warfare into the organized life of man...But the fact remains that the choice was ours. How can so great a stain be purged, how can there be quiet in the heart that remembers Hiroshima?<sup>73</sup>

In these sentences Thurman speaks confessionally, politically, realistically, and poetically. He includes himself and his American congregant-readers in the experience of guilt that arises from the valid judgment the United States, as a nation and people and not just its government, received from the Japanese rulers and people, other nation-states (including Allied powers), as well as domestic anti-war collectives and individual citizens. His line concerning the potential for “quiet in the heart that remembers Hiroshima,” shows Thurman, as author of “Necessities,” at his most poetic as well as his most ethical, prophetic, and intimate. That he leaves this line to linger as the last sentence in the second paragraph seems,

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<sup>73</sup> Thurman, *Inward Journey*, 41.

for me, to invite the congregant-reader her-/himself to also linger confessionally and spiritually (and likely uncomfortably) in the painful panorama his poesy presents.

In the third and final paragraph Thurman responds to the general mood he has provoked and causal factors he has particularized in the first two paragraphs. Here he seems to step away from, so as to better speak to the center of, the “we” and “us” he was very much a part of up to this point in “Necessities.” He first reminds his congregant-readers of their shared responsibility “in such times” (i.e. anxious and paralyzed initial post-war culture) to leverage their personal and societal political and philanthropic agency to facilitate reparative action and foster a reconciliatory climate at the “level of the(ir) daily round” and local, domestic, and international political legislation. And almost as if he anticipated and welcomed the cynical soul among his congregant-readers—that person all too ready to scoff at the thought of a handful of informed peaceniks or one determined individual to make a significant difference—Thurman counters with what, in my imagining, seems a pre-prepared though not any less honest or radical response:

The level of the daily round—courage, gentleness, and kindly devotion...at the disposal of simple community in our homes, our work, and our play. The good deed continues to be good...The need for love is as urgent and desperate as it ever was.<sup>74</sup>

In fashioning these lines as he did and placing them as ethical elixir and spiritual salve to settle his congregant-readers into a hopeful posture of prayer and action, I believe Thurman risks losing some of his audience—specifically those who tend to sentimentalize spirituality or those who detest and reject just that kind of faith. After reading the post-bomb headlines and listening to and watching the war-journalists, military leaders and politicians on radio and television, who could really believe that the cup of cold water or the friendly smile could

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<sup>74</sup> Thurman, *Inward Journey*, 41-42.

really make any, let alone a significant, contribution to the patient work of first restoring order, and then building peace? Thurman could and did believe so. And he did so not only in writing “Necessities” but throughout most of the give and take of his ministry and teaching. His belief in the persistent, patient, and prophetic work of the individual at all levels of social participation, echoed in this last paragraph and developed more formally in his related addresses, “The Apostles of Sensitiveness” and “The Spiritual and Political Prospects of a Nation Emerging from Total War,” was a central linchpin of his theological anthropology and notion of peace is/as community.

### **Meditation on Psalm 139**

Thurman’s prose poem on Psalm 139 speaks both to his appreciation for this particular scripture and to the foundational themes upon which he built his religious thought and pastoral vision. Like his spiritual forebears, Thurman was drawn to the psalms for their honest, poetic, and spacious testimony concerning humanity’s relationship with the Divine. This particular piece of scripture, certainly seminal and central for Judaism and also Christianity, factored significantly into Thurman’s own prayer life.<sup>75</sup> His intent in writing this meditation was to focus on a particular strand of meaning in each verse and “develop it into a creative overtone which conveys its own insight” in relation to his own personal response to the scriptural text.<sup>76</sup> In this analysis of Thurman’s prose poem I consider the piece’s primary message, structure, and the primary literary devices he employs, and take a closer look at several sections of the meditation.

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<sup>75</sup> Psalm 139 played a vital role in Thurman’s personal and professional spirituality. For more on its import in his personal narrative and teaching on prayer, see *With Head and Heart*, 1-3; *Disciplines of the Spirit*, chapter no. 3, “Prayer.”

<sup>76</sup> Thurman, *Inward Journey*, 7.

The primary message of Thurman's prose poem is essentially that of psalm 139 itself: the foundational, mysterious, irrevocable, and eternal companioning of the human person by the creator, sustainer, judge and redeemer God. Granted, sometimes the various "overtones" of meaning he produces focus or extend what biblical scholars have traditionally interpreted as the Psalmist's original gist, yet by and large Thurman meant his augmentation to amplify and illuminate rather than add to or overwrite his scriptural canvas. He does so by reimagining the extent of the individual's life beyond conception and the human race's existence beyond evolutionary evidence and by grounding both in the broader history of existence itself. Thurman's reading of God's eternal presence within life itself, especially to humanity, involves issues of: divine empowerment, individual and racial identity, Creator-creature relationship, spiritual intimacy and anxiety, divine judgment and personal conscience, stewardship, and wonder. These are quite common religious and theological motifs which Thurman particularized throughout his ministry, including this piece of poesy. Throughout this text Thurman voices his/the individual's dialectical response to being pursued by the inescapable God: "I cannot escape Thy Scrutiny! I would not escape Thy Love!"<sup>77</sup>

Structurally, Thurman's meditation is composed of eleven stanzas of similar length which sequentially treat the main ideas found in the psalm's native structure.<sup>78</sup> Thurman employs various literary devices throughout the piece. One of the most notable is his consistent use of questioning and exclamatory phrases to introduce or conclude a new stanza or thought, or signal a particularly charged utterance from himself/the individual person or

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<sup>77</sup> Thurman, *Inward Journey*, 141.

<sup>78</sup> Thurman sets out his prose poem in the following sequence of stanzas which parallel the development of Psalm 139: 1. Thou Hast Searched Me and Known Me; 2. Thou Art Acquainted with All My Ways; 3. Thou Hast Beset Me Behind and Before; 4. Thou Knowest It Altogether; 5. Whither Shall I Go from Thy Presence; 6. If I Ascend into Heaven, Thou Art There!; 7. In Thy Book, All My Members are Written; 8. How Precious Are Thy Thoughts Unto Me, O God!; 9. When I Awake, I Am Still With Thee; 10. I Hate Them with Perfect Hate; 11. Try Me and Know My Thoughts.

the Divine. Combining this technique with similar prepositional setups (“In all places...”/ “When I have...”) in the first stanza, “Thou Hast Searched Me and Known Me,” he writes:

Thou Hast Searched Me and Known Me

In all places  
 Where I have dallied in joyous abandon,  
 Where I have responded to ancient desires and yielded  
     to impulses as old as life, blinded like things that move  
     without sight;  
 Where chores have remained chores, unfulfilled by  
     laziness of spirit and sluggishness of mind;  
 ...  
 Where the quiet hush of utter surrender envelops me  
     in the great silence of intimate commitment;  
 Thou hast known me!

When I have lost my way, and thick fog has shrouded  
     from my view the familiar path and the lights of home;  
 When with deliberate intent I have turned my back on  
     truth and peace;  
 When in the midst of the crowd I have sought refuge  
     among the strangers;  
 ...  
 When in loneliness I have sat in the thicket of despair  
     too weak to move, to lift my head;

Thou hast searched for and found me!<sup>79</sup>

A second and particularly innovative element Thurman employs is his attention given to the intricacies of the human body as created by God and experienced by the person her/himself. In particular he delights in the art and economy of the organism’s form and function. Extending the psalmist’s utterance, “In Thy Book, all my members were written,” in the seventh stanza Thurman muses:

The organism! How rare a thing it is!  
 The miracle of Hand:  
     Fingers and thumbs  
     Caught up in single grasp,  
     Holding, shaping, fashioning outward things,  
     To make the dream a fact.

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<sup>79</sup> Thurman, *Inward Journey*, 140-41.



The miracle of Parts:

A restless muscle sending blood day unto day  
 To sustain the rhythm of lungs, in and out,  
 To keep alive the cell and striding step;  
 The measured growth of bone  
 To make the wholesome balance, the upright stance;  
 Great network of nerves reaching everywhere  
 To alert, to caution,  
 To gather news on every hand  
 To keep the world in place,  
 That meaning may remain;<sup>80</sup>

...

In these lines as well as the majority of the subsequent stanza ("How Precious Are Thy Thoughts Unto Me, O God!"), Thurman lyrically treats the main themes presented in his more analytical *The Search for Common Ground*, which may be considered his most significant statement concerning theological anthropology. Taken together, stanzas seven and eight illustrate his contention that the Divine can be encountered, understood, and praised through the human body as well as the larger biomatrix. And not only God; the person her-/himself can learn more about her/his own true nature, particularly the ethical drive toward wholeness, through reflection on the form and processes of her/his body and the natural world.

How precious are Thy thoughts!

The nerve of life abounds in all I see,  
 The kernel of the seed holds in its place a swinging door,  
 Through which the boundless energy of living substance flows,  
 Forming itself in root and stalk, in branch and fruit.<sup>81</sup>

...

How precious are Thy thoughts!

The response to goodness, the urge to minister;

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<sup>80</sup> Thurman, *Inward Journey*, 148.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 149.

The quickened willingness to bless;  
 The deep rejection of the evil deed, revealed;  
 The pull of the clear thought, the honest desire;  
 An all-embracing tenderness cradling the kindly act;  
 The far-flung hope compromising myriad strands of all man's  
     dreams;  
 The hard rebuff to all that mocks and scorns;  
 The whole surrender of the center of consent,  
 To lose life only to find it again.

How precious are Thy thoughts unto me, O God!  
 How great is the sum of them!<sup>82</sup>

The Creator-creature-larger creation dynamic central to these consecutive stanzas highlights the ontological interdependence and creation-centered spirituality at the core of Thurman's own personal faith and pastoral vision. For him the Divine was and would always be profoundly present in every element of life including every aspect of the individual and human culture. This fact raised important religious questions concerning the search for meaning, the project of ethics, and human creativity. What is the original source of the individual and social drive for meaning, harmony, beauty—the particular individual organism, the social collective, the life process, or the Creator God?

Functioning as interlocutor between the Hebraic poet and his own contemporary audience Thurman makes his own answer clear: that God is the ultimate source, sustainer, and end of all things. Yet he also changes voice throughout the meditation in order to preserve the mystical and ethical unity of the individual, the tribe, existence, and God. In various sections Thurman speaks as the individual (to God or her/him-self) and also as God/Spirit/the Divine (to the generic individual or the individual reader). In other places he channels the voice of religious truth or tradition or that of a narrator setting a spiritual or topical scene. Thurman presents his text to the reader as a conversation, one that s/he is

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<sup>82</sup> Thurman, *Inward Journey*, 150.

invited to experience between the individual, the Divine, and life itself within the psalm. Perhaps from there s/he may better attend to this same conversation particularized within her/his own life and prayer.

Thurman's overarching purpose in this prose poem, to illuminate the psalm's perennial religious message and enrich its meaning and application for his readers in the context of their personal lives, is certainly achieved. As with his other works of extended prose poetry, Thurman's interpretation of Psalm 139 reveals central themes in his religious thought in original lyricism that induces contemplation, invites and provokes confession, and in so doing celebrates creativity as essential to the individual and social practice of vital prayer. It also demands more mental focus and leisure time than his typical centering piece in order to perceive both the theological complexity and imaginative play of his poesy.

### **“Standing Inside with Jesus Christ”**

Turning to the third and last of Thurman's texts considered in this section, I reiterate his own insistence that while he enjoyed and found success in writing, his first and foremost craft was the spoken word. “Standing Inside with Jesus Christ,” a sermon Thurman delivered in the spring of 1970, shows him treating several of his foundational themes and concerns (God, religious/mystical experience, community, and love) in relation to two of his most significant religious influences (Nancy Ambrose and Jesus of Nazareth/Christ).<sup>83</sup> The sermon is typical of Thurman in that its message is delivered through its content (words and arguments), rhetorical genre (preached sermon) and also through the mood he, as pastor-preacher, exuded and invited his audience to participate in and share. I will consider the

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<sup>83</sup> Howard Thurman, “Standing Inside.”

sermon's general message, summarize its structure, lay out its teaching points, and finally discuss the primary rhetorical devices Thurman employs.<sup>84</sup>

At first listen "Standing Inside" appears to be as one of Thurman's standard contemplative sermons which were geared toward deepening the congregation's prayerful attending to God, self and the world in light of the specific issue or topic he posed. Further examination leads me to particularize this text as a decisively kerygmatic sermon wherein Thurman presents the person and event of Jesus Christ as teacher of and vehicle for abundant life, ethical growth and participatory love as experiences and fruits of salvation. His parsing of important theological and ethical issues concerning contemporary life, Jesus and the church is spiritually provocative precisely because it is imaginative. From the start Thurman makes his intention clear: "Tonight I want to feel and think with you about Jesus Christ."<sup>85</sup>

This opening line launches the preacher and congregation into an investigation of three contributions Jesus makes to history: the vision (life as community), the vehicle (love), and the Creating-Companioning-Judging-Sustaining Presence (God) he [Jesus] incarnated and advocated for in the world. Preaching "Standing Inside," Thurman treats Jesus' contributions in four moves.

The first move opens via Thurman's reintroduction of the historical person of Jesus Christ to his audience. He says, "...In order to prepare your imaginations I'd like for you to listen without prejudice—now it's going to be difficult—to listen as if you were hearing this for the first time. Suppose you never heard the name Jesus Christ?"<sup>86</sup> He next reimagines Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem detailing the Christ as religious subject (rather than

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<sup>84</sup> In the audio recording I analyzed and transcribed during my archival research, Thurman offers a prayer before beginning his sermon. I have included the prayer itself in my transcription but bracket it out of my analysis of the sermon itself presented in this section.

<sup>85</sup> Thurman, "Standing Inside."

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

religious object). Speaking his listeners into this episode marking the final week of Jesus' life, Thurman inverts his narrative and presents a retrospective of Jesus' lifelong soulful discipline of growing in communion with his Father (God), and consequently attaining oneness with all life. Here he interprets Jesus as one who "stood inside of life," as the following passage illustrates:

So close had he [Jesus] worked with God that the line of separation between his will and God's will would fade and reappear, fade and reappear.

He had learned so much. Sometimes we think that Jesus Christ didn't have to learn anything; no. Of course, that's a careless reading of the Gospel. But it's there.

So sensitive had grown his spirit and the living quality of his being that he seemed more and more to stand inside of life...looking out upon life as a man who gazes from a window in a room out into the yard and beyond the distant hills.

He could feel the sparrowness of the sparrow. He could feel the leprosy of the leper. He could feel the blindness of the blind, the crippleness of the cripple and the frenzy of the mad. He stood inside of the misery. [Nearly whispered: That's why he could deal with the misery.]

He had become joy, he had become sorrow, hope and anger...to the joyful, to the sorrowful, to the hopeful, to the anguished.

Now could he feel his way into the mind of those who cast their palms and such in his path? Was he in the cry of those who exclaimed their wild and unrestrained Hosannas? Did he mingle with emotions that lay beneath? Was he in the noise they made: those who yelled crucify? Or was he outside and the noise beating down upon him?

Only if he stood inside could he say, "Father, forgive them for they don't know what they are doing." When you stand on the outside you can't do that.

I wonder what was at work in the mind of the Master as he jogged along on the back of that fateful donkey...<sup>87</sup>

After declaring his purpose ("to feel and think" with his congregation about Jesus Christ) and building the vision of Jesus, the Christ who experienced deep intimacy with God and existence, during his final approach to Jerusalem, Thurman begins his second move. Here he

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<sup>87</sup> Thurman, "Standing Inside."

deals with the difficulty people have expressing “the things that are deepest in our spirit.”<sup>88</sup> He contends that prior to language the human organism communicated via a “continuum” of impulse and thought-feeling that can still be sourced. He says, “You see long before man learned to talk they communicated at a deeper level. You can go back into the continuum that is deeper than all concepts and ideas.”<sup>89</sup> Thurman employs this image of a trans-language continuum to link his grandmother Nancy Ambrose’s spiritual life with Jesus’. For him both individuals “stood inside.” Thurman contends, however, that whereas Jesus stood “inside of life,” Ambrose stood “inside of Jesus.”

I was anxious to get there [to see his grandmother in Waycross during an academic break] so I could tell my grandmother all these new things that I had been learning about Jesus. And I made one of the great discoveries of my life. That she didn’t know anything about any kind of criticism: high, low, or middling. She couldn’t read her name if it was as big as this chapel.

But she stood inside of Jesus...and looked out onto the world through his eyes and she knew by heart what I (through my studies) could never know. Now this is what I am talking about. Now what I am going to do in the time I have left is to try to put into words what I think is the great gift that Jesus Christ gives to the human race.<sup>90</sup>

If Thurman’s recapitulation of Jesus to his listeners “as if for the first time” reset their minds and spirits to consider afresh the implications of his intimacy with God and life and final entry into Jerusalem, his account of Ambrose seems geared to invite and free his congregants to apprehend the rest of his message via the continuum of heart and spirit more so than through the abstraction of mind. Concerning this he adds, “Now I am not going to talk Christology, you can read that. And I am not going to talk theology particularly. But I want to try to put into words just from my own view, from the side of the hill on which I

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<sup>88</sup> Thurman, “Standing Inside.”

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

have been climbing all these years, how it looks to me.”<sup>91</sup> This self-disclosure closes the sermon’s second move.

Thurman’s third move, the most information-dense section of this sermon, centers on the three primary gifts Jesus offered the world: a vision (life as community), the vehicle (love) and the Creating-Companioning-Judging-Sustaining Presence (God). Thurman does not present any new ideas here but instead freshly illustrates these foundational concerns of his ministry through self-disclosure, critique of contemporary church and academy culture, and biblical interpretation. The vision Jesus reveals is that of mutual understanding and coexistence amongst people and even between humans and animals. Perhaps the most prophetic moment in “Standing Inside” arises from Thurman’s referencing Jesus’ *koinonia* vision and then naming its stark contrast to humanity’s growing estrangement from the natural world. He contends:

One reason I think that the number of hospitals are increasing in populations—every second bed is mentally disturbed—it is not due to the fact that we are living under so much pressure, and the noise and tempo of life is so magnified. That’s important. But what I think that the real reason, the real reason is this...there there is something deep in man that is rooted in the earth...in the earth...that he is a part of the earth...of the wind, the stars, (pause). And you can’t poison the streams, pollute the atmosphere, upset the balance of life without the pain of that being felt in the psyche of modern man...No this is what I am talking about. Life is what I can’t violate—life. Without killing something in me. I can’t do it. And we don’t believe that.<sup>92</sup>

For Thurman, following and worshipping Jesus means refusing to “embalm” him and instead, “let(ting) the spirit that was in him—get in you.”<sup>93</sup> Any ultimate barriers we put up to keep ourselves protected from others, he says: “[I]s against life and against God— and it can’t stand up.”<sup>94</sup> From this first point Thurman next posits love as the sole means to reclaim

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<sup>91</sup> Thurman, “Standing Inside.”

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

community with other people and all of life. He is careful here to qualify love as a way of life rather than just a “technique” to navigate relationship. “Professional ministers” who reduce love to being merely a means to an end or a product to be sold eventually become sad “peddlers of love” rather than serving Christ and his “love ethic” as true preachers and pastors.<sup>95</sup>

Now he (Jesus) gave to us the vision of a great creative ideal—that the normal thing is that people and all living things should live in harmony and community—that the way by which that is done, the technique is love—but you see it is more than just the technique—it is something that is, how to put this, it is something that is an expression of need—it can’t be something that I use. Now let me tarry for a moment here—you see I think that just as we know now from our recent and remote experiences that there are professional healers in the world, there are professional lovers also whose business it is to peddle love but not to love. Now this is the thing that has overtaken Christianity.<sup>96</sup>

Taking the institutional church, particularly its pastoral leadership, to task as peddlers of love, Thurman also in this section criticizes those in theological academia who fuss over orthodoxy at orthopraxy’s expense. In such a climate, he contends, “[E]thics is starved to death.”<sup>97</sup>

Thurman uses the final component of this third section as a segue to his fourth and final move. He points to Jesus’ recapitulation of God as the primary author and force of love as the means to community. God for Jesus, according to Thurman, is that “vast creative energy” which empowers people to love. Thurman then confronts his congregation in arguing on Jesus’ behalf, “[H]e (Jesus) said, ‘There is available to you

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<sup>95</sup> Thurman, “Standing Inside.” After this critique of the contemporary institutional Church, Thurman admittedly “digresses” in offering a correlation of his critique with the evolution of Buddhism as a moral corrective to the Hinduism of Gautama’s day. Here Thurman posits, “Let me digress a moment. When the religion, the oldest religion in the world, Hinduism and the group within Hinduism, the Jains, by some great grace of God began implementing the notion of reverence for life...this became a part of the morality...the ethic of Hinduism, alright. But this is rough going. So what happened, little by little the Hindus extracted out of the ethical ideal of reverence for life, all the ethic and just left the doctrine. And as a result of the vacuum that this doctrine created in Hinduism, Buddhism was born to supply an ethical concrete.”

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.



the boundless strength and energy and power of God, therefore you have no alibi.”<sup>98</sup>

After admitting that it is easier for him to “feel” rather than “think” his way to accepting God as the Creator of life Who inspires and enables love, Thurman shares his own difficulties in coming to terms with Jesus’ love ethic. In concluding “Standing Inside,” he confesses:

Now this is the most difficult thing to believe—God is love. I confess to you very simply that there are vast dimensions of this that I cannot understand. I cannot even feel my way into its depths and its heights and its wisdom. I have seen too much human misery, too much evil, to have some simply satisfying word here...

All I know is this: that when I love, when I love—I will do gladly for the person I love what no power in heaven or hell could make me do if I didn’t love. Therefore, whatever else God may be, He must be like that. So, I love the Master...<sup>99</sup>

In delivering “Standing Inside,” Thurman employed several rhetorical techniques, namely 1) a variety of images and scenes, 2) creative wording 3) vocal phrasing, intonation and silence and 4) self-disclosure. Through them he worked to establish a contemplative ethos which heightened his engagement with his audience, their intake of the preaching and his attentiveness to the Spirit in their midst.<sup>100</sup>

I identified six primary images or scenes in “Standing Inside” Thurman used to articulate the salvific nature of Jesus’ life and ministry, the unity of all of life in God and the practical application of Jesus’ love ethic in daily discipleship.<sup>101</sup> After opening with a consideration of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Thurman’s poetic retrospective of the Master’s earlier

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<sup>98</sup> Thurman, “Standing Inside.”

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> As presented earlier in this chapter, these rhetorical devices and their intended uses were quite commonplace in Thurman’s preaching.

<sup>101</sup> In my analysis of this sermon, I’ve pointed out the following six images or scenes: 1) Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem at Passover; 2) Jesus’ growth and development during his life and ministry; 3) the pre-language continuum; 4) Thurman’s experiences with his grandmother; 5) the teaching section relating three contributions Jesus made to the world; and 6) Thurman’s theodicy confession and final appreciation of Jesus Christ.

years of prayerfully deepening his communion with God and all of existence adds weight and perspective to the Palm Sunday motif. There is no coincidence in the trajectory of Christ's life for Thurman; Jesus' love ethic called him to solidarity, especially with the disinherited, and subsequently to his betrayal, trial, torture and death.<sup>102</sup> Thurman's next image, the "pre-language continuum," further contextualizes Jesus' at-one-ment with life and also is a nexus between Jesus' own intimacy with life as Christ and Ambrose's mystical identity as one who "stood inside (of) Jesus" and saw life "through his eyes."

I believe Thurman's stress on the vital difference between intellectual and experiential familiarity with God in the scene where he is talking theology with Ambrose builds on the trans-concept, trans-language ground of an individual's deepest relationship with the Divine. As the springboard into Thurman's treatment of Jesus' greatest gifts to history, this vignette also might have reoriented his audience to listen with their souls and their minds. Finally, Thurman's confession of his lifelong struggle to believe in and trust a loving God in the closing scene tethers any spiritualized notions of love back to its ethical grounding as the prophetic heart of contemporary discipleship within a broken world.

Thurman enriches the color, tightens the focus and deepens the prayerful elements in each of his images and scenes through his word choice, speech patterns, use of silence and self-disclosure. I have given significant attention to these as well as related elements of discourse in transcribing "Standing Inside" and limit my thoughts here to a few specific observations. Throughout the sermon Thurman introduces vital words, turns of phrase and even goes against traditional rubrics of language to speak his thoughts to the congregation.

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<sup>102</sup> I was not able to locate an order or service or any other indicator of the larger liturgical context of the worship service in which Thurman delivered "Standing Inside." Though Thurman did not cite any particular scriptural passage as the basis of the sermon during his delivery, his reference to the Triumphant Entry brings to mind its original rendering in the Synoptic Gospels. This is particularly interesting given that the Western Church would have just finished celebrating Easter Sunday a few weeks prior on Sunday, March 22, 1970.

He illustrates Jesus' intimate solidarity with existence by noting how the Master could feel "the sparrow-ness of the sparrow...the leprosy of the leper...the blindness of the blind...the cripple-ness of the cripple and the frenzy of the mad."<sup>103</sup> Thurman's creative phrasing, especially when coupled with his slowed rate of delivery in naming each quality Christ knew, gains the reader's ear and mind. The preacher identifies with sense as a way of knowing himself later in the sermon when he admits his tendency to more easily "feel" than "think" his way into the fact of God as animating Creator of all things. This bit of self-disclosure confirms Thurman's persistence in his opening desire ("to feel and think" with his congregation about Jesus Christ) and also potentially reminds his listeners to attend to the sermon through their own affective channels.

Throughout "Standing Inside," both Thurman's intonation and cadence are in constant flux. As in his other sermons, in this text Thurman's slow delivery of certain words and phrases gives rise to the image of the words arising out of liturgical silence, being conceived and then gestating in his mouth through the sounding of their first syllables and finally being born into the world of the sermon and the service through the gentle pour or sharp push of his breath and lips. A particular example arises in his treatment of "professional lovers." Thurman slows his cadence at the beginning of the following passage and particularizes each occasion of the word "love" to cast a divide between love as merely a technique and love as holistic lifestyle:

Now let me tarry for a moment here...you see I think that just as we know now from our recent and remote experiences that there are professional healers in the world...there are professional lovers also...whose business it is to peddle love but not to love. Now this is the thing that has overtaken Christianity.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Thurman, "Standing Inside."

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

Thurman's tone in this passage is warm while gently instructive concerning the issue of clerical professionalism concerning Christian hospitality. This is in stark contrast to his caustic and prophetic declaration concerning the harm in humanity's growing alienation from the larger Creation. He delivers the following statements in a voice signaling personal desperation and pastoral concern and a quickening cadence.

One reason I think that the number of hospitals are increasing in populations, every second bed is mentally disturbed: it is not due to the fact that we are living under so much pressure, and the noise and the tempo of life is so magnified. That's important. But I think that the real reason, the real reason is this...that there is something deep in man that is rooted in the earth...in the earth...that he is a part of the earth...of the wind, the stars...[extended pause]...and you can't poison the streams, pollute the atmosphere, upset the balance of life without the pain of that being felt in the psyche of modern man. No. This is what I am talking about.<sup>105</sup>

At this point Thurman takes a breath and seems to recollect himself and let his argument settle into his congregant's minds. He then concludes his thoughts in a forceful though breathier tone:

Life is what I can't violate...life...without killing something in me. I can't do it. And we don't believe that.<sup>106</sup>

The silences within "Standing Inside" seem to be present for several purposes. A number of silences are practically necessary due to the sermon's significant length and number of moves. These moments of pause give Thurman a chance to catch his breath and recenter his spirit before moving into a new idea or section. Other periods of silence, both brief and extended, are characteristic of Thurman's unique homiletical style. Within these silences Thurman would wait meditatively for the words that best expressed the ideas and feelings he wanted to convey to present themselves. Finally, Thurman frequently held intentional silence

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<sup>105</sup> Thurman, "Standing Inside."

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

at various moments in his preaching as a means of presenting a particular word, phrase or point to the congregation in and of itself as an individual element to be reflected upon within the sermon's larger context.

### **Case-Studies: Concluding Thoughts**

I conclude this section with some general comments about these texts as a group and how they collectively speak to Thurman's concern for peace and mysticism in light of this chapter's focus on his spiritual idiom. In the fourth stanza of his poetic musings on Psalm 139 Thurman wrote, "My words cry out to give their hearts away. Again and again I seek my way with them."<sup>107</sup> The psalmist's original verse, "Before a word is on my tongue, lo, O LORD Thou knowest it altogether," inspired these lines. The three texts I've examined represent unique conversations in which Thurman—the pastor, the theologian and the mystic—worked to share spiritual insight and ethical challenge with his audience while also sharing himself as a spiritual shepherd who, like them, was also a seeker.

The painful question Thurman raises in "Necessities" concerning the real chance of peace in "the heart that remembers Hiroshima" is at one with his stated personal difficulty believing in a God of love and God as love in the concluding lines of "Standing Inside." The acute violences of atomic warfare and racism/segregation, especially in Thurman's day, flushed the question of theodicy out of the ivory tower and into the marketplace, sanctuary pew and the campus green. Reading across these three case-studies texts, Thurman comes across as one well-versed in tending to the questions of faith themselves, in both their painful and joyful complexities, before pronouncing some "good word" about God capable of

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<sup>107</sup> Thurman, *Inward Journey*, 144.

remedying every individual and social dis-ease. In the particular questions of faith he raised, both implicitly and explicitly, I believe Thurman led his congregant-readers more deeply into their individual selves, their collective identities and the larger global scene in order to affirm, rather than spiritualize, reality and from there to find and be found by, rather than to despair of or doubt, the Divine Presence he named God. For those he invited to ascertain their particular realities who were not ready or able to sense or source God in their experience, I believe Thurman himself, as author and preacher, was a vital emblem and envoy of such presence.

In sum, I believe the requisites for peace Thurman affirmed in “Necessities” (“faith in life, faith in one’s self, faith in one another, faith in God”) are necessarily vetted and hopefully validated in the encounter of self-in-/God/-in-self that Thurman investigated in his contemporary psalmody.

Parsing these three texts in light of one another, I locate the author-preacher at the center of a theistic cross with congruent beams. One piece bridges the inward and outward dimensions of spirituality while the other spans the spiritual found in both the sacred and the profane, transversely perched and speaking to all quadrants: Thurman the essayist, the poet and the preacher.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

I have attempted to present Thurman as nothing less and nothing more than what he was as orator and writer—a mystically intuitive, intellectually and aesthetically creative and purposeful pastor and public theologian who used his gifts of language to create and share prayerful community with his congregants and readers, to touch and allow transformation of

their individual and shared crises and to recalibrate their sense of self and history in the context of a living, companioning God.

Through his sermons, lectures, audio-recordings and published texts Thurman served as teaching theologian and spiritual guide to many people from a wide array of cultural and religious backgrounds. I believe there also was a more intimate intrapersonal conversational dynamic at play in this heart of his outreach. In speaking and writing for others, Thurman also sought to find, nurture, bless and express himself as a minister-educator who was born and raised and lived and worked in a country, educational system, social movement and religious establishment that never adequately appreciated his particular theological genius.

Affirming Jesus as a *koinonia* preacher-architect and reclaiming the language of silence, poetry and nature as a trusted mystic womb supporting spiritual growth for those to whom he ministered was also Thurman's primary means of effecting personal reconciliation by attending to his own life experience life. Furthermore, I believe the fact that his rhetorical self-disclosure was not always conscious and never employed as a gimmick deepened his congregants' and readers' trust in his middle mythology; they witnessed Thurman constructing and inhabiting it in Sunday liturgy and giving it feet through the week. More attention is given to this reality in the remaining chapters.

All of Thurman's individual writings and sermons taken together and cross-read as one cumulative text may, following Catholic theologian David Tracy's reasoning, be argued to be a "classic."<sup>108</sup> Tracy characterizes a "classic" as a culturally specific "text" (writing, person, event, symbol) bearing an excess of meaning and an explicit timelessness which confronts the reader, conjures in her/him a sense that reality is different or more than s/he

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<sup>108</sup> David Tracy, *On Naming the Present: God, Hermeneutics, and Church* (New York: Orbis Books, 1994), 115.

currently knows and thereby “transforms her/his horizon” via a largesse of meaning that is both particular and universal.<sup>109</sup> Though dwarfed by established “classics” such as the *Gita* and Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, like them Thurman’s pastoral corpus confronts and converts worldviews and has inherent strengths and weaknesses.

The primary brilliance of Thurman’s idiom was his ability to fuse contemplative image, historical fact and moral intent in a spiritual vision that spoke to the core experience and love-ethic of Jesus, yet remained ecumenically and interreligiously conversant. His extrapolation of the natural world and the arts reopened both as ripe seedbeds of holy witness, where his hearers and readers, both within and beyond his texts, could see, hear, and know God. Wrapping these aspects in a conversational pastoral voice that was neither sophistic nor sentimental, Thurman practiced respectful intimacy with his congregants and readers.

His idiom’s weaknesses emerge from the lack of his devotional-spiritual texts’ clear tether in his theological and philosophical thought. Had Thurman supplemented his poesy with more critical context when parsing mystics like Eckhart and Fenelon, or Christian thought on war and peace, or his personal Christology, his contemplative voice would have been more efficient in training his audience in reflective “thought.” However, doing so may have also depleted the sense of astute “feeling” Thurman most desired to convey. Additionally, had Thurman further developed his homiletics, specifically in reference to the place of silence, ritual and political commentary in his own sermons and preaching and liturgy in general, he might have quieted some of the cult mythos surrounding his mystic speech, gained more credibility among theologians teaching preaching and ministerial formation, and perhaps even published a standard homiletical text.

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<sup>109</sup> David Tracy, 115.



Regardless of these and other potential critiques of Thurman's "ministry of the word" and spiritual idiom, it is clear that as a minister, mystic and teacher he creatively catechized himself and others in a rigorous acoustics of God. "The purpose," he writes "remains ever the same: to focus the mind and the heart upon God as the Eternal Source and Goal of Life. To find Him as Companion and Presence is 'to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly' with Him."<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Thurman, *Inward Journey*, 7. Internal quote is from Micah 6:8.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **“WHOLE-MAKING”: HOWARD THURMAN AS PEACEMAKER**

The long arm of the relentless logic of reaping and sowing gathers within the sweep of its judgment the innocent and the guilty, the responsible and the irresponsible, the weak and the strong, the old and the young. The heavy shadow of the threat of war is upon us, and as we search our own hearts we find we are at war within ourselves. We recognize the failure of the things upon which we have pinned our hopes. We recognize the hopes that have not deserted us, even in these strange times loaded with stranger events, and we long for some authentic word that will speak peace to our hearts and peace to the nations of the earth. Even as we long for this, our guilt looms ever before us. We are wanderers with shattered spirits, offering in the quietness our fragments...Our Father, Creator of life, Sustainer of the generations of men, leave us not alone, leave us not alone.

Howard Thurman, “Reaping and Sowing,” *The Centering Moment*

#### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Throughout his life and since his death in 1981, Howard Thurman has been tagged with many monikers: mystic, gifted preacher, American Gandhi, “activator of activists” and poet, among others. In the previous chapters I have explored various elements of his concerns with peace and mysticism. In this final chapter I integrate findings from chapters one through four, first by using the paradigm of “whole-making” to identify certain strengths and weaknesses of Thurman’s witness, and then through a consideration of Thurman as (a) “peacemaker.” I follow up these two sections with a brief sketch-up of potential next steps in research and teaching related to Thurman, peace and mysticism, and spiritual formation more broadly construed. Finally, an overall conclusion to my dissertation rounds out this chapter.

## II. “WHOLE-MAKING”: A COMMON THEME IN THURMAN’S LIFE, THOUGHT, AND SPIRITUAL IDIOM

In recovering Thurman’s concerns with and treatment of peace, especially as linked to his interest in mysticism, I have stressed the centrality of his concept of “community” in his religious thought and pastoral work in these areas. His corollary notion of “whole-making,” particularly as manifest in his cosmology and interpretation of mysticism, also factors significantly into his analysis of peace. It provides a prime heuristic through which to assess positive and negative critiques of his work.

### Rehearsing Thurman’s Notion of “Whole-Making”

Thurman used the term “whole-making” in referring to the inherent dynamic of concrescence he believed was present in all forms of life. Thurman argued that Life’s tendency toward unity at every level of existence was the ultimate clue to peace *is/as* community as creation’s primary method and final telos. He taught that the human individual ultimately aspires, as with other forms of life, toward harmony in all facets of her/his life, including relationship with self and others (interpersonally and socially/collectively; intrapersonally in negotiating a proper “sense of self”; spiritually relating to God; and ecologically in relationship with other forms of life). Through mystical encounter a person apprehends life’s unity and her/his correlation within it. S/he is also flooded with “whole-making energies” which orients and empowers her/his efforts to realize peace *is/as community* within her/himself and in the world.

While formally positing “whole-making” as a means of more closely articulating his view of life’s search for unity Thurman also incorporated the concept more personally into

his own personal and professional search for deeper wholeness in all of his relationships.<sup>1</sup> As a means of reviewing central findings from the previous chapters, I will now consider essential aspects of “whole-making” in Thurman’s life, thought and spiritual idiom.

Thurman’s life can be considered as a search for whole-making, his thought a contemplative explication of whole-making and his spiritual idiom a means of channeling God’s call to wholeness and inviting others into whole-making as gift, power, call and responsibility.

### **Whole-making in Thurman’s Life, Thought and Spiritual Idiom**

#### *Whole-Making in Thurman’s Life*

Thurman’s life was a consistent and persistent search for wholeness—from his Waycross childhood through his final bout with cancer. His own experiences of sensing it, seeking it and finding it informed his formal articulation of the different types of peace and, more personally, the manifold resources needed for peace with(in) himself and his relationships with God, his family, his Church and society, and of course the natural world. Thurman was always seeking the most authentic integration of the many and varied aspects of his personal and professional experience into a singular life.

Schooled from an early age on life’s innate tendencies toward harmony—as well as on human culture’s ability to cultivate or stomp out such tendencies—Thurman landed as an undergraduate at Morehouse confident that wholeness could be located and fostered even in situations of intense fracture. From Morehouse forward he was resolved to make the most of every opportunity for the well-being within himself and among his family, fellows and

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<sup>1</sup> Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1979), 269. Here Thurman writes, “My testimony is that life is against all dualism. Life is One. Therefore, a way of life that is worth living must be a way worthy of life itself. Nothing less than that can abide. Always, against all that fragments and shatters and against all things that separate and divide within and without, life labors to meld together into a single harmony.”

colleagues. Thurman's decision for the ministry was a watershed moment in his search for community; in it he formally and professionally affirmed and answered his long-held sense of "call." In his graduate theological training and the various positions he held as pastor and educator, he persisted in primary relationships, spiritual disciplines and theological discourse which nurtured his spiritual sensitivities and center.<sup>2</sup>

### *Whole-Making in Thurman's Thought*

Thurman's religious thought illustrates his constructive arguments for "whole-making" as inherent in life, as a necessary project for culture; and also to clarify and nurture the role of religion and the religious, particularly Christianity and the contemporary Christian, as vital and joyful heralds of peace, justice and reconciliation. All of his writing, lecturing and preaching centered on naming and exploring essential aspects of community. His signature interdisciplinary method of incorporating findings from disparate academic disciplines, professional fields, and cultural histories was consistent in his essays, sermons and other texts composing his "peace literature."<sup>3</sup>

What was novel and illuminating was the amount and quality of attention Thurman dedicated to other socio-spiritual issues (i.e. poverty/materialism, military engagement, interreligious dialogue and fellowship, and ecological concerns) while maintaining his lifelong focus on fostering interracial harmony and mutual understanding. As he did with

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<sup>2</sup> Inherent in Thurman's search for environments that would enable him to give himself to the work of whole-making as a minister, while also feeding his own spiritual and relational needs, was his interest in, study of and relationships with individuals, collectives and traditions that themselves modeled, and sometimes even radicalized, the whole-making principle. Certainly Gandhi, Ambrose and his second wife Sue Bailey headline this group but there were many other similar souls to whom Thurman gravitated throughout his life (male mentors in Waycross, the American Indians, the Morehouse Men and Rufus Jones among others).

<sup>3</sup> As recalled, I employ this term to reference the larger informal collection of Thurman's analytical writings, lectures and sermons as well as certain centering pieces specifically devoted to addressing the topic of "peace" and related subjects (i.e. reconciliation, nonviolence, whole-making).

racism/segregation, Thurman situated his rather significant treatment of these other concerns within a Christian hermeneutic of peace and justice. Stewardship of the earth, economic justice for the socially disinherited and neighborly communion with the religious and cultural “other” were ethically sound for Thurman precisely because they were inherent components of individual and social righteousness under God.

### *Whole-Making in Thurman’s Spiritual Idiom*

Thurman’s centering pieces, sermons and contemplative essays, taken together with his liturgical innovations, represent the “texts” of his spiritual idiom. I have employed the term “spiritual idiom” to name the ways in which Thurman used language, both written and spoken, and related rhetorical elements to teach about and form persons in the mystical dynamics of reconciliation. Evidence of whole-making in his spiritual idiom is first seen in Thurman’s desire to help his congregants and readers see the entirety of their personal lives as well as all of existence as holy ground wherein they might meet the living God and work as spiritual agents of peace and justice. Exploring such perennial religious themes as Christ’s Nativity and the Maccabean Revolt, and regularly expositing scripture, Thurman also frequently wrote on spiritual themes within everyday life in an attempt to highlight the soulful aspects of so-called “secular” life.<sup>4</sup>

Thurman’s use of silence, story, self-disclosure, and the arts as well as traditional and contemporary performance of Christian ritual pointed to his desire to share affective and imaginative spiritual community with his audience as a vital part of, rather than prelude to, his intellectually creative and ethically challenging teaching. Thurman’s spiritual idiom

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<sup>4</sup> Thurman was especially interested in sunset, dusk, mealtimes, late-night brooding, encounters with/in the natural world and also events of societal, national and international violence, peace and revolution as particular moments in everyday life pregnant with religious/spiritual meaning and consequence.

allowed him to function as both a mystic-preacher and poet-philosopher. The theologian Richard Deats believes that the titles of Thurman's contemplative texts in themselves illustrate the whole-making tendencies and intellectual and spiritual depth of Thurman's idiom:

[Thurman] came across as one who was deeply mystical, deeply attuned to the spirit welling up from within. I think my wife always says the titles of his books are wonderful and stay with you—that they express Thurman: *Growing Edge*, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, *Footprints of a Dream*. The way he had with images. The way they stuck with you. That was why he was such a great preacher and writer.<sup>5</sup>

Thurman also reached beyond mere analysis, and through pastoral imagination sought to personally engage with his audience and positively affect their commerce in the world. His spiritual idiom was his means of channeling God's call to wholeness and inviting others into whole-making as gift, power, call and responsibility.

### **Thurman's Witness Concerning Peace and Mysticism: Strengths and Innovations**

Thurman's overall witness relative to peace and mysticism presents in his personal life, religious thought, professional ministry and spiritual idiom. Primarily a pastor-preacher and teacher, as a consummate generalist he was able to make significant contributions to many facets of ecclesial, educational and cultural life. Four particular strengths and innovations that merit specific consideration are: 1) Thurman's insistence on what I will term "spirituality at the center"; 2) his contributions to spiritual nonviolence, particularly within mainline Christianity; and 3) The Breadth and Depth of Thurman's Treatment of Various "Images of Rupture"; and 4) Thurman's Writing and Liturgical Ministry.

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<sup>5</sup> Author interview with Richard Deats, August 27, 2003, audio cassette.

*Thurman's Insistence on Spirituality at the Center*

Thurman's concern with spirituality was something he shared with many of his close colleagues, including other seminal religious personalities who, like him, shaped America's spiritual geography during the twentieth century. Particular to Thurman was his insistence on placing spirituality at the center of ministry. Spirituality was the defining principle of his own pastoral work; he felt it should also be the foundation of all ministry within the Church, academy and domestic and transnational projects of social change.

He understood mysticism as a particular way of spirituality, one that, when practiced properly, tended to promote wholeness in both individual and collective religion as a means of personal and social growth in peace and righteousness.<sup>6</sup> Thurman worked to democratize mysticism in his ministry, believing that it was both a means and sign of peace open to the lifestyle and needs of all people, including the cloistered ascetic, faithful layperson and steadfast activist alike.

The whole-making spirituality inherent in mysticism, Thurman felt, could mature and enrich individual and collective life. He advocated it as a vital exercise for any and all who were interested in true religion. Thurman argued that the Church's will to political power, America's preference for over-sentimental, entertainment-driven, legalistic or hyper-rational religion and ecclesial apathy naïveté concerning spiritual disciplines was responsible for

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<sup>6</sup> Thurman's thinking in this area finds much congruency with Roger S. Gottlieb's arguments in his article "The Transcendence of Justice and the Justice of Transcendence: Mysticism, Deep Ecology, and Political Life," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, (March 1999): 149-166. In particular on pp. 164-65 Gottlieb writes, "Humanity's responses to the perils and pains of existence give rise to many attempts to see the sources of our suffering, to escape or transcend our limits, and to form or recognize communities of solidarity— both with other people and other beings. The cry of the heart has gone out to gods and goddesses, to totem animals and sacred mountains, and to those with whom we would join on the barricades. In the desperate time of the present, as cynics celebrate the end of alternatives to global capitalism, global industrialism, and global technoadddiction, those of us who are not entranced by the prospect of a fully administered society search for something else. Surely we can touch with our living hearts the Heart of the World and listen to the secret revelations of its unending beat. Surely, at least as individuals, we do not have to be bound by the endless commodification of the living world. Surely, if we cannot defeat or change, then we can *transcend* that which surrounds us."



mystical spirituality's ouster from its central place within the lives of religious institutions and spiritual individuals. And just as he worked as the "spiritual architect" of social programs to reintegrate spiritual empowerment and contemplative disciplines into various initiatives fighting for social change, Thurman similarly functioned as a spiritual father of the modern church, reforming the worship experience, educational programs and social engagement of the communities he pastored and advocating similar renewal in the larger church as well as within other faith-based institutions.<sup>7</sup> Thurman's work as a modern reformer keen to place spirituality at the center of the work of the church and culture signals his concern that humanity reorient itself and its hyperactive pursuit of life within a more receptive posture. Such a posture, he believed, allowed space to first recognize the need for Another (namely God) and second, recover God as the source, standard and sustainer of all works of peace and justice at all levels.

*Thurman's Contributions to Spiritual Nonviolence particularly within Mainline Christianity*

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<sup>7</sup> In my research on Thurman's informal ecclesiology as I've discerned it inherently interwoven within his sermons, centering pieces and also his more formal socio-spiritual analytical texts, I was reminded of Avery Dulles' seminal work on ecclesiology, *Models of the Church* (New York, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1987).

Dulles' text was often criticized by a number of initial reviewers, both from academe and administrators of local congregations, because of a misread of an important aspect of his text. In *Models*, Dulles treats five interrelated (and not mutually exclusive) metaphors, constructs or "models" of the Christian Church (the Church as—Institution, Mystical Communion, Sacrament, Herald, and Servant). Certain critics have taken Dulles' thesis as an argument for various local congregations and different denominational branches of the larger Christian Church to prioritize one or more of these "models" of being and doing "church" over/against the others. Dulles intended the opposite. In offering these various models, his intent was to demonstrate the various calls Christians had in their collective identity as the people of God and followers of Christ, and to do so in a way that affirmed the potential mutual enrichment of these various models within each denominational and local congregation.

Using Dulles' models in reference to Thurman's ecclesiology, Thurman certainly seems to have prioritized church as "mystical communion" and church as "servant" while working within the institutional necessities of organized religion so as to have the widest potential proclamation and effect for the ministry he shared with his congregants, students and colleagues. I also suspect that because he was so disillusioned with the traditional "missionary" aspect of the Christian Church, Thurman, again borrowing from Dulles' terminology, may very well have seen the "Servant"-hood of the local and universal Church as the greatest proclamation or "evangelical" call institutionalize Christianity could make.

Thurman's personal pacifism will never measure up to that of Mohandas Gandhi or James Lawson; nor is his formal treatment of Christian nonviolence on a par, analytically speaking, with that of Jim Douglass, James Cone or Walter Wink. Still, Thurman's contributions to the spiritual roots and aspects of nonviolence, particularly from within Christianity, are as significant as they are unique. Bennett's well-worn title for Thurman as "American Gandhi" is indeed appropriate, especially given the many ways Thurman contributed to the recasting of the whole of Gandhian nonviolence (i.e. its spiritual, ethical and political aspects) into a theologically cogent and socially applicable vehicle for Americans to advance positive change in the areas of workers' rights and desegregation and related peace and justice campaigns. Where others have criticized Thurman for "going mystic," I believe his self-chosen situatedness as a contemplative churchman among so many motivated activists, policy writers, activist-artists and publicly-minded intellectuals allowed Thurman to make the wide-ranging contributions he did.

Central to Thurman's accomplishments in this area were: 1) Thurman's theological explication of nonviolence vis-à-vis religious/mystical experience and the vision and program of the Gospels and 2) his articulation and application of these theological principles in imagining discipleship as a practical lifestyle of nonviolence intent on proclaiming, participating in and practicing Jesus' "love-ethic."

A bit of context is helpful in addressing the first element. As American theologians and social activists were working to translate Gandhi's *satyagraha* program and its specific spirituality into their social justice campaigns during the twentieth century, several variables confounded their work.<sup>8</sup> As Leila Danielson has asserted, as children of the Social Gospel

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<sup>8</sup> Leilah C. Danielson, "'In My Extremity I Turned to Gandhi': American pacifists, Christianity, and Gandhian nonviolence, 1915-1941," *Church History* (June 2003): 361-388.

many American Christians, particularly Protestants, “feared that boycotts and civil disobedience lacked the spirit of love and goodwill that made social redemption possible,” despite their appreciation for the Mahatma’s opposition to violence in any form.<sup>9</sup>

Additionally, Gandhi’s belief in the power and importance of spiritual purity and his related expectation that his satyagrahi commit themselves to spiritual disciplines<sup>10</sup> in preparation for their social acts of resistance and love were not shared by many leaders in the American church.<sup>11</sup>

Thurman’s own fascination with Gandhi as a spiritual person and social movement leader, along with his personal commitments and pastoral advocacy concerning spiritual disciplines (especially for those engaged in works of resistance) enabled Thurman to articulate a confessionally appropriate, personalist-centered and socially applicable Christian spirituality of nonviolence for his American contemporaries in *Jesus and the Disinherited*, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, *The Luminous Darkness* and *The Creative Encounter*.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Danielson, 361.

<sup>10</sup> Standard disciplines here including fasting, simple living, seasonal celibacy and regular examination of conscience.

<sup>11</sup> Danielson, 362. Here she writes, “Gandhi’s belief in the power of spiritual purity held limited appeal for African American civil rights activists, and they rarely used tactics like fasting and simple living as part of their nonviolent campaign for freedom and equality. Martin Luther King, Jr. also had a stronger conviction of human sinfulness than Gandhi, frequently urging his fellow activists against, ‘superficial optimism.’” She continues later on the same page, “American pacifists worked to redo Gandhi in this way: “...entailed appropriating Gandhi as a Jesus figure and placing nonviolence within the context of Social Gospel ideals. It also involved displacing their progressive heritage, with its overriding confidence in the power of reason and parliamentarianism to reform social ills. Thus, despite the decline of pacifism within mainline Protestantism over the course of the 1930s, it continued to evolve in ways that would profoundly shape American reform culture in the postwar era.”

<sup>12</sup> These four texts of Thurman’s, when taken together, offer a substantial treatment of mysticism and social change considered from theological, psychosocial and historical perspectives. *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949) presents Thurman’s seminal liberation-focused Christic spirituality. *The Creative Encounter* (1954) offers a detailed analysis of the intrapersonal and social dynamics of religious experience. It provides additional insights into the interpersonal and intrapersonal dynamics of relationship between the individual person and society (particularly the disinherited individual and the larger cultural matrix) which Thurman addressed in *Jesus and the Disinherited*. *Disciplines of the Spirit* (1963) provides theological study and practical instruction on five disciplines (Commitment, Growing in Wisdom and Stature, Suffering, Prayer and Reconciliation) which, taken in tandem or individually, can deepen religious and ethical identity and agency. And finally, in *The Luminous Darkness* (1965) Thurman provides a cogent narrative historical overview of Southern culture in the United

Second (and for me more vital) are Thurman's efforts and accomplishments in integrating the theological principles, prayerful disciplines and overarching triumphant mood of these texts and other of his related lectures and essays into the bedrock of his pastoral ministry as a preacher, counselor and teacher. Again, just as mysticism was not exclusive to the archetypal spiritual sage, effective nonviolence, especially effective Gospel-based nonviolence, was not something only lifelong activists were to be involved in and committed to. No, Thurman invited all individuals, especially Christians, to recover a practical lifestyle of nonviolence and whole-making as the essence of sharing and celebrating the Gospel in the world. Thurman's personal and professional experience had convinced him that to idealize and perhaps even intend such life were important starting points, but in the end both were a far cry from consistently actualizing Gospel-based nonviolence in the daily round.<sup>13</sup>

*The Breadth and Depth of Thurman's Treatment of Various "Images of Rupture"*

Mindful of my substantial consideration of Thurman's treatment of five primary images of social rupture in previous chapters, here I only wish to make two final observations

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States between the 1900-1960's. This last text serves to concretize Thurman's more formal analyses presented in the previous three books within his historical and cultural context.

<sup>13</sup> Thurman was an enthusiastic advocate for the place of spirituality and spiritual disciplines in the lives of individuals working for social change and also encouraged such disciplines to be incorporated into the formal preparation and prosecution of various works of nonviolent resistance.

Thurman was well aware of the significant commitment of time, mental and spiritual energy and humility necessary to cultivate depth, maturity, resilience and trust in the spiritual life. Writing about this in *Deep is the Hunger*, he notes on p. 151, "The notion is that spiritual life requires cultivation, development, and is not a gift merely. For such a process, time is of the essence... Time is of the essence in developing the inner life because, without a large sense of leisure, the external world with its demands, emergencies and crises, chokes the flowering of the mood of Presence..."

Along with individuals and groups learning to withdraw from life's busyness and daily demands to make time for quiet prayer, self-reflection and other more contemplative disciplines, Thurman also noted the resistance modern humanity had to sitting still, being alone and letting go of a hectic, action-centered lifestyle and ethic. Concerning this he writes on pp. 96-97 in *Disciplines of the Spirit*, "We must lose our fear of rest, our fear of solitude. We have made a fetish of fevered action, we build up our own sense of security." Here he also gives the idea of the two apple trees and then says, "So that when the time comes for the long pull, the really productive period or season in one's life—there is no storehouse of energy or resources upon which one may draw. And one of the best ways for the accumulation of these things...they cannot happen automatically. They must be prepared for—so that the first place, it seems to me to be very important that we learn how to be still, we learn how to have reprieve, to give to the spirit and to the body and to one's whole self a sense of lull. And this is contrary to the tradition of our culture."

concerning his analysis of racism/segregation, poverty/materialism, war/military engagement, interreligious dialogue and community and environmental degradation as a whole. First, I believe that a fundamental analytical integrity and systematic diagnosis can be seen running across and in the spaces in between Thurman's individual treatment of these five specific areas of rupture. It is very unlikely that Thurman intended his thoughts on these different issues to be formally integrated into a unified set of sermons or a single published text. Nevertheless, across them all, as well as in between any two or three of them taken in tandem, consistencies persist in his analyses. Front and center within each are: 1) Thurman's concern to prioritize the individual's experience of and proper religious and ethical response to each instance of "rupture", 2) analysis of the benefits to the wider human family if positive action is taken toward justice and reconciliation, 3) encouragement to do something to alleviate suffering and bring peace, no matter how small the act or positive impact and 4) a call for prayerful hope, patience and solidarity to be shared with others, especially those directly impacted in the various episodes of violence.

Secondly, Thurman's treatment of these five issues central to peace and reconciliation reveals his ability to bring a wide range of resources to bear in his thinking and writing without losing his central focus on the mystical encounter and ethical responsibilities of the individual person. Weaving together insights from Meister Eckhart, Anna Freud and contemporary cellular biology with Buddhist philosophy, notes from the slave spirituals, and autobiographical yarns to argue on one topic, a speaker/writer risks losing his/her own or the audience's focus. However, Thurman rarely lost his analytical and pastoral focus on the solitary individual's call and responsibility before God to work for personal, societal and

cosmic peace, even while speaking on major societal and global issues such as war and environmental concerns.

*Thurman's Writing and Liturgical Ministry*

Finally, Thurman's spiritual idiom represents a fourth strength and innovation within his treatment of peace and mysticism. As a writer, preacher, educator and liturgist Thurman comforted, challenged and called his congregants, students and readers to a deeper integration of all aspects of their lives into a singular "sense of self" which could be lifted up in prayerful surrender and offering to God. Thurman integrated contemporary domestic and international issues, events and problems related to violence, justice and peace into his worship services and devotional writings. Theological reflection upon war, racial and political conflict and the plight of third-world kin in the context of communal worship and contemplative reading allowed Thurman and his listeners a slower, less cerebral encounter with themselves and God as they explored these various areas of conflict and need. Fusing the real life stuff of peace and violence with teachings on prayer, confession and the experience of God in his idiom, Thurman sounded three calls in one.

He called activists and policy makers to "shine the spotlight inward"<sup>14</sup> so as to deepen their internal spiritual engagement with God and others as a means of sanctifying and strengthening their public witness. He called socially passive individuals, particularly those who were Christians, to greater theological reflection on and active engagement in the social pursuit of peace and justice. And he called the doctrinaire believers to recover the experiential ground of faith en route to the realization that radical solidarity with the

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<sup>14</sup> This phrase is attributed to Mohandas K. Gandhi.

teachings of Christ, rather than institution-centered religious piety, was the true sign of righteousness before God (and in all relationships).

### **Thurman's Witness Concerning Peace and Mysticism: Questions and Critiques**

Thurman's wide-reaching ministry allowed him to invite and guide changes at the congregational, campus, regional and national levels as he pursued his work in peace and mysticism. Three areas of his life and thought that merit deeper critique and questioning include: 1) Thurman's relationship with Christianity; 2) his theology and praxis of interreligious encounter and community; and 3) his analysis of social ethics and collective morality.

#### *Thurman and Christianity*

Central to my general interest in Thurman as a spiritual guide and more precisely in the interplay of peace and mysticism in his life and thought is the matter of his Christian identity. Thurman was raised in the church, baptized, licensed to preach and ordained in the church and spent the majority of his professional life as a congregational pastor, university chaplain and teaching theologian. Explication of the life, teaching and example of Jesus Christ as well as the teachings and lives of numerous Christian mystics and theologians were often at the center of Thurman's writing and liturgical work. Yet Thurman did not refer to himself as a Christian, nor specify his work as that of exclusively Christian theology or ministry. These facts take on increasing significance given Thurman's periods of disillusionment with the institutional Church and also his lifelong pastoral experiments in cultivating interracial and intercultural spiritual communities that, while understanding themselves as "churches,"

certainly deviated from even the most minimal contemporary ecclesial standards legitimating Christian worship, confession of faith and church membership.

A related and more particular question is the matter of Thurman's final analysis of the place of Christianity among other world religions and spiritual traditions. Positively, Thurman's hospitable engagement with, and in some cases defense of, other faith paths is a strong witness to the cruciform solidarity, mutual understanding and humility before God and others at the heart of the Christian Gospel. Similarly, his writing and preaching against war, racism, and other social sins, and his related concern to foster a theologically informed eco-stewardship—all of which were primarily grounded in Christian scripture and theology—find Thurman in the company of Elton Trueblood, Dorothy Day, Clarence Jordan and other self-identified Christians who saw Christianity as ministry performed not only in the Church but by the Church in and for the world.

So how did Thurman, author of *Jesus and the Disinherited* and grandson of Nancy Ambrose, understand and identify himself and his life's work? As a Christian minister working within an imperfect church and world and preaching an inclusive Gospel? As a seeker who centered his own religious faith and theology on the essentials of the historical Jesus and a Schweitzerian resurrection principle?

My quest to nail down as much as possible the specifics of Thurman's Christian identity relative to his personal faith and formal ministry is either finally answered or ultimately frustrated in facing the fact of Thurman's own mystical posture and significant treatment of mysticism. Does Thurman's reputation and identity as a mystic (or at least a deeply formed



spiritual individual with mystic tendencies) concretize, blur or in other ways nuance his Christian-ness?<sup>15</sup> Commenting on this Altschuler-Byrne argues:

Thurman as a mystic and Thurman as a Christian? There need not be any dichotomy in the use of these words to describe Howard Thurman. He was both a Christian and a mystic. However, it would not be accurate to meld these two words into a label like ‘Christian mystic’ because by definition that is self-limiting. In the fullest sense, however, he was a follower of Jesus and he embraced the mystic approach to developing a spiritual life.<sup>16</sup>

My working view of Thurman’s theological leanings and religious identity is that while his spirituality was mystical (i.e. he operated from an experiential, contemplative center), Thurman’s religious identity was decisively “Christian” (i.e. one who takes as his primary spiritual and ethical Guide/Companion Jesus-Christ) as evidenced in his autobiographical writings, more formal theology and his lifetime of service within Christian churches and church-related educational institutions.

### *Thurman and Other Religious Traditions*

The previous question of Thurman’s Christian identity directly relates to my concern with his approach to interreligious dialogue and community. He believed and taught that the

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<sup>15</sup> My use of the concept “Christian-ness” here is rooted in Raimundo Panikkar’s explication of the notion in his article, “The Dawn of Christianness,” *CrossCurrents* 50 (Spring/Summer 2000): 185-195. Writing on pp. 189-90 Panikkar conceives of “Christianness” as a Christ-centered spiritual path and identity rooted in “...the confession of a personal faith that adopts an attitude similar to that of Christ, to the degree that Christ represents the central symbol of one’s life. I call this aspect Christianness, by which I hope to suggest a new Christic consciousness. The novelty is sociological and consists above all in passing from an esoteric awareness, which might be called mystical, to outward forms of realization...Christianness constitutes the Christian contribution to this cosmic change in the adventure of the universe in which we are all involved... Christianness does not need to be interpreted as an exclusively historical fact. It is something we are in the process of creating, but it is not being made only by us. A distinction should be made between Christianity, church, and Christ, referring to the social aspect of religion, its sacramental dimension, and its mystical nucleus. It is the last, which might be called the Christic principle, that is related to Christianness.”

<sup>16</sup> Sydna Altschuler Byrne, interview by author, electronic mail transcript, January 18, 2004, 4. Altschuler Byrne also contends, “In the traditional sense of the word theology—the study of God and the various streams of religious beliefs—I would say that Thurman would be difficult to place in any particular category of religious belief. His work went beyond the cataloging of religious thought and directly to the heart of the matter—namely the experience of God as direct and knowable. In my view he was more mystic than theologian. His wife, Sue, once said to me, ‘Howard is God’s man.’” Italics mine.

person, teachings, platform, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ was unique. But was it exclusively so for Thurman and if so, then by what standards and in what ways? How did Thurman's interpretation of the Christian Gospel affect his engagement with the non-Christian other?

Three points serve to articulate these issues. First, I believe that Thurman consciously engaged individual persons, essential teachings and the larger institutional realities of non-Christian faith traditions as a theistic contemplative ministering through the Christian Church whose personal faith and pastoral work, while influenced by a great diversity of wisdom traditions, were absolutely centered in the person and teachings of Jesus Christ. His well-chronicled ability to debate and pray with non-Christians was born of and strengthened by his careful study of his own Christian tradition, other axial faiths, intellectual and cultural history and also regular assessment of his own religious identity. In extending himself toward other Christians and individuals and groups grounded in other religious and philosophical traditions, Thurman, while a seeker, maintained a strong sense of Christian identity which grounded his personal and professional interreligious encounter(s).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Of the various interreligious encounters Thurman treated in his published texts, one particular episode is worth mentioning: Thurman's recollections of his time spent in dialogue and worship with Canadian Indians; see *With Head and Heart*, 242-47. Here Thurman writes on p. 246-47, "My first lecture came in midmorning of Monday. As I was being introduced I made a sudden decision to dispense with the interpreter. When I told him of my wish, he was completely astounded. 'Only two or three of us will understand what you are talking about,' he said. 'But I'll listen very carefully and then summarize your address for the men when you have finished.' At first the atmosphere was tense and disconcerting. It was quite clear that the men didn't understand my words and were puzzled by the unusual procedure. My words went forth, but they seemed to strike an invisible wall, only to fall back to meet other words flowing from my mouth. The tension was almost unbearable. Then, suddenly, as if by some kind of magic, the wall vanished and I had the experience of sensing an organic flow of meaning passing between them and me. It was as if together we had dropped into a continuum of communication that existed *a priori* long before human speech was formed into sounds and symbols. Never before had I found a common path through such primeval woods. When I finished, there was a long breath of silence as if together we were recovering our separate rhythms... On the last night of the conference, I was awakened by a man who brought a message that the men wanted me to say a few words in the morning before they left for home. When I came down for breakfast, the dining room was empty. The men were standing around in clusters, chatting and smoking. Their cars were packed and they were ready to leave. While I was having my coffee and toast it was announced that I would make a closing speech. When I finished, each man came by my chair. Some took my hand, some gripped my shoulders with unspoken feeling, and at last an old

With my second point we come again to Thurman's theology of revelation history and interreligious encounter as grounded in his tendency to affirm a universal mysticism and a single Divine Reality (i.e. God, Brahman, Allah, Wakan Tanka, et al.) at the heart of each of the world's manifold faith traditions and spiritual paths. Central to this meta-religious understanding of humanity's faith-systems was Thurman's primarily functional definition of religion. The functional approach to defining religious traditions and vetting their efficacy has proven valuable in measuring faith traditions' prowess in morally empowering adherents to pursue works of justice and peace.<sup>18</sup> However, whenever spiritual paths, particularly history-thick religions, are read solely through a functional hermeneutic, theological reduction always results regardless of whether or not it was intended.

A third and final element to consider is Thurman's pastoral sensitivity to the specifics of his congregants', colleagues' and students' lived experience. In dialogue with believers of every stripe as well as non-believers (agnostics, atheists, seekers), Thurman displayed tremendous respect for the inherent integrity of the individual's life journey, and most particularly for the language s/he used in naming its most spiritual, conflicted, empowering and transformative aspects.<sup>19</sup>

### *Thurman's Personalism and Interpretation of Social Ethics*

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chief, his two long braids falling over his shoulders, looked down at me, his eyes holding mine, and he stroked the top of my head with his right hand. And through it all, no man uttered a word."

<sup>18</sup> This seems especially true in both academic work and the actual work of sustained interreligious dialogue concerning religion in relation to ethics, reconciliation and social change. Significant arguments have been made in these areas by Catholic theologian Paul Knitter [*One Earth Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995)] and scholar-monk and Christian sanyassa Wayne Teasdale [*The Mystic Heart: Discovering a Universal Spirituality in the World's Religions*, (Novato, CA: New World Library, 1999)].

<sup>19</sup> His own personal experience, particularly as an African American Christian who experienced acute struggles as a child coming into the church and also throughout his career preserving his integrity within its rigid institutional violence, helped him to listen for the sacred not only in the experience but in the ways the experiences of God were metered out through his congregants', students' and colleagues' language.

Thurman's preference to form his theological analysis and devotional writings and enter into interreligious encounter primarily from a person-centered hermeneutic positioned him, as teacher and pastor, to speak authoritatively to mysticism's intersection with various psychosocial ills within (the context of) individual human personality. His concern with intrapersonal peace included mysticism's ethical demands on the individual to cultivate peace *is/as community* in her/his "outward" relations with other people and the natural world.

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This latter element in Thurman's treatment of mysticism and social transformation has been critiqued by previous scholars whose vital arguments I have touched on in previous chapters and with which I by and large concur.

Questions related to Thurman's pastoral work and writing on behalf of movements of social change persist given this admitted weakness in his analysis. The most consistent of them centers on Thurman's over-confidence in the "good-will" of individuals working together to overcome systemic injustice and evil. Smith, Fluker and Pollard identify Thurman's positive view of human nature and confidence in individual and group social agency as a liability in his academic treatment of mysticism and ethics.<sup>21</sup> But, more practically speaking, did his theological anthropology also keep him from seeing how, as a

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<sup>20</sup> Thurman's most significant treatment of the intrapersonal-interpersonal-social dynamics of mysticism are found in: *The Creative Encounter*, Chapter 5 ("Reconciliation") of *Disciplines of the Spirit* and his article "Mysticism and Ethics."

<sup>21</sup> The primary critiques previous scholars have registered against Thurman's treatment of mysticism and social change are: 1) his overriding confidence in humanity's intentionality, within a cultural context, to work for the good of all, and related to this, 2) a lack of sophistication in Thurman's treatment of social morality. For more on Smith's, Fluker's and Pollard's critique of Thurman's social analyses regarding these issues see chapters two and three of this dissertation. By and large their critique of Thurman here resonates with much of what contemporary Catholic theologian Scott Appleby has posited concerning the integration of "personality theory" and "liberation work" in liberation theology's socio-political analyses. Writing on p. 136 of his article, "Toward a Theology and Praxis of Reconciliation," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 39 nos. 1-2 (Wint-Spr 2002): p 132-140, Appleby claims that the Catholic theologian, by placing her/his analysis within the Roman Church's social teaching, is able to work within a theological and intellectual system which "...[weds] a personality theology that makes sense of grace and conversion as an experience of the individual to a liberationist theology that grounds reconciliation in concrete social processes constitutive of the 'quest for temporal and political justice.'"

spiritual guide, he could have provided greater sociological analysis and spiritual training to his peers involved in civil disobedience and similar forms of activism (i.e. public prayer vigils, politically motivated sit-ins, boycotting of local, regional or national businesses, silent attendance at political, religious and educational conferences)? What merit might have come from a Thurman-led or Thurman-imagined series of workshops for these peers focused on training in essential spiritual disciplines and application of insights from social analysis? Certainly when taken together the entirety of *Jesus and the Disinherited*, *The Creative Encounter*, *Disciplines of the Spirit* and various sections of *The Luminous Darkness* outline a fairly consistent mystical spirituality of resistance, liberation and reconciliation.<sup>22</sup> Given Benjamin Mays, James Lawson and NAME's work in training activists in nonviolent religion and tactics of civil disobedience, one can only wonder what sort of reception a Thurman manual detailing a "hands-on" spirituality of practical nonviolence would have received within the F.O.R., the inner-circle around Martin King, Jr. and among the Friends.<sup>23</sup>

Having critiqued various elements of Thurman's pastoral and theological work concerning peace and mysticism, I next briefly consider Thurman's own judgment of his life and work.

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<sup>22</sup> See footnote 12 in this chapter.

<sup>23</sup> I am not suggesting here that Thurman's formal theology or pastoral pedagogy concerning spiritual nonviolence relative to public acts of nonviolent resistance was unfulfilled or inadequate. However, my particular curiosity as to whether his teaching could have received greater application, both in terms of a broader readership and greater integration into specific social programs and acts of resistance, stems from my reading of Benjamin Mays' text *Seeking to be Christian in Race Relations* (New York: Friendship Press, 1964). While Mays does not offer a formulaic "step-by-step" training in spiritual nonviolence as applied to interpersonal or social relationships, he does work to differentiate "Christian acts" of nonviolence, in terms of intentionality, spirituality and technique, from other forms of personal and social nonviolence.

## Thurman's Self-Assessment of His Life and Work

Thurman ended his autobiography *With Head and Heart* with an extended postscript.

Here is an excerpt:

What I have written is but a fleeting intimation of the outside of what one man sees and may tell about the path he walks. No one shares the secret of a life; no one enters into the heart of the mystery... When we are admitted, the price exacted of us is the sealing of the lips.<sup>24</sup>

My analysis in this section stems from a cumulative review of Thurman's autobiographical writings, personal and professional correspondence and also interviews and related comments from his family, friends and colleagues. These materials lead me to believe that Thurman felt a great sense of accomplishment in certain areas of his life and work yet also persistently struggled to reach self-set standards in others.

I tend to believe that Thurman was most proud of his work in ministry because he remained true to the spiritual and social experiments he felt called to as a pastor. He took many risks in the pulpit, classroom and marketplace in order to advance what he considered was a desperately needed practical mysticism of Gospel nonviolence. At the heart of this program for Thurman was his theological and ministerial concern with the personal lives of individuals, particularly their emotional needs and spiritual questions.<sup>25</sup> As his career progressed, Thurman was often tasked with greater administrative responsibilities. These

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<sup>24</sup> Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1979), final unnumbered page immediately following p. 269.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 262. Here he writes, "The source of one of my major conflicts at Boston University was precisely this point. As dean of chapel I was a member of the university council, the president's cabinet. There were times when a member of the community would need to see me because of a personal crisis. Often the timing was very bad: I would have to make a choice between two necessities. Inevitably I leaned toward the immediate need if it could not be postponed. This meant being absent from the cabinet meeting. In making such a choice, which at times seemed to come with demonic frequency, increasing difficulties arose with the administration. And understandably so. There is no simple reaction to the sensitivity of this issue. My bias growing out of my interpretation of my commitment landed me inevitably on the side of the human situation."

often conflicted with his felt need to prioritize and attend to the personal crises of those around him whenever possible. He always chose the latter.

Thurman seems to have struggled most throughout his life and career to find success in two primary areas. He had much success in his own pastorates and university appointments in transforming the consciousness and praxis of local congregations through their appropriation of Jesus' love-ethic and practical nonviolence. I believe that Thurman wanted to effect similar change on a larger scale throughout the broader structures of the American church and was often frustrated with the church's resistance to such spirituality. It was here that Thurman certainly struggled to accept that there were limits to what both he and his like-minded peers could accomplish. Yet even among those who affirmed his contemplative spirituality and approach to personal discipleship and social change, few truly answered Thurman's call that contemplation, practical nonviolence and mystical sensitiveness become a sacramental daily lifestyle. Taken together, these issues suggest that Thurman sincerely appreciated the reception his teachings received yet he also wished that more individuals and the larger culture in general could have heard and responded to them on a deeper, more praxis-based and more prophetic level.<sup>26</sup>

Lastly, Thurman's struggles with racism in general and specifically the divide between blacks and whites reveals the great extent to which he wrestled with the meaning of his own "black fact," throughout his life. Counterbalancing his joy, resilience and centeredness were his frustration, anger and confusion related to this his most primal wound.

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<sup>26</sup> A careful reading of Thurman's centering pieces, other published devotional texts and his various sermons treating the import of silence, leisure, self-examination and contemplative prayer reveal his constant admonition that the individual, particularly the American, must proactively remove her/himself from the busy-ness of mainstream culture in order to invest time and energy to cultivating her/his spiritual life. Thurman personally encouraged Martin Luther King, Jr., Bill Deats, Jesse Jackson among other theo-political leaders, authors and campaign figureheads to not only take the impetus of contemplative spirituality and nonviolent lifestyle to heart but to integrate them, deeply and daily, into their lives.

### III. THURMAN AS “PEACEMAKER”: ELEMENTS AND ISSUES

From my initial research into the confluence of mysticism and peace in Thurman’s life and thought, I knew several things concerning his treatment of peace. I knew that Thurman’s treatment of peace, while significant, was not of the same magnitude of his Christian contemporary Thomas Merton, intellectual rigor and Christological complexity of Catholic theologian Jim Douglass or systematic nature as that currently being developed by Protestant theologian Miraslov Volf. I also knew that while well read and very curious about the political and economic aspects and power dynamics of transnational peace, Thurman didn’t pretend more knowledge than he had in these areas. Instead, as has been developed throughout the previous chapters, Thurman’s concern with peace, while holistic, was also non-systematic (i.e. informal). Building from a concept of God as the Creator, Sustainer and Judge of all life Who fashions life in peace, sets life’s dynamism as the search for peace and lures all of existence, including the individual person and human culture, toward greater concrescence, he centered his theological anthropology on the individual’s pursuit of wholeness through a religion of practical mysticism wherein s/he functioned as an “apostle of sensitiveness” imagining and effecting personal, socio-political and cosmic peace.

With my abridged summation and critique of the interplay of peace and mysticism in Thurman’s life, thought and idiom in hand, I now turn to the final substantial component of this project and consider Thurman as a “peacemaker.” After setting out a concept of peacemaker congruent both with Christian spirituality and Thurman’s own vocational self-understanding, I will sketch out three primary ways in which Thurman functioned as a peacemaker.



## Peacemaker: Coming to Terms

The notion of “peacemaker” and various related “works of peace” (i.e. peacekeeping, peacemaking and peacebuilding) figure significantly in most religious traditions and are also essential to the fields of politics, security studies and education, among others. Building from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, the historical Church has experimented through the centuries to find practical, efficient and creative ways to foster and concretize peace and justice within itself and the world as part of its God-given “ministry of reconciliation.”<sup>27</sup> Certain of these experiments have met with more success than others. This is also the case amongst the great diversity of peace-work currently pursued through the modern Church.

The field of peace studies in general, and Christian theology in particular, both make important qualifications concerning different types of peace and the elements necessary to various processes of repairing, preserving and deepening peace through works of reconciliation and justice. Mindful as I am of these, my intent here is to provide a compact paradigm of “peacemaker” applicable to Thurman himself and his work as they have been presented in this dissertation. I choose to use an informal construct of what a “peacemaker” is, how s/he acts and what s/he does that Thurman himself composed in reflecting on the Beatitudes. Imagining the “peacemaker(s)” he posited:

Blessed are the peacemakers...I must see that no man gives all nor takes all but rather that, by yielding and affirming, wholeness of living in community *becomes* the way of life. Of course I do not wish war in myself, in my private circle, in the wide world of men. Yet the seeds of war are in me. Deep is the conflict within...Blessed are the peacemakers. This means that I must possess and create a will that is good toward myself, toward my fellows, toward life and living. This good will must constantly be fed by facts and a careful understanding of them—facts concerning myself, concerning my fellows, concerning life. There must be an energized imagination....My judgment will be tenderized, my hardness will be softened, my justice will be merciful. I will be a peacemaker....The peacemaker is so like what men are seen to be at their best that they remind men of what God must be

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<sup>27</sup> II Corinthians, chapters 5-6.

like...They warm men with the thought of God. They breathe His promise to the spirit of men.<sup>28</sup>

Thurman's illustration of the "peacemaker" suggests an individual who recognizes her/his responsibility to in her/his own way, actively cultivate mutual understanding among those around her/him including non-human forms of life and even "life and living." Thurman's "peacemaker" seems a critical-realist in her/his recognition of the struggles inherent in sowing and reaping community in the world (i.e. constant work of fact-finding, ethical application, self-examination, moral conversion, spiritual dependence upon God/the Divine). Finally, his notion of the "peacemaker" details an individual who incarnates the peace of God and the God of Peace in her/his social actions and also in her/his being and personality.

Thurman's explication above provides a creative imagining of the identity, nature and work of the "peacemaker" suitable to arguing his own identity as a "peacemaker." The analysis of Thurman as "peacemaker" that follows builds on his own stress of the holistic pursuit and proclamation of peace and focuses on prayerful attentiveness and truthful, loving response to God, self and others as the foundation of a life oriented toward peace. My only adjustment/addition is that my conception of peacemaking and peacemaker applied to Thurman in this section, while religious, is more specifically grounded in the Christian concept of discipleship.

### **Thurman's Self-Understanding Relative to My Notion of "Peacemaker"**

I believe my working description-definition of the "peacemaker" can be used to highlight particular elements of Thurman's life and work integral to his identity as a

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<sup>28</sup> Howard Thurman, *Deep is the Hunger: Meditations for Apostles of Sensitiveness* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951; reprint; Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press, 1991,) 189-90.

peacemaker. We already know that Thurman himself was deeply concerned with peace, theologically, politically, culturally and pastorally. Scholars and devotees of his life and work have commented on the peaceful elements of his preaching, writing and personage, but none of them have utilized the heuristic of “peacemaker” in their analyses.

Still, much of Thurman’s self-understanding is congruent with my adoption of his working description-definition above. His ultimate desire, as recalled, was to “become a ‘religious man.’”<sup>29</sup> His published texts, archival documents, commentary from his colleagues and students as well as scholarship performed on his life, work and thought reveal Thurman as peacemaker. They register him as a congregational pastor, teaching theologian and mystagogue committed to a deep search for peace in his personal life and to a ministry of providing individuals and the larger culture the spiritual resources necessary for their pursuit of the same.<sup>30</sup>

### **Thurman was a “Peacemaker”**

My consideration of Thurman as a peacemaker incorporates his role as a pastor and spiritual author doing practical, hands-on ministry with his work as a public theologian lecturing, teaching and writing critical texts concerning religion and public life. While the latter is often taken as a derivative of the former, I believe that from mid-career onward neither Thurman nor his colleagues, advocates or critics could (easily) separate out one from the other in his vocation as a spiritual guide and teaching theologian.

Thurman’s conception of reconciliation as both God’s primal and perennial “gift” and humanity’s most vital and creative work undergirded his overall work as a peacemaker. His

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<sup>29</sup> Lerone Bennet, Jr. “Howard Thurman: Twentieth Century Holy Man,” *Ebony* (February 1978), 17.

<sup>30</sup> Sydna Altschuler Byrne, interview by author, 4. Here Altschuler Byrne writes, “Thurman was a peacemaker in that he worked to help people understand that ‘there are more things that unite us than divide us.’”

identity as peacemaker may best be understood in considering Thurman: 1) as a guide to the inner-life; 2) as a pastor who did the work of congregational development and social engagement; 3) as a proponent of a holistic eco-spirituality and advocate for a deeper spiritual stewardship of the environment.

### *As a Guide to the Inner Life*

Thurman's interest in mysticism on its own and also in relation to social change was something that was not unique to him but instead something he held in common with many progressive American Christians, particularly those within the academy and related to the Quakers and Catholic contingents of peaceful movements for social change. And along with Thurman many of them would also rightly be considered peacemakers in one way or another. Thurman distinguished himself within these ranks through his role as a guide to the inner life. While not every mystic can or should preach and teach nor is every teacher or preacher innately wired as a contemplative devoted to tending and adoring the inner flame, Thurman, akin to his contemporaries Thomas Merton and Quaker philosopher-mystic Thomas Kelly, was a proficient spiritual guide who, while well read and profoundly learned, first and foremost knew mystical encounter from the inside. His ability to speak creatively and prophetically about prayer, communal worship and other components of religious life from his own spiritual center was essential in so many of his congregants, students, colleagues and related others coming to trust themselves and their spiritual journeys to his tutelage.

Much has been made since Thurman's death as well as in the latter years of his life about his identity and role as the "spiritual father/architect" of the American Civil Rights Movement. His efforts in this context were indeed significant. As an author, liturgist,

confessor and spiritual counselor and iconic personality Thurman's contributions to socio-spiritual change were both unique and substantial. Related to this, however, I feel that both his primary posture and theological grounding while pursuing this work are often misappropriated and frequently misunderstood. While Thurman wrote and spoke significantly concerning mysticism's relationship to social change, even more specifically developing a practical spirituality of reconciliation emanating from his mystical treatment of nonviolence, and drew on modern psychology, secular nonviolent theorists and sociologists in doing so, he spoke on these areas and issues not as a community organizer prioritizing religion or an F.O.R. staffer trained in conflict resolution but instead as a mystic-pastor primarily grounded in biblical and mystical theology and as a poet deeply invested in the arts. And while Thurman sat on boards and on occasion attended various marches and rallies, like Merton's "silent" witness his significant leadership within the social change arena was somewhat of an anomaly.

#### *As a Congregational Pastor*

Concerning Thurman's deeply contemplative and prayerful theological posture as a peacemaker, I believe more focused light also needs to be directed on his work as a congregational pastor who both himself stood at and simultaneously imagined the Church, particularly as centered in worship, as/at the threshold of the creative encounter between interior reconciliation and social peace and justice. Raising questions about the relevance of spiritually-rooted political and social activism as a component of discipleship in teaching and preaching, and training congregants in and encouraging them in works of evangelical pacifism was a risky apostolate for the average local American church, even at the height of

the merged energies of the Social Gospel, liturgical renewal movement, the workers' rights campaign and desegregation. Thurman's persistence in his pastoral experiments which wed spiritual piety and mystical development with ethical vision and political agency was his signature witness to the church's theo-political relevance to society and its authenticity in following Christ. The mystic's and activist's temples were not exclusive. For Thurman they belonged *together* in the same church.

What is more, it is important to note that during Thurman's tenure as the primary pastor and ministerial administrator at Marsh Chapel, Rankin Chapel and Fellowship Church, these congregations provided witness and activism concerning social justice yet were first and foremost known, again especially during Thurman's years at the helm, as spiritual centers for contemplative renewal and seedbeds of faith-based resources. This puts Thurman and his primary congregations in stark contrast to countless other prophetic social-justice based local churches and ecclesial branches that, while advocating and attempting to model a God-centered and spirituality-rooted discipleship of resistance and reconciliation, are often found wanting in the depth and stability of a truly prayerful center and ultimate dependence upon a cruciform praxis of nonviolence.

#### *As an Advocate for a Spirituality-Centered Environmental Ethic*

In light of the significant attention already paid to this topic, I limit my thoughts here to four primary points. First I underscore my belief that the entirety of Thurman's concern for the environment, including his advocacy for a better stewardship of the earth and Creation's central place in his theology, stemmed directly from his personal experience of the natural world. Second, Thurman's witness concerning the importance and proper caretaking of the

environment signals how he, in a variety of ways, can be seen as a contemporary Christian voice anticipating the environmental movement. His work signaled a concern that individuals and culture at large recover the sacral sense of nature and shift from a posture of objectification of the earth to one of interdependence with and stewardship of Creation as a means of affirming the long-term health of nature and humanity itself. Commenting on the place of the environment in Thurman's life and thought, Richard Deats contends:

It is significant that he [Howard Thurman] would say this before the environmental movement. In Christian theology there has been a neglect of the appreciation of the created world. We use it but we do not respect, honor, stand in awe before the world. He [Thurman] helps farm that love of God's creation and identification with it. Maybe if he would have been writing (and) thinking twenty years later, he might have said it in a more explicit way.  
<sup>31</sup>

Third, my research into Thurman's treatment of the environment reveals a life-long struggle, initially manifest in his teenage years, regarding his desire to adopt a lifestyle that witnessed both to his connection to and concern for the natural world. Ultimately Thurman did not commit to vegetarianism or refuse to purchase goods made through practices that were harmful to animals. Yet he did toil intellectually and spiritually over this issue throughout his life.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Deats, interview by author.

<sup>32</sup> While preaching in favor of a more significant spirituality of stewardship for the environment to American society, especially religious and specifically Christian sectors, Thurman regularly pointed to his own struggles to codify and live a practical personal ethic of nonviolence toward Creation that was right for him. Writing in his autobiography, Thurman noted his inability to adopt a vegetarian-based diet despite his adolescent experience of "having to" kill rattlesnakes, killing and preparing chickens for family meals, his brief work in a Florida butcher's market and slaughterhouse as well as his later relationships with Gandhi, Tagore, Muriel Lester and other Hindu and Christian vegetarians. Writing on pp. 249-50 of *With Head and Heart*, he confesses, "As a boy, frightened as I was by rattlesnakes, I hated to kill one. All during my early years it was my job to kill the chickens we ate on Sunday by breaking their necks with a quick twist of the wrist. Finally, I made such a fuss over having to do it that Grandma stopped insisting. But every Saturday morning during the summer months when I worked as a delivery boy for the market, I had to kill many chickens, pluck the feathers, cut off their heads, and bring them in to the butcher for weighing and dressing./ As traumatic as that experience was, it did not compare with what awaited me when I took a job at a slaughterhouse. It was there that I learned how to kill sheep and watch them as they seemed complacently to offer their throats to be cut by the sharp knives...None of these experiences, however, turned me into a vegetarian. Over and over I

These three points taken together lead into a fourth element that establishes Thurman, the environmental steward, as a peacemaker. His entire corpus of published and unpublished texts, sermons and addresses, along with his personal correspondence and journals, validates the primacy of the natural world in Thurman's pastoral work. His works show his attention to nature as a locus of revelation, seedbed of mystical encounter and source not only of his personal spirituality but also his formal theology. Creation was never object but instead, for Thurman, always the most intimate subject and most primary ground of community and Presence. Previous scholarship has rightly emphasized the import of the environment in his personal life. More work can be done concerning the natural world as a central motif in his notions of community, nonviolence and presence.<sup>33</sup>

#### *Thurman's Overall Pastoral Witness*

Thurman's occupations as a guide to the inner life, as a congregational pastor and as a prophetic steward of Creation, as vital as they are to understanding his religious vocation, do not represent the entire range of his ministry nor what I consider the most significant aspect of his identity as a peacemaker. More than any one function he performed or arena he participated in, I contend the primary mark of Thurman's identity as a peacemaker was his pastoral integrity represented in his ability to speak with one voice while serving in diverse offices and fulfilling multiple concurrent roles. This integrity, taken together with his well-

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have echoed the words of the Apostle Paul (Romans 7:21 Moffatt's translation), 'I desire to do what is right but wrong is all that I can manage.' The most persistent struggles of my life have always centered on the gray areas of compromise. It may be that a man cannot live in a situation or a society of which he cannot approve, or to which he cannot assent, without compromise. After all, this is the issue upon which the survival of the weak turns when the fight is for survival itself."

<sup>33</sup> In particular, more can be done to recover the Christian roots of Thurman's spiritual writings and theological articulation of the natural world. An essential element of Thurman's Christology is his consideration of Jesus' personal connection to nature as Thurman found it expressed in scriptural commentary and poetry concerning the Nazarene's prayer-time and meditation in nature as well as his inclusion of agricultural and seasonal elements in his teaching and preaching.



known, effervescent yet calming sense of humor and joy and gifts of rhetoric, are the foundations of Thurman's iconic identity and reputation as a (strong-minded and spiritually seasoned) mystic-shepherd to the church and world. Throughout his career Thurman encouraged a sensitive and respectful embrace of the supposed "[O]ther" as a means of discerning, embracing and tending Life's unity; and (consequently) knowing, being known by, and committing one's self to God, within every day and over a lifetime of experience.<sup>34</sup> And mysticism was for him the most revelatory and empowering way to know God who is most "other" as the One who is most "intimate" and the energizing, reconciling means through which to embrace the other and foster interdependent unity across and among races, religions, political mindsets and also between humanity and the larger environment.

### **The Mystic as Peacemaker**

Mysticism has always played a significant role and had a checkered reputation within various religious traditions and the academy. With the steady advance of public and scholarly interest in spirituality of late, this continues to be the case.<sup>35</sup> Thurman, long identified as a "mystic," also contributes significantly to the conception of the "mystic" as "peacemaker."

Thurman exemplifies the mystic in this light first through his consistent proclamation that the mystical path is open and accessible to all people as the core of individual spirituality and collective religion. In liberating mysticism from the possession of the privileged few,

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<sup>34</sup> This was, perhaps in my mind, Thurman's greatest work of "resistance" to the negative energies he had experienced and perceived in the church and the world against himself and against spirituality.

<sup>35</sup> Ellen T. Charry, "Christian Spirituality : Whither?" *Theology Today*, (no. 56 vol. 1, Ap 1999), 1-4. For a broader analysis of the complexity of defining "spirituality" and its steady move to the center of religious and theological studies, see Sandra Schneiders' "Spirituality in the Academy" *Theological Studies* (50 no. 4D, 1989), 676-697. Finally, E. Glenn Hinson provides his own practical theology of spiritual formation and directives on adapting traditional Christian spiritual disciplines to contemporary life in his text *A Serious Call to Contemplative Lifestyle* (Smyth and Helwys: Atlanta, GA, 2000).

Thurman tuned individuals into the God within, rather than the Institution as God, encouraged them to take ownership for the development of their own spiritual lives and consider the confluence of intimacy with God, intimacy with others and intimacy with self as a triune ground of authentic prayer.

That Thurman, himself a mystic, continued to worship and serve within the institutional church as a prophetic pioneer also reveals him as a reformer, one ever careful to ground his primary teaching of mysticism in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, the larger liturgy of the Church and the necessary preparatory and sanctifying spiritual disciplines inherent in both. In this Thurman aimed to prevent mysticism as an individualist-centered “personal” religion as well as mysticism as an a-historical spiritual path devoid of the historical theological tradition(s) out of which modern mysticism emerged.

Final evidence of the mystic as peacemaker in Thurman’s life returns us to his well-known moniker as “spiritual architect” and “father” of the American Civil Rights Movement. In line with many of his Quaker and Roman Catholic contemporaries, Thurman made direct connections in his formal thought, writings and spiritual guidance of social activist leadership between the reconciliation and spiritual empowerment at the core of religious experience and the spiritually empowered social justice and reconciliation they and others worked toward. He also challenged them to reclaim the spiritual aspects of their activism and ethical grounding in their internal prayer. Thurman encouraged them to live the whole of their lives from the ground of God within and among them.

### **The Congregational Preacher as Peacemaker**

Smart, soulful and substantive storytelling is a crucial skill for the successful preacher. To preach the Gospel effectively, the Christian minister must construct an integrative narrative, one which weaves a proper mixture of scriptural exegesis, theological and ethical explication, rhetorical hooks, current issues and experiences within congregational and cultural life into an intelligent, imaginative and ethically charged “Word.” This tenet is especially important for the congregational pastor’s preaching on issues of peace and nonviolence. If s/he prioritizes expositing the biblical foundations of forgiveness or the plight of the economically disinherited, the preacher might very well fail to contextualize contemporary social problems within the Gospel’s horizon of cruciform justice. Raising theological questions concerning a current ethnic war or hot-button environmental issue without grounding such analysis within the Church’s historical peace-witness also brings imbalance to her/his homily. The (Christian) Gospel lives between its seminal revelation within the story of Jesus Christ, the historical witness of the Spirit within the church and culture and the present moment. Thus, only the minister who effectively leverages revelation history in her/his treatment of the issues of the present day and age and vice-versa may be understood as authentically and apostolically proclaiming the “good news.”

Additionally, the congregational minister’s message gains greater purchase when consciously and carefully interwoven into the overall liturgy of the Sunday service. Besides being grounded in scripture, the preacher’s “word” also can and should be anticipated in the opening call to worship or collect, meshed with the service music and written and delivered so as to touch on present congregational issues and upcoming events. Homilists who apply

these two steps anchor their weekly words of peace in the historical and theological largesse of the Church; they also proclaim and preserve discipleship as a communal adventure of prayerful and proactive spiritual and ethical engagement with the world.

Thurman's pulpit technique provides many "for instances" of this approach to preaching on issues of peace. He folded his treatment of specific social issues into weekly messages intended to enrich his congregants' relationship with God, self and one another as a means of concretizing doctrinal truths and religious wisdom in practical, livable spirituality. Meticulously crafting his sermon, Thurman also devoted much time and energy to imagining, writing and facilitating regular weekly worship and special religious services. "Not Peace, But a Sword," "The Community of Fear" and other sermons from his trove of peace literature all follow his familiar method. He integrated his sermon into the larger liturgy and his treatment of personal and social issues of peace and justice within the wider story of humanity's intimate relationship with and ultimate responsibility to God.

### **Christian Peacemaking: Furthering Teaching and Praxis**

In this brief consideration of how Thurman's witness nuances Christian teaching and agency concerning peace, I want to begin with my belief that, at its core, all Christian wisdom and teaching is teaching about peacemaking and reconciliation, though it is not always considered as such within church and culture. It is lamentable whenever the daily work of realizing one's need for God, working to trust and live with God, and loving one's neighbor and the larger Creation as one's self are conceded to as rote regulations that all "good Christians" must perform, or at least aspire to, rather than enthusiastically engaged as vital acts of peacemaking and justice. It is also tragic that the "harder," more "prophetic"

scriptures and traditional teachings on nonviolent resistance and just revolution continue to be spiritualized (read “watered down” or “softened”) within mainstream church discourse.<sup>36</sup> Both of these predicaments handcuff the average churchgoer’s opportunity to first explore, and then, through grace, come to incarnate discipleship as a deeper, more radical “following after” the Christ who preached about just as he himself turned the other cheek, resisted Empire, prioritized the dispossessed and forgave his enemies.

A number of Thurman’s peers and critics have argued that his personal witness may have lacked sufficient, consistent “front line” political activism. His preaching and teaching concerning the *Jubilee* roots, historical theology, practical spirituality and ethical demands of peace and nonviolence at the core of the Christian Gospel, however, reveal Thurman’s significant pastoral concern to educate, invite and form others in Christianity as an ethically sensitive and active pursuit of peace *is/as community* through a lifestyle of cruciform nonviolence.<sup>37</sup> Thurman did not take a personal vow of Gospel nonviolence or rigidly commit to a reified ethical code, nor did he demand such from his congregants or students. He instead proclaimed discipleship as a double-journey—inward to and with one’s self and God within the self and outward to and with God and others as God and they were known,

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<sup>36</sup> Mary Evelyn Jegen addresses the lack of powerful, creative and authentic teaching concerning Christian nonviolence in her article “Spirituality and Theology of Nonviolence,” *Worship* no. 2 (March 1986): 119-133. On p. 130 she asks, “Why the failure to appropriate this way of the nonviolent Jesus in Christian life and practice on the societal level? And why do we not have a continuing tradition of a developing theology of nonviolence?” Answering her own question, Jegen says that since 500 C.E., biblical interpreters and Church theologians have derived their teachings, specifically those detailing Christian identity and behavior in society, from “nonbiblical sources.”

<sup>37</sup> Thurman’s pastoral concern, as an advocate of and preacher of a theologically-informed and spiritually-empowered nonviolence, was to educate his congregants, students and peers to see injustice not solely through humanist lenses of in/justice or psychosocial lenses of non/violence but to ground these views in a more foundational theological vision of in/justice and non/violence, particularly in light of the Christian Gospel. His approach correlates to Mary Jegen’s belief that properly conducted Christian liturgy helps to intellectually, morally and spiritually form the personhood of the believer regarding personal and social issues of peace and justice. Writing on p. 131 of “Spirituality and Theology of Nonviolence” she argues, “For many Christians, war is not wrong now in terms of a priori principles but rather, reading the signs of the times in the light of the gospel, from celebrating the Eucharist and from acting on the truth expressed in our worship.”

loved and served within the multiplicity of the individual's social relations. He raised the ethical questions of faith regularly, creatively and prophetically in his multiform ministry as well as providing the contemplative catechesis necessary to his colleagues' and congregants' engagement of nonviolence as a rite and of Pentecost itself empowered by "the spirit he (Jesus Christ) set loose in the world."<sup>38</sup>

Considering Thurman as "peacemaker" has allowed me to concretize specific ways he, as a mystic, worked as a preacher, pastor, theologian and author to further community, mutual understanding and reconciliation among individuals, groups and humanity's relationship with the natural world. I now turn to consider potential directions for further scholarship on Thurman relative to peace and mysticism.

#### IV. GOING FORWARD: THURMAN SCHOLARSHIP

I believe my work in this dissertation makes significant and much needed contributions to Thurman scholarship in light of more general academic research, constructive analysis and practical theology concerning spirituality and peace. My project recovers and extends the

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<sup>38</sup> Howard Thurman, *The Centering Moment* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969; reprint, Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 2000), 30. My re-imagining Thurman here as an advocate of a spiritual Pentecost that transformed not only the individual's experience of God in the world but also, through this, her/his relationship with and overall treatment of her/his neighbors and enemies and also the stranger is very much informed by Dan Mosely and Mary Jegen.

Writing in his article, "Liturgy as Peacemaking" *Encounter* 60:2 (Spring 1999): 169-186, Mosely contends, "Death did not decrease the power of God's activity in the world, but somehow it expanded it. The spirit came among them and created a group of people whose cultural and language differences didn't divide, but empowered. The story of Pentecost is one in which people who were strangers discovered that they were *at peace with each other and that they could work together even when they didn't have the same background or the same cultural values.*" Italics mine. Perhaps a case can be made to envision Thurman as a "Pentecost-informed" and "Pentecost-offering" force in the American Church (and more generally America's national life) calling for a rebirth of what it means to be religiously engaged in social weal.

Related to Mosely's article, Jegen provides an important tie-in between the "peace of Christ" and the "gift of the Spirit." On p. 129 of "Theology and Spirituality of Nonviolence" she writes, "The peace of Christ is a gift intrinsically bound up with the gift of the Spirit. One cannot exist without the other. Peace in the Spirit is the consequence of Jesus' gift of himself in his nonviolent struggle against the evil powers embodied in the religious and political forces aligned against him... This love is carried out only in the power of the Spirit, the power released into the world by the death and resurrection of Jesus (John 15:12-14)."

legitimacy of his concerns with peace, deepens previous treatment of his articulation of mysticism and reconciliation and invites further scholarly and pastoral consideration of both. In no way do I feel I have closed the book on any of the various aspects of Thurman's life, thought and spiritual idiom in this dissertation. So where to go from here in furthering scholarly understanding of Howard Thurman?

Reminding ourselves of Martin Marty's nomination of Thurman as a "holy man for the new millennium" is a helpful place from which to begin navigating a course.<sup>39</sup> Thurman remains an important dialogue partner in contemporary academic and ministerial conversations relative to spiritual formation and practical theology in our new millennium. My archival research, original interviews and overall methodology in pursuing Thurman's concerns for peace and mysticism suggest there is important substantial research and constructive work to be done on specific issues of his life and thought. I will suggest four particular elements from the most general to the more specific.

Thurman's identity as a Christian and his life and work within the Church are related issues that merit further investigation. I have treated certain aspects of this topic in my analysis that give way to additional questions. Thurman's self-understanding and theological identity vis-à-vis Christianity as an institution, considered in light of his devotion to the historical Jesus, constitute a vital thread of inquiry. Relative to this is the soteriology undergirding Thurman's exposition of the Cross as a historical, mystical and eschatological

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<sup>39</sup> Since 2000 much new progress has already been made by Walter Fluker and his colleagues at Morehouse in preparing and publishing a multi-volume set of critical editions of Thurman's papers. The first volume has proven a much needed scholarly edition of Thurman's writings [Walter Fluker, senior editor. *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman, Volume I* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2009).] Seminal Thurman scholar Luther Smith edited a volume on Thurman for Orbis' Modern Spiritual Masters spirituality series that was published in 2005 [Luther E. Smith, ed. *Howard Thurman : Essential Writings* (Maryknoll, N.Y. : Orbis Books, 2006). In addition to these independent scholarly collections of Thurman's writings and papers, his primary texts and life narrative continue to be incorporated into readers on American spirituality and Christian treatments of nonviolence.

event. What can we better understand of Jesus' life and ministry and its culmination at Calvary relative to the universalist tendencies of Thurman's interpretation of mysticism and certain aspects of his later ecclesiology? Two more circumscribed areas to consider here are Thurman's mystical theology relative to his reading and sourcing of the larger Christian mystical tradition, and a more critical theological examination of his liturgical praxis.

Thurman's concern with the natural world also continues to provide fodder for scholarly analysis and pastoral praxis, especially as eco-stewardship and creation-spirituality daily gain more credibility in academic publications, theology classrooms and denominational ministries related to justice and reconciliation. I believe an excellent next step for Thurman scholars in this area is the question of how the centrality of the natural world in his personal life and theological paradigm of community informed his appreciation for and sourcing of treatments of the environment in other spiritual traditions, perhaps especially Judaism, Hinduism and Lakota religion.

Building on my analysis in the fourth chapter, it seems more needs to be done to better understand the purpose and method of Thurman's spiritual idiom as a means of better appropriating his writing and speaking as an exercise in spiritual direction and formation. In 1996 Thurman's former student and longtime family friend Ed Kaplan published a similar study of Abraham Joshua Heschel's rhetoric, *Holiness in Words: Abraham Joshua Heschel's Poetics of Piety*.<sup>40</sup> Since then significant new scholarship concerning this foundational aspect of Thomas Merton's life and work has also been published. Combining certain threads from my analysis with a deeper re-reading of Mitchell and Kaplan's treatment of Thurman's idiom against a systematic analysis of his devotional writings and sermons seems a logical next

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<sup>40</sup> Edward K. Kaplan, *Holiness in Words: Abraham Joshua Heschel's Poetics of Piety*. (New York, N.Y.: Staute University of New York Press, 1996).



step.<sup>41</sup> The more recent pastoral theology and proclamation hermeneutic that Presbyterian systematic theologian Edward Farley has set forth in his *Practicing Gospel: Unconventional Thoughts on the Church's Ministry* and Methodist theologian and liturgist Don E. Salier's primary texts can provide cogent paradigms in which to frame such analysis.<sup>42</sup>

My final suggestion to further the findings of my dissertation centers on Thurman's biography. Throughout my research for this project I found myself consistently searching for a critical biographical study of Thurman, written from a psychospiritual perspective, that was not there. I believe such a text is an absolute necessity to further explore particular theological and social issues in his formal thought and devotional literature, especially given his largely autobiographical pastoral method. With specific reference to my dissertation analysis, deeper biographical analysis of Thurman could potentially help to further develop his treatment of the five images of socio-spiritual rupture while also adding more of his self-understanding to current and anticipated analyses of his pastoral method and spiritual idiom.<sup>43</sup>

As I wrap up this initial attempt at sketching future directions in Thurman scholarship, I realize that I have only nominally touched on mysticism and made no mention, either generally or specifically, of the issues of peace, reconciliation, nonviolence or

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<sup>41</sup> I think that Thurman's own interest in considering his preaching and writing ministry as an integrated ministry of "the Word," and his concern to help his congregants/readers develop a more refined sense of "History," "Self," "Presence," and "Quiet" will be important to pay attention to in any future scholarship treating his spiritual idiom.

<sup>42</sup> I suggest Farley and Saliers as promising analytical conversation partners because I believe both minister-theologians, while specializing in their own particular theological specialties, are significantly and creatively grounded in the historical theology and mystical schools of the universal Christian Church while also having a particular penchant for scholarship treating issues of practical theology as it engages Protestantism in America at the social and congregational levels. For further consideration of their work, see Farley's *Practicing Gospel: Unconventional Thoughts on the Church's Ministry* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2003) and Saliers' *Worship and Spirituality* (Akron, OH: Order of Saint Luke, 1996).

<sup>43</sup> My own initial psychospiritual biography of Thurman is represented in my unpublished paper "Creative Encounter: Howard Thurman's Spiritual Quest" written under Fr. Raymond Studzinski's direction (Fall 2000) as a component of my course work and research requirements while a doctoral student in Religious Studies at the Catholic University of America.

peacemaking. My interest in these issues as appropriated through my heuristic of peace *is/as community*, has not changed nor lessened. If anything, it is stronger now as I finish my writing than during my first drafting of the initial chapters several years ago. What has changed is my proposed methodology. The most viable next steps in carrying my research on Thurman's treatment of peace forward are those that integrate his peace witness and treatment of nonviolence more deeply into his Christology, liturgical praxis and pastoral identity as a contemplative teacher rooted in the Church.

## V. CONCLUSION

When I first decided upon Howard Thurman as a general dissertation subject, two elements of his life and thought fascinated me: his pastoral treatment of social issues from a contemplative posture and the pastoral imagination through which he expressed this vision. Whittling these general interests down through literature surveys of Thurman scholarship and archival research, I formally began this project asking about Thurman's treatment of peace relative to his well-established commerce with mysticism. What has been learned?

I discovered a great deal more than I originally expected in terms of Thurman's concern with peace as rooted in his foundational work on "community." Along with new archival documents and individuals willing to provide interviews, I found many implicit and explicit references to peace in his published texts which previously received little or no mention. Thurman's treatments of materialism/poverty, military engagement/war, interreligious dialogue and community and environmental degradation as I have recovered them show the great extent that he, while centering his work on the issue of

racism/segregation, thought and ministered quite systematically and creatively as a twentieth-century peacemaker.

Thurman's identity as a mystic was central to his vision, formal theology, contemplative writings and ministerial praxis as a peacemaker. In the last quarter of the twentieth century the Jesuit priest and scholar Karl Rahner suggested that, "the Christian of the future will be a mystic or he will not exist at all."<sup>44</sup> I believe there is much new source material and original analysis in my writing to affirm Thurman as a Christian mystic whose personal life and professional work validate Rahner's contention that mysticism must be central to contemporary discipleship if such is to be joyful, ethically dynamic and truly cruciform.

Prior to my dissertation the majority of scholarship regarding Thurman had been focused on his life, his mysticism and his ministry as they concerned liberation and justice. My work, by and large, has examined reconciliation as also vital to his concept of peace. Thurman's life and thought clearly reveal his argument that the peace of God, which is the ground of all positive peace, brings liberation and reconciliation together as the shared toil and harvest of peace. His more formal analytical texts argue this consistently; his devotional writings and spoken word help the seeker better imagine and achieve it. Liberation and reconciliation never were and today still are not optional for the religiously-minded peacemaker, especially the Christian. They always have been and always will be necessities of the individual believer, the local congregation and the various faith communities ministering around the globe. Activism and contemplation, on their own divided from one another, can only achieve so much and go so far.

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<sup>44</sup> Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 20 (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1981), 149. Rahner argues this point in volume 20 in his article, "The Spirituality of the Church of the Future."

Borrowing a phrase from John Howard Yoder, Thurman's unique penchant for knowing this, coupled with his vocation for deepening the search for peace through his mysticism and concern for the natural world, allowed him a prophetic role "to speak for the peace of the city" as a contemplative shepherd.<sup>45</sup> Such a shepherd, I believe, not only speaks for but, following the biblical model, also leads others toward peace, guards against those things that would do violence to wholeness and compound fear and stays with her/his flock both in and out of season. Additionally, the peacemaking shepherd channels peace to others through her/his very presence and identity.

I believe Howard Thurman was such a shepherd within both the church and the world of the twentieth century. And I believe the contemporary local parish congregation, the universal church at large, the social activists and the scholar investigating spirituality, theology and peace-studies still need, and need to better listen to, his voice.

Our Father, we come to Thee, seeking in quiet ways the courage to ease the tensions and break the discord in which, in one way or another, our lives are surrounded. We offer to Thee the treasures of our life, to the end that we may be so touched by Thy spirit and sensitized by Thy love and Thy tenderness that we may find our way in peace and in strength and in confidence. This is what we seek, even as we worship Thee, O God, in spirit and in truth.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Yoder, *Nevertheless*, 17-18.

<sup>46</sup> Thurman, *The Centering Moment*, 35. From devotional no. 14, "Right Relations with Others."

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