

Meet Howard Thurman
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We all seek mentors and role models for our living, and for the life-work we aspire to. This is certainly true for me, in ministry.

I seek people out for their advice and example.

Some are a phone call away; some I've never met personally.

I know them only through their writings; but their influence is no less powerful.

Howard Thurman has been a mentor for me,
and I think he can be a spiritual resource for you.

Born in 1899, raised in the segregated South, witness to the changes wrought by two world wars, Thurman plumbed the spiritual depths of turbulent times.

He was part of the generation that came before Martin Luther King, Jr.

In the 1930s and 40s, he helped lay the spiritual groundwork for the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s.

It is said that Dr. King carried a copy of Thurman's book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, in his briefcase wherever he traveled.

We'll hear more about this book, today.

It's a challenge for me to describe the life and impact of a spiritual leader in a sermon of less than twenty minutes.

In the past, I tried to cram in as much information as possible.

The effect, for me and the congregation both, was like riding a train at high speed through a beautiful landscape, in this case the spiritual landscape of a man's life, with barely enough time to catch a glimpse of a few important scenes.

But Thurman's life, so rich in accomplishment, was grounded in meditation and prayer. So right now, I'd like to slow the train down, even bring it to a stop. Howard Thurman would surely approve.

Picture a train station in Daytona, Florida, circa 1914, in the heat of late summer. As the train pulls in, a black teenager approaches, dragging a heavy trunk. The trunk has no handles; it's tied shut with rope.

Young Howard Thurman is leaving home.

He's headed for high school in Jacksonville, one of the few high schools in the state that accepts black students.

To qualify, Howard had to pass the ninth-grade exams, although the black schools in his home town only go through the eighth grade. His principal spent the year, tutoring him personally, so that he would pass.

But there's a problem here. The ticket agent won't accept his trunk.

According to the rules, the baggage check must be tied to the handle, and there is no handle.

The trunk must be shipped express, and Howard does not have the money to pay for it. In his own words:

I sat down on the steps of the railway station and cried my heart out.

Presently I opened my eyes and saw before me a large pair of work shoes.

My eyes crawled upward until I saw the man's face.

He was a black man, dressed in overalls and a denim cap.

As he looked down at me he rolled a cigarette and lit it.

Then he said, "Boy, what in hell are you crying about?" And I told him.

*“If you’re trying to get out of this damn town to get an education,
the least I can do is help you.*

Come with me,” he said. He took me to the agent and asked,

“How much does it take to send this boy’s trunk to Jacksonville?”

Then he took out his rawhide money bag and counted the money out.

When the agent handed him the receipt, he handed it to me.

Then, without a word, he turned and disappeared down the railroad track.

I never saw him again. [With Head and Heart, p. 24]

The trip to Jacksonville was just the first leg of a journey that would take Thurman through high school, where he graduated as valedictorian, and college, where he did the same, and a long career of teaching and ministry.

The benevolent stranger at the station met young Howard at his point of greatest need. But his presence would have meant nothing if Howard had not gone out that day to meet that train.

Years of dreams and inward preparation brought Howard to this moment of encounter.

Consider our reading today about the inward sea.

We are challenged to navigate this sea, to make our way to the center,
guarded by the judging eye of conscience and the flaming sword of self-doubt.

And to lay down our highest commitment there, as an offering.

From that moment it becomes a permanent part of who we are,
tapped into the energies that sustain life.

Even as a young boy, Howard Thurman had already begun to chart his inward sea. His earliest spiritual recollections concern nature.

Young Howard always looked forward to nightfall; and unlike many children who are scared of the dark, he found comfort in the darkness surrounding him.

Howard Thurman writes:

The night was more than a companion. It was a presence, an articulate climate ... I could hear the night think, and I could feel the night feel...

I felt embraced, enveloped, held secure... All the little secrets of my life and heart and all of my most intimate and private thoughts would not be violated, I knew, if I spread them out before me in the night. [With Head and Heart, p. 9]

He developed a special friendship with a large oak tree in his back yard.

He loved the strength of this tree, around which he could barely wrap his arms.

He admired the way it stood up to the violent storms of coastal Florida, bending before the wind but never breaking.

In the same way, he drew strength from his grandmother, Nancy Ambrose, who was very much like that oak tree, to him.

He recalled resting his head on her lap during Sunday worship, when he was still too young to know what the people were saying.

Nancy Ambrose had once been a slave. When Howard was older, she often told him this story:

Once or twice a year, the master would allow a slave preacher to come from a neighboring estate and lead the slaves in worship.

As the service drew to a close, the preacher would pause, his eyes scrutinizing every face in the congregation, and he would say to them:

You are not slaves! You are God's children!

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This may sound like the denial of fact. But it tells the truth in a powerful way. The congregation needed to hear, again and again, about the difference between the outer status of slavery, versus the inner condition of *being* a slave. The preacher wanted them to know that their masters did not have the power to determine their worth as human beings. Their true worth was determined by their kinship to the sacred.

This was this kinship which Howard Thurman first experienced in his private encounters with the holy, and continued in a life of meditation. It was this unshakable sense of human worth and dignity which informed his preaching of the Christian Gospel.

In his book titled *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Howard Thurman answers critics who link Christianity to segregation, and the abuse of power. He makes a distinction between the Christian churches, and what he calls “the religion of Jesus”.

As Thurman describes, Jesus was a Jew, living in a time and place where the people had their backs against the wall. They saw two options: to knuckle under, or to respond with violence. But Jesus preached a third way. He said, the Kingdom of Heaven is in you. Your worth is not determined by the Roman occupier. In other words: *You are not slaves: you are children of God.*

Interpreting the Gospel this way, Thurman provided a spiritual grounding for the struggle against segregation and for human rights. He drew attention to the possibilities of religion as a catalyst to ‘release the vast courage’ that was needed to effect real change.

In the example of Jesus, Thurman saw the challenge to meet one another as fellow human beings; to step across artificial boundaries of race, and class, and nationality.

Mere familiarity is not enough.

Between Jews and Romans in first-century Palestine, or between blacks and whites in the Jim Crow South, daily contact was routine.

But this contact was brutal. It lacked a human dimension.

It only served to reinforce attitudes of fear and mutual contempt.

We need to come to *know* one another as persons, not with the cold familiarity of the prison guard but with the compassion of a brother or sister, one person at a time.

Such crossing-of-boundaries is necessary, not only in cases of open conflict, but in every time and place where diverse groups of people must learn to live together.

In 1943, in the middle of a promising career, Howard Thurman received what he called a tap on the shoulder.

It came as an invitation to help start an interracial church in San Francisco.

The church would be led by two ministers, one white and one black.

The governing board, staff, and Sunday school teachers would be integrated.

This meant giving up his tenure as a college professor, uprooting his family, and moving across the country.

He said yes.

San Francisco in the 1940s was a city in need of healing.

Howard Thurman speaks of the 'bleeding wound' from the exile of Japanese Americans to internment camps.

The war industry brought an thousands of Filipino workers, and black and white workers from the South.

The city became a crucible of ethnic tensions, misunderstanding and xenophobia threatening to boil over at any time.

It was in this tense environment that the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples opened its doors, and held its first services in a former Japanese church.

They offered cultural programs, dinners and art exhibits representing the many different ethnic groups in the city.

People from different faith traditions came to worship, and to lead worship.

Thurman opened up the format to include meditation, drama and liturgical dance.

In Sunday school, the children learned about the lives of children in other countries, and their religions.

Thurman recalls one boy who told his mother,

‘I knew Jesus was a Baptist, but I had no idea that he was a Jew!’

Such achievements may seem pretty tame by today’s standards.

But seventy years ago, when all this happened, Thurman was breaking new ground.

Howard Thurman died in 1981.

This morning, it has been a privilege to give you this brief sketch this man.

If we had all day, I could do a better job.

But for now, let’s reflect on a few of the opportunities and challenges that Thurman presents to us.

Like Howard Thurman, we draw inspiration from many sources including “direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder”.

Spiritual experience was a foundation of Thurman’s religious life, and it can be a foundation for ours, as individuals and as a church.

So let us remember that our Sunday worship is a spiritual practice that we do together.

Spiritual practice, for an individual or a group, is more than a private affair.

The division between spirituality and action is an artificial one.

As a mystic, Thurman sought to tear down the walls that alienate people from their kinship with God and separate them from one another.

In Thurman's experience, racial segregation was such a wall.
In this time and place, where are the walls that dehumanize and separate us?
Who are the strangers among us, whom we are called to meet face to face?

Thurman does not demand that each person be a hero in some political struggle.
He did not often appear on the front lines of the Civil Rights struggle.
But Thurman did know his gifts, and he used them well.
Thurman's influence had as much to do with *who he was* as what he *did* or what he *said*.
Thurman would advise each of us to cultivate the gifts we have
and to act out of our most deeply held intentions.

There is more than one way for us to serve.
But what does *not* serve life's purpose is to exist as a private island,
cut off from the flow of life, maintaining an artificial separation
between private experience and outer action.

So let us continue to ask ourselves, as individuals and as a church:
What are we for? What is our soul's intention?

Let this intention receive the stamp of our inner authority.
Let it be placed as an offering on our altar, to become part of our collective soul.
So may it be.