

Howard Thurman 1899 – 1981
Minister, Theologian, Educator, Author, Mystic

Arliss Ungar

Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive. Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman

(Quotations from *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979 are reprinted by permission of the publisher, now Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company.)

Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman was born in racially segregated Daytona Beach, Florida at the turn of the 20th century. When he was seven years old, his father, Saul Solomon Thurman, a railroad crew worker, died of pneumonia. Thurman was outraged at the funeral service by the minister's condemnation of his father as a "sinner" who died "out of Christ" because he was not a member of a church. In those early years, Thurman rejected the church which he later made his life's work. He was raised by his grandmother, Nancy Ambrose, while his mother, Alice, worked cooking and doing laundry for white folks to support the family.

Dr. Thurman's life was profoundly influenced by his grandmother, a former slave who could neither read nor write, but who insisted on his education at a time and place where African American children did not usually go beyond the seventh grade. He called her "the anchor person who held us together."

"This was Grandma," Thurman wrote. "She was fearless and embraced life with zest. Her devotion spilled over to every child in the neighborhood....She spoke very little of her early life as a slave, except occasionally in poignant memory of a moment, the sharing of which would speak to the condition of her grandchildren....I got from her...an enormous respect for the magic there is in knowledge....I learned more...about the genius of the religion of Jesus from my grandmother than from all the men who taught me – because she moved inside the experience and lived out of that kind of center. (With Head and Heart, 13. The following unnamed readings are from this source.)

Thurman said that

When I was young I found more companionship in nature than I did among people. The woods befriended me....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....Nightfall was meaningful to my childhood, for the night was more than a companion....There was something about the night that seemed to cover my spirit like a gentle blanket....I found myself wishing that the night would hurry and come, for under its cover, my mind would roam. I felt embraced, enveloped, held secure....The ocean and the night surrounded my little life with a reassurance that could not be affronted by the behavior of human beings. The ocean at night gave me a sense of timelessness, of existing beyond the reach of the ebb and flow of circumstances....

When the storms blew, the branches of the large oak tree in our backyard would snap and fall. But the topmost branches of the oak tree would sway, giving way just enough to save themselves from snapping loose. I needed the strength of that tree, and, like it, I wanted to hold my ground. Eventually, I discovered that the oak tree and I had a unique relationship. I could sit, my back against its trunk, and feel the same peace that would come to me in my bed at night. I could reach down in the quiet places of my spirit, take out my bruises and my joys, unfold them, and talk about them. I could talk aloud to the oak tree and know that I was understood. It, too, was a part of my reality, like the woods, the night, and the pounding surf, my earliest companions, giving me space....Whatever I was doing I managed to get home once or twice a year....On each visit I would go to my oak tree to lean against it for an intense moment of past intimacy. (7-8)

“The great contribution religion made to my life as a boy growing up in Florida, was this,” he said, “It gave me a sense of worth, an intrinsic sense of being creditable to myself – a sense that God, who created the ocean, which I loved, and the eclipses, and all the other things in nature, also created me. So that I felt, in all the external world around me, that there was a kind of kinship that was not pantheistic but grounded in a fundamental experience of meaning which was all mine by virtue of the fact that I was created.” (Theology Today)

After Thurman finished the seventh grade, the end of schooling for most black children in his town, the principal taught him eighth grade privately. Thurman was the first African American in his town to complete the eighth grade and go on to high school. But the nearest high school for Blacks was the Florida Baptist Academy in Jacksonville. A cousin there agreed to let him live with him in exchange for chores. Thurman explained,

When time came to leave for Jacksonville, I packed a borrowed old trunk with no lock and no handles, roped it securely, said my good-byes, and left for the railway station. When I bought my ticket, the agent refused to check my trunk on my ticket because the regulations stipulated that the check must be attached to the trunk handle, not to a rope. The trunk would have to be sent express but I had no money except for a dollar and a few cents left after I bought my ticket. 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 to help you. Come with me,” he said. He took me around 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 handled 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. (24-25)

Thurman dedicated his autobiography *“To the stranger in the railroad station in Daytona Beach who restored my broken dream sixty-five years ago.”*

His four years in high school were not easy. There was little money and little food. He managed with the help of \$5 a month in financial assistance from James Gamble of Procter and Gamble soap company, who answered his letter pleading for help.

In 1919, Thurman enrolled in Morehouse College in Atlanta with a tuition scholarship. Over the course of the four years, he read every book in the school library. His senior year, he was a member of the prestigious Morehouse debate team, and editor of the yearbook. He said, *“I was profoundly affected by the sense of mission the college inculcated in us. We understood that our job was to learn so that we could go back into our communities and teach others.”* (35) *“John Hope....was the first black man to become president of Morehouse College. Genteel, scholarly, decorous, he talked to us in chapel every Tuesday morning. This constituted perhaps our greatest single course of instruction in the four undergraduate years.”* At a time when whites referred to all Black men as “boy,” Dr. Hope referred to the students as “young gentlemen,” causing *“the seeds of self-worth and confidence, long dormant,..to germinate and sprout.* (36)

Thurman graduated from Morehouse College as valedictorian. He used the money from winning all the cash prizes awarded at commencement to attend summer school classes in philosophy at Columbia, including a class in reflective thinking which he described as *“perhaps the most significant single course I ever took.”* (44)

Denied admittance to Andover Newton Theological Seminary in Massachusetts, Thurman enrolled in Rochester Theological Seminary in New York as one of the two Black students admitted each year.

I experienced, he said, the most radical period of adjustment of my life up to that moment. I was living for the first time in a totally white world. The impact of this fact alone was staggering....As the weeks wore on I discovered that...I could hold my own very well; my anxiety diminished....I spent hours each week wandering around in the stacks, taking down first one book, then another, examining the title, reading the foreword and the tale of contents leafing through the pages, reading a paragraph here and there, getting the feel of the book and familiarizing myself with writers across centuries who would in time would become as closely related to me as my personal friends....I felt that I had much to overcome because of a restricted literary background, but it was not long before I realized that most of my classmates were in no way better equipped than I to deal with ideas, though in one particular way they seemed to have an unyielding advantage. They were at home in this world, and I felt a stranger. Whether they were gifted intellectually, or mediocre, the fact remained that this world belonged to them. (46-48)

He studied such courses as history of religion and systematic theology. In addition to classes and preaching at nearby churches, he attended the theater and concerts in New York City. *“This was an exhilarating time for me,”* he said, *“full of rewards and possibilities.”*(54) In the summers he worked at the First Baptist Church in Roanoke, where in 1925 he was ordained.

In 1926 he graduated at the top of his class. The week following graduation, he married Katie Kelly, and they immediately took the train to Oberlin, Ohio where he was called as pastor of the

Mount Zion Baptist Church. He remained there for two years. *“Over time,” he said, “my preaching became less motivated by the desire to ‘teach’; it became almost entirely devoted to the meaning of the experience of our common quest and journey.”* (73)

“I attended a state religious education convention in a town not far from Oberlin....As I was leaving the church, I noticed a book table near the door. The sign said, ‘Your choice for ten cents.’ I bought two books, The Life of Mary Baker Eddy and a little book entitled Finding the Trail of Life, by Rufus Jones of Haverford College. I was intrigued by the title and sat on the steps of the church and began reading. I did not move until I had read the entire book. When I finished I knew that if this man were alive, I wanted to study with him.” (74)

Through a mutual friend, Thurman contacted Rufus Jones, the Quaker philosopher and mystic, who was leader of the pacifist, interracial Fellowship of Reconciliation. Jones agreed to do a program of directed study. Thurman resigned as minister of the church and, in January 1929, went to Haverford to study with Jones. He gave up any thoughts of pursuing a Ph.D. His title of “Doctor” is from his many honorary degrees. *“My study at Haverford,”* Thurman said, *“was a crucial experience, a watershed from which flowed much of the thought and endeavor to which I was to commit the rest of my working life. These months defined my deepest religious urges and framed in meaning much of what I had learned over the years.”* (77) About this time, his first daughter, Olive, was born. But his wife, who was ill with tuberculosis, took the child and went back to the South to convalesce with her family.

Thurman was invited to speak at Tuskegee Institute. There he met Dr. George Washington Carver. *“To the end of my years,”* he said, *“I will carry in memory his face as he sat in his special pew in chapel looking intently into mine as I preached the morning’s sermon. There was the customary rose in his lapel, a Bible in his lap, and a light in his eyes that seemed to be controlled by some inner dimmer switch.”* (77-78)

He was invited to take the chaplaincy at Tuskegee, but was already committed to teach at Morehouse and Spelman, a women’s college, that fall. At Morehouse he taught philosophy and religion, and at Spelman he taught the Bible as living literature and served as religious adviser to the students and faculty.

“I believe,” he said, *“...that my contribution to the students [at Spelman] was not made in the classroom or even in the chapel services, but more in the personal encounters we had in individual and group counseling. It was here that the small miracles were wrought. Again and again, I was privileged to observe a student grow into awareness, then into self-esteem, and finally into the confidence to begin a quest in her own right.”* (79)

During his second year in Atlanta his wife died. His mother came to live with him and take care of the baby during what he called *“that painfully tragic year.”* Physically and emotionally exhausted, he sailed to Europe for *“solace and restoration.”*

After he returned, he became reacquainted with and married Sue Bailey, a friend from their

student days, who, he said, “*brought into our coming together a rare beauty of person, a clear and analytical mind, a sensitive imagination, and a fresh enthusiasm of heart that only love could inspire.*” (84) For the rest of his years, she was his powerful partner in work and in life.

It was 1932, they moved to Howard University in Washington D.C. where he was called to become professor of theology, and later dean of the Andrew Rankin Chapel, and “to radiate from that high citadel of learning, a ‘conscience’ for the nation’s capital.” (Thurman Trust web page) He remained at Howard University for twelve years.. The Thurmans opened their hearts and their home to the students. It was during this time that their second daughter, Anne, was born. Dr. Thurman, a man with a humbleness about him, became one of the country’s greatest preachers, speaking with sincerity and authenticity to the hearts and minds of his listeners. His deep baritone voice, powerful and compelling, was punctuated by long pauses. At his funeral, Jesse Jackson said, “I have been given three minutes to speak on Howard Thurman. Howard Thurman could pause for three minutes.” (UUCB sermon)

“Gradually,” Thurman said, “Sunday morning service at Rankin Chapel became a watering place for a wide range of worshipers, not only from within the university community, but also from the District of Columbia. Despite the fact that the District at that time was as segregated racially as Atlanta or Jackson, the Sunday chapel service provided a time and a place where race, sex, culture, material belongings, and earlier religious orientation became undifferentiated in the presence of God...”

In 1935, after wrestling with “*the paradox of being a black Christian minister who was representing and, by implication, defending a religion associated in the minds of many...with racism and colonialism,*” Thurman and his wife and another African-American couple undertook a pilgrimage of friendship to South Asia as guests of the Student Christian Movement of India, Burma and Ceylon, then colonies of the British Empire. A literal high point of the trip for Thurman was a climb to the top of a mountain in the Khyber Pass near Darjeeling to view the sunrise over the Himalayas.

He related,

After much teasing and coaxing I made it up to the top and was guided to a small pavilion. It was completely dark. I could feel the presence of other people close at hand but could see no one....Murmurs of conversations could be heard but not decoded. Then as dawn approached, everyone became silent. One could just hear now and then the sound of gently breathing.

At first there was just a faint finger of pink in the sky, then suddenly the whole landscape burst into one burnished gold radiance: everything was clear. Beyond, the solitary glowing peak of Everest rose....The glorious sight lasted no more than a minute; the clouds came together again and closed the view....

More than forty years have passed since that morning. It remains for me a transcendent moment of sheer glory and beatitude, when time, space, and circumstance evaporated and when my naked spirit looked into the depths of what is forbidden for anyone to see. I would never, never be the same again. (127-128)

“At Khyber Pass, Howard Thurman decided to stay in the Christian tradition and to make it live for the weak as well as the strong – for all peoples, whatever their color, whatever their caste. He would try to atone for the slave traffickers who called themselves Christians.” (Atlantic) It was here that the idea for an inter-racial church first came to him.

While in India, he had an extended conversation with Mahatma Gandhi about oppression, freedom and nonviolence. This conversation deepened his faith in the power of non-violent resistance. He brought Gandhi’s teachings back to the United States. On his return, he continued to reflect on how the teachings of Jesus applied to those facing suffering and oppression. In *Jesus and the Disinherited*, one of his more than twenty books, he asks, “*What does the message of Jesus have to say to those whose backs are against the wall?*” He says, “*The masses of men live with their backs constantly against the wall. They are the poor, the disinherited, the dispossessed. What does our religion say to them? The issue is not what it counsels them to do for others whose needs may be greater, but what religion offers to meet their own needs. The search for an answer to this question is perhaps the most important religious quest for modern life.*” This book, published in 1949, laid a foundation for the non-violent civil rights movement by asserting that the basic goal of Jesus’ life was to help the disinherited to change from within so that they would be empowered to survive in the face of oppression and to overcome persecution. (Faith) It is said that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. always kept a copy of this book with him. During the Civil Rights Movement Thurman was sometimes criticized for not being “in the streets” in the protest movement. Instead, he stayed in the background, providing a spiritual resource for Dr. King and other civil rights leaders such as Jesse Jackson and James Farmer.

In keeping with his belief that racial understanding requires a deep knowing of others, in 1944 he gave up his tenured full professorship and position as dean of chapel at Howard University to co-found with Dr. Alfred Fisk the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco, the nation's first intentionally intercultural, interracial, interdenominational church. It’s mission was “to create a religious fellowship that transcended artificial barriers of race, nation, culture, gender, and social distinctions.” (Fellowship Church). Thurman said,

Here at last I could put to the test once more the major concern of my life: Is the worship of God the central and most significant act of the human spirit? Is it really true that in the presence of God there is neither male nor female, child nor adult, rich nor poor, nor any classification by which mankind defines itself in categories, however meaningful? Is it only in the religious experience that the individual discovers what, ultimately, he amounts to?...Our worship became increasingly a celebration before God of life lived during the week; the daily life and the period of worship were one systolic and diastolic rhythm. Increasing numbers of people who were engaged in the common life of the city of San Francisco found in the church restoration, inspiration, and courage for their work on behalf of social change in the community. (144)

Later, during the 1960's he conceded that the Black Power Movement was an important step along the way to his goal of interracial harmony.

The Thurmans spent nine years in San Francisco, building an active, vibrant, debt free, inter-faith congregation that stressed social action and the arts in religious life.

In 1947, Thurman was invited by Harvard Divinity School to give the annual Ingersol Lecture on Immortality. He was the first Black person to do so. His talk on insights from Negro spirituals showed that “*the genius of the slave songs is their unyielding affirmation of life, defying the judgment of the denigrating environment which spawned them.*” This was the subject of his book, *Deep River: The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*. (216-217)

In 1953, Thurman received an invitation to go to Boston University to create an interracial, interdenominational religious center not only for the campus, but for the community as well. He wrote to the board of the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples:

To develop a congregation somewhat like this in a university community is to touch at every step of the way hundreds of young people who themselves will be going to the ends of the earth to take up their responsibilities as members of communities. Conceivably, this means the widest possible dissemination of the ideas in which I believe.

The fact that one of America’s great universities takes the completely unprecedented step in American education to invite a Negro to become one of its administrative deans, on behalf of a development in religious meaning and experience, in itself makes a limitless contribution to inter-group relations at this fateful moment in the history of America and the world. (168)

With “profound emotional upheaval” he left the Church for the for Fellowship of All Peoples to become dean of Boston University's Marsh Chapel as head of a six-member board of preachers, and professor of Spiritual Disciplines and Resources in the Graduate School of Theology. He was the first African-American academic dean at a predominantly white university.

Thurman revitalized an “almost moribund” chapel, creating, he said, “*an atmosphere of worship in which any seeker could find his place at the altar.*” Printed on every order of service at Marsh Chapel while Thurman was there were these words: “*This...service is so designed to address itself to the deepest needs and aspirations of the human spirit. In doing so, it does not seek to undermine whatever may be the religious context which gives meaning and richness to your particular life, but rather to deepen the authentic lines along which your quest for spirituality has led you.*” (171-172) “*Set in the midst of a Methodist university which was moving more and more away from its church-relatedness,*” Thurman said, “*the chapel stood as an ecumenical consortium at the center of campus life.*” (181)

In 1963, when Thurman first saw the coast of Africa, he wrote in his journal,

From my cabin window I look out on the full moon and the ghosts of my forefathers rise and fall with the undulating waves. Across these same waters, how many years ago they came. What were the inchoate mutterings locked tight within the circle of their hearts? In the deep heavy darkness of the foul-smelling hole of the ship, where they could not see the sky nor hear the night noises nor feel the warm compassion of the tribe, they held their breath against the agony.

How does the human spirit accommodate itself to desolation? How did they? What tools

of the spirit were in their hands with which to cut a path through the wilderness of despair? Through the years, Dr. Thurman helped many people to “cut a path through the wilderness of despair.” (193)

His official retirement was scheduled for 1965. He arranged for a leave of absence from chapel duties, but for three years remained at the university as minister-at-large, engaged in the wider ministry, but relieved of administrative responsibilities. He was free to travel during this time. His salary was underwritten by two anonymous San Francisco friends.

His time at Boston was not without controversy. Although he welcomed broad inter-faith diversity, perhaps his personal belief in Jesus as a human teacher, rather than as Devine, was, in some minds, at odds with the Methodist roots of the University. Attempts to reorganize the Marsh Chapel as an autonomous congregation were unsuccessful. His duties as a pastor sometimes conflicted with his responsibility to attend academic meetings.

An article in a 1953 *Atlantic Monthly* describes him this way: *In repose his face is sad. His eyes are large and expressive, his nose finely sculptured; but it is his long, thin hands, pale-palmed, that most people remember. They are never still, gesticulating constantly. His humor is as famous as his eloquence – the unself-conscious grin, the rollicking laughter, particularly at himself, the mischief that always seems to lurk behind his eyes.*

God, for Thurman, was everywhere and “utterly identified with every single thing, incident, or person....I prayed to God,” he said. “I talked to Jesus. He was a companion.” Thurman defined creed as “a bronze plaque erected at the site of a battle, signifying who won.” “What the creed does not say in its text is the point of view of those who lost.” He said dogma was “the rationalization of somebody else’s personal religious experience.” (Atlantic) He explained, “It’s the nature of religious experience...of whatever kind, to be fluid, dynamic, moving, surging; it is the nature of the mind to hold things so that there can be a handle. An object of thought must have a this-ness and a that-ness dimension. This is the way the mind works, but life is not lived that way.” (*Theology Today*)

Thurman spoke out against the evils of segregation, and its effect on the individual’s sense of self-worth. In 1965, in his book *Luminous Darkness: A personal interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope*, Thurman says (in the language of the day), “The real evil of segregation is the imposition of self-rejection! It settles on the individual a status which announces to all and sundry that he is of limited worth as a human being. It rings him round with a circle of shame and humiliation. It binds his children with a climate of no-accountedness as a part of their earliest experiences of self. Thus it renders them cripples, often for the length and breadth of their days.” (24)

Richard Newman from Harvard University explained:

There is no doubt about the reality of Thurman’s mysticism. When I reviewed his autobiography *With Head and Heart* (1979), I tried to understand and explain it: “This is a product of his radical self-understanding and his realization that the truth he found in himself

is universal. Having had revealed to him, as other mystics, a glimpse of the unity of the universe, he goes on to say, 'The Head and the Heart at last inseparable, they are lost in the wonder of the One.' Howard Thurman is a humble seeker who has never been without wonder; that may be his secret." To my surprise, Thurman wrote to me, saying that the review was the "*most insightful and sensitive one*" of his autobiography he had seen. (Newman)

Rev. Richard Boeke relates, "Howard was an ordained Baptist Minister, but he was a universalist who loved everybody: Christian, Moslem, Buddhist, Jew. A Quaker wrote, "When Howard Thurman spoke, he filled the entire room with compassion." Geneva Gates told how Howard helped her face her approaching blindness. What did he say? Geneva replied, "He didn't say anything. He held my hand and cried." (UUCB sermon)

When he formally retired Thurman was given \$10,000 donated by hundreds of friends and alumni from the two universities where he taught. This money became the fiscal foundation of the Howard Thurman Educational Trust for the education of African American college age youth primarily from the deep South, and the collection and dissemination of his writings and tapes. "*This marked the end of my formal extended academic career,*" he said, "*and marked the beginning of a new challenge for my life as chairman of the educational trust that bears my name. With the change of residence from Boston to San Francisco at sixty-five I began a new career.*" (192)

"He gave all of his strength and energy – even during the period of his long illness – to the work of the Trust which he founded in 1965. He envisioned the Trust (a non-profit public foundation) as providing scholarships for college undergraduates, supporting intercultural community and school activities and disseminating his recorded and published works." (Commemorative Service) He came to see the Black Power Movement as a necessary step along the path toward interracial harmony.

After a lifetime of helping people to "actualize their potential" in their struggle for courage, self-respect, and emotional security when oppression attacked their dignity, Howard Thurman died on April 10, 1981 at the age of 81. His philosophy and his life work stressed "activism rooted in faith, guided by spirit, and maintained in peace." (Faith) The Reverend Doctor Howard Thurman was a man of humility and compassion, a prophetic man of wisdom, a caring pastor, a seeker of insight and truth, and a visionary religious leader for non-violent social transformation.

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