

“Backs Against the Wall: The Howard Thurman Story”

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David Long



Readings

Psalm 46:10

Be still and know that I am God.

Centering Down

from *What Makes You Come Alive: A Spiritual Walk with Howard Thurman*

by Larita Coleman Brown

Howard Thurman believed that a place deep within us yearns for moments of quiet serenity. Silence, stillness and solitude: in our noise-filled lives, these bring peace, heal, strengthen and facilitate spiritual growth.... When we intentionally center down in contemplative prayer and meditation, God reminds us of our unsevered bond. Invoking our inward quietness can aid the discernment process when facing life-altering decisions....

What follows is an edited version of the notes David used to make his presentation.

Howard Thurman is my spiritual mentor. He's best known for the spiritual inspiration and guidance he gave to leaders of the civil rights movement. For Thurman, an inward spiritual journey is a precondition for action and is as important as the action itself. There is far more to Howard Thurman than the spiritual grounding he provided to the civil rights movement. He was one of most profound spiritual leaders of our age. He spent a lifetime exploring and expounding on the religion of Jesus. Thurman's focus was on the life we live right now (think of Jesus' admonition that the "kingdom of heaven is at hand").

I first became acquainted with Howard Thurman over fifty years ago when we were in the Washington DC area. Carolyn and I were close friends with Mary Jane and Akram Deiranieh. Mary Jane was from rural Kentucky coal country. Akram was a Muslim Palestinian immigrant from Jordan who was a U.S. citizen. Mary Jane had been a Christian education student at Boston University where Howard Thurman, then Dean of the University Chapel, had married them. We were part of a monthly small group Mary Jane led called the Tillich Group because we studied the works of theologian Paul Tillich.

Mary Jane and Akram often referred to the teachings and example of Howard Thurman. I filed this information away but didn't explore it at the time. Ten or fifteen years ago, I discovered that sermons and lectures of Howard Thurman had been recorded and were available for listening in a digital archive at Boston University. I listened to several of his sermons and was hooked. For over a decade I've listened to Howard Thurman as a major part of my spiritual practice. Unfortunately, Boston University digital archive closed, hopefully temporarily, but I discovered the Howard Thurman digital library at Emory University library, which I'm now using.

Prior to finding Howard Thurman, my thinking about life had been heavily influenced by Victor Frankl's book *Man's Search for Meaning*. For me Howard Thurman picked up where that book left off. He provided me an opportunity to engage with questions of life's meaning at a deeper level. In excerpts of the film "Backs Against the Wall: The Howard Thurman Story," we see the huge impact Thurman had on Martin Luther King and other civil rights leaders. He provided the spiritual grounding for nonviolent protest. But Thurman himself was not a social reformer or activist – not on the front lines. Rather, he was a student and practitioner of the inner life and its connection to the life we are called to live. He expounded the "religion of Jesus" – the "way," which is very different from the "religion about Jesus" – the theology of Jesus the Christ and its focus on personal salvation.

Thurman was wary of orthodoxy and doctrine and creeds and religious intermediaries such as priests. His views about religion formed at an early age, growing up as he did in a racially segregated Daytona Beach Florida. His mother was a domestic, and his father was a laborer on the railroad, a good job for a black man at the time. Howard spent a lot of time with his grandmother, Nancy Ambrose – a slave up to the end of the Civil War. She could not read or write, so as a child, Howard read the Bible to her. She wouldn't allow him to read from letters of Paul, whom she considered an apologist for slave owners. Thurman's mother and grandmother were regular churchgoers; his father was not. His father died when Howard was seven. The minister refused to hold a funeral service for his father because he had not been a regular church participant. The family found a visiting minister to hold the service, but when that minister found that Thurman's father was not a regular churchgoer, as Thurman puts it, he "preached his father into hell." This experience had a profound impact on Howard as a young boy. He said to mother after the service, "that preacher didn't know daddy, did he?"

Thurman was an exceptional student. Public schooling for black students went only to the seventh grade, but the principal saw promise in Thurman and tutored him so he could pass eighth grade exams. He later received a scholarship to a black Baptist-run high school in Jacksonville. He graduated from Morehouse College as valedictorian and went on to Rochester Seminary in New York, where he was one of only two black students in his class, of which he also was the valedictorian. He studied with Rufus Jones, a prominent Quaker mystic at Haverford College, and his first church was a black church in Oberlin Ohio. Thurman had teaching positions at Morehouse College and at Howard University, where he was then appointed Dean of the Chapel. With that introduction, let's see first excerpt from the film "Backs Against the Wall: the Howard Thurman Story."

[The clip ends with a comment from Otis Moss Jr.: "We thought we had a liberator, and Moses, but instead we got a mystic." Dave then played an audio clip of Thurman's own words on mysticism.]

The religion of Jesus is the central focus of Thurman's message. He believed that we are all children of God with the inherent dignity that flows from that understanding. "The kingdom of God is at hand" right here in our daily lives. As children of God, we need to love ourselves, not in a narcissistic way, but in a way that recognizes the dignity conferred on us as children of God. For Thurman, to love others we must love ourselves; we must dig deep to uncover the spirit of God in ourselves. In loving ourselves, we need to forgive our own faults, including harm we inflict upon others. And in loving others, we need to look beyond their virtues and faults to uncover the spirit of God in them. Getting in touch with the spirit of God in oneself and seeking wholeness does not necessarily mean an easy life. It may mean confronting injustice.

[Dave played some more audio clips of Thurman discussing these themes: wholeness and love of self and the fact that we inflict faults on others and so must be patient with their faults.]

For Thurman, to love one's neighbor does not mean you condone or acquiesce in your neighbor's actions or attitudes.

A trip to India in 1935 catalyzed Thurman's views about non-violent resistance to injustice and oppression. [Here a clip from the DVD was played featuring Gandhi.]

For Thurman, it was important to maintain a proper balance between one's inner life and outer life. The inner life is not an end in itself. Withdrawal and meditation are essential, but do not make a complete life. The purpose of withdrawal should be to prepare to engage with life and take appropriate action in the world.

[Two audio clips were played discussing the importance of withdrawal and withdrawal versus action.]

For Thurman, the essence of life is to live one's dream, to sing one's own song. We must recognize that the song will change throughout a lifetime. He taught that the purpose of life is to live the dream and sing the song most appropriate to every stage of life.

[Two more audio clips were played featuring the importance of the dream of the heart and how it is that we must sing a new song.]

Howard Thurman dreamed new dreams and sang new songs throughout his lifetime. One of his lifelong dreams was to create a multiracial, multiethnic church at a time when the most racially segregated time of the week was during Sunday morning worship. It's reported that he and his wife Sue catalyzed this dream when they were in India in 1935 at the Khyber Pass.

[The final video clip was played featuring the Church of Fellowship for All Peoples.]

Howard Thurman's questions for us are: What is our dream? What is the new song that is right for us to sing?