

# Dangerous Memories and Redemptive Possibilities: Reflections on the Life and Work of Howard Thurman

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*Howard Thurman (1899–1981) touched the lives of many leaders in and beyond the US civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Thurman earned his degree in politics/economics at Morehouse College and in theology at Rochester Theological Seminary. He served as dean of the chapel at Boston University from 1953 to 1965. At once mystic, pacifist and integrationist, his thought was vitally impacted by experience of oppression in America's Deep South. Thurman was an isolated child in an aggrieved community, forced back upon a deep inner spirituality to cope with material deprivation and indifference. He explored the importance of 'sites of memory' as a means of recovering emotion, not least grief. For Thurman, the individual is the point of departure, but is only fully constituted in 'the crucible of relationship'; the purpose of knowledge is action; and the object of action is to secure loving relationships.*

The fact that the first twenty-five years of my life were spent in Florida and in Georgia has left deep scars in my spirit and has rendered me terribly sensitive to the churning abyss separating white from black. Living outside of the region, I am aware of the national span of racial prejudice and the virus of segregation that undermines the vitality of American life. Nevertheless, a strange necessity has been laid upon me to devote my life to the central concern that transcends the walls that divide and would achieve in literal fact what is experienced as literal truth: human life is one and all men are members one of another. And this insight is spiritual and it is the hard core of religious experience. (Thurman 1965: x)

I didn't have to wait for the revolution. I have never been in search for identity—and I think that (all) I've ever felt and worked on and believed in was founded in a kind of private, almost unconscious autonomy that did not seek vindication in my environment because it was in me. (Thurman quoted in Goodwin 1973)<sup>1</sup>

Howard Thurman's life and work provide an excellent insight into the generation of an ideology of nonviolence and black leadership in the south. Thurman's career as pastor, scholar, teacher, university chaplain, preacher and administrator extended over 55 years and touched the lives of many highly visible leaders within and beyond the modern civil rights movement.<sup>2</sup> Born in Daytona Beach, Florida at the turn of the century in the midst of the dehumanising onslaughts of segregation and Jim Crow, Thurman committed himself to transforming parochial and dogmatic pockets of organised religion into a community transcending barriers of racism, classism, sexism, denominationalism and religious exclusivism. Although women and men from various racial, socio-economic, cultural and religious backgrounds found affinity with this universal spirit, the peculiar genius of Howard Thurman was rooted in his location on 'the underside of history,' i.e., the African-American experience of oppression in the United States.<sup>3</sup> Thurman is properly located within the context of black oppression. His vision of community is significantly shaped by his encounters with the extremes of race and class domination in America's Deep South at the turn of the century. The 'dangerous memories' of Thurman are 'sites' for reflection on the intervening variables of race and class. Those 'sites' shape the central, unifying theme of his life and thought, which he refers to as 'the search for common ground'. Thurman's self-perception as a solitary brooder, moreover, sheds light on a vital, though neglected, dimension of American discourse on spirituality, ethics and leadership (Mitchell 1985: 52; see also Smith 1980).

### **The Black Community of Waycross: Site of '*Dangerous Memories*'**

The 'deep scars' to which Thurman alludes in the quotation which opens this article were the residues of confinement, while growing up, to the small, hostile, segregated community of Waycross, Florida. The young Thurman was a victim of the tight circle of poverty and racism and of the fears that accompanied both. The 'deep scars' were not peculiar to Thurman, but marked his community as a whole. In Vincent Harding's apt metaphor, the black community of Waycross was part of a greater,

surging river of oppression and redemptive possibilities (Harding 1981: 3–23). The ‘black community’, according to James Blackwell, is a *social* phenomenon, which can only be understood within the context of Western hegemonic practices. He defines ‘the black community’ as ‘a highly diversified, interrelated aggregate of people who unite into relatively cohesive structures in response to white oppression, racism, and patterned repression’. He further contends that ‘there is no single authentic black experience in America except that which is developed as a consequence of ubiquitous white racism and the prevalent color consciousness’. Following Blackwell, black experiences are multiple, ‘each one as authentic as the other. The common denominator for them all [being] the coalescence of racism and color’ (Blackwell 1973: xi). Blackwell’s definition is to be understood in the context of ‘the lingering memory’ of ‘African tribalism’ in ‘the minds of African slaves’. The sense of history and connectedness with the past, according to Sterling Stuckey, ‘enabled them [enslaved Africans] to go back to a sense of community in the traditional African settings and to include all Africans in their common experience of oppression in North America’. Stuckey suggests that

slave ships were the first incubators of slave unity across cultural lines, cruelly revealing irreducible links from one ethnic group to the other, fostering resistance thousands of miles before the shores of the new land appeared on the horizon – before there was mention of natural rights in North America. (Stuckey 1987: 3)

These ‘lingering memories’ are also ‘dangerous memories’. *Dangerous memories fund a community’s sense of dignity; they inspire and empower those who challenge oppression. Dangerous memories are a people’s history of resistance and struggle, of dignity and transcendence in the face of struggle* (Welch 1988: 11–12). German political theologian Johann Baptist Metz uses this language to identify the Cross as an act political resistance (Metz 1980: 89). This understanding of the Cross leads to a deeper dimension of that neglected dimension of not only religious and theological discourse, but the relationship between leadership and ethics as well. It is the *affective* dimension of the intellectual task of *grieving for the dead*. Malidoma Patrice Some has suggested that the great need in Western civilisation is the need for *ritualised grief*. The Great Lie of modernity, of Machine Culture, is that there is no real past – only Progress, the forward, future-fixated movement of Western individualism that destroys all connections with the ancestors. In Some’s words:

Modernism means unemotionalism, or that which owes emotion to the world. It also means loss of memory of the way of acting that encompasses both the body and the soul. To cleanse the modern world from its unresolved problems of the soul, there ought not to be a Memorial Day but a massive funeral day when everyone is expected to shed tears for the titanic loss wrecked by Progress on people's souls. (Some 1993: 122)

Resistance, in this perspective, requires *rememory*, to borrow from Toni Morrison's lexicon. *Rememory* functions to re-collect, re-assemble and re-configure individual and collective consciousness into a meaningful and sequential whole through the process of narrativisation. The significance of rememory in grief is the narrativisation of the past, the reclaiming of bodies of disparate and disconnected meaning lodged in the unconscious matrices of the soul. In an interview on her novel, *Beloved*, Morrison states,

There is no place you or I can go, to think about or not think about, to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of slaves; nothing that reminds us of the ones who made the journey and of those who did not make it. There is no suitable memorial or plaque or wreath or wall or park or skyscraper lobby. There's no 300-foot tower. There is no small bench by the road. (Henderson 1991: 7);<sup>4</sup>

It is a return not merely to intellectual excavation of historical data, but is associated with deep emotional energy, which is spiritual and emphatic. *Dangerous memories* offer entrée into forgotten worlds of meaning. They allow recovery of dismembered bodies of experience otherwise invisible to consciousness.

Black Church traditions are repositories of these lost and dismembered bodies of experience. Dangerous memories involve the simultaneous acts of *weeping, confession and resistance*. Black preaching is an example of this methodology suggested by Christine Smith (Smith 1992). The narrative history of Black preaching, which predates the Great Awakenings and frontier revivals of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, is punctuated with diachronic and synchronic weeping, confession and resistance in response to Eurowestern hegemonic practices. Today, however, there is more at stake than identifying systemic patterns of injustice that breed suffering and perpetuate violent acts of racial hostility. The *lifeworlds* of twenty-first century, post-industrial Black life reflect behaviours deep and ominous enough to qualify as demoniacal. The critical task

of rememory includes the three infra-centres of weeping, confession and resistance, but distances itself from any critique that has the effect of undermining the liberative yearnings of Black life and struggle.

Waycross became for Thurman a *site of dangerous memories*,

where memory crystallizes and secretes itself ... at a particular historical moment, a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn – but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists. There are *lieux de memoire*, sites of memory, because there are no longer *milieux de memoire*, real environments of memory. (Nora 1989: 7)

But these sites of memory became for Thurman, and many others of his generation, environments for reflection, reappropriation and reconfiguration of memory as redemptive possibilities. Thurman's early childhood, to which he returns again and again in sermons, writings and meditations, provides us with insights into the ways in which these dangerous memories served as environments for the reconstruction of meaning and discursive possibilities in the context of the Deep South. They afford us opportunity to see the ways in which his belief in the interiority of religious experience served as a wellspring for practical action and political resistance within American society.

## The Early Years

### *Nature and Family*

Howard Thurman was born at the turn of the century on 18 November 1899 in Daytona Beach, Florida and died 10 April 1981. A second child and only son, born to Saul Solomon Thurman and Alice Ambrose, young Howard was an unusual child whose closest companion was nature itself.<sup>5</sup> The deep, dark woods, the lonely solitude of the Florida nights, the rhythmic movement of the Halifax River, the pounding surf and majestic stillness of the Atlantic Ocean, the terrible mystery and fascination of tropical storms, the resiliency and strength of the old oak tree in his backyard – all these early childhood experiences with nature provided Thurman with clues to the inner unity of all living things. That sense of an inner and comprehensive unity of all living things dogged Thurman throughout his life and formed the core of his thought (BBC 1976).

Thurman's early affinity with nature can be explained, in part, by the extreme hardships of his family environment and his inner need for security and affirmation.<sup>6</sup> His early years were beset by adversity and even tragedy, scarring his tender spirit. The profoundest impression made upon him was the funeral service of his father (Thurman 1960: 8). At the funeral a local evangelist, Reverend Sam Cromarte, seized the opportunity to illustrate the fate of those who died 'outside of Christ'. Thurman says, 'I listened with wonderment, then anger, and finally mounting rage as Sam Cromarte preached my father into hell' (Thurman 1979b: 6). In the need to find a sense of meaning and immunity against the onslaught of this devastating event, Thurman turned to the huge oak tree in his backyard. He would *remember* it, many years later, as his 'windbreak against existence'. Thurman sought the strength of the tree able to withstand raging storms (Thurman 1960: 7-8).

The circumstances surrounding the death of Thurman's father cut deeply into the son's developing personality. Thurman's mother's constant struggle to provide for her family after Saul's death had no less astringent an impact on the boy's sensibilities. Alice Ambrose, a quiet, devoutly Christian woman, went to work as a domestic for a white family in downtown Daytona (Thurman 1979b: 12). Her responsibilities to her employer took away much of the valuable time which Howard and his two sisters needed, and which she wanted so badly to share with them. Thurman's mother worked so hard to support the family that she actually forgot the correct date of her son's birth.

The sudden death of Thurman's father was followed closely by the death of his stepfather. His mother's work situation was a terrible burden, separating her from her children. Moreover, Thurman had no close childhood acquaintances. He felt abandoned; he was self-aware and fearful. All of these factors prompted Thurman to develop an elaborate inner world, and contributed to his identification with nature. In an unpublished manuscript, Thurman shares the loneliness and sense of rejection:

I seemed to be passed over unnoticed, my company was not welcomed by girls nor by the boys in choosing sides for games. Among my peers I seemed to be an 'extra,' but never quite so ... I was ever haunted by a feeling of awkwardness in all my relationships, I felt clumsy. As I walked, it was as if my feet felt fearful of being together. I've told how under stress, the toe of my right foot would rub against my left heel, and that I was fat... I had no older brother or father to defend me, only Momma, Grandma, and my

sisters. Yet somehow I did not feel I was a failure just because I did not 'belong' with boys and girls my age. The humiliations of my youth threatened me, but did not undermine my self-worth. (Thurman 1979a: 6)

If there was one dominant force, outside of Thurman's companionship with nature that was responsible for his sense of self-worth in the face of overwhelming difficulties, it was his maternal grandmother, Nancy Ambrose. She 'was the first to teach Thurman that spirituality sustains one in the midst of life's many predicaments' (Smith 1991: 32; see also Jackson 1978: 207–14; Frazier 1939: 114–24). 'Grandma Nancy' came to live with her daughter and children after the death of Saul Thurman and was actually the person who reared Thurman and his sisters. He refers to her as 'the anchor person in our family' who 'brooded over our lives' (BBC 1976). It was his grandmother who early helped to instil in him a sense of self-worth in spite of the indignities he suffered from his peers and his painful encounters with the crushing reality of segregation in the Deep South. Thurman remembers, 'You felt that she contained and honored all of our feelings and all of hers, but they didn't spill over. I got certain strength from her. That was very fortunate for me' (Goodwin 1973: 533).<sup>7</sup> Thurman writes that whenever his grandmother would sense that he and his sisters were experiencing a loss of personal worth, she would tell them a story of a slave preacher who once or twice a year would visit her plantation. At the close of his delivery, he would pause and tell them: 'You are not niggers! You are not slaves! You are God's children!' He says that 'When my grandmother got to that part of the story there would be a slight stiffening in her spine and we sucked in our breath. When she finished, our spirits were restored' (Thurman 1979b: 21; see also Goodwin 1973: 534).

Although Nancy Ambrose was illiterate, she had great appreciation for education. She had discovered early that there was something 'magic' to education. When she was a slave, her mistress discovered her daughter teaching Nancy to read. The little girl was chastised and sent to bed without supper. This experience affected Nancy deeply and convinced her that education was a means of liberation. She assumed responsibility for seeing that Thurman and his sisters excelled in school. Grandma Nancy's concern and diligence in monitoring Howard's educational progress was highly rewarded. He was the first black student in Daytona to take and pass the eighth-grade examination, which qualified him for high school (BBC 1976).

These formative influences from the world of nature and his family environment, especially from his grandmother, did much to kindle a growing sense of personal worth and mission in young Thurman. Another factor, which played a prominent role in his early search for 'common ground', was the black church. Both his mother and grandmother were faithful church members, and it was through their examples and tutelage that Thurman was enabled to pursue and actualise what he would later call 'the hunger of the heart' (Thurman 1984: 275, 279–80). Although at his father's funeral he had sworn out of confusion and anger, that he would never have anything to do with the church, at the age of 12 he joined Mount Bethel Baptist Church. The attendant ceremonies and rites of passage were, and still are, integral parts of the black church tradition and they did much to give Thurman a strong sense of self-worth. Thurman's experience of baptism and later of discipline by a 'sponsor' in the church bound him to a community of people who cared for him. The community of Thurman's youth bolstered his sense of personal worth against the ravages of a larger and hostile society. He explains the meaning of these early church experiences:

In the fellowship of the church, particularly in the experience of worship, there was a feeling of sharing in primary community. Not only did church membership seem to bear heavily upon one's ultimate destiny beyond death and the grave; more than all the communal ties, it also undergirded one's sense of personal identity. It was summed up in the familiar phrase, 'If God is for you, who can prevail against you?' (Thurman 1979b: 17)

In the Black community of Daytona, Florida, the Thurmans lived in a section called Waycross (Thurman 1979b: 9). Thurman described his neighbourhood as an 'extended family'.<sup>8</sup> According to him, all children in Waycross were under the general supervision of the adults:

Any child belonged to the whole immediate community, so that if an adult saw me and wanted me to do an errand, I did not have to go home and ask my mother's permission. I would simply do it because Mrs. Thomas told me and that was all that was necessary (BBC 1976).

Despite the extreme hardships endured by the people of Waycross because of segregation, they were able to compensate through caring and sharing in community. Thurman highlights the community's response to his father's death as one example of this:

My father's death was only one of many experiences I recall that bore the aura of the caring of all, the sharing of all, during times of illness or suffering. The sick were cared for at home for no hospitals were open to us [black people] other than the 'pesthouse' on the outskirts of town, where smallpox victims were isolated. *In every aspect of the common life, there was a sense of shared responsibility.* (Thurman 1979b: 11, emphasis added).

There were others in the black community of Daytona, outside the family context, who served as models for Thurman during his early years (Thurman 1979b: 21). Mary McLeod Bethune, one of the outstanding leaders of the twentieth century and the founder of Bethune Cookman College in Daytona, was another important model of excellence and community for Thurman. He was aware of her struggles in starting the school and knew of her unrelenting faith that enabled her to realise the vision of creating a centre of quality education for young Negro women in the South. He and his family knew Mrs Bethune personally and often attended commencement exercises of the school. He would hear her speak of her trials and victories at his church on fifth Sunday nights, which were undoubtedly Missionary nights. He speaks of the significance of the school for local youth even though many young women in Daytona could not afford to attend. 'The very presence of the school, and the inner strength and authority of Mrs. Bethune, gave boys like me a view of possibilities to be realized in some distant future.' Years later, in his eulogy delivered for Mrs Bethune, Thurman said, 'Her life was involved with my own life as long as I can remember my own life' (Thurman 1979b: 23; see also Holt 1984: esp. 114; Thurman 1955b).

These experiences of primary community in the contexts of the family, church and the black community of Waycross were at least equalled by the overwhelming experiences of segregation in the early years of Thurman's development. The psychological toll of these experiences, according to Thurman, could have been devastating, but he chose early to treat white people indifferently and to cast them outside of the scope of 'the magnetic field of his morality'.

To all white persons, the category of exception applied. I did not regard them as involved in my religious reference. They were read out of the human race – they simply did not belong to it in the first place. Behavior toward them was amoral. (Thurman 1965: 3)

It was not until later years that Thurman was able to overcome this moral indifference to white people (Thurman 1959b: 21; 1979b: 51).

The early experiences with nature, the family environment, the black church and the black community of Waycross served as the wellsprings for the formative years of Howard Thurman. In this respect, Thurman's biography is a text revealing common themes of the development of black leadership and ideology in the Deep South. Suffering and community are defining motifs of the social environments from which twentieth-century black leaders in the Deep South emerged and from which they took their primary discursive cues. One cannot read early slave texts – spirituals, autobiographies, folktales and poetry – without noting the paradoxical themes of suffering and community. Yet, at the heart of this suffering community, there sat a powerful sense of connectedness with a long and sacred history reaching beyond its existential settings. And it is from these psychological and social configurations of memory, that a community was forged in dialectical tension with a dreadful oppression. To understand this kind of interaction between the forces of oppression, on the one side, and the spark of redemptive possibility, on the other, is to discover a clue to Thurman's early conceptualizations of the central concern of his life: *the search for common ground*. It is also a clue to Thurman's wrestling with the question of good and evil. For Thurman, good and evil sit side by side in dialectical interplay, nurturing and forming the myriad expressions of life. For Thurman, it is only in the crucible of suffering that authentic community is formed (Fluker 1989).

In later life, Thurman would write brilliant prose about this 'lingering memory' of the African past and its relation to redemptive possibilities of the present:

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 their despair? If only death of the body could come to deliver the soul from dying ... If death had*

come, being ushered into life by a terrible paroxysm of pain, all the assurance of the Way of the Tribe would have carried the spirit home on the wings of precious ceremony and holy ritual. But this! Nothing anywhere in all the myths, in all the stories, in all the ancient memory of the race, had given hint of this tortuous convulsion. There were no gods to hear, no magic spell of witch doctor to summon, even one's companion in chains muttered his quivering misery in a tongue unknown and a sound unfamiliar.

O my fathers, what was it like to be stripped of all supports of life save the beating of the heart and the ebb and flow of fetid air in the lungs? In a strange moment when you suddenly caught your breath, did some intimation from the future give to your spirit a wink of promise? In the darkness, did you hear the silent feet of your children beating a melody of freedom to words which you would never know, in a land in which your bones would be warmed again in the depths of the cold earth in which you would sleep, unrealized and alone? (Thurman 1979b: 193–4)

What were these 'tools of the spirit' that enabled those ancestors, trapped in slave ships, to forge community out of the human vacuum of misery? How might these techniques of the spirit enable a new breed of leaders to envision and create new meanings out of a hope that will not die?

### Howard Thurman as Opener of the Way

Thurman saw his role in the Movement as always calling those individuals involved in the struggle back to that primary experience of encounter with, in his language, the 'literal truth' or 'the truth of God'. Thurman's ministry of teaching and healing extended beyond the walls of the church to personal encounters with individuals who found in his presence 'a place, a moment' to declare, 'I choose!'. This was part of the ministry performed for so many African Americans leaders who had to deal with the brutal and harsh realities of living in a society, which rendered them nameless, faceless and sexless. This dimension of Howard Thurman was one of the peculiar graces of the man. Somehow, he was able to dig deep into the inner recesses of being, into places others could not reach. Thurman seemed to be able to find the hidden treasures of the soul and to navigate forsaken wastelands of the heart, the shattered hopes and the flickering visions of yesteryear. He taught those in despair how to dream

again, how to begin again, how to resurrect the crucified and forsaken symbols of life and make of them redemptive messengers in a world that conspires against faith, hope and love. In the words of his wife, the late Sue Bailey Thurman, 'he helped to move the stumps out of the way for so many people' (S.B Thurman 1989).

The testimonies from many notable leaders within and beyond the African-American community are legion.<sup>9</sup> Crusaders like Jesse Jackson proclaim that

Dr. Thurman was a teacher of teachers, a leader of leaders, a preacher of preachers. No small wonder, then, that Martin Luther King, Jr., Whitney Young, Samuel Proctor, Vernon Jordan, Otis Moss ... sat at his feet, for we knew it was a blessing to give this prophet a glass of water or to touch the hem of his garment. (See Millet 1982: 83)

Those closest to Thurman report that, while in his presence, the inimitable Mr Jackson *literally* sat at the master's feet.<sup>10</sup> But Jackson is not alone in his adulation. Vincent Harding, a noted historian of the African-American struggle, remembers the quiet idiom that marked the gracious manner of Thurman's presence. Harding writes, 'I remember our silences. They were filled with wisdom and compassion. Indeed, it may be that he was the wisest and most compassionate man I have ever known.' He continues, 'Howard Thurman opened doors ... Many of us have become more fully human because of his opening love. Many of us have been challenged by his life to do our own moving, deep into the heart of our own 'spiritual idiom', thereby drawing nearer to the 'inside [of] all peoples, all cultures, all faiths' (Harding 1984: xiv). For the late Arthur Ashe, tennis champion and humanitarian, Thurman represented 'the supreme example of the black American's capacity for achieving spiritual growth and maturity despite the incessant blows of racism. Born in the shadow of slavery, black and poor, he developed his understanding of the human and divine to such an extent that he influenced thousands of people' (Ashe & Rampersand 1993: 286).

Perhaps the remarks of Pulitzer Prize-winning author and Georgian Alice Walker capture best the power of Thurman's presence as a veritable *angelos* incarnate in his written word. She called him

one of the greatest spiritual resources of this nation ... The essence of his thought emerges in a message of hope, reconciliation, and love ... In those long midnight hours when morning seems weeks away,

the words of Howard Thurman have kept watch with me. (Quoted in Makechnie 1988: 79)

How came this intriguing personality to such a prominent place in the lives of many leaders who laboured for justice in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s and after? What was the secret of his comforting presence and profound insight into the spiritual moorings of leaders engaged in social transformation?

The designation, *Opener of the Way*,<sup>11</sup> is used to express the distinctive characterisation of Thurman's contribution to leaders in the forefront of the movement. As a discursive pointer, it also provides a window through which we can examine the notion of 'the interiority of religious experience' and how this dimension is wedded to healing and social transformation in Thurman's thought and praxis. By utilising this language I also want to highlight Thurman's conscious role as *pedagogue* in teaching and explicating the religious and ethical significance of the political, economic and social arrangements in which these individuals found themselves.<sup>12</sup>

Mozella Mitchell's depiction of Thurman as 'a sophisticated modern-day shaman' and 'a technician of the sacred' is helpful (Mitchell 1982: 28).<sup>13</sup> For Mitchell, Thurman stands somewhere between the priest and the shaman while maintaining a distinctive posture as a social prophet. Unlike the prophet who speaks to the community, 'Thus says the Lord', the shaman leads the community to God by 'giving others access to the spiritual world and effects a cure for their ailing condition'. According to Mitchell,

Thurman, in his shamanistic function, does not simply bring the message of truth from God to the religious community, but he leads individuals and the community to have an experience with the divine from which they may gain a sense of wholeness themselves. (Mitchell 1985: 88)

Mitchell's description of Thurman places him alongside a company of African-American healers and teachers whose roots reach beyond the American clime and find affinity with a long and neglected tradition (Noll 1991; Some 1994). While it is helpful to compare Thurman with the shaman of archaic societies, Thurman's linkage with his African past is a more fruitful way to understand his role as *Opener of the Way* from the underside of history. In this paradigm, one sees exciting parallels with the enslaved preachers of the African Diaspora. Like his precursors, Thurman provided a symbolic focus for leaders of the movement. James

Weldon Johnson and W.E.B. Du Bois attributed the centrality of the enslaved African preacher to his or her role as *teacher* and *healer*. Johnson wrote that ‘it was through him [sic] that people of diverse languages and customs that were brought here from diverse parts of Africa and thrown into slavery, were given their first sense of unity and solidarity. He was the first shepherd of his bewildered flock’ (Johnson 1927: 2). Speaking of ‘the ‘priest’ and ‘medicine-man’, Du Bois wrote, ‘He early appeared on the plantation and found his function as the healer of the sick, the interpreter of the Unknown, the comforter of the sorrowing, the supernatural avenger of wrong, and the one who [c]rudely, but picturesquely expressed the long disappointment, and resentment of a stolen and oppressed people’ (Du Bois 1969: 216).<sup>14</sup>

From early childhood, Thurman felt himself ‘marked’ (1979b: 265). Most illuminating is this characteristically modest statement about his peculiar gift:

One day, how early in my life I do not recall, I discovered a little scar tissue in the center of both ear lobes. When I asked about it, I was told that my ears had been pierced when I was a baby. I was told that at the time of my birth my eyes were covered by a film. This meant, according to the custom, that I was gifted with ‘second sight’ – a clairvoyance, the peculiar endowment of one who could tell the future. No parent wanted a child so endowed. It spelled danger and grief. If the ears were pierced, however, the power of the gift would be dissipated. How deeply I was influenced by this ‘superstition’ I do not know. Who is there who can understand such things? One thing I do know, there are times when I am visited by the emergence of a quick memory, the vivid recollection of a face, a person, an event that shoots up from the unconscious on its own errand. Or it may be an insight or an inspiration, an ‘opening,’ to use a phrase from the Society of Friends. It is idea and more than idea. We say this thought came into our minds or we had a ‘hunch’ that this was going to happen; our language is full of such references (Smith 1995: 263; see also Eliade 1964: 16).

### **Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr**

Thurman states in his autobiography that on more than one occasion he felt a premonition to minister to those engaged in the thick of the struggle. His relationship with Martin Luther King, Jr is exemplary.<sup>15</sup> After the

stabbing of King in Harlem on 20 September 1958, Thurman felt the inner necessity to go to him. In reference to this, he writes:

Many times through the years I have had strange visitations in which there emerges at the center of my consciousness a face, a sense of urgency, a vibrant sensation, involving some particular person. On a certain Friday afternoon, Martin emerged in my awareness and would not leave. When I came home I said to Sue [his wife], 'Tomorrow morning I am going down to New York to see Martin. I am not sure why, but I must talk with him personally if the doctors permit.' (Thurman 1979b: 254–5)

During his visit with the young civil rights leader, Thurman encouraged him to extend his convalescence four weeks beyond those recommended by his doctor in order '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'. Thurman suggested, 'The movement had become an organism with a life of its own to which he [King] must relate in fresh and extraordinary ways or be swallowed up by it' (Thurman 1979b: 255).<sup>16</sup> King's most recent biographers indicate that he did indeed take an extended convalescence culminating in his trip to the land of Gandhi in February 1959. Taylor Branch writes: 'Recovering at home, King settled into a period of relative stillness unique to his entire adult life. He delivered no speeches or sermons outside the Dexter pulpit for many weeks. Nor did he travel.' Branch also reports that King turned down pressing agenda within the movement during this period (Branch 1988: 245). Stephen B. Oates reports that

As he convalesced, King had time to do what he had longed for all these months: he read books and meditated. And he talked a good deal about the trial he was going through. He decided that God was teaching him a lesson here, and that was personal redemption through suffering. It seemed to him that the stabbing had been for a purpose, that it was part of God's plan to prepare him for some larger work in the bastion of segregation that was the American South. (Oates 1982: 140; see also Garrow 1986: 111–13)

In a series of letters between Thurman and King, it is possible to glean some of the content of the conversation.<sup>17</sup> This correspondence also offers rare insight into the nature of Thurman's role in the Civil Rights Movement. The relationship with King is of particular importance because it reveals the level of the struggle in which Thurman was self-consciously

engaged as healer and teacher. Earlier that year, 7 July 1958, King had written Thurman inviting him to come and preach in the Dexter pulpit. In a letter dated 18 July, Thurman replied that if his schedule could accommodate, he would gladly come. The closing sentence, however, is most revealing. He wrote, 'In the event that I can come, I hope there will be time enough to have a long, unhurried, probing conversation.' This suggests that Thurman had wished to spend time with King before the Harlem incident. One month after the stabbing and subsequent to Thurman's visitation, he wrote King another letter. Two matters of concern were raised by the seasoned sage to the younger visionary. The first was the item mentioned above regarding an additional four weeks of convalescence. The second comment raised his concern for King's safety and the effectiveness of his ministry. In reply to the October correspondence, King, in a letter, dated 8 November, thanks Thurman for his visit and counsel:

It was certainly kind of you to come by the Harlem Hospital to see me. The few minutes that we spent together were rich indeed. Your encouraging words came as a great spiritual lift and were of inestimable value in giving me the strength and courage to face the ordeal of that trying period.

I am happy to report that I am feeling very well now and making steady progress toward a complete recovery. I am following your advice on the question 'Where do I go from here?'

The probing question, 'Where do I go from here?' is a more personal formulation of King's broader social problematic addressed in the last chapter of his 1958 book, *Stride Toward Freedom*, and later expanded into a full length inquiry in his last book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (King 1958, 1967). More importantly, this question arises from the same schema of the methodology utilised by Thurman as the initial step of commitment as a spiritual discipline, i.e. the questions of *identity* ('Who am I?'), *purpose* ('What do I want?'), and *method* ('How do I propose to get it?').

Commitment for Thurman is more than mere intellectual assent or emotional attachment to an ideal, as in the quest for social justice. Rather, it is at the heart of one's personal religious experience, however defined. Commitment involves 'singleness of mind'.

This means surrendering the life at the very core of one's self-consciousness to a single end, goal, or purpose. When a man is able

to bring to bear upon a single purpose all the powers of his being, his whole life is energized and vitalized (Thurman 1973: 19).

This is particularly true, Thurman suggests, in the experience of suffering or crisis. In crises, one is forced to ask the question of purpose, 'What is it that I want, really?' He opines:

When a man faces this question put to him by life, or when he is caught up in the necessity of answering it, or by deliberate intent seeks an answer, he is at once involved in the dynamics of commitment. At such a moment he knows what, in the living of his life, he must be *for* and what he must be *against* (Thurman 1973: 34).

On 19 November, Thurman wrote King:

It is wonderful to know that you are better and that plans are afoot in your own thinking for structuring your life in a way that will deepen its channel. It would be a very good thing if we could spend several hours of uninterrupted talk about these matters that are of such paramount significance for the fulfillment of the tasks to which our hands are set.

In the last two letters, dated 11 September and 30 September 1959, respectively, the two busy men share their disappointment in not being able to confirm a preaching date for Thurman at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church and missing one another while King was in San Francisco earlier that month. Thurman's closing remarks in the earlier letter reflect his concern for the young civil rights leader: 'I think of you in my prayers and quiet time very often with the hope that you will continue to find all the things that are needful for your peace.' King, in reply, states, 'I hope we will be able to talk together in the not-too-distant future.' Whether this conversation took place is unknown. However, nearly five years later, Thurman was one of the thousands of pilgrims who gathered at the foot of the Lincoln Memorial to hear King share his dream for America. This dream was also Thurman's. In his later years, long after King's tragic death, he reflected on the heroic image of Martin:

I joined my friend Frank Wilson in the memorable March on Washington and was part of the vast throng who heard and felt the unearthly upheaval of triumphant anguish: 'Free at last! Free at last! Thank God A'mighty, I am free at last.' Perhaps the ultimate demand laid upon the human spirit is the responsibility to select *where* one bears witness to the Truth of his spirit. The final expression of the

committed spirit is affirm: I choose! and to abide. I felt myself a fellow pilgrim with him and with all the host of those who dreamed his dream and shared his vision. (Thurman 1979b: 255)

Thurman's healing ministry to King and others in the movement is suggestive of a much-neglected dimension of American theological discourse. His approach to social justice issues has been labelled as 'mystical' and unresponsive to the concrete realities of oppressed peoples. This reading of Thurman is misinformed and unjustified. Any serious, reflective reading of the Thurman corpus reveals a fundamental concern with the plight of the oppressed. Luther Smith suggests that this misreading of Thurman is based primarily on the fact that he does not provide specific proposals for social transformation. Yet, Smith contends that while none of Thurman's writings offer a blueprint for social policy, he does offer 'a heightened awareness of human suffering that is at stake, he clarifies how fundamental religious principles are involved in issues, he challenges our attitudes and commitments that contribute to social crises, and he inspires us to respond to the issues' (Smith 1989). Thurman's contribution to American theological discourse and leadership development rests on his provision of an intellectual framework for a proper *sense of self* and *urge toward community*. Otis Moss captures well the significance of Thurman's contribution to the Civil Rights Movement:

It might be that he [Thurman] did not join the march from Selma to Montgomery, or many of the other marches, but he has participated at the level that shapes the philosophy that creates the march – and without that people don't know what to do before they march, while they march or after they march (Mitchell 1985: 52; Fluker 1989: 174; Otis Moss quoted in Bennett 1978.)

### ***A Strange Freedom: The Interiority of Religious Experience***

To be known, to be called by one's name, is to find one's place and hold it against the hordes of hell. This is to *know* one's value for one's self alone. It is to honor an act as one's very own, it is to live a life that is one's very own, it is to worship a God who is one's very own. (Thurman 1971c: 38)

At the funeral of Whitney Young in 1971, Thurman stated 'The time and place of a person's life on earth is the time and place of the body, but the meaning and significance of that life is as far-reaching and redemptive

as the gifts, the dedication, the response to the demand of the times, the total commitment of one's powers can make it' (Thurman 1979b: 208). He often asked, 'What does it mean to *live* life seriously (not to *take* life seriously), to live freely unencumbered by the necessity of always conforming to external things that limit our potential to be authentically human in the world?' Thurman thought it demanded a journey into the interior; into those places we have sealed off and placed no-trespassing signs around. It meant, for him, an inward journey into dangerous territory, where the real issues of life and death must be confronted, where the 'Angel with the flaming sword' greets us – where we are not allowed entry unless we yield 'the fluid area of our consent'.

There is in every person an inward sea, and in that sea there is an island and on that island there is an altar and standing guard before that altar is the 'angel with the flaming sword.' Nothing can get by that angel to be placed upon that altar unless it has the mark of inner authority. Nothing passes 'the angel with the flaming sword' to be placed upon your altar unless it be a part of 'the fluid area of your consent.' This is your link with the Eternal. (Thurman 1976b: 15)

This journey into the interior, according to Thurman, is not extraordinary; in many respects, it is far removed from what we normally call 'religion.' The Angel with the flaming sword is encountered in the mundane, earthly experiences of living and being in the world. At any juncture in the road, there may suddenly appear a sign, a flash, a burning bush, which places us in candidacy for this experience. Often in struggle, in crisis, in the heart of suffering and trial, one encounters the Angel, the truth about one's self, the mendacious stereotypes about self and others, and the subtle and surreptitious ways in which one has been named.

Luther Smith correctly observes that for Thurman 'the crucible of relationship' provides the hermeneutical key for ascertaining meaning in the various modes of existence in which one finds oneself (Smith 1988: 94–8; see also Cartwright 1984–1985: 22–34; Muelder 1982: 7–13). In this perspective, epistemological and axiological questions are rooted in a moral anthropology, which avoids the dichotomous portrayal of the self as an irreconcilable tension between nature and spirit. Rather, for Thurman, the self is essentially relational and agential. Ratiocination is a secondary act. 'The deed reveals meaning. Meaning does not exist as a disembodied force, but it becomes evident through relationships' (Smith 1988: 97). All meaningful knowledge is for the sake of action, and all meaningful action is for the sake of loving relationship (Macmurray

1957: 15). Therefore, religious faith is not to be confused with dogmatic assertions fixed in creed and formal statements, but it has to do rather with 'literal truth and the conviction it inspires'. This truth is disclosed in creative encounter with a 'Thou' in lived-community with others (Berdyayev 1944: 47).

Thurman emphasised the dynamic, intuitive nature of truth. He characterised intuitive knowledge as 'immediate, direct, and not an inference from logic ... It is an awareness of literal truth directly perceived.' In Thurman's conceptualisation of spirituality and social transformation, which he referred to as 'the inner life and world-mindedness,' the individual is the point of departure. A persistent note in his thinking is that one must begin with oneself, with one's own 'working paper' (Thurman 1972a: 46; see also Thurman 1939: 3–10, 1975: 64, 1972c: 111–19).<sup>18</sup> Consequently, his usage of terms 'inner life' or 'inner awareness' refer to more than the formal discursive activity of the mind, but rather include the entire range of self-awareness of the individual (Thurman 1945: 188). 'Inner life' means

the awareness of the individual's responsiveness to realities that are transcendent in character, emanating from a core of Reality of which the individual is aware and of which the individual is also aware that he is a part. The inner life, therefore, is activity that takes place within consciousness, but does not originate there and is a part of a Reality central to all life and is at once the ground of all awareness. It is there that man becomes conscious of his meaning and destiny as a child, an offspring of God. (Thurman 1945: 188)

In Thurman's terminology, the 'interiority of religious experience', is synonymous with 'the inner life'. 'Interiority' means to belong to the inner constitution or concealed nature of something; it connotes dimensionality, that which lies away from the border or shore. For Thurman, therefore, religious experience is a journey into the inner regions of self; it is an exploration into that which is normally concealed from the conscious mind. It is in this experience of self-exploration that one discovers one's worth or inherent value. Religious experience is defined by Thurman as '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' (Thurman 1972a: 20). Since the cultivation of the inner life is the basis for the development of a genuine sense of self and authentic existence in the world, it is in this process that one discovers one's name and destiny as a child of God.

Thurman is acutely aware of the danger of subjectivism and privatisation of meaning implied in the emphasis on the development of inner consciousness. He guards against this tendency by accentuating the need for empirical verification of what one experiences in one's inner life. '*The real questions at issue here*', he contends, '*are, how may a man know he is not being deceived? Is there any way by which he may know beyond doubt, and therefore with verification, that what he experiences is authentic and genuine?*' Rational coherence between the inner experience of self and the social world is the method employed to test for self-deception. He argues, 'Whatever seems to deny a fundamental structure of orderliness upon which rationality seems to depend cannot be countenanced.' Walter G. Muelder suggests that the underlying ethical theory, which is operative in this construal, is neither *heteronomous*, nor *autonomous*, but *theonomous*.

This means that the imperatives are not imposed from external sources, nor completely devised by inner personal mandates, but express at the deepest level a metaphysical divine moral order which is also the rational law of a person's own being. There is a meeting place for the communication between God and the person, a place of yielding private, personal will to transcending purposes that are at the same time common ground. Here revelation and intuition meet, a place rich with the sense of the ultimate worth of the individual as a private and social person. (Muelder 1982: 9)

Similarly, Nicolas Berdyaev argues that emergence from subjectivity proceeds along two distinct lines: objectivisation and transcension or transcendence, the former leading to bondage because it alienates the divine image from itself which is personality, and the latter leading to authentic freedom because it raises the person to the level of the transsubjective, to the realm of Spirit, which is freedom (Thurman 1972a: 57; see Berdyaev 1944: 29). Religious faith, therefore, is 'the tutor' or the 'unseen model' by which one structures the facts of his or her experience. For this reason, Thurman counselled:

The person concerned about social change must not only understand the materials with which he has to do, the things which he is trying to manipulate, to reorder, to refashion but again and again he must expose the roots of his mind to the literal truth that is the tutor of the facts, the orderer and reorderer of the facts of his experience. (Thurman 1955a)

This must be done, Thurman contended, so that in the quest for social justice, one's vision of society never conforms to some external pattern, but is 'modeled and shaped in accordance to the innermost transformation that is going on in his spirit' (Thurman 1955a). He insisted that those engaged in acts of liberation must continually examine the sources of their motivation and the ways in which the circling series of social processes, which they seek to change, are related to their spiritual pilgrimage. Always, the primary questions for the social activist are, '*What are you trying to do with your life? What kind of person are you trying to become?*'<sup>19</sup> It was Thurman's conviction that the individual in his or her actions 'is trying to snare into the body of his facts, his conviction of those facts'. He cautioned, however, that faith so understood always runs the risk of becoming idolatrous, as in patriotic visions of 'the American way' (Thurman 1955a). Therefore, one must always examine one's motives for acting. One must allow one's will to be tutored by the unseen model of truth that is deeply embedded within every individual. The issues of *identity*, *purpose* and *method* come together in any individual in relation to that individual's social context.

For the marginalised person, this exploration of interiority is especially significant. Marginality undermines self-actualisation. It is a condition that results from intrusive, recalcitrant and oppressive power arrangements warring upon personal meaning and social space. According to Thurman, each individual has a basic need to be cared for and understood by another in a way that transcends all that is good and evil. In religious experience, this inner necessity for love is fulfilled in encounter with God and in community with others. In the presence of God and in relations with others, the person is affirmed and is aware of being attended to as a whole.

Whether he is a good person or a bad person, he is being dealt with at a point beyond all that is limiting, and all that is creative within him. He is dealt with at the core of his being, and at that core he is touched and released. (Thurman 1974: 68; see also Thurman 1972a: 115)

Luther Smith cautions that, 'Thurman's introspective approach to reality and meaning should not be interpreted as a self-centred exercise. He begins with himself, but moves out to society as an arena of discovery and involvement. Thurman says that the *sense* of self may precede the sense of community and the history that forms it, but in fact the self is shaped by community. Community, and its history, precede the self; we are born into community' (Smith 1988: 91).

As one dares to ask the primary questions of *identity, purpose, and method* and is willing to be tutored by the 'sound of the genuine' that is within (see Thurman 1971a: 14–15), a re-freshing occurs; a new sense of self and Presence emerge which enables one to re-enter the struggle with new courage and determination. For Thurman, this quest for personal space involves defiant activity, for it presupposes that the one's liberative quest in society cannot ultimately be divorced from one's wrestling with the internal issues of power and dominance.<sup>20</sup> Jesus, like the rest of humanity, was not immune to the dilemmas of existence and the temptations to personally dominate others and to cling to security and comfort. Jesus' defiance is best articulated in his conscious choice to go to Jerusalem though he knew it meant death to challenge an obdurate culture (Thurman 1978: 58–62). Ultimately, the interiority of religious experience brings us to crossroads where we must 'choose'.<sup>21</sup> For Thurman, this is the faith that is courage and courage that is faith. No one escapes this awful demand; especially those who dare to challenge the political and economic structures, which assign one's position in the world.

### The Challenge of Black Leadership

The challenge to the leadership of African-American communities, and indeed, to the leadership of America as a whole, is to enter the unsafe places of memory, and to find a newborn courage. It is to confront the dangerous memory of the past and to recapture the redemptive possibilities of the present. We may see through Thurman how cultural studies in general may explore more intensely the relationship of spirituality to social transformation and the nexus between memory and hope in the quest for liberation

Throughout African-American history, the Black Church has provided a pool of leadership, creating social institutions and organisations that have prophetically challenged the world to move toward a 'beloved community.' The Black Church occupies a distinctive socio-cultural location and has a long history of producing quality leadership, despite inadequate material and social resources. This will likely continue. The Black Church has played a significant role in shaping the moral languages of America and serves as a strategic resource in the formation of transformational leadership for national and international communities. Ethicists involved in research and writing on the Black Church Tradition claim that historically the Black Church has been the chief social locus for the ethical foundations of leadership in the African-American community. The

majority of African-American leadership has been influenced by its distinctive ethos. Today, a new kind of ethical leadership is needed. This new leadership will not come only from the Black Church, but the Church will continue to supply its historical moorings.

Howard Thurman occupies a distinctive place in the pantheon of African-American leadership not least because of his early role as a theoretician of nonviolent direct action and his insistence upon the spiritual and moral dimensions of the struggle to create loving and just relations among human beings. His role as teacher and healer to a generation of ethical leaders can be traced to his early career in the 1920s. Working closely with the YMCA and other intercollegiate and interracial organisations, Thurman had already begun a public career as a spokesman for the spiritual and moral bases of community in America. He was insistent that religion challenges youth to be involved in the moral struggle to reclaim the soul of America. Thurman believed that youth 'must take sides and give what they have to give in their own way, confident that what they are trying to do represents what God is trying to do. Anything less than that is moral treason' (Thurman 1929; see also Thurman 1926, 1928: 387–92).<sup>22</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Parantheses added.
2. The 'modern Civil Rights Movement' refers to the designation offered by Morris (1984). Morris dates the movement from June 1953, the date of the Baton Rouge protest against the city's segregated bus system. The significance of the Baton Rouge movement, for Morris, lies in its impact upon the strategic manoeuvres of African Americans 'directly involved in economic boycotts, street marches, mass meetings, going to jail by the thousands, and a whole range of disruptive tactics commonly referred to as nonviolent direct action' (1984: ix). This confrontation marks a significant moment in a long tradition of protest by masses of African Americans predating the Civil War. See Franklin 1986 and Fairclough 1987: 11–35.
3. The terminology of 'the underside of history' is borrowed from Gustavo Gutierrez's insightful critique of the Euro-centric domination of history. See 'Theology from the Underside of History,' ch.7 in Gutierrez 1984: 169–214. He writes: 'The history of humanity has been written "with a white hand," from the side of the dominators.' But history, where God reveals Godself and is proclaimed by the poor, 'must be reread from the side of the poor ... from a point of departure in their struggles, their resistances, their hopes' (1984: 201). In this respect, Thurman is representative of a rich and vibrant tradition of African-American theologising which has as its initial problematic, the oppressive interaction of race and class in American society. See Fluker 1989: 3–77.
4. In a 1977 interview with Paula Giddings, she explains, 'The memory is long beyond the parameters of cognition. I don't want to sound too mystical about it, but I feel like a conduit, I really do. I'm fascinated about what it means to make people remember what I don't even know' (Giddings 1977: 26–30, quoted in Denard 1991: 317). Morrison's narrative strategy is a 'kind of literary archeology' in which she uses imaginative and

cultural knowledge to retrieve and reconstruct the past of African Americans. Thus her works are sites of ‘dangerous memories,’ small benches by the road, memorials that invoke resistance and healing.

5. Thurman had two sisters: Henrietta, the eldest, and a younger sister, Madeline. In reference to Thurman’s affinity with nature, he says in his autobiography, ‘When I was young, I found more companionship in nature than I did among people’ (Thurman 1979b: 7). See also Lerone Bennett (1978: 76). Bennett describes Thurman as a ‘loner, a brooder, a sensitive suffering spirit who sought solace in the woods and on deserted beaches and communicated with forces that are not visible and audible to other mortals’.
6. In speaking of the assurance and immunity which his friends from nature offered, Thurman said, ‘I felt rooted in life, in nature, in existence’ (Thurman 1979b: 8).
7. See also Thurman (1979b: 12): ‘She was always there. She was the receptacle for the little frustrations and hurts I brought to her.’
8. For discussion of the concept of ‘extended family’ in black community, see Hill & Shackleford (1976: 201–206); Billingsley (1978); Dodson (1996: 23–5, 37–53).
9. George K. Makechnie, Dean Emeritus of Boston University’s Sargent College of Allied Health Professions, has compiled many of these tributes to Thurman’s legacy in Makechnie (1988). See also Millet (1982).
10. Interviews with Anne Spencer Thurman, Sue Bailey Thurman, Joyce Sloan, and Marvin Chandler, Howard Thurman Educational Trust, San Francisco, 11 August 1982.
11. Following Metu-Neter, positive thought is the hallmark of the Egyptian deity Anubis, *Guide of the Dead*: ‘positive thoughts ... must guide us when we are in the grip of emotion’. Learning to think positively can be viewed as akin to being embalmed – Anubis is an embalmer – ‘against craving and temptation’ (Metu-Neter, 145). On this view, positive thinking becomes a process of identification with an indwelling intelligence that lies at the heart ‘of our mental and bodily processes’. This inner self is a spiritual quality to be regarded as an object of discovery – not creation – accessed through the removal of impediments (in the form of misunderstanding and misdirection) to its apprehension. This removal of impediments to knowledge of one’s deeper self can be called ‘the Opening of the Way’, and the agent – or that aspect of the agent – that procures this can be styled ‘the Opener of the Way’. This notion of a deep or immutable self could be viewed as just an exaggerated expression of individualism. Indeed, it could be construed as a Freudian turn, as of ‘ego’ to ‘id’. But, most challengingly, it might be regarded as attesting to an atomic self, so deep and pervasive as to reach beyond any individual – engaging an order at once powerful, universal and even, perhaps, divine (Metu-Neter, 142–3). In any event, such a reading would be close to Thurman.
12. *The Search for Common* should be understood within this framework. What is not so well known about this mystical spirit, is that he was a keen interpreter of the American democratic dogma. Examples of his wrestling with the American democratic experiment can be found in a number of unpublished sermons preached at the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples from 29 July to 26 August 1951. In these sermons, Thurman gave a decidedly religious interpretation to the founding principles of democracy, addressing the themes of equality, the right to life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness and their significance for the oppressed (Thurman 1951; see also Thurman 1958; 1959a; 1976a).
13. Mitchell claims that ‘Most of Thurman’s power stems from his mythical-ritual technique combined with the use of powerful intellect in phenomenological explorations and religious and cultural studies. In his functions as a religious authority and in his mythic-ritual technique, Thurman shares much in common with the shaman of archaic societies. I maintain that his appropriation and use of such techniques is conscious and deliberate, a natural outgrowth of his style of practical mysticism. He becomes in large measure a sophisticated modern-day shaman, and he does so in order

- to penetrate behind the wall of Christian orthodoxy and to get at and utilize genuine religious experience as a cure for many of the ills of our day. He becomes, then, a self-styled sophisticated shaman.' See also Mitchell (1985: 88) and Larsen (1976: 98–10). Along with Mircae Eliade and Stephen Larsen, Mitchell makes a distinction between the role of the 'priest' and 'shaman', in that the former is concerned primarily with 'traditional mythological forms' through which members of the community are periodically re-awakened to the awareness of the sacred. The shaman, however, 'is not satisfied celebrating encounter with the sacred that happened in the long ago but rather develops an affinity for renewing regularly the contact in his [sic] own person' (quoted in Mitchell 1982: 29).
14. Du Bois observed that 'it was under the leadership of the priest and medicine man' that the Negro church preserved remnants of African tribal life (Du Bois 1898, as quoted in Frazier & Lincoln 1974: 13). See also Ray (1976). Ray discusses archetypal symbols as sacred images: gods, ancestors, sacred actions or things which make up the traditional African cosmology. He states, 'Ritual specialists, priests, prophets, diviners, and kings are the servants of the community and their role is to mediate the sacred to their people. The life of priests and kings is bound up with the societies they serve; rites which strengthen them, strengthen the people as a whole ... In times of colonial oppression and rapid social change, ritual symbols also served to create and reinforce new religious and political movements' (Ray 1976: 17). Other references to the role of the 'priest' and 'medicine-man' can be found in Wilmore (1986: 19); Levine (1977: 55–88); Raboteau (1980: 43–92, 211–88); and Stuckey (1987: 3–97). See especially Theophus H. Smith's discussion of shamanism and Afro-American spirituality (Smith 1995: 159–76). His insightful depiction of Sojourner Truth as shaman and conjure-woman is a salient feature of 'black social prophetism for human transformation on a global scale' (Smith 1995: 173–4)
  15. Several writers have made reference to the influence of Thurman on his younger visionary. See Bennett (1976: 74–5); Ansbro (1982: 27–9, 272); 'Dr. King Mentor Remembered' (*The Boston Globe*, 15 January 1982); Baldwin (1984–1985: 1, 1987: 19); Murphy (1983: 154–5). Perhaps Thurman's own accounting of his relationship with King is sufficient for our purposes: 'I am one of a few and maybe the only person who was a member of the faculty of the Graduate School of Theology at Boston University when Dr. King took his doctorate degree who did not have him in the classroom. I think this is a mark of distinction. We had contacts, but our primary contact was sitting around my television watching the World Series ... I've known him and his family, his mother and father for many years. And Mrs. Thurman's and my relationship to those two young people (Martin and Coretta King) was a personal and primary one. It was not involved in the light and the drama. *My concern was always about the state of his spiritual life all the time.* And I felt it was my relationship with him that gave me the right to do it, while Mrs. Thurman's interest was always in the little things involving the children and the wife of a man who had to live his private life in public. And this is a great agony. I understand from one of his biographers that a book that I wrote in 1949 was very influential on his thinking: *Jesus and the Disinherited*. But I did not hear this from him and I do not make a claim of it; but lest someone may know that it is in this biographical statement you will think that I am trying to be falsely modest by not mentioning it; so I've done it and now I can go on with my work' (Thurman 1968, emphasis added).
  16. Thurman recommended an 'additional four weeks to those that the doctor felt you [King] needed for complete recovery'. 'Howard Thurman to Martin Luther King, Jr.', 20 October, King Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Memorial Library, Boston University.
  17. 'Martin Luther King, Jr. to Dr. Howard Thurman,' 7 July 1958; 'Howard Thurman to Martin Luther King, Jr.,' 18 July 1958; 'Howard Thurman to Martin Luther King, Jr.,' 20 October 1958; 'Martin Luther King, Jr. to Howard Thurman,' 8 November 1958; 'Howard Thurman to Martin Luther King, Jr.,' 19 November 1958; 'Howard Thurman to Martin Luther King, Jr.,' 11 September 1959; and 'Martin Luther King, Jr. to

Howard Thurman, 30 September 1959, King Papers, Special Collections, Mugar Memorial Library, Boston University.

18. A healthy sense of self is garnered out of a dynamic tension between the individual's self-fact and self-image. The person's self-fact is her or his inherent worth as a child of God; it is the central fact that one is part of the very movement of life itself. The individual's self-image is formed by relationships with others, and to a large extent, self-image determines one's destiny. However, the individual's case must ultimately rest with one's self-fact of intrinsic worth. Thurman writes, 'The responsibility for living with meaning and dignity can never be taken away from the individual' (Thurman 1975: 93). This is a significant point for Thurman's treatment of the individual's response to dehumanising onslaughts like racism and other forces that work against human potential and community (Thurman 1972a: 19, 1973: 57, 1971b: 21)
19. See Thurman (1973: 26–37), where he discusses three primary questions related to the discipline of commitment. They are respectively, 'Who am I?', 'What do I want?', and 'How do I propose to get it?'
20. Thurman explores these issues full-blown in Thurman (1972b: 104–105, 1978, 1981).
21. This was the basis for Thurman's perception of the church as a resource for activists: 'To me it was important that individuals who were in the thick of 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!"' (Thurman 1979b: 160).
22. In the article, Mordecai Wyatt Johnson is quoted, 'The Rev. Mr. Thurman is unquestionably one of the keenest minds in the race today. He is a consecrated Christian leader burning with passion to serve his fellow man.'

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