Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr.
at the Intersection Where Worlds Collide

This definition of ethical leadership is based upon a triangular model, which incorporates three dynamically interrelated dimensions of human existence: self, social, and spiritual. In the dimension of the self or the personal, the concern is with questions of identity, and purpose (Who am I? What do I want? What do I propose to do and become?) The social or public dimension involves the relationship with the other (To whom and what am I ultimately accountable?); and the third, spiritual, addresses the human need for a sense of ultimacy, excellence, and hope (In reference to the great mystery of being, Who am I? What do I want? What do I propose to do and become? Who is the Other? How am I to respond to the actions of the Other upon me?). This latter dimension should not be narrowly identified with religion, although religious experience is a vital resource in one’s spiritual quest. For this third dimension, I more interested in answering the questions of identity and purpose in respect to how leaders perceive their own quests of meaning. This is fundamentally a spiritual exercise. Howard Thurman was fond of telling the story of the musk deer of North India:

In the springtime, the roe is haunted by the odor of
musk. He runs wildly over hill and ravine with his nostrils dilating and his little body throbbing with desire, sure that around the next clump of trees or bush he will find the musk, the object of his quest. Then at last he falls, exhausted, with his little head resting on his tiny hoofs, only to discover that the odor of musk is in his own hide.

The dreams, the keys to the meaning of life, the answers to the problems that we face are not only outside of us but also within. While the external world of nature and human society is the arena of social contracting, action and work, the world of values is within.

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. After the stabbing of Martin Luther King, Jr. in Harlem on 20 September 1958, Thurman felt the inner necessity to go to him. In reference to this movement of the Spirit upon him, 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."

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." 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. Stephen B. Oates reports that

As he convalesced, King had time to do what he had longed or 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.

In a series of letters between Thurman and King, it is possible to glean some of the content of the conversation that ensued from the visitation. 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 Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama where he pastored. 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 statement suggests that Thurman had desired opportunity 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?"

One would not want to make "much ado about nothing," but clearly 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? More importantly, this question arises from the same schema of the methodology utilized 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 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.

This is particularly true, Thurman suggests, in the experience of suffering or crisis. In crisis, 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.
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's healing ministry to King and others in the Movement is suggestive of a much-neglected dimension of American leadership discourse and practice. His approach to social justice issues has been labeled 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." Thurman's contribution to spirituality, ethics and leadership rests on his provision of an intellectual framework for a proper sense of self and urge toward community which will find greater elaboration in the following chapters. Otis Moss, Jr. 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.

For Thurman commitment is fundamental to the moral life. Commitment involves volition, which may be a radical, self-conscious yielding on the part of the individual or a systematic, disciplined effort over a period of time. The result of the commitment of the individual is a new, integrated basis for moral action; a new value content and center of loyalty inform his actions in the world. The person's loyalty to God, which proceeds from the personal assurance of being loved by God, forms the ground of the moral life. What is discovered in private must be witnessed to in the world. Thurman comments on the nature of the individual's spiritual experience and its relationship to moral action:

His experience is personal, private but in no sense exclusive. All of the vision of God and holiness which he experiences, he must achieve in the context of the social situation by which day-to-day life is defined. What is disclosed in his religious experience he must define in community. That which God shareth with him, he must inspire his fellows to seek for
themselves. He is dedicated therefore to the removing of all barriers which block or frustrate this possibility in the world.

King and Thurman demonstrate that for ethical leaders, each encounter with the other carries within itself the danger of disfiguring; of being tested and proven so that that which is hidden (and that which calls us) discloses itself in acts of compassion and justice. Ethical leaders, therefore, are transfigured and transforming actors who present themselves to the world as symbols and for instances of what is possible and hopeful. In the experience of encounter, one is readied or predisposed to hope, hope being simultaneously the transformation of threat, temptation, danger and death into a vision of the possible, a sense of values, a sense of the future, i.e., having faith to move on in creative activity that aspires to goodness. The task of the ethical leader is to inspire and guide others in the process of transformation through courageous acts of defiance and resistance against systems of injustice. At a personal level, this process involves reliving and recovering their cultural futures through life stories, rituals and creative actions which give meaning to life; a focus is placed on reconciling acts of community with the spiritual and ethical question being, “What can I hope for?” The personal narratives
and their respective analyses of the power of hope Thurman and King provide key concepts for leaders who must have the courage to hope at the intersections where worlds collide.