

# ***Backs Against the Wall: The Howard Thurman Story***

## **Film Discussion Guide**

### **I. Christianity and Racial Justice**

Howard Thurman believed in the fundamental unity of all persons, as well as of all creation. With a deep focus on the interior life, Thurman prioritized the relationship of individual to individual and of individual to God. Anything that hindered or opposed these fundamental relationships must of necessity be challenged. In his seminal book *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949), Thurman offers a strong critique of American Christianity because of what he perceives as its tacit (if not vocal) support for a system of racial discrimination and injustice. He distinguishes between institutional Christianity, which he describes as the religion *about* Jesus, and the religion *of* Jesus, which addresses and champions the oppressed whose backs are, in Thurman's words, "against the wall." In *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Thurman asks the following question:

*Why is it that Christianity seems impotent to deal radically – and therefore effectively – with the issues of discrimination and injustice on the basis of race, religion and national origin? Is this impotency due to a betrayal of the genius of the religion or to a basic weakness in the religion itself?*

### **Questions to Consider**

1. Is Thurman right that, at times, American Christianity has been "impotent" to effectively deal with discrimination and injustice? When and why has that occurred?
2. Is racism "built-in" to Christianity, as Thurman asks, or is it a distortion and even perversion of the faith itself? How has Christianity been used to justify slavery, oppression of minorities and women? Similarly, how has Christianity been used to defend rather than to challenge the status quo?
3. Like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Thurman sees eleven o'clock on Sunday morning as the most segregated hour in American public life. Do you agree? Is this reality changing in churches today? If so, why (or why not)?

4. Thurman writes that Christianity is often weakest when face to face with “the color bar.” That is, Christianity often is least appealing or persuasive when seen in the light of race relations. Do you agree?

5. In *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Thurman writes that Jesus’ life and teachings have seldom been interpreted in any way that might give hope and relief to those whose “backs are against the wall.” This was in 1949, when segregation was in full force in America. Do you believe that the situation has changed now? Are Jesus’ life and teachings interpreted in a way that supports those who lack political, social, or economic power? If so, how is that being accomplished?

6. How is Christianity being used today to combat the problems of discrimination and injustice that Thurman addresses? How was it used for this purpose during the civil rights movement of the 1960s? What is or should be the connection between faith and social justice?

### Related Thurman Quotes

*Many and varied are the interpretations dealing with the teachings and life of Jesus of Nazareth. But few of these interpretations deal with what the teachings and the life of Jesus have to say to those who stand, at a moment in human history, with their backs against the wall. (Jesus and the Disinherited, 11)*

*Christianity as it was born in the mind of this Jewish teacher and thinker appears as a technique of survival for the oppressed. That it became, through the intervening years, a religion of the powerful and the dominant, used sometimes as an instrument of oppression, must not tempt us into believing that it was thus in the mind and life of Jesus. (Essential Writings, 118; Jesus and the Disinherited, 28-29)*

*It is one of the great spiritual problems of Christianity in America that it has tolerated such injustices between Negroes and Caucasians, (for instance, that) in this area of human relations its moral imperative has been greatly weakened. It is for this reason that many people all over the world feel that Christianity is weakest when it is brought face to face with the color bar. (Essential Writings, 104; Deep River, 47)*

*The Church is divisive and discriminating, even within its fellowship. It is divided into dozens of splinters. This would indicate that it is essentially sectarian in character. ...Here we come upon the shame of what is meant by the phrase of a certain minister in referring to the eleven o’clock hour on Sunday morning as “the great and sacred hour of segregation.” (Essential Writings, 77; The Creative Encounter, 139)*

*Because a man is a Christian is no indication to me what his attitude toward me may be in any given circumstance...It is entirely possible that I, for instance, can work for the redemption of the souls of people, help them in their need in many critical ways, while at the same time keep them out of my neighborhood, out of my school, and out of my local church. And all of this with*

*no apparent conflict in values or disturbance of conscience. (Essential Writings, 108; Luminous Darkness, 63-65)*

**Luther Smith (28:40-30:58)**

When you're going through a period where you have the Ku Klux Klan identifying itself as a Christian organization, and a period in which people are leaving congregations on a Sunday morning to participate in lynchings, where you have Christian clergy and laity who are either refusing to say something about the kind of discrimination that occurs and the kind of violence that is occurring or are rather tepid in whatever they have to say. Then one begins to wonder, to what extent does this faith have a claim of relevance to my identity and the transformation of society itself. Thurman spoke to that in a very pointed way and with his examples of what occurs in the life of a community, of the Black community and how easy it is that fear, and hate, and deception could be tools by which Black people could address this, but this does not represent not only the depth of the Christian faith but the depth of their capacities to approach this injustice in a way that aligns more with how Jesus had really counseled people to approach this. Thurman provided a spiritual perspective that was empowering. And it was something that not only the most educated could do, it was something that persons who were laborers in some of the most menial jobs could understand. They were given by God the power and the authority to respond to the realities of their injustice in ways that could be true to their faith, in ways that were true to Jesus' love ethic, and in ways that did not require them to compromise the integrity of who they were as persons who were called to love everybody.

**John Lewis (05:04-06:04)**

Howard Thurman, in a book, had the capacity to make Jesus come alive, to make him real. That he was not concerned about the over yonder or the by and by, but he was concerned about the streets of America. . . . He was concerned about the here and now, the social gospel. . . . And so it did influence Dr. King a great deal. Because I'm not just concerned with the streets of honey that are paved in gold, but I'm concerned about the streets of Montgomery, the streets of Birmingham, the streets of Selma. He made it real, he painted a picture. . . .

**Jesse Jackson (04:38-05:44)**

[Thurman] said, 'When your back's against the wall, you have three options. One, you can adjust, and most people adjust to that situation, they find a niche in oppression and some even find a modicum of prosperity in oppression. They wheel, they deal, they operate, they adjust, the home, church, school, they live in small circles. Some people don't even know that they are being oppressed. Sometimes oppression is not evident. Then there are those who resent, they know better and don't like it, but they feel like they can do nothing about it. They look upon the system with contempt, but they really feel they can not change it. Then there are those who

resist, who fight back. Do you adjust to oppression and simply resent it, and become angry and self-destructive, or do you resist?' There may be the formidable legal action, legislative action, mass demonstrations, civil disobedience, but he calls upon us to resist when your back's against the wall.

**Walter Earl Fluker (1:46:00-1:46:53)**

What does the religion of Jesus have to say to those whose backs are against the wall? For Thurman, in order to answer that question, as a Christian, one must make a distinction between the religion of Jesus and the religion about Jesus. . . . The religion of Jesus is a religion where Jesus himself assumes responsibility for his own relationship with God. And out of that works out of his own freedom and responsibility for the oppressed. This becomes the standard line for Thurman. . . .

**Jesse Jackson (8:40-9:50)**

I carried the book with me, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, every day just as a reference. The way Howard Thurman interpreted scripture. He makes it clear, Jesus was born a Jew and poor, debating about who his father was, on the Roman occupation which looked upon him with contempt. The threat of genocide, of killing the first baby; his mother, Mary, and Joseph took him to Egypt to hide him as a refugee, as an immigrant. When he was called to preach, he would call upon Isaiah's notion of 'I will only preach the Gospel. Good news to the poor, heal the broken hearted, to set the captive free.' That's the character of the religion. Now some characters within the religion don't accept the mission statement; they're just using the name of it. But the character of the religion is 'defend the poor, deliver the needy, set the captive free, and have a spirit that cannot be bought up, but it also cannot be intimidated.' And if it means you will perish, then let me perish. But my sense of dignity is non-negotiable. That's the stuff of Howard Thurman.

**II. Non-Violence**

The concept of non-violence had been important to Thurman since his student days as a member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, an international pacifist organization. Later, his encounter with Gandhi and with Gandhi's use of creative non-violence as a technique against oppression further cemented Thurman's belief in the use of non-violence as a means of social change. Gandhi's example revealed to Thurman that non-violence could and should have religious foundations, and Thurman later encouraged Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other American civil rights leaders to ensure that nonviolent social activism was founded upon spiritual principles. For Thurman, nonviolence was both a spiritual discipline and a way of life.

**Questions to Consider**

1. Do you consider non-violence to be a practical alternative in the face of violent oppression? Does it have the possibility of influencing or changing the aggressor/oppressor, as Thurman suggests it does?
2. For Thurman, non-violence is not just a tactic in opposing injustice, but also a spiritual discipline. How does considering non-violence as a spiritual discipline affect your thinking about it? Consider what “spiritual discipline” means to you, and whether you can envision a process for practicing non-violence as such.
3. What should be the Christian approach to non-violence? Can it be legitimately considered as a way of life? What would that look like?
4. In what kinds of scenarios do you imagine non-violence to be inappropriate or ineffective? Is it an “absolute” value (i.e. the right choice in every circumstance)? Do you think it was such for Howard Thurman? (Consider Thurman’s thought and action regarding the Second World War.)
5. The Quakers, or Society of Friends, are well-known for their historic embrace of pacifism, often refusing to serve in the military or to support any kind of warfare. Can you see their influence in Thurman’s own embrace of non-violence as a way of life?
6. Is it possible for a person to practice non-violence apart from a spiritual or religious commitment?

### **Related Thurman Quotes:**

*The disinherited man has a sense of gross injury. He finds it impossible to forgive, because his injury is often gratuitous. It is not for something that he has done, an action resulting from a deliberate violation of another; He is penalized for what he IS in the eyes and standards of another. Somehow he must free himself of the will to retaliation that keeps alive his hatred. (Jesus and the Disinherited, 107)*

*. . . hatred destroys finally the core of the life of the hater. While it lasts, burning in white heat, its effect seems positive and dynamic. But at last it turns to ash, for it guarantees a final isolation from one’s fellows. . . . The logic of the development of hatred is death to the spirit and disintegration of ethical and moral values. (Jesus and the Disinherited, 76-77)*

[Grandma Nancy Abrose said] ‘No one ever wins a fight.’ This suggests that there is always some other way; or does it mean that man can always choose the weapons he shall use? Not to fight at all is to choose a weapon by which one fights. Perhaps the authentic moral stature of a man is determined by his choice of weapons which he uses in his fight against the adversary. Of all weapons, love is the most deadly and devastating, and few there be who dare trust their fate in its hands. (*Deep is the Hunger*, 10-11)

*. . . nonviolence is not merely a mood or climate, or even an attitude. It is a technique and, in and of itself, a discipline. In the first place, it is a rejection of physical force, a renunciation of the tools of physical violence. . . . But the psychological tools of nonviolence are of another order. Their purpose is to open the door of the heart so that what another is feeling and experiencing can find its way within. They assume that it is possible for a man to get real insight into the meaning of his deeds, attitudes, or way of life as they affect the life of his fellows. A man faced with nonviolence is forced to deal with himself, finally; every way of escape is ultimately cut off. This is why there can be no possible limit as to time or duration of nonviolent acts. Their purpose is not merely to change an odious situation, but, further, to make it urgent for a man to face himself in his action. Finally all must face the same basic question: Is what I am doing an expression of my fundamental intent toward any man when I am most myself? . . . The purpose of [the] use of nonviolence as a collective device is to awaken conscience and an awareness of the evil of a violent system, and to make available the experience of the collective destiny in which all people in the system are participating. . . . this is, at last, the work of reconciliation. The discipline for all who are involved has the same aim—to find a way to honor what is deepest in one person and to have that person honor what is deepest in the other. (**Disciplines of the Spirit**, 114-15, 115-16, 119, 120-21; **Essential Writings**, 125-127)*

### **Luther Smith (1:40:10-1:41:25)**

[On Thurman's meeting with Gandhi] Here is someone who is leading a movement of social transformation, committed to the philosophy of nonviolence as a spiritual expression of who one is and a spiritual expression of faith, and that it's working toward addressing the powerful forces that seek to oppress the disinherited of the country. I think there's from Thurman reverence for Gandhi, in addition to the kind of respect that he had for Gandhi. And when Gandhi says to Thurman that it's perhaps through the Negro that nonviolence will be a force of transformation for the world, I think Thurman received that as more than a blessing but also an obligation to repeat that as something that he would be carrying from India back to the United States as a word that might inspire not only his own work but others in terms of the kind of transformation that is needed.

### **Lerita Coleman Brown (30:47-32:08)**

Howard Thurman and Gandhi both believed that if you attack people back, you were basically spiraling into attack and violence and that does not transform people, it continues to separate them. So in order to create transformation in society, you needed to be more loving of the person that was hating you. It's a challenge, people resist it still, they believe that they need to engage in some kind of violence with others, but Thurman really understood that it was really the love that transformed people. Perfect love casts out fear. And I think he encouraged people to be more loving, as opposed to respond to people who are acting violently with the violence. And he talked a bit about how when you do not respond to violence to a person it changes something in them, they have to think about that. Like, why isn't this person attacking me back and what does this mean really at a deeper level? So even though that may not have always been a popular

stance he understood that underneath that was the spirituality and it was the love. And both of those were things that helped to not only challenge but transform those social times.

**Luther Smith (1:55:44-1:56:19)**

Thurman's understanding of nonviolence is that the love ethic, which he believes informs the practice of nonviolence, is the only ethic that provides the assurance toward beloved Community and therefore this is his commitment to nonviolence. Thurman is not an absolutist, he is not saying that violence has no role whatsoever in addressing the threats of community or the threats upon an individual.

**Walter Earl Fluker (1:59:58-2:01:27)**

[With regard to World War II] Thurman remains a pacifist but not an absolutist. He sees his service still upholding non-violent resistance. He sees his service as to those who are part of the war. So he's writing letters, especially to African American military people, men and women, and he's also providing pastoral support. . . . But he does not ever go over to the place where he thinks that one needs to denounce non-violent resistance. . . . There's some ambiguity there, there's some contingencies there. So Thurman is not an absolutist. . . . He remains non-violent throughout, but he sees a ministry to those who are involved in the war and writes glowingly, especially about African American accomplishments in the war.

**Alton Pollard (3:30-3:58)**

People sometimes do think that nonviolence was very endemic to the African American community as a way of life when in fact it was not. And even Thurman was very clear that nonviolence was a cultivated or a new kind of experience for most rank and file people including leadership in the movement, wherever the movement was being generated.

**Alton Pollard (09:44-11:04)**

Nonviolence I think was perceived in the early 20th and even into the mid 20th century to African American communities and congregations as kind of a mysterious stance. It was not so much the philosophical, because people could make the connections with Jesus of Nazareth. It was not much of a leap to see that this was a movement that was very consistent with what they understood in the biblical narrative. But what they understood from their own historical escuses, what they had journeyed through for 400 years seemed to fly in the face of the nonviolent, contradicting the idea that one can progress or move forward if you turn the other cheek and do these other sorts of things. It had not been the experience of people of African descent that they could move forward even through violent means and now you're going to tell us that we should retract, withdraw? And if we do this that we're going to make progress?

### III. Spirituality and Religious Experience

For Thurman, “religious experience” is central to the meaning and purpose of life. It involves a “conscious and direct exposure of the individual to God” which at the same time makes possible a communal relationship with others. Religious experience is nothing if it does not elicit a response from the individual involved in it; thus, the connection between spirituality and social action.

#### Questions to Consider:

1. What is “spirituality” for Howard Thurman? How is his understanding like or unlike your own understanding of that term? “Spirituality” is a problematic term for some people. Is there another term which, in your mind, better captures what Howard Thurman is about?
2. Scholar Luther Smith identifies three major themes in Thurman’s spirituality: 1) the significance of religious experience (i.e. mystical experience); 2) the hunger for community; and 3) the realization of a true sense of self. How do these things reflect Thurman’s desire for an outward-focused rather than an inward-focused spirituality?
3. Thurman asserted that “the personal is the social.” Reflecting on that quote, how does religious experience become the basis for social transformation in Thurman’s thought?
4. Thurman has often been referred to as a “mystic,” although according to scholars, he did not regularly apply that term to himself. In what ways is Thurman like or unlike the traditional Western stereotype of a mystic?
5. Thurman provides a “working definition” of mysticism in a lecture delivered late in his life in 1978. In that lecture, he defines mysticism as “The response of the individual to a personal encounter with God within his own soul.” What does this tell us about Thurman’s own understanding of this notoriously slippery term?



6. Thurman emphasized the practice of spiritual disciplines and wrote a book about them called *Disciplines of the Spirit* (1963). Which spiritual practices does Thurman particularly emphasize and why? Note that several of these disciplines have specifically to do with engagement with others.

### Related Thurman Quotes:

*The human spirit has two fundamental demands that must be met relative to God. First, He must be vast, limitless, transcendent, all comprehensive, so that there is nothing that is outside the wide reaches of His apprehension. The stars in the universe, the great galaxies of spatial groupings moving in endless rhythmic patterns in the trackless skies, as well as the tiny blade of grass by the roadside, all are within His grasp. The second demand is that He be personal and intimate. A man must have a sense of being cared for, of not being alone and stranded in the universe. (Essential Writings 43; Deep is the Hunger 145-46)*

*I draw close to God as I draw close to my fellows. (Meditations of the Heart, 121)*

*The central fact in religious experience is the awareness of meeting God. The descriptive words used are varied: sometimes it is called an encounter; sometimes, a confrontation; and sometimes, a sense of Presence. What is insisted upon, however, without regard to the term used, is that in the experience defined as religious, the individual is seen as being exposed to direct knowledge of ultimate meaning . . . in which all that the individual is, becomes clear as immediate and often distinct revelation. He is face to face with something which is so much more, and so much more inclusive, than all of his awareness of himself that for him, in the moment, there are no questions. Without asking, somehow he knows. (Essential Writings, 38-9, The Creative Encounter, 23-24)*

*Religious experience in its profoundest dimension is the finding of man by God and the finding of God by man. (The Creative Encounter, 39; Essential Writings, 43)*

*In the total religious experience we learn how to wait; we learn how to ready the mind and the spirit. It is in the waiting, brooding, lingering, tarrying timeless moments that the essence of the religious experience becomes most fruitful. . . . In fine, I cannot command; I work at preparing*

*my mind, my spirit for the moment when God comes to Himself in me. (Essential Writings, 45-6; Temptations of Jesus, 14)*

*. . . a man comes into possession of himself more completely when he is free to love another. (Essential Writings, 51; The Luminous Darkness, 111)*

*. . . the things that are true in any religious experience are to be found in that religious experience precisely because they are true: they are not true simply because they are found in that religious experience. . . . This is not to say that all religions are one and the same, but it is to say that the essence of religious experience is unique, comprehensible, and not delimiting. (Essential Writings, 79-80; With Head and Heart, 120-21)*

*. . . nonviolence is not merely a mood or climate, or even an attitude. It is a technique and, in and of itself, a discipline. (Disciplines of the Spirit, 114-115; Essential Writings, 125)*

*My testimony is that life is against all dualism. Life is One. . . . The Head and the Heart at last inseparable. (Essential Writings, 131; With Head and Heart, 269)*

*The burden of being black and the burden of being white is so heavy that it is rare in our society to experience oneself as a human being. It may be . . . that to experience oneself as a human being is one with experiencing one's fellows as human beings. Precisely what does it mean to experience oneself as a human being? In the first place, it means that the individual must have a sense of kinship to life that transcends and goes beyond the immediate kinship of family or the organic kinship that binds him ethnically or 'racially' or nationally. He has to feel that he belongs to his total environment. (The Luminous Darkness 94)*

### **Luther Smith (1:51:00-1:53:31)**

Often when people think of mysticism, they think of someone who is in some way disconnected from the realities of life and is having some kind of spiritual experience where they are assured of God's presence, and it just widens their mind and horizons about the very presence of the nature of God, and this person lives inside of that experience and all they do is then seek it again. Mysticism itself has many, many different expressions. Thurman's particular expression of mysticism . . . he describes religious experience as the conscious and direct experience of God. And that mysticism is an intense aspect of his conscious and direct experience of God, where the meaning of everything is somehow or other known, even if there are not the words to describe that meaning. And for Thurman it goes to how religious experience is a felt experience and how religion is not just a thought out experience. It has its thought out dimensions, but they emerge from the integrity of the experience itself. So Thurman is a mystic who feels the presence of God deeply, and there is for Thurman this awareness of God not only being present, but God loves me in a very personal and in a very private way, and that my life can be grounded in the assurance of

God's love. This for Thurman is the depth of meaning and that what I am experiencing is not just intended for me, but is intended for everyone, and therefore I must be concerned not only about the experience I have had but also the extent to which others have access to such an experience or access to the meaning of community that I've derived out of this experience. So a mystical experience for Thurman is very personal and it's very communal.

**Beverly Mitchell (00:32)**

I think the formative ideas of his spirituality have to do with the importance that he places on the interconnectedness of all things, and that it's essential for us to be rooted or attuned to the interior life where God speaks, because out of that flows our external activity. . . . (01:26) It's an interior connection that flows and leads to the exterior in his thinking. (01:46) He recognizes that all of life is connected and that life is about engaging and living out of love.

**Lerita Coleman Brown (05:43-06:46)**

Howard Thurman believed that we needed to cultivate our spirits in many ways. Two of the ways . . . which he focused on were prayer. That is, regular, daily or consistent prayer and creating the atmosphere. He felt like silence again was important for prayer and readying the spirit for an encounter with God. He also felt like there needed to be commitment, that one needed to be committed to their spiritual life. Sometimes people will engage in spirituality, you know, for a little while and then when things feel a little bit better they may just lose their spiritual practices. He felt like it should be a part of one's life. So, there were these disciplines that one needs to engage . . . on a regular basis so that we are constantly involved in spiritual growth and moving towards spiritual maturity.

**Walter Earl Fluker (19:38-21:26)**

The way he talked about [mysticism] was that, you know, 'It's religious experience. How do I make myself available to the immediacy of religious experience?' And he thought there were two principals involved in this religious experience. One is God, and one is the individual. There's no mediator, intercessor, between. It is the naked, raw experience. And it's not simply absorption, as many tend to think of mysticism, and to the absolute where I'm lost and a wanderer, the beatific vision of God. That's some of it. Thurman had language along the line of melding. Not melting, but melding into this moment. So that the individual maintains some of his or her own autonomy and agency. And God must, he thought, have autonomy and freedom or agency. But it's...at the same time this melding takes place, he thought, which leaves the human free and also responsible. So it's not simply being wrapped up in a mystery, and a wanderer, and absorbed in the nature and fullness of God. But one is also responsible for what she or he brings back to the world.

**Alton Pollard (30:00-33:06)**

What does Thurman mean by mysticism? I think in the first place, Thurman was always very careful to say that mysticism was not an exotic experience only to be experienced by a relative few. He was always very clear that mysticism as he understood it, meaning those moments of experience of the divine that are unconditioned, that have not been touched or sullied in any way, redacted or reformed by what one will later try to use as interpretive tools of language, of theology, of study, of ritual and liturgy, all of those things, all those come later. But in the actual moment of divine encounter, for Thurman, the opportunity, the moment when you are able to touch, in the biblical language, the hem of the garment, in the universal, simply touch that which is without condition, sacred, is for him the experience of utter sacrality, the mystical. And it is again something that anyone can have and it has little to do with one's education, it has little to do with one's background or condition or circumstance in life, it has everything to do with one's hunger and thirst to live in this world. And if you are a person who is indeed seeking God's face, Thurman seemed to be utterly convinced you had the capacity to have this kind of experience. You just didn't have the language for it or you didn't have the knowledge that says to you, this is mystical. And as he would talk, many would say, oh yes, I've had encounters like that but I did not have a handle for it. I didn't have marketing tools to give it. That's one of the things I find so beautiful about Thurman because he was never terribly concerned about the naming, the labeling, the branding. It was all about the experiencing, the journey, and inviting others into the same. Not experiencing precisely what he experienced, but experiencing in the contours of their own life's journey the utter depths of the infinite that they could embrace that would also tell them much about themselves. I think he had that spot on.

**Luther Smith (2:33:00-2:34:02)**

There are at least two pivotal dimensions of Howard Thurman's legacy that I think are vital for us. One is Thurman's legacy in terms of the nature of the spiritual life, and how for Thurman the spiritual life is not only enriched, but the spiritual life gets its integrity for being connected to that which is external to us. That you don't have a deep inner life without a deep outer life, you don't have a deep outer life without a deep inner life, and when those two are placed in opposition to one another, it fails the person and it fails the people. Thurman's insistence on that and his help in understanding the way in which we can enter into the disciplines to address that, I think is important.

**Lerita Coleman Brown (07:06-8:02)**

Howard Thurman believed that contemplative prayer or spiritual practices were not just for an individual person. That they were to help you move to action. . . . He found that if one were going to live from that divine center, that place where the still small voice resides, that often it wasn't just to improve your life, that it was to then move you out into the world to address some of the social issues of the time. So spirituality wasn't just for an individual to improve their own lives, it was for improving the entire society for all people.

#### **Luther Smith (30:07-30:58)**

Thurman provided a spiritual perspective that was empowering. And it was something that not only the most educated could do, it was something that persons who were laborers in some of the most menial jobs could understand. They were given by God the power and the authority to respond to the realities of their injustice in ways that could be true to their faith, in ways that were true to Jesus' love ethic, and in ways that did not require them to compromise the integrity of who they were as persons who were called to love everybody.

#### **Alton Pollard (16:34-18:17)**

Thurman was of a different ilk, and he understood that as terribly important as social institutions are, getting them right on the page of equality, that the deeper issue was the fragmentation of the human spirit. Even beyond the divisiveness of issues of race, and gender, and sexuality, and language, and region, and religion, and nation, and all of these kinds of things, as critical as those are, for him it was the recognition that our human spirits are fragmented, our capacity to be at one with the universe, with the Divine, with God, whatever language one is most comfortable with, that sense of being centered in one's own well-being. This for him was the piece that prevented many of us from being able to connect resolutely to another. And until we decide to go deeper within and not merely address the lateral dimensions of life, the sociological, the psychological, we're not able to bring about the beloved community, the commonweal of God, again whatever language one wants to use. And I think that this is one of the great contributions that he makes that for many of us is still a very elusive recognition.

### **IV. The Church**

For Thurman, the institutional church in America was and had been both a vehicle for discrimination and racial injustice and a beacon of hope for a transformed community living according to the example of Jesus. To some extent, Thurman distrusted the institutional church and wrote that denominations could pose yet another obstacle to the formation of real, inclusive community. Yet, Thurman spent his life pastoring and helping to build church congregations that could model his vision of inclusive community.

### Questions to Consider:

1. According to Thurman, how had the institutional church failed in its mission to represent the true message of Christianity?
2. How did Thurman's vision of The Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco reflect his understanding of what the church really should be? How did the work and worship life of Fellowship Church reflect Thurman's vision?
3. Why was it important to Thurman that the arts be integrated into worship experiences? How did they support his vision of what the church should be? What role did the arts play for Thurman in theological terms?
4. Fellowship Church very pointedly did not have any creed or any denominational ties. How was this unusual, and what do you see as the positive or negative consequences of these decisions?
5. How closely do you think Thurman's vision of the church tracks with what most people experience in America today?
6. What does Thurman have to say to today's "nones" – those who claim no religious or spiritual affiliation, or those who may describe themselves as "spiritual but not religious"? Are there ways in which his inclusive theology and circumspect attitude toward denominational life may be congenial to younger generations today?

### Related Thurman Quotes:

*I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of times that I have heard a sermon on the meaning of religion, of Christianity, to the man who stands with his back against the wall. It is urgent that my meaning be crystal clear. The masses of men live with their backs consistently against the wall. They are the poor, the disinherited, the dispossessed...The search for an answer to this question is perhaps the most important religious quest of modern life. (**Jesus and Disinherited**, 13)*

*The Church is divisive and discriminating, even within its fellowship. It is divided into dozens of splinters. This would indicate that it is essentially sectarian in character. ...Here we come upon the shame of what is meant by the phrase of a certain minister in referring to the eleven o'clock hour on Sunday morning as "the great and sacred hour of segregation." (**Essential Writings**, 77; **The Creative Encounter**, 139)*

*American Christianity has betrayed the religion of Jesus almost beyond redemption. Churches have been established for the underprivileged, the weak, the poor on the theory they prefer to be among themselves. Churches have been established for the Chinese, the Japanese, the Korean, the Mexican, the Filipino, the Italian and the Negro with the same theory in mind. The result is that in the one place in which normal, free contacts might be most naturally established - in which the relations of the individual to his God should take priority over conditions of class, race, power, status, wealth or the like - this place is one of the chief instruments for guaranteeing barriers. (**Jesus and the Disinherited** 98)*

*The concept of denominationalism seems to me to be in itself a violation of what I am delineating as the Jesus idea. The separate vision of a denomination tends to give to the individual who embraces it an ultimate, particularized status, even before God. . . . In the encounter with God in the religious experience, however, the denominational frame of reference receives its true status, which is a frame of reference, without standing, as such, in the ultimate meaning of the experience itself. (**Essential Writings**, 77-8; **The Creative Encounter**, 140-2)*

*Fellowship Church was a unique idea, fresh, untried. There were no precedents and no traditions to aid in structuring the present or gauging the future. (**Head and Heart** 148)*

*One thing we had in common was a vast hunger for a better way of living together that we had ever known and a deeper spiritual hunger that only the God of life could satisfy. . . . I desire to share in the spiritual growth and ethical awareness of men and women of varied national, cultural, racial and creedal heritage united in a religious fellowship. (**Head and Heart** 143)*

*. . . meaningful and creative experiences between peoples can be more compelling than ideas, concepts, faiths, fears, ideologies and prejudices that divide them. (**Essential Writings** 99; **With Head and Heart** 148)*

*Radiating from this center were our deepest personal and corporate concerns for the total community, and we worked faithfully to implement this imperative of our commitment. We were responsible but penetrating critics aiding in every effort to make the good life possible for all people. (**Head and Heart** 145)*

### **Otis Moss, III (starts 12:04, with cuts)**

When he talks about that deep hunger that the human spirit has, Thurman really has no. . . use for denominations. He has no use for categories as a mystic (**12:19**). . . . (**13:08**) He says that there is an essence in reference to every human being. How do we get at that essence? That we are all created. We have the divine imprint of God upon us. How do we get there? And the language of denominations, the language of different faith traditions, that tree and the trunk of the tree and the roots is an image that he uses over and over again. And so his work in California is that great experiment, that people are hungering to build community based on their essence and not on social construction. (**13:45**)

### **Alton Pollard (04:26-5:38)**

The [American] church, on the one hand, that was predominantly Caucasian, but seemed to lack a moral center, a moral impulse when it came to issues of race and the social divide. So that was on the one hand. On the other hand, [Thurman] found that when it came to congregations that were predominately African American, at times it seemed to be the case that leadership and congregations that were committed to the [civil rights] movement seemed to be more wedded to the social politics, to the social dynamics of what was going on with respect to the movement, than with the spiritual impulses underlying that ought to provide the resources long-term to give strength to people and the movement. So for him, both of those were non-starters that would be defeating in the long term if they were not corrected, and of course we're still wrestling with the implications of what Thurman understood to this very day.

**Walter Earl Fluker (1:24:47-1:26:54)**

[On Thurman's experimental work in worship as Dean of the Chapel at Howard University.] How do we create a space, experiment with a space? Thurman sees himself as a scientist almost, in a lab coat. You should picture him, experimenting with religious experience and ecclesiology. The ways we understand church and worship. So he introduces things like (and these were not common in this period) dance, liturgical [dance], during the service. Women with leotards dancing in worship. Or, in his...his love of the female image, much like Mary, Mother of God, he creates a liturgy with silhouettes of Black Madonnas . . . where women during the worship would actually assume the role of Madonna. Just a powerful statement about religion. But his major concern was to create a space, an atmosphere where the possibility of community could take place. He does this again at the Fellowship church when he leaves, but at Howard it's his early experimentation with his . . . answer to the question 'Is it true that in the presence of God there's neither male or female, black nor white, nor a Jew, nor any other characterization that would prevent us from being one? Is it true?' He's trying to answer. . . . And the hypothesis is if we can create experiences of unity over time intervals of sufficient duration, we should be able to undermine any barrier that stands between the individual and God and the individual and the Other. That's his experiment.

**Luther Smith (1:48:03-1:49:02)**

[The Khyber Pass vision and the church.] Here is one of the borders there to Afghanistan from South Asia, and he has this vision of wholeness that all the more for him relates to the racial realities in the United States. And it also plays with what he's been hearing about the failure of the Christian faith to address the racial issue, and he has this awareness that what he needs to be about is addressing the issue of the racial divide in the United States through the church and to have some witness of the capacity of the Christian church to address the racial divide in a way that it is resonant with the very principles of the faith itself, as well as the needs for justice in the society.



**Walter Earl Fluker (Starts 2:11:21, with cuts)**

[On Thurman's work at Fellowship Church.] You can see in some of the existing pictures and frames from Howard Thurman's time at the Fellowship church, you see folks in Native American dress, you see a lot of Filipinos. You certainly see different kinds of ethnic groups together. African Americans among them. . . . This must have looked very strange to folks in San Francisco. A worshipping community of poor people and people who were not poor. Very important around the class divisions that he inherited, the ethnic variety and the ways in which worship was constructed. So again, you have the liturgical dance and you have sometimes the figures of these Madonnas that are part of this and the dance with Japanese Americans **(2:12:23)**. **(2:14:01)** The religious education for Thurman accentuates intercultural exchange beyond interfaith, intercultural. So, a part of the work is centered around the aesthetic, art **(2:14:18)**. . . . **(2:14:49)** Always pushing beyond what Thurman thought were the artificial barriers of race, tradition, ethnicity, heritage. . . . Because he really did believe that in the presence of God there was no characterization that could hold. While one could claim one's particularity, ultimately in the presence of God, we were one. **(2:15:17)**

**Luther Smith (Starts 02:02:00, with cuts)**

I think Fellowship Church was this kind of example that inspired persons in the adventure of interracial Church growth, but it was also challenging those who had become resigned to the separation of the races at what was often considered to be the most segregated hour of the United States---eleven o'clock on Sunday morning **(02:02:26)** . . . **(02:03:00)** Fellowship Church was really more than just the racial and ethnic and national composition of the congregation, it also was about deepening appreciation of the cultures. So, beyond the importance of having people who are different from one another coming together, it was how do we attend to with some depth the roots of our difference? The music, the food, the stories of the places from which we've come, what is happening to us as a people? And this really relates to that primary emphasis that Thurman has on going beyond contact, going beyond fellowship, but really having sympathetic understanding. And Fellowship Church worked at its members coming to appreciate the distinctiveness of each other. They also had a choir that travelled and appeared in places outside of California. Here was the church on the road, and its interracial, intercultural character being a witness through song, through beauty, in speaking the heart of the church. So, I think that's the primary witness of Fellowship Church, in some ways all the more indicating, 'What is the great sin of the Christian church, in terms of the racial divide, and more than that, is it possible to address that creatively?' And I think Fellowship Church was an example of a possibility of doing that. **(02:04:51)**

**V. Community**

Community is central to religious life in Thurman's opinion. "The personal is the social," whether in regard to one's relationship to others or to God. Religious experience is always defined in community. It is, for Thurman, the end goal or purpose of all life.

### Questions to Consider:

1. What does Thurman mean by the term “community,” and how is it formed?
2. In his book *Meditations of the Heart*, Thurman asserts that “I draw close to God as I draw close to my fellows.” Do you agree with this statement? How does it reflect Thurman’s larger concerns for community?
3. Thurman argues that the end purpose of all life is to move toward community (or a kind of universal unity). How would this sort of thinking inform how a person lives or conducts her or himself, or how one thinks about the nature of human relationships?
4. Is Thurman’s idea of interracial, inter-cultural, multi-religious community where individual particularities are maintained and valued (within a larger shared sense of fellowship) possible today? Are we more or less culturally divided today than in Thurman’s time? In your estimation, was Thurman’s vision ever possible or simply a useful if illusory ideal?

### Related Thurman Quotes:

*The profoundest disclosure in the religious experience is the awareness that the individual is not alone. What he discovers as being true and valid for himself must at last be a universal experience. . . . 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. He is under judgment to make a highway for the Lord in the hearts and in the market place of his fellows. Through his living men must find it a reasonable thing to trust Him and to trust one another and therefore to be brought nearer to the great sacramental moment when they too are exposed to the love of God at a point in them beyond the evil and the good. . . .* (***The Creative Encounter*** 123-24, 129-30; ***Essential Writings*** 96-7)

*In human society, the experience of community, or realized potential, is rooted in life itself because the intuitive human urge for community reflects a characteristic of all life.* (***The Search for Common Ground***, 5; ***Essential Writings*** 90-1)

*There is some region in every man that listens for the sound of the genuine in other men. But where there is contact that is stripped of fellow-feeling, the sound cannot come through and the will to listen for it is not manifest.* (***The Luminous Darkness***, 38-9; ***Essential Writings*** 104)

*The central emphasis of the teaching of Jesus centers upon the relationship of individual to individual, and of all individuals to God. So profound has been the conviction of Christians as to the ultimate significance of his teaching about love that they have rested their case, both for the validity and the supremacy of the Christian religion, at this point. . . . Jesus rests his case for the*

*ultimate significance of life on the love ethic. Love is the intelligent, kindly but stern expression of kinship of one individual for another, having as its purpose the maintenance and furtherance of life at its highest level. . . . If we accept the basic proposition that all life is one, arising out of a common center – God, all expressions of love are acts of God. Hate, then, becomes a form of annihilation of self and others; in short – suicide. (Deep is the Hunger 108-9; Essential Writings 119)*

**Otis Moss, III (starts 12:04, with cuts; this quote used earlier)**

When he talks about that deep hunger that the human spirit has, Thurman really has no. . . use for denominations. He has no use for categories as a mystic (12:19). . . . (13:08) He says that there is an essence in reference to every human being. How do we get at that essence? That we are all created. We have the divine imprint of God upon us. How do we get there? And the language of denominations, the language of different faith traditions, that tree and the trunk of the tree and the roots is an image that he uses over and over again. And so his work in [Fellowship church in] California is that great experiment, that people are hungering to build community based on their essence and not on social construction. (13:45)

**Beverly Mitchell (02:42-3:31)**

The connection between spirituality and community flows from the idea that we are a part of each other, that we belong to each other, that the wellbeing of the whole communal life depends upon right relationship and engagement with each other. The spiritual life is what makes that possible. It's also the foundation for engagement in loving acts, in care for the neighbor, recognizing that our interconnectedness means that we all have a role, we all have a part to play in this life.

**Walter Earl Fluker (56:44-57:44)**

[On Thurman, Martin Luther King, Jr., and community.] There are two ways to think out loud about the relationship between Martin Luther King, Jr., and Howard Thurman. Certainly as it relates to the ways in which both of them thought about community. King calls it the “beloved community” . . . and he borrows from a philosophical tradition, beginning with Josiah Royce, the Harvard professor who talks about a community, a brotherhood that is ordered by love. And Royce is really saying love and reason. King is certainly in this tradition, as is Thurman, because it's the kind of liberal theological tradition of the time, which actually raises a question, at least for people in the tradition that produces King and Thurman. The question of integration: How do we come together?

**Alton Pollard (25:33-26:28)**

He was well aware that it is not possible to fully embrace the issues of the universal if one has not embraced the particularity of oneself, and from the particular springs the universal. When we understand that about ourselves, or as Thurman would say, when you dive deep into the well of

oneself, you emerge into the wellspring of others. That's a kind of understanding of community that has dimensions that are more than lateral, that are more than sociological, that are more than even empirical, because we resonate with each other as human beings across that spectrum that is known as spiritual.

**Walter Earl Fluker (starts 1:24:35, with cuts)**

[On Thurman's work in community building as Dean of the Chapel at Howard University.] It's an incredible place, and Thurman sees his mission again in this space is to create religious life which also gives substance to this notion of community. How do we create a space, experiment with a space? Thurman sees himself as a scientist almost, in a lab coat. You should picture him, experimenting with religious experience and ecclesiology. The ways we understand church and worship. So he introduces things like (and these were not common in this period) dance, liturgical [dance], during the service **(1:25:16)**. . . . **(1:25:49)** Just a powerful statement about religion. But his major concern was to create a space, an atmosphere where the possibility of community could take place. He does this again at the Fellowship church when he leaves, but at Howard it's his early experimentation with his . . . answer to the question, 'Is it true that in the presence of God there's neither male or female, black nor white, nor a Jew, nor any other characterization that would prevent us from being one? Is it true?' He's trying to answer. . . . And the hypothesis is if we can create experiences of unity over time intervals of sufficient duration, we should be able to undermine any barrier that stands between the individual and God and the individual and the Other. That's his experiment. **(1:26:54)**

## **VI. Thurman and Civil Rights**

Howard Thurman's impact on the civil rights movement and its leaders often has been overlooked, although figures such as U. S. Congressman John Lewis, Reverend Jesse Jackson, and Vernon Jordan acknowledge Thurman's influence in the film, and Thurman's direct and indirect impact on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., is undoubted. Although Thurman was one of the first black leaders to meet Gandhi in India and to bring Gandhi's principles of non-violence back to American audiences, he (Thurman) was not on the "front lines" of the civil rights movement,

as often has been noted, and this may account in part for why Thurman has been overlooked in histories of that period.

### **Questions to Consider:**

1. How would you describe Thurman's overall role in the Civil Rights Movement and its genesis? Do you agree that his role or influence often has been overlooked or under-appreciated? Why or why not?
2. In the film, the Reverend Jesse Jackson asserts that Thurman provided an important "philosophical framework" for the Movement. From your viewing of the film, and perhaps reading of Thurman, what do you think that framework entailed? Do you see similar philosophical frameworks behind social movements today? Why or why not?
2. How important was Thurman's visit with Gandhi in India in 1936? What sort of kinship or common experience did they share? What sort of challenge or encouragement did Gandhi give Thurman about the teaching of nonviolence? In what ways might the meeting with Gandhi be said to have changed Thurman?
3. How would you characterize Thurman's relationship with Martin Luther King, Jr.? What role or roles did Thurman play or seek to play in King's life? Would you consider Thurman a formative influence on King, even though they did not march together?
4. What was Thurman's influence on other civil rights leaders, including Jesse Jackson, Vernon Jordan, and John Lewis? In the film, these men credit Thurman with providing an essential spiritual foundation for their own work in the movement. Do you agree with that interpretation?
5. Fifty years on, do you think of the Civil Rights Movement as a spiritual as well as a political/social movement? Do you think that, if the Movement had not had a spiritual component, it could have been as successful as it was?
6. What difference does it make that Thurman was a spiritual resource for the movement and not a front-line activist, given Thurman's own writings on the problem of racism in America? Does the fact that Thurman did not march negate the validity of his message? Or does it reinforce the importance of having religious or spiritual foundations for activism?
7. What do you think is Thurman's legacy today in terms of issues of race and of racial justice? What does his work have to say to contemporary movements, such as Black Lives Matter? Or debates over immigration and how the church should respond to that issue?

### **Related Thurman Quotes:**

[Speaking of the meeting with Gandhi] *Before we left he said that with a clear perception it could be through the Afro-American that the unadulterated message of nonviolence would be delivered to all men everywhere. (With Head and Heart, 132)*

*Christianity as it was born in the mind of [Jesus] appears as a technique of survival for the oppressed. That it became, through the intervening years, a religion of the powerful and the dominant, used sometimes as an instrument of oppression, must not tempt us into believing that it was thus in the mind and life of Jesus. (Essential Writings, 118; Jesus and the Disinherited, 28-29)*

*It is one of the great spiritual problems of Christianity in America that it has tolerated such injustices between Negroes and Caucasians, (for instance, that) in this area of human relations its moral imperative has been greatly weakened. It is for this reason that many people all over the world feel that Christianity is weakest when it is brought face to face with the color bar. (Essential Writings, 104; Deep River, 47)*

*. . . a man comes into possession of himself more completely when he is free to love another. (Essential Writings, 51; The Luminous Darkness, 111)*

*. . . nonviolence is not merely a mood or climate, or even an attitude. It is a technique and, in and of itself, a discipline. (Essential Writings, 125; Disciplines of the Spirit, 114-15)*

*The burden of being black and the burden of being white is so heavy that it is rare in our society to experience oneself as a human being. It may be . . . that to experience oneself as a human being is one with experiencing one's fellows as human beings. Precisely what does it mean to experience oneself as a human being? In the first place, it means that the individual must have a sense of kinship to life that transcends and goes beyond the immediate kinship of family or the organic kinship that binds him ethnically or 'racially' or nationally. . . . (The Luminous Darkness 94)*

*The disinherited man has a sense of gross injury. He finds it impossible to forgive, because his injury is often gratuitous. It is not for something that he has done, an action resulting from a deliberate violation of another; He is penalized for what he IS in the eyes and standards of another. Somehow he must free himself of the will to retaliation that keeps alive his hatred. (Jesus and the Disinherited, 107)*

### **Jesse Jackson (1:20-2:00)**

He helped establish the philosophical framework of how to struggle. You cannot stop the oppressor from oppressing, you cannot let his actions determine your reaction, you must be in control of yourself, in control of your spirit. And he was a spiritual teacher in the sense of

self-control. Secondly, he talked about how in the long run of things that if you have the capacity to control yourself you ultimately can break the stronghold of the oppressor. You cannot let the oppressor break your spirit. They may be able to break your bones or your arms, but not your spirit.

**Beverly Mitchell (03:53-5:09:03)**

Thurman played a very important, significant role for many of the clergy, the religious leaders who were involved in the movement. They spent time together in reflection and prayer and hymn singing to enable them to engage and prepare themselves for the task ahead, which was meeting segregation head on, a formidable foe. And Thurman thought that a right foundation, a connection to one's inner resources that comes from responding to God's meeting us in encounter, was crucial for activists to be able to withstand the challenge of a social order that intended to crush the humanity and dignity of African-Americans. So it was spiritual preparation. Discipline was important. And he was seen as a mentor and a resource in making that connection between the interior and the exterior. . . .

**Otis Moss, III (25:17-26:28)**

[On Thurman's spiritual influence on civil rights leaders.] Without Howard Thurman we then will not have a Martin Luther King. Without Howard Thurman, you remove Andrew Young, you remove a James Orange, Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Septima Clark in terms of their theological understanding. What he did was, he passed on, literally, spiritual wisdom, spiritual timber, that other people built their houses with. And so his presence, his person, his intellect, his spirit became the gift versus an institution. Many times we look for an institution. What institution did someone build? . . . [Thurman] said, 'I don't want categories. So I give of myself, and I allow that to rest on you to take the material and build something in the process.' And that's what is happened with Thurman.

**Alton Pollard (07:03-7:48)**

. . . [H]e was clearly, and I love the way Lerone Bennett put it, that he was a mover of movers, he was an activator of activists, that he was more than an activist. I think that's absolutely right. You have to have repositories, wellsprings of knowledge, wisdom ready for you as a movement, as an individual, as a community to come back to from time to time. You need a touchstone where you can be replenished, refreshed, renewed, re-empowered to go back out there and not lose your sense of moral and ethical compass. And he was a rarity in his capacity to do that.

**Vernon Jordan (02:00-2:45)**

[Reflecting on his own experience in the segregated America which Thurman challenges.] I knew when my parents would take me downtown I would sit in the back of the bus. I knew that when we got downtown if I wanted water it would be colored water and if I wanted to go to the

bathroom it would be the colored bathroom. I understood the rules. But also had parents who said, while we were sitting in the back of the bus, “because you are having to sit here doesn’t mean the people sitting up there are better than you. You are as good as they are if not better. “

### **Lawrence Carter (14:12-15:11)**

. . . equality isn’t just for a certain class of people. It’s for all of the people, all of the time. You see, Lincoln left that word, “all” out of his Gettysburg Address...For all the people, by all the people, of all of the people. And that little editing, I think King, and Thurman, Mays, a host of others, put there concerning the building of the beloved world community. We’re all equal in the sight of God. Everybody has humanity, and nobody can be reduced to their component parts.

### **John Lewis (03:20-04:45)**

Howard Thurman made this trip to India and he spent time with Gandhi. And he came back speaking and talking about the philosophy and the discipline of nonviolence. And he would preach and teach at colleges and university, would give these unbelievable lectures, and I think that had an influence on a man like Benjamin Mays at Morehouse. And then he would start preaching in the chapel, and Martin Luther King Jr. probably first heard [him], so giving serious thought and thinking to the teaching of Gandhi through Dr. Mays, through Howard Thurman. So it can be traced back. And Martin Luther King Jr would often quote Howard Thurman on many, many occasions. And Mordecai Johnson, who was the president of Howard, he would talk about Gandhi and Howard Thurman. Howard Thurman was one of the great religious men of the 19th and 20th centuries.

### **Alton Pollard (07:58-9:11)**

There’s no question that a main reason why Howard Thurman is lesser known than King or Jesse Jackson or some other movement leaders is because, one he was not interested in being known, and two, he was not on the forefront where the media was concerned. And yet when you look at his track record, it’s very clear that he was so deeply enmeshed in movement activities, but in his own way. He was deeply engaged in the work of the Congress of Racial Equality, he was deeply engaged in the Fellowship of Reconciliation, he actually attended the March on Washington in 1963, but most people had no clue that he was quietly there. That’s kind of the way he tended to move in life. Now in the pulpit it was the case that people caught wind of him and they would want to see this curiosity, but in the social sphere at large he really did have no need to move other than anonymously and yet be very available to any and everyone that sought the energy of his life.

### **Alton Pollard (12:54-14:40)**

Thurman was always curious to know about the movement, its successes, its failures, its direction, if there was a moral arc that was indeed evident. And he would regularly be engaged



by movement leaders, names that are well-known today, Andrew Young, and Vernon Jordan and so many others. . . Vincent Harding . . . people who would raise the questions. He not only would raise his own challenges but also in the same way that he was committed to Civil Rights, he was just as committed to those younger activists who were now beginning to move in directions that seemed to be inimical to the nonviolent movement of Civil Rights in the deep South -- The Black Power activists and those who had moved beyond the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and were moving in the direction of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense, etc. He was just as interested in and committed to those young people and prepared to provide those same critiques in a day and a time when, slowly but surely, spiritual verities seemed to not have the favor of the day--in large part, I think Thurman would argue, because the church had for so long been derelict in its duty, abdicating its responsibility to model change in its ranks, let alone in challenging the social order, that it maybe had one or two legs to stand on instead of all of the legs that were needed.

**Lerita Coleman Brown (07:06-7:54)**

Howard Thurman believed that contemplative prayer or spiritual practices were not just for an individual person. That they were to help you move to action. . . . He found that if one were going to live from that divine center, that place where the still small voice resides, that often it wasn't just to improve your life, that it was to then move you out into the world to address some of the social issues of the time. So spirituality wasn't just for an individual to improve their own lives, it was for improving the entire society for all people.

**VII. Thurman and African-American History and Culture**

Howard Thurman's legacy is not only to be found in the fields of religion, spirituality, and civil rights, but also in African-American history and culture in general. Named one of the nation's leading Black preachers by *Time* and *Ebony* magazines, Thurman wrote books on Negro spirituals and about being Black and Christian in America, and he dissected the problems of racism in books, speeches, and sermons. Thurman's contributions to African-American culture are manifold and distinctive: He was one of the first African-Americans to meet with Gandhi and to preach non-violent resistance to American audiences; he co-founded and co-led one of the first intentionally interracial, interreligious churches in America (The Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco); he was the first African-American chaplain at a large, majority-white university (Boston University); and he was one of the first interpreters of the spirituals.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. How would you describe Howard Thurman's legacy for African-American culture? Which aspects of his work do you see as most significant for contemporary African-Americans?

2. Howard Thurman was, first and foremost, a preacher and a theologian. But he was also a writer, an accomplished poet, and a skilled interpreter of art and music. How does Thurman's work in these other fields underscore his legacy? Does it give him a broader appeal? Try to list the fields that Howard Thurman's legacy could be said to have touched, particularly in regard to African-American experience. What did he do in these other areas that was important?
3. Thurman wrote a seminal early study of the slave spirituals titled *Deep River* (Later reprinted with an earlier essay on the subject titled *Deep River and The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*.) For Thurman, the spirituals reflected the slaves' desire for freedom, their resistance to oppression and their descriptions of life under it, and God's promise of redemption. Their cries would be heard, and they would not be left alone. How resonant is Thurman's interpretation of the spirituals today? Do they have the same or similar meanings for us? What contribution does Thurman's work on the spirituals make for African-American history? Does he help to put this music into its original context?
4. While at Howard University, Thurman notably experimented with worship, including recreating well-known, biblically-themed European paintings as tableaux with Black student actors. What impact might this re-presentation of familiar European paintings (featuring European figures) have had on African-American worshippers who would not be used to seeing figures like themselves in biblical imagery? What might Thurman have been trying to say by undertaking these live portraits? Finally, how does this early attempt at re-presenting biblical narratives (1930s) fit into the "Black Christ" and "Black Christianity" movements which come later in the century?
5. Do you think that Thurman's other experimentation in worship, particularly with liturgical dance, reflects a desire to incorporate African-American traditions or themes into the worshipping experience? Can you identify specific cultural resources that Thurman may have drawn upon?
6. Some would argue that Thurman's desire to blend intellect with feeling in his preaching and liturgy is itself a reflection of his upbringing in African-American church traditions. Do you agree? Do those traditions provide more access to the emotions than do some others?
7. How does Thurman's pioneering work in civil rights, non-violence, university chaplaincy, church leadership, and worship arts (as cited in the introduction to this section) reflect the importance of his legacy for African-American history and culture. In what ways was he a "first" (or almost one) in terms of his various accomplishments?
8. In some ways, Sue Bailey Thurman's contribution to the history and preservation of African-American culture was even more direct than her husband's. What specific contributions did she make through speaking, organizing, and involvement with cultural institutions?

9. Describe the impact that visiting West Africa late in life had on Thurman. In what ways did that visit become an attempt on Thurman's part to reconcile various religious traditions and understandings with which he had struggled throughout his life?

### **Related Thurman Quotes:**

*The genius of the slave songs is their unyielding affirmation of life defying the judgment of the denigrating environment which spawned them. The indigenous insights inherent in the Negro spirituals bear significantly on the timeless search for the meaning of life and death in human experience. (**With Head and Heart**, 216)*

*And this is the miracle of their achievement, causing them to take their place alongside the great religious thinkers of the human race. They made a worthless life, a life of chattel property, a mere thing, a body, worth living. (**Essential Writings**, 26; **The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death**, 135)*

*At Howard, I began to experiment with forms of worship other than usual religious services. The sermon was not always the centerpiece. Within the regular order of service, I provided stretches of time for meditation, a quiet time for prayers generated by silence. I also wanted to develop a service that would permit greater freedom for the play of creative imagination, a vesper service; these were called Twilight Hours. . . . One of the most daring of these . . . was the introduction of dance as a spiritual ritual. This was a hazardous experiment, because the general attitude toward dance was that it might be art but it was also entertainment. (**With Head and Heart**, 92-3)*

*[Approaching the coast of Africa] 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? . . . 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? (**With Head and Heart**, 193)*

*I hoped to find a common ground between Christian religious experience and the religious experience in the background and in the heart of the African people. If such a common ground could be located and defined, it seemed to me that the finest insights of Christianity could be energized by the cumulative, boundless energy of hundreds of years of the brooding spirit of God as it expressed itself in many forms in the life of a great people. (**With Head and Heart**, 197)*

**Walter Earl Fluker (1:24:53-1:26:54)**

Thurman sees himself as a scientist almost, in a lab coat. You should picture him, experimenting with religious experience and ecclesiology. The ways we understand church and worship. So he introduces things like (and these were not common in this period) dance, liturgical [dance], during the service. Women with leotards dancing in worship. Or, in his...his love of the female image, much like Mary, Mother of God, he creates a liturgy with silhouettes of Black Madonnas . . . where women during the worship would actually assume the role of Madonna. Just a powerful statement about religion. But his major concern was to create a space, an atmosphere where the possibility of community could take place. He does this again at the Fellowship church when he leaves, but at Howard it's his early experimentation with his . . . answer to the question 'Is it true that in the presence of God there's neither male or female, black nor white, nor a Jew, nor any other characterization that would prevent us from being one? Is it true?' He's trying to answer. . . . And the hypothesis is if we can create experiences of unity over time intervals of sufficient duration, we should be able to undermine any barrier that stands between the individual and God and the individual and the Other. That's his experiment.

**Luther Smith (starts 2:00:02, with cuts)**

I think Fellowship Church was this kind of example that inspired persons in the adventure of interracial Church growth, but it was also challenging those who had become resigned to the separation of the races at what was often considered to be the most segregated hour of the United States---eleven o'clock on Sunday morning **(02:02:06)** . . . **(02:03:00)** Fellowship Church was really more than just the racial and ethnic and national composition of the congregation, it also was about deepening appreciation of the cultures. So, beyond the importance of having people who are different from one another coming together, it was how do we attend to with some depth the roots of our difference? The music, the food, the stories of the places from which we've come, what is happening to us as a people? And this really relates to that primary emphasis that Thurman has on going beyond contact, going beyond fellowship, but really having sympathetic understanding. And Fellowship Church worked at its members coming to appreciate the distinctiveness of each other. They also had a choir that travelled and appeared in places outside of California. Here was the church on the road, and its interracial, intercultural character being a witness through song, through beauty, in speaking the heart of the church. So, I think that's the primary witness of Fellowship Church, in some ways all the more indicating, 'What is the great sin of the Christian church, in terms of the racial divide?' And more than that, 'Is it possible to address that creatively?' And I think Fellowship Church was an example of a possibility of doing that. **(02:04:51)**

**Alton Pollard (19:07-19:52)**

[Rochester divinity school] Professor George Cross strongly challenged Thurman, deeply encouraged him because he was so admiring of Thurman's intellectual and spiritual gifts, to embrace the larger universal issues that were driving not only his personal existence, but the larger existence of us all. And Thurman's response to that was a very simple one but a most eloquent one: That a man in his Black skin must face the timeless issues of life together. That there is no divorcing of one's empirical self, one's existential self from the larger issues of life.

**Otis Moss, III (02:21-2:57)**

There's this view that Christianity is held and is beholden to Europe. And Howard Thurman [is] writing from a perspective where the Christian view is not held and sequestered by the European view. And he brings his grandmother's theology, he brings in this community, and he gives an Africanity to the interpretation of Jesus that is bottom-up and not top-down and that's what I love about his interpretation.

**Lawrence Carter (starts 42:28 with cuts)**

Thurman was interested in people, not just preaching, but being the preachments itself. The preachments, themselves. Thurman thought that people had an ethical obligation to live up to the Gospel **(42:53)**. . . . **(43:14)** Howard Thurman believed that everybody should emulate the historical Jesus. Its probably not an accident that black Americans talk more about Jesus. White Americans talk more about the Christ. One is abstract, one is very concrete. **(43:34)**

**Walter Earl Fluker (2:26:58-2:27:57)**

[On Thurman and diversity in the church.] Bringing the world into worship. And so you had these different cultures represented in the choir, you had them represented in liturgy and dance, and most importantly, for Thurman, I think, the fact that he was an African American person who came to that pulpit Sunday after Sunday. His embodied presence probably spoke in ways that even a good sermon couldn't get through. Because he was the leader of the congregation and many of the sermons, he's dealing with their...they are critiques of American...not patriarchy, but yes...but patriotism and critiques of race.

**Lawrence Carter (09:15-10:14)**

I think it may very well be that...Jesus, the religion of Jesus, and this is Thurman's wording, Thurman believed to be most appropriate for being the religion of African-Americans and oppressed people. Jesus was oppressed in his day and he thought that it would be unique relevance of the way Jesus dealt with his oppressors, spiritually. And from the lips of Jesus' mouth came the preachments love your enemies. So Howard Thurman's ministry is all about finding a way to love those people who don't respect your humanity.

**Luther Smith (08:02-09:02)**

I have heard [Professor James] Cone say that his work in Black liberation theology is indebted to Howard Thurman, especially Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited*. He credits Thurman with having this focus on what's occurring with African Americans and Jesus' relationship to that, and he indicated that it influenced his work. As well as Thurman's work on the spirituals. which Cone said informed his own thinking related to the book he [Cone] wrote on the spirituals and the blues. So in a public setting James Cone spoke about this and indicated that clearly Thurman has informed his work. . . . I thought that was important for those who are trying to track the formation of Black theology.

**Walter Earl Fluker (11:10-13:34)**

I liked to think of Thurman as the . . . early James Cone, or the forerunner of the Cones of the world. They lived in different times, Thurman during an era where respectability politics was huge. Where one had to follow some very...restrictive codes. Thurman in many ways during his time was iconoclastic. The work of *Jesus and the Disinherited* is just one example of that for Thurman. He's already rebelling against systems within his own time frame and asking very hard questions. The question like, "What does the gospel of Jesus have to say to those whose backs are against the wall?" Cone is asking that same question, really, in the late '60s with the rise of black power, black consciousness. And he does it, we felt in those days, with rage. . . . I don't see them being dissimilar in terms of the prophetic voice they raise for their respective generations. They do differ, however, in terms of Thurman's emphatic embrace of non-violent resistance and the notion of redemptive suffering. Cone is in a new era, where some new questions are being raised. . . . Cone is asking a question the same as Thurman that is directed to those whose backs are against the wall, but he's also saying that God is not only on the side of the oppressed, but to identify with this God, one must become black. Because black symbolizes the very nature of God, who is not only on the side of the oppressed but who has joined the oppressed in their suffering.

**Luther Smith (09:22-10:39)**

I think in the arc of Black theology, Thurman has his place, even though it's not necessarily a place and a trajectory that he is seeking to claim. Thurman understood this whole matter of *Jesus and the Disinherited* and the realities that occur with Black people as really the heart of the Christian message and Christian identity ... And he was speaking to that out of his times, I don't think he was trying to form a particular theology out of that. I feel that Thurman understood himself as reflecting what was, quote, "true Christianity," the religion of Jesus that was missed so much by churches, and what he felt was a religion about Jesus. So from Thurman's perspective, I don't think there was any intent in really being the launch for that kind of theological trajectory, as much as he saw himself as reflecting of what true Christianity is and is to be in light of the issues of the day.

**Luther Smith (22:49-24:52)**

I see *Jesus and the Disinherited* as a seminal writing in certainly theological works even though I don't think Thurman wrote it to be a significant piece for systematic theologians. It's a significant piece about the very nature of spirituality itself, but also I think Thurman's whole intent was to talk about what is at the core of Christian identity. And he made the plight of African Americans at the very core, at this point in time, of what Christian identity requires us to engage in some serious way. He compared African Americans to those with which Jesus was most active and speaking to their social conditions. And when you are an African American wondering the extent to which your faith is a resource for dealing with the oppression that is felt and you hear someone say your very identity is analogous to those with whom Jesus was most engaged in transforming their lives, that's a new kind of understanding.

**Walter Earl Fluker (2:17:03-2:19:05)**

Howard Thurman was not a musician. I think most people know that who knew him well. But he had an incredible appetite for the aesthetic. And one of those appetitive expressions was his understanding of the spirituals, his love for what was called the Negro Spirituals. So he writes *Deep River* and the *Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*. One of those was his Ingersoll lecture at Harvard in 1944, where he's plunging deep into the spirituals. He began this work in the late '20s. And when we think of Thurman looking at the spirituals as a source for religious and theological reflection, one needs to understand that he's pointing to what he thinks is idiomatic, or indigenous to, his own tradition and particularity. Read *Grandma Nancy*. And read his mother *Alice*. This long tradition. So he combs the spirituals. Normally in theology we look at scriptures, we look at tradition, we look at reason. Experience is where Thurman lands and this experience and tradition is important for him. So he says, "If we're going to answer this big question," which everybody asks of Thurman now-what does the religion of Jesus say to those whose backs are against the wall-one needs to look maybe in one's backyard and see what is in the tradition there and how others have resisted. The spirituals for Thurman were certainly songs of comfort, they were songs of aesthetic beauty, but they were also forms of resistance.

**Luther Smith (1:18:48-1:20:22)**

I think the spirituals were important to Thurman early on in his life. For example, Thurman speaks of a situation at Morehouse College when he was there, when there was this question as to whether or not the choir would sing the spirituals for a white audience. That the choir members basically feared the audience would be hearing them as a form of entertainment, whereas the spirituals were statement of, for the singers, of heritage, of people who had experienced, who were experiencing this tragedy of brutality and who were drawing upon their religious resources to overcome that. The singers of Morehouse did not want this audience to

hear them as simply providing tunes and melodies that failed to address the deeper meanings that were important to them as singers. I think even before Howard University, Howard Thurman himself had understood the spirituals as a significant resource not only for him personally but for the community of African American people.

**Eileen Guenther (5:52-6:11)**

Thurman focused on community and he was also well aware that what the spirituals offered was hope and comfort. When you're talking about Jacob's Ladder for instance, it's rooted in the ground, the ladder is on the ground, but then it goes to the heavens. It's an emblem of hope.// (6:36-6:45) And that was an important concept for those who were enslaved and it's an important concept for the spirituals themselves.

**Eileen Guenther (07:05-7:33)**

The spirituals give a sense of somebody-ness, that's James Cone's word, but it also applies to Thurman's ideas. In a situation where they are considered, a thing, a commodity, a utility, a non-person, a bit of property, in that situation the spirituals gave them self-respect, an idea that they were God's children.

**Eileen Guenther (13:48-14:59)**

The use of spirituals in the Civil Rights Movement just thrills my very soul. I love the spirituals to start with and I love the way that they make a difference in social justice in our time. There are original spirituals that are sung the way they were sung in the slave era, but then they re-text them, they contextualize them. So you have "Ain't gonna let nobody turn me around" which was the original. But then they put in "Ain't gonna let Sheriff Clark turn me around, Ain't gonna let Chief Pritchett turn me around, Ain't gonna let your dogs turn me around, Ain't gonna let the hoses turn me around." And it makes it real for them in that situation and it gives them faith, and motivation, and courage in a situation that, facing dogs and hoses, you need the courage if you're going to do it. And the music did that. There are other songs that are used in the Civil Rights Movement. "I Shall Not be Moved" is one, "This Little Light of Mine," many different verses get added. They sang so much in jails that one time a bunch of them were released from jail and the jailor was heard to say, "Thank goodness they're gone I couldn't stand their singing any more!"



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

William Apel, “Mystic as Prophet: The Deep Freedom of Thomas Merton and Howard Thurman,” in *Merton Annual: Studies in Culture, Spirituality and Social Concerns*, Vol. 16 (2003), 172–187.

Quinton H. Dixie and Peter Eisenstadt, *Visions of a Better World: Howard Thurman’s Pilgrimage to India and the Origins of African American Nonviolence* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011).

Walter Earl Fluker, “Dangerous Memories and Redemptive Possibilities: Reflections on the Life and Work of Howard Thurman,” in Preston King and Walter Earl Fluker, eds., *Black Leaders and Ideologies in the South: Resistance and Nonviolence* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 147–176.

Walter Earl Fluker, “Leaders Who Have Shaped Religious Dialogue—Howard Thurman: Intercultural and Interreligious Leader,” in Sharon Henderson Callahan, ed., *Religious Leadership: A Reference Handbook* (Vol. 2) (Los Angeles: Sage, 2013), 571–578.

Walter Earl Fluker, *Ethical Leadership: The Quest for Character, Civility, and Community* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009).

Walter Earl Fluker and Catherine Tumber, *A Strange Freedom: The Best of Howard Thurman on Religious Experience and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998).

Mark S. Giles, “Howard Thurman: The Making of a Morehouse Man, 1919–1923,” *The Journal of Educational Foundations* 20:1–2 (2006), 105–122.

Mark S. Giles, “Howard Thurman, Black Spirituality, and Critical Race Theory in Higher Education,” *Journal of Negro Education* 79:3 (2010), 354–365.

Eileen Guenther, *In Their Own Words: Slave Life and the Power of Spirituals* (St. Louis, Missouri: Morningstar Music Publishers, 2016).

W. Scott Haldeman, “Building a Reconciling Community: The Legacy of Howard Thurman,” *Liturgy* 29:3 (2014), 31–36.

Clarence E. Hardy III, “Imagine a World: Howard Thurman, Spiritual Perception, and American Calvinism,” *Journal of Religion* 81:1 (2001), 78–97.

Edward K. Kaplan, “A Jewish Dialogue with Howard Thurman: Mysticism, Compassion, and Community,” *CrossCurrents* 60(4) (2010), 515–525.

Mozella Mitchell, *Spiritual Dynamics of Howard Thurman's Theology* (Levering, MI: Wyndham Hall Press, 1985).

Mozella Mitchell, ed., *The Human Search: Howard Thurman and the Quest for Freedom: Proceedings of the Second Annual Thurman Convocation* (Peter Lang Inc., International Academic Publishers, 1992).

Anthony Neal, *Common Ground: A Comparison of the Ideas of Consciousness in the Writings of Howard Thurman and Huey Newton* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2015).

Alton B. Pollard, III, *Mysticism and Social Change: The Social Witness of Howard Thurman* (New York: Peter Lang, Inc., International Academic Publishers, 1992).

Luther E. Smith, *Howard Thurman: Essential Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006).

Luther E. Smith, *Howard Thurman: The Mystic As Prophet* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1982)

Corey D. B. Walker, "Love, Blackness, Imagination: Howard Thurman's Vision of *Communitas*," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112:4 (2013), 641–655.

Zachery Williams, "Prophets of Black Progress: Benjamin E. Mays and Howard W. Thurman, Pioneering Black Religious Intellectuals," *Journal of African American Men* 5:4 (2001), 23–38.