

## **Howard Thurman and Contemplative Practices (Lerita Coleman Brown)**

**Which spiritual practices were most important to Howard Thurman? Did he have a regular time each day set aside for these types of things?**

Howard Thurman noted in his autobiography, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman*, that he always maintained a certain clairvoyant sense. Frequently, he felt an urge toward prayer accompanied by a scene, vision, or memory of a person. He would later learn that the person was in crisis. Drawn to nature Howard Thurman reports many visions or spiritual moments occurring while he was outside. He felt nature to be a great teacher providing him with a sense of oneness, nurturance, and many lessons.

Howard Thurman possessed an intimate, personal relationship with God. He remarked several times in his writing and sermons that he prayed to God and talked with Jesus. He felt Jesus to be a real companion and held personal conversations with him. He also writes that during troubled time, he would carry and read segments of *The Inward Journey* to comfort himself. Thurman believed, however, that he need not lay claim as author of these writings because he believed Spirit spoke through him. Thus, he was not surprised that others found their spiritual needs being met by something he wrote.

**2. How do you use Thurman's work in your own spiritual direction? How does Thurman's work stand out from that of other, better-known, modern contemplatives such as Thomas Merton?**

I frequently read meditations written by Howard Thurman at the beginning and/or end of a spiritual direction meeting. My favorite books include *Meditations of the Heart*, *The Inward Journey*, *The Centering Moment*, *Deep is the Hunger* and *The Mood of Christmas* (which contains several meditations marking celebratory occasions

specifically Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's). Frequently, I recommend that spiritual seekers read his meditations for their daily contemplative prayer or meditation time in the mornings and evenings. Blessedly, beyond all of his published writings, we have Thurman's deep bellowing voice which adds emphasis and tenor to his words. Occasionally I play audio recordings of Howard Thurman reading his meditations during spiritual direction/companionship and always for retreat or quiet days I conduct to introduce people to his life and work. Those familiar with Howard Thurman often refer to him as a mystic and the spiritual architect of the Civil Rights Movement. Howard Thurman was influenced by the Quaker monastic tradition which I often describe as "ordinary mystics" or "boots on the ground mystics." Quaker mystics felt that actions were as important as living from the Divine Presence within.

\*Howard Thurman and Thomas Merton both contributed to American spirituality however, the beauty of Howard Thurman is his emphasis on people as human spirits. Both men reached a certain level of transcendence of Christianity which Thurman believed should reflect the essence of the religion of Jesus. There is evidence that Howard Thurman was aware of Thomas Merton but uncertainty remains about whether Thomas Merton knew of Howard Thurman.

**3. How could (would) someone just starting out on a personal spiritual practice utilize Thurman? Do you suggest specific writings and meditations by Thurman that a beginner might use?**

Several themes emerge from the living wisdom of Howard Thurman. Two essential ones are basking in nature and silence. Thurman spent a great deal of time outdoors as a young boy and learned from the ocean and trees that gave him strength in later life. He noticed a certain stillness which coincided with the stillness he felt inside when

he quieted his mind. He felt a presence and sense of oneness with all things in nature. Thurman observed the strength of trees—that they stayed rooted during storms and applied this notion to his own life. Thus, as part of the spiritual journey, Howard Thurman might suggest that people quiet their minds or go outside if they want to readily experience the Presence of God.

Contemplative themes for example, are highlighted in many of his meditations; “How Good to Center Down,” “Silence is the Door to God,” “An Island of Peace Within One’s Soul,” “A Lull in the Rhythm of Doing,” (compiled in *Meditations of the Heart*)

As a spiritual director/companion and retreat leader I always advise that spiritual seekers begin with three Howard Thurman books: *Meditations of the Heart*, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, and *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman*. I also highly recommend everyone visit the Virtual Listening Room at the Howard and Sue Bailey Thurman Collection at Boston University ( <http://hgar-srv3.bu.edu/web/howard-thurman/virtual-listening-room>) so they can hear his voice and listen to the voluminous amounts of material digitized there. This treasure trove of sermons and public lectures is a gift.

#### **4. Can you give us an example of what one of your spiritual direction/companioning sessions looks like?**

I typically meet with individuals for spiritual direction/companioning for 1-1 1/2 hours. I light candles and set out sacred icons (items that evoke peace, love, and joy) on a table. Once each person arrives, we sit and I read a prayer or meditation (sometimes scripture or something inspirational frequently written by Howard Thurman or other spiritual leader). Then we take a few minutes of silence, to quiet the mind and still the

heart. The directee signals the end of the silence by talking. People bring all types of issues and topics to spiritual direction/companionship as I listen with them for what stirrings or messages the Spirit (who serves as the real Spiritual Director) may have for them. I may be guided to ask a question or suggest other readings, or check in with them about their prayer life. Most people take notes in a journal. My intention with my daily prayer and meditation is to gently guide all who come to spiritual direction toward their own internal Teacher (Spirit) for daily listening and guidance.

I emphasize to every person that spiritual direction/companionship is not therapy or counseling. We meet once a month because there are no spiritual emergencies. Spirit is always available and is often heard as a whisper or experienced as a compelling feeling. Like Howard Thurman, I want people to always be listening for a “word in their hearts,” before making decisions. I find that making references to Howard Thurman’s life, writings, and wisdom inspire people, especially those who feel that they live with their backs against the wall (i.e., oppression).

### **In what ways is the living wisdom of Howard Thurman still relevant today?**

In addition to encouraging quietness of mind and basking in nature, Howard Thurman contributes to the growing yearning to connect contemplation with compassionate social action. Through his discussions about race and inter-group relations (e.g., *The Creative Encounter*, *In Search for Common Ground*, *The Luminous Darkness*), we learn that he did not advocate racial reconciliation because it was the right thing to do. Howard Thurman believed that union with God was impossible without it. In his estimation, we are all human spirits who may look different but are all part of God’s creation and beloved community. In *The Creative Encounter*, Howard Thurman notes:

“It is my belief that in the Presence of God there is neither male nor female, white nor black, Gentile nor Jew, Protestant nor Catholic, Hindu, Buddhist, nor Moslem, but a human spirit stripped to the literal substance of itself before God. Wherever man has this sense of the Eternal in his spirit, he hunts for it in his home, in his work, among his friends, in his pleasures, and in all of the levels of his function.” (*The Creative Encounter*, p. 152))

**(I wasn't certain if this commentary about why Howard Thurman is not as well known as Thomas Merton was necessary so like everything else I have written, so please include/exclude whatever you would like).**

\*\*I often wonder why Howard Thurman is not as well known as Thomas Merton. There may be any number of reasons; he may have been overshadowed by the courageous activism of Martin Luther King, Jr., he either was not considered a “traditional” mystic, meaning he lived outside of a monastic or cloistered community. Moreover, it is difficult to locate information about African and African American mystics as if African and mystic are antithetical concepts.