

Mysticism and Social Action: The Ethical Demands of Oneness

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We must proclaim the truth that all life is one and that we are all of us tied together. Therefore it is mandatory that we work for a society in which the least person can find refuge and refreshment.... [We] must lay [our] lives on the altar of social change so that wherever [we] are the Kingdom of God is at hand.

– Howard Thurman, “Religion in a Time of Crisis” (1943)

Howard Thurman was born and raised among the working poor in racially divided Daytona, Florida, little more than a generation removed from slavery. In the foreword to his 1965 book *The Luminous Darkness*,¹ Thurman describes the scars this left deep in his spirit and his enduring “sensitivity to the churning abyss separating white from black.” He goes on to say, “Nevertheless, a strange necessity has been laid upon me to devote my life to the central concern that transcends the walls that divide and would achieve in literal fact that which is experienced as literal truth: human life is one and all [people] are members of one another.” With these words he introduces his reflection on “the anatomy of segregation and the ground of hope.” He wrote it as an offering during the height of the Southern Freedom Movement (more commonly known as the Civil Rights Movement) in just two sittings, so indelibly was its message etched within him.

From the arrival of the first European ships on the shores of what is now the United States, race has been used as a wedge and a justification for oppression and genocide. Yet Thurman, and many wise souls before and since, have recognized an inherent oneness that breathes through all life and being. Despite growing up under the brutalities of U.S. apartheid, Thurman knew in his bones and in his spirit our profound inseparability from one another. He often noted that “the contradictions of life are neither final or ultimate” and he, as do we,

¹ Howard Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness*. Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1989.

inhabited the contradiction of our fundamental oneness in a world fractured by so many forms of separation and division.

To Thurman, the way to undermine this fracture and work toward restoring (an original and yet mostly unrealized) wholeness was through the cultivation of authentic relationships. His central pursuit was the search for community – the “common ground” (to use his term) among people at the root of our humanness and our spiritual nature. This quest was at the heart of the Fellowship Church experiment in the 1940’s. At a time of local, national, and global conflict, The Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples sought to discover whether repeated and consistent experiences of genuine fellowship among people could be more compelling than all that divides them, transcending the barriers of race, religion, nationality, culture, and social class.²

Fellowship Church provided a powerful and pioneering witness, but how are we called to live into the “strange necessity” of Thurman’s concern in our own times? Twenty-first century times when State violence and mass incarceration claim the lives of Black and Brown people with impunity. When Indigenous sovereignty and environmental sanctity are threatened by the hyper-materialism of a capitalist corporatocracy, and economic inequality is at historic extremes. Times when immigrants are vilified and dehumanized, deported or banned. When fear and nationalism are manipulated to justify an inflated military budget and divestment from programs of social uplift. And in these times, too, of growing social movements, united action, and glimpses of hope. It is often out of extremity that possibilities emerge. When the conditions of inequity become dire, more and more people are rattled from their complacency and awaken to the imperative for social change and the restoration of our collective humanity.

Vincent Harding, the great historian and activist, who regarded Dr. Thurman as his surrogate father, tells us that Thurman was profoundly concerned with the social justice activism of his day. In an interview, Harding notes that “Thurman was a resource... reminding us of the

² Co-founded by Howard Thurman and Dr. Alfred Fisk in San Francisco in 1944, The Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples (aka Fellowship Church) was the first intentionally interracial intercultural church – in both congregation and leadership – in the United States.

wholeness of life. He was *with* the Movement, but in a very different way than Martin [King] was with the Movement, or that Fannie Lou Hamer was with the Movement, or that Ella Baker was with the Movement. He was with the Movement as a manifestation of this *wholeness* that he believed in so deeply. He recognized that what the Movement was doing was not simply trying to get laws passed, but trying to bring a new wholeness to American society. And anything that is working for wholeness, from his perspective, is working for the Divine.”³

Howard Thurman was a mystic. He offered this “working definition” of mysticism as “the response of the individual to a personal encounter with God within his own soul.” He adds, “such a response is total, affecting the inner quality of the life and its outward expression and manifestation.”⁴ Although most often thought of as an intensely private experience, Thurman notes that “even in the moment of vision there is a sense of community – a unity not only with God but a unity with all life....”⁵ In my conversations with his daughter, Olive Thurman Wong, she lamented that so many people failed to grasp the centrality of oneness to her father’s life and thought. She insisted, “You can’t really understand my father unless you understand that point.” Of course “oneness” is an easy enough thing to bandy about. Even an easy thing to profess, until we realize that it must include not only the people we like and agree with, not only those to whom we are sympathetic, but also those whom we view as abhorrent. (Whatever side of a political question we may hold!) We don’t get to choose who we are one with – it’s everybody.

But be clear that oneness does not mean sameness. And unity is not uniformity. (This is not a homogenization thing.) Thurman cherished the unique expressions of every individual, and the sacred dance between the particular and the universal. We can regard it this way: the

³ Arleigh Prelow, InSpirit Communication and Film, *Howard Thurman: Spirit of a Movement*, documentary short commissioned by the Museum of the African Diaspora, San Francisco, CA, 2005.

⁴ Howard Thurman, *Mysticism and the Experience of Love*, Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1961, p.6

⁵ Howard Thurman, “Mysticism and Social Change” (1939) in *A Strange Freedom*, Walter E. Fluker and Catherine Tumber, eds., Boston: Beacon Press, 1998, p.116

infinite diversity of expression emerges from an infinitely inclusive whole. A divine whole. In a theistic frame (which was Thurman's languaging), one with God, and through that oneness with God, everything and everyone – every expression of Life – is one with every other expression of Life. Buddhist master Thich Nhat Hanh uses the term “interbeing” to describe this. Even in science, quantum physicists and quantum biologists point toward a common energetic matrix, and a unifying intelligence within all that is.

This unitive worldview – this worldview of oneness – has profound ethical implications. If all life is one, then there is no “them” separate from some constructed and exclusive “us.” If all life is one, we cannot abuse or drop bombs on some “other” people – there is no other! We cannot exploit or commodify the earth if the earth is the body of the Divine, part of the oneness. There is no race or class or nation, no river or blade of grass, that is not part of this sacred all-embracing wholeness and ultimately, therefore, part of (whatever I may understand to be) myself. Within this paradigm any act of violence, hostility, oppression or exploitation is perpetrated against God, against the Divine, against the whole. And any genuine act of loving kindness or service is likewise of benefit to the whole. In a cosmology of oneness, nothing is inconsequential; everything – from the microscopic to the macrocosmic – touches and impacts every other thing.

In my classes on mysticism and social change, I describe this view of oneness as “north” on the ethical compass of the mystic ethos. (And one need not have had a personal experience of mystic union to adopt this ethic and worldview.) It is something to guide us, to point ourselves toward, to check ourselves against as we work for justice, healing, and liberation. It is the ideal that compels us, although we may never attain it, expanding the radius of our concern and the depth of our responsibility.

Thurman's was a prophetic mysticism that engaged the world rather than withdrawing from it. A mysticism that sought to bring the vision glimpsed in what he sometimes called the “creative encounter” into manifestation in human relationships, social institutions, and policies –

in the practical for-instances of our lives. He writes, “What [the mystic] experiences [during the encounter with the Divine] he is under obligation to achieve in [lived] experience.... He cannot escape the responsibility of working out the good in a manifold of inner and outer relations.... [The mystic] must embrace the social whole and seek to achieve empirically the good which has possessed him in his moment of profoundest insight. In his effort to do this, he constantly checks his action by his insight. It keeps his insight true and his action valid.”⁶

There is a stereotype of mystics seeking to escape the world, concerned only with the ecstasy of their own experience of union with the Divine; yet in that union is a doorway that opens out into everything and everyone. The experience of oneness brings us back into relationship with the allness. The oneness and the allness inter-be (to return to the term from Thich Nhat Hanh). Thus we feel deeply the wounds of a battered world, and the suffering and needs of the people – including, as Thurman puts it in *Jesus and the Disinherited*, those “with their backs against the wall” – the disenfranchised, the marginalized and the oppressed. Inaction is not an option. The mystic worldview creates an ethical mandate, and it offers a new way to enter the work of social transformation – from the position of oneness rather than dualism. It shifts the paradigm. So it is not that I am “helping” some other unfortunate somebodies from my position of privilege or superiority, but rather seeking to restore a fundamental wholeness of which we are all a part.⁷ Thurman often quoted socialist union leader Eugene Debs: “While there is a lower class, I am in it, while there is a criminal element, I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free.”

In common usage, a “prophet” has come to mean a fortune teller or clairvoyant, but the religious origins of the term in the Abrahamic traditions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) relate back to the prophets of the Hebrew scriptures – those who, emboldened by their own “creative encounters” with God, spoke truth to power for the welfare and liberation of the people. Simply

⁶ *Strange Freedom*, 121

⁷ It is important to note that not everyone responds to the mystic encounter with a sense of social commitment, but this is descriptive of Thurman’s brand of affirmation mysticism.

put, prophets *denounce* injustice, and *announce* the vision of a new and possible world. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (a 20th century mystic, activist, and scholar in the Jewish tradition) said that prophets “combine a very deep love, a very powerful dissent, a painful rebuke, with unwavering hope.”⁸

Luther Smith, in his book *Howard Thurman: The Mystic as Prophet*, notes, “Thurman’s prophetic mysticism stresses the formation of community through a liberation process that includes inner freedom. Inward liberation is not only a prerequisite for social transformation, it preserves the revolutionary sense of purpose after social transformation. Inward liberation keeps struggle (means) from being confused as the objective (ends).”⁹ Smith offers the example that the struggle for voting rights for African Americans was not simply about obtaining access to the ballot, but to then use that tool in reshaping society. Voting was a means, not the ends. Veterans of the Southern Freedom Movement are quick to point out that their goal was not simply to obtain civil rights, but that this was in fact a movement for spiritual liberation and to redeem the soul of this nation.

To Thurman “the mystic’s concern with the imperative of social action is not merely to improve the condition of society. It is not merely to feed the hungry, relieve human suffering and human misery.” He notes, “If this were all, in and of itself, it would be important surely. But this is not all. The basic consideration has to do with the removal of all that prevents God from coming to [fullness] in the life of the individual. Whatever there is that blocks this, calls for action.”¹⁰ Thurman spoke of the spiritual disciplines as those practices by which we remove the barriers to our “inner altar” – our place of communion with God. And through this definition, he included activism *as a spiritual discipline*, acknowledging that conditions of social and economic injustice

⁸ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays edited by Susannah Heschel*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996, p. 399.

⁹ Luther Smith, *Howard Thurman: The Mystic as Prophet*. Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1992, p.208.

¹⁰ “Mysticism and Social Action,” Lawrence Lecture on Religion and Society, First Unitarian Church of Berkeley, Kensington, CA, October 13, 1978.

can block both the oppressed *and the oppressor* from, as he put it, “free and easy access” to that altar. He affirmed the necessity to identify with, and work for the liberation and reconciliation of *all* parties in order to restore the beloved community. “It is much easier,” Thurman acknowledges, “within the context of mystical piety to identify with the sufferer, the hungry, the poor, the neglected, than with those whose power, privilege and insensitivity are largely responsible for the social ills.”¹¹ However, *both* are cut off from their inner altars, and both must be addressed.

A poignant contemporary example of this can be found in the spiritual activism of the Water Protectors at Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota, as they worked to halt the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL). The \$3.8B project was designed to carry crude oil across 1,172 miles, passing under numerous bodies of water, including the Missouri River – violating sacred sites on treaty-protected lands of the Lakota and Dakota peoples, and threatening the water supply for the tribal nations and millions of people living in surrounding areas. In early 2016, not finding protection through legal means, the first of several camps was established as a center for cultural preservation and spiritual resistance to the pipeline. By September many thousands of people had gathered, including members of more than 300 tribes from across the Americas, along with Indigenous peoples of other continents, and non-Native supporters.

Their protest was conducted in a climate of prayer and nonviolence; prayers not only for the water and the earth and the sovereignty of the Indigenous peoples whose rights and ancestral land were being violated, but prayers for the militarized police and security guards who fought against them with firearms and water cannons and toxic gas, prayers for the executives of Energy Transfer Partners who developed the project, and the U.S. government officials who were tasked with its regulation. Their prayers and sacred ceremonies were for the healing of all parties in service to the wellbeing of all – both now and for future generations.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

This recognition that creative, transformative, and lasting social change must encompass everyone and everything is evident in Thurman's witness. He affirms, "Every living thing...belongs to every other living thing, and I can never be what I ought to be until the last living manifestation of Life is what it ought to be. For better or for worse I am tied into the idiom of everything that lives. And if I forget this, I profane God's creation. If I remember it, I come to myself in you and you come to yourself in me."¹² This is a rigorous mandate, requiring both the cultivation of the inner spirit and the commitment to a just and ethical social order. For Thurman the two are inextricably linked. The "inward journey" of personal transformation and the "outward journey" of social transformation, like the in-breath and the out-breath, or the systole and diastole of the heartbeat, cannot ultimately be separated. Spiritual practice is important not only for renewal in order to sustain the work of justice-making, but to deepen the place from which we undertake that work, so that we may bring to it a greater integrity and inspiration. And activism can be engaged as an integral part of our personal and collective spiritual formation. Even as we address the urgent realities of present injustice, we must simultaneously reach beyond them to imagine and bring forth a new vision for the world.

There is a saying that "pain pushes until vision pulls." Many of us are drawn to the work of social action out of the suffering or trauma we experience or witness, or out of rage at inequity or harm. But inhabiting the energy of trauma or rage over time can take a heavy toll. In my own life, I played out the split that so many experience: where we have an "activist self" and a "spiritual self." (For some people it is an activist self *or* a spiritual self, often with a lot of judgment cast from one side toward the other!) After years on the roller coaster – alternating periods of intense activism with crash-and-burn health crises and deeply spirit-centered periods of illness and recovery – I decided to explore what an integrated life could be. Howard Thurman was a crucial part of my answer, offering an example of how to embody the both/and of spirituality and social action in a way that feels not only authentic, but sustainable.

¹² Prelow documentary, *op cit*.

It is encouraging to see “self-care” become a topic of conversation and concern among today’s activists. Sustaining ourselves, taking time for healing, reflection, and rejuvenation is essential to being effective in our work, and to being a beneficial presence in our communities and in the larger world. Self-care and community care are not separate! But too often self-care is regarded simply as a way to provide short term relief from stress, or to numb the pain – a glass of wine or a beer after a hard day, getting a manicure or massage, or zoning out in front of the television. And perhaps sometimes these may be what is needed in the moment. But I am talking here about something deeper, about how we stay connected to our spiritual Source, Thurman’s inner altar, the place within that inspires us to do the work of our calling, and that allows us to bring our wisest, truest, best selves to it on an ongoing basis.

Genuine sustainability is not just about employing enough self-care practices to keep-on-keeping-on, continuing to do what we are already doing without keeling over, often working in the same dysfunctional and abusive ways. There is nothing transformational about that – for ourselves individually, for our strategies as activists and leaders, for our organizations, our movements, or the world. The real question is how do we sustain the *soul* – the spiritual center, the higher vision, the deepest heart – that can motivate and inform our work, and every aspect of our lives in our commitment to personal and social transformation. In this way all that we do can emerge from, and be nourished by, a sense of connection to something greater, something larger than we are from which we can draw strength – whether that is one another, our Ancestors or cultural heritage, Nature, a Higher Power, God – the Sacred, however each of us may define it.

In light of this it may be helpful to reconsider self-care as “soul-care,” or transformational self-care, to indicate the practices that help us establish, maintain, and grow that inner connection. My organization, OneLife Institute (which draws heavily on the teachings of Dr. Thurman), came up with the term soul-care to highlight this distinction. In our workshops we describe it as “the growth, development, and preservation of inner resources that allow you to

meet whatever life throws at you with _____ and _____.” What goes in those blanks is unique to each person, and may even shift from time to time. For me it’s *love* and *wisdom*. Those are the qualities that I most hope (and strive) to embody. We can take those words, those qualities, and set them as sacred intentions. Allow them to be our anchors, our touchstones. Indeed, they are already within us waiting to be given full expression.

So the self-care / soul-care question becomes: what practices and choices allow us to live from that place of connection to the Sacred, to cultivate our spiritual qualities and meet whatever life brings with the best that is within us. The need for renewal and maintaining an open channel to the Divine was a concern that Thurman raised with those activists and others who sought his counsel and ministry. How do we nourish the wellsprings of the inner spirit in order to sustain our work for justice and withstand the assaults of the struggle? Some common disciplines include meditation, prayer, reading inspirational texts, music, art, creative expression, yoga, tai chi, or other contemplative practice. Personally, I find some of my sweetest communion in the little backyard garden behind my apartment, or walking in the neighborhood attentive to the feel of the sun, wind, rain, and earth or the fragrance of flowers. Nature is a potent spiritual healer. Thurman’s own mystical awakenings were experienced as a young boy seeking refuge in nature. He wrote of the peace he found in the company of his favorite oak tree, and of feeling like he was part of the dark starry nights, the ocean’s thunder, the flowing river and the woods. In his later life in San Francisco he cherished long walks along the Pacific and tending his roses.

Where do *you* find water for your thirsty spirit? And what connects you with your spiritual Source? What if you engaged those practices proactively, as part of the daily fabric of your life, instead of waiting until accumulated trauma or burnout take their toll. Not using spirituality as an escape or anesthesia, but as a source of replenishment, insight, resilience. What if we centered those practices collectively and integrated them into our activist movements? Communal spiritual practice – of singing, prayer and shared worship – was central to the Southern

Freedom Movement. And we see it today, for example, in the struggle for Indigenous sovereignty and in the Movement for Black Lives. By bringing spiritual practice into our activism, and embracing activism as a spiritual practice, we are transformed as we transform our world. The process is reciprocal.

And we do not undertake this work alone. We have comrades, community, allies and accomplices all over the planet. There is strength and hope in remembering this, and in reaching beyond the manifest world to the larger Life that surrounds us – the forces of Nature, the wisdom of the Ancestors, the power and presence of the Spirit. These too are part of the oneness. A mystic approach to social action invites us to call on energies beyond our finite selves in order to stand with grace, courage, and fierce love, addressing the indignities of the world with a depth that causes them to crumble. Thurman reminds us that God is against all dualisms, and anything that denies the oneness of Life, ultimately, cannot stand.

As we lay our lives upon the altar of social change (referencing the epigraph that began this reflection), the goal is not striving to have a “mystic experience,” but rather seeking to honor the oneness. To live with as much wisdom, compassion, and integrity as we can, mindful that what we do (and what we *don't* do) affects more than just ourselves. (Thurman cautions that “How I live is never merely my business.”¹³) Mystic consciousness is the sense of belonging to something greater – not just as an intellectual belief, but a visceral relationship with the Divine in all life. In this context the brutal territorialism of individual, corporate, or national empire-building is unconscionable, and every act of oppression or cruelty, a sacrilege. In a worldview of oneness, primary allegiance is not bound by country or creed or culture, or even individualized self-hood, but is to the larger Life, to the sacred transcendent Unity revealing in glorious diversity as the infinite kin-dom.¹⁴

¹³ *Strange Freedom*, 127

¹⁴ The term “kin-dom” was introduced by Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz in *Mujerista Theology*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996, p.89

The mystic ethos invites an ethic and an activism driven by love, and prompts a prophetic engagement with the world. It calls us to become conscious of the entirety of our thought, belief, and action... to seek the places of inconsistency and consider them in light of the larger questions of the meaning of life and the core of our values. There were three questions that Dr. Thurman regularly posed, encouraging people to this deeper reflection. First a question of identity: “Who are you?” (and then a long pause, followed by, “Who are you... *really?*”) Next a question of values and purpose: “What do you *want?*” (or sometimes, “What are you *for?*”) Finally, a discernment of means: “How will you get it?” I come back to these questions again and again and again. They are guideposts for me, a way of making sure I am staying true to my own ethical compass, true to the authentic purpose and calling on my life. And that I respond faithfully – in alignment with this truth – to the exigencies of the world.

Thurman notes, “The time and place of a [person’s] life is the time and place of [their] body, but the *meaning* of a [person’s] life is as eternal and as significant as with all of [their being they] *will* to make it.”¹⁵ This meaning is expressed in the enduring commitments that guide our every step – daring to live more fully, love more deeply, risk more boldly in service to whatever has claimed us, and to give all that we are as a consecrated instrument of healing and justice. In a world where “an eye for an eye” not only leaves everybody blind, but turned to ashes, we must claim a new paradigm – a new covenant with one another, and with all lifekind. I believe that this covenant can be found within the mystic ethos of oneness. Truly understood, it calls us to the highest level of ethical integrity. This is no fluffy feel-good short cut to reconciliation, but a scrupulous demand to do the difficult work of healing centuries of abuse and fracture. The task for each of us will depend on the particulars of our own history, social location, capacities and gifts. The task for all of us is the common project of restoring the sacred wholeness that is our collective truth. Thurman’s autobiography, *With Head and Heart*, ends with this affirmation:

¹⁵ “A Tribute to Life,” in *The Living Wisdom of Howard Thurman* audio collection. Sounds True, 2010.

My testimony is that life is against all dualism. Life is One. Therefore, a way of life that is worth living must be a way worthy of life itself. Nothing less than that can abide. Always, against all that fragments and shatters and against all things that separate and divide within and without, life labors to meld together into a single harmony. ... In all things there is a secret door which leads into the central place, where the Creator of life and the God of the human heart are one and the same. I take my stand for the future and for the generations who follow over the bridges we already have crossed. It is here that the meaning of the hunger of the heart is unified. The Head and the Heart at last inseparable; they are lost in the wonder of the One.¹⁶

NOTE: This essay was written for the forthcoming volume, *Anchored in the Current: The Eternal Wisdom of Howard Thurman in A Changing World*, edited by Gregory C. Ellison, Westminster John Knox Press.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

What might the mystic ethic of oneness look like in your own life? ... In your commitment to justice and social change... In your spiritual practice... In your work... In how you eat or shop... In how you vote....?

What would a commitment to oneness mean collectively? In how we greet one another on the street... In our federal budget... In the national policies we endorse or tolerate...?

What are the spiritual practices that open the way to your own “inner altar” and keep your spirit renewed and connected with Source? How can you incorporate them into your life on a regular basis?

¹⁶ Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1979, p.269