



Howard Thurman  
Shaping Spirituality From Love to Justice

## Editor's Reflections

In the introduction to his book *Saying Yes and Saying No*, Robert McAfee Brown tells the story of the statement of faith he wrote later in life, for the purpose of joining the presbytery in which his new home was located. By now an elder statesman of the church, Brown decided that rather than follow the usual course of saying only what he believed, he would also take the accompanying step of identifying things that he did *not* believe, in the fashion of the Barmen Declaration, things such as “I say Yes to the ongoing presence and power of God in the Holy Spirit; I say No to our attempts to limit how the Spirit will act” (page 13).

This issue of *Hungryhearts*, in similar manner, offers as much about the spiritual life by what is absent as by what is present. The authors, apart from me, are not the Caucasians that make up so much of our denomination; the recurring figure is in fact African-American. Contributors are not only women, often considered to be more spiritually-inclined, but evenly divided between the genders. Each one is ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament, but not one is a full-time parish pastor. Their vocations at present are to more specialized ministries, meaning that their lives tend to be much more like those of parishioners. The call to silence and solitude is present to be sure; it does not stand alone, but walks hand-in-hand with action and community. And in this wide-ranging look at the spiritual life, Presbyterians are not excluded from the mix, but make a significant contribution.

This issue is also a good indicator of new initiatives begun by the Office of Spiritual Formation. Our feature article comes from our annual General Assembly dinner, co-sponsored this year by the National Black Presbyterian Caucus, the first time in memory that any two church entities have entered into such a partnership. That the collaboration was between these two parties in particular can only portend well for the future, one associated with justice, the other with spirituality, and the truth showing a significant strand in each. Also emerging as part of the Denver General Assembly, only hinted at by the Oscar Romero prayer/poem, are new forays into producing our resources in Spanish, beginning with a translated version of our new *lectio divina* bookmarker, and current and past issues of *Hungryhearts* soon to follow. Watch our website, [www.pcusa.org/spiritualformation](http://www.pcusa.org/spiritualformation) for more information on all of these materials.

Spirituality is neither a one-size-fits-all that means nothing, nor is it easily caricatured into a certain type. Rather, the life of the Spirit is a custom-made garment as new as baptism and as colorful as the bow that hung over Noah's head. It is not only form-fitting as we grow, but is a garb that leads us into growth, prepared by saints gone long before us, yet still in fashion this day and all the days to come. Indeed, by saying no to stereotypes, our being formed in the Spirit offers a resounding yes to God.

Beloved, we are God's children now;  
what we will be has not yet been revealed.

What we do know is this:

when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.

1 John 3:2

Peace,  
Steve

### Spiritual Formation

is the activity of the Holy Spirit which molds our lives into the likeness of Jesus Christ. This likeness is one of deep intimacy with God and genuine compassion for all of creation. The Spirit works not only in the lives of individuals but also in the church, shaping it into the Body of Christ. We cooperate with this work of the Spirit through certain practices that make us more open and responsive to the Spirit's touch, disciplines such as sabbath keeping, works of compassion and justice, discernment, worship, hospitality, spiritual friendships, and contemplative silence.

Office of Spiritual Formation,  
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Cover photograph of Howard Thurman by permission of Olive Thurman, through the assistance of *The Howard Thurman Papers Project* of Morehouse College, Walter Earl Fluker, Director.

# Contemplative Prayer: Shaping Spirituality From Love to Justice

by Eugene Taylor Sutton


I was reared in black Baptist congregations in rural North Carolina and in Washington, D.C., which is to say that I sang, cried, clapped and shouted my way into faith. Bold, bluesy, and vibrant, African-American culture values self-expression in its religion as well as in its art, music, and everyday conversation. One is not encouraged to sit still, quiet, and motionless in the company of others, and if this is done while the community is “having church,” then prayers and exhortations are offered for the Spirit to visit that place more powerfully. Exuberant bursts of noise and speech often signify the presence of God in black church spirituality, much as they did in the Book of Acts’ account of the birth of the Christian movement at Pentecost.

How is it, then, that someone nurtured as a child on the milk of revivalist spirituality finds himself nourished by contemplative worship in his adult years? And how is it that this longtime social justice warrior, a son of the Sixties with its movements against racism, war, and poverty, now struggles to insert periods of Centering Prayer<sup>1</sup> and meditation into his daily round of activities? What is there in the African-American spiritual tradition that lays the groundwork for a contemplative who is also committed to working for justice?

As it happens, mystic and prophetic religion has many roots in both the African soul and the rich African soil. By the rivers of the Gambia, by the rivers of the Niger, by the rivers of the Roanoke, by the rivers of the Savannah, by the rivers of the Mississippi — there my forebears sat down and wept when they remembered home and freedom. For there by the rivers of slavery their captors asked them for songs, and their tormentors asked for mirth, saying, “Why don’t y’all dance for us and sing one of those songs that you people do so well!” But how could they sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?

Sometimes — in safe company — the Lord’s song of freedom and justice welled up within the African-American soul and burst out with songs of ecstatic joy and deliverance. But at other times, the song played a softer tone in the sorrowful heart, expressing itself in the Spirituals that so frequently provided needed balm for the lamenting soul. And still at other times, there was silence: the prayerful silence whose yearning for God and the establishment of God’s kingdom could not take the shape of words. These voiceless prayers of inviting and acknowledging the divine presence within, growing out of the soul-stirrings of a people whose captors had “silenced” them from voicing their true aspirations, laid the seeds for a flowering of contemplative ways of praying in African-American spirituality.

The most well-known figure in this tradition is Howard Thurman (1900-1981), the distinguished clergyman, writer and academic. He was raised in poverty in rural Florida, requiring financial assistance to attend both Morehouse College and Rochester Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1926. After pastoring a black Baptist congregation in Oberlin, Ohio, Thurman left for Haverford College to study with the Quaker philosopher and mystical writer Rufus Jones. He was especially influenced by the writings of the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart, and later St. Francis of Assisi. His career would lead him to a preaching and teaching ministry at Morehouse College, Howard University, the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco, and Boston University.

Thurman authored over twenty books, numerous articles, and many interviews, addresses, and sermons. The titles of his books reflect his contemplative leanings, such as *The Centering Moment*, *Deep is the Hunger*, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, *The Inward Journey*, *The Luminous Darkness*, and *Meditations of the Heart*. 

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The starting point for authentic living, Thurman believed, was to “center down” enough to hear God’s voice in the midst of the busyness of daily life:

**How good it is to center down!  
To sit quietly and see one’s self pass by!  
The streets of our minds seethe with endless traffic;  
Our spirits resound with clashings, with noisy silences,  
While something deep within hungers and thirsts for the still moment and the resting lull.  
With full intensity we seek, ere the quiet passes, a fresh sense of order in our living;  
A direction, a strong sure purpose that will structure our confusion and bring meaning in our chaos.  
We look at ourselves in this waiting moment — the kinds of people we are.  
The questions persist: what are we doing with our lives? — what are the motives that order our days?  
What is the end of our doings? Where are we trying to go?  
Where do we put the emphasis and where are our values focused?  
For what end do we make sacrifices? Where is my treasure and what do I love most in life?  
What do I hate most in life and to what am I true?  
Over and over the questions beat in upon the waiting moment.  
As we listen, floating up through all the jangling echoes of our turbulence, there is a sound of another kind —  
A deeper note which only the stillness of the heart makes clear.  
It moves directly to the core of our being. Our questions are answered,  
Our spirits refreshed, and we move back into the traffic of our daily round  
With the peace of the Eternal in our step.  
How good it is to center down!<sup>2</sup>**

The “centering moment” that Thurman illuminates also serves to describe the inner movements of Centering Prayer, the method of praying beyond thoughts, words and emotions that prepares the heart to receive the gift of contemplation, or “resting in God.” The aim of Centering Prayer is to enable the follower of Christ to consent to God’s presence and action within, to pray the prayer of our Lord “...thy will be done” in us, among us, and throughout the earth, as in heaven.

Thurman describes the activity of God that one consents to in prayer as “enlarging the heart”:

**God is at work enlarging the boundaries of my heart.**

**God is making room in my heart for compassion.**

**There is already a vast abundance of room for pity. It is often easy to be overcome with self-pity, that sticky substance that ruins everything it touches. My list of excuses is a long list and even as I say it, I know that under closest scrutiny they disappear, one by one. There is pity in me — pity for others. But there is something in it that cannot be trusted; it is mixed with pride, arrogance, cunning. I see this only when I expose myself to the eyes of God in the quiet time. It is now that I see what my pity really is and the sources from which it springs.**

**God is making room in my heart for compassion: the awareness that where my life begins is where your life begins; the awareness that a sensitiveness to your needs cannot be separated from a sensitiveness to my needs; the awareness that the joys of my heart are never mine alone — nor are my sorrows. I struggle against the work of God in my heart; I want to be let alone. I want my boundaries to remain fixed, that I may be at rest. But even now, as I turn to [God] in the quietness, [God’s] work in me is ever the same.**


**God is at work enlarging the boundaries of my heart.<sup>3</sup>**



Thurman was a lifelong mentor to Martin Luther King Jr., who was in his final year of study for his Ph.D. at Boston University when Thurman began teaching there in 1953. (Martin's father, familiarly known as "Daddy King," and Thurman were classmates at Morehouse, and Thurman had been a family friend ever since.) In preaching, spirituality and in the ethics of nonviolence, Thurman had "a personal, spiritual influence on Martin that was so lofty, and that helped him to endure. The spiritual and moral energy Thurman generated influenced him so much."<sup>4</sup> King's own words show the product of God "enlarging the boundaries" of the human heart through sacrificial *love*:

**To our most bitter opponents we say: "We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We shall meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, and we shall continue to love you. We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws, because non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good. Throw us in jail, and we shall still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities at the midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you. But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom, but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory."<sup>5</sup>**

All justice, which is the ordering of society to conform to the vision of God for the world, must begin in love. And love can only grow in a human heart that has been enlarged by God through opening up to the Divine Presence in prayer. The sons and daughters of Africa knew that the Lord God delivers those who are oppressed to freedom, as typified by the liberation of God's people from bondage and slavery in the Hebrew Scriptures. But they also knew that this same God was *within* them as well, freeing them from personal bondage to freedom in Christ, leading them on a spiritual journey to Divine union. The personal contemplative journey feeds the political journey.

Christian mysticism has its roots in the African soil and soul, from the writings of the early Desert Fathers and Mothers, the flowering of contemplative spirituality in North Africa, to the origins of Christian monasticism in Egypt represented by such figures as Antony and Pachomius. The Christian contemplative heritage began in Africa, and continues to be nurtured by the descendants of Africa in diaspora around the world today. Contemplative prayer moves spirituality from love to justice, and it is a way for African Americans to connect again with their spiritual roots.<sup>6</sup> 

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For more information on Centering Prayer, see the Summer/Fall 2001 and Spring 2003 issues of

*Hungryhearts*, or go to the *Hungryhearts* archive at [www.pcusa.org/spiritualformation/hungryhearts/](http://www.pcusa.org/spiritualformation/hungryhearts/).

<sup>2</sup> Howard Thurman, "How Good to Center Down." *Meditations of the Heart*. Richmond IN: Friends United Press, 1976: 28.

<sup>3</sup> "Not Pity, but Compassion." *Meditations of the Heart*: 49.

<sup>4</sup> Lewis V. Baldwin, *There Is A Balm In Gilead: The Cultural Roots of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.* Interview with Dr. Philip Lenud, December 9, 1986. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991: 301.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., "A Christmas Sermon on Peace," December 24, 1967, in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King Jr.* James M. Washington, ed.. NY: Harper & Row, 1986: 253-258.

<sup>6</sup> See Eugene Taylor Sutton, "'Oh, Freedom!': Contemplative Dimensions of African-American Spirituality" in *The Diversity of Centering Prayer*. Gustave Reininger, ed. NY: Continuum, 1999.

## The Long View

It helps now and then to step back and take the long view.  
The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.  
We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction  
of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.  
Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying  
that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.  
No statement says all that can be said.  
No prayer fully expresses our faith.  
No confession brings perfection.  
No program accomplishes Christ's mission.  
No set of goals and objectives includes everything.  
That is what we are about.  
We plant the seeds that one day will grow.  
We water the seeds that are already planted,  
knowing that they hold future promise.  
We lay foundations that will need further development.  
We provide yeast that produces effects beyond our capabilities.  
We cannot do everything,  
and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.  
This enables us to do something and to do it very well.  
It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning,  
a step along the way,  
and an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.  
We may never see the end results.  
But that is the difference between the master-builder and the worker.  
We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not messiahs.  
We are prophets of a future not our own.

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This prayer/poem has often been attributed to Oscar Romero, archbishop of San Salvador from 1977-1980. During that time his eyes were opened to the violence and abuse taking place in that nation, and he was martyred because of his defense of the poor. Although no original source can be identified, these words are certainly in the spirit of his ministry. *The Violence of Love*, a collection of his sermons and writings, was published in 1988.

Holy Man/Holy Community:  
Howard Thurman, Early Christian Asceticism,  
and the Black Church Tradition  
by Gay L. Byron

Howard Thurman (1900-1981) has been referred to as a holy man for the new millennium.<sup>1</sup> This mystic, theologian, pastor, poet, preacher, and prolific author generated a rich body of writings that have enabled many to explore various aspects of his life and thought. The mystical and spiritual dimensions of his writings open a window onto a much-neglected element of African-American religious experience. [A select bibliography can be found on page 12].

There have been many efforts to interpret Thurman as a mystic, and to articulate the mystical teachings in his writings.<sup>2</sup> Yet I want to suggest that Thurman might also be compared to those early Christians who were known as ascetics and dwelled in the Egyptian desert over 1600 years ago. These desert fathers and mothers renounced the ways of mainstream society and cultivated a life dedicated to God, which often included offering an important critique of the injustices in their world. They adhered to a set of ascetic practices — prayer, fasting, silence, stillness, and self-control, among others — that paved the way toward self-mastery and freedom. More importantly, they served as spiritual guides for many who were searching for ways to be more open to God. What would it mean, then, to analyze Thurman and his teachings through the lens of asceticism? How might an understanding of this early Christian tradition provide a framework for interpreting African-American Christianity and the Black Church Tradition?<sup>3</sup> What are the ascetic dimensions of Howard Thurman’s teachings? And, how might his teachings serve as a source of spiritual direction for the times in which we live?

In this essay, I want to explore some possible connections between early Christian asceticism and the teachings of Howard Thurman. While understanding Thurman as a mystic, I want to extend beyond this category and propose that Thurman cultivated his own program of spiritual disciplines as a response to the social, political, and moral upheaval that existed in U.S. society during his formative and professional years, and that, unfortunately, continues to exist in many segments of contemporary society. Thus, I want to examine how ascetic practices are evidenced in his experiences and teachings as a way of understanding how such practices might serve to highlight an important dimension of contemporary African-American Christianity.

### Early Christian Asceticism

Asceticism (from the Greek word *askēsis*) is generally understood as the renunciation of worldly passions for the purpose of turning one’s total attention to God. In the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Walter Kaelber defines asceticism as a voluntary, sustained, and to some degree systematic program of self-discipline and self-denial in which earthly passions and desires are renounced in order to attain a higher spiritual state. This definition places an emphasis on the religious implications of asceticism, wherein the chief goal is to attain a higher spiritual state that is unaffected by the social and political concerns of the larger environment.<sup>4</sup>

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Yet, in recent years scholars have begun to broaden their understanding of asceticism and ascetic practices to include acts of political and social critique, sources of social power, and “performances” designed to inaugurate a more just and equitable world.<sup>5</sup> For example, New Testament scholar Vincent L. Wimbush asserts that “ascetic behavior represents a range of responses to social, political and physical worlds perceived as oppressive or unfriendly, or as stumbling blocks to the pursuit of heroic *personal* or *communal* goals, life styles, and commitment [emphasis added].”<sup>6</sup> It is this broader, more socially responsive, understanding of asceticism that informs this analysis of Howard Thurman.<sup>7</sup>

According to Kallistos Ware, a bishop of the Orthodox Church, there are two basic components in ascetic practice: withdrawal (from the Greek *anachōrēsis*, from which we get “anchorite”) and self-control (*enkrateia* in Greek).<sup>8</sup> Both of these terms, on the surface, carry negative, individualist, or self-centered connotations. But ascetic practices, as evidenced by the definition above, may serve *both* personal and communal goals. The ancient ascetics were on a path toward spiritual perfection, but this quest did not prevent them from re-engaging and re-connecting with the communities out of which they emerged. In fact, the early Christian ascetics were very much aware of the social and economic disparities that existed in society. But they chose to respond to such disparities and injustices by turning inward and pursuing a range of practices that would ultimately lead to perfection and freedom.

The ascetic performs a number of disciplines or exercises, such as renouncing the passions of the flesh, enduring suffering and temptations, adhering to periods of silence, stillness, tranquility, fasting, and prayer. The ascetic takes on these disciplines as a type of spiritual vocation. Bishop Ware argues that this vocation of *askēsis*

**signifies not simply a selfish quest for individual salvation but a service rendered to the total human family; not simply the cutting off or destroying of the lower but, much more profoundly, the refinement and illumination of the lower and its transfiguration into something higher.**<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, the vocation is not simply limited to a few select individuals, but it is a vocation for all.<sup>10</sup>

## A Holy Man for the New Millennium

**I am inclined to see Thurman not only as a holy man but also as a prophet who is preparing the way for the coming millennium — a millennium in which we, as world citizens, will either rejoice in the unity found in our diversity or else destroy each other in some final nuclear apocalypse.**<sup>11</sup>

Howard Thurman was born on November 18, 1900 in Daytona Beach, Florida. He spent his formative years under the watchful eye of his grandmother Nancy Ambrose, a former slave, and in the care of what he considered his primary community, the Mount Bethel Baptist Church. The fellowship of the church affirmed Thurman’s personal identity. His grandmother offered him the most influential and consistent example of religious and moral virtue. She also helped him gain a healthy critical eye (or hermeneutic of suspicion) with respect to the Bible. As a young child he was forbidden to read to her any of the letters of Paul (except I Corinthians 13), because Paul urged “slaves to be obedient to their masters.”<sup>12</sup> The young Thurman demonstrated spiritual and intellectual characteristics far beyond his biological years. He often spent time communing with nature as a way of connecting with the Divine, whether near the ocean, in the woods, or under his favorite oak tree. These early childhood experiences — in the church, with his grandmother, and alone with God — were the seeds for his emerging ascetic sensibilities.

From 1915-1919 he attended the Florida Baptist Academy in Jacksonville. He then went on to attend Morehouse College from 1919-1923 majoring in economics. During this time he spent the summer of 1922 studying philosophy in residence at Columbia University. He considered pursuing a degree in law, but opted to fulfill his dream of becoming a pastor. After graduating from Morehouse in 1923, he chose to matriculate at Rochester Theological Seminary (now Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School) in Rochester, New York, one of the leading theological institutions of his time that reserved two slots each

year for African-American students. His entry into this all-white community provided many challenges for Thurman, but he conquered the challenges, as well as the real and symbolic boundaries of the institution, and forged new possibilities for interracial relations on the campus and in the wider Rochester community. By the time he graduated with his Bachelor of Divinity degree in 1926, he had served as class president, integrated seminary housing, lectured in various settings throughout the city, preached in a diverse range of Protestant churches, and earned the honor of being valedictorian of his class.

Thurman married Kate Kelley shortly after his graduation from seminary on June 11, 1926. They relocated to Oberlin, Ohio where Thurman accepted the call to pastor a small group of African-Americans at the Mount Zion Baptist Church. This pastoral assignment lasted for only two-and-a-half years, as after giving birth to their only child, Kate was diagnosed with a terminal case of tuberculosis. Thurman relocated his family to Georgia so that Kate could be close to her relatives and accepted a position as director of religious life at Morehouse and Spelman Colleges, which he held from 1929-1932. After the death of his wife, Thurman went through a period of grief, searching his soul for a new sense of direction. After reading a small publication by the writer and philosopher Rufus Jones entitled *Finding the Trail of Life*, Thurman was convinced that he needed to study with this influential Quaker mystic.<sup>13</sup>

Although he enjoyed basking in ideas and feeding his keen intellectual capacity, Thurman discerned shortly after completing his theological studies that the scholar's vocation and the lengthy, rigorous requirements of a doctoral program would deter him from his deeper commitment to nurture his spiritual sensibilities. He recounts in his autobiography:

**I sensed somehow that if I were to devote full time to the requirements of a doctoral program, academic strictures would gradually usurp the energy I wanted so desperately to nourish the inner regions of my spirit, which was even then clamoring for attention.**<sup>14</sup>

Thus, after receiving a special academic fellowship, he decided to devote a semester of independent study with Rufus Jones at Haverford College during the spring of 1929. Thurman attended his lectures in philosophy and joined a special seminar led by Jones on the mystic Meister Eckhart, which was generally reserved for professors of philosophy and religion in the Philadelphia area. His intensive study with Jones served as a crucial experience for the development of his own form of asceticism and a watershed foundation for his professional commitments.

In 1931, Thurman became reacquainted with Sue Bailey, a friend from his college days who became a strong source of support. The following year they married and moved to Washington D.C., where he joined the faculty of the School of Religion of Howard University. It was during his tenure there that Thurman matured into a persuasive preacher, gifted professor, and influential religious leader.

During the fall of 1935, he was invited to join a small delegation of African-Americans on a "pilgrimage of friendship" to India, Burma, and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). This sojourn to the East became another watershed experience for his ascetic formation. He had the opportunity to meet with Rabindranath Tagore, the mystic and Nobel Prize laureate who was often called "the poet of Asia," and Mahatma Gandhi. Thurman recounts that the most challenging aspect of this experience was his encounters with Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims who continually raised questions about his commitment to Christianity, which supported slavery and colonialism. In short, they wanted to know why *he* — a black man — was a Christian.<sup>15</sup> Thurman was forced to face the contradictions that existed between his faith in the teachings of Jesus and the Christian institutions that were established to support the proclamation of these teachings. He admitted that he did not know of a single example of a local church that had an integrated ministry.

While at the Khyber Pass, shortly before his return to the U.S., Thurman experienced a transforming vision:

**We saw clearly what we must do somehow when we returned to America. We knew that we must test whether a religious fellowship could be developed in America that was capable of cutting across all racial barriers, with a carry-over into the common life, a fellowship that would alter the behavior patterns of those involved. It became imperative now to find out if experiences of spiritual unity among people could be more compelling than the experiences that divide them.**<sup>16</sup>

This vision propelled him to devote himself to exploring “the deepest needs of the human spirit.”<sup>17</sup>

### A Holy Community that Transcends Time and Space

**Thurman, like Gandhi or Thomas Merton, is one of those holy men who is opening up the path to a new spiritual adventure. Thurman’s Fellowship of All Peoples is a utopian experiment in passing over and coming back, an experiment in welcoming the stranger....**<sup>18</sup>

In 1943, having spent twelve years at Howard University, Thurman received a letter from Dr. Alfred G. Fisk, a Presbyterian Minister of the Word and Sacrament, and professor of philosophy at San Francisco State College. Fisk wrote in the hope that Thurman could recommend a student who might want to join him as co-pastor of a bold interracial and intercultural venture that was being supported by the Presbyterian Church.<sup>19</sup> Thurman recognized this letter as a call *for him* to pursue his dream of organizing and leading a multiracial and multicultural community of faith. He took a one-year leave of absence — without pay — from Howard, accepted the modest salary of \$2,400, and relocated his family to San Francisco, assured that God would take care of them.<sup>20</sup> He served nine years (1944-1953) as co-pastor of the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples, which is considered the first integrated and inclusive church in this country.<sup>21</sup>

The worship experience at the Church was central for Thurman. His asceticism was not simply personal and private. He believed that the corporate act of worship was a setting in which whole communities could encounter the power of God. He also wanted to

deepen the spiritual life of the gathered people: “The worship experience became a watering hole for this widely diverse and often disparate group of members and visitors from many walks of life.”<sup>22</sup> The church drew international visitors, as well as local political social radicals. Yet, the church did not fit the limited definition of an “activist” group. Thurman understood the church as a *resource* for activists — a place for prayer, stillness, and renewal.

The church was also an instrument through which he could transmit his teachings about social responsibility. Thurman believed, “there can never be a substitute for taking *personal responsibility* for social change.”<sup>23</sup> He understood his ministry for social change as being one that motivated individuals to take action in their worlds, their homes, their lives, and on their own streets.<sup>24</sup> This aspect of his pastoral ministry exemplified the true essence of asceticism, which calls for responses to “social, political, and physical worlds perceived as oppressive or unfriendly.”<sup>25</sup>

Another key ascetic practice that Thurman employed in this pastoral ministry was “creative quiet” or silence:

**...I sought for all who shared in the Fellowship community — a search for the moment when God appeared in the head, heart, and soul of the worshipper. This was the moment above all moments, intimate, personal, private, yet shared, miraculously, with the whole human family in celebration. Often there was the need for quiet, for silence, to deepen the collective, corporate sense of worship.....[T]he use of creative quiet made possible the communication with sick and shut-in members and national associate members in distant cities who were brought into these moments of silence and waiting together.**<sup>26</sup>

Silence for Thurman was a means through which individuals could draw near to God and transform themselves, even as they are transforming the world.



In 1953, after spending nine years in San Francisco, Thurman received an offer from Dr. Harold Case, president of Boston University, to serve as the first Dean of Marsh Chapel and as Professor of Spiritual Resources and Disciplines. The urban setting of Boston University provided for Thurman the perfect “laboratory” to continue his experiment of testing whether people of different races, cultures, and faiths could encounter the Divine in a gathered worship setting. He also had an opportunity to create a course, “Spiritual Disciplines and Resources,” that would lead his students to a deeper appreciation for the inner dimensions of the religious life.

In many respects the “disciplines of spirit” suggested by Howard Thurman in his 1963 book of the same name have much in common with the teachings of the early Christian ascetics. In *Disciplines of the Spirit*, Thurman outlines a program of the ascetic life that emphasizes commitment, wisdom, suffering, prayer, and reconciliation. All of these disciplines lead the individual to engage more fully his or her environment and to discern God’s will in a given situation.

During the tumultuous years of social protest during the sixties, instead of rallying in the streets, Thurman set forth directives for self-mastery that would enable Civil Rights leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Whitney Young to focus their efforts on developing resources and strategies for an inward journey toward freedom. This “inward journey” would enable them to stand firm in their faith in God who is able to tear down demonic strongholds and bring about change. Thurman wanted his students and protégés to gain a type of “strange freedom” that would empower them to meet the spiritual and political challenges of their time:


**In the throes of suffering and evil, we are called to cultivate spiritually self-disciplined habits and practices, which enable us to courageously exercise moral and practical choices as we make our way through the world.<sup>27</sup>**

## Howard Thurman and the Ascetic Dimensions of the Black Church Tradition

Howard Thurman is one of the most prolific African-American religious leaders of the twentieth century. His writings continue to serve as spiritual resources in this country and throughout the world. He is generally understood as a “mystic,” but I would encourage readers and followers of his teachings to examine the ascetic behaviors that informed his life and ministry.

Thurman has been rightly designated a “holy man” for the new millennium. He was an ascetic who was constantly in pursuit of freedom and perfection. Like the desert father Antony, one of the early Christian ascetics, Thurman was considered a spiritual guide who based himself in communities of faith and learning and offered his insights to those who were willing to come. He “took flight” or withdrew from his normal activities on several occasions in order to renew his connection with the Divine. But he always returned and reconnected with his community with a renewed sense of purpose, insight, and hope.

Thurman’s asceticism also led to self-mastery. Once again, his interior discipline was always in service to his community of accountability. Whether it was his biological birth community in the segregated South, the church community of his early childhood years, his academic communities of training, his academic communities of professorial and ministerial service, his international communities of “pilgrimage,” or his beloved community of faith, the Fellowship Church, Thurman was always seeking a type of ascetic freedom from any and all obstacles that might have prohibited him from being all that God wanted him to be.

This “holy man” brought about “holy community” through his acts of withdrawal and self-control. His asceticism is a true legacy of the Black Church Tradition, and a gift to the church universal. 

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Darrell J. Fasching, "Howard Thurman: Holy Man for the Coming Millennium," in *The Human Search: Howard Thurman and the Quest for Freedom*. Mozella G. Mitchell, ed. NY: Peter Lang, 1992: 191-203.
- <sup>2</sup> See, for example, Alton B. Pollard III, *Mysticism and Social Change: The Social Witness of Howard Thurman*. NY: Peter Lang, 1992. See also Luther E. Smith Jr., *Howard Thurman: The Mystic as Prophet*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1981 (repr. 1991).
- <sup>3</sup> "Black Church Tradition" is a general phrase used to describe African-American Christianity as evidenced through the development of institutional churches throughout the United States. See Anne H. and Anthony Pinn, *Fortress Introduction to Black Church History*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002
- <sup>4</sup> Walter Kaelber, "Asceticism," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. I. Mircea Eliade, et. al, eds. NY: MacMillan, 1987: 441
- <sup>5</sup> See, for example, Richard Valantasis, "Constructions of Power in Asceticism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63, no. 4 (1995): 775-821, esp. 797.
- <sup>6</sup> Vincent L. Wimbush, ed. *Ascetic Behavior in Greco-Roman Antiquity*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990: 2.
- <sup>7</sup> For an excellent survey of different facets of early Christian asceticism, see *Asceticism*, Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, eds. NY: Oxford University Press, 1995; repr. 2002. For a more focused analysis of asceticism and its implications with respect to understanding the symbolic references to ancient Egyptians and Ethiopians in early Christian writings, see Gay L. Byron, *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature*. London: Routledge, 2002: 77-103.
- <sup>8</sup> Kallistos Ware, "The Way of the Ascetics: Negative or Affirmative?" in *Asceticism*: 3-15.
- <sup>9</sup> Ware, "The Way of the Ascetics": 12.
- <sup>10</sup> Ware, "The Way of the Ascetics": 13.
- <sup>11</sup> Fasching, "Howard Thurman": 192.
- <sup>12</sup> Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996: 30-31.
- <sup>13</sup> Rufus Jones, *Finding the Trail of Life*. NY: The MacMillan Company, 1927. See the Pendle Hill website ([www.pendlehill.org/pamphlets/Jones.html](http://www.pendlehill.org/pamphlets/Jones.html)) for a list of his more than fifty publications.
- <sup>14</sup> *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman*. NY: Harvest Books, 1981: 76.
- <sup>15</sup> *Footprints of a Dream: The Story of the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples*. NY: Harper & Brothers, 1959: 23-24.
- <sup>16</sup> *Footprints*: 24.
- <sup>17</sup> *Footprints*: 22.
- <sup>18</sup> Fasching, "Howard Thurman": 198-199.
- <sup>19</sup> *With Head and Heart*: 139
- <sup>20</sup> *With Head and Heart*: 139-162.
- <sup>21</sup> Although the Fellowship Church is regarded as the first authentically inclusive model of institutional religion in the United States, there were other expressions of inclusive, interracial worship gatherings. See for example, William Seymour and the Azusa Street Revival that lasted for three years (1906-1909) in Los Angeles, CA, and eventually became an organized church in 1909. For more background information about Seymour and Pentecostalism, see *Fortress Introduction to Black Church History*: 108-112.
- <sup>22</sup> *With Head and Heart*: 144.
- <sup>23</sup> *With Head and Heart*: 161.
- <sup>24</sup> *With Head and Heart*: 162.
- <sup>25</sup> Wimbush, *Ascetic Behavior*: 2.
- <sup>26</sup> *With Head and Heart*: 159.
- <sup>27</sup> Walter Earl Fluker and Catherine Tumber, eds. *A Strange Freedom: The Best of Howard Thurman on Religious Experience and Public Life*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1988: 15.

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**The Autobiography of Howard Thurman**  
Harvest Books, 1981.

Give us a word...



*In Search of Wisdom: Faith Formation in the Black Church*

Edited by Anne E. Streaty Wimberly & Evelyn L. Parker

Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002

*In Search of Wisdom* is a collection of articles by African-American Christian educators, pastors, counselors and biblical scholars whose purpose is to identify ways the black church can intentionally create an educational atmosphere that fosters the formation of wisdom. Wisdom, as the editors define it, is the truths about life and about God. By exploring both African and African-American biblical and cultural roots of wisdom formation, the authors point to the importance of elders and sages, stories and proverbs, and music from spirituals to hip-hop in passing on the messages about the truths of life and God. In the words of Temba L.J. Mafico, author of the chapter, "Forming Wisdom: Biblical and African Guides,"

**Where may wisdom be found to address the challenges of the day? How may we act wisely along the journey of life we are set upon? What do we say to our young to inspire their wisdom formation...The pivotal pedagogical approach discovered in both the biblical and African historical contexts involves listening to the elder's accounts of the vicissitudes of their lives and observing natural phenomenon...It is the experiences of real life, both favorable and challenging, and reflection on those experiences, that are exceedingly helpful in our formation of wisdom (page 23 and following).**

The book has chapters dedicated to specific populations within the African-American church community: cross-generational connectedness, youth, female mentoring, and middle and late adulthood. Trunell Felder's chapter "Counsel from Wise Others: Forming Wisdom Through Male Mentoring" is particularly helpful. After defining the need, nature and function of the mentor and mentoring program, Felder presents a very clear and comprehensive seven-module program for mentoring young black men. He lays out the key objectives, method, key concepts and scriptural references for each module. His outline is easy to follow and can be adapted for a church group.

I read this book as an African-American woman standing between two generations, my children who are young adults in their twenties and my parents who are in their eighties. On one occasion my younger son was upset because someone had taken credit for work he had done, a situation I knew his grandfather had encountered many times in his lifetime. After listening intently his grandfather began his response by saying, "A rising tide lifts all boats".

After reading this book, one will become more intentional in seeking and creating an environment where wisdom can be heard. It gives you something to think about and something to do.

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*The Rev. Paula Owens Parker is the executive director of the Daughters of Zelophehad ministry in Richmond, Virginia, where she is also a spiritual director, healing prayer minister, and adjunct faculty member for the SOZO School of Healing Prayer at Richmond Hill, an urban ecumenical retreat center (see the Summer 2003 issue of Hungryhearts).*

*Please note that materials reviewed in Hungryhearts are not available through the Office of Spiritual Formation.*

**The great need today is for Christians who are active and critical, who don't accept situations without analyzing them inwardly and deeply. We no longer want masses of people like those who have been trifled with for so long. We want persons like fruitful fig trees, who can say yes to justice and no to injustice and can make use of the precious gift of life, regardless of the circumstances.**

*Oscar Romero*

## *Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope*

Joan D. Chittister

*Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.,  
2003.*

In this important book, well-known author Joan Chittister addresses the twin realities of struggle and hope, seeing them not in conflict as much as partners in a necessary creative tension. Weaving a story from her younger days with the familiar biblical passage of Jacob's wrestling with the angel, Chittister identifies the dynamic of life as a "matrix of miracles punctuated by one interruption after another, each miracle dependent on the preceding interruption that threatened its very existence" (page 13).

The challenge, as she presents it, is to neither assume that suffering is good for us, nor that our lack of faith is at fault. Rather, struggles naturally emerge as our lives enter new and uncharted territories; a spirituality of struggle, then, recognizes that "no winter lasts forever." The short reflections that make up each chapter do not sugar-coat painful realities by too easily embracing an early spring, however. Chittister speaks of fear and darkness in a deep fashion, looking at isolation, powerlessness, and exhaustion in a way that leaves no question that these are authentic to both her and the human condition. But before these accurate descriptions can become too oppressive, she knits them with the equally true yet all too often forgotten (at least in the midst of crisis) gifts of conversion, faith, and courage.

Among the things that make this a valuable book is Chittister's ability to identify the point-counterpoint of struggle and hope in everyday life. The grand and dramatic garner our attention and that of the media, but normal lives that know their share of quiet desperation are not given short-shrift. And in like fashion, the gifts of God made available for the people of God are noted in the understated heroism of simply getting up after circumstances have led us to fall down.

For all who walk the spiritual path, this is a book that should not be missed. Small enough to read for minutes a day, you will find yourself returning to it again and again.

## Taking the Long View

The spiritual life is summed up well in the prayer/poem attributed to Oscar Romero found on page six, "The Long View." It means accepting that no one of us can do it all, and except by the power of God, anything at all. And at the same time, it means that we do have a part to play — and a critical one at that — because only we can be the persons God made us to be. It is only over time that our true selves emerge, however slowly, incrementally affecting the world around us. But a discerning eye will recognize that these small steps are just as valuable as the occasional larger ones, if they move us along the narrow path.

The work of the Office of Spiritual Formation is made possible by the many financial gifts made on our behalf, mostly small contributions that allow us to keep producing and sending *Hungryhearts* free of charge. We are grateful to those who can send just \$3 a year for their subscription, as we are for the \$10 or \$20 annual gifts, as they surely do add up.

But in these days of tightened budgets and limited resources, our office would like you to consider another contribution, of energy, time, and confidence. What would it mean for you to approach your session or presbytery to make an even larger budgeted donation to the spiritual formation of our denomination? Even \$100 from one hundred churches on an annual basis would make a significant impact on the quality and quantity of resources that can be produced and distributed. With new initiatives regarding seminaries, pastors, and racial-ethnic partnerships, there is much excitement in the air. But it is only through your help, and that of our churches and presbyteries, that the necessary steps forward can be taken.

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I am like a green olive tree in the house of God.  
I trust in the steadfast love of God forever and ever.  
Psalm 52:8



**October  
24  
2003**

[www.timeday.org](http://www.timeday.org)

## Take Back Your Time Day

Sabbath keeping is a way of living out our belief that we are not our own;  
that we belong to God.

*John Calvin*

Seventy years ago, the United States Senate overwhelmingly passed a bill that would have made the official U.S. workweek *thirty* hours – anything more would have been overtime. On April 6, 2003, the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that momentous but forgotten event in U.S. history, organizers of a new initiative to fight overwork and time poverty will officially launch the “Take Back Your Time” campaign, leading to a national event organizers call “**Take Back Your Time Day**,” to be held on October 24, 2003.

### **The More Things Change...**

The Senate’s goal back in 1933 was to create jobs for the unemployed, while giving workers time for family life, education, recreation, and civic participation. Yet in 2003, the National Sleep Foundation reports that a third of all Americans work more than **fifty** hours each week. According to the International Labor Organization, Americans now work more than 1,978 hours annually, a full 350 hours — nine weeks — more than Western Europeans average. Juliet Schor, author of *The Overworked American*, estimates that the average American now works 199 hours — five weeks — more each year than he or she did thirty years ago.

“Medieval peasants worked less than we do,” says Take Back Your Time’s national coordinator John de Graaf, editor of the recently released book *Take Back Your Time* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers). “Don’t get me wrong, Take Back Your Time Day is not anti-work. But the fact is that American life has gotten way out of balance. Americans are working harder than ever as they are forced to sacrifice things that really matter, like good health and a clean environment, active citizenship and social justice, and time for nature and the soul.” “Time is a family value,” adds Bill Doherty, a family therapist at the University of Minnesota and co-author of *Putting Family First*. “But now families rarely have time to eat dinner together and even our children are being pushed into schedules that used to be reserved for CEOs. Overwork and over-scheduling are weakening the bonds that hold our families together.”

**Work is good,  
but when we work all  
the time work becomes a  
curse not a blessing.**

*John Calvin*

### **“Earth Day” of Time**

**On the Sabbath, we  
cease to do our work so God  
can do God’s work in us.**

*John Calvin*

Jerome Segal, a professor at the University of Maryland and author of *Graceful Simplicity*, hopes that on Friday, October 24<sup>th</sup>, thousands of Americans will participate in teach-ins and other public events to begin a new national non-partisan dialogue about time poverty and what we can do about it. “The date falls nine weeks before the end of the year, symbolizing the nine full weeks more we work each year compared to our trans-Atlantic neighbors,” he adds. “We see it as being like the Earth Day, which stirred the consciousness of America about what we were doing to the environment. Take Back Your Time Day could do for our overworked, over-scheduled, overstressed lives what Earth Day did for the planet.”

For more information on a faithful balance between rest and work, see the Office of Spiritual Formation’s *An Invitation to Sabbath*, available through Presbyterian Distribution Services by calling 800-524-2612 (item # 70-440-00-001), or for free (without graphics) at [www.pcusa.org/spiritualformation/sabbath.htm](http://www.pcusa.org/spiritualformation/sabbath.htm). A study guide on this resource is forthcoming.



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**Howard Thurman:  
Shaping Spirituality From Love to Justice**

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