



**Listening for the Voice of God:
A Personal Reflection on Howard Thurman**

By Walter E. Fluker

In our first Book Club article for our reading of *Jesus and the Disinherited*, our facilitator, Walter Fluker, offers a window into his own relationship with Thurman and his ongoing work overseeing the *Howard Thurman Papers Project* in this adapted excerpt from *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman, Volume One*.

You must wait and listen for the sound of the genuine that is within you. When you hear it, that will be your voice and the Voice of God.

—Howard Washington Thurman

Many years have passed since these eloquent words ignited a passion within me that sparked my journey with Howard Thurman. I am one of the many men and women who found in Howard Thurman a fount of inspiration and strength during a critical passage in our lives. Thurman and I met at a crossroads in our respective pilgrimages—he, a wise, old sage with little time left, and I, a struggling seminary student who had grown weary of abstract theological discussions that had become stale, irrelevant, and powerless. His wise counsel, his deep, penetrating silences, his wit and humanity—yes, his laughter—all these and more, provided for me an inner healing and new sense of direction that continues to this day.

I first became acquainted with Howard Thurman in 1972 when I served as a chaplain's assistant in the U.S. Army. It was my weekly responsibility to prepare the Sunday bulletin for the post chapel at Fort Riley, Kansas. The post chaplain regularly assigned selections from Thurman's small collection of meditations *The Centering Moment* for the back of the bulletin. With the exception of one other African American chaplain assigned to Fort Riley, I felt awash in a sea of white clerics and assistants whose religious experiences were foreign to my own. I had been brought up in a small storefront Baptist church on the south side of Chicago, where the faces and deep-structured issues of consciousnesses found little in common with the day-to-day routine of the military religious life and practice. Imagine my surprise and delight when I saw Howard Thurman's face on the back cover of *The Centering Moment*. When I read through the meditations, I was struck then, as now, by the quiet cadence and lofty idealism of Thurman's interpretation of the religious experience—always pointing inwardly and, yet, challenging the human spirit to soar higher into itself and the world of nature, people, and ideas.

I did not encounter Thurman again until the beginning of my seminary course on black preaching taught by Carl Marbury at Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary in 1977. Dean Marbury introduced the class of budding homileticians to a variety of black

preaching—but my experience in the class was marked by the evening when he asked students to listen to a long-playing album of “The Third Component” a sermon by Thurman. One year later, during my middle year, I was to meet the face of the words and the voice that had so enraptured me at Fort Riley and in the preaching class. Garrett’s Church and Black Experience program held a consultation with Thurman in October 1978. I was selected as the student chaperone to pick up Thurman at the airport and deliver him to his hotel. Instead, we spent the entire afternoon discussing my plans for the future. Such was the generous and gracious spirit of this unusual man. He asked again and again in probing interrogatives that I later discovered were his hallmark, “Who are you, really? What are you trying to do with your life?” I answered matter-of-factly, in the forgivable arrogance of naïveté, “I want to change the church into a moral force for the transformation of society.” His silences were gentle and mocking—and then he would ask again, “But *who* are you? *Who* do you seek to become?”

After that encounter in the fall of 1979, I was invited to the Howard Thurman Educational Trust in San Francisco as a part of the appropriately entitled “Footprints of the Disinherited,” the first of three series of conversations between Thurman and ten African American students interested in religious vocation. There a company of my peers and I wrestled the “angel with the flaming sword”. Thurman began the first session with a three-hour reading of the Gospel of Mark with only one break. He asked us to abandon all theological presuppositions about what we had heard about Jesus and to imagine that we were somewhere else—maybe in a French villa or alone in a cafe and someone approached us and told us this story for the first time. Beyond the sweet-liquored words and long pauses that drew us into our own rhythms, I can only remember that I encountered Jesus as a radically free man. At the end of the week, we were changed—I was changed—*forever*.

During my last year in seminary, Thurman and I exchanged letters regularly—I always asking the questions that he never quite answered—and he smiling gently through his written words. That last year in seminary was the hardest; I had to decide whether to pursue a PhD program in religion or to go another way. In the midst of this agonizing ordeal, I wrote a long letter to Thurman outlining my deepest fears and desires related to vocation. After what seemed a millennium, he replied in a two-page handwritten letter that was virtually impossible to decipher with doodles and tiny etchings within the margins. He suggested that my problem with choice was not for lack of opportunity but the converse, I had many options. In his inimitable prose, laying out for me the choices with which I was struggling, and finally suggesting that whatever decision I made that “You must *wait* and *listen* for the sound of the genuine that is within you. When you hear it, that will be your voice and the Voice of God.” I didn’t know how to respond to these words—but in that moment as I read them, tears of release flowed from a center within me that had already

made the decision.

I chose to enroll in the PhD program in social ethics at Boston University. Little did I know then that only one and a half years later, he would pass on and that his wife, Sue Bailey Thurman, would donate a large portion of his papers to Boston University. Eight years later, I completed my dissertation, "A Comparative Analysis of the Ideal of Community in the Thought of Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King Jr." at Boston University and began a pastoral and teaching career.

... In 1990, I accepted a new academic post as Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Professor of Theology and dean of Black Church Studies at Colgate Rochester Divinity School, and in the fall of 1991 the Howard Thurman Papers Project was born. Rochester, New York, was not foreign territory for Thurman. He completed his seminary training in 1926 at the fabled Rochester Theological Seminary. Renamed the Colgate Rochester Divinity School / Bexley Hall / Crozer Theological Seminary, it was the home of the project until 1998 when I accepted a post as professor of philosophy and religion, executive director of the Leadership Center and Coca-Cola Professor of Leadership Studies at Thurman's undergraduate alma mater, Morehouse College.

At the Leadership Center, Thurman's legacy continues as a critical resource in the development of curricular driven strategies linking spirituality and ethics for the preparation of leaders at local, national, and international levels. The remains of Howard Thurman and his beloved wife and partner, Sue Bailey Thurman, rest in a towering obelisk situated parallel to a statute of his younger visionary, Martin Luther King Jr. pointing to the future, but that future is best understood by remembering the past.

... *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman* challenge its readers to remember the story of Howard Thurman in the context of larger historical narratives which gave birth to the modern civil rights movement. ... It is our hope that in documenting Thurman's remarkable story we might also invite our readers to recommit themselves to the larger quest for character, civility, and community that marked his narrative.

Excerpted:

Thurman, Howard and Walter E. Fluker (ed.). *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman*. Columbia, SC: The University of South Carolina Press, 2009. (Adapted from the Preface)