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**Article #3: Howard Thurman's "Tools of the Spirit"**

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Originally published as "Howard Thurman: Intercultural and Interreligious Leader-Leaders Who Have Shaped U.S. Religious Dialogue" by Walter E. Fluker in *Religious Leadership: A Reference Handbook, Volume 2*, edited by Sharon Henderson Callahan. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2013, pp. 571-578.

## HOWARD THURMAN

### *Intercultural and Interreligious Leader*

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Howard Washington Thurman (1899–1981) has been called a *holy man for a new millennium*. Thurman's search for common ground between diverse groups finds creative resonance at this critical impasse of American and world history. With increasing tensions of race, class, sexuality, and gender in the public square—and the concomitant need to carve a fresh and critical approach to the often violent usages of religious discourse as warrants for moral action—Thurman's gentle wisdom and clear analytic provides a resource for a religiously inspired public ethic that does not fall prey to weary parochialism and the warring politics of division (Bennett, 1978; Corbett, 1979; Fasching, 1992, pp. 191–203; Mangram, 1976). He was a religious leader who inspired his own religious community while simultaneously honoring and building bridges with communities of other faiths. As a minister, theologian, academic, university chaplain, and writer, Thurman's influence on religious thought and practice is perhaps more relevant in the 21st century than in his own historical situation. He had an abiding respect for all religions, believing that Christianity was one of many ways to understand God, the world, and our relationship to both. He was a pioneer in Christian-Jewish dialogue, and believed that Judaism had value not only as a precursor to Christianity, but also as a vital, living, religion worthy of contributing to our understanding of the great mysteries of the universe. Moreover, Thurman's intellectual and spiritual curiosity was not confined to the Judaic and Christian traditions. In 1936, in a pilgrimage of friendship, Thurman led the first delegation of African Americans to India to meet Mahatma Gandhi.

Having grown up poor in Waycross, a segregated section of Daytona, Florida, Thurman understood on the most

visceral level the practical, material challenges that cannot be resolved by prayer alone. He understood that God asks of us not only devotion but also activism. He was a mentor of Martin Luther King, Jr. and many others in the modern civil rights movement. However, he neither sought nor desired public acclaim, and the fact that his name is not more universally recognized belies his extraordinary accomplishments.

### Howard Thurman and Mysticism

It is impossible to understand Howard Thurman and his theological outlook without understanding his relationship to mysticism. Although he seldom referred to himself as a *mystic*, Thurman was deeply rooted in the American mystical tradition. Thurman's reluctance to being labeled a mystic is attributable to his insistence that religious experience is nonexclusive and accessible to any person who prepares for the encounter. For him, any individual who surrenders himself or herself to God is a candidate for *the creative encounter*. (Thurman uses the terms *religious experience*, *creative encounter*, *mysticism*, and *mystical* interchangeably, and this author has followed this approach throughout this essay.)

Thurman's early experiences as a boy growing up in Waycross were mystical in the profoundest sense. In a lecture delivered in 1978, Thurman says,

Long before I was acquainted with the term "mysticism" and before such a category provided any frame of reference for my mind and thought, the line between the inner and the outer in my own experience was not closely drawn. (p. 18; Jones, 1923, p. xv)

Later, his formal education, his readings in Olive Schreiner, and his studies with Rufus Jones made a singular impact on his formulation of mysticism and its relatedness to social action. He defined *mysticism* as Jones described it in 1923: “Mystical experience is consciousness of direct and immediate relationship with some transcendent reality which, in the moment of experience, is believed to be God.” “Mysticism,” said Thurman in his 1978 lecture, is “the type of religion which puts the emphasis on the immediate awareness of the relation with God, on direct and intimate consciousness of . . . ‘divine presence.’ . . . This definition includes not only a personal attitude toward God, but recognition of the primary experience of God with the inner core of the individual” (Thurman, 1978, p. 18; Jones, 1923, p. xv). For Thurman and Jones, it is central to the mystic’s claim that in the creative encounter, he or she experiences that which is perceived as “vital, total, and absolute” at an intensely personal level while he or she remains a creature involved in all the perplexities of finitude and limitation. Also with Jones, Thurman makes the distinction between the *negation mystic* and the *affirmation mystic*. The affirmation mystic’s *raison d’être* is the transformation of society, because as he or she experiences the vision of union, the social world “ensnares the human spirit in a maze of particulars so that the One cannot be sensed nor the good realized” (Fluker, 2012, p. 216). Mysticism, therefore, is not *life-denying* in the sense of detachment and withdrawal from the world; rather, it is *life-affirming*. That which the mystic discovers within is also inherent in all life. The outer world, like the inner world, is pregnant with truth and meaning. The infinite is discoverable in the finite, transitory world of nature, people, and other living things. Therefore, engagement with the world is not opposed to union with God, but the beatific vision, ultimate meaning, and truth are found in all dimensions of life.

We now turn to an examination of Thurman’s mystical perspective in respect to (a) his personal quest for a human identity within a racialized culture, (b) his understanding of the inward journey, and (c) what he calls *tools of the spirit*.

### Race and the Quest for Human Identity

Thurman’s imaginative and pragmatic intellectual project has its origins in his own “struggle to achieve and reveal and confirm a human identity” that evolved into a distinctive theological vision forged on the borderlands of American liberal theology, mystical experience, his often critical assessment of black Christian practices, and racial uplift (Fluker, 2009, pp. 139–144). Regarding the struggle of African Americans to confirm a human identity, James Baldwin (1993) wrote,

This past, the Negro’s past, of rope, fire, torture, castration, infanticide, rape, death and humiliation; fear by day and night, fear as deep as the marrow of the bone; doubt that he was worthy of life, since everyone around him denied it; sorrow for his women, for

his kinsfolk, for his children, who needed his protection, and whom he could not protect; rage, hatred for white men so deep that it often turned against him and his own, and made all love, all trust, all joy impossible—this past, this endless struggle to achieve and reveal and confirm a human identity. (p. 98)

Thurman’s theological perspective and intellectual project may be best understood within the framework of his early years in the Deep South at the turn of the 20th century, where identity and agency were constructed primarily on the basis of race, gender, and second-class citizenship. Even his self-identified, lifelong quest for *common ground* is a mixed metaphor of sorts because it emerges not from a romantic idealism of racial harmony and reconciliation but is the product of his own adaptive strategies and wrestling with the problematic outlined in W. E. B. Du Bois’s (1903) classic meditation in “Our Spiritual Strivings,” where he asks, “How does it *feel* to be a problem?” (p. 44).

At an early age, problematized racial identity for Thurman meant understanding what it meant to be human. More precisely, it meant coming to terms with his own humanity within the contexts of blistering, negating assaults against his personhood. Hence, *mystical experience* for Thurman, as described in Jonesian terms, had much to do with the place of personality and the social utility of the mystical experience on the devotee. Thurman’s early encounters in the segregated environment of Daytona, Florida, left permanent scars on his spirit and influenced his deep understanding of mystical experience and the call to social engagement. These assaults against his person were simultaneously queries, insinuations, and acts of violence against his black body or what religious scholar Anthony Pinn, in *Understanding and Transforming the Black Church*, describes as the “economy of discipline.” In one of Thurman’s early writings, “‘Relaxation’ and Race Conflict,” he comments on the historical significance of black subjectivity being relegated to the body as chattel, an object of derision and persecution. “The slave was essentially a *body*—of course there were many exceptions to this point of view. The idea that the slave was a body has proved itself to be extraordinarily long-lived. As a small boy I remember being stuck with a pin, and when I reacted to it the little [white] boy who had done it said, ‘Oh, that doesn’t hurt you; you can’t feel!’” (Fluker, 2009, p. 148). Years later, as a student at Morehouse College, Thurman lived in Georgia marked by race mobs, lynching, and other acts of inhumanity, and felt their traumatic impact.

For Thurman, his identities as a black man and as a human being were inseparable. Indeed, he understood that had he wished to separate the one from the other—which he did not—it would have been impossible to do so within the racist world that he inhabited. Thus, it was with a sense of bewilderment and incredulity that he listened to the advice of his major professor, George Cross, who said to his brilliant student toward the end of his last year at Rochester Theological Seminary:

You are a very sensitive Negro man . . . and doubtless feel under great obligation to put all the weight of your mind and

spirit at the disposal of the struggle of your own people for full citizenship. But let me remind you that all social questions are transitory in nature and it would be a terrible waste for you to limit your creative energy to the solution of the race problem, however insistent its nature. Give yourself to the timeless issues of the human spirit. . . . Perhaps I have no right to say this to you because as a white man I can never know what it is to be in your situation. (Thurman, 1979, p. 60)

In his autobiography titled *With Head and Heart*, from which the above passage is quoted, Thurman says that he “pondered the meaning of his words, and wondered what kind of response I could make to this man who did not know that a man and his black skin must face the ‘timeless issues of the human spirit’ together.” This fact of facing the timeless issues of the human spirit would become over the years the central question for his construction of a mystical encounter that holds transcendence and black embodiment in creative tension. Thurman’s mysticism is not a detached otherworldly quest that denies particularity, rather particularity—especially individuality, as evidenced in embodied existence—is, for him, a statement about materiality as the arena for knowledge and redemptive agency. An oft-quoted statement from Thurman’s (1979) autobiography underscores the necessity of the appreciation and embrace of the time-space continuum and human transcendence in his thinking: “The time and place of a man’s life on earth are the time and place of his body, but the meaning and significance of his life are as vast and far-reaching as his gifts, his times, and the passionate commitment of all his powers can make it” (p. 208).

## Religious Experience and the Quest for Human Identity

Beyond the constructs of race and its damaging consequences, religion played both a negative and a creative role in Thurman’s quest for freedom, authenticity, and justice. The most intense and harrowing experience of his childhood was the death of his father, Saul Solomon Thurman, which occurred when Thurman was only 7 years old. Afterward, his grief was compounded as he witnessed his father’s eternal damnation preached by an itinerant evangelist who did not even know Saul Solomon. Thurman left the funeral service with a powerful vindictive against organized religion that would remain for the rest of his life. It was only later that he would partly reconcile for himself the inherent conflict in the evangelist’s dictum and the larger questions of faith and dogma.

The two most significant persons in Thurman’s religious development were his mother and grandmother. Although he identified nature and the black church of the community of Waycross as influences in his life, these women, along with Mary McLeod Bethune, received the most prominent places among early influences. Thurman’s lifelong devotion to Alice Ambrose as son, confidant, and protector was perhaps the strongest indicator of the role she played in helping him map out a sense of identity through religious experience.

From childhood, Thurman witnessed his mother’s prayer life as the mounting pressures of being mother and wife, and of working as a domestic in downtown Daytona, took their toll. Thurman’s mother was left with three small children following the death of his father. Thurman observed his mother’s dedication to the church, but most striking for him was her private prayer, about which he writes in his autobiography. An oft-quoted story is Thurman’s experience of his mother’s faith as they observed Halley’s Comet in 1910 and she comforted her frightened son, saying “Nothing will happen to us, Howard. God will take care of us” (Fluker, 2009, p. xxxiv).

Thurman’s grandmother, Nancy Ambrose (fondly, Grandma Nancy), was a woman of great resilience and inner strength. Through her actions, she taught Thurman a model of freedom that did not pay homage to doctrinal or human authority that failed to acknowledge the dignity of human personality. The story that Grandma Nancy told to Thurman, of the slave preacher who occasionally was allowed to preach in the place of the regular white minister, was critical to Thurman’s construction of identity and mystical experience. A significant reminder was the power in his grandmother’s unapologetic faith in her *Maker* over and above parts of accepted biblical authority. Thurman found in his grandmother’s religious experience a simple affirmation of God’s presence in the lives of the disinherited. The most widely told story of Thurman’s relationship to his grandmother is about Thurman reading the Bible to her. As Thurman relates in *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Nancy Ambrose could not read, so she asked Thurman to read the Bible to her two or three times per week. On one occasion, Thurman asked his grandmother why she never allowed him to read from the Letters of Paul. She told him that when she was a slave, the master’s minister read from Paul to show that slavery was God’s will. “Always the white minister used as his text something from Paul. . . . ‘Slaves, be obedient to them that are your masters . . . , as unto Christ’” (Thurman, 1976, pp. 30–31).

In addition to these pivotal female influences, Thurman’s early affinity with nature and his experience of its protective, nourishing, capricious, and adaptive capacities were early resources that shaped his idea of religious experience as being the total and absolute melding of the individual with the larger processes of life. He reflects on his childhood experiences of death, isolation, and loneliness; but somehow his closeness to the oak tree, the Halifax River, the dark Florida nights, and the tempests and storms that visited the coast were for his companions who befriended and engulfed him in a sense of ineffable mystery.

Throughout his life, nature remained for Thurman a bountiful resource for prose, poetry, and sermonic flights of imagination mixed with female analogy, metaphor, and symbol. Sermons and meditations bearing titles such as “Deep River,” “The Luminous Darkness,” “The Growing Edge,” and “The Narrow Ridge” (Fluker & Tumber, 1999, pp. 57, 240, 298, 305) are examples of the ways in which his mystical encounters with nature fed deeper longings of his spirit to be supported and validated in a society in



which he wandered “nameless up and down the streets of other minds where no salutation greets and no sign is given to mark the place one calls one’s own” (Fluker & Tumber, 1999, p. viii).

### The Inward Journey

For Thurman, the dynamic self-conscious construction of self begins with the inward journey. This inward journeying, for Thurman, is neither narcissistic nor self-delusional; rather, it is an empirical investigation and inventory of one’s personal existence. The individual is advised to look at the “hard facts of one’s existence” with the primary question being “Who am I, really?” To answer this question, he recommends that one observe the tension between *self-fact* and *self-image*. Self-image refers to the ways in which one sees oneself in relation to others and the larger culture of which she is a part. Self-fact has to do with the inherent worth and dignity of the individual which, at long last, Thurman thinks is fulfilled in mystical encounter. The second question, according to Thurman, is “What do I want, really?” This question has to do with a sense of purposeful living that cannot dodge the initial question of identity. And finally, Thurman (1963) proposes that one must ask “How do I get what I want?” which is a hard question that is answered through the individual response to religious experience and the ethical mandate implied in religious encounter with self, the other, and the world (pp. 26–37; Fluker, 1988, pp. 34–35).

### Inner and Outer Modalities of Religious Experience

The inward journey consists of dynamic, nonlinear, inner and outer modalities of religious experience. Much of this language is consistent with Rufus Jones’s distinctions. In “The Inner Life and World Mindedness,” Thurman explains that the terms *inner life* or *inner awareness* refer to more than the mere formal discursive activity of the mind, but rather include the entire range of self-awareness of the individual. As Thurman writes in that essay, inner life means:

[T]he awareness of the individual’s responsiveness to realities that are transcendent in character, emanating from a core of Reality of which the individual is aware and of which the individual is also aware that he [or she] is a part. The inner life, therefore, is activity that takes place within consciousness, but does not originate there and is a part of a Reality central to all life and is at once the ground of all awareness. It is there that [a person] becomes conscious of his [or her] meaning and destiny as a child, an offspring of God. (p. 188)

Thus, the inner life refers to the interiority of religious experience and stresses the finding of one’s *individuality* in relation to the community of which a person is a part. Thurman insists that the mystic

discovers that [s]he is a person and a personality in a profound sense can only be achieved in a milieu of human relations. Personality is something more than mere individuality—it is a fulfillment of the logic of individuality in community. (Fluker & Tumber, 1999, p. 116)

According to Thurman, for the individual, there are two demands of the religious experience. The experience must first give the individual a sense of *ultimate security*. This sense of being ultimately cared for and affirmed identifies the individual with all existence as one created being among many others and establishes an ultimate or transcendent point of reference. The second demand of the religious experience is that the encounter with this *ultimate outcome* (which may or may not include God language) must give the individual *personal assurance*, in other words, he or she is dealt with at his or her most private and intimate center. This gives the individual a basis for understanding his or her own value and inherent worth as a child of God. Combined with the sense of the interiority of religious experience is the ethical urgency to authenticate the distillation of the encounter through meaningful communication and action in the world.

The exteriority of religious experience, the outward journey, is the criterion for testing the validity of the inner experience in concrete, historical situations. The validation of knowledge claims rests on two primary principles, empirical and ethical. First, there is empirical validation of knowledge, a methodological practice for which Thurman credits Rufus Jones. However significant the knowledge disclosed in religious experience, it must be tested within a particular community of discourse and practice. Thurman (1965/1989) warns against absolutist tendencies of religious knowledge: “[I]t must be remembered that what is true in any religion is to be found in that religion because it is true, it is not true because it is found in that religion” (p. 112). Truth must never be held hostage to the mystic’s vision—there must be rational countenance of religious truth claims and respect for the objectivity and independence of scientific inquiry. This is important for Thurman’s pragmatic conception of truth. Since knowledge derived from religious experience includes a primarily functional aspect, in that it has personal and social utility, it runs the risk of becoming idolatrous. Second, ethical validation is necessary for all religious knowledge; religious disclosure or revelation must speak to the questions of justice and human flourishing. In *The Luminous Darkness*, Thurman claims that a parochial religious experience cannot sustain a universal ethic. In this perspective, epistemological and axiological questions are rooted in a moral anthropology that avoids the dichotomous portrayal of the self as an irreconcilable tension between nature and spirit. Rather, for Thurman, the self is essentially relational and agential. Ratiocination is a secondary act. “The deed reveals meaning. Meaning does not exist as a disembodied force, but it becomes evident through relationships” (Smith, 1988, p. 97). In language for which he has become famous, he asks as a Christian, “What, then, is the word of the religion

of Jesus to those who stand with their backs against the wall?" (Thurman, 1976, p. 108). For Thurman, religious experience, like democratic processes, must be tested in the crucible of experience and nurture inclusiveness and expansion. This was Thurman's rallying point against all theological constructions that claimed absolute knowledge without ethical practices that ensure equality and freedom of the individual.

At stake for Thurman in this pragmatic ethical formulation was the place of personal and private identity and public communication. He was highly critical of the spurious distinction between *knowledge* and *values* that erodes personal identity and severely impairs public discourse. He consistently warned of the danger of promoting an objectivist view of knowledge at the expense of the private life of the individual. The obfuscation of individuality was, for Thurman, a key problematic of the epistemic validation of claims to authority and meaning in a pluralistic culture. The quest for authority in the public sphere, for him, was at once a quest for personal assurance and security that are provided for the individual through religious experience. For Thurman, the normative character of speech and action should be guided by what one experiences at the innermost place of one's self and in community with others. Consequently, the ethical life is not informed exclusively by autonomous or heteronomous premises, but by religious experience that is the private domain of the individual. Yet this private domain is neither exclusive nor ahistorical, but rooted in a relational ethic that finds its validation in public communication. This perspective was important for Thurman (1937) because he believed that the ultimate sanction of the moral life is personal integrity, born of the need to be in harmony within the self, society, and the world. For him, civic participation that is not guided by a coherent and meaningful personal existence generates social practices that conspire against the harmonic possibilities of public life (pp. 38–44). Central to his understanding of *civic virtue* are the integrity and moral inviolability of the individual, which ultimately rest on a transcendent reference (Thurman, 1952). Transcendence, however, is not narrowly defined in deontological terms, but is relational and inherent in the very being and practices of the moral agent. Therefore, religious experience allows for the discovery of a transcendent reference within the moral self that is at once the ground and guarantor of the very processes of life that seek wholeness, harmony, and integration—in sum—community. *Personal knowing*, in the quest for moral authority, is indispensable to creative public engagement amidst the discordant voices that speak about the future of American democratic and global cultures.

## Tools of the Spirit

In *The Search for Common Ground*, which is a philosophical treatise on race in post-1960s America, Thurman suggests that there are broad and varied sources from which we must draw to fulfill the promise of democracy in a diverse society. Thurman's astute observations, in some respects, anticipate

the problematic associated with postblackness (Touré, 2011). These sources include memory in the creation stories, living structures, the utopian dream of the prophets, common consciousness, and identity. Thurman's primary concern, however, which marks his distinctive contribution to the present impasse, is the place of religious experience and the role of moral imagination in funding ethical insight and public discourse. It is to this important aspect of Thurman's thought that we now turn as a brief preliminary recommendation for the development of *tools of the spirit*.

Thurman's thinking and experience with mysticism as a resource for personal and social transformation, and most important, for the endless struggle with identity, otherness, and human flourishing bequeath to us some important practical lessons—which this author refers to here, using his language, as *tools of the spirit*. In *With Head and Heart*, Thurman (1979) gives a moving, intimate meditation on his first experience of viewing the coasts of Africa:

From my cabin window I look out on the full moon and the ghosts of my forefathers rise and fall with the undulating waves. Across these same waters, how many years ago they came. What were the inchoate mutterings locked tight within the circle of their hearts? In the deep, heavy darkness of the foul-smelling hole of the ship, where they could not see the sky nor hear the night noises nor feel the warm compassion of the tribe, they held their breath against the agony.

How does the human spirit accommodate itself to desolation? How did they? What *tools of the spirit* were in their hands with which to cut a path through the wilderness of their despair? (p. 193)

Thurman teaches us how to reenter time, lost time, and time-swept-under-the-rug to address what the late Pierre Bourdieu called *forgetfulness* and *learned ignorance*. Thurman's theological project addresses the profoundly spiritual issue of *feeling like a problem*, the overriding sense of guilt and shame; and the need to address the questions of identity, otherness, and human flourishing. What might tools of the spirit, offered to us by Howard Thurman's conjuring of race, religion, and culture in the Deep South of the United States, say to us in the 21st century?

A fundamental assumption in Thurman's thinking is what he calls *common consciousness*, which refers to the affinity between human consciousness and other forms of sentient existence evident in nature. For Thurman, the theme of the kinship of all living things extends even into the realm of communication between animals, plants, and human beings. He reasons that if life is one, then there ought to be a fundamental sense of unity at all levels of existence. Since life in any form cannot be fundamentally alien to life, then more than two forms may share the same moment in time without resistance and without threat. This understanding of common consciousness is fundamental to Thurman's understanding of mysticism and the role of imagination.

Common consciousness, then, is the unique, essential element that human beings share with all life in its varied and manifold expressions of itself. For Thurman, it is the veritable creative presence of the Spirit of God that moves

undisguised and uninhibited beneath all the complex and intricate stories that mark conscious existence, and yet it is the least observed and noted phenomenon of our existence.

This *living, pulsing, breathing dimension of experience*, as Thurman conceptualizes it, finds its residence in human consciousness through cultivated disciplines that allow for the development of habits and practices that make the moral life possible. Thurman names these disciplines at various times as commitment, prayer, growth, suffering, and reconciliation. At the heart of these disciplines, and the aim of the human quest, is the experience of love, which is a tool of the spirit.

## Love

Thurman believed that all love is of God, and therefore to love is the most profound act of life; only secondarily is loving an act of religion or morality (Grier, 1983, p. 23). Love is the fruit of the presence of God; it is the power that overcomes barriers that separate individuals, groups, and nations from one another (Thurman, 1961, p. 36). In the experience of love one becomes aware that he or she, however named or labeled by self or others, is completely understood, accepted, and free. For Thurman, this is the basis of the moral life: to know that one is understood and accepted beyond praiseworthiness and blame is to experience a radically new freedom, unmediated by the trappings of culture and societal norms. The quest for authority in the public sphere, for him, was at once a quest for personal assurance and for security, which are provided to the individual through religious experience, or what he called *the creative encounter*. And it is precisely this new awareness of the strangeness of freedom that predisposes the individual to a life characterized by virtuous living and habituation.

## Freedom

Freedom is another tool of the spirit. For Thurman, freedom is the basis for responsible, imaginative discourse in the public domain. It is the encounter with one's own freedom, one's own distinct birthright as a child of God that enables and requires one to become an agent of reconciliation in the world. But one's freedom is not disassociated from the freedom of the other. In fact, one discovers in the creative encounter, that he or she is bound by love and the kinship of all living things and is therefore bound to work for the fulfillment of the other. In other words, one discovers in his or her struggle to be liberated from the barriers that work against wholeness (however actualized through the exigencies of living and being in the world) that he or she cannot hope to be saved without the other. This realization places an incredible burden on the individual who has no hope beyond the liberation of the other, especially the liberation of the enemy. For Thurman, the public sphere is

not a detached, isolated, and indifferent dimension of being; it is immediate, internalized, and present in all one's intentions and actions. Any future willing or action must take into account *a sense of history*—the manifold debris of historical being and consciousness. Stated simply, the person who comes to consciousness as a free and responsible being cannot divorce himself or herself from the distorted and fragmented discourse that shapes the place of the other and of himself or herself in the world.

## The Sound of the Genuine

A third tool of the spirit is what Thurman called, especially during his later years, *the sound of the genuine*. This undifferentiated level of being is the seat of common consciousness, much like Meister Eckhart's apex or Gottheit, to which Thurman often referred. Eckhart von Hochheim, commonly known as Meister Eckhart (1260–1328), was an influential mystic, preacher, and religious writer. The sound of the genuine is the *uncreated element* within the person and is synonymous with Eckhart's notions of *uncreated grace* and *divine spark*. For Eckhart, the apex or uncreated element is not the individual soul but rather a spark of the Intellect, the Son of God, uncreated and immutable (Kelley, 1977, pp. 133–39). Thurman believed that the uncreated element is the basis for the person's identification with God as a child of God, the seat of intuition and the meeting place between God and the individual. He (1954) writes, "Man and God do communicate. . . . Eckhart insists that there is in the soul of man an apex, a spark which is God, the Godhead. This is the very ground of the soul. It is in and of itself the Godhead" (p. 43. See also Thurman, "Our Spirits Remember God," 1961a, p. 133; Thurman, 1961c; 1973c). Martin E. Marty places Thurman in the tradition of Meister Eckhart because of his emphasis on the potentiality of the self and his fusion of the idea of love with divine freedom and mystical union. For Eckhart and Thurman, Marty (1983) says, "'The unifying of the will with the Will of the highest' issues forth in fresh action. . . . 'Being precedes work'" (p. 7).

The sound of the genuine in Thurman's language addresses the need to begin with a fresh approach to the place of religion in public discourse. The sound of the genuine is the spiritual and moral source of the interrelated concepts of character, civility, and community; these concepts are based on a relational model from which loving and powerful acts of the self are bound to the freedom and liberation of the other. The critical ethical question for Thurman is "What is my personal relation to what I know?" (McCullough, 1991, p. 13). As noted, ratiocination, or technical knowledge, for Thurman, is a secondary act as opposed to the primary and literal encounter with the truth of one's own being. The clue to the outer world of relations is found in the inner world of experience. It is in the creative

encounter with self and the other that a new and fresh moral purpose is born so that one is enabled and required to work for the liberation of the other. This dynamic relational matrix, or “inter-ness,” (Hahn, 1995, p. 11) for Thurman, is in direct contradistinction to systems that militate against wholeness and integrity in the self and in the other (Fluker & Tumber, 1999, p. 21). It allows one to resist and not yield to the subtle and surreptitious ways in which one is named and names the other (Fluker, 2003).

## Imagination

A fourth tool of the spirit is the imagination. The sound of the genuine involves imagination. For Thurman (1971), imagination is “the peculiar quality of mind that enables a man to stand in his own place, defined by the uniqueness of his life’s story, and project himself into another person’s life or situation. He makes soundings there, looking out upon life through the other’s eyes, even as he remains himself. It is to inform one’s self of the view from ‘the other side.’” Imagination is a constituent part of the individual’s nature as a self-transcendent being. Imagination becomes a veritable *angelos*, a messenger of God, when the individual through self-transcendence puts himself or herself in another’s place. Imagination, in this sense, is the agency through which empathy is realized. Through imagination, the individual is enabled to transcend himself or herself and reach others at the cores of their being, at the seat of “common consciousness” (Thurman, 1961). In doing so, the other is addressed at a place beyond all good and evil. This, according to Thurman, is the experience of love: When an individual is addressed at the centermost place of self, he or she experiences wholeness and harmony with the one who loves him or her. This is also the *common ground* of our relations with others: “I see you where you are, striving and struggling, and in the light of the highest possibility of your personality, I deal with you there” (Thurman, 1961a, p. 121).

This usage of imagination, however, is neither docetic nor divorced from the contingencies of life and action. Rather for Thurman, it is a return to *the matter of matter* (to use Luther Smith’s apt phraseology). Spirituality and social transformation are one fluid sentence in a larger narrative of the self in its quest for meaning and wholeness. This quest is rooted in the moral imagination, which creates the context for vigorous and creative public discourse and where citizens hold one another accountable for what they know and value. It was with this sense of moral imagination that Thurman dared to experiment with ecclesial models at Howard University, the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco, and Boston University. These ecclesial models held in bold relief a universal intent with broad appeal to interfaith worship and dialogue where dogma, creed, and theological perspectives found mutual concern with the transformation of society into a community.

## Conclusion

Near the end of his life, Thurman felt that a new religious and public narrative was in the making—and his only regret was that he might not be around to witness it. This wise sage and technician of the sacred left these tools of the spirit that might enable us to construct a desperately needed language of civility and community in American society. What might be the *sound* of this new language? If Thurman is correct, then certainly not only will it bear some affinity to the biblical narrative from which he drew his own imaginative and creative public language, but it will also find new metaphors, symbols, and analogies with nature and aesthetic triggers that will cause us to continue with this endless struggle to achieve and confirm a human identity—new names that speak at once to our being and becoming. Where might we hear these names? For Moses, it was a burning bush that would not consume itself until he chose to identify with the plight of his people and live into his name; for Jacob, a descending and ascending spiral staircase to heaven and earth and trysting with an angel that gave him a name that prefigured his destiny and the destiny of his people; and for Jesus, the transfiguration of material form into spiritual event with Elijah and Moses. For Thurman, it is the common place, the common ground of meeting the Other whose face bears the distinct representation of the Divine—to see the Other is to see your God; to hear the Other, however strange and dissonant, is to hear the melody of the Divine.

For a public discourse that marks this suggestion from Thurman it will be necessary to return to another place long-forgotten in the discordant melodies of the present and to hear afresh as it were for the first time—the sound of the genuine in the perplexing sirens of the public sphere: complex and obtuse sounds that beg for answers to the pressing moral issues of our day. Can we hear beyond the shrieks and screams of religion, race, class, and gender, the sound that calls us to attention to a place of common consciousness and public imagination? The truth that religious experience and moral imagination brings to current public debates is not found in the utilitarian answers that mock the fall of modernity—but in a fresh and vibrant articulation of hope in human agency to reinvent itself for this time, which proceeds from encounters with truths that move at levels unimpeded by religious formulae and dogma; that *imagines* a future with the Other where peace will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea, and where nations will beat their swords and weapons into ploughshares and pruning hooks. Are we able to put ourselves in that space—to be in the place where the Sound, like a mighty and rushing wind, fills the room; the place where we hear in our own language, the many voices that herald the New Age?



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