



Howard Thurman

Biography Timeline – **November 18, 1899**, born Howard Washington Thurman in West Palm Beach, Florida, one of three children to Alice & Saul Solomon Thurman, with a caul over his face, a traditional sign of mysterious blessing; **1907**, father Saul dies of pneumonia; is raised by his mother and maternal grandmother, Nancy Ambrose, mostly in Daytona, Florida; **1913**, is baptized in Halifax River and becomes member of Mount Bethel Baptist Church in Daytona; **1915**, a stranger in the Daytona Beach railroad station restores his dream of an education as he goes on to attend Florida Baptist Academy in Jacksonville; **1919**, graduates valedictorian from Florida Baptist Academy and enters Morehouse; **1920's**, youth movement leader; eventually becomes first African-American board member of the pacifist Fellowship of Reconciliation; **1923**, graduates valedictorian from Morehouse College (B.A.), enters Rochester Theological Seminary; **August 2, 1925**, ordained at First Baptist Church, Roanoke, Virginia; **1926**, graduates from Rochester Theological Seminary (B.D.); **June 11, 1926**, marries Kate Kelley, with whom he will have one daughter, Olive Katherine; **1926-1929**, pastor, Mt. Zion Baptist Church, Oberlin, Ohio; **1929**, resigns his pastorate to study with Quaker mystic Rufus Jones at Haverford College; becomes Director of Religious Life and Professor of Religion, Morehouse and Spellman colleges; **December 21, 1930**, Kate dies; **1931**, appointed Professor of Christian Theology and Dean of Rankin Chapel at Howard University; **June 12, 1932**, marries Sue Bailey, with whom he will have a second daughter, Anne; **1935-36**, leads "Pilgrimage of Friendship," a trip sponsored by the Student Christian Movement, to Ceylon, Burma, and India, where he, his wife, and two others became the first African-Americans to meet Mohandas K. Gandhi; **February 1936**, at Khyber Pass in Afghanistan experiences a vision of a unified church open to all and determines to seek the fulfillment of this vision in the U.S.; back at Howard, begins pioneering work in liturgical and theological innovation; **1944**, leaves Howard to help co-found and co-pastor racially integrated, intercultural congregation, the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco; **1947**, becomes first black person to deliver the Ingersoll Lectures at Harvard Divinity School; **1953**, *Life* magazine identifies Thurman as "one of the twelve greatest preachers of the century;" **1953**, appointed Professor of Spiritual Resources and Dean of Marsh Chapel at Boston University, first full-time black professor; **1953-65**, involved with some of the most distinguished intellectual, literary, and political figures of his day -- Benjamin Mays, Reinhold Niebuhr, Langston Hughes, Mary McLeod Bethune, Alan Paton, Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, Eleanor Roosevelt, W.E.B. Dubois; **1965**, retires from Boston University; founds The Howard Thurman Educational Trust; **1975**, named Honorary Canon of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine Episcopal Cathedral, New York; **April 10, 1981**, dies at home in San Francisco; his ashes (and the ashes of his wife) eventually lie in repose at the base of the Thurman Obelisk at Morehouse College, Atlanta, Georgia, and at Howard University in Washington, D.C.; **November 1, 2009**, the first of five projected volumes of *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman* (Walter Fluker, editor) is published by University of South Carolina Press; **January 2019**, documentary film "BACKS AGAINST THE WALL: THE HOWARD THURMAN STORY" is released; **April 10, 2019**, fifth and final volume of *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman* (Walter Fluker, editor) is published by University of South Carolina Press.

Howard Thurman integrated into his African-American Christian heritage elements of his own mystical experiences as a child and a youth, his firm and clear grasp of various religious traditions, the philosophy of pragmatism, and the central tenets of the

Social Gospel, to form the basis of a distinctive interfaith, interracial ministry. Far from being a mere syncretist, Thurman's original thinking and his daring authentic example provide vivid proof that God has not been "*left ... without a witness in doing good*"(1)

Nearly two generations after his retirement from full-time ministry and a generation after his death, Thurman remains the exemplar *par excellence* from the 20th century for those who yearn to live out the necessary, faithful balance of the inner and outward journeys in the 21st century.

Those who heard Thurman preach and teach – at Morehouse College, Howard University's Rankin Chapel, the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco, the Marsh Chapel at Boston University, or a myriad other locales – would report being mesmerized by his deep resonant voice and his even deeper spirit. Churches which welcomed him for extended stints of teaching and preaching would report a radical "*slowing down*" of pace and a "*quieting of head and heart.*"(2)

Thurman was among the first group of African-Americans ever to meet with Gandhi in India and, thereafter, was the initial person responsible for bringing Gandhian nonviolence back to America as a methodology for social change. For countless leaders of the Civil Rights movement, Thurman served as mentor, advisor and counselor. It has been roundly reported by biographers and friends, that Martin Luther King, Jr. carried a copy of Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited* wherever he went during and after the launching of the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama.

Preachers would flock to hear him preach and leading theologians would appraise his impact as incalculably original and invaluablely powerful. James Cone has described Thurman as the most original theological mind ever to arise on American soil. (3)

Ecumenists and enthusiasts for interfaith endeavors have come to regard him as generations ahead of his time.

Humanity possesses, Thurman firmly believed, an inherent, potential reverence, and he viewed Jesus as the premier guide and guarantor for connecting with God – "to Jesus, God breathed through all that is."(4)

The defining motif of Thurman's thinking was his incessant "*search for common ground*" (5) and a perpetual listening for "*the sound of the genuine.*" (6) His overall vision was a "*friendly world underneath friendly skies.*" (7) In the beauty, anguish, and unalloyed faithfulness of Negro Spirituals, Thurman found genius expressions of humanity's most profound connections with God. (8)

Thurman understood forgiveness to be manifested when there is "*an awareness of ... having done violence to the integrity of the soul and to the sense of goodness and righteousness which became manifest along our journey.*" (9) For Thurman "*The God of life is the God of religion*" and not the other way around.(10)

Thurman's views on prayer were varied and dynamically multivalent. He defined prayer as a way of connecting with God's "*divine agenda or working paper*" (11) and the main way "*to find a clue to God's purposes in the world.*" (12) The openness of the human heart in prayer was, for Thurman, "*the swinging door that no man can shut.*" (13)

Ultimately, Thurman believed and operated under a consistent assumption and commitment: all human beings can make a successful journey to an intimate connection with the God of their lives in "the inward sea." Such journeys and such intimate connections are what save us, within our earthen domains and into eternity:

"There is in every one of us an inward sea. In that sea there is an island; and on that island there is a temple. In that temple there is an altar; and on that altar burns a flame. Each one of us, whether we bow our knee at an altar external to ourselves or not, is committed to the journey that will lead him to the exploration of his inward sea, to locate his inward island, to find the temple, and to meet, at the altar in that temple, the God of his life. Before that altar, impurities of life are burned away; before that altar, all the deepest intent of your spirit stands naked and revealed; before that altar, you hear the voice of God, giving lift to your spirit, forgiveness for your sins, renewal for your commitment. As you leave that altar within your temple, on your island, in your inward sea, all the world becomes different and you know that, whatever awaits you, nothing that life can do will destroy you." (14)

Praying with Howard Thurman - Suggestions for Use

Day 1 Give thanks to God for the strangers who have restored your hopes and dreams at the most crucial stages of your journey.

Day 2 Pick a day in the coming month when you will physically withdraw and retreat – as Jesus did, as Howard Thurman did, as our premier religious leaders have always done – for rest, renewal, and prayer. Pray today by giving thanks for time with God now and for the forthcoming time of intensified communing with God.

Day 3 Pray today by envisioning a swinging door through which God will come and speak to you. Envision that same door as the passageway through which you will tender your innermost thoughts, dreams, joys and sorrows.

Day 4 Pray today by quietly and confidently contemplating the following question:
How can the God of my religion become ever more truly the God of my life?

Day 5 Pray today by considering someone who may be or who may have been a personal adversary to you. Ponder how you and that person can find *“common ground.”*

Day 6 Consider your favorite spiritual song. If you don't have one, pick one or ask a friend to suggest one. Now say the words of the spiritual song out loud, fervently, purposefully, as a prayer. If you like, sing the song. Let the intoned words of the song – spoken or sung – be your prayer throughout this day.

Day 7 Read aloud "*The Inward Sea*" paragraph cited above. Meditate on the ways in which you have connected with God in such an intimate and powerful manner. Then ponder how you might return -- again and again -- to such an intimate connection with the God of your life so that all aspects of your human experience might be refreshed.

NOTES

- (1) Acts 14:17
- (2) From a conversation with Dr. Alvin O'Neal Jackson during his participation in Spirit Fest, June 2005, at Community Christian Church, Kansas City, Missouri, as he recalled his time as a ministerial intern with Dr. T. Garrott Benjamin of Second Christian Church (now Light of the World Christian Church) in Indianapolis, Indiana, when Thurman would spend a week with the clergy and congregation there.
- (3) Declared during a "Vacation Liberation School" lecture at the "Forty Acres and a Mule" Campus of St. James United Methodist Church, Kansas City, Missouri.
- (4) Howard Thurman, *The Inward Journey* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), p. 30.
- (5) See Howard Thurman, *The Search for Common Ground: An Inquiry into the Basis of Man's Experience of Community* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973)
- (6) Howard Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness: A personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), pp. 38 and 99.
- (7) Howard Thurman, *The Greatest of These* (Oakland, California: Eucalyptus Press, 1944), p. ix.
- (8) See Howard Thurman, *Deep River: Reflections on the Religious Insight of Certain of the Negro Spirituals* (Oakland, California: Eucalyptus Press, 1945; New York: Harper & Brothers, 1955).
- (9) Howard Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit* (New York: Harper & Row 1963), p. 103.
- (10) Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart* (New York: Harper and Row, 1953; Boston,: Beacon Press, 1981), p. 23; in a memorable conversation with Dr. Dorsey Blake, the current pastor of The Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples, in San Francisco, California, August, 2001, this notion was emphasized again and again.
- (11) See Howard Thurman, *A Strange Freedom: The Best of Howard Thurman on Religious Experience and Public Life*, edited by Walter Earl Fluker and Catherine Tumber (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), p. 87.
- (12) *Ibid.*, p. 84.
- (13) See Thurman, *A Strange Freedom*, p. 286; see also Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, p. 127.
- (14) Howard Thurman, *The Growing Edge* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), pp. 43-44; see also Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart*, p. 15.

FOR FURTHER READING:

Howard Thurman, *Deep is The Hunger* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951)

Howard Thurman, *The Greatest of These* (Oakland, California: Eucalyptus Press, 1944)

Howard Thurman, *Jesus and The Disinherited* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1949)

Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart* (New York: Harper and Row, 1953)

Howard Thurman, *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman, Volumes I-V*, Walter Earl Fluker, editor
(Columbia, South Carolina: The University of South Carolina Press, 2009-2019)

Howard Thurman, *A Strange Freedom: The Best of Howard Thurman on Religious Experience and Public Life*, edited by Walter Earl Fluker and Catherine Tumber (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998)

Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1979)