

A Strange Freedom

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Howard Thurman, although not himself a Unitarian Universalist, exerted a powerful influence upon the broader tradition of liberal religion in America during the middle of the twentieth century. He spent his childhood as an African American growing up in Daytona Florida during the height of segregation. At the age of eleven his father died, and his grandmother came to live with him and his mother. Thurman's grandmother, Nancy, had been born into slavery on a Florida plantation. She was a devout Christian who knew the Bible well. However she could neither read nor write herself, and so one of young Howard chores was to read passages of the Bible to his grandmother, according to her instructions.

Like all of us she had her favorite passages. The prophet Isaiah and his uplifting message of Israel's glorious return out of exile in Babylon was not an uncommon request. Also popular with his Grandma Nancy were the Psalms and their devotional praise of God and his Covenant. Of course, most of the time Thurman read to her the stories

and parables of Jesus, recounting again and again his tragic life and his revolutionary ministry. But there was one portion of the Bible that Thurman was forbidden to read: the letters of Paul to the early church. These letters are actually the earliest portions of the New Testament, and beloved by Christians all over the world. However, Nancy, Howard Thurman's grandmother, the ex-slave, could tolerate only First Corinthians thirteen, "Love is patient, love is kind, etc..." Everything else by Paul was verboten.

One day, many years later, Thurman asked his grandmother point blank why this was so.

"When I was older and was half through college, I chanced to be spending a few days at home near the end of summer vacation. With a feeling of great temerity I asked her one day why it was that she would not let me read any of the Pauline letters. What she told me I will never forget. 'During the days of slavery,' she said, 'the master's minister would occasionally hold services for the slaves. Old man McGee was so mean that he would not let a Negro minister preach to his slaves. Always the white minister used as his text something from Paul. At least three or four times a year he used as a text: 'Slaves, be obedient to them that are your masters...as unto Christ.' Then he would go on to show how it was God's will that we were slaves and how, if we were good and happy slaves, god would bless us. I promised my Maker that

if I ever learned to read and if freedom ever came, I would not read that part of the Bible.””

When Howard Thurman’s father had died, he had died “out of Christ”—meaning he had not declared Jesus as his Lord and Savior. He was not “saved” in the traditional Protestant understanding that was prevalent among the African American Baptist tradition in which Thurman was raised. As a result, the minister of the local Baptist church refused to do the funeral. After much last minute scrambling, the family located a traveling preacher, named Sam Cromarte, who agreed to do the service. Thurman tells the story of that minister’s sermon at his father’s funeral.

“I listened with wonderment, then anger, and finally mounting rage as Sam Cromarte preached my father into hell. This was his chance to illustrate what would happen to ‘sinners’ who died ‘out of Christ’ as my father had done. And he did not waste it. Under my breath I kept whispering to Mamma, ‘He didn’t know Papa, did he? Did he?’ Out of her own pain, conflict, and compassionate love, she reached over and gripped my bare knees with her hand, giving a gentle but firm, comforting squeeze. It was sufficient to restrain for the moment my bewildered and outraged spirit.”

These two anecdotes of Howard Thurman’s life: reading the Bible to his grandmother, the former slave, and enduring the emotional and

spiritual abuse of the minister during his father's funeral; shaped Thurman's theology. The first we might call, "The Religion of Jesus". The latter we could call "The Religion About Jesus." In his seminal work *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Thurman says it is the difference between Jesus as a religious subject or as a religious object. If he is a religious object to be worshiped and revered, then all one need do is believe his death and resurrection to be a historical fact, and you can rest assured of the state of your eternal soul. However, if we take Jesus to be a religious subject, then we need to study and understand not simply his death and its effects upon his followers and the church, but rather to place the emphasis on Jesus' parables, his lessons, his ethical exhortations, and his prophetic actions. The religion of Jesus takes seriously his life and ministry, and doesn't skim over the bulk of the Gospel to get to the Mel Gibson-esque ending that revels in the pain, suffering and blood.

The religion about Jesus was the religion of the preacher who condemned Thurman's father to hell, as well as the religion of the white preacher who would tell slaves to stay in their place and be happy. Jesus, Thurman notes, hung out with the oppressed and downtrodden, and his message of revolutionary love was directed at these people, not the ones in power with all of the influence. Interestingly, this is not too far from our own Unitarian ancestors. Emerson believed that all of us could have the same religious insights and experiences that Jesus did, if

only we would listen to them. Theodore Parker believed that Jesus' ethical teachings and prophetic witness was what was "permanent" in Christianity and that the death and resurrection, so contrary to reason and science, was "transient" and would eventually fade away. In essence Parker says that the religion of Jesus is the center of Christianity while the religion about him as a religious object was not. Howard Thurman's grandmother would have loved to hear that sermon.

Thurman had the opportunity to travel to India to meet with Gandhi in 1935. Gandhi was quite astute and had many questions for Thurman. One of the most difficult questions was this, "How can African Americans, who were once slaves and now treated as second class citizens, be the same religion as the people who oppress them? How can you take their religion? What does Christianity say to the oppressed? What message of hope can it offer?" Answering these questions became one of the central issues in Thurman's intellectual career.

In his book "The Luminous Darkness; a Personal Interpretation of Segregation" Thurman writes:

"The real evil of segregation is the imposition of self-rejection! It settles upon the individual a status which announces to all and sundry that he is of limited worth as a human being. It rings him round with a circle of shame and humiliation. It binds his children with a climate of

no-accountness as a part of their earliest experience of the self. Thus it renders them cripples, often for the length of their days. And for this there is no forgiveness, only atonement. And only God can judge of what that atonement consists. What does it mean to grow up with a cheap self-estimate? There is a sentence I copied many years ago, the source of which I have forgotten: ‘We were despised so long at last we despised ourselves.’”

Here he is saying in prose what he said in poetry in this morning’s Modern reading. Segregation takes away a person’s sense of being in the world. It is an institution that denies you your most basic sense: your sense of existence. The person subjugated to segregation is transparent, others see through them, but don’t count them among their kind. It denies the personhood of another person. Segregation is as far away from Humanism as it is possible to get.

Thurman tells the story of going back to Florida as an adult to visit family members. He takes with him his two daughters; at this point both of them were young children. They decide to walk down to the local park to play. On their way they pass by a white elementary school, for surely the schools are segregated. His daughters see bright shiny new playground equipment. Instantly they ask if they can go to that playground to play. This was the moment Howard Thurman was dreading. He would have to tell his daughters, raised mostly in the friendly confines of various Northern college towns with progressive

views on race, that they could not play on this playground in Florida because they are black. He says, “I will explain that when we are back home drinking our lemonade. For now let us continue on to the park as we planned.” So of course they play, and when they get home they drink their lemonade. His daughters, not forgetting his promise to tell them why they could not play on those shiny new swings, repeat their question.

According to his autobiography, Thurman answers them this way: “It is against the law for us to use those swings, even though it is a public school. At present, only white children can play there. But it takes the state legislature, the courts, the sheriffs and policemen, the white churches, the mayors, the banks and businesses, and the majority of white people in the state of Florida—it takes all these to keep two little black girls from swinging in those swings. That is how important you are! Never forget, the estimate of your own importance and self-worth can be judged by how many weapons and how much power people are willing to use to control you and keep you in the place they have assigned to you. You are two very important little girls. Your presence can threaten the entire state of Florida.”

Instead of degrading their self-worth, Thurman turns it around and actually enhances his daughters’ self-worth. Social segregation leads to segregation of the spirit too. When we live in proximity to another group but do not have a sense of fellowship, hatred and resentment can

foster. We see them as wholly other than us, and this dualism seeps into our brains as the primary lens through which one views the world. Segregation then can be as much a spiritual condition of radical dualism, in addition to being a social caste system. Therefore part of the response to segregation must also be a spiritual response of unity between different races or groups of people.

“The impact upon the individual when he experiences himself as a human being is to regard himself as being of infinite worth. Such a sense of worth is not confined by narrow limits of self so that worth may be determined by contrast with something or someone of less worth. No, this is a specious basis for ascertaining worth. Such a sense of worth is rooted in one’s own consciousness which expands and expands until there is involved the totality of life itself.”

These are probably familiar words to those of you familiar with the First Principle of “Inherent worth and dignity of every person.” There were other ways in which Thurman’s mystical humanism made him sound like we should be putting his name on our mugs, T-shirts, and bookmarks as a UU. He was a Universalist. Everyone is a child of God, he says. The Ku Klux Klan members who leave their Sunday morning worship services to burn crosses on lawns, and then return to those services after they are done, have a fundamental misunderstanding of the life, teachings, and ministry of Jesus whom they claim as their Lord and Savior. As we heard from our Ancient reading this morning, Jesus heals

lepers, eats and drinks meals not with Ceaser but with prostitutes and tax collectors—the people lowest on the social totem pole. The message he is sending with these actions is clear: God’s love applies to everyone without exception. Not just the pretty people or the cool people, or the so-called chosen people, but all the people are the children of God. This is essentially the argument the Universalists used in debating their theory of salvation with the Orthodox. It is the religion of Jesus over and against the religion about Jesus. Thurman wields it against rabid segregationists who would divide society into sheep and goats. It is a fundamentally wrong understanding of the New Testament.

His perspective is mystical; it transcends a single denomination or even Christianity itself. Thurman studied under a theologian named Rufus Jones who was a prominent mystical Quaker who read Emerson and William James in addition to George Fox, the founder of Quakerism. Jones and Thurman believed that God was not limited to the stories of the Bible, although they drew from them a good deal of inspiration. Like the Transcendental Unitarians of a the century before them, they believed that God was available to all. God for them was the animating spirit present in all of life. They were true Unitarians in the sense that they believed that God, humanity, and the entire world were interconnected; a unity.

The beauty of Howard Thurman’s theology, particularly for us religious liberals these days, is that he takes a spiritually satisfying

mysticism, what we might call “spirituality” in today’s parlance, and perfectly blends it with a prophetic call to social justice. Thus his religion of Jesus is also the religion that kept the slaves hopeful and empowered their descendants to tear down the walls of separation and Jim Crowe. It is no wonder that Martin Luther King Jr. kept a copy of Jesus and the Disinherited in his briefcase with him at all times.

May we continue to be inspired by Howard Thurman’s vision.
May we never tire of our efforts to make that vision a reality. Amen
Blessed Be.