

# How to Create a Society That Prizes Decency

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In 2020 Joe Biden ran on the theme of saving the soul of America. Once he was president, he used the power of his office to help direct hundreds of billions of dollars through the infrastructure law and the CHIPS Act to the people and places that had been left behind. At the time, I hoped that these programs would not only create jobs and give people a sense of financial security but also be seen as a sign of respect, a sign to the unseen and the alienated that America had their back.

These policies were successful in economic terms, sparking a torrent of additional investment and lifting real wages, but economic progress has not produced social or spiritual progress — less alienation, higher social trust. American society, at every economic level, is still plagued by enmity, distrust, isolation, willful misunderstanding, ungraciousness and just plain meanness. The pain in America resides in places deeper than economic policies can reach. So how can we create a society in which it is easier to be decent to one another?

To answer that question, I returned to Howard Thurman's magnificent 1949 book, "Jesus and the Disinherited." Thurman, a Black theologian, was a contemporary of Martin Luther King Sr., at Morehouse and had a strong influence on the activism of his son Martin Luther King Jr.

In the book Thurman asks a series of profound questions: How is it possible for the disinherited and the oppressed to live pushed against the wall without losing their humanity? More broadly, how is it possible to strengthen the spiritual and social foundation of society so that people will recognize one another's full dignity amid the normal tussles of life? These are germane questions today, when so many — on the left and right — feel that society has pushed them against the wall.

Thurman emphasizes that Jesus was a poor Jew living under the tyranny of Roman power. But even in these vicious circumstances, Jesus focused his attention on the "inward center" of each person. He showed that you can't look only at a person's economic or political circumstances. The crucial level for any person is the spiritual level, the place where souls are either sanctified or degraded.

Thurman reminds us that when the networks of relationships in a society are broken and unjust, national transformation must flow from a tide of personal transformations.

He first focuses on how our circumstances either diminish or elevate our souls. With tremendous insight, Thurman probes the psychologies of both those who dominate and those who are disinherited. He points out that those who do the dominating often live in fear that if they don't keep dominating, then their security will vanish. Meanwhile, those who are disinherited face their own psychic pressures: "There are few things more devastating than to have it burned into you that you do not count."

In a passage that anticipates the rise of Donald Trump, Thurman notes the awful power of the demagogue who says to the alienated youth: "No one loves you — I love you; no one will give you work — I will give you work; no one wants you — I want you." In another passage that anticipates the current agony in Gaza: "The doom of the children is the greatest tragedy of the disinherited."

It is natural, Thurman writes, for people who are disinherited to feel fear and

hatred toward their oppressors. It is natural to want to lie to those who dominate you in order to protect yourself. But, he continues, these are self-destructive responses.

He writes, “Jesus rejected hatred because he saw that hatred meant death to the mind, death to the spirit, death to communion with his father.” When you try to deceive someone else, even for your own protection, you end up becoming a deceiver deep in your nature. You end up losing the ability to make moral distinctions.

Thurman argued that the first step toward reconciliation comes when we redefine the people on both sides of these power equations. When status categories are frozen, people in different groups meet as enemies. But you can scramble status categories by asking deeper questions of one another: How have you decided to live your life? What are the questions you have had to answer? These inquiries begin the process of seeing others in their full dignity. They initiate a process of sharing mutual worth and value.

Then comes my favorite sentence in the book, “There cannot be too great insistence on the point that we are here dealing with a discipline, a method, a technique, as over against some form of wishful thinking or simple desiring.”

A discipline, a method, a technique.

To be a good citizen, it is necessary to be warm-hearted, but it is also necessary to master the disciplines, methods and techniques required to live well together: how to listen well, how to ask for and offer forgiveness, how not to misunderstand one another, how to converse in a way that reduces inequalities of respect. In a society with so much loneliness and distrust, we are failing at these social and moral disciplines.

Similarly, to create social change, it is necessary to have good intentions, but it is also necessary to master the disciplines and techniques of effective social action. The people in the civil rights organizations in the 1950s and '60s spent a lot of time rigorously thinking about which methods would work and which would backfire. Thurman's emphasis on methodological rigor and technique influenced King's brilliant and often counterintuitive principles of nonviolent resistance:

1. It is not a method for cowards. It is active nonviolent resistance to evil.

2. It seeks not to defeat or humiliate the opponent but to win his friendship and understanding in order to move toward a beloved community.
3. The attack is directed against the forces of evil rather than against the people who happen to be doing the evil.
4. One must have a willingness to accept suffering without retaliation, to accept blows from an opponent without striking back. Unearned suffering is redemptive.
5. It avoids not only external physical violence but also internal violence of the spirit. It is a refusal to hate.
6. Nonviolent resistance is based on the conviction that the universe is on the side of justice. It has a deep faith in the future.

There are obviously times when this nonviolent strategy is inappropriate — in a state of anarchy or war, when the very existence of your people is under threat. But these techniques did work in Birmingham, Selma, Chicago and beyond. Most important, they altered people's souls, fortifying the state of consciousness of the disinherited, undermining the state of consciousness of the dominators and elevating the consciousness of those who looked on in awe and admiration.

These thoughtful techniques are a long way from the tit-for-tat crudities that now often pass for public discourse, the tantrums of the merchants of rage, the 57 percent of Republicans and the 41 percent of Democrats who regard people in the other party as their [enemies](#).

As many have noted, we're not going to solve our problems at the same level of consciousness on which we created them. If the national consciousness, the state of our national soul, is to repair, it will be because people begin to think as deeply as Thurman did and begin to be intolerant of the immoralities of their own side.

I was impressed this week by Georgia's former lieutenant governor Geoff Duncan. A conservative Republican, he announced his decision to support Biden, and he rebuked those other conservatives who are appalled by Trump but still vow to vote for him. Duncan's reasoning was straightforward: Character is more important than policy. Or to put it more grandly, the soul of our democracy is more important than whatever the future top tax rate might be.