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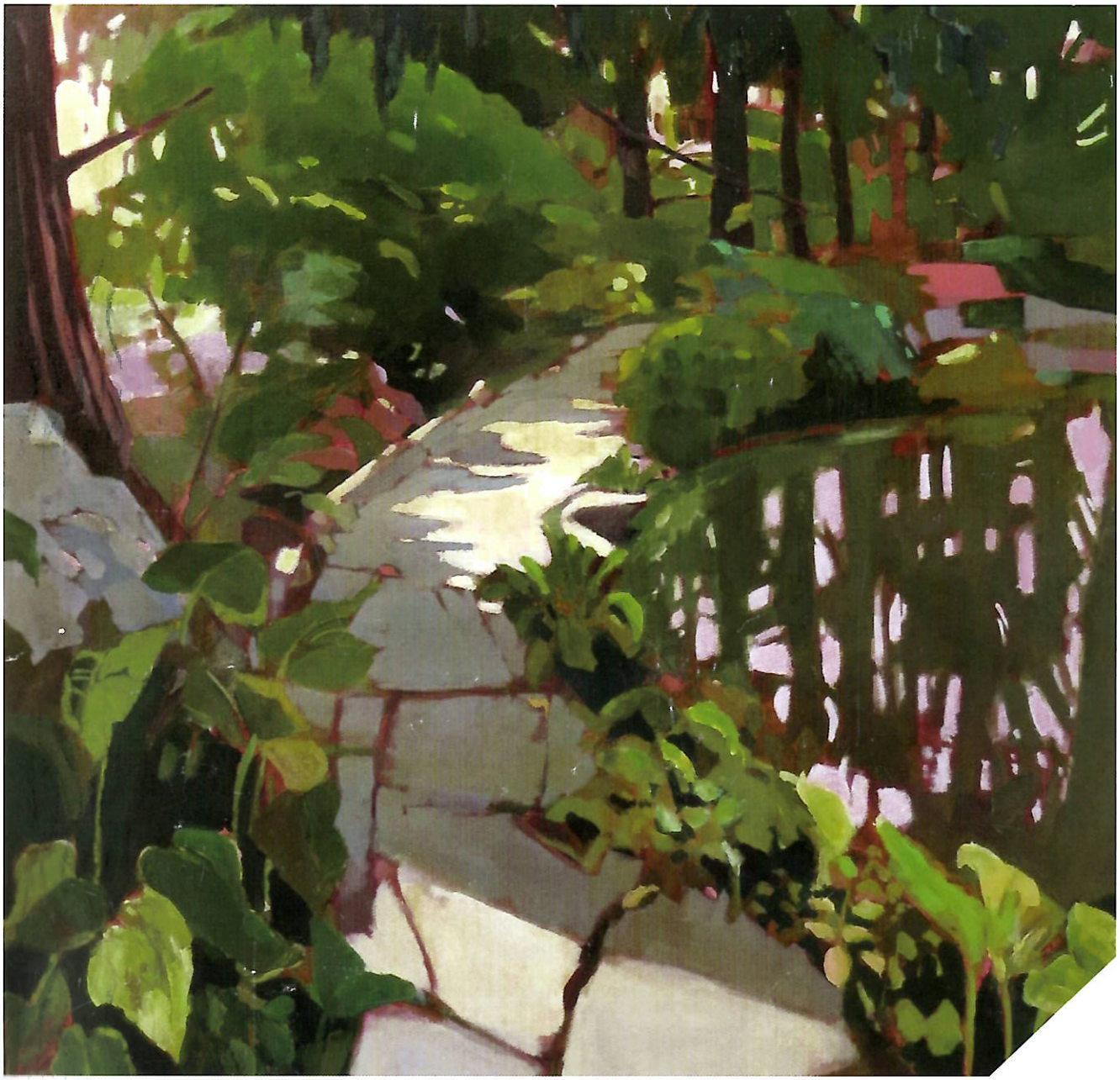

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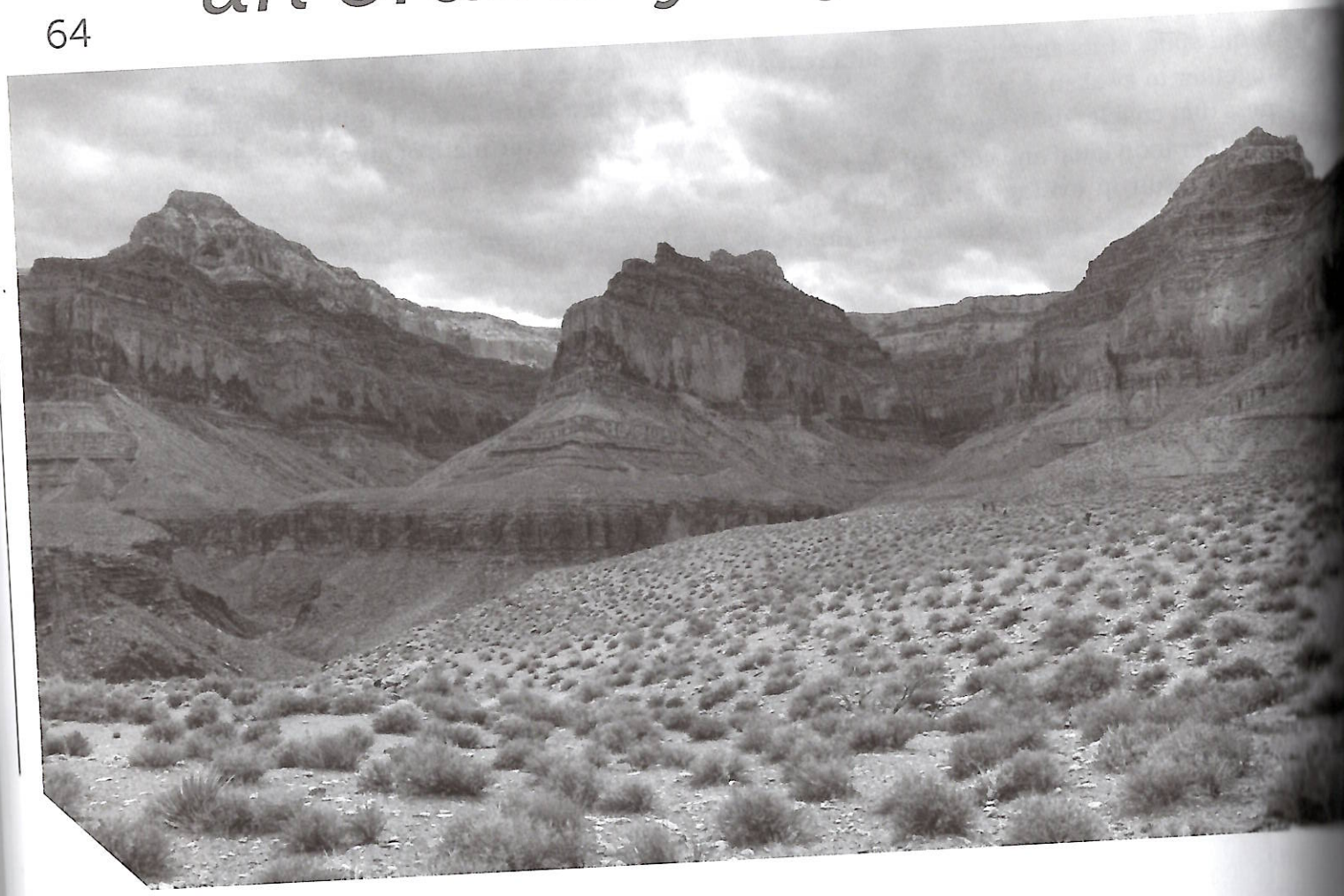
an ordinary mystic:



CONTEMPLATION, INNER AUTHORITY, AND SPIRITUAL DIRECTION IN THE LIFE AND WORK OF

HOWARD THURMAN

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In a moment of pure grace, I found myself standing once again at the south rim of the Grand Canyon. I felt drawn to and embraced by the stillness and silence whenever I visited or even thought of the Grand Canyon. The stillness dazzled me, and as I watched it, felt it, and listened to it, I noticed an energy emanating from it. Feeling this energy pulsate at a special frequency, I "knew" it was the same Energy that held all things together.

I am not certain when and where my love affair with silence and stillness began. Perhaps it is related to my childhood pastime of sitting alone in the backyard and feeling the breeze on a blustery day. These special times with the "Holy spirit," as I named them, became my first contemplative experiences. Yet after witnessing many years of "making a joyful noise unto the lord" as a participant in African American worship services, I questioned if my desire for stillness, silence, and sol-

itude was just plain odd. Likewise, as I queried family and friends about spiritual direction or companioning, they responded with curious stares and responses like, "do you mean visiting a psychic advisor or reader?"

Thus, I pondered if I was unique or a member of an elite group who has mystical encounters. Do "regular" or "ordinary" people like me, who do not live in religious communities, become contemplatives or mystics? Is spiritual direction or companioning unknown in the African American community? In my quest for a role model, I was directed to the life and work of Howard Thurman, an African American mystic, contemplative, and spiritual advisor who instantly became my historical mentor.

Therefore, I wish to share the life, writings, and ministry of Thurman with some emphasis on their mystical and contemplative aspects. I focus on how his development into a mystic and contemplative is both similar to and different from better-known mystics such as Saint Teresa of Ávila or Saint John of the Cross. How did Thurman, reared in a typical African American Baptist faith tradition, develop a mystical and contemplative life? Moreover, I examine his influence on African American spirituality and the cultivation of the notion of "inner authority" as a by-product of contemplative practices. What implications do his life, work, and writings, especially on prayer, have for spiritual direction or companioning, particularly with African Americans and others who struggle with issues of social injustice and trauma in their daily lives? Finally, I provide some insights on how spiritual guidance operates in the African American community and what role contemporary spiritual direction may play in expanding the spiritual resources available to African Americans specifically.

BECOMING A MYSTIC

Unlike me, I believe Thurman knew as a young boy that he was a mystic. He describes incidents similar to mine yet with a clearer sense of inner knowing and acceptance.

> The ocean and the night together surrounded my little life with a reassurance that could not be affronted by the behavior of human beings. The ocean at night gave me a sense of timelessness, of existing beyond the reach of the ebb and flow of circumstances. Death would be a minor thing, I felt, in the sweep of that natural embrace... the experience of these storms gave me a certain overriding immunity against much of the pain with which I would have to deal in the years ahead when the ocean was only a memory. The sense held: I felt rooted in life, in nature, in existence. (Thurman, 1970, 8)
>
> As a boy in Florida, I walked along the beach of the Atlantic in the quiet stillness that can only be completely felt when the murmur of the ocean is stilled and the tides move stealthily along the shore. I held my breath against the night and watched the

> stars etch their brightness on the face of the darkened canopy of the heavens. I had the sense that all things, the sand, the sea, the stars, the night, and I were one lung through which all of life breathed. Not only was I aware of vast rhythm enveloping all, but I was a part of it and it was a part of me. (Smith, 174–75)

> The sun had disappeared behind the pines and moss-draped oaks, and the stillness that embraced the world embraced him until it seemed as if earth, river, sky, boy, shared the same pulse. Beyond the stillness and within it was a presence that spoke to him without a voice, revealed itself to him without a vision. Howard found himself replying, not in words that would stir silence but in wordless rapture of communion. (Yates, 26)

Amazingly, these early experiences not only determined Thurman's entire approach to life, spirituality, religion, and his relationship with God, but they also allowed him to realize his innate potential despite the exigencies of Jim Crow and the demonization of African American men.

Born in 1900 to Alice and Saul Thurman in Daytona Beach, Florida, Thurman lost his father at the age of seven. Appalled by the eulogy at his father's funeral (an unfamiliar preacher condemned his father to hell for not attending church), Thurman vowed never to join another congregation. Two major circumstances, however, changed the course of this decision. First were his early and pervasive mystical experiences.

Young Thurman spent a considerable amount of time in nature, especially after the trauma of his father's death and bewildering funeral service.

> When I was young, I found more companionship in nature than I did among people. The woods befriended me...the quiet, even the danger, of the woods provided my rather lonely spirit with a sense of belonging that did not depend on human relationships. I was usually with a group of boys as we explored the woods, but I tended to wander away to be alone for a time, for in that way I could sense the strength of the quiet and the aliveness of the woods. (Thurman, 1979, 7)

In the woods near his home, Thurman discovered a favorite oak tree that would nurture his soul throughout his life. He returned to that tree to share his joys and sorrows, feeling that the tree truly understood him. The tree strengthened him and modeled for him that even in the midst of a horrible storm, although it might lose a branch or two, it held its ground just in the way Thurman wanted to.

The second early and steadfast influence was his maternal grandmother, Nancy Ambrose, who served as his first role model. His primary caretaker after the death of his father, Thurman's grandmother provided a strong sense of being rooted in God. A stalwart member of the African American community in Daytona Beach, she taught Thurman about faith and spirituality. Luther Smith Jr. writes:

> Nancy Ambrose was the first to teach Thurman that spirituality sustains one in the midst of life's many predicaments...she witnessed to the power of her spirituality to meet one of the fundamental demands of life's hierarchy of needs: the need to survive. This survival function of religion is not just addressing the condition of the body, but the survival of an identity—that center of a person which gives definition to one's being. His grandmother interpreted religious sources within a context which addressed Thurman's identity needs more pointedly than his other three teachers...Her "religious essence" was not just in dialogue with concern for the world but with the particular issue of what it means to be black in America. (Smith, 40–41)

Thus, from an early age, Thurman's grandmother instructed him through her own example and readings (including Bible passages she prohibited him from reading) that his essential worth as well as all wisdom and strength were centered in God.

Thurman's other mentors at Morehouse College and Rochester Theological Seminary, along with the Quaker mystic Rufus Jones, who taught at Oberlin College, only deepened his intellectual understanding and personal experiences of mysticism. According to Smith, "More than any other teacher, jones formed the nexus that religious experience at its profoundest level is mystical experience" (33).

CONTEMPLATIVE WORSHIP AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF INNER AUTHORITY

Beyond his twenty-eight books, one of the first intentional interracial congregations, recordings of his lectures, and a foundation, two of Thurman's greatest legacies were his emphasis on contemplative practices (especially silence) and his development of the notion of "inner authority." His strong advocacy for the contemplative life represented his view that cultivating a relationship with God through stillness and silence is natural. Thus, periods of silent worship were instrumental to his desire to integrate spirituality into the traditional, communal worship experience for his congregation. Sometimes these congregations were predominantly African American, for example at Howard University, but frequently they were interracial congregations, such as in San Francisco and at Boston University.

> The sermon was not always the centerpiece within the regular order of service. I provided stretches of time for meditation, a quiet time for prayer generated by silence. (Thurman, 1970, 92)

In vesper services, he would have readings and, as he relates in his autobiography:

> ...periods of silence here and there to allow the inspiration of the words to hold full sway. When the service was over, I left the pulpit, but the audience remained in their seats in total silence for several minutes. When they rose to leave, the ushers gave each of them a copy of the reading. (Thurman, 1970, 93)

Although many contemporary African American congregations begin Sunday service with praise worship led by a praise team, activities that lie on the other end of the contemplative continuum, such as stillness and silence, are not new to us. Even though less frequent now, in Thurman's lifetime and before, communal worship service began with a "Holy Hush" as members were encouraged to center and pray as they entered the church (Holmes).

In addition to incorporating contemplative prayer into his worship service and writing meditations for members to read, Thurman acted as a spiritual advisor to many in the civil rights movement, including Martin Luther King Jr. He taught them (as his grandmother and others had instructed) that by going within or living from within through the quiet and deep listening of contemplative prayer, people could develop and maintain the resolve to face and move against the prevailing legal injustices.

He still teaches us the principle of inner authority in his work. By being rooted in and living from God, whether that presence is within us or in nature, one can develop the "authority" to move against oppression.

> There is in every person an inward sea, and in that sea there is an island and on that island there is an altar and standing guard before that altar is the "angel with the flaming sword." Nothing can get by that angel to be placed upon that altar unless it has the mark of your inner authority. Nothing passes "the angel with the flaming sword" to be placed upon your altar unless it be a part of "the fluid area of your consent." This is your crucial link with the eternal. (Thurman, 1953, 15)

More importantly, Thurman describes in his book Jesus and the Disinherited how Jesus tried to encourage people like himself, born into oppression (like Jews in Roman society), that they needed to protect their inner sanctuary. Both Jesus and Thurman believed that no matter how repressive the external circumstances, God created an inner sanctuary in each of us. It is only by our (inner) authority that we allow it to be disturbed. Thus, utilizing one's inner authority may enable someone to participate in a social movement or to move away from an abusive relationship (i.e., marital, parental, sexual, occupational), accept a call for a vocation, or make a decision that may be unpopular with cultural or family dictates.

Inner authority is another way to live from an authentic self: the one God created, and a self deeply embedded in the presence. Awareness and mastery of this principle is vital for the healing of people who suffer discrimination, particularly individuals of African descent throughout the African diaspora. Although a body may be assaulted or a mind temporarily disturbed, "the inner sanctuary cannot be breached without consent" (Thurman, cited in Holmes, 27). Indeed,

Thurman would suggest that contemplative practices strengthen the cultivation of inner authority.

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

Appointed as a professor at Morehouse college, his alma mater, Thurman lectured on religion and philosophy in the early 1950s. He also taught Bible as literature and served as a religious advisor to students and faculty at Spelman college. I would describe this position as the beginning of his ministry of spiritual direction or companioning (including some group spiritual direction), although he did not refer to it as such. Some might label it pastoral care; however, he served as a professor and not a minister or pastor.

> I believe, looking back, that my contribution to the students was not made in the classroom or even in the chapel services, but more in the personal encounters we had in individual and group counseling....it was here that the small miracles were wrought.... Again and again, I was privileged to observe a student grow into awareness, then into self-esteem, and finally into the confidence to begin a quest in her own right. (Thurman, 1970, 79)

Spiritual direction or something similar has existed in the African American community for decades. However, the form and contemplative practice are very different from what is currently known as an ongoing spiritual direction or companioning relationship. I have observed three informal types of spiritual guidance. They are the spiritual advisor or healer, the church mother, and the family matriarch, "Big Mama." Each of these people serves as a wisdom figure who conveys spiritual guidance, nurturance, and advice. The advice frequently springs from a life of experience, prayer, scripture reading, and often church attendance.

Embedded in the African American community are spiritual healers, frequently women but many times men. These people do not dispense herbal remedies or practice shamanism but instead impart spiritual wisdom heavily sprinkled with scripture and provocative questioning. Epitomized in the character Aunt Ester in August Wilson's play *Gem of the Ocean*, this spiritual advisor or healer operates outside of the church and frequently with the "un-churched."

The "church mother" is another form of spiritual guide. In large and small African American churches, an older woman serves as the church mother. She is named as such so that "Mother Wilson" or "Mother Booker" is a person some couples or individuals visit in crisis or troubling times. She has little or no formal psychological training or knowledge. The church mother encourages her visitors with scripture, prayer, or an admonishment like "Trust in the Lord." She tells people that all decisions must be grounded in prayer.

Finally, most African American families contain an elderly female figure affectionately known as "Big Mama," who may also be referred to as "Nana," or "Mama Lucy" or "Ma Dear." Frequently, Big Mama acts as wisdom figure, arbitrator, disciplinarian, and one with a watchful eye over most family interactions. Although not always sought out for spiritual purposes, her guidance is also based in prayer. Big Mama attends church regularly, reads the Bible religiously, prays daily for her extended family, and encourages others to attend religious services as well. Many family gatherings, such as Christmas, Easter, and Sunday meals, occur in her home.

More formal relationships, such as pastoral care or counseling, occur with pastors, deacons, and church elders. However, these types of spiritual guidance are frequently "crisis oriented" and not typically an ongoing relationship with regular monthly meetings. The issue is further complicated by the confusion about pastoral counseling and the stigma associated with counseling and spiritual guidance. Many African American churches are pastor-centered, and unless it is personally endorsed or supported by the pastor, spiritual direction or companioning may be perceived as a usurpation of pastoral duties.

Hence, the notion of one-to-one spiritual direction at a retreat center or with a stranger or unknown person is a foreign concept to most African Americans. Why go to a stranger when someone right in the church who knows you more intimately is available for the exploration of spiritual issues? Moreover, many African Americans do not differentiate among pastoral care, pastoral counseling, spiritual healing, and advice from the church mother or Big Mama because each of these relationships shares similar elements of inner wisdom, guidance, prayer, and scripture. Therefore, the terms "spiritual direction" and "spiritual companioning" may add to the confusion about these various ministries.

UNCOVERING "ORDINARY MYSTICS"

Regardless of the path, all spiritual seekers possess the same universal yearning for a closer and more intimate relationship with God. Furthermore, growing numbers of African Americans, and women in particular, describe themselves as "deeply spiritual" and seek a more formal, ongoing spiritual or spiritual-direction relationship. As spiritual directors or companions, the challenge becomes how we can make spiritual companioning more accessible to them and others like them. The life and work of Thurman offer several poignant possibilities. Similarly, if we find ourselves companioning individuals who are victims of oppression and trauma, there are some approaches and caveats to consider.

Frequently, individuals reared in rural settings like the one of Thurman's youth experience "mystical" or contemplative encounters. The exposure to nature and stillness that characterizes country life creates an environment ripe for noticing and experiencing the Presence. The setting is similar to a retreat center. In contrast, in the hustle and bustle of urban settings with people scurrying here and there, and perhaps people living in noisier or tighter quarters (with

neighbors beyond the next wall), individuals must make a concerted effort to "be still." Even on Sunday, a contemplative moment may be absent from the worship service, family gatherings, and other church activities that punctuate the day. However, many African Americans have spent some time living or visiting with relatives in rural or coastal settings.

Some spiritual seekers arrive with formal knowledge about contemplation and mysticism. Others, like me, have had experiences that we didn't consider "mystical." Hence, helping people to name their sense of Presence (particularly outside of a church) may stimulate a longer dialogue about one's relationship with God. Maybe the most important question a spiritual companion can ask is, "What in your daily life reminds you of God?" Responses may range from prayer to reading scripture, taking a nature walk, or playing with children or grandchildren.

When directed by the Spirit, another question to pose is, "Outside of a church setting, where have you felt the presence of God?" Discussions of this sort may lead to remembrances of a time, a person, or an object similar to Thurman's oak tree. Others may have already had mystical encounters with God on vacations (such as to the Grand Canyon) or during travels. Helping people to seek God in places other than church can trigger an image of God other than the one provided or formed in childhood and an exploration into one's relationship with God.

CAVEATS ABOUT SILENCE

Although Thurman provides an outstanding role model and advocate for a contemplative life, there are many who find stillness and silence disturbing. Anecdotally, many of my African American spiritual directees reveal that they are most apprehensive about their initial encounter with silence. The feelings of trepidation are not unique to African Americans, however. Clearly when people become still or quiet they frequently stumble across a painful memory or some traumatic incident (Holmes; Kellemen). People who spend time in the wilderness speak of hallucinations, appearances of apparitions, and the like (Sinetar). This is not uncommon for those who pursue contemplative experiences (like Jesus in the desert) or who decide to live in solitude (Sinetar; Kelsey). Moreover, solitary confinement is considered the worse kind of punishment.

Therefore, stopping and slowing down frequently leads to *feeling* the pain, disappointment, or rage that is buried within. Facing uncomfortable feelings may be even more poignant for those who have experienced prejudice, discrimination, or trauma. Barbara Holmes notes that, to survive, victims of oppression must conceal such feelings. Apprehensions about uncovering unpleasant and painful memories may account for the dearth of designated silent periods in many American communal worship services, particularly in African American churches. Likewise, it may also explain the lack of awareness about and exposure to the life and work of Thurman among African Americans. Nonetheless, the desire for some infusion of spirituality into the religious experiences of people, particularly African Americans, remains.

CONCLUSION

Once I encountered the work of Thurman, I felt as if a window opened up to a world filled with "ordinary mystics," people like me, who lead contemplative and mystical lives but who do not reside in religious communities. Recently, I discovered formal studies about regular mystics as well; one such source has been Marsha Sinetar's *Ordinary People as Monks and Mystics—Lifestyles for Self-Discovery*. Experiencing the Presence or Sacred in daily life allowed Thurman and those he touched to uncover both comfort and strength as they lived and walked "through the Valley of the Shadow of Death" of life in the pre- and post-civil rights era.

Although criticized for not being a more active participant in the civil rights movement, Thurman felt he was called to the "hunger of the spirit", and that social activism would detract from his efforts (Smith). George Cross, one of Thurman's professors at Rochester Theological Seminary, shared the following with him as he graduated:

> **I think, Howard Thurman, you have the ability and the gift to make a creative contribution to American religious thought. You are sensitive, and you a Negro. No one could blame you if you did battle on the racial problem but, as your friend, I say to you that to do that would be a waste. This must be done but your gifts are in another dimension.**
>
> **No white man has the right to say this, for he does not know what it is to be a Negro, but all social questions are temporary questions. They are a part of the total growth of the race to maturity. If a man's energy goes into social problems, when that is not longer relevant his work is done. You, Howard Thurman, should address yourself to the timeless hunger of the human spirit. Doing so, your greatest capacities will be released. (Cited in Luther, 28–29)**

Barbara Holmes comments:

> **And indeed, his greatest gifts were unbridled. What Thurman gives us in his many writings is a treasury of transcendent religious and mystical experience that continues to transform individuals long after the civil rights movement. He speaks of the urgency to address the hunger and desire people have for communion with "the Most Holy one." Others speak about the absence of contemplative prayer time and how it can develop into a restless yearning in people (Holmes).**

Thurman's life and work offer an excellent contemplative framework for spiritual direction. He acted as a spiritual advisor, and at times provided pastoral care or counseling, to numerous individuals concerned with social justice issues. The instruction to "go within" before "venturing out" was indeed vital to the success of a nonviolent movement.

Moreover, those who write about soul care and spiritual direction in the African American community understand that issues of pain and suffering must be addressed. Having some "compassionate commiseration" or shared suffering then makes it more endurable suffering. As Kellemen and Edwards point out, "our hurting friends need our silence, not our speeches" (46).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Several recommendations emerge from the life and writings of Thurman. These recommendations would be particularly useful for work with African Americans but certainly apply to any member of an oppressed group or individuals who struggle with social justice, pain, or trauma.

First inquire about contemplative role models, such as aunts or uncles, a grandfather or grandmother (like Nancy Ambrose, Thurman's grandmother). What lessons or examples did they provide? What spiritual practices or philosophies might the spiritual directee want to emulate? likewise, someone may remember a church elder, church mother, or Big Mama from childhood. Identifying early spiritual guides can provide the transitional role models needed for a more formal spiritual direction or companioning relationship.

Second, as noted earlier, ask about previous mystical or unitive experiences. Many people are "ordinary mystics" like Thurman and me but remain unaware of it (Sinetar, 1986).

Third, for those who find contemplative prayer too strange or uncomfortable, conduct a short silent meditation or demonstration of contemplative prayer followed by a discussion of any discomfort during a spiritual direction meeting. Suggesting some short attempts (three to five minutes) at meditation (and journaling about them) in the three- to four-week interval between meetings is helpful as well (Cameron and Bryan). Many people are well versed in petitionary prayer, but fewer know about the "listening" aspects that accompany more contemplative forms.

Fourth, introducing a spiritual directee, retreatant, or member of a spiritual formation class to the writings of Thurman would be extremely valuable. The books that highlight the notion of "inner authority" (e.g., Meditations of the Heart, Jesus and the Disinherited) encourage the cultivation of an inner sanctuary as a place to reside and return in a climate of hostility or threat. similarly, learning about an ordinary mystic who regularly engaged in contemplative practices and led a mystical life shows people how to experience the presence in daily life.

PRAYER

Finally, Thurman focuses on the importance and power of prayer, the same entity that is the foundation for the spiritual direction or companioning relationship, the covenant between spiritual director and spiritual directee, and the core of spiritual life. His emphasis on prayer, contemplative prayer more specifically, is similar to other mystics like Saint John the Cross and Saint Teresa of Ávila. Thurman describes the power of prayer through Jesus's "glow of God," a luminance in which many sinners were healed; "A great while before the day, he withdrew to a solitary place and prayed as was his custom" (Thurman, 1951, 103).

> **When Jesus prayed, he was conscious that, in his prayer, he met the Presence and this consciousness was far more important and significant than answering the prayer. (146)**

As a contemplative, Howard Thurman understood—both through his own words and those of his biographers—that life itself is a form of prayer. Yet, without pausing, becoming still, and centering down, it is difficult to experience and live life as prayer. Through reading and writing about Thurman and his work, I have experienced the Presence. My prayer is that more people, especially African Americans, will come to know his teachings and, like me, be inspired by his contemplative life to develop a closer relationship with the Presence, becoming "ordinary mystics." ✦

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