

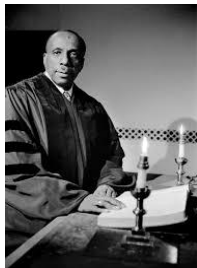
**Deep Is the Hunger:  
Honoring Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman**

Tuesday Vespers (online), February 23, 2021  
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento  
Piano Prelude: Medley: Steal Away, Sometimes I  
Feel Like a Motherless Child, Nobody Knows the  
Trouble I've Seen, arr. Mark Hayes. Hymns: This  
Little Light of Mine; There Is More Love

Chalice Lighting Words

--Soul Matters Sharing Circle

May the light we now kindle, and the time  
we share together,  
anchor us to that inner flame, that sacred  
center,  
which helps us remember who we were...  
before the world told us who it wanted us to  
be.  
May our time together clear the way for  
those memories that help lead us back home.



Introduction

This evening's vesper service features the words of Dr. Howard Thurman, a minister, mystic and prophetic social activist who lived from 1899 to 1981. I will tell you about his life in a moment. Most of the readings that we will hear tonight were written by him as prayers for public worship services, private contemplation, or both. After each selection of his that we offer, we will take a few moments of silence to let them sink in. (We'll measure the time of pause by taking six breaths, in and out.) Also, the text of our service will be posted on the church website tomorrow, so you won't feel the need to write down anything we say or go looking for it. Just receive the words tonight and let them settle in your soul.

Reading 1 (We Are Deeply Agitated)

*The first reading is "We Are Deeply Agitated." Though it was published in the 1950s or 60s, I think it resonates for our current era.*

Despite all the urgencies of our private lives, despite all of the necessities by which we are surrounded day after day in the central function, in the commonplace task, our minds and our thoughts, yea, the innermost center of ourselves, is deeply agitated, perturbed.

[In these times,] We are a part of a momentous searching from which there can be no luxury of detachment. We are hurt and we are afraid. We are dazed by the relentless movement of forces which do not seem responsive to the private will and the sensitive individual judgment. We remember so many things during these times. So very many things. We seek wisdom and guidance for our own thoughts, for our own behavior. We seek wisdom and guidance for [this country's leaders] and the leaders of the world.

O Spirit of Truth, we place before Thee/ the hard, stubborn, recalcitrant, unyielding toughness of fear and demagoguery; [and] the vacillating uncertainty, [and] the weakness and the strength of goodness and righteousness; the ... struggle that is at work in the heart of our land... We dare to lay it bare before Thy scrutiny, O God of our spirits. Leave us not alone! Amen. [Pause]



Biography of Howard Thurman

Before we hear additional readings by Thurman, I'd like to tell you about him. This slide shows you the childhood home of Howard Thurman, which is now a historic site in Daytona Beach, Florida. He was born in 1899. He lived in this house until he went to high school, moving 90 miles up the coast to Jacksonville to attend a Baptist high school. In the early 1900s, that was the closest place where Blacks from Daytona could find a high school that would accept them.<sup>i</sup>

Thurman attended the historically black Morehouse College in Atlanta. He graduated in 1823, then went to Rochester, New York, to attend a Baptist seminary. At the age of 28 he returned to Atlanta to serve as Director of Religious Life at Morehouse and Spellman colleges. Five years later he was appointed the Dean for Religious Life and a professor of theology at Howard University in Washington, DC. At age 25 he married Katie Kelley. They had a little girl. Katie served in anti-tuberculosis work and contracted the disease. She died, leaving Howard with a child of three years of age. In a few years Howard married Sue Bailey, and they had a second child. Sue became Howard's partner in his academic life, activism, writing, and ministry, and she provided leadership and mentorship to African American women.

When Dr. Thurman took a sabbatical from Howard University, the family went to India, Burma, and Ceylon, all of which were still British colonies in the 1930s. In India, Thurman met with independence leader Mohandas K. Gandhi. From those conversations with Gandhi, Thurman adopted the principle of non-violence as a way of life and as a strategy for political change.

In 1944 a white Presbyterian minister and college professor named Alfred Fisk recruited Howard and Sue Thurman to come to San Francisco and help him establish an inter-racial congregation, which he called the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples. Fisk had been opposed to the removal of Japanese Americans to internment camps and to the discrimination against Black families moving to San Francisco in the Second World War. Taking a leave of absence from the university in Washington, Howard Thurman was to spend a year at the church, but he stayed for nine years as its co-pastor. While the congregation included white and Asian American members, the church also provided a home for the many African American families who had moved from Oklahoma, Texas, and Arkansas to work in the defense industry. The church elected 10 White and 10 Black members to serve on its session [board of elders].<sup>ii</sup>



Here is a picture of the Fellowship Church today. This is the building to which the congregation relocated in 1949, a few years after its founding. A friend of mine who worshiped there a few years ago told me that when Rev. Thurman went to make a pastoral visit to a congregation member who was in the hospital in San Francisco, he was refused entry to the facility because he was Black.

Fellowship Church is traditional in architecture and Protestant in its worship style, yet interfaith in spirit. You can hear this in Thurman's prayers. Though he speaks to God often as our divine Father, he speaks of Jesus in a more Unitarian way, not as the Messiah but as a messenger inspired by God, in deep relationship with God. While interfaith projects are common in our own day, it was pathbreaking in the 1940s to have a Protestant church founded on the goal of unity and cooperation across religious boundaries.

In one prayer of his that I like, Thurman says that all people around the world are stirred by the same concerns, dreams, hopes and longings, even as their "spirits are fed, their roots are watered, by other faiths...."

He writes: "We know what it is like to lay claim to the strength of our heritage and the guidance of our own faith.... We know the comfort of the familiar landscape that enables us to find our way even in the darkness of our sin and sorrow." Yet other peoples find meaning in "the glow of other traditions." And hence Thurman prays to God: "Teach us... to know the yearnings and longings of those of other lands who call Thee by a strange name, who find a community of worship in practices far removed from what in our self-righteousness we would regard as either sacred or holy, who *find* in *their* heritage/ that which gives strength to their footsteps." What a lovely statement of interfaith respect, honoring the ways of others whose heritage gives them what they need to move forward into life.

After nine years at the San Francisco church, Howard and Sue moved back to the East Coast. He was appointed the dean of Marsh Chapel at Boston University, a Methodist institution. He directed religious programs on campus and served on the faculty at its School of Theology for the next 12 years. He was the first African American dean of a chapel at a white-dominant university in this country.

In 1945 Thurman published a book entitled *Deep River: Reflections on the Religious Insight of Certain of the Negro Spirituals*. In his honor tonight, our pianist Irina has chosen a number of hymns from the African American tradition.



Here are some pictures of Dr. Thurman. When he departed Howard University in 1944 for his leave of absence in San Francisco, Eleanor Roosevelt attended a dinner in his honor.

In 1949 Thurman wrote the book *Jesus and the Disinherited*. It gained wide attention among professors and students at Black seminaries as well as progressive White theological schools. Martin Luther King Junior would have read the book in seminary, or perhaps later at Boston University, where he earned his Ph.D. Moreover, Thurman was a mentor of Martin Luther King at Boston University. It's fair to attribute a large measure of Dr. King's adoption and articulation of the principles of nonviolence to his relationship with Dr. Thurman.

In 1965 Sue and Howard Thurman returned to San Francisco. He wrote books and founded the Howard Thurman Educational Trust. He passed away in 1981 and his wife lived into the 1990s. My friend has told me it is her understanding that Sue Thurman stayed involved in the Fellowship Church the rest of her life. She even was part of efforts to recruit the minister who still serves there, Dr. Dorsey Blake. For many years Dorsey Blake also has been a professor at two seminaries in Berkeley, with Rev. Lucy being one of his many loving and

beloved students. Dr. Blake also was a member of my committee four years ago when I defended my doctoral thesis, which is a history of UUSS.

Howard Thurman's work and his words have shaped many leaders in this country, and his meditations, prayers and short essays continue to move and inspire all kinds of people. There is so much material for spiritual reflection in his work. We hope you find some nourishment from the few selections we have chosen for you, as well as in the music which meant so much to Howard Thurman.

### Reading 2: For a Time of Sorrow

*Next I have a short reading which has been used often in funerals and memorial services. I will read it in honor of those among us who are grieving losses, and the countless others grieving losses in these times. It's entitled For a Time of Sorrow. We'll pause for silence afterwards for six deep breaths.*

I share with you the agony of your grief/  
 The anguish of your heart finds echo in my own.  
 I know I cannot enter all you feel  
 Nor bear with you the burden of your pain;  
 I can but offer what my love does give:  
 The strength of caring,  
 The warmth of one who seeks to understand  
 The silent storm-swept barrenness of so great a loss.  
 This I do in quiet ways,  
 That on your lonely path  
 You may not walk alone. [Pause]

### Music: "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child"

#### Reading 3 (Keep Open the Door of [Your] Heart)

*This meditation by Thurman is entitled Keep Open the Door of [Your] Heart. We will pause for half a minute, or six deep breaths, after the reading.*

"Keep open the door of your heart, it matters not/ how many doors are closed against you."

... We are accustomed to thinking that one person's attitude toward another is a response to an attitude. The formula is very neat: love begets love, hate begets hate, indifference begets indifference. Often this is true. We try to hand out to others what we experience at their hands. There are moments in every person's life when they try to give as good, or bad, as they get. This presupposes the relation between humans is somehow mechanical, as if each

person is completely separated. This is far from the truth.

There is a profound unity/ more pertinent and authentic than the unilateral dimension of our lives. This we can discover when we are able to keep open the door of our heart. This is one's ultimate responsibility and is not dependent on whether the heart of another is kept open for us.

It is impossible for you to keep another from loving you. Love is stronger than hate. The great disclosure to one who has found that when they keep open the door of their heart: it matters not how many doors are closed against them.



#### Reading 4: The Humble Spirit (excerpt)

*This is the first part of a prayer about the humble spirit and the contrite heart. Thurman says:*

The humble spirit. I learn the meaning of the humble spirit from the earth. The earth takes into itself the rain, the heat of the sun, and it works with these gifts of life to bring the magic out of itself to be used for growth and sustenance of all living things. The earth is good because it takes what life gives, and within itself it uses its gifts to make life abound. It waits for fruition and gathers its fruit unto itself for more life and more growing. I shall learn of the earth the meaning of the humble spirit.

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<sup>1</sup>City of Daytona Beach website: <https://www.codb.us/514/Howard-Thurman-Home>

#### Reading 5: "The Sound of the Genuine"

There is something in every one of you that waits, listens for the genuine in yourself—and if you cannot hear it, you will never find whatever it is for which you are searching and if you hear it and then do not follow it, it was better that you had never been born.

You are the only you that has ever lived; your idiom is the only idiom of its kind in all the existences, and if you cannot hear the sound of the genuine in you, you will all of your life spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls.

There is/ in you/ something that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself. [Yet] sometimes there is so much traffic going on in your minds, so many different kinds of signals, so many vast impulses floating through your organism that go back thousands of generations long before you were even a thought in the mind of creation, and you are buffeted by these. And in the midst of all of this, you have got to find out what your name is. Who are you? How does the sound of the genuine come through to you? . . . .

The sound of the genuine is flowing through you.

Thank you for attending Vespers tonight.

Howard Thurman's *Meditations of the Heart* is published by Beacon Press, the publishing house owned by the UUA. It is available in the UUA Bookstore. (And Rev. Roger has a new copy he's happy to sell or a used one to lend to you.)

<https://www.uuabookstore.org/Meditations-of-the-Heart-P16834.aspx>

<sup>2</sup>Huneke Stained Glass website: <https://www.hunekestainedglass.com/fellowship-of-all-peoples>