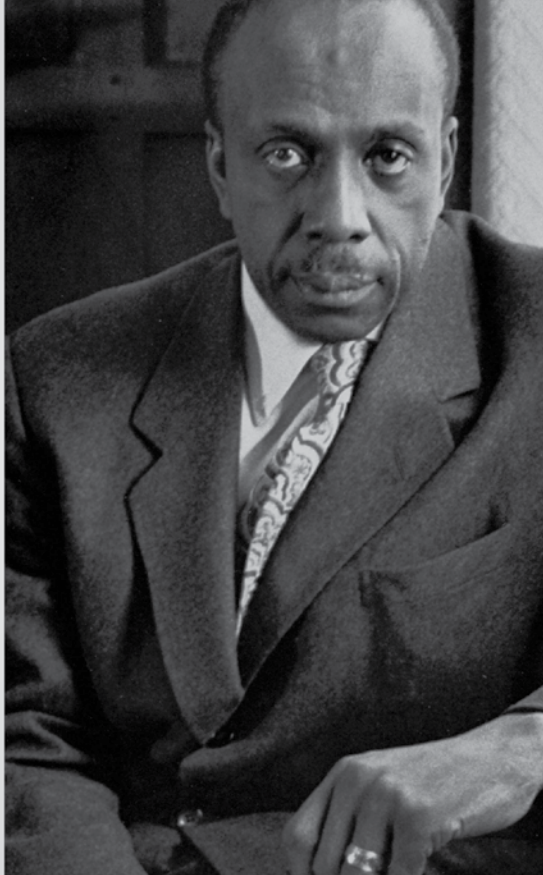


THE
LIVING
WISDOM
OF
HOWARD
THURMAN



A VISIONARY
FOR OUR TIME

Howard Thurman
with Vincent Harding,
Michael Bernard Beckwith,
Alice Walker,
and others



Produced by Liza J. Rankow

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INTRODUCTION

When I consider the magnificent richness of the human relationships that have filled my life with gifts of hope, loving guidance, and deep inspiration, I can never find adequate thanks for the powerful presence of Howard Thurman. And because this son of Africa's people in America was so great a gift to me, I am very happy to share him with you in this introductory selection of audio recordings from his vast storehouse of life-giving wisdom. I am convinced that this man, who died almost 30 years ago, is a voice that our nation needs to hear now, a spirit whom we need to engage now, as we struggle to understand ourselves as a people—our identity, our purpose, and the meaning of our marvelous diversity. I think that we need him now because we are still trying to understand our own role as members—loving, caring, sharing members—of the human community.

It was as a graduate student at the University of Chicago in the 1950s that I first met Thurman on the pages of *Jesus and the Disinherited*, his classic message of hope, challenge, and encouragement to those (as he put it) who stand at a moment in human history with their backs against the wall. But beyond the words of the book, he entered my life as a living being in the difficult days after the assassination of his

beloved Martin Luther King, Jr., as I worked in Atlanta with my friend and sister Coretta Scott King to establish the King Memorial Center. From that point until the end of his life—and probably even beyond—Thurman became my surrogate father, nurturing me, shepherding me, at many times carrying me through very difficult days in my own life. And I remember with great joy the many times he invited me to join him on his long walks through the hilly streets of San Francisco. I also recall how readily and lovingly he encouraged my dear wife, Rosemarie, and me to relax like family in the home he shared in that city with his gifted spouse and powerful coworker, Sue Bailey Thurman.

Over the years of our relationship it became increasingly clear to me why many people found Howard Thurman so hard to categorize. For instance, early in his public life a young freedom-loving African American social activist complained publicly that “We thought we had found our Moses in Thurman, but he turned out to be not Moses, but a mystic!” What the young man didn’t know was that Thurman was deeply involved in the ongoing quest for freedom and justice, but saw his role not on the front lines of marches and demonstrations. Instead he sought to offer hope, clarification, and encouragement to those who were preparing to set out on the marches. To sit with them and consider carefully what they were seeking and why, and how they might best go about it. And when they returned, after either victory or defeat or both, Thurman knew they needed someone like him to meet them,

to listen, and to guide. It was his role to continue urging that they, that *we*, recognize the need to constantly expand our dreams—and to be assured that no defeat of our movement toward a manifestation of universal oneness can ever be permanent, because that oneness was the will of the Divine for us all.

Because Martin Luther King, Jr. was inspired and challenged by Thurman's search for truth, it is said that King carried *Jesus and the Disinherited* in his briefcase on the many thousands of miles he journeyed during the years of the Freedom Movement. James Farmer, C. T. Vivian, Marian Wright Edelman, Samuel DeWitt Proctor, James Lawson, and many other well-known and little-known movement activists were similarly influenced by Thurman's thought and counsel. Most recently, President Barack Obama acknowledged the importance of Thurman's teachings for his own life. I trust that connection will deepen and endure.

And now I invite you to listen to Thurman as he opens his heart to us in these reflections, these wrestlings with truth. Hear him, feel him, as he encourages us to move with him on the inward journey, to sit quietly and—as he puts it—to see ourselves go by. In relatively brief meditations, in longer sermons, in places of brooding reflection, or those where his playful humor is on display, we find him often approaching us with questions. Not directives. Not speeches. But questions like: Who are you, *really*? What are you *for*? What's the fundamental thing

that you are after in your life? Questions all gently, firmly urging us to explore ourselves, to ask ourselves about ourselves. For he knew that such searching for self-knowledge was crucial to every other search in which we could possibly engage. He knew that such searching was essential to building the human community.

It was Thurman who constantly reminded us, and reminds us still, as he put it, that the things that are true in religion are not true *because* they are in religion, but rather they're in religion because they are *true*. So it is understandable that such a teacher, such a guide to the deep waters that undergird all religious experience, could move comfortably among Baptists and Buddhists, could share silence and fellowship with Quakers, Jews, Muslims, and those who identify themselves solely as offspring of the Divine Creator or children of Mother Earth.

The recordings you will hear span a quarter century—from the early 1950s to the late 1970s. Each of the six sessions is introduced by someone whose life has been profoundly touched by Howard Thurman. Alice Walker, Edward Kaplan, Luther Smith, Liza Rankow, Michael Beckwith, and I each speak from our own relationship with Thurman to provide a bridge of context and personal connection, especially for those of you who may be meeting him for the first time through this collection.

Thurman was—and this was a deep part of his spirituality—a seeker. He was never satisfied with the truth that he had achieved, knowing

always that there was more to come and that he must never think that he had found it all. His faith was not a door that closed in on him as something to be kept, protected, and guarded. Rather it was a great portal that opened out into the spirit, faith, dreams, and seekings of humankind. Thurman urges us always to see our magnificent possibilities, our amazing capacities, not only to dream great dreams but to realize that those dreams “will not rest until they incarnate themselves in us”—in each of us, in all of us, *for* all of us. Let us listen.

—Vincent G. Harding

HOWARD THURMAN (1899–1981)

A visionary religious leader and thinker, Howard Thurman has been called a teacher of teachers, a preacher of preachers, an activator of activists, and a mover of movers. Thurman's philosophical and pastoral contributions were formative to the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, as



was his influence on Martin Luther King, Jr., and many others involved in the struggle for freedom and social justice. *Ebony* magazine named Dr. Thurman among the 50 most important figures in African American history, and *Life* magazine hailed him as one of the greatest preachers in the nation. Thurman was a pioneer in developing interracial, intercultural, interfaith communities of worship, and his “liberating spirituality”—as Vincent Harding has termed it—grew out of an organic mysticism that engaged the world, rather than withdrawing from it.

Young Howard Thurman (circa 1919)

Howard Washington Thurman was born on November 18, 1899, and grew up among the working poor of racially divided Daytona, Florida. His maternal grandmother, Nancy Ambrose, exerted a particularly formative and lasting influence on Thurman's theological and intellectual development. Born into slavery, she recognized the liberative power of education and instilled in her grandson a lifelong commitment to learning and academic excellence.

In a time and place where even the opportunity for a high school education was rare for African Americans, Thurman went on to graduate from Morehouse College (1923) and Rochester Theological Seminary (1926), in both cases as class valedictorian. He was ordained as a Baptist minister in 1925.

Thurman's first pastorate was a small, mostly Black community church in Oberlin, Ohio, where he also undertook postgraduate coursework at the Oberlin Graduate School of Theology. He was a leader and popular speaker in the YMCA



Howard and Sue Bailey Thurman in India (circa 1935-1936)

Courtesy of the Thurman Family and Arleigh Peelow / Howard Thurman Film Project

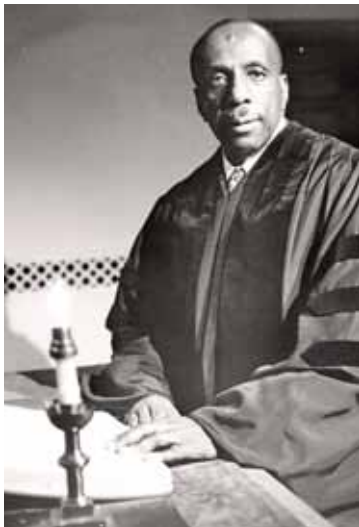
and Student Christian Movement, and was active in the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), a national interracial pacifist organization. In early 1929, Thurman spent six months in directed study with Rufus Jones—the Quaker scholar, mystic, and activist—before returning to Atlanta as professor of religion and director of religious life at Morehouse and Spelman Colleges. In 1932, he was appointed a professor in the school of religion at Howard University (HU) and four years later became the first dean of the university’s Rankin Chapel. Here he began to truly develop the interfaith character of his ministry and push the creative margins of liturgy.

During his time at HU, Thurman and his wife, Sue Bailey Thurman, led an African American delegation of religious leaders to India, Burma, and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) on a “Pilgrimage of Friendship,” from fall 1935 through spring 1936. In India the Thurmans met with Mohandas Gandhi and discussed the relevance of Gandhi’s methods of nonviolent resistance for the struggle of African Americans for freedom and equality in the United States. Gandhi predicted that it would be through the African American movement for liberation that the power of nonviolent social change would reach world recognition.

Toward the end of their journey, while visiting Khyber Pass, Thurman experienced a profound vision of the essential oneness of all people, and of a religious fellowship that would bring together seekers of all races

and creeds. In 1944, he received the opportunity to put this vision into action as cofounding pastor of the nation's first intentionally multiracial and intercultural congregation—The Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco, California. At a time of local, national, and global conflict, Fellowship Church sought to discover whether meaningful experiences of spiritual unity among peoples could be more compelling than all that divides them, transcending the barriers of race, religion, nationality, culture, and social class.

In 1953, Thurman accepted the position of dean of Marsh Chapel at Boston University (BU), becoming the first African American to hold such a significant appointment at a predominantly white university. At BU the Thurmans were able to expand the testing ground for their intercultural, interfaith ministry to a larger congregation comprised of both university and



Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman, dean of Marsh Chapel, Boston University

From the Howard Thurman Collection, Howard Gottlieb Archival Research Center at Boston University

community members. A weekly radio broadcast of Thurman's chapel presentations was central to his Boston ministry.

Following retirement from BU in 1965, Thurman continued his "wider ministry" of writing, teaching, and lecturing across the nation and around the world. His Howard Thurman Educational Trust, established



in 1965, became a vehicle for the distribution of Thurman's books and tapes and provided mentorship and financial assistance to African American youth pursuing higher education. (This was one of the ways he sought to pay forward the help he had received as a struggling young student in Florida.)

A prolific author, Thurman published numerous articles and essays and more than 20 books. Among his best known is *Jesus and the Disinherited*. In it he explores the construction of oppression through fear, hate, and deception, and how

Thurman in the classroom

the love ethic of Jesus might serve as a radical force for social transformation. This book informed and inspired many leaders and participants in the Civil Rights Movement and beyond.

Thurman's "primary identity was that of a mystic. He was a mystic who recognized the necessity of social activism for enabling and responding to religious experience," wrote Luther Smith in 1991. In Thurman's view, the mystic's motivation for social engagement is not simply to improve the lot of the marginalized or disenfranchised, not only to correct injustice or remove harm, but to restore communion with the Divine. Recognizing the damaging effects of injustice on both victim and perpetrator, sufferer and offender, his central pursuit was the search for authentic community—the "common ground" among people at the root of their humanness and their spiritual nature. He taught reverence for every individual: to "meet people where they are, but deal with them as if they were where they ought to be," according to their inherent worth as children of God. For Thurman the inward journey of personal transformation and the outward journey of social transformation could not be separated.

Howard Thurman passed away on April 10, 1981, after an extended illness. His writings and recorded lectures, sermons, and meditations continue to inspire religious leaders, social activists, and seekers from all walks of life.

—Liza J. Rankow

A WORD ABOUT GENDER-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

In our 21st-century world, where many are sensitive to gender-inclusive language, Thurman's frequent use of masculine pronouns and the terms "man," "brother," and "mankind" to refer to humanity may jar some listeners. His references to God in the masculine gender may also prove uncomfortable to some. In the historical and cultural context in which Thurman spoke and wrote, and during the period of these recordings, he expressed himself in the traditional language of his day. Be assured that these linguistic conventions do not reflect prejudice against the value and giftedness of women. Thurman was an early supporter of women's leadership in the church and the world, and he often indicated how women throughout his life had shaped him. Wherever he was, he advocated for and mentored women—and he was very clearly mentored by them. His personal and professional relationships with women were characterized by the respect and equality that gender-inclusive language symbolizes. Thurman's religious thought is frequently cited by women theologians who believe his legacy contributes to advancing the feminine spirit today.

CONTRIBUTORS

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Vincent G. Harding, PhD, is a historian, activist, author, and educator. Deeply concerned for the state and development of American democracy, he has spent a half century participating in, studying, and teaching about movements for compassionate social change. Harding is chairperson of the Veterans of Hope Project—an educational initiative on religion, culture, and participatory democracy—which he cofounded in 1997 with his late wife Rosemarie Freeneay Harding. He is author of many books, including *Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero; Hope and History*; and *There Is a River*. Dr. Harding was the first director of the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Center for Social Change and the founding director of the Institute of the Black World, both in Atlanta, Georgia. He also served as senior consultant to the groundbreaking PBS series on the history of the Civil Rights Movement, *Eyes on the Prize*. In 2004 he retired as professor emeritus after more than 20 years on the faculty of the Iliff School of Theology in Denver, Colorado. Harding and his wife, Rosemarie, became the unofficial children of Howard and Sue Bailey Thurman.



Luther E. Smith, Jr., PhD, is professor of church and community at the Candler School of Theology of Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, where he has served on the faculty since 1979. The title of his teaching position reflects his life's commitment to social transformation as an expression of religious conviction. In addition to publishing many articles on Howard Thurman, Dr. Smith is the

author of *Howard Thurman: The Mystic as Prophet* and editor of *Howard Thurman: Essential Writings*. He is also the senior advisory editor for the Howard Thurman Papers Project.



Edward K. Kaplan, PhD, is Kevy and Hortense Kaiserman Professor in the Humanities, and was founding chair of the program in religious studies at Brandeis University, where he has taught since 1978. Dr. Kaplan is particularly interested in the relationship between aesthetic, ethical, and religious experience in literature and the lives and writings of religious activists and thinkers. In addition

to studies of French literature, he has published essays on Martin Buber, Thomas Merton, Howard Thurman, and books on Abraham Joshua Heschel, the Jewish philosopher, theologian, and activist.



Alice Walker is an American novelist, short-story writer, poet, essayist, and activist. Her most famous novel, *The Color Purple*, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award in 1983. Alice Walker's creative vision is rooted in the economic hardship, racial terrorism, and folk wisdom of African American life and culture, particularly in the rural South. Her writing explores multidimensional kinships among women; among men and women; among humans and animals; and embraces the redemptive power of social, spiritual, and political revolution.



Liza J. Rankow, PhD, is an interfaith minister and the founding director of OneLife Institute, a nonprofit organization based in Oakland, California. Dr. Rankow has provided counseling and offered classes and workshops in spiritual development for more than 20 years. As a scholar and activist, her main interest is exploring the powerful synergy between mysticism and social change. She maintains a special emphasis in the life and work of Dr. Howard Thurman, teaching a variety of classes on Thurman in both academic and community settings.



Michael Bernard Beckwith is the founder and spiritual director of the Agape International Spiritual Center, a trans-denominational spiritual community known for its rich cultural diversity, local and global humanitarian programs, and promotion of the arts. Widely credited for introducing Howard Thurman's writings to the New Thought community, he and Thurman first met during Beckwith's freshman year at Morehouse College. Award-winning author of *Spiritual Liberation*, *The Answer Is You*, and *A Manifesto of Peace*, Beckwith has taught alongside international leaders of the world's spiritual traditions.

FURTHER READING

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Selected Web Resources

Howard Thurman Documentary Film

howardthurmanfilm.com

Howard Thurman Papers Project

morehouse.edu/centers/leadershipcenter/howardthurman.html

Religion & Ethics Newsweekly. Feature on Thurman (PBS)

pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week520/feature.html

Interview with Dr. Thurman (*Theology Today*, 1981)

<http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/jul1981/v38-2-criticscorner1.htm>

Thurman Books at Friends United Press

howardthurmanbooks.org

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