

vintage lunch

unexpected saints: **HOWARD THURMAN** (1899-1981)

CHILDHOOD

It was a time of watching and waiting for what I did not know—yet I always knew.

Nightfall...was a presence. The nights in Florida, as I grew up, seemed to have certain dominant characteristics. They were not dark; they were black. When there was no moon, the stars hung like lanterns, so close I felt that one could reach up and pluck them from the heavens. The night had its own language....At such times I could hear the night think, and feel the night feel. This comforted me...I felt embraced, enveloped, held secure. In some fantastic way, the night belongs to me.

Eventually I discovered that the oak tree and I had a unique relationship. I could sit my back against its trunk, and feel the same peace that would come to me in my bed at night. I could reach down in the quiet places of my spirit, take out my bruises and my joys, unfold them, and talk about them. I could talk aloud to the oak tree and know that I was understood. It, too, was part of my reality, like the woods, the night, and the pounding surf, my earliest companions, giving me space.

As a child I was accustomed to spending many hours alone in my rowboat, fishing along the river, when there was no sound save the lapping of the waves against the boat. There were times when it seemed as if the earth and the river and the sky and I were one beat of the same pulse. It was a time of watching and waiting for what I did not know—yet I always knew. There would come a moment when beyond the single pulse beat there was a sense of Presence which seemed always to speak to me. My response to the sense of Presence always had the quality of personal communion. There was no voice. There was no image. There was no vision. There was God.

THE RELIGION OF JESUS

How can I believe that life has meaning if I do not believe that my own life has meaning?

Once when I was very young, my grandmother, sensing the meaning of the constant threat under which I was living, told me about the message one of the slave ministers on her plantation...On the rare occasions when he was able to hold services for his fellow slaves, the climactic moment came in these exhilarating words: 'You are not slaves; you are not n****s condemned forever to do your master's will – you are God's children.' When those words were uttered, a warm glow crept all through the very being of the slaves, and they felt the feeling of themselves run through them. Even at this far distance I can relive the pulsing tremor of raw energy that was released in me as I responded to her words. The sense of being permanently grounded in God gave to the people of that far-off time a way to experience themselves as human beings.

A man and his black skin must face the timeless issues of the human spirit together.... I continued to struggle with the central issue, which was the apparent inability, the demonstrable failure of Christianity to deal effectively with a system of social and economic injustice with which it existed side by side throughout the Western world....My quest for an answer reminded me again and again of my need to preserve, at all costs, the inspirations and the strength I drew from my commitment to the religion of Jesus....I learned more about the genius of the religion of Jesus from my grandmother than from all the men who taught me all...the Greek and all of the rest of it -- because she moved inside the experience and lived out of that kind of center.

Living in a climate of deep insecurity, Jesus, faced with so narrow a margin of civil guarantees, had to find some other basis upon which to establish a sense of well-being. He knew that the goals of religion as he understood them could never be worked out within the then-established order. Deep from within that order he projected a dream, the logic of which would give to all the needful security. There would be room for all, and no man would be a threat to his brother. 'The kingdom of God is

within.' 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor.' The basic principles of his way of life cut straight through to the despair of his fellows and found it groundless. (*Jesus and the Disinherited*)

TO COME ALIVE

Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive and then go do that.

Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.



The core of my preaching has always concerned itself with the development of the inner resources needed for the creation of a friendly world of friendly men....It was important to me that individuals who were in the thick of the struggle for social change would be able to find renewal and fresh courage in the spiritual resources of the church. There must be provided a place, a movement, when a person would declare, "I choose!"... **God must be** all-inclusive, all-comprehending, and in a profound sense universal....Prayer is the method by which the individual makes his way to the temple of quiet within his own spirit and the activity of his spirit within its walls. It is also the readying of the spirit for communication with God. It is the total process of quieting down. Perhaps as important as prayer itself is the "readying" of the spirit for the experience.

There is something in every one of you that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself. It is the only true guide you will ever have. And if you cannot hear it, you will all of your life spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls.

During these turbulent times we must remind ourselves repeatedly that life goes on. This we are apt to forget. The wisdom of life transcends our wisdoms; the purpose of life outlasts our purposes; the process of life cushions our processes. The mass attack of disillusion and despair, distilled out of the collapse of hope, has so invaded our thoughts that what we know to be true and valid seems unreal and ephemeral. There seems to be little energy left for aught but futility. This is the great deception. By it whole peoples have gone down to oblivion without the will to affirm the great and permanent strength of the clean and the commonplace. Let us not be deceived.

It is just as important as ever to attend to the little graces by which the dignity of our lives is maintained and sustained. Birds still sing; the stars continue to cast their gentle gleam over the desolation of the battlefields, and the heart is still inspired by the kind word and the gracious deed.

There is no need to fear evil. There is every need to understand what it does, how it operates in the world, what it draws upon to sustain itself. We must not shrink from the knowledge of the evilness of evil. Over and over we must know that the real target of evil is not destruction of the body, the reduction to rubble of cities; the real target of evil is to corrupt the spirit of man and to give his soul the contagion of inner disintegration. When this happens, there is nothing left, the very citadel of man is captured and laid waste. Therefore, the evil in the world around us must not be allowed to move from without to within. This would be to be overcome by evil.

**To drink in the beauty that is within reach,
to clothe one's life with simple deeds of kindness,
to keep alive a sensitiveness to the movement of the spirit of God
in the quietness of the human heart and in the workings of the human mind —**
this is, as always, the ultimate answer to the great deception.

Excerpts from Howard Thurman's writings & speeches: *Howard Thurman: Essential Writings; Disciplines of the Spirit; With Head and Heart; Jesus and the Disinherited; The Creative Encounter: An Interpretation of Religion and the Social Witness; Meditations of the Heart; The Luminous Darkness*

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