



BEING: TO CENTER DOWN | HOWARD THURMAN (1899-1981)

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

Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman articulated the vision of spiritual discipline that informed the intellectual and moral basis of the Black freedom movement in the South. A spiritual activist, Thurman was not the one on the front lines during the marches; he was the moral anchor to whom people retreated to be refilled, a spiritual sage who connected contemplation and action, prayer and work, mysticism and social justice with a prophetic ability to combine unflinching realism, deep compassion, and stubborn hope.

CHILDHOOD: 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. (*With Head and Heart*, 9).

INJUSTICE: 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. (*With Head and Heart*)

TROUBLED TIMES: There seems to be a vast stirring of energy, malignant and unstructured, that catapults to the surface all kinds of disharmonies, conflicts, and disorders...The stirring of energy in myriad forms of unstructured malevolencies may well be the spirit of Life, of God at work on behalf of new life and perhaps a new creation on this planet. We must find our place in the areas of the new vitalities, the place where the old is breaking up and the new is being born. What a moment to be alive and, more importantly, to be aware! Of course, this we cannot do unless we are able to gather unto ourselves the wise caution of Fenelon, “Accustom yourself to remain at peace in the depth of your heart, in spite of your restless imagination.” God grant this for each of us. (*For the Inward Journey*)

PURPOSE: **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.**

Dialogue Lab:

Martin Luther King carried a dog-eared copy of Thurman’s Jesus and the Disinherited in his briefcase at all times as he worked in the civil rights movement.

***Where are you seeing or experiencing disharmony, conflicts, disorder right now?
What practice, person, place, community or resource is sustaining you?***

QUIET: The true purpose of all spiritual disciplines is to clear away whatever may block our awareness of that which is God in us...One of these is the practice of silence, or quiet. As a child I was accustomed to spend 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. (*Disciplines of the Spirit*)

LISTEN: 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. (speech)

PRACTICE: **We must find sources of strength and renewal for our own spirits, lest we perish.**

There is a wide spread recognition of the need for refreshment of the mind and the heart. It is very much in order to make certain concrete suggestions in this regard. First, we must learn to be quiet, to settle down in one spot for a spell. Sometime during each day, everything should stop and the art of being still must be practiced. For some temperaments, it will not be easy because the entire nervous system and body have been geared over the years to activity, to overt and tense functions. Nevertheless, the art of being still must be practiced until development and habit are sure.

If possible, find a comfortable chair or quiet spot where one may engage in nothing. There is no reading of a book or paper, no thinking of the next course of action, no rejection of remote or immediate mistakes of the past, no talk. One is engaged in doing nothing at all except being still. At first one may get drowsy and actually go to sleep. The time will come, however, when one may be quiet for a spell without drowsiness, but with a quality of creative lassitude that makes for renewal of mind and body.

Such periods may be snatched from the greedy demands of one's day's work; they may be islanded in a sea of other human beings; they may come only at the end of the day, or in the quiet hush of the early morning. We must, each one of us, find our own time and develop our own peculiar way of being quiet. We must lose our fear of rest.

There are some of us who keep up our morale (a belief in one's cause) by always being busy. **We had made a fetish of fevered action.** We build up our own sense of security by trying to provide a relentless, advantageous contrast between ourselves and others by the fevered, intense activities in which we are engaged. Actually, such people are afraid of quiet. Again, most activities become a substitute for the hard-won core of purpose and direction.

The time will come when all activities are depressing and heavy, and **the dreaded question, 'What's the use?'** will have to be faced and dealt with. The first step in the discovery of sources of strength and renewal is to develop the art of being still, physical and mental cessation from churning. This is not all, but it is the point at which we begin. (*Deep Is the Hunger*, 175-6)

How good it is to center down! To sit quietly and see one's self pass by!
The streets of our minds seethe with endless traffic; Our spirits resound with clashings, with noisy silences,
While something deep within hungers and thirsts for the still moment and the resting lull.
With full intensity we seek, ere the quiet passes, a fresh sense of order in our living;
A direction, a strong sure purpose that will structure our confusion and bring meaning to our chaos.
We look at ourselves in this waiting moment—the kinds of people we are.
The questions persist: what are we doing with our lives? – what are the motives that order our days?
What is the end of our doings? Where are we trying to go? Where do we put the emphasis and where are our values focused?
For what end do we make sacrifices? Where is my treasure and what do I love most in life?
What do I hate most in life and to what am I true? Over and over the questions beat in upon the waiting moment.
As we listen, floating up through all the jangling echoes of our turbulence,
there is a sound of another kind— A deeper note which only the stillness of the heart makes clear.
It moves directly to the core of our being. Our questions are answered.
Our spirits refreshed, and we move back into the traffic of our daily round
With the peace of the Eternal in our step. How good it is to center down!

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