

Howard Thurman was born in Daytona Beach, Florida in 1899 to his parents, Alice and Saul Solomon Thurman.¹ He was largely raised by his grandmother, who had been a slave.² Schools for black students at the time in Daytona Beach only went through seventh grade, and Thurman's family worked hard to send him to Jacksonville where he could finish high school.³

In 1926, Thurman “graduated with honors from Morehouse College and the Colgate Rochester Divinity School.”⁴ “In 1925, he became and [*sic*] ordained Baptist minister. His first pastorate, at Mount Zion Baptist Church in Oberlin, Ohio, was followed by a joint appointment as professor of religion and director of religious life at Morehouse and Spelman colleges in Atlanta, Georgia. Thurman spent the spring semester of 1929 studying at Haverford College with Rufus Jones, a Quaker mystic and leader of the pacifist, interracial Fellowship of Reconciliation. Here he began his journey towards a philosophy that stressed an activism rooted in faith, guided by spirit, and maintained in peace.”⁵ Thurman went on to describe “this time as the watershed event of his life. However, Jones' focus was global, and Thurman thought local. 'How can we manage the carking fear of the white man's power,' he asked, 'and not be defeated by our own rage and hatred?’”⁶

In 1932, “Howard University called him to become its first Dean of Andrew Rankin Chapel,” a position which he held until 1944.⁷

In 1935, Thurman traveled to India where he met with Mohandas Gandhi. Gandhi “challenged Thurman to rethink the idea of Christianity as a religion used by whites to keep black[s] 'in their place'

1 “Dr. Howard Thurman,” *Boston University Howard Thurman Center for Common Ground*, accessed May 27, 2017, <http://www.bu.edu/thurman/about/dr-thurman/>.

2 “This Far By Faith: People of Faith: Howard Thurman,” *Public Broadcasting Service (PBS)*, accessed May 27, 2017, http://www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/people/howard_thurman.html.

3 Ibid.

4 See note 1 above.

5 See note 2 above.

6 Ibid.

7 See note 1 above.

with images of a white Christ and ideas of a land of milk and honey in the great beyond. Hindu principles offered Indians a basis for nonviolent opposition to British power, he said. Did Christianity have a similar power to overcome white racism?”⁸ Thurman was impacted by this encounter with Gandhi for the rest of his life. In one of his seminal works, a book entitled, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949), “Thurman expounded on the idea of Jesus as a liberating figure, bringing new testament gospel together with non-violent resistance.”⁹ The book “offered ancient but eternal tools for warring with principalities and powers that oppress the poor, the dispossessed, and all people of the earth who hunger in flesh and spirit for the Kingdom of Heaven.”¹⁰

Thurman left his position at Howard University in 1944 and moved to San Francisco to co-found The Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples, “the first fully integrated, multi-cultural church in the U.S... [which was based] on the ideal of diverse community with a focus on a common faith in God, [and where] Thurman brought people of every ethnic background together to worship and work for peace.”¹¹ He remained here until 1953 when he moved back to the East Coast to take a position at Boston University as Professor of Spiritual Resources and Dean of Marsh Chapel. “As Dean of Marsh Chapel for 12 years, he ministered to 30,000 communicants of all faiths and nationalities.”¹²

Thurman served at Boston University until 1965 when he went back to the West Coast to found and direct the Howard Thurman Educational Trust in San Francisco, California. “He envisioned the Trust (a nonprofit public foundation) as providing scholarships for college undergraduates, supporting intercultural community and school activities, and disseminating his recorded and published works.”¹³ Directing this trust was the focus of his work, even through long periods of illness, until he passed away “at his home in the early morning hours of April 10, 1981” at the age of 81 years.¹⁴

8 See note 2 above.

9 Ibid.

10 See note 1 above.

11 See note 2 above.

12 See note 1 above.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

“Thurman was one of the leading theologians of his time, writing *The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death* and his opposition to segregation and support of the civil rights movement in *This Luminous Darkness*. Altogether, he wrote nineteen books, including an autobiography published in 1979” entitled *With Head and Heart*.¹⁵

It's specifically noteworthy that Thurman was a mentor of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, and a strong influence on him at the intersection of religious leadership and social justice activism, especially consequential to the successes of the Civil Rights Movement. “Each of these philosophers made sacrifices in order to serve the needs of 'those with their backs against the wall,' as Thurman put it in 1949, because they believed that we are 'enmeshed in an intricate fabric of co-dependence'.... The doctrine of the beloved community, whether theological[ly] or philosophical[ly] construed, constitutes for King and Thurman as well as Royce a philosophical theory of social freedom and a call to service... Until the very end, argues Fluker, 'King maintained the belief that authentic community would come to America through the redemptive struggles of black Americans and others who dared to follow their glorious example.'”¹⁶ This belief of King's may not have been formed without the influence of his mentor, Howard Thurman.

Thurman is quite essentially relevant today, especially as both racial and religious tensions continue to rise. His signature approach to integration in both of these arenas could do much to promote peace through justice, grounded in the meaning-making and cosmic understanding of an intentionally liberative theology. While influences on Thurman (like Gandhi) as well as pupils of Thurman (like King) have much more household name recognition across demographics of the USA today, we would do well to improve our awareness of Thurman himself and his distinct contributions to that lineage of healing religious and racial divides through a renewed sense of what the Beloved community means and its potential to serve as a framework to lead us forward into a more equitable age.

15 Bracks, Lean'tin, and Jessie Carney Smith, *African American Almanac: 400 Years of Triumph, Courage and Excellence* (Chicago: Visible Ink Press, 2012), p. 127, accessed May 27, 2017, *eBook Collection*, EBSCOhost.

16 Jensen, Kipton, "The Growing Edges of Beloved Community: From Royce to Thurman and King," *Transactions Of The Charles S. Peirce Society* 52, no. 2: 239-258, accessed May 28, 2017, *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost.

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