

**WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT? -
THE MYSTICISM OF HOWARD THURMAN**

A Paper prepared for Prairie Group by
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Introduction: I once had the honor to meet Howard Thurman. It was in the last years of his life, during the seventies, probably during my first settled ministry in Hayward California. Although my memory of the occasion frustrates me in its sparse details, what I do remember seems appropriate for the theme of this paper. I place the meeting in the last years of his life because Dr. Thurman was frail. He received us in an upholstered chair, covered in a blanket. He could not rise to greet us. His devoted wife Sue hovered nearby, clearly monitoring his energy and attentive to his needs. I was a new minister only scantily familiar with Dr. Thurman's writings and career, but aware and awake enough that I was honored and humbled to be invited to accompany a visit by a colleague who counted himself among Howard Thurman's countless friends.

What I remember the most about the visit was not the conversation but the light – and not the morning light in Thurman's San Francisco home, but rather the light that seemed to be coming from him. Swallowed up in his large armchair and blankets, only his arms and his face visible to us, the phrase that comes to mind as I remember this encounter with Dr. Thurman is from one of his own book titles – he projected a “luminous darkness”. The skin on his hand felt smooth and gentle as a baby's to my touch, and his face seemed to me to glow against the pillow that supported his head. It is one of the few times that I've had a personal experience of that aura that surrounds the faces of the saints, the Madonna, or Jesus in medieval art.

Was Howard Thurman a saint? He would scoff at the suggestion. Yet, if we turn to William James' ground breaking book on *The Varieties of Religious Experience* we find a

psychologist's description of the saintly character which resonates with all that we know of Howard Thurman. James wrote:

“ The saintly character is the character for which spiritual emotions are the habitual center of the personal energy...the features can be easily traced... They are these:

1. The feeling of being in a wider life than that of this world's selfish interests; and a conviction, not merely intellectual, but as it were sensible, of the existence of an Ideal Power.
2. A sense of the friendly continuity of the ideal power with our own life, and a willing self-surrender to its control.
3. An immense elation and freedom, as the outlines of the confining selfhood melt down.
4. A shifting of the emotional centre towards loving and harmonious affections, towards 'yes,yes' and away from 'no', where the claims of the non-ego are concerned.”ⁱ

In all we have read by and about Howard Thurman, these features of his life and thought are eminently recognizable. Still, I believe he would have turned away any effort to ascribe saintliness to him, as a flattery and a distraction – but would he do the same with the label “mystic”? Certainly not! Although he did not write extensively about mysticism *per se*, Thurman's autobiographical and theological writing often came back to his mystical experiences. There is much that crosses over between William James' description of the qualities of sainthood and the experience of the mystical. In this paper, I first want to explore what we should understand mystical experience to involve, and in taking a position on what mysticism is, to locate the mystical experiences and expressions of Howard Thurman on the map of the wide terrain of human mysticism.

In the second part of the paper, I want to explore how Thurman drew from his mystical experiences and instincts as the ground in which not only his theological stance but his prophetic voice was rooted. In doing so, I will conclude with the answer to the question that titles the paper: What's Love got to do with it?

Part 1: One of our theological identity networks in Unitarian Universalism calls itself the UU Mystics, and for them the word directly points to what we have affirmed as the first source of our faith: *direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life.* They go on to state broadly that mysticism's role in history is human transformation. I want to come back to our first UU source, and see how its words and the statement that "mysticism is about human transformation" match up with and help us understand Howard Thurman's mysticism. In order to enter into Thurman's experiences, however, an excursion into the philosophy of religion is necessary so that we can map the territory of mysticism and locate Howard Thurman on that map.

The word "mysticism" itself is initially discouraging, originating as it does from the Greek verb which means "to conceal". In a 1961 lecture on *Mysticism and the Experience of Love*ⁱⁱ Thurman himself drew upon and quoted from a 1933 book by Mary Anita Ewer, *A Survey of Mystical Symbolism* that helped him distinguish among various mysticisms. He said that the most important difference among mysticisms was based on two issues: first, how you perceive the greater unity of life, and second, the nature of the personal response exhibited by the mystic. Ewer outlines four kinds of mysticism based on these distinctions:

1. A loving response to a personal God that outreaches through direct encounter .
2. A contemplative response to a God known through the mind.
3. An obedient and confident response to a God known through inner experience.

4. A response seeking power and knowledge through occult sciences and technologies.

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (SEP) article on mysticism encourages us to use a narrow definition of mysticism, rather than a wide one which would include all religiously identified supersensory or subsensory experiences which are not accessible through standard introspection or sensory modes. Their advocacy is for a narrow definition of mysticism which would not include most typical religious experiences and emotions associated with doctrines, liturgies, visions, out of body experiences, or even the sense that one has encountered God as a presence or companion. This narrow definition of mysticism focuses on human experiences of unity, or non-duality, which may or may not be able to be expressed, and is probably best represented by the second and third types in Ewer's categories.

So where does Howard Thurman place his own experience among these descriptions? Though he quotes Ewer appreciatively, he does not place his own definition of mysticism neatly among her categories. He says instead: "...mysticism is defined as the response of the individual to a personal encounter with God within his own spirit."ⁱⁱⁱ As we shall see by the end of the paper, this is a personal definition that honors and includes the first three of the Ewer's categories, rejecting only the fourth.

Howard Thurman's telling of his life story begins with death, and with the night, and with the ocean. In those three primal experiences that he remembers from his earliest childhood and that he kept returning to throughout his life, the foundations of Thurman's mysticism were laid. In these experiences we find the beginnings of a justification for placing Thurman's mysticism within the narrow definition of non-duality. He wrote:

"The ocean and the night together surrounded my little life with a reassurance that could not be affronted by the behavior of human beings. The ocean at night gave me a sense

of timelessness, of existing beyond the reach of the ebb and flow of circumstances. Death would be a minor thing, I felt, in the sweep of that natural embrace.”

He goes on to describe the experience of watching ocean storms:

“Again, the boundaries of self did not hold me. Unafraid, I was held by the storms embrace. The experience of these storms gave me a certain overriding immunity against much of the pain with which I would have to deal in the years ahead when the ocean was only a memory. The sense held: I felt rooted in life, in nature, in existence.”^{iv}

This early experience of *self-dissolving* in response to the power of the natural world suggests that Thurman was at the beginning of his life an extrovertive mystic, that is, one who draws from the experience of the world, and particularly of nature as the source for unitive experience. But in the very next paragraph of the *Autobiography*, Thurman points to another place where his primal experience of nature’s unity led him into a new form of mystical experience, an introvertive form. He describes his childhood sense of strength and comfort while sitting against the oak tree in backyard, a tree so important to him that its picture appears in his autobiography on the same plate of photographs as that of his grandmother and mother. Thurman wrote:

“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 into the quiet places of my spirit, take out my bruises and 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.”^v

So where is God in these early unitive experiences? Was the young Thurman primarily a nature mystic, who was drawn to contemplative practices by his early experiences of retreat under his oak tree? God first appears actively in Howard’s autobiography in the

year 1910 when Halley's comet passed across the sky and terrified him, along with millions of others. Howard's mother reassured him by saying : "Nothing will happen to us, Howard. God will take care of us." In *Disciplines of the Spirit* , Thurman amplified the story and used it to introduce his reflections on prayer:

"In that moment, something was touched and kindled in me, a quiet reassurance that has never quite deserted me. As I look back on it, what I sensed then was the fact that what stirred in me was one with what created and controlled the comet. It was this inarticulate awareness that silenced my fear and stilled my panic. Here at once is the primary ground and basis of man's experience of prayer. I am calling it, for the purpose of this discussion, the 'givenness of God' as expressed in the hunger of the heart."^{vi}

I think the answer to the question "Where is God" lies in this "givenness". From his earliest years, God for Thurman was simply a given, taken for granted. Young Howard experienced God first as a Comforter in fear, and later as the Source of Creation, that made the ocean and the rivers and the night. The cultural context of African American Protestant Christianity proceeded then to shape Thurman in ways that he never had any desire to renounce. One of the great debates in the philosophy of religion is whether the contents of mystical experiences are in fact different from one human being to another, or whether the differences in the experiences are culturally determined. In the latter case, the argument is made that what mystics are touching, whether they are Christian, Buddhist, or Muslim is a common ground of non-dual human experience that transcends all cultural and doctrinal differences. Thurman explored this question his whole life, from his home within the Christian tradition. He struggled with it as he worked to create an inclusive theological mission statement for the Fellowship Church of all Peoples, and as he sought to express the universalism of his mystical experience from the pulpits of Christian churches. In one of his meditations "The Kingdom of Values", Thurman wrote:

“It is a truth recognized over and over again in various guises that the key to the meaning of life is found deep within each one of us, When Jesus insists that the Kingdom of God is within, he is affirming that which is a part of the common experience of the race. Incidentally, this is one of the unique things about Jesus: he calls attention again and again to that which is so utterly a part of the deep commonplace experience of life...

“The key to the meaning of life is within you. If you have a glass of water out of the ocean, all the water in the ocean is not in your glass, but all the water in your glass is ocean water.”^{vii}

Tracing Thurman’s early mystical experiences through the autobiography, I was struck by the way he wrote descriptively and in a matter-of-fact way about his baptism. The experience of being a member of the Christian community, and the obligations required of a Christian and the sense of self-worth being a Christian gave to young Howard was much more important to him than any experience of being saved from hell. It is in the ceremony of ordination, rather than the ceremony of baptism, that Thurman next writes about a mystical experience that changes his life:

“The ceremony of ordination was held at eight o’clock in the evening, and the moment of transcendental glory was for me the laying on of hands, which I had so strongly resisted. During the performance of this ancient and beautiful ritual ‘the heavens opened and the spirit descended like a dove. Ever since, when it seems I am deserted by the Voice that called me forth, I know that if I can find my way back to that moment, the clouds will lift and the path before me will once again be clear and beckoning.”^{viii}

Another important philosophical debate about mystical experience is whether and how it can be cultivated.^{ix} William James argued that two of the four marks of mystical experience were its “transiency” and its “passivity”.^x Challenging James’ views, from a perspective of both personal experience and academic integrity, was one of greatest modern writers about

mystical experience, Evelyn Underhill. Underhill argued with all of William James categories for understanding what mystical experience entails. She wrote:

“True mysticism is active and practical, not passive and theoretical. It is an organic life-process, something that the whole self does; not something as to which the intellect holds an opinion.

The “changeless One” is for the mystic..a living and personal Object of Love, never an object of exploration.

Living Union with this One..is a definite state or form of enhanced life. It is obtained neither from an intellectual realization of its delights, nor from the most acute emotional longings.”^{xi}

Evelyn Underhill’s claims help us understand Howard Thurman’s place among mystics. There is no question that Thurman was “active and practical” in his understanding of the place that mystical experience had in human life. It was not an activity that he associated with his intellect but something that he associated with sub-rational experience, primarily the cultivation of silence. Writing in *Disciplines of the Spirit*, Thurman specifically described the discipline and experience of the silence he practiced as a prelude to prayer. Yet throughout his writings, one comes away with the recognition that the active practice of silent meditation and contemplation was from his earliest years a deep well from which Thurman drew strength every day.

Underhill was most drawn to using the example of falling in love as a metaphor for what prompts mystical experience, and in this point she helps us understand Thurman’s mysticism as well. It was a love relationship with God, one that was actively pursued rather than passively received. In the second part of the paper I want to explore what love has to do with Thurman’s mysticism in greater depth. First, however, it is important to appreciate that Thurman believed you could not love anyone, whether another human being or God, until

you had come to terms with what it meant to be alone in the world. So often in the meditations, prayers, books, and mystical writings of Howard Thurman we are reminded that a critical part of being human is the experience of being alone in the world. All of us have at times felt locked inside our bodies, certain that there is no one else who experiences things the way we do or that understands what it is like to be me. Thurman invites us into that aloneness without dismissing or denying the fact that it can be a fearful place. He suggests that it is also a fruitful place, a creative place, to which we must go if we are to realize in the deepest possible way that even in our aloneness we are always connected to a life greater than our own, which he called God. Thurman wrote about his aloneness and his intimacy with God in a meditation titled “Friends I Knew Not”:

“Below the surface of all the activity and functioning in which life engages us, there is a level of disengagement when the individual is a private actor on a lonely stage. It is here that things are seen without their outer garbs – the seedlings of desires take quiet root, the bitter waters and the sweet springs find their beginnings, the tiny stirrings that become the raging tempests are seen to shimmer in the semi-darkness – this is the ‘region’, the ‘place’, the ‘clime’ where man is the lonely solitary guest in the vast empty house of this world.

“But this is not all of a man’s life; this is not the full and solid picture. The strands of life cannot be so divided that each can be traced to a separate source. There is no mine, there is no thine. When there is that which I would claim as my own, a second look, a subtle strangeness, something announces that there can never be anything that is my very own. Always moving in upon a man’s life is the friend whose existence he did not know, whose coming and going is not his to determine. The journeying takes many forms – sometimes it is in the vista that that opens before his mind because of lines written long before in an age he did not know; sometimes it is a simple encounter along the way when before his eyes the unknown stranger becomes the bearer of tidings that could be borne only by a friend.

Sometimes a deep racial memory throws into focus an ancient wisdom that steadies the hand and stabilizes the heart. Always moving in upon a man's life is the friend whose existence he did not know, whose coming and going is not his to determine. At last a man's life is his very own, *and* a man's life is never his alone."^{xii}

Writing in this way, Thurman reveals to us the tension between his aloneness and his unity with God. At times he apologizes for the anthropomorphization of the Divine, but the language of love and friendship is more powerful than any other to put this experience into words. Always he comes back to the necessity of avoiding intellectualizing such experiences. As dedicated and competent an intellectual as he was, Thurman never gave his intellectual life priority over the emotional, and saw the spiritual as the place where head and heart came together. That is where the title for the autobiography came from, and where it ends, with these words: “ ..there is a secret door which leads into the central place, where the Creator of life and the God of the human heart are one and the same...It is here that the meaning of the hunger of the heart is unified. The Head and the Heart are at last inseparable; they are lost in wonder in the One.”^{xiii}

Part 2: I mentioned that Evelyn Underhill's claims about what constitutes mystical experience were helpful to us in understanding Thurman's identity as a mystic, but I cheated a little by leaving out one of her claims in my initial description. Underhill wrote that the “..aims (of mysticism) are wholly transcendental and spiritual. It is in no way concerned with adding to, exploring, re-arranging or improving anything in the visible universe.”^{xiv} Underhill's assertion begs the question of whether Howard Thurman's prophetic voice and social activism were somehow disconnected from his spiritual practices, and his mystical experiences, or whether Underhill was wrong in her assessment of the meaning and the

purposes of mysticism. Mystics are often characterized in popular culture as “navel gazers” unconcerned about the heat and dust of social justice battles.

In Underhill’s defense, I think that her reference is to the mystic’s unflinching willingness to meet the world as it is, without illusions, whether they be doctrinal, emotional, or political. This acceptance of reality *as it is* does not necessarily mean that individuals or religious communities that draw nourishment from mystical roots are disinterested in the ethical implications of their experiences or the ability of mystical insights to improve the human condition. Howard Thurman wrote extensively on just these issues, and the foundation for this aspect of his career was laid in his early years through his relationship with the great Quaker teacher, mystic, and activist Rufus Jones.

A long-time professor at Haverford College, a founder of the American Friends Service Committee, a mentor not only to Howard Thurman but to Harry Emerson Fosdick, Rufus Jones was arguably the most influential Quaker theologian of the 20th century. Mathew Hedstrom gives us a concise summary of why Jones’ influence was so crucial in the kind of mystic that Howard Thurman became:

“Jones connected the psychological and the mystical with the social. One of the central themes of his scholarship in the history of mysticism is that mystical experience itself, as he put it, *flourishes best in groups*. This, of course, reflects more than anything else the communal mystical practice that is Quaker silent worship. As Jones phrased the same idea in (his book) *Social Law In the Spiritual World*, ‘No man can be holy unto himself.’

“With this understanding of the relationship of soul, self, and society, Jones was able to develop his concept of the nature of mysticism, the subject around which his life revolved, both professionally and personally. He grouped mystics into two classes: negation mystics and affirmation mystics. The first class sought what Abraham Maslow would later call “peak experiences,” the ecstatic rapture of union with the divine. As one may surmise, Jones was

not terribly impressed with this, which he regarded as spiritual escapism. Rather, he looked to the affirmation mystics for guidance. Such mystics, with whom he certainly hoped to include himself, ‘do not make vision the end of life, but rather the beginning . . . More important than the vision is obedience to the vision.’ For the affirmation mystic, the solitary, personal, inward, mystical experience, which for Jones always lay at the heart of spiritual life, was to be valued only insofar as it empowered the participant to service in the world.^{xv} (Jones quotes are from *Social Law in the Spiritual World* –published 1904.)

Howard Thurman stumbled into Jones’ writings by happenstance while at Oberlin College. He tells the story of picking up Jones’ book *Finding the Trail of Life* and being unable to put it down until he had finished it. Thurman came away from the experience of reading this one book convinced that he must rearrange his life to be able to study with this author. A few months later he had been accepted to study tuition free at Haverford College under Rufus Jones. The paragraphs in *With Head and Heart* that describe the work with Rufus Jones give us the most specific picture of the formal study of mysticism that Howard Thurman undertook and how Rufus Jones influenced his intellectual approach to mysticism and his personal practice within it:

“.. in the general field of mystical religion, he gave me carefully selected reading assignments and later listened to my reactions to the reading and discussed them with me. I wrote several papers, one on Spanish mystics, particularly Madame Guyon, and another, a definitive study of the mysticism of St. Francis of Assisi. My study at Haverford was a crucial experience, a watershed from which flowed much of the thought and endeavor to which I was to commit the rest of my working life. These months defined my deepest religious urges and framed in meaning much of what I had learned over the years. During the entire time with Rufus, issues of racial conflict never arose, for the fact of racial differences was never dealt with at the conscious level. The ethical emphasis in his interpretations of

mystical religion dealt primarily with war and peace, the poverty and hunger of whole populations, and the issues arising from the conflicts between nations. Paradoxically, in his presence, the specific issues of race with which I had been confronted all my life as a black man in America seemed strangely irrelevant.”^{xvi}

Throughout his life, whenever Thurman wrote specifically about mysticism, his indebtedness to Rufus Jones was evident and acknowledged. In 1939, a decade after completing his year of study with Jones at Haverford, during his tenure at Howard University, Thurman was invited to lecture at Eden Theological Seminary in St. Louis. The lectures were published under the title “Mysticism and Social Change” and two of them are included in the collected volume *A Strange Freedom*. In these lectures we find the earliest comprehensive reflections that Howard Thurman published on the relationship between mysticism and social ethics in his personal theology. His indebtedness to Jones is obvious, but also to Gandhi, for these reflections followed not long after the Thurmans’ voyage to India and the study of the Mahatma that Thurman made both before and after he had the opportunity to meet him personally.

“Mysticism and Social Change” begins where Thurman’s autobiography begins and where he often would start in any meditations or reflections on mysticism: with the primal experience of being alone in the world. This is a fact of psychological development that every human being confronts as part of childhood individuation, but Thurman believed that it was the beginning of spiritual development as well. He called it “the paradox of conscious life the awful sense of being an isolate, independent and alone...while on the other hand is the necessity to feel oneself as a primary part of all life...”^{xvii}

In the lectures at Eden, however, he distinguishes between the solitary experience of the mystic and the life that a mystic must live in human community:

“Ultimately I am alone”, Thurman said, “so vastly alone that in my aloneness is all the life of the universe. In such moments of profound awareness, I seem to be all that there is in the world, and all that there is seems to be I...all tensions are resolved – only the vision, the experience itself seems to be real but this is not for long. (The mystic) knows that he cannot escape the fundamental problem of ethics as it works itself out in his time-space relationships, namely, what is the true end of man and how may that end influence the conduct of his life... The life of the mystic is worked out in the world of men and things.”^{xviii}

Despite the poetry of this beginning, Thurman is quickly specific about making an important distinction, that the mystic experiences “unity”, but not “identity” with the divine, and that this experience of unity is not sustainable over time. His choice of words about what remains of mystical experiences is of interest here – he says that mystical experience leaves “a deposit” in the personality. A person is transformed by mystical experience. The memory of unity invites disciplines that seek to remove barriers to that experience of unity being engaged again and again. The experience of unity becomes the foundation of a vision for a life lived in God, rather than in self. Thurman puts it this way:

“Now things are not ethical or unethical merely because they aid or take away from achieving individuality but because they are now viewed as ways that lead to the mount of vision or away from the mount of vision. The meaning of life for (the mystic) is in the vision of the good which he has thoroughly experienced. The vision makes mandatory that he *be* good so as to stand ever in candidacy for the reception of God.”^{xix}

So the discipline of the mystic is both a solitary one of engaging with all that is personal that separates one from God, and at the same time a social and communal one of offering humble and disinterested service to other persons. The mystic “discovers that he is a person, and a personality in a profound sense can only be achieved in a milieu of human

relations. Personality is something more than mere individuality – it is a fulfillment of the logic of individuality in community.”^{xx}

So far, Thurman is completely within the teachings of Rufus Jones in his description of the affirmation mystic, directly quoting Jones’ assertion that “only through the finite in the Infinite to be found.” In the next lecture, Thurman goes on to build the case for the personal self-interest of the mystic in unity with God being coincident with the imperative for social redemption and transformation. He points out that “much of the limitations and corruptions of his own life of which (the mystic) seeks to rid himself through discipline and rigorism is due to the fact of his belonging to a community of men and interests which foster the very thing he discovers beclouding his vision.”^{xxi} Then he places the imperative for a mystic’s commitment to social transformation at the heart of his own tradition. Thurman writes: “It is basic to the Christian tradition that social sin and personal sin are bound up together in an inexorable relationship, so that it is literally true that no man can expect to have his soul saved alone...It is not only the socialist but also the affirmation mystic or the man seeking the fullness of the vision of God who must say truly ‘While there is a lower class, I am in it. While there is a criminal element, I am of it. While there is a man in jail, I am not free.’ The distinction between personal selfishness and social selfishness, between personal religion and social religion which we are wont to make, must forever remain artificial and unrealistic.”^{xxii}

The rest of the lecture reads like a theological preface to a handbook for community organizing. Now he not only echoes Rufus Jones, but Gandhi and Marx. Thurman argues individuals cannot become persons in society when they are faced with a “life and death struggle for bare security”. He says that those who possess the means of production cannot be expected to act in anything other than their own self-interest, and that organizing within the body politic so that its collective will is changed to distribute economic resources more fairly

in absolutely essential. “Some method must be achieved by which the sufferers in the situation can act so as to shock the oppressor into a state of upheaval and insecurity. This is possible only when the oppressed individuals can become persons in a social classification, and a basis of equality can accordingly be established between them and the oppressor.”^{xxiii} “When that happens” he says, “the insight of the mystic as to the ultimate meaning of human life will have practical relevancy without seeming to be unrealistic, romantic, or sentimental.”^{xxiv}

In articulating a social ethics of mysticism, Howard Thurman was consistently true to the particularities of his own experience as a 20th century African American. He embodied the paradox that he would often write about between being alone in his own skin at a particular point in human history and at the same time experiencing himself as part of an eternal unity that he experienced as a common ground for all humanity and all of life.

Twenty-two years later, Howard Thurman was invited to deliver a memorial lecture names for his old teacher Rufus Jones at the Baltimore Friends School. Now on the other side of his parish ministry experiences at the Fellowship Church, serving as dean of Marsh Chapel, Thurman returned to the themes he had taken up at Eden Seminary in a lecture he titled: *Mysticism and the Experience of Love*. This lecture would become the foundation for the reflections on this theme published in the 1963 volume *The Disciplines of the Spirit*.^{xxv} quoted earlier. In these writings, Thurman continued to articulate what he called the “ethical imperative of religious experience”: “The experience of God reconciles all the warring parts that are ultimately involved in the life of every man as against whatever keeps alive the conflict, and its work is healing ever redemptive... This is the miracle of religious experience – the sense of being totally dealt with, completely understood and utterly cared for. This is what a man seeks with his fellows. This is why the way of reconciliation and the way of love finally are one way.”^{xxv}

Here then is the connection between Thurman's mysticism, his prophetic voice and his pastoral ministry, and the answer to the title question of this paper: "What's love got to do with it?" Despite his intellectual engagement with mystical experience, and his appreciation for non-theistic contemplative mysticism, Thurman's own mystical experience was always felt and remembered in very personal terms, and therefore was easy to access and engage in his everyday relational life with other persons. This "friend" he does not know, this friend that he calls God, that comes to him in the wisdom and poetry of the ages, in the unexpected encounter, and in the most personal intimate moments of our life, is one with the memories, knowledge and wisdom we carry, that go deeper than our own experience. A Humanist might be willing to say that the friend is Love, and our lineage of Universalist forebears would say the distinction is irrelevant, that God is Love and God is known first and foremost through how we experience and act in love.

In moving forward from the ultimate human experience of unity, this mystical experience of loving and being loved by God, Howard Thurman tells us that we are required to take up a discipline and be bound by an ethic. What is the discipline and ethic of love? Thurman answers the question this way:

"In the first place it is something that I must deliberately want to do. ..In the second place, I must find the opening or openings through which my love can flow into the life of another, and at the same time locate in myself openings through which their love can flow into me. Most often this involves an increased understanding of another person. This is arrived at by the disciplined use of imagination. ..Very glibly we are apt to use such words as 'sympathy', 'compassion', 'sitting where they sit', but in experience it is genuinely to be rocked to one's foundations. We resist making room for considerations that will bend us out of the path of preoccupation with ourselves, our needs, our problems. We corrupt our imagination when we give it range only over our own affairs." ^{xxvi}

In his reflections on love as a discipline, we realize that Thurman is talking about something equally applicable to interpersonal and to political life. All committed partners eventually discover that the love they share has to go deeper than romantic and sexual attraction. Every long term relationship moves through hills and valleys of intensity, and ages and stages of growth. In couples one partner can at times be more needy than the other. Changes associated with work and career can alter the energy available for the relationship. Personality traits once endearing can become annoying, and patterns of behavior that you thought would change or that you could change over time appear to be fixed.

During these times, the love between partners becomes more of a discipline, in the sense that you have to make a conscious choice to keep those expressions and gestures of love coming. They don't just happen as easily or as frequently. Although this sounds like it makes the relationship something different than it was before, and although many people whose relationships don't survive these changes would tell you that "things changed", that they fell "out of love", the challenge that comes with practicing love as a discipline actually can have profound spiritual consequences. For those who practice love as a discipline with one partner to whom they are committed will come to realize that learning this practice can transform their understanding of *how to love*, not *only* someone who loves you, but everyone and everything else on that planet.

That's a big leap, but according to Howard Thurman, imagining loving everyone is at the heart of the discipline of love. He says "We corrupt our imagination when we give it reign only over our own affairs". In this way of thinking about imagination, we are invited to take our own most intimate and meaningful experiences of love and to choose to believe that not only does everyone on the planet want those experiences, but that they have the capacity to have them, and that they are more likely to have them if those around them behave in loving

ways. This progression has been described in the wisdom literature and scriptures of many cultures, and it is wisdom deeply ingrained within African American spirituality and culture. You begin with nurturing the capacity to love within your own self. By respecting and loving yourself, you will recognize when love and respect is genuine in others. Families are the laboratory of love, the culture in which it becomes abundant. Mature family love is not just about you and what you need. Community is where love multiplies, as the power of individual and family love is increased many fold. But the disciplines of love in community become more demanding.

It is in community that we begin to see how love works as an ethic, and not just a personal discipline you do because you get love back from someone, not just something you do because you have a duty to the family of your own making. In community we recognize that there are ways of living and working together that make a community flourish. The word “ethics” could be defined as “what works for communities”. Without ethics communities cannot survive. We may write down these ethical best practices or laws and create systems to enforce them, but when we apply the language of ethics to describe love in community, we realize that this is what the great religious teachers have pointed towards across cultures and throughout the ages. When love rooted in mystical experience becomes an ethical practice at the center of how a community understands itself, it has the power to change entire cultures.

The contemporary theologian Matthew Fox, known for his articulation of a Creation Spirituality outside of the traditional doctrines of his Christian Catholic background, has argued that our conventional Western religions deny this mystical ethic of love at their peril. He writes:

“Mysticism doesn’t fit well with patriarchal education and religion...mysticism cannot fit into the wineskin of exclusively left brain religion or education. Thus we have so

little of it even among our trained religious leaders. ... We are out of touch with our 'true selves'. A civilization that denies the mystic is no civilization at all. It offers no hope and no adventure, no challenge worthy of sacrifice and joy to its youth or its artists. It offers no festivity, no Sabbath, no living ritual to its people. And no deep healing.” ^{xxvii}

Practicing mystical love as an ethic for a culture usually conflicts with the typical agenda of nation states and what they perceive as their self-interest. Here again, Howard Thurman has vividly described what is at stake in this conflict. Here he is writing in 1963 in the context of American segregation, but we can just as easily apply these words to the dynamics of today's Middle East, to today's debate about immigration policy, or to trade policy with China. These words of Howard Thurman remain as alive today as they were then:

“Any structure of society..that does not provide maximum opportunities for free-flowing circulation among one another, works against social and individual health. Any attitudes, private or group which prohibit people from coming into “across the board” contact with each other work against the implementation of the love ethic. So considered, segregation, prescriptions of separation, are a disease of the human spirit and the body politic. It does not matter how meaningful the tight circle of isolated security may be, in which individuals or groups move. The very existence of such circles, whether regarded as a necessity of religious faith, political ideology, or social purity, precludes the possibility of the experience of love as part of the necessity of man's life. The experience of love is either a necessity or a luxury. If it is a luxury, it is expendable; if it be a necessity, then to deny it is to perish.”^{xxviii}

So what's love got to do with it? Everything! It is the practical personal and political application of Howard Thurman's mysticism. Not only is love not “just a second hand emotion as described in the song lyrics– when all is said and done it is not just an emotion at

all. Like water and food, it is a necessity of human life and needs to be nurtured and conserved and treasured like the other natural resources on which our lives depend, and it must be understood as a political strategy for social reform and transformation expressed in non-violence. Walter Fluker and Carolyn Tumber write that for Howard Thurman:

“Love is synonymous with reconciliation and expresses the ‘intent’ of God. Reconciliation begins within when the individual’s need to be cared for and understood is met in encounter with God. The experience of reconciliation with God becomes the ground and moral mandate for sharing one’s experience in relations with others and in society. For Thurman, whatever impedes the actualization of community, either personally or socially, must be confronted and transformed into a higher synthesis of love. The way to the reconciliation of society is through redemptive suffering rooted in love or non-violence.”^{xxix}

In this summary, we see clearly the place that Howard Thurman’s mystical theology and ethic of love holds in 20th century history, as both a theological and indeed a physical bridge between two spiritual and political giants who are so often paired in our hearts and our conversation because of their common commitment to non-violence, Gandhi and Martin Luther King. Thurman’s encounters with them were brief but important. He met Gandhi in 1936, during his mature years when the Mahatma was withdrawn from politics to focus on teaching *ahimsa* and was fighting the caste system in India rather than the British. Thurman first met King when he was a young Ph.D candidate at Boston University prior to taking his first church, and King acknowledged that he was deeply influenced by Thurman both personally and through the printed word. In Thurman’s life and writing, we find an articulation of the mystical foundation for social transformation that was more complete than any that Gandhi or King ever attempted. We find a student of Gandhi who was able to draw upon the African American experience and religious sensibilities to help make a way for

Martin King to appear. We find in the end a human being who in the fullness of his life experience was able to communicate the depths of life to the academy, the church, the family, and the individual throughout an entire lifespan with equal ease in a way that Gandhi or King within their time-bound and controversial careers could never hope to do.

Ultimately, Howard Thurman's mystical ethic returns full circle to surrender, a surrender that was familiar to Gandhi and to King. As the end of his 1936 lectures on *Mysticism and Social Change*, Thurman offered this conclusion:

“At long last it may be true that life is its own restraint, that the seeds of destruction are inherent in the nature of evil and that what one individual grasps as the ultimate end of life is somehow now being worked out through long weary stages in the revelation of God in the progress of history. It is this faith and this confidence that makes the affirmation mystic see that working and waiting are two separate activities of the human spirit but he who works for the new day in that act waits for its coming which can be achieved by God and God, alone.”^{xxx}

ENDNOTES

ⁱ James, William *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Penguin Books, London (1982) pp 272-273

ⁱⁱ Thurman, Howard, *Mysticism and the Experience of Love*, Pendle Hill Pamphlets, Wallingford PA 1961

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., P. 6

^{iv} Thurman, Howard *With Head and Heart*, Harcourt Brace NY (1979) p.8

^v Ibid. p. 9

^{vi} Thurman, Howard *Disciplines of the Spirit*, Friends United Press, Richmond IN (1963) p. 63

^{vii} Thurman, Howard *For the Inward Journey* Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich NY (1984) pp 54-55

^{viii} Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, p. 58

^{ix} One footnote in Thurman's career's and to the general direction of this paper nevertheless has a synchronicity that I enjoy. One of the 20th century's most notorious and creative scientific experiments around mystical experience was the 1962 Good Friday experiment conducted in the basement of Marsh Chapel at Boston University, by Phd candidate Dr. Walter Pahnke, a student of Dr. Timothy Leary of Harvard. Twenty

theological students from Andover-Newton were assembled in the basement chapel as Howard Thurman was preparing to begin his Good Friday Service in the main sanctuary of Marsh Chapel upstairs. Half the students were given the psychedelic drug psilocybin and half were given a nicotine placebo. With Dr, Huston Smith as one of their guides, one who in fact received the psilocybin himself in this double blind experiment, the students were invited to relax and listen to Thurman's liturgy and Good Friday sermon. After the experiment was over, all were asked to fill out a survey on their experience that was based on the William James categories of mystical experience. The goal of the experiment was to see how the psychedelic experience matched up with the most widely used analysis of the elements of mystical experience drawn by James from his reading in traditional mystical literature. Thurman's knowledge of and participation in the planning of the experiment is not acknowledged in his own writings, but it is a reasonable assumption that his consent would have been necessary and a reasonable presumption that his interest in the study would have been intense.

^x James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* P. 361

^{xi} Underhill, Evelyn *Mysticism* One World Publications 1999 (original from 1911) – reprinted in *Mountain Record* Fall 2009 , Zen Mountain Monastery, Mt Tremper NY

^{xii} From *The Inward Journey*, Harper and Row NY (1961).

^{xiii} Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, p. 269

^{xiv} Underhill, Evelyn, op. cit.

^{xv} Hedstrom, Matthew “Rufus Jones and Mysticism for the Masses“ *Cross Currents*, Summer2004, Vol. 54, N 2

^{xvi} Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, p. 76-77

^{xvii} Thurman, Howard *The Search for Common Ground*, Friends United Press, Richmond IN (1971) p. xiv

^{xviii} Fluker, W. and Tumber C , eds. *Strange Freedom* Beacon Press, Boston (1998) p 109

^{xix} *Ibid.*, p 112

^{xx} *Ibid.* p. 116

^{xxi} *Ibid.* p. 117

^{xxii} *Ibid.* p. 117

^{xxiii} *Ibid.* p. 122

^{xxiv} *Ibid.* p. 121

^{xxv} *Ibid.* p. 179-180

^{xxvi} *Ibid.* p. 182

^{xxvii} Fox, Matthew: *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ* (Harper and Row NY 1988)

^{xxviii} Fluker and Tumber, eds. *Strange Freedom*, p. 184

^{xxix} Fluker and Tumber, eds. *Strange Freedom*, p. 163

^{xxx} Fluker and Tumber, eds. *Strange Freedom*, p. 123