

*Would Unitarian Universalism be Relevant to Howard Thurman Today?*

*WHAT GROUNDS OUR HOPE?*

by

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INTRODUCTION: As you may have already noted, I have reversed the question I was assigned. Humbled by the breadth of Howard Thurman's work, and the significance of the work which has followed his, I have wondered what he would think of Unitarian Universalism today. It is my hope that this paper will justify the liberty I have taken with my assignment.

Like many, I thought I knew Howard Thurman. I knew the broad outlines of his career. I knew him as an oft-quoted, deeply spiritual man. I 'used' his words in services. The poetry and prose of his eloquent words often could convey just what I was looking for in a sermon or a newsletter column.

I knew him as a source for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and honored his work in shaping King's depth of spirit, even as I understood little about how or if it shaped King's public power. I did not understand the 'apostolic succession' of nonviolent resistance between Gandhi, through Thurman to King.

Nor did I know the importance of Rufus Jones, the great Quaker thinker, to Thurman. Rufus Jones had been an early influence on my life as I left the Baptist church. I did not know the connection.

But perhaps most interestingly, I did not know the work of Walter Earl Fluker or Catherine Tumber, who edited *A Strange Freedom*<sup>1</sup>.

Through them, I came to understand the power and import of Thurman's work *as a whole*. Fluker and Tumber, in very different paths, have carried Thurman's work forward and shaped it in ways that are making an important difference in our current times. I will refer in this paper, appropriately, to Thurman's work but I will also refer to Tumber (and also with reference to Fluker) to answer the important question for us: Would Unitarian Universalism be relevant to Howard Thurman as we understand him today?

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<sup>1</sup> . Walter Earl Fluker and Catherine Tumber, eds.. *A Strange Freedom: The Best of Howard Thurman on Religious Experience and Public Life*.(Introduction) Beacon Press. Boston.1998.

I will answer this question in two parts:

- (1) Grounding in the particular and functioning in the universal.
- (2) Forging an American Democratic Faith after *The Broken Covenant*

## Part 1. GROUNDING IN THE PARTICULAR AND FUNCTIONING IN THE UNIVERSAL

I take the form of the first topic from Martin Marty's *Forward to A Strange Freedom* edited by Walter Earl Fluker and Catherine Tumber. In it he says, in an effort to locate Thurman, that "for all their (referring to mystics in general) search for the *unum*—for participation and absorption in the One, the Whole, or God-life—they tend to use the raw material of particular traditions."<sup>2</sup>

For Howard Thurman, this particular tradition was Christianity. Even though he had vowed never to have anything to do with the church after an evangelical preacher "prayed his Father into hell" at the funeral; even though he found nature far more nourishing than the people around him—still he grew up in the midst of the rhythms and rituals of the Black church and the love of his Mother and Grandmother. The stories and themes of Christianity were carved deep within his being.

So were the forms and functions of the church. Not only was he baptized, but he was trained to lead a prayer meeting, raise a hymn, and pray in public as a boy.<sup>3</sup> He said, "Looking back, it is clear to me that the watchful attention of my sponsors in the church served to enhance my consciousness that whatever I did with my life *mattered*."<sup>4</sup>

I do not wish to repeat the paper on Thurman's mysticism which has been assigned (and at this point will have been read and discussed). I do, however, wish to point out the importance of Thurman's religious particularity in his formation, which served him well in his later multi-cultural and universalizing work.

Marty says, "They (mystics) not only partly transcend these traditions but rework them into idiosyncratic visions that, when they appear to be valid at all, turn out to be universal in grasp."<sup>5</sup> He says, "above all (Thurman's spirituality) is "moored". . . (it) offers an anchor, a harbor from which one departs for the high seas and to which one returns, changed. Thurman visited many ports, spiritually,

<sup>2</sup> Martin Marty. *A Strange Freedom*, Walter Earl Fluker and Catherine Tumber, eds., "Introduction" p. xi.

<sup>3</sup> Howard Thurman. *With Head and Heart: An Autobiography*. p.19.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p, 20

<sup>5</sup> Marty. p. xi

but he is safely at home in the one that gives him access to the figure and scope of Jesus of Nazareth.”<sup>6</sup>

We must start here as Unitarian Universalists if we are to claim any part of Thurman’s legacy as important to our own faith and public work today, and if we are to think that Thurman would find us relevant to the work he began. Thurman’s life was spent in an ever-larger circle of inclusion. He met Gandhi as a companion in the struggle for justice and as a companion in religious depth. He worked to create an inter-cultural inter-racial church. He was able to speak in the public square. He was able to do it because he spoke from a core of strength, grounded in Jesus of Nazareth, and the God of the Prophets.

The question for us when we consider Thurman’s life as an example is: How do we raise children up in the particularities of a tradition with a scripture, a narrative, rituals, and formative tasks in ways that will lead them to be ever more inclusive and multi-faith in scope? As Marty says, most mystics change over time, sometimes idiosyncratically. We cannot predict what sort of path this will take. But it is rare to find a person who has become spiritually mature and can meet others across religions in a common understanding of faith, who has not been grounded in the particularities of a tradition.

Some of us who have come to Unitarian Universalism through a different faith tradition can make our own transitions. But until fairly recently (as history unfolds) Unitarians and Universalists were raised in a largely Christian context and from within that context, grew a sense of spiritual universalism.

In an intervening period, however, in a quest to be inclusive, we have found ‘the particular’ to be more and more troubling. This formula, if you will, of being “moored” and “grounded” in the particular experiences and formative events of a specific tradition, and then moving into ever larger circles of understanding serves the generation well which first undertakes the exhilarating and challenging path of inclusivity and liberation. The generations which follow, however, have a harder time being moored since their mooring tends to be more to a concept than a particular religious experience or tradition. In our Unitarian Universalist tradition we often find ourselves attempting to find mooring in the *concept* of inclusivity. While inclusivity can be soul-satisfying and challenging, it does not moor a community. While speaking to the universal it often fails to provide particular rituals, or developmental challenges for its children. It finds it difficult

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid p. xiii

to provide a context within which a congregation or denomination can measure itself, or choose its priorities, or define ways to be faithful.

I imagine that Howard Thurman would find the organizing of our faith around the concept of inclusivity compelling. At the same time I believe he would be perplexed at our often-reactive rejection of traditional theological language, stories, and rituals in which he was primarily grounded.

Surprisingly, it has been our work with Community Organizing Groups which has brought some of us full circle as we have attempted to be a faithful voice in the public square. Those of us who have participated in Industrial Areas Foundation, or Gamaliel to name two congregationally based organizing groups, have found ourselves praying in the public square, finding common language and experience with people whose language we remember but in many cases do not use when we are in our own congregations. A conversation is often heard among UUs involved in multi-faith organizing groups about whether to protest the use of religious language (in prayers for example) which is particular. (i.e., praying ‘in Jesus’ name.’) Is it therefore exclusive, we ask ourselves? We have, in my experience, provided a ‘good example’ for interfaith language when we pray “in the name of all that is Holy” or “All that is loving”. But in the end it seems ironic to me that we struggle with the language of particularity in our congregations, and with the language of inclusivity in the public square.

Thurman would be interested in our efforts but I expect, in large part, would not understand what would be the center or ground of our experience out of which our need to be inclusive would arise.

Let me draw out this point by quoting from a column Catherine Tumber wrote in the May/June 2007 issue of the *Boston Review* called “The Proper Place for Religion in Politics”. It is subtitled, “The limitations of reason and human will.”

Tumber quotes Jim Wallis (uncited) when he says, “Why do so many liberals seem supportive of religious language when it is invoked by black civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr., but recoil when such language is employed by white political leaders?”

Part of the liberal recoil is appropriate, Tumber says. It comes from our felt belief that at least some of the use of religious language by white political leaders is a method to make connections or gather power, and it comes across as ingenuous or fawning.

The use of particular religious language in the public square by Howard Thurman, and by Martin Luther King, Jr. was not a misunderstanding of religious particularity and literalism, according to Tumber. She says, “King’s own social justice ministry was not crafted for politics but rooted in a sense of cosmic struggle that grounded hope itself.”<sup>7</sup>

Thurman would appropriately ask of us whether our religious language, even in moments of solidarity with the cause at hand, is crafted for politics (or substitute, perhaps, inclusion) or whether it has been rooted in an authentic experience of *cosmic struggle that grounds our hope* (emphasis mine) ?

Thurman would ask what grounds our hope.

Tumber continues, “Learning from King, contemporary religious progressives would do well to look for signs of religious integrity—a mood, a set of convictions, an orientation particular to religion—*without using a political prism* (emphasis mine). Among them might be included a double consciousness of knowing yet not knowing God; a humility before the majesty of the heavens; a sense of worldly alienation that dares hope for reconciliation; a sense of mystery breaking in on the prosaic; an understanding, with Kierkegaard, that faith often requires a “leap”; a reckoning with the limitations of life that surpasses stoic resignation; a sense of a cosmic future that will outlive us upon which to base present hope. Without at least some of these elements, which capture God’s immensity, religion loses its shape and becomes all too malleable to human purposes.”<sup>8</sup>

Tumber reminds us that Thurman, King, and other authentic religious and political leaders of the civil rights era were using a religious prism to speak of social issues. Our people would be counseled well to tend to this distinction when we are tempted to abandon traditional and particular language, rituals and practices of faith in favor of universal concepts upon which to ground ourselves. Concepts, while interesting, will not necessarily stand the test of time or trial. We may come, in time, to find that our beloved liberal religious tradition has been subverted into a faith all too malleable to human purposes which may be noble at the time, but not grounded in enough depth to sustain either the cause at hand, or the tradition which supports it.

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<sup>7</sup> Catherine Tumber. *Boston Review*. May/June 2007. *The Proper Place for Religion in Politics*.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*

Part One: Conclusion: Thurman would find us weak on two fronts. A thorough reading of Thurman on the issue of the particular and the universal would help our members:

1. Come to an understanding that they could live within the language, rituals, and spiritual disciplines of our historical tradition, while at the same time acknowledging the universality of faith and hope; that particularity and universality are not exclusive in religion, but are in fact necessary each to the other. (*Particularity* to ground and moor our perspective and practice and *universality* to prevent idolatry and exclusivity.)
2. In the public square they would come to understand the use of religious language as reflective of a struggle for religious integrity, not as a tool for accumulating power—and test the use of such language, no matter what its source, on the basis of that understanding.

## PART TWO: Forging an American Democratic Faith after *The Broken Covenant*

In the mid-1970s, Robert Bellah, sociologist of religion, published a small book, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial*.<sup>9</sup> In it, he made the case that America had been founded on the basis of the belief that it was *The New Israel*, *The City on the Hill*, and that the founding generations were *God's Chosen People*. The texts he uses would be familiar to all of us, most principally the sermon preached by John Winthrop on board ship in 1630 before landing in the new world.<sup>10</sup>

He goes on to say that the place of the group, particularly groups that differed significantly from the majority of the early colonists, was just as significant to the *mythos* as the place of the pious pilgrims. He says,

In 17<sup>th</sup>-century America the commonest way to make the distinction between white and black was to speak of Christians and Negroes. On the one hand being a Christian meant a deep commitment to the oneness of man; on the other it meant the right of Christian Europeans to enslave or destroy any who differed radically from them in belief, custom, and complexion. The dialectic between universalism and particularism, between inclusion and exclusion is found among all peoples. But nowhere more than in America has a universal conception of man existed side by side with such harsh and brutal exclusions.<sup>11</sup>

Bellah quotes Emerson. He says,

In 1878 Emerson stated the cultural assumption well when he said, "Opportunity of civil rights, of education, of personal power, and not less of wealth; doors wide open. . . invitation to every nation, to every race and skin, . . . hospitality of fair field and equal laws to all. Let them compete and success to the strongest, the wisest, and the best. The land is wide enough, the soil has bread for all."

There is no need to question Emerson's sincerity, (says Bellah) but there is need to question his empirical accuracy.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Bellah. *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial*. Seabury Press. 1975.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. pp. 13-15.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. pp. 87-88.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. pp. 90-91.

We have read, for these meetings, the history of Thomas Jefferson and the slave power by Garry Wills, which makes the same point citing specific events around the creation of the founding documents and the power structure in the new government.<sup>13</sup>

It is into this context and this tragic history that we return to the life and work of Howard Thurman. He reflects the conflict (which he embodied as an American Christian Negro) most specifically in his autobiography, when he speaks of an invitation to go to India.

My central concern was whether I could in good conscience go to India, or any other missionary field, as a representative of the Christian religion as it was projected from the West, and primarily from America. I did not want to go to India as an apologist for a segregated American Christianity, yet how could I go under the auspices of the Student Christian Movement without seeming in fact to contradict my intention?

...I did not think I could go to India and speak my own mind, interpreting Christianity as I felt it and thought it. I was sure that I would be bound by assumption to interpret Christianity from within the framework of *American* Christianity, which, from my point of view, lacked much that was fundamental to the genius of the faith itself.<sup>14</sup>

Thurman's concerns about what the trip represented were realized very soon after his arrival in India, following a lecture he gave at the Law College in Colombo, Ceylon. The chairman invited him to coffee following the lecture and said,

...I am convinced you are an intelligent man. What are you doing here? Your forebears were taken from the west coast of Africa as slaves, by Christians. They were sold in America, a Christian country, to Christians. They were held in slavery for some two hundred years by Christians. They were freed as a result of economic forces rather than Christian idealism, by a man who was not himself a professing Christian.

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<sup>13</sup> Garry Wills. *Negro President: Jefferson and the Slave Power*. Houghton Mifflin. 2005.

<sup>14</sup> Howard Thurman. *With Head and Heart*. Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1979 pp. 103-104.

Since that time you have been brutalized, lynched, burned, and denied most civil rights by Christians, and Christianity is unable to have any effect on your terrible plight.<sup>15</sup>

Thurman, in part because he had struggled with the very question before ever going to India, replied,

It is far from my purpose to symbolize anyone or anything. I think the religion of Jesus in its true genius offers me a promising way to work through the conflicts of a disordered world. I make a careful distinction between Christianity and the religion of Jesus. My judgment about slavery and racial prejudice relative to Christianity is far more devastating than yours could ever be. From my investigation and study, the religion of Jesus projected a creative solution to the pressing problem of survival for the minority of which He was a part in the Greco-Roman world. When Christianity became an imperial and world religion, it marched under banners other than that of the teacher and prophet of Galilee. Finally, the minority in my country that is concerned about and dedicated to experiencing that spirit that was in Jesus Christ is on the side of freedom, liberty, and justice for all people, black, white, red, yellow, saint, sinner, rich, or poor. They, too, are a fact to be reckoned with in my country.<sup>16</sup>

Nowhere does Thurman consider this complex issue more thoroughly, than in his essay on Negro Spirituals, *The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*.<sup>17</sup> In it he talks about the spiritual resourcefulness of the slaves captured in what W.E.B. DuBois called “sorrow songs”. In the introduction to the lecture by Fluker and Tumber, they speak of his “tragic understanding of the human condition”. They say that “in the particularity of their struggles there resides a universal moral intent for inclusive human community.”<sup>18</sup>

Early in his lecture, Thurman says, “When the external circumstances of life are dramatic or unusual, causing the human spirit to make demands upon all the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. pp. 113-114.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p. 114.

<sup>17</sup> Walter Earl Fluker and Catherine Tucker, eds. *A Strange Freedom: The Best of Howard Thurman on Religious Experience and the Public Life* Beacon Press. pp. 55-79. Originally delivered as the Ingersoll Lecture at Harvard University April 14, 2947.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 56.

reaches of its resourcefulness in order to keep from being engulfed, then the value of its findings made articulate, has more than passing significance.”<sup>19</sup>

He makes the interesting observation that the Negro Spirituals do not focus on the slave holder as the enemy. The slave owners are not even mentioned in the spirituals. The despair as well as the hope which is captured in the songs is not about the relationship of the slave and the slave holder. Thurman says that people often mistake the scriptural admonition to “love your enemies” as particular instructions directed to particular individuals. But Thurman says that “life is regarded as an experience of evil, of frustration, of despair.” It is a state of being which is tragic, first because we are solitary beings and we walk life’s way alone, and second because along life’s way we experience vindictiveness and cruelty of others. One’s true home has nothing to do with a certain slave holder, or one’s situation in life. It exists outside temporal events.

Thurman says, “The consciousness that. . . the vicissitudes of life could not exhaust God’s resources, did not ever leave them.”<sup>20</sup> He also says that there was “little place in their reckoning for the distinction between God and Jesus,”<sup>21</sup> adding that sometimes in the spirituals they are used interchangeably.

Then he says, and this is my point, “People who live under great pressures, grappling with tremendous imponderables which left to themselves they could not manage, have no surplus energy for metaphysical distinctions. Such distinctions apart from the necessity of circumstances or urgency of spirit, belong to those upon whom the hold of the environment is relatively relaxed. Urgency forces a reach for the ultimate, which ultimate in the intensity of demand is incorporated in the warp and woof of immediacy.”<sup>22</sup>

It might be easy to say that this is the equivalent of “foxhole theology,” or the grasping after a loving and meaningful presence in the face of unspeakable tragedy and evil. Thurman speaks to this interpretation, remarking that some would say such reasoning serves as a kind of soporific, making for docility and submission, making people more defenseless than they would have been without it.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p. 56.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p. 69.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 70.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p. 70.

But then he says,

...the facts make clear that religion (deepened) the capacity of endurance and the absorption of suffering. . . What greater tribute could be paid to religious faith in general and to their religious faith in particular than this: It taught a people how to ride high to life, to look squarely in the face those facts that argue most dramatically against all hope and to use those facts as raw material out of which they fashioned a hope that the environment, with all of its cruelty, could not crush. With untutored hands—with a sure artistry and genius created out of a vast vitality, a concept of God was wrenched from the Sacred Book, the Bible, the chronicle of a people who had learned through great necessity the secret meaning of suffering. This total experience enabled them to reject annihilation and affirm a terrible right to live.<sup>23</sup>

It is from this understanding of hope in the midst of the tragic that Thurman built his view of possibility for the future of all people. It was not that he believed the social order would, in time, become more loving, more inclusive, and would provide a context for growing freedom. It was that the Negro Spirituals illustrated a world view detached from the particularity of situations (the slave/slaveholder relationship) and language (God and Jesus were interchangeable), and enabled the slaves to be able to find the larger contexts within which hope could emerge.

Does this have anything to say to religious liberals today? More importantly, is it possible to talk of American Democratic Faith in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in the context of Thurman's analysis of Negro Spirituals, perhaps the most articulate expression of *The Broken Covenant* since the founding of the republic, in all its moral and political ambiguity?

I believe that Thurman would deeply appreciate our emphasis on diversity, our struggle to acknowledge white privilege, and to make the structures and purposes of our Association in keeping with our call to radical hospitality.

In a series of four lectures addressed to Eden Theological Seminary called *Mysticism and Social Change*,<sup>24</sup> Thurman speaks about Rufus Jones' concept of *affirmation mystics* who are "concerned with working out in a social frame of reference the realism of their mystic experience." He says,

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p. 71.

<sup>24</sup> Howard Thurman. "Mysticism and Social Change" excerpts. *A Strange Freedom*.

...the mystic is always more than any finite task declares, and “yet he accepts this task because he has discovered that only through the finite is the Infinite to be found.”<sup>25</sup>

Thurman would find our practice of looking to our own actions as the beginning of change as hopeful in a world that deludes itself. He says,

In his effort to achieve this in experience he is brought face to face with evil in his own life and in the lives of others and the reflection of this evil in the relationships by which he is bound to his fellows and his fellows are bound to him.<sup>26</sup>

That said, I believe Thurman would challenge us on the basis for our *examin*. He says,

...his problem is how to work out an atonement for this guilt in ways that would be redemptive and *not make this action the goal of life* (emphasis mine).

Thurman would not question the ends of our action. But I believe he would challenge us at their source. For Thurman, the source of action is God. He would question whether the source of our action was the belief that we were the sole initiators and instigators of change. Whether we would call ourselves *affirmation mystics* or not, Thurman was at the forefront of the lineage of Civil Rights activists who believed they were co-creators with God. This is probably no more clearly stated in the end of his talk where he says, “he who *works* for the new day in that act *waits* for its coming which can be achieved by God and God, alone.”<sup>27</sup> (Emphasis mine.)

For Thurman, the important question is the quality of spirit with which we work for change, and the quality of spirit with which we wait for change. The change itself is not the final accomplishment, but the relationship with God that is sustained during the change. It is what gives life and courage through the Negro Spirituals and what gives people working for justice and equity in the land hope beyond their own lifetimes.

Thurman says, in the conclusion to the speech at Eden Seminary,

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 116-116.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p. 121.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p. 123.

He therefore refuses to reach the conclusion that violent coercion is the ultimate means by which a community of men can be achieved in which individuals may emerge as persons standing in immediate candidacy for the vision of God. 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 what one individual grasps as the ultimate end of life is somehow even 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...<sup>28</sup>

From the vantage point of the 21<sup>st</sup> century we might be less inclined than Thurman to presume that the 'progress of history' is being worked out by God. This, to me is less the question which Thurman raises for us than when he asks about the origin of our action in the world. I would imagine that Thurman might find at least some of our work in the world to emerge from pridefulness rather than participation. He would caution us to practice the spiritual disciplines of both working and waiting as we discern our place as well as our action in the family of things. And if we would not say that God acts in the world in the way that Thurman does, then we would still be obligated to wrestle deeply with what is rightly ours to do in a much larger context than our own plans and strategies.

#### CONCLUSION: Part 2 *American Democratic Faith after the Broken Covenant*

If, as Bellah proposes and Garry Wills underscores, our history as a country is essentially tragic, then we become actors in a drama which is ongoing, builds on the past, and to the degree we can participate fully in it, shapes the future. While an analysis of how we got here is useful and gives us awareness that we would otherwise blunder through, Thurman has a different view of history. Most telling is his analysis of the Negro Spirituals. They are not symbols of oppressor and oppressed, passive participant and overlord. They are instead, creations of the religious imagination that bond the spirit to a larger context in which suffering exists. Thurman would caution us not to rely solely on sociological, psychological, or even historical analysis as our tools for change, but rather to rely on redemption in the midst of tragedy as our primary reference.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p. 123

What might it mean to Unitarian Universalism if we began to ask where redemption might be found in what remains an essentially tragic history? It isn't found in denial of the realities. It isn't found in parsing what is good or bad action in the face of tragedy. For Unitarian Universalists it isn't found in finding new heroes or condemning fallen ones. It is remembering always that there is no purity, no clear line of ethical clarity, no action without mixed consequences—in short that we must do our best, keep open to truth, and always recognize that life is grounded in the tragic. The very earth upon which we walk contains the dust of all life which has preceded us.

If Thurman has anything to teach us it is that no matter our circumstances, no matter our station in life, what is important is the quality of spirit with which we live, the quality of silence in which we participate in humility with life, and the quality of our action which arises out of our sense that we are participants in a tragic drama, but participants nonetheless.

With Bellah we can say that the covenant has always been broken. That certainly is the Christian story of Jesus--The one that Thurman said came before the power brokers used Christianity as a tool for oppression.

Even as Thurman said God is found in the particular, he also said that we can't get caught in the particular as a way of coercion or violence.

Thurman would be surprised to find the strides in our society today. He would be grateful for the opportunities in our society for so many more people than in his lifetime. He also would be dismayed by world-wide Fundamentalism, and the resurgence of anti-immigrant sentiment. He would see how the tragic nature of our country once again is made manifest in our time. Grappling with his clear message of suffering, as well as his faithfulness in the midst of so much that could bring him to despair, would be good for our people. Not only would his spiritual depth be instructive, but his vision of how we can be in a world which suffers and a God which suffers with it, could open a window to new possibilities for our activists as well as our contemplatives. Wedding action to reflection, and reflection to a suffering, yearning intention would shift the center of our work from strategy to discernment, accountability to faithfulness, and discouragement to hope.

## IN CONCLUSION:

This paper is not an argument for a 'return' to Christianity, or one version of religious particularity. It is an argument for a return to particular narratives, broken though they may be, in which we do not choose among the 'good' and 'bad' parts of history, faith, or action—but within which we claim the whole as our own—and in that claiming find our communal narrative, our communal suffering, and our communal participation in “the cosmic struggle that grounds hope itself.” In turn, it is an argument that we educate our children and young people in the particularities of the great stories of cosmic struggle and spiritual practice so that they will be prepared to *act* and *wait* in the spirit of Howard Thurman, knowing the struggle is much larger than their lives, their religious tradition, or their lifetimes.

## ADDENDUM:

Walter Earl Fluker, one of the editors of *Strange Freedom*, has developed “The Ethical Leadership Model”<sup>29</sup> to develop ‘character, civility and community.’ This training program “addresses how spiritual and environmental elements shape human consciousness and actions.” It is centered at Morehouse College in the Thurman Leadership Center, and in 2010 became the “Coca-Cola Pre-college Leadership Program Creating the Beloved Community: An Orientation to Ethical Leadership.”

According to the descriptive literature ethical leadership is “more than moral.” It requires “fitting and appropriate decisions, as well as careful discernment, asking “which values and morals do you use?”

The program approaches the building of character as a quest in search of one’s own narrative script. The participants come to understand their lives as a story which includes, “integrity, truth, empathy, and “staying awake.”

Fluker believes that ethical leadership grows out of knowing one’s own narrative and knowing that it is not the only narrative. One is grounded as well as open.

This approach may help religious liberals reclaim our narrative as well as our openness. While I was not able to explore these materials thoroughly, I would commend this resource to those who would seek to create a narrative that is true to our own ‘cosmic struggle’, owns all of our history, and provides our young people skills in humility, forgiveness, as well as hope.

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<sup>29</sup> See *Faith and Leadership*: Walter Earl Fluker “Naming a Place Called Home” interview online.

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