

The Unfinished Search for Common Ground

*Reimagining Howard Thurman's
Life and Work*

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Introduction

THE UNFINISHED SEARCH FOR
COMMON GROUND

Walter Earl Fluker

*“In quietness and confidence shall be your strength.”
Long before I was born God was at work.
Creating life, nature and the world of men and things.
The worlds were ideas in the mind of God
That have been realizing themselves through the ages.
God is not through with creation—
God is not through with me.*

—Howard Thurman¹

An “unfinished search” is a linguistic conundrum. To search implies that something is “unfinished,” “incomplete,” or “ongoing.” So why pin this tautological error to Thurman’s “search for common ground”? First, the search for common ground is a rather general, hackneyed label for all things that need a shared linguistic repository in situations where there are conflicts of interests, opinions, and aggressions that require some premise from which to proceed in rational argumentation (e.g., political compromises, contested social issues, or even in the more grave and weightier contexts of negotiation and diplomacy among nations). One might say, for instance, that the United States’ and China’s search for peaceful coexistence or common ground is unfinished. In this sense, the process of seeking common ground is pragmatic, transactional (*quid pro quo*), and temporary because the proposed solutions and treaties that ensue are products of the tenuous interplay of power where the grounds of compromise are always

¹ HT, “Quietness and Confidence,” in *Deep Is the Hunger: Meditations for Apostles of Sensitiveness* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951), 211.

shifting and therefore need deliberation, adaptation, revision, and reimagining. I am using the “unfinished search for common ground” in Howard Thurman partly in this sense. Thurman was not a stranger to conflict and aggression. In fact, he believed that “No understanding of the significance of community can escape the place and significance of aggression.”² Therefore, he argued that those committed to the actualization of community must acknowledge the role of conflict as an essential element in the creation of a just and loving society. For this reason, he believed that democracy, at its best, is a squabble, a contentious exchange of ideas, opinions, values, and practices within the context of civil relations because “this is the kind of world that is grounded in creativity; that is essentially dynamic; that potentials are an important part of any present consideration or predicament.”³

Thurman’s teaching and ministerial positions as professor, pastor, and university chaplain, and his later work with the Howard Thurman Educational Trust Fund served as spiritual and intellectual laboratories in which his vision of community could be tested, revised, and reimagined.⁴ Yet his creative search for common ground went beyond utilitarian calculi, measurable outcomes, and efficiency that mock the fall of modernity in neoliberal projects where *winner take all*.⁵ With the rise of religious activism in the nation’s highest court and the rampant rage and violence incited by Christian nationalism, Thurman’s religious search for “democratic space,” especially at this moment in the history of this nation and the globe, should be given equal par with social, political, and global contestations that seek common ground because the potential consequences of failing to do so could be devastating.⁶

I am also interested in “common ground” qua Thurman, as a religious or spiritual quest for knowledge of Presence, integrity, freedom, responsibility, love,

² HT, SCG, 90; HT, “Mysticism and Ethics,” *Journal of Religious Thought* 27, no. 2 (Summer Supplement): 23.

³ HT, “A Faith to Live By: Democracy and the Individual 1,” Fellowship Church, October 19, 1952, in HT, *Democracy and the Soul of America*, ed. Peter Eisenstadt and Walter Earl Fluker (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2022), 74–82.

⁴ SCG is a philosophical exposition of the nature of community where he interrogates the basis and sources of community and seeks an understanding of its meaning within the context of the struggles between the civil rights movement and the rise of Black nationalism. See also his “Convocation Address,” Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, November 1971, in *Perspectives, A Journal of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary* 13, no. 2 (Spring 1972), https://archive.org/stream/perspective19721973pitt/perspective19721973pitt_djvu.txt; and HT, “Community and the Will of God,” Mendenhall Lecture, DePauw University, February 1961 (a series of unpublished lectures), HTC, Box 8, Folder 7:6a.

⁵ Anand Giridharadas, *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World* (New York: Knopf, 2018).

⁶ See my essay in the present volume titled “Creating and Cultivating Democratic Spaces: Reflections on Howard Thurman and Democracy.”

and imagination.⁷ Thurman's vision of common ground is profoundly religious and metaphysical. On the one hand, it is incomplete, *arriving* but never quite finished. Yet he believed, paradoxically, that there was an end, a *telos*, an omega point in which common ground would be fulfilled in time and history. He often quoted the prophet Isaiah, that finally, "The earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea."⁸ Luther Smith, in his excellent essay published in this volume, writes, "Thurman does not pretend to be a seer who knows if this will occur soon or in one thousand or ten thousand years. But he does believe in a time of finality. We may argue with him about this common ground conclusion. I certainly do. From my personal experiences with him, I believe Howard Thurman would welcome the debate."⁹

In this introduction, I join Smith, Thurman, and others in this debate. I believe that Thurman's search for common ground is unfinished and that however we resolve the apparent contradictions or paradoxes, we are nonetheless summoned by him to continue the search that he has bequeathed to us in his voluminous writings, sermons, and public addresses. Our work is not to accept at face value his claims of "common ground" as an essentialist project that is embedded in modernistic language and paradigms that he also struggled to reimagine for his time.¹⁰ I refer here to the ways in which the misappropriation of common ground can be a foil for the ways in which the democratic ideal of "the radical egalitarian hypothesis" has masqueraded—and continues to masquerade—as a shape-shifting national imaginary of a nonracial, color-blind society while the economic, political, and social situations of the poor of all colors and creeds progressively deteriorate.¹¹ Therefore our task is, in some respects, a harder and more complex challenge to seek new and fresh meanings

⁷ Walter Earl Fluker, "The Inward Sea: Mapping Interior Landmarks for Leaders," in *Anchored in the Current: The Eternal Wisdom of Howard Thurman in a Changing World*, ed. Gregory C. Ellison (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 55–70.

⁸ Isaiah 9:11, New American Standard Bible.

⁹ Luther E. Smith, "Prophetic Vision and Its Radical Consequences," in this volume.

¹⁰ Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African-American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 38–50, 80–81, and 159; see also Victor Anderson, *Creative Exchange: A Constructive Theology of African American Religious Experience* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), chapter 4, "The Smell of Life: A Pragmatic Theology of Religious Experience," esp. 113–15. I have suggested in another place that we might experiment with Thurman's modernistic liberal language of common ground as a call to *congregate, conjure, and conspire in commons*. *Commons* is a rereading of HT's common ground that can be reconfigured and translated into *common loyalties and commitments to justice and peace*. Walter Earl Fluker, *The Ground Has Shifted: The Black Church in Post-Racial America* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 85–96.

¹¹ For a more fully developed argument along these lines, see Fluker, *The Ground Has Shifted*.

from his magnificent architectonic of common ground. As he often quoted from Hermann Hagedorn, “We died, but you who live must do a harder thing than dying is, for you must think and ghosts shall drive you on.”¹²

Thurman’s Unfinished Search

A key theme in Thurman was his intensely personal understanding of community, in which he saw himself as both subject and object in a parabolic journey toward community.¹³ Thurman reflects in his autobiography on a “watershed moment” at an informal retreat in 1925 in Pawling, New York, where he encountered the South African writer Olive Schreiner for the first time. George “Shorty” Collins read her allegory of “The Hunter,”¹⁴ a searcher after truth, who while hunting for wild fowl caught a glimpse of a reflection in a lake of an elusive, “vast white bird, with silver wings outstretched, sailing in the everlasting blue.” The hunter was so struck by this reflection that he spent the rest of his life searching for another glimpse of her. After traveling through numerous mountains and valleys of “beliefs, immortality, realism, sensuality, negation and the dark night of the soul,” his white hair, feeble frame, and shrunken face revealed the torturous paths and incredible sacrifices made in his quest for one more glimpse of this beautiful creature. Schreiner writes, “The old, thin hands cut the stones ill and jaggedly, for the fingers were stiff and bent. The beauty and the strength of the man was gone.” In his last breath, the Hunter cries out,

“I have sought,” he said, “for long years I have laboured; but I have not found her. I have not rested, I have not repined, and I have not seen her; now my strength is gone. Where I lie down worn-out others will stand, young and fresh. By the steps that I have cut they will climb; by the stairs that I have built they will mount. They will never know the name of the man who made them. At the clumsy work they will laugh; when the stones roll, they will curse me. But they will mount, and on my work; they will climb, and by my stair! They will find her, and through me! And no man liveth to himself and no man dieth to himself. . . . My soul

¹² A favorite quote of HT’s, which he used in a variety of settings. See Hermann Hagedorn (1882–1964), “The Boy in Armor,” in *Ladders through the Blue: A Book of Lyrics* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1925), 59–61.

¹³ Mozella Gordon Mitchell, *Spiritual Dynamics of Howard Thurman’s Theology* (Bristol, IN: Wyndham Hall Press, 1985), 51.

¹⁴ Olive Schreiner, “The Hunter,” in *A Track to the Water’s Edge: The Olive Schreiner Reader*, ed. HT (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 84–95. George “Shorty” Collins was a lifelong friend and colleague of HT’s. See HT, PHWT 1:lix.

hears their glad step coming,” he said; “and they shall mount! they shall mount!” He raised his shrivelled hand to his eyes.

Then slowly from the white sky above, through the still air, came something falling, falling, falling. Softly it fluttered down and dropped on to the breast of the dying man. He felt it with his hands. It was a feather. *He died holding it.*

Thurman’s personal quest for truth, “the search for common ground,” is mirrored in this allegory, but it is not his search alone. His religious search for common ground was *unfinished* because it was rooted in the spiraling dance of the God of Life who is always on “the hunt,” always seeking actualization within and beyond the time-space continuum of nature, people, and things.¹⁵ Thurman’s biography—from his earliest explorations of the sense of Presence while hunting in the lonely woods, caressing the mystery and comfort of dark Florida nights, fishing in the Halifax River and meditating under his old oak tree, to his lifelong quest to create and sustain religious and democratic spaces where individuals and collectives might share common consciousness—was part of a *double-search*.¹⁶ Those high moments of resolve and the possibilities inherent in this double-search were fraught with the ambiguities and contingencies of history and time—never quite arriving but always yearning for completion, wholeness, and harmony. His experiments at Rankin Chapel at Howard University, Fellowship Church in San Francisco, and Marsh Chapel at Boston University are examples of the attendant challenges of achieving common ground through religious experience in the institutional settings of churches and universities. Each of these sites of ecclesial and nonecclesial practices had its “fresh starts, its false starts, its rising and its falling.”¹⁷ Yet for him they were signals of what is at stake in the mystic’s quest for knowledge of and union with God, and illustrations of his firm hope that common ground would come to pass “somewhere, sometime, someplace—even on earth.”¹⁸

¹⁵ HT uses the metaphor of a hawk circling in a hunt from the poet Robinson Jeffers in the opening paragraph of SCG. The poet asks, “Why does God hunt in circles? Has he lost something? Is it possible—himself? In the darkness between the stars did he lose himself and become godless, and seeks—himself?” Robinson Jeffers, “The Inhumanist,” stanza I (Stanford University Press, 1991), 256. Quoted in HT, SCG, 1.

¹⁶ See Fluker, “Creating and Sustaining Democratic Spaces”; HT, *The Creative Encounter: An Interpretation of Religion and the Social Witness* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1972), 39; Rufus Jones, *The Double Search* (Philadelphia: J. C. Winston Co., 1904), 6.

¹⁷ HT, “America in Search of a Soul,” January 20, 1976, University of Redlands, Redlands, California, in SF, 265–72. Also in HT, *Democracy and the Soul of America*, 114–124.

¹⁸ HT, “Mysticism and Social Change,” February 13–16, 1939, Eden Theological

Before his death on April 10, 1981, Thurman was still in pursuit of his early investigations of the larger question of particularity and universality and how these were related to his own personal quest to “find God” in authentic religious experience.¹⁹ Finding God, for Thurman, speaks to the dynamic interplay between infinity and finitude, and his personal acknowledgment during his last days that there is a “nonspatial and nontemporal dimension of my personality that has to do with life and is not bound by death,”²⁰ because the contradictions of life are not final.

There are two events in his last days where he speaks openly of his unfinished search for God. One was at the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1978, where I was in attendance.²¹ In his distinct and mesmerizing cadence, he spoke about the mystery of life and death and the “double-search, the hunt” for his elusive God. He indicated that he had questions for God that were unanswered. In language reminiscent of the epigraph in his autobiography, “Always we are on the outside of our story, always we are beggars who seek entrance to the kingdom of our dwelling place.”²² In his last dramatic sentences, after a long, silent, waiting moment with his hands folding and unfolding in prayer-fashion, trying to grasp the elusive meaning that haunted him, he exclaimed to his breathless audience, “I shall find Him—how long I do not know—but I shall find Him somewhere under the old oak tree.”²³

Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri, in PHWT 2:190; see also Olive Schreiner, “The Dawn of Civilization,” *The Nation and the Athenaeum*, March 26, 1921, 912–14.

¹⁹ HT, “Finding God” (1927), in PHWT 1:110–14; HT, “The Perils of Immature Piety” (1925), in PHWT 1:47–51.

²⁰ Peter Eisenstadt, *Against the Hounds of Hell: A Life of Howard Thurman* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2021), 390; HT, “‘Concluding Chapter’ Head and Heart” (unpublished draft), HTC, Box 4, Folder 1–4.

²¹ The author has not been able to locate the proceedings of this conference that took place in fall 1978. The conference organizer was the late Reverend Dr. Ndugu G. B. T’Ofori-Atta (aka George B. Thomas), Professor Emeritus of Persons, Society and Culture at ITC and a devotee of Howard Thurman. The conference included an array of speakers, including Vincent Harding.

²² “Always we are on the outside of our story, always we are beggars who seek entrance to the kingdom of our dwelling place. When we are admitted, the price that is exacted of us is the sealing of our lips. And this is the strangest of all the paradoxes of the human adventure: we live inside all experience, but we are permitted to bear witness only to the outside. Such is the riddle of life and the story of the passing of our days.” HT, WHAH, 270.

²³ See Shively T. J. Smith’s essay in this volume, where she examines Thurman’s interpretive quest and raises the critical issue of imagination as an aesthetic vehicle into Thurman’s own passionate and personal hermeneutical imagining as “a conundrum of interpretation and articulation that ... we miss if we do not ask, ‘How does Thurman search for common ground?’”

The other occasion was the recording of an audio during his hospitalization at Mt. Zion Hospital in San Francisco in the spring of 1981.²⁴ I was privileged to listen to the tape along with Reverend Marvin Chandler, former pastor of the Fellowship Church and former executive director of the Howard Thurman Educational Fund, and Thurman's daughter, Anne Spencer Thurman. According to them, Thurman, who was suffering from the debilitating effects of cancer, respiratory deterioration, and a ruptured appendix, went into crisis and they thought he had died. They sat at his bedside mourning his passing when suddenly Thurman awakened and returned from what he called "the fight that I was having with death."²⁵ Startled, but with prescience of mind, they asked him to share what he experienced and then recorded his response. Thurman indicated that he was traveling through the universe in search of God, and that he had two questions that he wanted to ask: "Why is there black and white?" and "Why is there male and female?" During this encounter, Thurman declared to the Creator of Life and existence, "I am going to follow you through the ends of existence until you give me an answer to these questions."²⁶

This was not the only occasion where these questions for God were raised. American author and philosopher Sam Keen reports that in an intimate meeting with Thurman two weeks before his death, he asked similar questions: "Why was I born a black man and you a white man? What in the universal way of things required me to be the particular person that I am?" Then Thurman whispered to Keen, "Why should the ultimate secret of my life be kept from me?"²⁷

His beloved companion, Sue Bailey Thurman, commented in several places on the "psychic trauma" of Thurman's inward struggle with particularity and universality that lasted until his final days. She says that during his aforementioned hospital stay, "he stayed the hand of death while he encountered 'the particular man' and the 'universal man' within himself and wrestled them to earth, until he won the consent of both—to Life, to Death, and Back to Life."²⁸

²⁴ I was fortunate to read a transcript of his reflections on this experience prepared by Joyce Sloane, librarian of the HT Trust. "Howard Thurman's Last Reflections: Howard Thurman Talking to Joyce Sloane about His Hospital Experience, April 3, 1981." Unpublished.

²⁵ "I did not know what death was about and I wanted to know who or what was responsible.... And I was determined to bird dog it throughout all the universe." Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Eisenstadt, *Against the Hounds of Hell*, 390–91. See also Sam Keen, "Memorial Tribute," in *Debate and Understanding*, "Simmering on the Calm Presence and Profound Wisdom of Howard Thurman" (special issue), ed. Ricardo A. Millet and Conley H. Hughes (Spring 1982): 90.

²⁸ Sue Bailey Thurman, "Epilogue," in "Simmering on the Calm Presence and Profound Wisdom of Howard Thurman," 91.

Revisiting Thurman's Common Ground

Thurman's use of "common ground" proceeds from his theological and philosophical conceptualization of "community" and his personal wrestling with the moral demands of religious experience. Beyond its utilitarian functionality, Thurman saw common ground as a transcendent ideal that calls us to seek wholeness, integration, and harmony within our private lives and in public discourse and practice. He believed that all life is interrelated and involved in goal-seeking, and therefore, in each manifestation of life, there is the potential for it to realize its proper form, or to come to itself; but in coming to itself, it shares in the ongoing cycle of life, death, and rebirth. Life itself is always *unfinished*. This, for him, is the dynamic character of the interrelatedness and interdependence inherent in all living things, at microscopic levels of existence, and in human society—never quite arriving but always giving way to "the growing edge"—the new, that which is not yet, but is becoming.²⁹

For Thurman, life's "capacity to begin again" is a theological supposition that the mind of God realizes itself in time.³⁰ The origin and goal of community, therefore, is in the mind of God, which is coming to Godself in time—and perhaps even God is revealing Godself *to* Godself in myriad time and space variations that yearn for wholeness, integration, and harmony.³¹ But for Thurman, this process is not a thing or merely an idea; it is profoundly personal. "When I refer to God, I am not talking about a thing, I am not talking about an object: I am talking about a Presence." Thurman's God is not only the creator of life but is the source of the "living stuff" of existence out of which every living thing is fashioned, and exists outside of its particular manifestations, so that "God bottoms existence—bottoms it—bottoms it!" It is through "disciplines of the spirit" (he names these disciplines at various places as detachment, commitment, prayer, growth, suffering, and reconciliation) that a fluid area of awareness of Presence emerges for the individual, so that experiences of union in divine and human encounter occur in episodic "for instances" of newness, openness, and vitality. These occasions for coming home to oneself and discovering that God is also part of "the *borning* process"—that is, God is longing to become "self-conscious" like a spring that "spills over in time and space, therefore when the Godhead which is at the core of me spills over in my time-space relationships, at least I can say that wherever such a person is there the

²⁹ See Barbara Brown Taylor's essay in this volume.

³⁰ Nimi Wariboko, *The Pentecostal Principle: Ethical Methodology in New Spirit*, Pentecostal Manifestos (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 1, 48–50.

³¹ See HT, "Mysticism and Social Change: God as Presence," July 12, 1978, Pacific School of Religion, in *Walking with God: The Sermon Series of Howard Thurman: The Way of the Mystics*, ed. Peter E. Eisenstadt and Walter Earl Fluker (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2021), 121–40.

kingdom of God is at hand.” Thurman admits that when he uses the formal names of “Creator” and “God,” he is aware of the anthropomorphic description of deity and its inherent limitations and paradoxes. He chooses this language because he feels it is impossible to think of action or agency as abstraction and that the mind can only make sense of this complexity by using symbols.³²

This religious dimension of community is fundamental for all his theological and ethical claims. The nature of the problem of community is rooted in the relationship of the individual to social existence. While the primacy of the individual is a major concern for Thurman, his ultimate vision is of a harmonious human society. Life, in this sense, is a dynamic, ongoing project. God is at work in creation in a manner akin to an artist shaping and reshaping their masterpiece. God is not finished with creation, and consequently, God is not finished with the human story, which is ever unfolding and coming to itself in time and history. Similarly, personality is an unfinished project involving the individual in relation to God in a concerted endeavor of free and responsible acts that issue forth in human and nonhuman flourishing rooted in “common consciousness.” Common consciousness is the unique, essential element that human beings share with all of life in its varied and manifold expressions. It is the veritable creative presence of the Spirit of God that moves undisguised and uninhibited beneath all the complex and intricate stories that mark conscious existence. It finds its residence in human consciousness through cultivated disciplines that allow for the development of habits and practices that make moral life possible. At the heart of these disciplines, and the aim of the human quest, is the experience of love.³³ This understanding of “common consciousness” is fundamental to Thurman’s understanding of religious experience and the role of imagination.³⁴

³² Ibid. See also HT, SCG, 5–6. He is comfortable in using a variety of symbols or names to point to what is always behind human thought and comprehension. “You may say truth; you may say the supreme good. I don’t care. That is not my affair. But to me it is God.” HT, “The Meaning of Loyalty III: The State,” May 20, 1951, in *Democracy and the Soul of America*, 32. Thurman’s use of “borning” is a reference to Meister Eckhart’s idea of the *eternal birth*. See *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart: Sermons and Treatises*, vol. 1, trans. and ed. Maurice O’C. Walshe (New York: Crossroad, 2008), Sermon 1, 29–38; HT, “Meister Eckhart,” in *The Way of the Mystics*, 82–90; HT, “Men Who Walked with God: The Great Hunger,” in *Walking with God*, 93–101; and HT, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

³³ “Common consciousness” refers to the affinity between human consciousness and other forms of conscious existence evident in nature. For Thurman, the theme of the kinship of all living things extends even into the realm of communication between animals, plants, and human beings. He reasons that if life is one, then there ought to be a sense of unity at all levels of existence. Since life in any form cannot be fundamentally alien to life, then more than two forms may share the same moment in time without resistance and without threat. See HT, “Convocation Address,” Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, and SG, 57.

³⁴ Walter E. Fluker, *They Looked for a City: A Comparative Analysis of the Ideal of*

Religious Experience and the Moral Imagination

For Thurman, imagination is related to “spirit.”³⁵ But spirit is not disassociated from the body—in fact, the search begins *with* the body. The body is the individual’s unique dwelling place and “home,” and every person “lives under the necessity for being at home in their own house.”³⁶ He suggests that the “mind *as* mind” evolved from the body as part of the unfolding process of potential resident in life, and that mind as such is the basis for the evolution of “spirit.” The imagination as “mind-evolved spirit” continued the same inherent quest for community that is resident in nature and the body.³⁷ When an individual consciously seeks community, therefore, he or she will discover “what he is seeking deliberately is but the logic of meaning that has gone into his creation.”³⁸

Thurman often spoke of this experience as “listening for the sound of the genuine.” “There is something within each of us,” says Thurman, “which waits and listens for the sound of the genuine within oneself and within the other.”³⁹ This something, this undifferentiated level of being, is the seat of common consciousness. The sound of the genuine involves imagination. For Thurman, imagination is a constituent part of being, and it becomes a veritable *angelos* when persons put themselves in another’s place. Imagination, in this sense, is the agency through which empathy is realized. Through imagination, the individual is enabled to reach the other at the core of their being, at the seat of “common consciousness.” This occurs when one person becomes for the other what is needed and when the need is most urgently and acutely felt.⁴⁰ In doing so, the other is addressed at a

Community in the Thought of Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King Jr. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989). See the discussion of love as ethical principle in the actualization of community in chapter 3.

³⁵ Luther Smith captures this idea of “spirit” as the “breath of God” in creation, providing value and meaning to existence. He writes, “Realizing and expressing itself in the material world, the work of the spirit is historical and political. It is the source for the definition of the individual, and the individual in relationship to the collective. As it discerns self, it discerns God and what it means to be a creature of God. . . . Spirituality is a way of life committed to understanding the nature and urgings of the spirit; the life organizes all its desires, energies, and resources so that they might be dominated by the spirit. Spirituality brings a harmony to living consistent with the peace and will of God.” Luther E. Smith, *The Mystic as Prophet* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 2007), 12.

³⁶ HT, *Deep Is the Hunger*, 195; HT, *The Luminous Darkness: A Personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope* (1965; repr., Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1989), 101.

³⁷ HT, Mendenhall Lecture, “Community and the Will of God,” February 1961, 1, HTC.

³⁸ HT, SCG, 34.

³⁹ HT, “The Sound of the Genuine: Baccalaureate Address, Spelman College, May 4, 1980,” *Spelman Messenger* 96, no. 4 (Summer 1980).

⁴⁰ HT, *The Inward Journey* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961); paperback ed. (Rich-

place beyond all that is blameworthy or praiseworthy. This, according to Thurman, is the experience of love: when a person is addressed at the centermost place of personality, experiencing wholeness and harmony within and with the other:

I see you where you are striving and struggling and in light of the highest possibility of your personality, I deal with you there. My religious faith is insistent that this can be done only out of a life of devotion. I must cultivate the inner spiritual resources of my life to such a point that I can bring you to my sanctuary before his presence, until, at last, I do not know you from myself.⁴¹

The Unfinished Search and Moral Imagination in Public Life

Thurman's unfinished "search for common ground" between diverse groups finds creative resonance at this critical impasse of American and world history.⁴² With increasing tensions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and the concomitant need to carve a fresh and critical approach to the often violent usages of religious discourse as warrants for moral action, Thurman's gentle wisdom and clear analytic provides a resource for a religiously inspired public ethic that does not fall prey to parochialism and the politics of division. He often suggested that "A parochial religious experience cannot sustain a universal ethic."⁴³ In fact, part of

mond, IN: Friends United Press, 1971), 121, 130, 133, 139–55; HT, *Mysticism and the Experience of Love* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Pamphlet 115, 1961), 21.

⁴¹ HT, *The Growing Edge* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956); paperback ed. (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1974), 27–28.

⁴² Darrell J. Fasching, "Holy Man for the Coming Millennium," in *The Human Search: Howard Thurman and the Quest for Freedom: Proceedings of the Second Annual Thurman Convocation*, Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Studies in Religion, Culture and Social Development, Volume 2, Mozella G. Mitchell, ed. (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), 191–203; Jan Corbett, "Howard Thurman: A Theologian for Our Times," *American Baptist Quarterly*, December 1979, 9–12; Lerone Bennett, "Howard Thurman: Twentieth Century Holy Man," *Ebony*, February 1978, 68–70, 72, 76, 84–85; John D. Mangram, "Jesus Christ in Howard Thurman's Thought," in *Common Ground: Essays in Honor of Howard Thurman on the Occasion of His Seventy-Fifth Birthday, November 18, 1975*, ed. Samuel Lucius Gandy (Washington, DC: Hoffman Press, 1975), 65; J. Deotis Roberts, "The American Negro's Contribution to Religious Thought," in *The Negro Impact on Western Civilization*, ed. John Slabey Roucek and Thomas Kiernan (New York: Philosophical Library, 1970), 87. See also Martin Marty, "Mysticism and the Religious Quest for Freedom," in *God and Human Freedom*, ed. Henry J. Young (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1983).

⁴³ Walter Earl Fluker, "Leaders Who Have Shaped U.S. Religious Dialogue: Howard Thurman: Intercultural and Interreligious Leader," in *Religious Leadership: A Reference Handbook*, vol. 2, ed. Sharon Henderson Callahan (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2013), 574.

Thurman's broad appeal is that while he is properly located within the African American Christian tradition, he is not in the least limited to it. Nor is Thurman's theology limited to Christian categories *per se*. Instead, he believed that

The things that are true in any religious experience are to be found in that religious experience precisely because they are true; they are not true simply because they are found in that religious experience. . . . Around any road, at any turning, a man may come upon the burning bush and hear the Voice saying, "Take off your shoes because the place where you are now standing is a holy place, even though you did not know it before."⁴⁴

Therefore, his perspective provides a broad basis for interreligious dialogue and illustrates the profundity of his ministry with respect to social justice, ecclesial and nonecclesial spaces, and the American democratic experiment.⁴⁵

At stake in the search for common ground is the place of personal and private identity. Thurman was highly critical of the spurious distinction between knowledge and values that erodes personal identity and severely impairs public discourse. He consistently warned of the danger of promoting a parochial view of knowledge at the expense of the private life of the individual. The obfuscation of individuality was, for him, a key problematic of the epistemic validation of claims to authority and meaning in a pluralistic culture. The quest for authority in the public sphere was at once a quest for personal assurance and security that are provided for the individual through religious experience, but not a narrow vision of religious interpretation that restricted the freedom of choice toward unsavory political ends that impede human and nonhuman flourishing.⁴⁶

For Thurman, the normative character of speech and action should be guided by what one experiences at the innermost place of oneself and in community with others. Consequently, the ethical life is not informed exclusively on autonomous nor heteronomous bases, but by a religious core that is the private domain of the individual. Yet this private domain is neither exclusive nor ahistorical but rooted in a relational ethic that finds its validation in public speech and action anchored in freedom and equality. This perspective was important for Thurman because he

⁴⁴ HT, WHAH, 120.

⁴⁵ See essays by Geshi Lobsang Tenzin Negi and Or N. Rose in this volume.

⁴⁶ "Individuality" for Thurman is not to be confused with the Western notion of "individualism," which portrays the person as a discrete entity, unrelated to community; individuality rather is a profound dimension of human development and personality. See "Mysticism and Social Change," where he insists that 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." PHWT 2:213; and HT, *The Creative Encounter*, 30–31.

believed that the ultimate sanction of the moral life is personal integrity born of the need to be in harmony within the self as a basis for public interaction and engagement. For him, civic participation that is not guided by a coherent and meaningful personal existence generates social practices that conspire against the harmonic possibilities of public life. Central to his understanding of civic virtue is the integrity and moral inviolability of the individual that ultimately rest upon a transcendent reference.⁴⁷ Transcendence, however, is not narrowly defined in deontological terms, but is relational and inherent in the very being and practices of the moral agent. Therefore, religious experience allows for the discovery of a transcendent reference within the moral self that is at once the ground and guarantor of the very processes of life that seek community. And personal knowing, in the quest for moral authority, is indispensable to creative public engagement amid the discordant voices that speak about the future of American democratic culture.

Even more is at stake for Thurman. The ground of the private life that floats the individual's quest for wholeness rests upon a fierce and unrelenting loyalty to truth (integrity, sincerity), which is inviolate.⁴⁸ Therefore, the individual must always return to the very source of one's loyalty to the truth, which for Thurman is the will of God manifesting itself in time and history. In the political contestations between loyalty to the state and loyalty to the truth, the individual is morally bound to the demands of truth, which for Thurman is at once transcendent and embodied in the integrity of the will. Therefore, in the search for common ground, especially in situations where the rise of unbridled nationalism is evident, it is incumbent that one's loyalty to God serve as the final word, even at the risk of death. This is a persistent theme in Thurman's writings and sermons that finds even greater resonance as we witness the growing tide of fascism and violence in the United States and around the globe. In a sermon titled "The Meaning of Loyalty III: The State," he said,

This means that as long as an individual can be rooted and easily committed to the kind of nationalism about which I have been thinking, and make that nationalism vehicular or expressive of this major, dominant loyalty which ultimately gives to the individual the basis of her own self-estimate and self-respect, there is no conflict, in my judgment, between that kind of patriotism and a recognition of a transcendent cause. But it is contingent, you see, upon the will-ing [in text], the self-conscious yielding of the devotion and personality. And that is why I can understand and appreciate the provisions that are made in our

⁴⁷ HT, "A Faith to Live By #7: Democracy and the Individual, II," sermon, Fellowship Church, October 26, 1952; in HT, *Democracy and the Soul of America*, 88–89.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

constitution for loyalty to the country, to the state. That seems to me to have a very creative logic in it that is fundamental to the very genius of the experience of group belonging. It is inherent in the whole process of sharing the common life. I can understand that. But I cannot understand at all in terms of the meaning either of loyalty or of religious experience anything beyond that formal insistence that men declare themselves in terms of the registering of their ultimate loyalty, non-competitive loyalty to a state. That I cannot understand.⁴⁹

This imaginative quest for community within and without finds its fulfillment in the experience of love. Love, for Thurman, is the experience through which one passes when she or he is able to deal with another human being at a point in that person beyond all good and evil. Likewise, to *be loved* is to have the sense of being dealt with in oneself at a point beyond all good and evil. Love is intrinsic interest in the other; it goes beyond abstract generalizations and expresses itself *in concreto*. Love and reason are not opposed, for Thurman, but the head and the heart must work together in the actualization of community. Love transcends and fulfills justice. Included in the experience of love is the role of the imagination, which allows the individual to identify with the other at the centermost place of their being. Finally, through the exposure of oneself to the other (including the enemy) with all its attendant risks, love issues forth in radical nonviolence the creative power that reconciles and restores community.

Saddling Our Dreams

There are inherent dangers in this imaginative quest for common ground. For Thurman, imagination can become a “self-absorbing” drama when one fails to traverse “a thin line” between undisciplined subjectivism and *megalothymia*.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ HT, “The Meaning of Loyalty III: The State,” May 20, 1951, in HT, *Democracy and the Soul of America*, 29–30.

⁵⁰ Geshi Lobsang Tenzin Negi comments on the danger of “self-absorption” and that “Thurman and His Holiness The Dalai Lama have anticipated what current research is demonstrating: that excessive self-focus is exacerbating many of our modern problems including the alarming rates of loneliness, depression, burnout, and self-harm, as well as the prevalence of social conflict, injustice, and ecological destruction.” See his essay printed in this volume, “Apostles of Sensitiveness: The Buddha Crown and Howard Thurman’s Growing Edge.” For HT, the undisciplined imagination leads to an unbalanced inwardness and the shirking of responsibility for one’s society and its problems. HT, “Mysticism and Social Action,” in *Lawrence Lectures on Religion & Society, 1977–1978* (Berkeley, CA: First Unitarian Church of Berkeley, 1978), 18. See also “Introduction,” HT, *Democracy and the Soul of America*. *Mega-*

Thurman is acutely aware of the danger of subjectivism and privatization of meaning implied in the emphasis on the development of inner consciousness. He tries to guard against this tendency by accentuating the need for external empirical verification of what one experiences in his inner life. He contends, “The real questions at issue here are, how may a man know he is not being deceived? Is there any way by which he may know beyond doubt, and therefore with verification, that what he experiences is authentic and genuine?”⁵¹ Rational coherence between the inner experience of self and the external world is the methodology employed to test for self-deception. He argues that “whatever seems to deny a fundamental structure of orderliness upon which rationality seems to depend cannot be countenanced.”⁵²

In 1964, Elizabeth Yates published the first biography of Howard Thurman, titled *Howard Thurman: Portrait of a Practical Dreamer*.⁵³ Her depiction of him as a “practical dreamer” spoke to the ways that Thurman tended to concentrate less on formal systematic presentations of ideas, calling listeners and readers instead to seek their own religious experience and respond to their contexts with integrity and imagination. For Thurman, this was no casual enterprise, because it demanded a “moral struggle” filled with a sense of the tragic, angst, and frustration, “the consequence of individuals finding their dreams and visions of a good society thwarted because of forces outside of their control and internal inhibitions that restrict the private will.”⁵⁴ He was insistent that we must “saddle our dreams before we ride them.”

It is the nature of dreams to run riot, never to wish to contain themselves within limitations that are fixed. Sometimes they seem to be the cry of the heart for the boundless and the unexplored . . . yet, our dreams must be saddled by the hard facts of our world before we ride them off among the stars. Thus, they become for us the bearers of the new possi-

lothymia refers to “the inordinate need for recognition and respect, the need to stand out as a symbol of prowess and power, to demand by height what one lacks in depth, to wrest from the other what one thinks is absent in oneself, and to find security in the obsequiousness of the other.” Walter Earl Fluker, *Ethical Leadership: The Quest for Character, Civility and Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 105; Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 141–339; and David Brooks, “All Politics Is Thymotic,” *New York Times*, March 19, 2006.

⁵¹ HT, *Creative Encounter*, 57.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 57–58.

⁵³ Elizabeth Yates, *Howard Thurman: Portrait of a Practical Dreamer* (New York: John Day Company, 1964).

⁵⁴ “Introduction,” *Moral Struggle and the Prophets*, Walking with God: The Howard Thurman Sermon Series, vol. 1 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2020).

bility, the enlarged horizon, the great hope. Even as they romp among the stars they come back to their place in our lives, bringing with them the radiance of the far heights, the lofty regions, and giving to all our days the lift and the magic of stars.⁵⁵

Reimagining the Search for Common Ground

So it is for our troubled and fragile times. Thurman's life and work are an invitation to a new generation of dreamers and activists who dare to continue the search for common ground amid the challenges and threats that confront us in the third decade of this century. We must inquire within our own contemporary contexts and seek responses that proceed from "the sound of the genuine" within us. This challenge before us involves reimagining Thurman's work and legacy at this critical impasse in democratic life and practices and to forge new "tools of the spirit" that enable us to not only imagine new possibilities for democratic space. But we must also seek practices that ensure that our speech and actions are always rooted in the vitality of life and spirit.

What might a reimagined search for common ground look, sound, smell, and feel like? It will certainly bear some affinity to the biblical narrative from which Thurman drew his own imaginative and creative public language. There is a common consciousness, common space, and common ground of meeting the other whose face bears the distinct representation of the Divine, realizing that necessary to see the other is to see your God; to hear the sound of the genuine in the other, however strange and dissonant, is to hear the melody of the divine.

For a public discourse that marks this suggestion from Thurman it will be necessary to return to another place long-forgotten in the discordant melodies of postmodernity and to hear afresh as it were for the first time—the sound of the genuine in the perplexing sirens of the public sphere: complex and obtuse sounds that beg for answers to the pressing moral issues of our day. Can we hear beyond the often conflicting demands of religion, race, class, sexuality, and gender, the voice of an other who calls us to attention to the place of common consciousness and public imagination? Thurman was not sure, yet he remained hopeful (not sentimental) that even if human beings destroy themselves through their own devices, the creator of life is infinitely more resourceful and creative than any expression of life. He agreed with Arnold Toynbee that "if we are so foolish to destroy our entire civilization and our own lives, then the creator of life could very easily make an ideal culture out of the ant."⁵⁶

⁵⁵ HT, "Saddle Your Dreams," in SF, 297–98.

⁵⁶ HT, *Deep Is the Hunger*, 38.

The truth that the religious experience and moral imagination will supply to the prevalent public debates is not specific, utilitarian answers couched in legal and political diatribes—important but ultimately inadequate, as we are witnessing in our contemporary battles around gun violence, abortion rights, sexual orientations, and the natural environment. Rather Thurman’s imaginative search for common ground calls for a fresh and vibrant articulation of hope in human agency to reinvent itself for this time, with answers that proceed from the encounter with a truth that moves at levels unrestrained by religious formulae and political dogma—that imagines a future with the other where peace will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea, where the child will play at the hole of the adder, and nations will beat the swords and weapons into plowshares and pruning hooks. Shall we—are we able to—put ourselves in that space? To be in the place when the Sound, like a mighty and rushing wind, fills the room and we hear in our own language the many voices that herald the New Age?⁵⁷

*God is not through with creation—
God is not through with us....*

If so, the essays in this volume provide us with windows through which we may peer into and eavesdrop on creative conversations taking place regarding this twentieth-century prophetic voice.

⁵⁷ Fluker, “Leaders Who Have Shaped U.S. Religious Dialogue,” 577.