
DEMOCRACY AND THE SOUL OF AMERICA

Howard Thurman

Edited by

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INTRODUCTION

Life, Liberty, and Loyalty

Coming Alive to Democracy

It has become, undoubtedly, Howard Thurman's best-known quotation, beloved by life coaches and authors of self-help books. "Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and go do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive."¹ You can find it on greeting cards, in advertisements for upscale lines of clothing or housewares, or as a glossy motivational thought of the day, often with a backdrop of a rugged mountain or an inviting seascape, or with men and women jumping for joy with their arms outstretched. It has many admirers, along with a few detractors who have written to explain "Why I Hate That Howard Thurman Quote."² We do not hate it, exactly, but, if taken in isolation from the body of Thurman's thought and work, it can be quite misleading. Putting aside its somewhat shaky provenance—its only source is a conversation that the Catholic scholar, Gil Baillie, remembered having with Thurman as a graduate student seeking advice on what needed to be done in the world. Thurman's response might be good personal advice, implying that you should not let others set your life course, but it poorly represents his views on how one should respond to the needs of the world. Far more typical are statements such as the fol-

1. Gil Baillie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: Crossroads Publishing, 1995), xv. Thurman no doubt said something similar to Baillie, who was of course under no obligation to remember Thurman's words with stenographic accuracy.

2. See Erin McGaughan, "Why I Hate That Howard Thurman Quote" (January 27, 2017), <https://erinmccaughandotcom.wordpress.com/2017/01/27/why-i-hate-that-howard-thurman-quote>.

lowing from his 1939 lecture series, “Mysticism and Social Change.” The mystic, he states, “is forced to deal with social relations . . . because in his effort to achieve the good he finds he must be responsive to human need by which he is surrounded, particularly the kind of human need to which the sufferers are victims of circumstances over which, as individuals, they have no control, circumstances that are not responsive to the exercise of an individual will.”³

Thurman was always critical of self-absorption. “You can’t pursue happiness on a private race track,” he said in 1951, for its consequence would not be “a simple thing like unhappiness, but you get disintegration of soul.” (This he argued was at the root of capitalism and imperialism.)⁴ A decade later, in 1961, he argued that far too many Americans were focused on the “private fulfillment of [their] lives” to the exclusion of the “responsibility which we have to get acquainted with the facts of the world,” including its less attractive aspects, such as the nuclear arms race.⁵ From the time of his study of mysticism with Rufus Jones in the late 1920s Thurman was concerned with what he called the “thin line” between “a sense of Presence in your spirit” and “being a little off,” unable to connect to external realities with the urgency they demand.⁶ Although he was heartened by the revival of meditation and spirituality in the 1970s he also worried that a too fervent practice of the “mysticism of the life within” could lead to an unbalanced inwardness and could lead to shirking of responsibility for one’s society and its problems.⁷ In general, it was Thurman’s firm belief that “men are made great by great responsibilities,” and without them they “lack a sense of responsibility for the common life” and their internal morale and sense of identity can shrivel.⁸

3. HT, “Mysticism and Social Change,” in *PHWT*, 2: 215.

4. HT, “The Declaration of Independence IV: The Pursuit of Happiness,” current volume, 72.

5. HT, “Community of Fear” (Marsh Chapel Sermon, May 7, 1961), HTC.

6. HT, *The Way of the Mystics*, ed. Peter Eisenstadt and Walter Earl Fluker (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2021), 146.

7. HT, “Mysticism and Social Action,” in *Lawrence Lectures on Religion & Society, 1977–1978* (Berkeley, CA: First Unitarian Church of Berkeley, 1978), 18. In this account and elsewhere Thurman argued that the Roman Empire declined because civic religion was replaced by mystery religions that valued interiority above all other virtues, and there was a similar decay of civic awareness in contemporary America.

8. HT, “The Quest for Stability” (April 1949), in *PHWT*, 3: 311.

In the end, perhaps, there is no real contradiction between the two perspectives on personal and spiritual commitment. Perhaps what Thurman was saying to Baillie was that if you start by asking the world what it needs, you will never find your answer. To know others, first know thyself.⁹ This is not an invitation to selfishness, but instead a pathway to finding your deeper connections to the people who sustain you, and to the web of interlocking communities that constitutes humanity. When you find what makes you come alive, you become the channel “through which the knowledge, the courageousness, the power, the endurance needful to meet the infinite needs of the world must flow.”¹⁰ Thurman gave this process many names: “detachment,” “relaxation,” “centering down,” and “affirmation mysticism.” It is also at the heart of Thurman’s vision of democracy, as articulated in the sermons and lectures published in the current volume.¹¹

This volume collects some of Thurman’s most important unpublished sermons on the nature of democracy in general and democracy in America in particular. His view of democracy certainly included what is normally considered to be politics and the political, but it was never centered there.

9. This is a familiar theme in Thurman. In 1961, writing of Abraham Lincoln, he described how Lincoln’s introspection and reflection on the deepest questions of democracy led to his resolution to end slavery in the United States: “Every individual has a private responsibility to discover the ground of his private peace. The core that defines for him the place where he stands in existence and its meaning, and to hold this inviolate as he seeks to discover the things in his world that can feed this. This is our responsibility.” See his sermon, “The Green Bough,” February 12, 1961. More generally, as he told his listeners in 1972 in “Black Pentecost: Footprints of the Divine,” printed in the current volume, “the thing to remember is that the only life you have is your life, and if you do not live your life, following the grain in your wood, being true to the secret which is your secret, then you must stretch yourself out of shape in order to hear the Word and this means, you see, that you cannot come to yourself in the Word.”

10. HT, “Kingdom of God” (June 1938), in *PHWT*, 2: 170.

11. If Thurman had a favorite quotation, it was surely the words of the American socialist leader Eugene V. Debs to the judge who in 1918 sentenced him to prison for opposing World War I. Expressing a passionate identification with the needs of those on the margins of society, Debs said: “While there is a lower class, I am in it, while there is a criminal element, I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free.” For a non-exhaustive list of Thurman’s use of this quotation, see *PHWT*, 2: 300, 347; 4: 284–85; HT, *The Way of the Mystics*, 16; and HT, *The Greatest of These* (Mills College, CA: Eucalyptus Press, 1944), 25.

Instead, suffusing the idea of democracy for Thurman was, in the words of Vincent Harding, a quest for “a liberating spirituality, a way of exploring and experiencing those crucial life points where personal and societal transformation is creatively joined.”¹² It is on the imprecise boundaries of the personal and the social that Thurman’s inquiries into democracy are located. How can democratic ideals enhance individual personhood? How can people best express their identities in a social context and how can we create a society in which every individual can flourish? How can a democracy deal with conflicts and its internal contradictions?

Many of the sermons in this book date from a relatively narrow time span, the early 1950s. One main reason for this is technological. Before the advent of tape recording, which in the United States was not commercially available until after World War II, very few of Thurman’s sermons were preserved. For the period after 1949 the number of extant sermons and sermon series takes an exponential leap, and this is reflected in the choices for this volume.¹³ But there are other reasons. Thurman seems to have been particularly absorbed with general questions about democracy at this time. This was a time of political transition for Thurman and those broadly on the political left, whether formerly sympathetic to the Popular Front or the more progressive aspects of the New Deal, to a much less hospitable time, amid an increasingly all-encompassing and virulent anti-communism. Thurman strongly opposed this tendency, as can be seen in his scorching excoriation of American blood lust after the 1953 execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. And although he always kept his distance from identification with the Communist Party, this did not prevent the FBI from keeping a file on his activities, which included accusations that he “advocated Communism.” (These two documents are printed for the first time in the current volume.)¹⁴

This was also a time of qualified optimism as the campaigns for full Black citizenship, unloosed by the war, increasingly made their weight

12. Vincent Harding, foreword to *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949; repr., Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), xii.

13. See HT, *Moral Struggle and the Prophets*, ed. Peter Eisenstadt and Walter Earl Fluker (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2020), xii.

14. See “Howard Thurman’s FBI Files,” and “Meditation on the Rosenbergs,” printed in the current volume.

felt. In April 1948, after delivering the lectures that became *Jesus and the Disinherited* in Austin, Texas, Thurman commented that the South was “still a beknighted [*sic*] part of the world, but I am happy over signs of creative ferment. They seem to be much in evidence.”¹⁵ The following year he told the congregation at Fellowship Church that “for some time now” he had wanted to visit Louisiana and Mississippi where “some very important things are happening,” and Thurman wanted to “feel it at close hand.”¹⁶ Finally, the early Cold War era was a time in which there was much discussion of the nature of American democracy and the role of American democracy in the worldwide struggle against the Soviet Union and communism. If Thurman abhorred the Cold War, he was certainly part of this discussion.¹⁷ In an America that was simultaneously moving forward and backward, it was time for a serious reassessment of the meaning of democracy.

Thurman’s writings on democracy collected here are all the more important because, a few crucial exceptions aside, Thurman did not like to give explicitly political sermons or lectures.¹⁸ This was not because he thought politics unimportant, but because, if anything, he thought it too important, with the ever-present danger of its overloading and frying one’s emotional circuitry. In a 1938 sermon he spoke of the “thousands and thousands of defenseless men, women, and children” being killed in aerial bombardments in Spain, China, and India and the lives of “sharecroppers in Mississippi and Arkansas.” We think, “what a nightmare life must be for those who live always on the threshold of some thing [*sic*] of terror.” But Thurman cautioned that “the temptation is to stop with our being outraged,” and if not careful, “we will discover that in our outcry and in our anxious indignation we have merely sublimated our impulses to help,” and it becomes “less and less likely that we shall go beyond outrage and beyond crying out loud.”¹⁹

15. HT to Gretchen Conduitte, April 23, 1948, Folder 21, Box 30, HTC.

16. HT, *Moral Struggle and the Prophets*, 121–22.

17. See, for example, HT, “The Religion of Jesus and the Disinherited,” in Thomas Herbert Johnson, ed., *In Defense of Democracy* (New York: Putnam, 1949).

18. Important exceptions, in the years before the sermons in this book commence, include “A ‘Native Son’ Speaks” (1940), in *PHWT*, 2: 246–52; “The Fascist Masquerade” (1946), in *PHWT*, 3: 145–62.

19. HT, “Kingdom of God” (June 1938), in *PHWT*, 2: 169.

Politics for Thurman was not about the dubious satisfactions of “crying out loud” and cathartic releases of anger. As he wrote in 1938, “always I must be careful lest I become merely aware of [the] world and its needs without being affected by the needs of the world.”²⁰ Wallowing in the headlines for Thurman was a superficial response precisely because it did not involve deep personal reflection or commitment. For Thurman, the question was how an individual, or a group of individuals, can find and muster the inner strength and the outer resolution to embark on a systematic campaign for social transformation, and make the difficult, democracy-sustaining personal commitment to transformative social change possible. This was a searing question that he raised as early as 1927 in a letter to his mentor, Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, seeking how “we may release to the full our greatest spiritual powers, that there may be such a grand swell of spiritual energy that existing systems will be upset from sheer dynamic—and make whatever temporary adjustments as may prove helpful in relieving intolerable situations until there is a genuine uprooting.”²¹

Thurman’s place in the pantheon of American religious and civic leadership has been widely celebrated since his death in 1981, but what is not so well known about Thurman is that he was also a keen observer and astute interpreter of American democratic dogma. Often caricatured from within and without the African American community as a powerful preacher and detached mystic, until recently Thurman has been ignored, or at best considered irrelevant, to the pressing social issues impacting public life in general—and Black life in particular.²² His

20. HT, “Kingdom of God,” 2: 170.

21. See “To Mordecai Wyatt Johnson,” September 20, 1927, Oberlin, OH, *PHWT*, 1: 117.

22. Walter E. Fluker, “Walking with God: Preparation, Presence and Practice,” <https://vimeo.com/298387811>, delivered as The Alonzo L. McDonald Lecture, Part I, Candler School of Theology, Emory University, October 23, 2018. See also Walter Earl Fluker, “Leaders Who Have Shaped U.S. Religious Dialogue,” in “Howard Thurman: Intercultural and Interreligious Leader,” in *Religious Leadership: A Reference Handbook*, vol. 2, ed. Sharon Henderson Callahan (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2013), 571–78; and Walter Earl Fluker, “Dangerous Memories and Redemptive Possibilities: Howard Thurman and Black Leadership in the South,” in *Black Leaders and Ideologies in the South: Resistance and Non-Violence*, ed. Preston King and Walter Earl Fluker (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2004), 147–76.

approach to social justice issues has been labeled by some as unresponsive to the concrete realities of oppressed peoples. This reading of Thurman, however, is misinformed and unjustified. Any serious, reflective reading of the Thurman corpus reveals a fundamental concern with the plight of the oppressed, and extensive writings on how, through the use of radical nonviolence, their position in society could be altered. Thurman had very clear and strong convictions about African Americans and the nature and destiny of the “national community” and what Sarah Azaransky calls “this worldwide struggle.”²³

Thurman wrote a correspondent in 1937: “My point of interest is religion interpreted against the background of my life and the life of my group in America. I am very much interested in some of the problems that arise in the experience of people who attempt to be Christian in a society that is essentially un-Christian.”²⁴ It was in these years that he was formulating and expounding his distinctively African American conception of radical nonviolence, promoting his idea of the “apostles of sensitiveness,” the small cells of activists who would work tirelessly for the transformation of the ills of American society, serving as an inspiration for James Farmer, Pauli Murray, and many others in the first wave of civil rights activism.²⁵ He told a Black audience in 1932 that “the tragedy of the race is that the idea of being the world’s underdog is sinking into his soul,” a message in which “the press, magazines, schools and even the church” all “conspir[e] in one grand course to make us think that we are nothing.”²⁶ He told a white audience in 1940 that

generally speaking the Negro is not a citizen. He is several steps removed from active participation in those social, economic, political arrangements by which our common body politic is controlled. The character of a democracy and the character of those

23. Sarah Azaransky, *This Worldwide Struggle: Religion and the International Roots of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

24. HT, “To Ruth Cunningham” (January 18, 1937), in Folder 14, Box 24, HTC.

25. For Thurman on radical nonviolence, see Peter Eisenstadt, *Against the Hounds of Hell* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2021), 138–83, 184–96, 244–73. See also Sarah Azaransky’s discussion of Thurman’s influence on James Farmer and Pauli Murray in *This Worldwide Struggle*, xx–xxx.

26. Eisenstadt, *Against the Hounds of Hell*, 131.

who live in it are determined by the amount of active responsibility felt by and is possible for the individual . . . Responsibility, a free initiative, the sense of the future, these are the things that make for civic character, that make real citizens. These are denied the Negro.²⁷

And if he believed in the necessity of a true interracial democracy, he also wrote in 1945, “minority groups are in a unique position . . . [in] keeping alive the true genius of the democratic challenge . . . because minorities are apt to be the most directly and immediately exposed to the effects of the breakdown of the democratic ideals in the body politic.”²⁸

Thurman has relatively little to say about democracy and Black Americans in the essays from the early 1950s printed in the current volume. In part this is by design. The sermons were all delivered at Fellowship Church; and before white or interracial audiences he was reluctant to speak directly on racial matters. But more generally he wanted his sermons and lectures to encourage his listeners to develop the constructive spiritual power to transform themselves and their society. He felt that Black Americans did not need to be informed about the challenges of being Black, and he did not want his white listeners to come away filled with pity for the plight of the “poor Negro.” “If a man feels sorry for you, he can very easily absolve himself from dealing with you in any sense as an equal.”²⁹ Instead, in these sermons he explored the spiritual basis of true democracy, the recognition of what he called the equality of infinite worth, and the need of the dominant group in society to recognize the full “persona” of every individual rather than, as had been the usual practice, reducing Black people to their bodies.

Thurman’s corpus is filled with stories and reflections that depict the Black body as *policed*, as a thing that makes sounds, has voice, but cannot speak and feel. In one of his earliest political writings, “‘Relaxation’ and Race Conflict” (1929), he comments on the historical significance

27. “A ‘Native Son’ Speaks,” in *PHWT*, 2: 246–52.

28. HT, “The Cultural and Spiritual Prospect for a Nation Emerging from Total War,” in *PHWT*, 3: 107.

29. HT, *Footprints of a Dream: The Story of the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), 47–48.

of Black subjectivity being relegated to the body as chattel, an object of derision and persecution.

The slave was essentially a *body*—of course there were many exceptions to this point of view. The idea that the slave was a body has proved itself to be extraordinarily long-lived. As a small boy I remember being stuck with a pin, and when I reacted to it the little [white] boy who had done it said, “Oh, that doesn’t hurt you; you can’t feel.”³⁰

The young boy (or girl, he told the story both ways) who stuck Thurman with a pin had merely taken the wisdom of his elders too literally—Black people were incapable of having feelings. But white society as a whole conspired to reduce African Americans to a mere brute, physical presence. Thurman described his time as a Morehouse College undergraduate in the harsh city of Atlanta: “Our physical lives were of little value. Any encounter with a white person was inherently dangerous and frequently fatal. Those of us who managed to remain physically whole found our lives defined in less than human terms.”³¹

Thurman did not want to be reduced merely to his Black body, but at the same time, he believed his body and his racial identity were inseparable from his humanity and did not think it a compliment when white friends told him that they never thought of him as Black.³² Thurman, in his life and his thought, was the epitome of what has been called “colored cosmopolitanism.”³³ For Thurman, his experiences with his Black body was a Black person who spoke and felt, and his blackness was inseparable

30. *PHWT*, 1: 148 (brackets added). In other places, he refers to a “little girl” who stuck him with her pinafore. See *WHAH*, 11–12.

31. *WHAH*, 36.

32. While in seminary a white friend told him, “I never think of you as a Negro.” He told him, “I am a human being, but also a Negro.” A 1928 article about Thurman by a white author claimed, somewhat doubtfully, that “this brilliant young Negro wishes to be judged as a man and not as a representative of his race.” If he didn’t want to be in the position of being a “representative” of all African Americans, Thurman found no contradiction between his human universality and his Black particularity; see Eisenstadt, *Against the Hounds of Hell*, 85, 105.

33. See Nico Slate, *Colored Cosmopolitanism: The Shared Struggle for Freedom in the United States and India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012.) See

from his humanity and his understanding of freedom and equality. Thus, it was with a sense of bewilderment and incredulity that he listened to the advice of his major professor, George Cross, who said to his brilliant student toward the end of his last year at Rochester Theological Seminary:

You are a very sensitive Negro man . . . and doubtless feel under great obligation to put all the weight of your mind and spirit at the disposal of the struggle of your own people for full citizenship. But let me remind you that all social questions are transitory in nature and it would be a terrible waste for you to limit your creative energy to the solution of the race problem, however insistent its nature. Give yourself to the timeless issues of the human spirit . . . Perhaps I have no right to say this to you because as a white man I can never know what it is to be in your situation.³⁴

Thurman says that he “pondered the meaning of his words, and wondered what kind of response I could make to this man who did not know that a man and his black skin must face the ‘timeless issues of the human spirit’ together.”³⁵ This fact of facing the timeless issues of the human spirit in his *Black skin* would become over the years a central question for his conception of a mystical encounter that holds transcendence and Black embodiment in creative tension in the construction of what some scholars call *democratic space*.³⁶

also Amanda Brown, *The Fellowship Church: Howard Thurman and the Twentieth Century Christian Left* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

34. *WHAH*, 60. Thurman shared this story with Walter Earl Fluker in a conversation in Evanston, Illinois, in April of 1978. The impact of Cross’s advice, though not fully realized at that moment, became in time a driving principle for decision making in relation to social action for Thurman. Luther Smith comments on the significance of this occasion and its relation to Thurman’s baptism; see Luther E. Smith, *Howard Thurman: The Mystic as Prophet* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 2007), 24.

35. *WHAH*, 60.

36. To live in and out of a Black body, to live as a Black body, to be *Black skin*, connotes what Judith Butler identifies as “boundary, fixity, surface, and intensification,” in short, *materiality*; and “it is through the intensification of feeling that bodies and worlds materialize and take shape, or that the effect of boundary, fixity and surface is produced” (Sara Ahmed, “Collective Feelings: Or, the Impressions Left by Others,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 21, no. 2 [April 1, 2004]: 29). See also Judith Butler,

For Thurman, walking with God includes the wedding of spirituality and social transformation in the development of democratic space. In other words, Thurman's imaginative theological project provides a way to construct possibilities for new spaces, new times, and new rhythms for historically marginalized and despised bodies within and beyond political constraints and limitations. Therefore, Thurman's understanding of mystical experience was not a detached otherworldly quest that denied particularity; rather, particularity—especially individuality, as evidenced in embodied existence—was, for him, a statement about materiality, both as a boundary that separates and an arena for affective knowledge, communication, and agency that bring bodies together.³⁷

In his innovative liturgical experiments at the Rankin Chapel of Howard University, the Fellowship Church in San Francisco, and Marsh Chapel at Boston University, Thurman explored the efficacy of the body as a site for communion. Through the arts, music, dance, poetry, iconography, and silence, Thurman sought to create an egalitarian ecclesiological space for interracial, intercultural, and interreligious gatherings that honored the aesthetic dimensions of the body: *seeing, feeling, smelling, touching, hearing, and knowing*.³⁸ For Thurman, matter *matters*, as

Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex" (New York: Routledge, 1993), 9. *Democratic space* refers to the ongoing struggle against the reconfiguration of space and the reordering of time for subjugated bodies. See Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 29–30; Charles E. Scott, "The Betrayal of Democratic Space," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 22, no. 4 (2008): 304; Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Experience of Freedom*; and Fluker, "Walking with God: Preparation, Presence and Practice," <https://vimeo.com/298387811>.

37. Fluker, "Walking with God."

38. See Thurman, "A Prayer for Peace," where he speaks of the "smell of life," in Walter Earl Fluker and Cathy Tumber, eds., *A Strange Freedom: The Best of Howard Thurman on Religious Life and Public Experience* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 307–8. See also HT, "The Commitment" (March 1949, the Fellowship Church, San Francisco), in *PHWT*, 3: 309–10. For Thurman, "the Commitment" was not a creed or a confession of faith but necessary architecture for the church, the building of a "floor upon which people of . . . radical diversities may stand together." "I mean the worship of God, the immediate awareness of the pushing out of the barriers of self, the moment when we flow together into one, when I am not male or female, yellow or green or black or white or brown, educated or illiterate, rich or poor, sick or well, righteous or unrighteous—but a naked human spirit that spills over into other human

Luther Smith rightly suggests;³⁹ indeed, bodies matter, because they dare to speak, feel, and act. An oft-quoted statement of Thurman underscores the necessity for the appreciation and embrace of the body's time-space continuum and human transcendence, that is, being both self-aware and daring to *live* and *re-narrate* incarnate existence:

The time and place of a person's life on earth is the time and place of the body, but the meaning and significance of that life is as far-reaching and redemptive as the gifts, the dedication, the response to the demand of the times, the total commitment of one's powers can make it.⁴⁰

According to the late Charles Long, Howard Thurman does precisely this work of re-narration of the body and space by resituating "the problematic [of race] within the structures of inwardness as the locus for a new rhythm of time," which represents the appropriation of a *mythos*

spirits as they spill over into me" (309) . . . "Now, dimension is an aesthetic sense. The experience of unity in the presence of God, of the oneness of God, puts a scent in my nostrils that sends me, in all of the things that I do, trying to express it. In my work, in my relationships with people on the street, I look with new eyes on those with reference to whom, when I was imprisoned in my little narrow self, I had no experience of oneness. The fears that I had, that kept eating away at the basis of social security, are now removed, because I have let down my guard in an effort to move creatively into an understanding of other people and let them move creatively into an understanding of me. And in that moment of shuttling, they become a part of me forever" (310).

39. Luther E. Smith, "Intimate Mystery: Howard Thurman's Search for Alternative Meaning," in *Ultimate Reality and Meaning* 11, no. 2 (June 1988): 97. The notions of *living* in Black skin and the *policing* of the Black body find affinity with Willie James Jennings's argument that Europeans, in their colonial conquests, performed "a deeply theological act that mirrored the identity and action of God in creating," in which they transitioned and reconfigured land and territory as part of the domain of the project of whiteness. Jennings adds, "Theorists and theories of race will not touch the ground until they reckon with the foundations of racial imaginings in the deployment of an altered theological vision of creation. We must narrate not only the alteration of bodies, but of space itself." See Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 60; and Walter Earl Fluker, "The Politics of Conversion and the Civilization of Friday," in *The Courage to Hope: From Black Suffering to Human Redemption*, ed. Quinton Dixie and Cornel West (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999).

40. *WHAH*, 208.

that provided meaning and affirmation of human dignity to an otherwise hopeless existence.⁴¹

Thurman's experimentation with contested democratic space grows out of a long history of resisting chattel slavery, Jim Crow, segregation, and the terror of the rope. Therefore, while his notion of democracy references historical documents like the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the United States, and the Emancipation Proclamation, one cannot assume that democratic space for Thurman was the same as it was for the American founding fathers or European intellectuals and *philosophes*.⁴² Democratic space, for Thurman, demonstrates both the claiming of the right and the moral duty to dissent, to disagree based on the radical freedom and the inherent dignity and worth of the individual within the context of Black suffering. Thurman's religious and ethical moorings, therefore, are both an imaginative conjuring of sequestered space and a demand for the reconfiguration of history and memory that rests in a return to and re-narration of creation and the reclaiming of the body as sacred space.⁴³ For Thurman, this is not a journey into an Edenic paradise of puritanical innocence; rather it is a perilous pilgrimage into the interiority of religious experience and the exteriority of democratic landscapes witnessed in bodily existence and time, or, what he called in

41. Charles Long writes, "The slaves who lived both within and outside of history, created historical structures but having no power to determine the locus of their meaning found a spiritual locus outside the body of historical time in which to save their bodies and to give meaning to their communities. The spirituals were their myths, and as Ashis Nandy put it, the 'affirmation of ahistoricity is an affirmation of the dignity and autonomy of the non-modern, [non-Western] peoples'" (Charles H. Long, "Howard Thurman and the Meaning of Religion in America," in Mozella G. Mitchell, ed., *The Human Search: Howard Thurman and the Quest for Freedom, Proceedings of the Second Annual Thurman Convocation* [New York: Peter Lang, 1992], 141) (brackets in original).

42. Benjamin Isakhan, "Eurocentrism and the History of Democracy," in *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 51 (2016): 56–70.

43. See HT, *The Search for Common Ground* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 5. His central question is, "What is there that seems to be implicit, or inherent in [human] racial memory that is on the side of community?" (brackets added). See also his Convocation Address, in *Perspectives, A Journal of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary* 13, no. 2 (Spring 1972), and his Mendenhall Lecture "Community and the Will of God" (February 1961), HTC.

his 1945 essay, “the inner life and world-mindedness.”⁴⁴ Therefore, it is not sufficient simply to focus on the inner life without being aware and engaged in the complex social, political, and economic arrangements that order and structure the individual’s embodied existence, which for him, was necessary for the task of creating democratic space.

Thurman’s four sermons on the Declaration of Independence, the centerpiece of this volume, are a link in a long historical chain of African Americans grappling with the promise of this document as well as its hypocrisies. This began as early as 1776, when Lemuel Haynes, a free Black man from Massachusetts, subsequently a New England Congregational minister, wrote an essay, “Liberty Further Extended: Or Free Thoughts on the Illegality of Slave-Keeping,” that had as its epigraph the newly written preamble of the Declaration on the inalienable rights to life and liberty. In his essay, Haynes stated that “Liberty is a Jewel which was handed Down to Man from the Cabinet of Heaven, and is Coeval with Existence.”⁴⁵ Thurman expressed himself in different words, but he was fully in agreement with this perhaps most basic tenet of Afro-Christianity, that Christianity is a religion of liberty and liberation. For Thurman, Thomas Jefferson’s original vision of democracy was fatally flawed because of its emphasis on private property as a basic right. “When property becomes sacred,” Thurman had written, people are reduced to expendable things, and a slave society is only the highest and most com-

44. “The Inner Life and World-Mindedness,” Thurman Papers, Boston University, *PHWT*, 3: 108–13. The “sense of self” is rooted in the nature of the self. Thurman makes a distinction between the inner and outer dimensions of the self. For him, the individual is both a child of nature and a child of spirit. The outer dimension of the self is part of the external world of nature. See HT, *The Creative Encounter*, p. 19; HT, *Disciplines*, p. 57; and HT, *Search for Common Ground*, 21.

45. Haynes never published his anti-slavery essay. It was discovered only in the 1980s; see Ruth Bogin, “Liberty Further Extended: A 1776 Antislavery Manuscript by Lemuel Haynes,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd series, 40, no. 1 (1983): 85–105. For Haynes, see John Saillant, *Black Puritan, Black Republican: The Life and Thought of Lemuel Haynes, 1753–1833* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.) For the African American identification and argument with the Declaration, see Mia Bay, “See Your Declaration Americans!!!: Abolitionism, Americanism, and the Revolutionary Tradition in Free Black Politics,” in Michael Kazin and Joseph A. McCartin, eds., *Americanism: New Perspectives on the History of an Idea* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 25–52.

plete realization of a society built on the preservation of private property in things. Private property then becomes an extension of oneself and one's life, and to protect their property "men are held guiltless when they destroy life that threatens their own life."⁴⁶

But Thurman did not believe that Jefferson's crabbed view of democracy exhausted the meanings of the Declaration. The only real basis for democracy was recognizing what he liked to call the "infinite worth" of every individual, not treating persons as means to an end, and creating societal structures that would advance those goals, and rejecting what he called the "cult of inequality," the belief that without a rigidly enforced hierarchy, society would dissolve into chaos.⁴⁷

This was a revolutionary idea, and Thurman in the 1950s and 1960s saw revolutions sprouting everywhere.⁴⁸ In 1955, speaking of independence movements in Asia and Africa, he quoted another part of the preamble to the Declaration: "Governments are instituted among men, deriving their powers from the consent of the governed; That whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter and abolish it."⁴⁹ Within a few years Thurman was writing enthusiastically of another revolution, what in 1963 he called the "profound social revolution that is taking place particularly in the United States, one which involves the future of the relationships between black and white citizens of the land."⁵⁰ This was a realization of Thurman's idea of loyalty, as he discussed in 1951, as "the willing and steadfast and practical devotion of a person to a cause," enmeshing one's fate with that of others. In Thurman's words, loyalty is "essentially a spiritual phenomenon

46. HT, "The Significance of Jesus III: Love" (September 1937), in *PHWT*, 2: 64. "That upon which [a person] depends as a guarantee of his economic survival becomes an extension of himself. It becomes his private property, and any individual who threatens to disturb his security threatens his life." Therefore, writing of contemporary labor violence, "hence, men feel quite justified in importing gunmen or thugs to kill defenseless strikers in a factory."

47. See "America in Search of a Soul," printed in the current volume. The "cult of inequality" was a favorite phrase of Thurman; see *PHWT*, 4:113, 120n6, 218.

48. For Thurman on revolution, see HT, "Religious Faith and Revolution," printed in the current volume, and Eisenstadt, *Against the Hounds of Hell*, 317.

49. HT, "Speech at Lambda Kappa Mu Human Relations Award Dinner" (November 1955), in *PHWT*, 4: 131–36.

50. Eisenstadt, *Against the Hounds of Hell*, 317.

derived from the nature of the universe,” the “fusing of the outer and the inner,” loyalty to oneself and to one’s chosen community, to one’s comrades.⁵¹

He had written in 1950 that “always in revolution there is this sense of the collective destiny, a sense of me-too-ness with reference to other people. I am not alone—that is what it says, and that becomes a part of the dynamic of every revolution.”⁵² A decade later, he found himself within this transforming, revolutionary sense of loyalty.⁵³ “Perhaps the most significant thing that has happened in the last few stirring years of the vast struggle for civil rights in the South and the North has been the dramatic loss of fear on the part of the masses of Negroes,” with “the sense of direct, conscious, and collective participation in a joint destiny,” generating “a strange and wonderful courage.”⁵⁴ It was this sort of loyalty to liberty and freedom that Thurman experienced, when, part of the throng, he participated in the March on Washington that August: “Nothing like this has ever happened in the history of our country. I was one of 200,000 people sharing a moment that contained all time and all experience, when everything was moving and everything was standing still, a moment that had in it the stillness of absolute motion.”⁵⁵ It was also perhaps the culminating moment for Thurman of his idea of non-violent revolution. As he argued in the 1961 sermon, “Emancipation and Human Freedom,” a basic premise of the civil rights revolution was the determination that life is not “essentially finished, fixed, set, frozen,” but “is essentially fluid, dynamic, creative.”⁵⁶ For Thurman, this was being demonstrated at every rally, demonstration, sit-in, and freedom ride, melting a social system that too many for too long had believed to be rock-hard, solid, and unchangeable.

The civil rights revolution in the mid-1960s intersected with a movement for Black nationalism. Thurman was always supportive of Black self-assertion, proud of his own racial identity, but he did not want his Blackness

51. HT, “The Meaning of Loyalty I,” printed in the current volume.

52. HT, “Religious Faith and Revolution,” printed in the current volume.

53. For Thurman’s many instances of comparing the civil rights movement to a revolution, see Eisenstadt, *Against the Hounds of Hell*, 317–18.

54. HT, “Nonviolence and the Art of Reconciliation,” in *PHWT*, 5: 7.

55. Eisenstadt, *Against the Hounds of Hell*, 319–20.

56. HT, “Emancipation and Human Freedom,” printed in the current volume.

defined too rigidly, or defined for him, as can be seen in the 1972 sermon “Black Pentecost: Footprints of the Disinherited.” “An absolute is an absolute, and it is the nature of an absolute to be an absolute, and I have a built-in allergy to any social absolute, because it is the absolute in white society that has lacerated me, and the only thing an absolute knows what to do is to absolute.”⁵⁷ Thurman believed personal and group identity was an open door and not a wall. As he stated twenty years earlier in a sermon on “Democracy and the Individual,” printed in the current volume, the central problem of democracy is that of the “urgency and the necessity constantly to redefine the boundaries of the group. Because if I do not redefine the boundaries of the group increasingly so as to include more and more diversity, more and more differences, more and more radically alien backgrounds and orientations, then the genius of democracy itself, rooted in this spiritual relationship, becomes a device that makes for group arrogance and group superiority.”⁵⁸

The final sermon in this book is a bicentennial sermon from 1976, “America in Search of a Soul,” and it serves as a culmination and a recapitulation of many of the earlier sermons in this volume. In it, Thurman elaborates on his distinction between freedom and liberty. Liberty is social and political. “It can be given; it can be taken away. It can be wiped out.” Freedom “is the process by which, standing in my place where I am, I can so act in that place as to influence, order, alter, or change the future.” Freedom can be latent. It is “the sense of option.” You might not have the liberty to exercise that option. But no one can reach inside you and force you to stop thinking of an alternative way of living your life, unless you let them.”

This contrast between freedom and liberty, Thurman argues, is a key, and a key contradiction in American history, a country founded on liberty and freedom, and a country that, from its creation, suppressed the freedom and liberties of the indigenous population, of other racial minorities, and those condemned to slavery. Perhaps more than any other of his sermons or essays, “America in Search of a Soul” shows Thurman’s bifurcated views of America and of American democracy. He saw the

57. HT, “Black Pentecost.”

58. HT, “A Faith to Live By: Democracy and the Individual II,” printed in the current volume.

creation of the United States as a great experiment, which he describes in almost providential terms, a test to see if people of very different backgrounds and levels of power could create a society of true equals. America for Thurman is a school, God's school, a school to test whether the promises of the Declaration of Independence, the Gettysburg Address, the Letter from Birmingham Jail, and other exalted symbolic documents are more than mere words. God has been an only moderately effective teacher because "Now, school is out. School is out, and it's been out for some time."⁵⁹ Some lessons have been learned, some lessons were never learned, and some lessons have been unlearned. If Thurman believed America was founded on a contradiction, he also believed, as one of his core religious and political beliefs, that no contradiction, regardless of how fixed and adamant it might appear, was ever final.

This introduction opened with the quote, "Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and go do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive." It also was so, and almost certainly more important for Thurman. The world cannot tell you what makes you come alive. "My life is rooted in a kind of awareness of my meaning that does not arise from your interpretation of my significance, that nothing, that no judgment that you impose upon me, no order of society into which you seek to have me regimented, can sever my roots from the dimension of awareness that gives to me my inner significance."⁶⁰ Both sentiments are part of Thurman's vision of democratic space, a community in which everyone is both infinitely equal and infinitely unique. "I have always wanted to be *me* without making it difficult for you to be *you*," he wrote in the preface to *The Search for Common*

59. HT, "America in Search of a Soul." Thurman used the same metaphor in "A Faith to Live By: Democracy and the Individual I," printed in the current volume: "We have been sent to school by Life, by God to develop confidence and faith, technique, methodologies for implementing the dream of one world, one family that God has for the human race. And school is out, school is out and there isn't enough time to do any teaching now. There is just time enough left for contagion. Either we demonstrate or die. There is no alternative left and I wonder what God thinks about his students, I wonder."

60. HT, "The Declaration of Independence I: Created Equal," printed in the current volume.

Ground.⁶¹ When Thurman was dying, in early 1981, he told his wife, Sue Bailey Thurman, “It is wonderful that you did not come between me and my struggle. You did not stand in my way.”⁶² In Thurman’s ideal democratic space, people would learn to care, nurture, and love one another enough to let them grow, and to not stand in their way.

Thurman never lived in an ideal democratic space, and he never expected to. Neither should we. In 1946, in one of his most trenchant political essays, “The Fascist Masquerade,” he explored how American fascism hid and festered behind the facades of intolerant brands of “true Christianity or true Americanism . . . provid[ing] for a legitimizing of sadistic or demonical impulses.” American fascism had many hatreds—of Jews, foreigners and immigrants, organized labor, liberals and radicals—and relied especially on the “appeal to anti-Negro sentiment in many sections, communities and among many groups.” This “is a ‘natural’ for the would-be demagogue. It is sure fire.” Fascism hates anyone and everyone who does not fit into their narrow vision of what it means to be Christian and what it means to be American.⁶³

For all that changed since Thurman wrote “The Fascist Masquerade,” too much, far too much, has not. Bigotry is still “sure fire.” As this is being written, at the end of 2021, we are all still living in circumstances very far from Thurman’s ideal democratic space. Two years into a debilitating pandemic, our worries about the future of democracy in the United States and overseas, along with a host of other problems that seem increasingly out of reach of democratic solutions have become acute. Thurman might have been dismayed by our current situation, but he would not have been surprised. His was a politics that was long practiced in the art of spiritual survival in inhospitable places and times. The first task was to “take the responsibility for how, mark my word, *how* I react to the forces that impinge upon my life, forces that are not responsive to my will, my desire, my ambition, my dream, my hope—forces that don’t know that

61. HT, *The Search for Common Ground*, xii.

62. Sue Bailey Thurman, Memorial Tribute, “Simmering on the Calm Presence and Profound Wisdom of Howard Thurman,” special issue, *Debate & Understanding*, ed. Ricardo A. Millet and Conley H. Hughes (Spring 1982), 91.

63. HT, “The Fascist Masquerade,” in *PHWT*, 3:145–62.

I'm here."⁶⁴ Giving way to unreasonable fear or giving up to despair were never options, according to Thurman. The second task, following an honest appraisal of one's situation, was to do what one could to change it.

In one of his meditations, Thurman references Martin Buber, who said that life for him was at its very best when he was living on what he called "the narrow ridge." It is a way of life that generates zest for each day's round because it is lived between abysses on either side with anticipation and imagination that gives us wings. "In each of us," Thurman writes, "there is a 'Cascade Eagle,' a bird that is higher when soaring the [narrow] gorge than the highest soarer above the plains—because the gorge is in the mountains. To give this eagle wings is the call to every *person*."⁶⁵ Democracy will always inhabit the narrow ridge between what is possible and what is impossible. If impossibility seems to have gained the upper hand in recent years, we can only push back against it with renewed strength, knowing that our freedoms will always be measured in part by the resistance it engenders from the unfreedoms around us. Or in Thurman's words, "It is in reference to the relationship between the movable and that which at the moment seems to be immovable that I get the sense of play which is freedom."⁶⁶ He loved the Declaration of Independence, despite some of the flaws of its creators, because he knew that democracy always had to be revolutionary, capable of renewing itself, capacious in its sympathies, willing to defend its fragility against its enemies, and, above all, an affirmation of the aliveness of life.⁶⁷

64. HT, "America in Search of a Soul."

65. "The Narrow Ridge," in HT, *The Inward Journey* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 85–86. Martin Buber (1878–1965) was a German-Israeli philosopher, religious thinker, and social theorist. The description of the Cascade eagle was taken from Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, where it is called a "Catskill eagle"; see HT, *Moral Struggle and the Prophets* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2020), 92n14.

66. HT, "The Declaration of Independence III: Liberty," printed in the current volume.

67. See HT, "The Declaration of Independence II: Life—An Inalienable Right," printed in the current volume.