
THE INNER LIFE AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Howard Thurman

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THE QUEST FOR STABILITY I

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“There is a sense of fear as of some impending doom around the next turning in the road. There seems to be a climate of disaster that does not quite materialize into cataclysmic incident; only a general loss of morale.” If this represented Thurman’s mood in early 1949, he was not alone. It was a feeling of unease widely shared in a postwar America in the early years of the Cold War, a so-called age of anxiety, contributing to what Thurman diagnosed as “a universal urgency for both personal and social stability.”¹ Thurman delivered three sermons at Fellowship Church on “The Quest for Stability” that February.² Thurman began the first of these sermons with the New Testament text, “And you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.”³ But truth, he argues, is a “relationship,” not “something fixed and permanent.” The problem with fixed truths is that they often do not take change into account, and can be bitterly hostile to change, and we “are in

1. W. H. Auden’s long poem, *The Age of Anxiety* (New York: Random House, 1947), won the Pulitzer Prize and became a popular catchphrase. One of Thurman’s most anxious essays, “The Fascist Masquerade,” *PHWT*, 2: 145–60, published in 1946, discussed his fears of the possibility of the coming of American fascism. For Thurman’s understanding of fear, see Peter Eisenstadt, “We Are Not Afraid: Howard Thurman and the Casting Out of Fear,” in *The Unfinished Search for Common Ground: Reimagining Howard Thurman’s Life and Work*, ed. Walter Earl Fluker (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2023), 139–56.

2. In addition to these sermons from February, Thurman gave four lectures on “The Quest for Stability” at the national convention of the YWCA in San Francisco that March, published in the *Woman’s Press* the following month, and this is reprinted in *PHWT*, 3: 311–18. While there is some overlap, the sermons printed here differ substantially from the published article. There are two versions of the current sermon, one of which includes a short reworking of the present sermon, which is again significantly different from other extant versions. It is printed here as an addendum.

3. John 8:32.

the midst of worldwide, world-shaking revolutions that affect almost every single aspect of our common life and of our thinking,” revolutions that are “upsetting of age-old supports that have guaranteed the established order.” He gives the example of the end of British India (and implicitly, the gathering worldwide struggle against colonialism and racism).

If one’s beliefs are too brittle, Thurman claims, they are liable to “break down. Then, all the world hath no meaning and there isn’t any validity of any kind of ideals and so I become a person of great instability.” So, Thurman asks, “How can we live with dignity and conviction in a world that is undergoing constant dimensions of shift?” For any dogmatic belief, he suggests, “the time will come when either the individual will have to pull down all the shades and enjoy his darkness—which is his light—or let the content of his belief battle it out in the arena with the content of other beliefs, always maintaining a relationship, a personal relationship, to the validity of the belief-notion.” For Thurman, truth is both rational and sentient, and it is not a thing per se but is rooted in and beyond the constant change and conceptualizations of order—it has to do with one’s existential encounter with self-fact in respect to something that flows underneath all time-space manifestations.⁴ For Thurman, we must find our truths in an involvement “always, constantly, inside and outside in a world that is essential process, that is creative, that is movement.” Truth is “a relationship that I as an individual maintain with the facts, with the hopes, the dreams, the people in my world,” though they are shifting and often inconstant. The way to find stabil-

4. For Thurman, truth is the rational element that is always present in love. Throughout his writings and meditations, Thurman insists that the head and the heart are one (HT, *WHAH*, 269). The rational nature of truth is predicated upon the inherent order or logic in life. There is a natural affinity between the order in life and the activity of the human mind which makes knowledge of the world possible (HT, *The Search for Common Ground*, 5). Thurman’s conception of truth is also sentient; it incorporates and transcends rationality. He emphasizes the intuitive nature of truth. Thurman defines intuitive knowledge as “immediate, direct, and not an inference from logic. . . . It is an awareness of literal truth directly perceived” (HT, *The Creative Encounter*, 46). See also his “Mysticism and Social Change” (1939), in *PHWT*, 2: 190–221. Here Thurman offers an exposition of the nature of intuition and its difference from discursive reasoning. Intuition is a constituent part of personality. It is not spontaneous, but always deeply rooted in the data with reference to which the process of intuition is related. For discussion of Thurman’s conception of truth, see Walter E. Fluker, *They Looked for a City*, 60–63.

ity in one's life, or in one's country, is by coming to terms with life's inherent mutability, its ever-growing edge.

I shall use as a text this morning those rather familiar words, “You shall know the truth and the truth will make you free.” And, of course, the moment we say the word [truth] we think not of a relationship, but we think almost at once of something that is fixed and permanent in the sense of solid; something that is inflexible, and therefore, unyielding. Now, I am proposing in our thinking about the quest for stability that in truth, there is our only authentic basis for stability and therefore for freedom.

We are all concerned with stability, personal stability, because in one way or another each of us has sometime, if not at the present moment, experienced a deep sense of instability. This sense of instability is dramatized in our world because we are a part of a changing, shifting order. We are in the midst of worldwide, world-shaking revolutions that affect almost every single aspect of our common life and of our thinking. Any fundamental mood in our world towards a larger sense of meaning for people means the upsetting of age-old supports that have guaranteed the established order.

Just to illustrate in one simple instance, simple but fearfully complex. For many years in a country like India, for instance, the people who were indigenous to the land were under the rule of some others, some outsiders.⁵ The first people—we don't know very much about them—those who preceded the coming of the Hindus down through the famous Khyber Pass.⁶ But when they came they pushed the indigenous people farther

5. Thurman's argument is that conquest by outsiders is a central feature of Indian history, and each of the major invaders—the Indo-Aryans, the Muslims, and the British—have profoundly shaped the history of South Asia. While this cycle seemed to come to an end with Indian and Pakistani independence in 1947, the subordinate status of the Dalits remained unresolved. The following year, in the Indian Constitution of 1950, untouchable status was declared illegal, though it did not eliminate the social practice and its associated stigma. For Thurman on untouchability, see *PHWT*, 2: 136–37; 3: 259–61.

6. Thurman visited the Khyber Pass in early 1936, in which he had an epiphany that eventually led to his participation in Fellowship Church; see Eisenstadt, *Against the Hounds of Hell*, 196.

south and farther south until they couldn't get down any farther without getting in the ocean; and there they stood their ground a little and burrowed themselves more deeply in the soil and became—so historians tell us—the outcastes of Hinduism. Now, when the invader came, all of the life that had been going on before was upset, and then sometime after the Mohammedans came, the Moslems came down and began moving into the land, and there the whole pattern of life underwent a radical change, a radical shift always in the interest of trying to guarantee the order as it was before the disturbance, and in that effort to guarantee the order as it was before the disturbance, there is built up a resistance to any change, because all change seems to be a part of that which is disorganizing the life, rather than that which will give to it some sense of stability and a new and enlarged sense of order.

After the Moslems, the British East India Company came down and the same process took place, and then after many years of stirring and stirring, the British withdrew—and it depends upon your point of view as to whether you say they withdrew voluntarily or through the result of a pressing invitation. But they withdrew, and when they withdrew, then at last those who are now regarded as the native Indians could say, “Well, this is ours now. We can find stability because that which disturbed us is now removed.” But deep within the womb of the country there was still another disturbance going on, and so the logic of the freedom of India from Britain expressed itself in the freedom of the Untouchable from within the framework, you see, so that stability then is always the result of the maintenance of a relationship of meaning and value and significance with that situation, individual, group, ideal, or belief that commends itself to us.

Now let's break that down for a few minutes. The key word in stability is the word loyalty. So that when I say I am a stable individual—not a stable citizen, just a stable individual—I mean by that, that I count. And I count with reference to some group, some unit, some set of individuals with whom I maintain a continuously significant relationship. Now I become so relaxed and adjusted to that continuing relationship that when that relationship shifts because the group itself is undergoing change, then I become unstable. Let me illustrate what I mean.

We all want to feel that we count with our families, that there is a group of people made up of men and women who guarantee us, in the midst of whom we have a sense of persona, a sense of being, so that as long as this group remains intact, as long as this group is not upset, then our relationship with it has the possibility of remaining intact; so long as I am true to it, so long as I'm loyal to it. But when there is a change of fortune, or a change of circumstances in one way or another, or a change of mind and attitude within this primary family group, that results in my not being, with reference to it, the kind of person that I was . . . Something has happened; my father has lost his job or my mother has become more nervous than ever, and there are other things that have happened that I don't quite know about, but I know that the family situation wobbles now, so that when I true⁷ my mind and my life to it, you see, in an effort to feel that I count, then I find that the thing that I'm truing it to is moving all the time, and that throws me in confusion, and the first thing I say is, "Something is wrong with me. Things aren't as they used to be." Then if I am convinced that I'm all right, then I say something is wrong with the situation, and suddenly I feel that I'm an alien, that I'm a man without a home, that now there isn't anybody to confer persona on me. So that I become unstable, because now I have no proof, I don't count!⁸

7. "Truing" means to bring (an object, wheel, or other construction) into the exact shape, alignment, or position required, or it can connote "unswervingly faithful or loyal to friends, a cause, or concept of truth." Thurman is using the word in the latter sense; "truing," s.v., *Collins English Dictionary*, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/truing>.

8. The idea of "counting," of "being accounted for," and "belonging" is an important theme in Thurman's vision of common ground. For Howard Thurman, to be "miscounted" means "to be ignored, to be passed over as of no account and of no meaning, . . . to be made into a faceless thing, not a man. . . . [It is] to act with no accounting, to go nameless up and down the streets of other minds where no salutation greets, and no sign is given to mark the place one calls one's own" (HT, *The Inward Journey: Meditations on the Spiritual Quest* [1961; repr. Richmond IN: Friends United Press, 1971], 38). The notion of "counting" for Thurman as an individual is extended into the political and social orbit where it becomes part of the fabric of democratic life and practice. See "Introduction," Peter Eisenstadt and Walter Earl Fluker, eds., in HT, *Democracy and the Soul of America*, xi–xxx; and Walter Earl Fluker, "Creating and Cultivating Democratic Spaces: Reflections on Howard Thurman and Democracy,"

Or it may be that my own self-confidence is in my own right arm. In my own self-confidence I haven't ever had a family to guarantee me, so that I have to guarantee myself; I know that if I got this, that I'd have to scrap for it, or if I grew up in a situation in which that were true, I would say to myself, and so as long as I have self-confidence, as long as I can depend upon the authentic character of my own prowess, my own power, I don't lean on anybody. When I'm in difficulties, I think my own way through. If I need this or that, I supply that need; I owe no man anything, I'm a self-made man! And then something begins to happen to me and now I don't have anybody to blame, since I am self-sufficient, and self-this and self-that. When I am not able to function in my habitual way, then I feel unstable, then my confidence begins to be undermined; and since I have nowhere I can turn for blame, then I begin to be my own whipping post, and my instability deepens because the more carefully I scrutinize myself and the basis of my former self-confidence, the more deeply I realize that I was mistaken. Or my stability may be in my ideals; in the inflexible character, that I know that for me these ideals, truths, or honesty, or honor or what have you are valid, and therefore all the world may shift, other men may prove false, but my ideals remain. Then, as long as I'm true to my ideals, and my ideals are fixed and unchanging and unyielding, then all I need to do is to maintain a relationship with them and then . . . I discover that this is the kind of world in which the ideals upon which men have built their lives also undergo change, and I find that as I have become more and more a part of the life that is in my environment, the more I seem somehow to be driven to strain myself to be true to these ideals. Because I don't have the confidence in them that I had once upon a time. And if they break down, then all the world hath no meaning and there isn't any validity of any kind of ideals, and so I become a person of great instability.⁹

in *The Unfinished Search for Common Ground: Reimagining Howard Thurman's Life and Work* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2023), 199–200. To “count” civically is to be granted a civic persona, as Thurman wrote in 1940: “it was not until the last war that the Negro became aware to some degree of his citizenship. Persona was conferred upon him by the dominant social group—he was made to feel that he counted” (*PHWT*, 2: 250). In the aftermath of World War I, however, “like a tremendous octopus, American society sought to place the Negro back into his position of anonymity.”

9. Thurman had been writing about the spiritual weakness of religious

Or finally, it may be that my belief is the thing that upholds me, that gives me a sense of stability. I remember once in divinity school, one day I went into the president's office and his secretary said, "I have something I want to show you. I've only shown it to two or three people, but I want you to see it." So, she opened her desk drawer and pulled out an envelope and she gave it to me. And it was her beliefs about God, about the church, about man, about . . . oh, various things, a catalogue of beliefs. And then when I read it, she waited for me to comment, and I didn't comment. I kept my eyes down on the paper for a moment, waiting for her to say something. Finally, she said, "I wrote those thirty-two years ago, and I'm happy to say that they are still as they were, that I [have] not change[d] a single word."

Now there are people who find their stability that way, and they recognize the fact [of] their stability so effectively that they reduce their exposure to any other body of beliefs that may somehow attack this belief, which is theirs, which has sustained them, and held them and kept them through the years. Now I have no quarrel with them, please do not misunderstand that, but I do know this about it, that the time will come when either the individual will have to pull down all the shades and enjoy his darkness—which is his light—or let the content of his belief battle it out in the arena with the content of other beliefs, always maintaining a relationship, a personal relationship, to the validity of the belief-notion. Now that is one of the great dangers of any kind of totalitarian system, whether it be religious or political or economic. There is a content there that is fixed and inflexible and unyielding, and there is only one requirement for the individual, and that is that the individual must maintain a constant relationship with this content, that the content is inexorable; it is changeless, it is inflexible, and therefore if there is any adjusting to be done, the individual must make the adjustment. But it happens that we live in a world in which we are caught always in one aspect or another of a creative process. Things are changing, they are shifting, they are undergoing all sorts of transformations; and the more sensitive we are, the more we are acutely aware of the fact that we are living in the midst of change. And this reality is so tremendous in its impact upon our minds and spirits that the result is emotional confusion and fog and frustration because we

"cocksureness" since the 1920s; see "The Perils of Premature Piety" (1925), in *PHWT*, 1: 47–52; and in the 1930s, "India Report" (1938), in *PHWT*, 2: 127.

always are insisting, you see, that we live in a world that is fixed, that is inflexible, that is unyielding, so that we can depend upon it.

And yet we are involved, always, constantly, inside and outside, in a world that is essential process, that is creative, that is movement. How can we live with dignity and conviction in a world that is undergoing constant dimensions of shift? It is suggested in the text that there is only one way by which that can be done, and that is that we shall find the freedom, the freedom that comes from truth as a relationship that I as an individual maintain with the facts, with the hopes, the dreams, the people in my world, even though I may say, I may discover again and again, that human beings can't be trusted.

As a simple illustration: every week someone says that to me: "Human beings can't be trusted, they are unreliable, they don't mean what they say, they don't intend to mean what they say, but they say it because they want either to fool you or to get rid of you." And when I pass a judgment like that, I discover that I know that there is something in it because all the time I catch myself doing the same thing! And yet I recognized that there is in me at the same time, a profound insistence, desire, will, intent, determination, to be a valid and authentic person; all the time I recognized that that is characteristic of myself. Therefore, when I deal with you, I must recognize the fact that whatever you may be saying to me, whatever you may be doing to me, that it is reasonable to assume that down underneath all of that is the same thing that I have discovered that is down underneath all this that I am doing to you.

And because of that, I will not permit my experiences with you to undermine my own sense of personal stability. Just one illustration of that idea: the truth about myself gives me freedom in my relationship to the truth that there is in you about yourself. "You shall know the truth," then, and in the truth you will find your freedom, and therefore your stability.

Addendum

Everybody knows that something has happened. Just when it happened, no one knows. But there is complete agreement that somewhere, something very important has given way, and all sorts of things are pulled out

of shape or sagging or falling apart. The result? Nerves! There is a sense of fear as of some impending doom around the next turning in the road. There seems to be a climate of disaster that does not quite materialize into cataclysmic incident; only a general loss of morale.

Explanations abound. Some say that we are caught in the open independence of the sea, far away from any port, and a storm of world revolution is upon us. They point to the breaking up of century-old social patterns all over the world. India is free for the first time in centuries, and deep within that freedom there is the division of Pakistan and Hindu.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the ferment within the country could not be stopped by half-measures; the great mass of Untouchables, by a stroke of the pen, are given freedom of movement and person within the wider political and social freedom of the country itself. Illustrations may be multiplied from the ends of the earth as well as from within our own country. Who would have dreamed that a report like “To Secure These Rights” would have been projected and produced by the Democratic Party, the party of the solid South?¹¹

There is the fact that we have passed through a period of total war. Always in the past, war has been the specialized function of a particular

10. This would have been better expressed as Pakistan and India, since India retained (and retains) a substantial Muslim minority after partition. In 1948 approximately 10 percent or about 35 million persons in India were Muslim. Today India’s population is about 15 percent Muslim.

11. In response to postwar violence against African American soldiers, President Truman formed his Presidential Commission on Civil Rights in September 1946. In December 1947 it issued its report “To Secure These Rights”—the title comes from the Declaration of Independence. The report, the first comprehensive federal plan for expanding civil rights issued since Reconstruction, called upon Congress, the White House, and state legislatures to adopt nearly three dozen proposals ranging from ending poll taxes, expanding voting rights, anti-lynching legislation, housing, fair employment practices, and most significantly, ending military segregation to protect the dignity of the uniform and its armed services. Truman accepted the report, and the following July, in Executive Order 9981, desegregated the military. The Democratic Party, while still the party of the “solid South” was increasingly also the party of the “liberal North,” where the so-called “Negro vote” was an increasingly important factor in their success. The new importance of civil rights for the Democratic Party led to the breakaway State’s Rights (or Dixiecrat) presidential bid of Strom Thurmond in 1948; see Matthew F. Delmont, *Half American: The Epic Story of African Americans Fighting World War II at Home and Abroad* (New York: Viking, 2022), 281–86.

group within the state, set up and organized for the purpose. But total war is new. By total war is meant that every man, woman, and child in the state was somehow involved—also that every conceivable resource of the national life was involved, that every social force was oriented to that end. This meant and continues to mean that no one may claim detachment. The result is deep strains and stresses in the soul of a people for which they had no preparation and from which there seems to be no sure basis for recovery. One could go on to call attention to the development and use of the atomic bomb. Many persons are sure not only that the development of the bomb marked the initiation of a new era for mankind but that it also killed something precious in the life of the race.¹²

Whatever may be the reasons for it, the fact remains that there is a universal urgency for both personal and social stability. This urgency can find fulfillment along at least three lines. A fresh sense of history must be developed. All of the events of our world must be placed in a context of incident that reveals their profound interrelatedness. History on this planet must be regarded not as individual happenings unrelated to social processes but instead as overlapping patterns of group behavior brought into play by a wide variety of creative personal and impersonal forces at work in the world. History is not irrational, for it has a deep logic and consistency.

There must be also a developed sense of self. This is important because it is only on such a basis that the dignity of man, the individual, can be restored. There must be some understanding of what it is that men seek and the varied means they use in order to find. Stripped to the literal substance of ourselves, what is it that we want and need in order to be worthwhile persons in our own sight? The assumption of democracy that the quality of infinite worth is the priceless ingredient in human life and relations must be examined and re-emphasized.

Finally, there must be a matured and maturing sense of Presence. This sense of Presence must be a reality at the personal level as well as on the social, naturalistic, and cosmic level. To state it in the simplest language of religion, modern man must know that he is a child of God and that the

12. See HT, "The Cultural and Spiritual Prospect for a Nation Emerging from Total War" (1945), and "The Inner Life and World-Mindedness" (1945), in *PHWT*, 3: 104–8, 108–13.

God of life in all its parts and the God of the human heart are one and the same. Such an assurance will vitalize the sense of self and highlight the sense of history with the warmth of a great confidence. Thus, we shall look out upon Life with quiet eyes and work on our tasks with the conviction and detachment of Eternity.