



HOWARD WASHINGTON THURMAN AND MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

CRITICAL RESOURCES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF ETHICAL LEADERSHIP

As we enter a new century beset by ethical issues and challenges, the leadership legacies of Howard Washington Thurman (1899–1981) and Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–1968) provide critical resources for spirituality and social transformation in the development of leaders. At stake in this discussion is not the claim to a metaphysical model or mandate for spirituality. Instead, I am looking at these African American leaders as resources for a developmental model that allows us to examine the ways in which spirituality, ethics, and leadership are linked and to provide a resource for training a new generation of leaders who are spiritually disciplined, morally anchored, and socially engaged.

THE BLACK CHURCH TRADITION

Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King Jr. are products of the “black church tradition,” and it is within this long-standing American tradition that we best understand them and the relevance of their legacies for the development of ethical leadership. The “black church tradition” is used advisedly in this context, given its recent *discovery* during the controversy surrounding Dr. Jeremiah Wright. Interestingly, most Americans still

associate the black church with the media-stimulated images of the Blues Brothers or with occasional encounters with televangelists while surfing television channels. Remarkably, few remember the role of the black church in the modern civil rights movement. Most forget, in fact, that Martin Luther King Jr. was a pastor before he became a civil rights leader, and few have ever heard of Howard Thurman and many other illustrious leaders of this tradition who have shaped many of the basic institutions and laws of this nation.

The controversy surrounding Pastor Jeremiah Wright has been significant in shaping public perceptions of black churches, and especially black ministers. From the beginning of Senator Barack Obama's campaign, his pastor posed a problem for his nomination. Politically, it was problematic for Obama to embrace Pastor Wright, because he feared that the preacher's incendiary and often colorful statements about race in American society would ignite a firestorm that he could not extinguish. Yet, by his own admission, he was torn; though he loved his pastor and his white grandmother, he could not abide their public commentary on race in America:

I can no more disown him [Reverend Wright] than I can my white grandmother—a woman who helped raise me, a woman who sacrificed again and again for me, a woman who loves me as much as she loves anything in this world, but a woman who once confessed her fear of black men who passed by her on the street, and who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe.¹

While both his grandmother and pastor honestly expressed their feelings about race in America, Dr. Wright committed the unpardonable sin—he spoke about it publicly. Lurking always beneath the surface of American culture is the ominous threat that race will become public and that we will have to deal with it.² But this has been precisely the public mission of the black church since its inception in American slavery.

First, the designation “black church tradition” encompasses a variety of highly syncretistic religious survivals and retentions from traditional African belief systems and Christian culture, which are more properly referred to under the canopy of the “black church.” The black church tradition, at its best, is an argument about the meaning and destiny of American democratic dogma. It finds creative affinity with what the late James M. Washington called “the American dissenting tradition,” which included “abolitionists and many other varieties of social reformers. Many Americans

do not understand or have forgotten how indebted we are to the stubborn tradition of loyal opposition in American history. The opposition's determination to put righteousness, conscience, and morality before social and political expediency helped to shape some of our most fundamental values and institutions."³ The moral argument represented by this tradition is a significant contribution to a national community in search of its soul.

The definition of "the Black Christian tradition" offered by Peter Paris in his enlightening book, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches*, captures the distilled formulation of the many arguments for the syncretistic view and the position represented in this proposal. Paris claims that "the tradition that has always been normative for the black churches and the black community is not the so-called Western tradition per se, although this tradition is an important source for blacks. More accurately, the normative tradition for blacks is the tradition governed by the principle of *nonracism*, which we call the black Christian tradition. The fundamental principle of the black Christian tradition is depicted most adequately in the biblical doctrine of the parenthood of God and the kinship of all peoples." This critical principle of *nonracism*, according to Paris, is fundamental for "justifying and motivating all endeavors by blacks for survival and social transformation." Moreover, the black Christian tradition has functioned both in priestly and prophetic functions—"the former aiding and abetting the race in its capacity to endure racism, the latter utilizing all available means to effect religious and moral reform in the society at large."⁴ A biblical anthropology (view of persons) that affirms the equality of all persons under God is the locus of authority and basis for the moral and political significance of black churches. Paris's definition is also helpful, as we will see, in understanding the priestly and prophetic functions that Thurman and King respectively demonstrated in their leadership roles.

Second, the black church tradition is not monolithic; rather, it spans a broad spectrum of denominational, theological, and cultural diversity. The particular strand of the black church tradition referred to here represents a long stream of thought and activism in the African American community in which liberation and integration are inextricably linked. Theologically, Martin Luther King Jr. labeled this quest "the search for the beloved community," and Howard Thurman, "the search for common ground." Lawrence Jones contends that "ever since blacks have been in America, they have been in search of the 'beloved community,'"⁵ a community grounded in an unshakable confidence in a theology of history. The approaches of representatives of this particular strand of the black church tradition to the

problem of community in American society clearly constitute an analysis of the broader problematic of religion, race, and culture.

The role and place of women in this tradition have remained largely invisible with the exception of recent research and writing, but the advances and progressive democratic politics of this nation owe a great deal to their courage, organizational prowess, and commitment to equality and justice. It is difficult to imagine what America would be without the activism of black church women like Ida B. Wells, Mary Church Terrell, Mary McLeod Bethune, Nannie Helen Burroughs, Fannie Lou Hamer, Pauli Murray, Ella Baker, Marian Wright Edelman, Vasthi McKenzie, and so many more who constitute the best in American democracy.⁶ Even in its most anemic and debilitating circumstances, the black church tradition has called America to live up to the better angels of its nature.

Throughout African American history, the black church has provided the pool of leadership that led to the creation of social institutions and organizations that have prophetically challenged the world to move toward a “beloved community.” Because of the black church’s distinctive socio-cultural location and long history of producing quality leadership, it is a prime candidate for offering direction for the development of leaders for our national and global communities.

At the center of discussion among scholars involved in research and writing on the black church tradition is the development of critical concepts and methods for a social ethic that takes seriously the indigenous sources and experiences of African American people. Most claim that, historically, the black church tradition has been the chief social locus for the ethical foundations of leadership in the African American community. For the most part, African American leadership has been influenced by the distinctive ethos of the black church tradition. The black church, however, is not the only repository of moral and social practices of African American leadership. Black colleges and universities have long-standing traditions of excellence dating back to early postbellum American cultures. Morehouse College was the alma mater of both Thurman and King. Since its humble beginnings during Reconstruction, Morehouse College has been a veritable “candle in the dark” for generations of black men who have sought higher learning and greater visions of service to the black community and the larger society.⁷ Morehouse men learned early a sense of personal worth and their responsibility to those less fortunate. Thurman says, “We understood that our job was to learn so that we could

go back into our communities and teach others.”⁸ At Morehouse College, Thurman and King were privileged to study with some of the ablest minds in America and to learn the relationship between education of the head and the heart. King, during his last year, wrote in the Morehouse student journal, *The Maroon Tiger*, that “the function of education . . . is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. But education which stops with efficiency may prove the greatest menace to society. The most dangerous criminal may be the man gifted with reason, but with no morals.”⁹

The contemporary issue at stake in African American moral traditions, as in the larger society, is the role of systems and their impact on the moral development of individuals.¹⁰ Simply stated, individuals are socially constructed, yet by definition are responsible and accountable for moral choices within the context of their social histories and stories. Hence the pertinent questions for the ethical and moral development of leaders in this respect are: What stories are the individual a part of, and how do those stories inform moral practices and habits? What is the role of institutions in this narrative perspective, and how might leaders develop habits and practices that conspire against unjust institutional practices that promote unhealthy and self-destructive existence? The operative assumption here is that African American moral traditions have played a significant role in shaping the moral languages of this nation and, consequently, can serve as a strategic resource in the formation of ethical leadership in the national community.

The point of departure in this inquiry into African American moral traditions is complemented by an interdisciplinary approach, which identifies critical resources and methodologies for the retrieval and appropriation of discourse that shapes character, civility, and community. In this endeavor I rely heavily upon the works Howard Washington Thurman and Martin Luther King Jr. In an earlier book, *They Looked for a City*, I compared the concepts of community in their thoughts and practices with the aim of making a statement about the traditions that had furnished their creative social visions for America and the world. While there was a large body of developing scholarship on King, few scholars had focused on Thurman’s contributions as a social critic. Thurman’s mystical orientation and emphasis on the primacy of the individual as the basis for social transformation had, for the most part, been relegated to the province of religious life and spiritual moorings. I demonstrated that their respective visions of community were not exclusive but compatible—one emphasizing individual transformation

through religious experience as a basis for social change and the other calling attention to the social fabric of American life and the need for the restructuring of American society through nonviolent resistance and a renewed vision of global community. With respect to their concepts of community and their points of entry, I argued that they represented two sides of the venerable tradition of loyal dissent that sought the highest and noblest ideals of American democracy: the black church tradition. Thurman and King, in many ways, represent the best in the American dream. Barack Obama, reflecting on their legacies and his obvious role as beneficiary of their achievements, affirms, "Howard Thurman, I think, represents some of the best in America. I constantly refer back to the work that has been done by Dr. King, Dr. Thurman, and others whose shoulders I really stand on." Their views of inclusive participatory democracy within American society and the method they upheld as the only moral and practical one available to men and women of conscience were, at once, a critique on American society and a distant goal to which the nation is called.¹²

HOWARD THURMAN: THE OPENER OF THE WAY

Howard Thurman met leaders at the intersections where worlds collided and tutored them through spiritual renewal and social activism. His career as pastor, scholar, teacher, university chaplain, preacher, and administrator extended over fifty-five years and touched the lives of many highly visible leaders within and beyond the modern civil rights movement.¹³ Born in Daytona Beach, Florida, at the turn of the twentieth century in the midst of the dehumanizing onslaughts of segregation and Jim Crow, Thurman committed himself to transforming parochial and dogmatic pockets of organized religion into a community transcending barriers of racism, classism, sexism, denominationalism, and religious exclusivism. Although women and men from various racial, socioeconomic, cultural, and religious backgrounds found affinity with this universal spirit, the peculiar genius of Howard Thurman was rooted in his location on "the underside of history," that is, the African American experience of oppression in the United States.¹⁴ The genesis of Thurman's vision of community is properly located within the context of black oppression and was significantly shaped by his encounters with the extremes of race and class domination in America's Deep South at the turn of the twentieth century. His early

wrestling with this problematic serves as a “site of dangerous memories”¹⁵ that shapes the central, unifying theme of his life and thought, which he refers to as “the search for common ground.” Thurman’s self-perception as a solitary brooder, moreover, sheds light on a vital, though neglected, dimension of American discourse on spirituality, ethics, and leadership.¹⁶

Thurman saw his role in the movement as always calling those individuals involved in the struggle back to that primary experience of encounter with, in his language, the “literal truth” or “the truth of God.” Thurman’s ministry of teaching and healing extended beyond the walls of the church to personal encounters with individuals who found in his presence a place, a moment to declare, “I choose!” This was part of the ministry performed for so many African American leaders who had to deal with the brutal and harsh realities of living in a society that rendered them nameless, faceless, and sexless. This dimension of Howard Thurman was one of the peculiar graces of the man. Somehow, he was able to dig deep into the inner recesses of the other’s being, into places others could not reach. Thurman seemed to be able to find the hidden treasures of the soul and to navigate forsaken wastelands of the heart, the shattered hopes and the flickering visions of yesteryear. He taught those in despair how to dream again, how to begin again, how to resurrect the crucified and forsaken symbols of their lives and make of them redemptive messengers in a world that conspires against faith, hope, and love. In the words of his wife, the late Sue Bailey Thurman, “He helped to move the stumps out of the way for so many people.”¹⁷

The testimonies from many notable leaders within and beyond the African American community are legion.¹⁸ Crusaders like Jesse Jackson proclaim that “Dr. Thurman was a teacher of teachers, a leader of leaders, a preacher of preachers. No small wonder, then, that Martin Luther King Jr., Whitney Young, Samuel Proctor, Vernon Jordan, Otis Moss . . . sat at his feet, for we knew it was a blessing to give this prophet a glass of water or to touch the hem of his garment.”¹⁹

Those closest to Thurman report that, while in his presence, the inimitable Mr. Jackson literally sat at the master’s feet.²⁰ But Jackson is not alone in his adulation. Vincent Harding, a noted historian of the African American struggle, remembers the quiet idiom that marked the gracious manner of Thurman’s presence. Harding writes, “I remember our silences. They were filled with wisdom and compassion. Indeed, it may be that he was the wisest and most compassionate man I have ever known.” He continues, “Howard Thurman opened doors. . . . Many of

us have become more fully human because of his opening love. Many of us have been challenged by his life to do our own moving, deep into the heart of our own 'spiritual idiom,' thereby drawing nearer to the inside [of] all peoples, all cultures, all faiths."²¹ Marian Wright Edelman, founder of the Children's Defense Fund, draws on the spiritual wisdom of Thurman for generations of children by counseling them to heed the words of Thurman "to wait and listen for the sound of the genuine," which for her is a lesson in "discipline, solitude and prayer."²² For the late Arthur Ashe, tennis champion and humanitarian, Thurman represented "the supreme example of the black American's capacity for achieving spiritual growth and maturity despite the incessant blows of racism. Born in the shadow of slavery, black and poor, he developed his understanding of the human and divine to such an extent that he influenced thousands of people."²³

For the civil rights leader and presidential adviser Vernon Jordan, "Dr. Thurman was one of the greatest and most influential preachers the world has produced. He was a spiritual leader of the nascent civil rights movement, and in later years would give wise counsel to Martin Luther King Jr., Whitney Young, James Farmer (who was his student), Jesse Jackson, and I am very proud to say, me." Jordan first heard Thurman preach in 1953 when he was a freshman at DePauw University. He was so enamored by the gifted preacher's eloquent and soul-stirring explication of the Lord's Prayer that he rushed to shake his hand at the close of the chapel service. "He didn't know me from anybody," writes Jordan, "but that would change." And change it did! Thurman became for Jordan a hero and mentor. Over the years, the young civil rights leader sought his counsel. On one occasion, after he became the head of the National Urban League, Jordan sat with Thurman an entire evening until dawn, discussing life and the lessons that Thurman had learned over the long years of the struggle. Jordan reflects, "Thurman is seen by some as a mystic, but I found him firmly grounded, a repository of wisdom." Indeed, Jordan shares that during his hospitalization after being shot in Fort Wayne, Indiana, Thurman sent him a collection of his taped meditations, which provided for him a point of focus and inner healing.²⁴

Perhaps the remarks of Pulitzer Prize-winning author Alice Walker capture best the power of Thurman's presence as a veritable *angelos* incarnate in his written word. She called him "one of the greatest spiritual resources of this nation. . . . The essence of his thought emerges in a message of hope, reconciliation, and love. . . . In those long midnight hours

when morning seems weeks away, the words of Howard Thurman have kept watch with me.”²⁵

How came this intriguing personality to such a prominent place in the lives of many leaders who labored in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s and who continue to struggle for justice in America? What was the secret of his comforting presence and profound insight into the spiritual moorings of leaders engaged in social transformation? I use the designation “Opener of the Way”²⁶ to express the distinctive characterization of Thurman’s contribution to leaders in the forefront of the movement. As a discursive pointer, it also provides a window through which we can examine his understanding of spirituality and how it is wedded to healing and social transformation in Thurman’s thought and praxis. By utilizing this language, I also want to highlight Thurman’s conscious role as pedagogue in teaching and explicating the spiritual and ethical significance of the political, economic, and social arrangements in which these individuals found themselves.²⁷

Mozella Mitchell’s depiction of Thurman as “a sophisticated modern-day shaman” and “a technician of the sacred” is helpful.²⁸ For Mitchell, Thurman stands somewhere between the priest and the shaman while maintaining a distinctive posture as a social prophet. Unlike the prophet who speaks to the community, “Thus says the Lord,” the shaman leads the community to God by “giving others access to the spiritual world and effecting a care for their ailing condition.” According to Mitchell, “Thurman, in his shamanistic function, does not simply bring the message of truth from God to the religious community, but he leads individuals and the community to have an experience with the divine from which they may gain a sense of wholeness themselves.”²⁹

Mitchell’s description of Thurman places him alongside a company of African American healers and teachers whose roots reach beyond the American clime and find affinity with a long and neglected tradition.³⁰ While it is helpful to compare Thurman with the shaman of archaic societies, Thurman’s linkage with his African past is a more fruitful way to understand his role as Opener of the Way from the underside of history. In this paradigm, one sees exciting parallels with the enslaved preachers of the African Diaspora. Like his precursors, Thurman provided a symbol for leaders of the movement to center upon. James Weldon Johnson and W. E. B. DuBois attributed the centrality of the enslaved African preacher to his or her role as teacher and healer. Johnson wrote that “it was through him [*sic*] that people of diverse languages and customs that were brought here

from diverse parts of Africa and thrown into slavery, were given their first sense of unity and solidarity. He was the first shepherd of his bewildered flock.³¹ Speaking of the “priest” and “medicine-man,” DuBois wrote, “He early appeared on the plantation and found his function as the healer of the sick, the interpreter of the Unknown, the comforter of the sorrowing, the supernatural avenger of wrong, and the one who [c]rudely, but picturesquely expressed the longing, disappointment, and resentment of a stolen and oppressed people.”³²

From early childhood, Thurman felt himself “marked.”³³ Most illuminating is this characteristically modest statement about his peculiar gift:

One day, how early in my life I do not recall, I discovered a little scar tissue in the center of both ear lobes. When I asked about it, I was told that my ears had been pierced when I was a baby. I was told that at the time of my birth my eyes were covered by a film. This meant, according to the custom, that I was gifted with “second sight”—a clairvoyance, the peculiar endowment of one who could tell the future. No parent wanted a child so endowed. It spelled danger and grief. If the ears were pierced, however, the power of the gift would be dissipated. How deeply I was influenced by this “superstition” I do not know. Who is there who can understand such things? One thing I do know, there are times when I am visited by the emergence of a quick memory, the vivid recollection of a face, a person, an event that shoots up from the unconscious on its own errand. Or it may be an insight or an inspiration, an “opening,” to use a phrase from the Society of Friends. It is idea and more than idea. We say this thought came into our minds or we had a “hunch” that this was going to happen; our language is full of such references.³⁴

Thurman represents an important symbol of America’s past—a past torn by what Mircea Eliade called “the massive terror of history” and indicted by the cacophonous tyranny of a fragmented public discourse that has collapsed on itself. Yet it is precisely his wrestling with the interstices of race and culture through the agency of religious experience that bequeaths to us a key to the meaning of what Reinhold Niebuhr called “the irony of American history,” and maybe its redemption.³⁵ Thurman’s intellectual and religious project teaches us how to reenter time, lost time, time-swept-under-the-rug and to establish a new rhythmic harmony among disparate and conflicting histories in the search for common ground.³⁶ His steady insistence on the search for common ground between groups finds creative

resonance at this critical impasse of American history.³⁷ With the increasing ideological tensions in the public square 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 spiritually inspired public ethic that does not pay homage to greedy, grinning gods of modernity.

Thurman has long been heralded as a stellar exemplar of American religious leadership, a theoretician of nonviolent direct action, and a cultivator of spiritual insight into the ethical dimensions of community.³⁸ More recently, scholars like Gary Dorrien have advanced the argument that Thurman along with Benjamin Elijah Mays, Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, and William Stuart Nelson were "proponents of a black social gospel." However, he accentuates an important difference in respect to their embrace of American theological liberalism. "To them," he writes, "the social gospel movement had barely begun; what was needed was an American Christianity that took seriously its own best preaching and ethics on behalf of equal opportunity, racial integration and peace. They took little interest in theological trends that obscured or relativized these goals. They were preachers, movement leaders and institutional builders, not academic theologians. The most promising religious thinker among them, Thurman, gave up his academic career to launch a model ministry of inclusion. He called American Christianity to its best religious vision and in several ways exemplified it."³⁹

Dorrien's observation underscores an important dimension of African American intellectual life since its beginnings: intellectual inquiry and engagement have always sought a public analogue. In this respect, Thurman's imaginative and pragmatic project of community has its origins in the "endless struggle to achieve and reveal and confirm a human identity."⁴⁰ His spiritual vision is forged on the *borderlands* between American liberal theology and the powerful black Christian tradition of protest, racial uplift, and social advancement of the race. Leaders in this tradition, such as Thurman, created an "autonomous third zone" where cultures could meet and interact. This feat of "straddling" diverse worlds may be the most distinctive contribution of Thurman to American theological discourse.⁴¹

Apostles of Sensitiveness

At the intersections of race, class, and religion, Howard Thurman called for leaders who were "apostles of sensitiveness." To be an apostle of sensitiveness is to have a sense of what is vital, a basic underlying awareness of life and its potentialities at every level of experience.⁴² The human project for Thurman

is the quest for meaning, understanding, and purpose in the midst of tragic existence—and it is this quest, for him, that marked the primal center of *innocence* and *becoming*. “The transition from innocence to knowledge is always perilous and fraught with hazard,” writes Thurman.⁴³ This transition from innocence to knowledge marks the way in which Thurman understood the encounter with the other as simultaneously a quest for self-recognition and understanding and the source of transformative action in the world. For him, spirituality is “the tutor” or “the unseen model” by which one structures the facts of his or her experience. For this reason, Thurman counseled, “The person concerned about social change must not only understand the materials with which he has to do, the things which he is trying to manipulate, to reorder, to refashion but again and again he must expose the roots of his mind to the literal truth that is the tutor of the facts, the orderer and reorderer of the facts of his experience.”⁴⁴

This must be done, Thurman contended, so that in the quest for social justice, one’s vision of society never conforms to some external pattern, but is “modeled and shaped in accordance to the innermost transformation that is going on in his spirit.”⁴⁵ He insisted that those engaged in acts of liberation must continually examine the sources of their motivation and the ways in which the social processes that they seek to change are related to their spiritual pilgrimage. Always, the primary questions for leaders involved in social transformation are: “What are you trying to do with your life? What kind of person are you trying to become?”⁴⁶ It was Thurman’s conviction that the leader in his or her actions “is trying to snare into the body of his facts, his conviction of those facts.” He cautioned, however, that faith thus understood always runs the risk of becoming idolatrous as in uncritical patriotic visions of “the American way.”⁴⁷ Therefore, one must examine the motivational content of action that involves a tutoring of the will by the unseen model, which for him was the truth resident within the individual. Here the questions of *identity*, *purpose*, and *method* are combined in relation to the individual’s social context. These three questions frame the inquiry into the development of the leader’s character that will be discussed in chapter 3 below.

At the funeral of civil rights leader Whitney Young in 1971, Thurman stated, “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.”⁴⁸ He often asked, “What does it mean to *live* life seriously (not to *take* life seriously),

to live freely unencumbered by the necessity of always conforming to external things that limit our potential to be authentically human in the world?" Thurman thought it demanded a journey into the interior, into those places we have sealed off and placed no-trespassing signs around. It meant, for him, an inward journey into dangerous territory, where the real issues of life and death must be confronted, where "the angel with the flaming sword" greets us, where we are not allowed entry unless we yield "the fluid area of our consent."

In his *Meditations of the Heart*, Thurman writes,

There is in every person an inward sea, and in that sea there is an island and on that island there is an altar and standing guard before that altar is the "angel with the flaming sword." Nothing can get by that angel to be placed upon that altar unless it has the mark of inner authority. Nothing passes "the angel with the flaming sword" to be placed upon your altar unless it be a part of "the fluid area of your consent." This is your link with the Eternal.⁴⁹

This journey into the interior, according to Thurman, is not extraordinary; in many respects, it is far removed from what we normally call "religion." The angel with the flaming sword is encountered in the mundane, earthly experiences of living and being in the world. At any juncture in the road, there may suddenly appear a sign, a flash, a burning bush, which places us in candidacy for this experience. Often in struggle, in crisis, in the heart of suffering and trial, one encounters the angel, the truth about oneself, the mendacious stereotypes about self and others, and the subtle and surreptitious ways in which one has been named. His ministry to Martin Luther King Jr., which is discussed below, is an example of the ways in which Thurman saw his ministry to leaders caught in the thick of the struggle.

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.: TRANSFORMED NONCONFORMISTS

More than any other American leader in the twentieth century, Martin Luther King Jr. stood at the intersection where worlds collided. In doing so, he challenged the nation to take seriously the role of spirituality and ethics in resolving what the authors of *Habits of the Heart* called the most important unresolved contradiction in our history, the tension between

“self-reliant competitive enterprise and a sense of public solidarity espoused by civic republicans.”⁵⁰ It was King’s spiritual genius that provided for him the essential assets and tools to lead a revolution of values that expanded the moral grammar of American history and culture from parochially applied democratic principles to concrete proposals for inclusiveness and action. This amazing feat, performed in a brief period of our history—from 1954 to 1968—was no doubt the nation’s finest example of what Martin Buber called “turning.” In doing so, King also changed the leadership equation: public leadership no longer belonged to the strict province of position, power, and privilege, but also to the marginalized moral minority—those whom King labeled “transformed nonconformists.”⁵¹

Much of the scholarship on Martin Luther King Jr. has centered on his role as a civil rights leader, his eclectic intellectual formation, and his distinctive place within the black church tradition.⁵² Little attention, however, has been given to the relationship among spirituality, ethics, and leadership in his thought and praxis.⁵³ This, of course, strikes one as surprising since the most casual observer of King’s life and work cannot help but be struck by a deep-seated spirituality wedded to a strong sense of Christian character and vocation. It is not surprising, however, that with the noble heritage bequeathed to him by his family, the Ebenezer Baptist Church, Morehouse College, and the larger black Atlanta community, King emerged as a luminous exemplar of the black church tradition of spirituality and social transformation. Equally revealing is his articulation of the thematic that characterizes the wedding of the notions of “spirituality” and “social transformation” in the language of “transformed nonconformity.” Embedded in his formulation of transformed nonconformity are significant elements of King’s biography and thinking regarding the place of spirituality, ethics, and leadership in his dream of human community.

Transformed Nonconformists

In Martin Luther King’s language, ethical leaders are transformed nonconformists who become aware of the transforming power of the encounter with the *other* within themselves and in community with others. King firmly believed that inner transformation was essential to involvement in social transformation. Transformation, however, is not equated with moral perfectionism; rather, it is understood as an inner quality of life that issues forth in deeds of goodwill and love for the neighbor. “In the final analysis,” says King, “what God requires is that your heart is right. Salvation isn’t reaching the destination of absolute morality, but it’s being in the process and on the right road.”⁵⁴ For him, the

transformed nonconformist experiences a new birth and a reorientation of values that enables her to struggle for social transformation. "Only through an inner spiritual transformation do we gain the strength to fight vigorously the evils of the world in an humble and loving spirit," King writes.⁵⁵

King's sense of character and calling was intricately related to his spiritual life and his quest for social justice. The pre-Montgomery King or the faces of "Little Mike," "Tweed" and "the Philosopher King"⁵⁶ do not readily lend themselves to the character that is disclosed in the moments of testing that followed his public ministry in Montgomery and thereafter. It is rather in engagement with the struggle for social justice that one begins to see the deep, furrowed glance of the preacher become leader of the people. I am reminded of the poetic meditation of the late Archbishop of Recife, Brazil, Dom Helder Camara:

Lord, guide me
 If you try me, send me out into the foggy night,
 so that I cannot see my way.
 Even if I stumble, this I beg,
 that I may look and smile serenely,
 bearing witness that you are with me and I walk in peace.

If you try me,
 send me out into an atmosphere too thin for me to breathe
 and I cannot feel the earth beneath my feet,
 let my behavior show men that they cannot part me forcibly from you
 in whom we breathe and move and are.
 If you let hate hamper and trap me,
 twist my heart, disfigure me,
 then give my eyes
 his love and peace,
 my face the expression of your Son.⁵⁷

This understanding of spirituality is not the same as the market-stimulated self-help philosophies on spiritual growth that crowd the shelves in mega bookstores and that promote personal development and solipsistic narcissism as the means to attain spiritual awareness. Rather, King's brand of spirituality stands in direct contradiction to the conforming, anesthetizing cultural deluge that dominates the printed and audio-visual media on leadership.

I cite here an event in his life where one sees clearly the relationship between spirituality and social transformation in King's portraiture of character: the often-cited "kitchen vision." David Garrow maintains that the kitchen vision of January 27, 1956, which took place in the early stages of the Montgomery boycott, was the paradigmatic moment in King's spirituality.⁵⁸ The experience captures for us an example of the way in which King understood spirituality to be part of a larger dynamic of ethics and leadership. It is also a revealing portrait of the testing of character that is integral to the spirituality of transformed nonconformity. Caught in the early phases of the Montgomery bus boycott, he received a chilling telephone call threatening his life and the life of his family: The chilling voice on the other end of the phone said, "Nigger, we are tired of you and your mess now. And if you are not out of town in three days, we're going to blow your brains out and blow up your house." King says he "sat there and thought about his little daughter who had just been born" and his "devoted and loyal wife," who was asleep. He thought about how he might be taken from her or she from him. He thought about his father and mother who had always been the steady-ing influences for him in trying moments, but they were 175 miles away in Atlanta. He said to himself:

You've got to call on that something in that person your Daddy used to tell you about, that power that can make a way out of no way. . . . And I discovered then that religion had to become real to me, and I had to know God for myself. And I bowed down over that cup of coffee. I never will forget it. . . . I prayed a prayer, and I prayed out loud that night. I said, "Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I'm right. I think the cause we represent is right. But, Lord, I must confess that I am weak now. I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage. And I can't let the people see me like this because if they see me weak and losing my courage, they will begin to get weak.

Then it happened:

And it seemed at that moment that I could hear an inner voice saying to me, "Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo I will be with you, even until the end of the world." . . . I heard the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone. No, never alone, never alone. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone.⁵⁹

King's belief in the primacy of inner transformation in the struggle for social justice informed his thinking about the relationship between law and justice. In his many statements about resisting unjust laws, he questioned the underlying assumption that the opinions of the majority should dictate the rightness of moral action. He reasoned that since the rational nature of human beings seeks conformity to law, people are inclined to make conformity the normative equation for truth and justice. Such conformity, according to King, yields to blindness of action and staleness of culture. Blind conformity makes us paranoid and distrustful of opinions that go against the majority; stale conformity quietly supports the status quo through inaction that leads to apathy and neglect of our duties as citizens. "Most people," he writes, "and Christians in particular are thermometers that record and register the temperature of majority opinion, not thermostats that transform and regulate the temperature of society."⁶⁰

He also resisted the temptation to *untransformed nonconformity* and anarchy. Nonconformity is not a good in and of itself; rather, it must be transformed through spiritual regeneration, which is an ongoing, disciplined, and deliberate practice characterized by love for the neighbor. Untransformed nonconformity, for King, leads to unwarranted suspicion and callous intolerance. Important for King, therefore, was the pragmatic thrust of law as an active, dynamic article that is renewed through conflict and struggle, through negation, preservation, and transformation. Democracy at its best, for King, is a squabble, a contentious exchange of ideas, opinions, values, and practice within the context of civil relations. When King speaks of a "revolution of values and priorities" and of overcoming the triplets of oppression (poverty, racism, and war), he speaks within the framework of American democratic society with the willingness to suffer the penalties imposed by law for civil disobedience.⁶¹ King was acutely aware of the dangers that meet transformed nonconformists at the intersection where worlds collide. As a Christian, he believed that as coworkers with God, leaders are called to create a just and loving society through redemptive suffering. In a revealing personal testimony, King writes,

My personal trials have taught me the value of unmerited suffering. . . . I have lived these past few years with the conviction that unearned suffering is redemptive. There are some who still find the cross a stumbling block, others consider it foolishness, but I am more convinced than ever before that it is the power of God unto social and individual salvation. So like the Apostle Paul I can now humbly say, "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus."⁶²

THURMAN AND KING AT THE INTERSECTION WHERE WORLDS COLLIDE

Thurman states in his autobiography that on more than one occasion he felt a premonition to minister to those engaged in the thick of the struggle. His relationship with Martin Luther King Jr. is exemplary.⁶³ After King was stabbed in Harlem on September 20, 1958, Thurman felt the inner necessity to go to him. In reference to this movement of the Spirit upon him, Thurman writes,

Many times through the years I have had strange visitations in which there emerges at the center of my consciousness a face, a sense of urgency, a vibrant sensation, involving some particular person. On a certain Friday afternoon, Martin emerged in my awareness and would not leave. When I came home I said to Sue [my wife], "Tomorrow morning I am going down to New York to see Martin. I am not sure why, but I must talk with him personally if the doctors permit."⁶⁴

During his visit with the young civil rights leader, Thurman encouraged King to extend his convalescence four weeks beyond those recommended by his doctor in order "to reassess himself in relation to the cause, to rest his body and mind with healing detachment, and to take a long look that only solitary brooding can provide." Thurman suggested, "The movement had become an organism with a life of its own to which he [King] must relate in fresh and extraordinary ways or be swallowed up by it."⁶⁵ King's biographers indicate that he did indeed take an extended convalescence culminating in his trip to the land of Gandhi in February 1959. Taylor Branch writes, "Recovering at home, King settled into a period of relative stillness unique to his entire adult life. He delivered no speeches or sermons outside the Dexter pulpit for many weeks. Nor did he travel." Branch also reports that King turned down pressing agendas within the movement during this period.⁶⁶ Stephen B. Oates reports that "as he convalesced, King had time to do what he had longed for all these months: he read books and meditated. And he talked a good deal about the trial he was going through. He decided that God was teaching him a lesson here, and that was personal redemption through suffering. It seemed to him that the stabbing had been for a purpose, that it was part of God's plan to prepare him for some larger work in the bastion of segregation that was the American South."⁶⁷

In a series of letters between Thurman and King, it is possible to glean some of the content of the conversation that ensued from the visitation.⁶⁸ This correspondence also offers rare insight into the nature of Thurman's role as Opener of the Way in the civil rights movement. The relationship with King is of particular importance because it reveals the level of the struggle in which Thurman was self-consciously engaged as healer and teacher. Earlier that year, on July 7, 1958, King had written Thurman inviting him to come and preach at the church where King pastored, Dexter Avenue Baptist in Montgomery, Alabama. In a letter dated July 18, Thurman replied that if his schedule could accommodate, he would gladly come. The closing sentence, however, is most revealing. He wrote, "In the event that I can come, I hope there will be time enough to have a long, unhurried, probing conversation." This statement suggests that Thurman had desired opportunity to spend time with King before the Harlem incident. One month after the stabbing and subsequent to Thurman's visitation, he wrote King another letter. Two matters of concern were raised by the seasoned sage to the younger visionary. The first was the item mentioned above regarding an additional four weeks of convalescence. The second comment raised his concern for King's safety and the effectiveness of his ministry. In reply to the October correspondence, King, in a letter dated November 8, thanks Thurman for his visit and counsel:

It was certainly kind of you to come by the Harlem Hospital to see me. The few minutes that we spent together were rich indeed. Your encouraging words came as a great spiritual lift and were of inestimable value in giving me the strength and courage to face the ordeal of that trying period.

I am happy to report that I am feeling very well now and making steady progress toward a complete recovery. I am following your advice on the question "Where do I go from here?"⁶⁹

One would not want to make much ado about nothing, but clearly the probing question "Where do I go from here?" is a more personal formulation of King's broader social problematic addressed in the last chapter of his 1958 book *Stride toward Freedom* and later expanded into a full-length inquiry in his last book, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*⁷⁰ More important, this question arises from the same schema of the methodology used by Thurman as the initial step of commitment as a

spiritual discipline, that is, the questions of identity (Who am I?), purpose (What do I want?) and method (How do I propose to get it?).

Commitment, for Thurman, is more than mere intellectual assent or emotional attachment to an ideal, as in the quest for social justice; rather, it is at the heart of one's personal religious experience, however defined. Commitment involves "singleness of mind." He writes, "This means surrendering the life at the very core of one's self-consciousness to a single end, goal, or purpose. When a man is able to bring to bear upon a single purpose all the powers of his being, his whole life is energized and vitalized."⁷¹

This is particularly true, Thurman suggests, in the experience of suffering or crisis. In crisis, one is forced to ask the question of purpose, "What is it that I want, really?" He opines:

When a man faces this question put to him by life, or when he is caught up in the necessity of answering it, or by deliberate intent seeks an answer, he is at once involved in the dynamics of commitment. At such a moment he knows what, in the living of his life, he must be *for* and what he must be *against*.⁷²

On November 19, Thurman wrote King:

It is wonderful to know that you are better and that plans are afoot in your own thinking for structuring your life in a way that will deepen its channel. It would be a very good thing if we could spend several hours of uninterrupted talk about these matters that are of such paramount significance for the fulfillment of the tasks to which our hands are set.

In the last two letters, dated September 11 and September 30, 1959, respectively, the two busy men share their disappointment in not being able to confirm a preaching date for Thurman at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church and missing one another while King was in San Francisco earlier that month. Thurman's closing remarks in the earlier letter reflect his concern for the young civil rights leader: "I think of you in my prayers and quiet time very often with the hope that you will continue to find all the things that are needful for your peace." King, in reply, writes, "I hope we will be able to talk together in the not-too-distant future." Whether this conversation took place is unknown. However, nearly five years later, Thurman was one of the thousands of pilgrims who gathered at the foot of the Lincoln Memorial to hear King share his dream for America. This

dream was also Thurman's. In his later years, long after King's tragic death, he reflected on the heroic image of Martin:

I joined my friend Frank Wilson in the memorable March on Washington and was part of the vast throng who heard and felt the unearthly upheaval of triumphant anguish: "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God A'mighty, I am free at last." Perhaps the ultimate demand laid upon the human spirit is the responsibility to select *where* one bears witness to the Truth of his spirit. The final expression of the committed spirit is to affirm: I choose! and to abide. I felt myself a fellow pilgrim with him and with all the host of those who dreamed his dream and shared his vision.⁷³

Thurman's healing ministry to King and others in the movement is suggestive of a much-neglected dimension of American leadership discourse and practice. His approach to social justice issues has been labeled "mystical" and unresponsive to the concrete realities of oppressed peoples. This reading of Thurman is misinformed and unjustified. Any serious, reflective reading of the Thurman corpus reveals a fundamental concern with the plight of the oppressed. Luther Smith suggests that this misreading of Thurman is based primarily on the fact that he does not provide specific proposals for social transformation. Yet Smith contends that while none of Thurman's writings offer a blueprint for social policy, he does offer "a heightened awareness of human suffering that is at stake, he clarifies how fundamental religious principles are involved in issues, he challenges our attitudes and commitments that contribute to social crises, and he inspires us to respond to the issues."⁷⁴ Thurman's contribution to spirituality, ethics, and leadership rests on his provision of an intellectual framework for a proper *sense of self* and *urge toward community*, which will find greater elaboration in the following chapters. Otis Moss Jr. captures well the significance of Thurman's contribution to the civil rights movement: "It might be that he did not join the march from Selma to Montgomery, or many of the other marches, but he has participated at the level that shapes the philosophy that creates the march—and without that, people don't know what to do before they march, while they march or after they march."⁷⁵

For Thurman *commitment* is fundamental to character. Commitment involves volition, which may be a radical, self-conscious yielding on the part of the individual or a systematic, disciplined effort over a period of time.⁷⁶ The result of the commitment of the individual is a new, integrated basis for moral action; a new value content and center of loyalty inform his

actions in the world.⁷⁷ The person's loyalty to God, which proceeds from the personal assurance of being loved by God, forms the ground of the moral life. What is discovered in private must be witnessed to in the world. Thurman comments on the nature of the individual's spiritual experience and its relationship to moral action:

His experience is personal, private but in no sense exclusive. All of the vision of God and holiness which he experiences, he must achieve in the context of the social situation by which day-to-day life is defined. What is disclosed in his religious experience he must define in community. That which God shareth with him, he must inspire his fellows to seek for themselves. He is dedicated therefore to the removing of all barriers which block or frustrate this possibility in the world.⁷⁸

King and Thurman demonstrate that for ethical leaders, each encounter with the *other* carries within itself the danger of disfiguring, of being tested and proven so that that which is hidden (and that which *calls* us) discloses itself in acts of courage, justice, and compassion. Ethical leaders, therefore, are *apostles of sensitiveness*, transfigured and transforming actors who present themselves to the world as symbols and for instances of what is possible and hopeful. In the experience of encounter, one is readied or predisposed to hope, hope being simultaneously the transformation of threat, temptation, danger, and death into a vision of the possible, a sense of values, a sense of the future, that is, having faith to move on in creative activity that aspires to goodness.

The task of the ethical leader is to *inspire* and *guide* others in the process of transformation through courageous acts of defiance and resistance against systems of injustice. At the personal dimension of character (which will be discussed later), this process involves reliving and recovering their cultural futures through life stories, rituals, and creative actions that give meaning to life. The focus is placed on reconciling acts of community, with the spiritual and ethical question being, What can I hope for? Through their personal narratives and their respective analyses of the power of hope, Thurman and King provide key concepts for leaders who must have the courage to hope at the intersections where worlds collide.