**1**

**PAPER SECTION NARRATIVES OF RESILIENCE**

**TITLE**

On Resiliency in Old Age: Lessons from Mystic and Prophet Howard Thurman

**OBJECTIVE**

Explore the implications of Thurman’s concept of a ‘liberating spirituality’ for personal and social transformation in later life.

**DESCRIPTION**

Thurman (1889-1981), the grandson of a former slave, grew up under the oppressive weight of Jim Crow laws and a culture of

violence in the South. He became a renowned teacher, writer, preacher, and a mentor of civil rights leaders in the 60’s. He learned

and practiced *how it might be possible for human beings to endure the terrible pressures of the dominating world without losing their humanity, without forfeiting their souls.\** Self-care strategies devised to bear the weight of the pressure of our earlier years may need revision to form healthier, more mutual relationships. Old age is an opportunity to do the necessary unfinished work of shedding the

strategies of fear, deception, and hate that interfere with loving the self, the other, and, even the enemy. Thurman’s life and work offer

clues.

\*from the Foreword by Vincent Harding in Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976).

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Fluker, Walter Earl, *Ethical Leadership* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009). The author is Professor of Ethical Leadership,

Boston University School of Theology.

Kalsched, Donald, *Trauma and the Soul: A Psycho-Spiritual Approach to Human Development and Its Interruption*

*(*London and New York: Routledge, 2013). The author is a Jungian analyst in private practice in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

He lectures widely on the subject of early trauma and its treatment.

McEntyre, Marilyn Chandler, *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009). The author is

writer and professor of medical humanities in the Joint Medical Program UC Berkeley-UCSF.

Thurman, Howard, *The Luminous Darkness*: *A Personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope*

(Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1989).First published in 1965 by Harper & Row. The wounds that Thurman identifies

continue to be the wounds that threaten human souls today where the ground of hope also exists.

Thurman, Howard, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (Orlando, Florida: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979).

Thurman, Howard, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976). First published in 1949 by Abingdon Press.

Here Thurman links the African-American experience with what he called ‘the religion of Jesus’ in order to show how an

unchained life is available to all men and women seeking wholeness, especially those with their backs against the wall.

Thurman, Howard , “Reconciliation” *in Disciplines of the Spirit* (Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1963):9.

Mystic, poet, philosopher, and theologian, Dr. Thurman authored more than twenty books. His purpose: “to utilize the raw

materials of daily experience as the time and place of the encounter with God.”

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**2**

**A Brief Overview of Howard Thurman’s Life (1889-1981)**

Against the odds for a black child growing up in the segregated South, Howard Thurman was able to continue

his public education in Florida, went on to Morehouse College in Atlanta where he graduated with top honors,

and from there went on to pursue a theological education for ministry at Rochester Theological Seminary in Rochester, NY (my alma mater some 40 years later, by then called Colgate Rochester Divinity School), the

only black student at the time, where he was affirmed in his intellectual abilities and the discovery of the

possibility of friendly relations with whites. He pastored for a while in Ohio and was called to the theology

faculty and dean of the chapel at Howard University in Washington, D.C. During those years, he traveled to

South East Asia where he met Mahatma Gandhi and other Hindus who challenged the compatibility of

Christianity with the struggles of black people for human dignity. He and his wife, Sue Bailey, returned from

their trip with a new shared commitment in response to the walls segregating American churches: *… we must*

*test whether a religious fellowship could be developed in America that was capable of cutting across all racial barriers with a carryover into the common life, a fellowship that would alter the behavior patterns of those*

*involved. It became imperative now to find out if experiences of spiritual unity among people could be more compelling than the experiences that divide them.*

Howard Thurman, *Footprints of a Dream* (New York: Harper,1959): 24,

He took up that challenge when he later moved to San Francisco and helped shape an interracial, interfaith congregation that exists today, the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples. He continued to experiment with the arts, meditation, and innovative liturgies to create worship that would affirm the human unity underlying creation

that he had come to understand and experience. Dogmas and creeds were de-emphasized in order to focus on the formation of an inclusive community in which worshippers were subjects of religious experience not objects of theological discourse.

He later joined Boston University, the first black person on the faculty of a major white institution, where he held

the position of Professor of Spiritual Resources and Disciplines and dean of the chapel. The student body included many persons of diverse religious and cultural backgrounds from beyond the U.S. In 1953, *Life* magazine listed Thurman as one of the twelve greatest preachers in the US, acclaimed by clergy and theological schools of all

faiths. He delivered meditations over radio and TV and spoke at hundreds of institutions, churches, and civic auditoriums, attracting large numbers of young adults. He was a prolific writer. His collected papers are a treasure trove for finding out more about his personal and professional associations and accomplishments, including his mentorship of Martin Luther King, Jr, and other civil rights leaders to whom he introduced Gandhi’s ideas about

non-violent resistance. *(The University of South Carolina Press has published 3 volumes to date.)*

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*Sankofa is an African word from the Akan tribe in Ghana.  The literal translation of the word and the symbol is “it is not taboo to fetch*

*what is at risk of being left behind.” The word is derived from the words: SAN (return), KO (go), FA (look, seek and take).*

*The sankofa symbolizes the Akan people’s quest for knowledge among the Akan with the implication that the quest is based on critical examination, and intelligent and patient investigation.*

*The symbol is based on a mythical bird with its feet firmly planted forward with its head turned backwards. Thus, the Akans believe the*

*past serves as a guide for planning the future. To the Akan, it is this wisdom in learning from the past which ensures a strong future.*

*The Akans believe that there must be movement and new learning as time passes. As this forward march proceeds, the knowledge*

*of the past must never be forgotten*. The text is from an interior window of the Carter G. Woodson Center at Berea College, Berea,

Kentucky. **This proposal is an invitation to explore and learn from the wisdom of Howard Thurman.**



**Rev. Carol J. Allen**