



*Crossings Reflection #4*¹

“The Sound of the Genuine”

Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman (1899–1981)



Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman

Howard Thurman was born among the working poor in Daytona, Florida, and reared principally by his grandmother, a former slave. He was educated at Florida Baptist Academy and received a B.A. degree from Morehouse College in 1923, graduating as the valedictorian of his class. He was ordained a Baptist minister in 1925, and the following year he received a B.D. (bachelor of divinity) degree from Rochester Theological Seminary.

While still a student, Thurman served as a leader of the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA). His first pastorate was at Mount Zion Baptist Church in Oberlin, Ohio, from 1926 to 1928. The following year he served a joint appointment as professor of religion and director of religious life at Morehouse and Spelman colleges in Atlanta, Georgia. About this same time, Thurman spent a semester studying at Haverford College with Rufus Jones, a Quaker mystic and leader of the pacifist, interracial Fellowship of Reconciliation.

Thurman went on to serve at Howard University in Washington, D.C., as professor of Christian theology and dean of Rankin Chapel from 1932 to 1944. From 1935 to 1936 Thurman also led the first black Delegation of Friendship to India, Burma (now Myanmar), and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). On this trip he and two others became the first African-Americans to meet Indian colonial independence leader Mohandas Gandhi. Thurman’s conversations with Gandhi broadened his international political vision and strengthened his Christian commitment to promoting intercultural understanding.

Thurman was the author of more than twenty books of spirituality and ethical and cultural criticism. The most famous of his works, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949), deeply influenced Martin Luther King Jr. and other leaders of the modern Civil Rights Movement. In 1944 Thurman left his prestigious tenured position as Dean of Rankin Chapel at Howard University to help the Fellowship of Reconciliation establish the first racially integrated, intercultural church in the United States, the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples, in San Francisco, California. The story of this distinctive church is told in Thurman’s book *Footprints of a Dream: The Story of the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples* (1959).

From 1953 to 1965 Dr. Thurman served as professor of spirituality and dean of Marsh Chapel at Boston University—the first African-American to occupy the post of dean at a traditionally Euro-American university. He continued his ministry as director of the Howard Thurman Educational Trust in San Francisco from 1965 until his death in 1981.

Thurman’s autobiography, *With Head and Heart* (1979) reflects the marvelous way that this African American spiritual sage integrated his religious inheritance from the black church elements with various Christian mystical traditions, American pragmatist philosophy, and the ethical ideals of the Social Gospel movement to form a distinctive, intercultural, interracial ministry and witness.

As we reprint this resource for use with students at the University of Indianapolis, *The Crossings Project* begins a two-year process (2004–2006) of exploring the rich reservoir of wisdom found in the African-American Christian tradition of spirituality. The Showers Lectures (Feb. 2005) will be devoted to the topic of African American spirituality.

¹ *Crossings Reflections* are occasional essays on various topics that contribute to reflection about questions of vocation, professional identity, and human flourishing in the context of the University’s motto of “Education for Service.” Copies of these occasional papers published by *The Crossings Project* are available upon request for use on and off campus.

“The Sound of the Genuine”¹

Baccalaureate Address *

by the Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman

There is in every person something that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in herself. . . . There is in you something that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself. Nobody like you has ever been born and no one like you will ever be born again—you are the only one. And if you miss the sound of the genuine in you, you will be a cripple all the rest of your life. Because you will never be able to get a scent on who you are.

Do you remember in the Book [Christian Bible] Jesus and his disciples were going through the hills and there appeared in the turn of the road a man who was possessed of devils as they thought. In the full moon when the great tidal waves of energy swept through his organism and he became as ten men . . . screaming through the hills like an animal in pain and then he met Jesus on the road. And Jesus asked him one question: “Who are you; what’s your name?” and for a moment his tilted mind righted itself and he said, “That’s it, I don’t know, there are legions of me. And they riot in my streets. If I only knew, then I would be whole.”²

So the burden of what I have to say to you is, “What is your name—who are you—and can you find a way to hear the sound of the genuine in yourself?” There are so many noises going on inside of you, so many echoes of all sorts, so many internalizing of the rumble and the traffic, the confusions, the disorders by which your environment is peopled that I wonder if you can get still enough—not quiet enough—still enough to hear rumbling up from your unique and essential idiom the sound of the genuine in you. I don’t know if you can. But this is your assignment.

I. Seek Self through ‘The Song of the River’

There is a children’s story written for adults called *The Blue Cat of Castleton*.³ You may know it. It is built on a New England legend which says that no cat mother wanted to have a kitten that had all blue hairs and pink ears. Because if she had such a kitten, it would be that kitten’s fate to hear the song of the river, and if the kitten heard the song of the river following that melody he or she would have to leave home, learn the song of the river, and go in quest of a home

where the song of the river was recognized. So the “kit-hero” of the story was born all blue hairs [and] pink ears except four blóQk hairs in his tail. . . . One by one the black hairs dropped out. This last night the kitten was asleep. He heard rumbling up under his sleeping consciousness the song of the river, and in a kind of drunken stupor he got up, shook himself and wondered down to the river. There the river taught him the song. . . .

Sing your own song, said the river
Sing, sing your own song
Out of yesterday song comes
It goes into tomorrow,
Sing your own song.

With your life fashion beauty,
This too is the song.
Riches will pass and power,
But beauty remains.
Sing your own song.

All that is worth doing,
Do well, the river said.
Sing, sing your own song
Certain and round be the measure
Every line graceful and true

Time is the mold, the weaver, carver,
Time and the workman together,
Sing your own song well,
Sing well, the river said,
Sing your own song well.

“Can you hear the
sound of the genuine
in yourself?”

So the kitten learned the song and went in quest of a home—and how would he know when he had found a home? He would walk in, stretch out, and begin singing the song and if the person who heard him recognized the song he knew that he had found a home. Without going into all the details one of the first places he went was into a pewter-maker’s house. He walked in, stretched out in front of the hearth, and began singing the song. As soon as the pewter-maker heard the first line of the melody, he froze, and a faraway look came in his eyes; then he remembered.

* The tradition of the baccalaureate address, while no longer as common as it once was in American higher education, remains an occasion for religious sages to share wisdom with students who are about to graduate with their bachelor’s degree in arts or sciences. The baccalaureate service derives from the medieval European custom of presenting the candidates for the degree of bachelor (bacca) with laurels (lauri) of sermonic oration. In American culture, the baccalaureate ceremony, which typically takes place the day before the rite of commencement, is a service of worship in celebration of and thanksgiving for lives dedicated to learning and wisdom.

Long, long ago [the pewter-maker] knew the song of the river. During the time that he knew the song of the river, every piece of pewter fashioned was an expression of an inner dream he had about the creative possibilities of pewter. He was so proud of it, until he put his imprint motto on the bottom of it so that *everybody* would know that he who knew the song of the river had stamped the pewter.

Then he married, babies began coming, tourists began demanding more and more pewter, budgets increased, money was hard, so he began grounding out the pewter cups. He was so embarrassed in his psyche that he didn't want to put his name on it. Then he heard the kitten and he remembered that somewhere along the way he had forgotten that he knew the song of the genuine in himself. A simple story.

II. Follow the Sound of the Genuine

There is something in every one of you that waits, listens for the genuine in yourself—and if you can not hear it, you will never find whatever it is for which you are searching and if you hear it and then do not follow it, it was better that you had never been born. You are the only you that has ever lived; your idiom is the only idiom of its kind in all the existences, and if you cannot hear the sound of the genuine in you, you will all of your life spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls.

There is in you something that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself and sometimes there is so much traffic going on in your minds, so many different kinds of signals, so many vast impulses floating through your organism that go back thousands of generations long before you were even a thought in the mind of creation and you are buffeted by these and in the midst of all of this you have got to find out what your name is. Who are you? How does the sound of the genuine come through to you. . . . The sound of the genuine is flowing through you.

Don't be deceived and thrown off by all the noises that are a part even of your dreams [and] your ambitions that you don't hear the sound of the genuine in you. Because that is the only true guide that you will ever have and if you don't have that you don't have a thing. You may be famous. You may be whatever the other ideals are which are a part of this generation, but you know you don't have the foggiest notion of who you are, where you are going, what you want. Cultivate the discipline of listening to the sound of the genuine in yourself.

Now there is something in everybody that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in other people. And it is so easy [for you or me] to say, "Anybody who looks like him or her or anybody who acts

as this person or the other acts," there simply can't be any sound of the genuine there. *I must wait and listen for the sound of the genuine in you.*⁴ I must wait. For if I cannot hear it, then in my scheme of things, you are not ever present. And everybody wants to feel that everybody else knows that she is there.

I have a blind friend who just became blind after she was a grown woman. I asked her, "What is the greatest disaster that your blindness has brought you?" She said, "When I go places where there are people, I have a feeling that nobody knows that I'm here. I can't see any recognition, I can't see. . . . and if nobody knows that I'm here, it's hard for me to know where I am."

"There is something in you that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in other people."

There is something that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in your mother, in your father, in the people you can't stand – and if you had the power you would wipe them out. But instinctively you know that if you wipe them out, you go with them. So you fight for your own life by finding some way to get along with them without killing them. There is something in you that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in other people. And if you can't hear it, then you are reduced by that much.

If I were to ask you what is the thing that you desire most in life this afternoon, you would say a lot of things off the top of your head, most of which you wouldn't believe. But you would think that you were saying the things that *I thought you ought to think* that you should say.⁵ But I think that if you were stripped to whatever there is in you that is literal and irreducible and you tried to answer that question, it may be something like this:

- I want to feel that I am thoroughly and completely understood so that now and then I can take my guard down and look out around me and not feel that I will be destroyed with my defenses down.
- I want to feel completely vulnerable, completely naked, completely exposed and absolutely secure. This is what you look for in your children when you have them. This is what you look for in your husband if you get one. That I can run the risk of radical exposure and know that the eye that beholds my vulnerability will not step on me. That I can feel secure in my awareness of the active presence of my own idiom in me.

So as I live my life then, this is what I am trying to fulfill. It doesn't matter whether I become a doctor, lawyer, housewife, that I'm secure because I hear the sound of the genuine in myself, and having learned to listen to that, I can become quiet enough, still enough to hear the sound of the genuine in you.

Now if I hear the sound of the genuine in me and if you hear the sound of the genuine in you it is possible for me to go down in [my spirit] and come up in [your spirit]. So that when I look at myself through your eyes having made that pilgrimage, *I see in me what you see in me*. [Then] the wall that separates and divides will disappear, and we will become one because of the sound of the genuine makes the same music.

III. Life's Assignment

Now this is your assignment and you can never say again that nobody told you.

Go thy way
All things say
Thou hast thy way to go
Thou hast thy day to live
Thou hast thy need of thee to make in the hearts of others
Do thy thing and be thou sure of this
No other can do for thee that appointed thee of God
Not any light shall fall upon thy road for other eyes
Thee the angel calls as he calls others
And thy life to thee is precious as the greatest life can be to Him
So live thy life and go thy way
So that God will not have to forgive Himself for letting you be born.⁶

There is in every person that which waits, waits, waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in herself. There is that in every person that waits—waits and listens—for the sound of the genuine in other people. And when these two sounds come together, this is the music God heard when He said, “Let us make man in our image.”⁷



Notes

1. This text is based on excerpts from Dr. Howard Thurman's Baccalaureate Address at Spelman College, May 4, 1980, as edited by Jo Moore Stewart for *The Spelman Messenger* Vol. 96 No. 4 (Summer 1980), 14-15. This text has been adapted from a transcription of an audiotape of Dr. Thurman's baccalaureate address. For the sake of clarity, emphasis has been added here and there to reflect the shifts in the speaker's tone and rhythm of delivery. We are grateful to Ms. Stewart for granting permission to *The Crossings Project* to reproduce this text for use as a resource for students at the University of Indianapolis.

Spelman College is one of the best known historic black colleges and universities in American higher education. Founded as a college for women, Spelman continues to provide an excellent liberal arts education. On the occasion that Dr. Thurman was awarded an honorary doctorate at Spelman College, where he had briefly taught fifty years before. The citation identified him as “a minister, an educator, a philosopher, an innovator, a philanthropist, a humanitarian, a preacher, a mystic, a visionary, an author, and a man of God.”

2. Dr. Thurman paraphrased this story from the Gospel According to Mark 5:1-13.

3. Catherine Cate Coblenz with illustrations by Janice Holland, *Blue Cat of Castle Town* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1949).

4. Italics not in the original. Emphasis added for clarity of reading.

5. Italics not in the original. Emphasis added for clarity of reading.

6. The poetry cited appears to have been composed by Thurman himself.

7. Thurman is quoting from the creation story in Genesis 1:26. The final words of Dr. Thurman's address—“Don't defy Him. Don't defy Him. Your arm might wither”—have been deleted from this text for the sake of clarity. In context, those words play upon the poetry of James Weldon Johnson, the author of *God's Trombones*, a volume of poetic texts based on the tradition of African-American preaching.

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