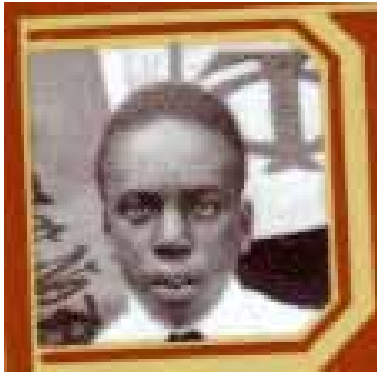


A (Brief) Introduction to the work of Dr. Howard Thurman

Young Howard

Born November 18, 1899, in Daytona Beach, Florida

Reared by his Grandma Nancy, who had been a slave and was a young woman during the American Civil War



Found the protective fold of his neighborhood and nature his “windbreak against existence.”

As a child I was accustomed to spending many hours alone in my rowboat, fishing along the river, when there

was no sound save the lapping of the waves against the boat. There were times when it seemed as if the earth and the river and the sky and I were one beat of the same pulse. It was a time of watching and waiting for what I did not know—yet I always knew. There would come a moment when beyond the single pulse beat there was a sense of Presence which seemed always to speak to me. My response to the sense of Presence always had the quality of personal communion. There was no voice. There was no image. There was no vision. There was God. (Disciplines of the Spirit)

Nightfall...was a presence. The nights in Florida, as I grew up, seemed to have certain dominant characteristics. They were not dark; they were black. When there was no moon, the stars hung like lanterns, so close I felt that one could reach up and pluck them from the heavens. The night had its own language....At such times I could hear the night think, and feel the night feel. This comforted me...I felt embraced, enveloped, held secure. In some fantastic way, the night belongs to me. (With Head and Heart)

Eventually I discovered that the oak tree and I had a unique relationship. I could sit my back against its trunk, and feel the same peace that would come to me in my bed at night. I could reach down in the quiet places of my spirit, take out my bruises and my joys, unfold them, and talk about them. I could talk aloud to the oak tree and know that I was understood. It, too, was part of my reality, like the woods, the night, and

the pounding surf, my earliest companions, giving me space. (With Head and Heart)



Grades 1-7 (8) in black school in Daytona Beach

Grades 9-graduation: Florida Baptist Academy in Jacksonville (one of three high schools for black students in Florida). Valedictorian.

College Days and Marriage

Graduated from Morehouse College in 1923 with degrees in economics and government. (Summer semester at Columbia in 1922 to study philosophy). Valedictorian.

Enrolled at Rochester Theological Seminary in 1923 (Rochester allotted two spots in the freshman class to black students). Bachelor of Divinity in 1926. Student body president. Valedictorian.

Married Kate Kelly, social worker, 1926 (Kate died of tuberculosis in 1930, after a three-year illness.) One daughter, Olive. Traveled alone abroad in heavy grief. Then...”without knowing when or how, I moved into profound focus....when I returned...I was aware that God was not yet done with me, that I need never fear



the darkness, nor delude myself that the contradictions of life are final.”

Career Path

Pastorate, Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Oberlin, Ohio, 1926-1928) Graduate studies at Graduate School of Theology at Oberlin College.

I began to explore my inner regions, and to cultivate an inner life of prayer and meditation. The experience of religion became increasingly central to my development. This was revealed to me in the gradual change in my attitude toward leading my congregation in public prayer. From the beginning of my ministry I tended to be highly self-conscious in public prayer... But as I began to acquiesce to the demands of the spirit within, I found no need to differentiate human need, theirs and my own.... I discovered that at last I was able to pray in public as if I were alone in the quiet of my own room. The door between their questing spirits and my own became a swinging door. At times... a sense of the love of God overwhelmed me. At such moments we became one in the presence of God. At the same time, my preaching became less moti-

vated by the desire to “teach”: it became almost entirely devoted to the meaning of the experience of our common quest and journey.

One afternoon a Chinese gentleman came to see me. I had seen him in church each Sunday morning for many weeks. Always he slipped away quietly without speaking to anyone. Now he introduced himself, saying that he was returning to China and wanted to tell me good-bye and express his appreciation for the experience of worshipping with us each Sunday morning. “When I close my eyes and listen with the spirit I am in my Buddhist temple experiencing the renewing of my own spirit.” I knew then what I had only sensed before. The barriers were crumbling. I was breaking new ground. Yet, it would be many years before I would fully understand the nature of the breakthrough. (With Head and Heart)

Professor of Religion and Director of Spiritual Life at Morehouse and Spelman Colleges. 1928-1932

Spring semester 1929 spent at Haverford College studying privately with the Quaker mystic Rufus Jones. Studied mystic religion through works of Meister Eckhard, Francis of Assisi, Spanish mystic Madame Guyon and others.

My study at Haverford was a crucial experience, a watershed from which flowed much of the thought and endeavor to which I was to commit the rest of my working life. These months defined my deepest religious urges and framed in meaning much of what I had learned over the years. (With Head and Heart)

Thurman is known as a practical, active mystic, an affirmation mystic.

Thurman believed that it was an individual’s personal and intimate encounters with God that established the foundation (and perhaps even the mandate) for the demonstration of love in community -- especially in the community of religious fellowship. (Dr. Liza Rankow)

“Mystical experience of unity—the profoundly moving, if fleeting, “creative encounter” with the realization that all life is one... filled with a sense of the Other. The life of the mystic is worked out in the world of men and things. Each soul must learn, so the mystic thinks, to stand up in its own right and live. [The mystic] knows

he cannot escape the fundamental problem of ethics as it works itself out in his time-space relationships....Discipline of some sort becomes necessary and inevitable. Affirmation mystics are concerned with working out in a social frame of reference the realism of their sense of the Other. (Adapted from A Thurman address in 1939 and from *With Head and Heart*)

“The first dimension is that God must be all-inclusive, all-comprehending, and in a profound sense universal....Prayer is the method by which the individual makes his way to the temple of quiet within his own spirit and the activity of his spirit within its walls. It is also the readying of the spirit for communication with God. It is the total process of quieting down. Perhaps as important as prayer itself is the “readying” of the spirit for the experience. (Adapted from Thurman’s book, *The Creative Encounter: An Interpretation of Religion and the Social Witness*.)

Married Susie Bailey, international Christian student movement leader, historian, musician, and poet in 1932.

Named Professor of Christian Theology and chairman of the Committee on Religious Life at Howard University in 1932. In 1936 became the first Dean of Howard University’s Rankin Chapel.

I spent long hours of quiet in the empty chapel, listening to the silence and gazing through the rose window at sunset, until slowly it was clear to me what I would have to do.

The order of the service was completely redesigned. [Music, poetry, art, liturgical dance, readings added.] Sunday morning service at Rankin Chapel became a watering place for a wide range of worshippers, not only from within the university community but also from the District of Columbia. Despite the fact that the District at that time was as segregated racially as Atlanta or Jackson, the Sunday chapel service provided a time and a place where race, sex, culture, material belongings and earlier religious orientation became undifferentiated in the presence of God. I provided sketches of time for meditation, a quiet time for prayers generated in silence....using Old and New Testament passages...I began to read aloud, the tones of the organ weaving in and out in muted accompaniment. There were periods of silence here and there to allow the inspiration of the words to hold full

A (Brief) Introduction to the work of Dr. Howard Thurman

sway. When the service was over, I left the pulpit, but the audience remained in their seats, in total silence, for several minutes. (With Head and Heart)

In 1935-1936 led the first all black American delegation to make a Christian youth movement “pilgrimage of friendship” to India, Ceylon, and Burma.

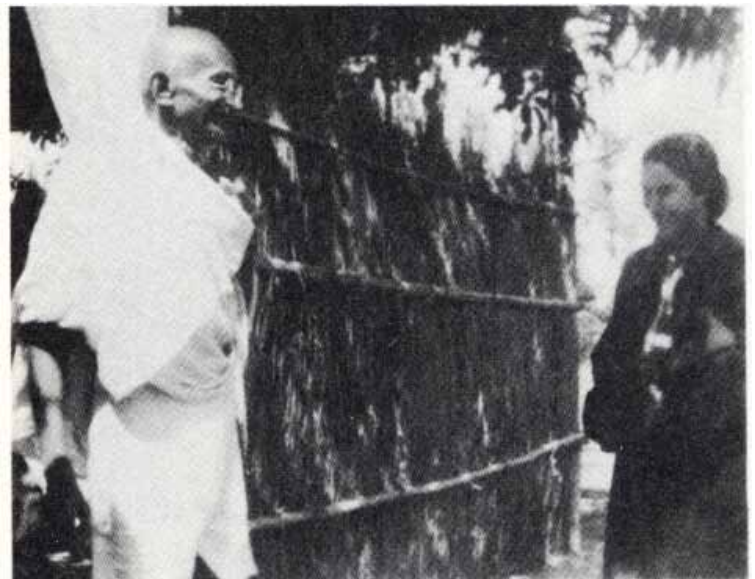
Met with Tagore, about whom Thurman said: “He was a poet of India who soared above the political and social patterns of exclusiveness dividing mankind. His tremendous spiritual insight created a mood unique among the voices of the world. He moved deep into the heart of his own spiritual idiom and came up inside all peoples, all cultures, and all faiths.”



Howard and Sue Thurman in India

Met Mahatma Gandhi and had first formal exchange between an African American religious leader and Gandhi.

...He [Gandhi] said that with a clear perception it could be through the Afro-American that the unadulterated message of nonviolence would be delivered to all men everywhere.



Ghandi and Sue Thurman

In 1944 became co-pastor of the first interracial, interfaith, interracial, intercultural church in America: The Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco. Eleanor Roosevelt gave the farewell address when Thurman left Howard University.

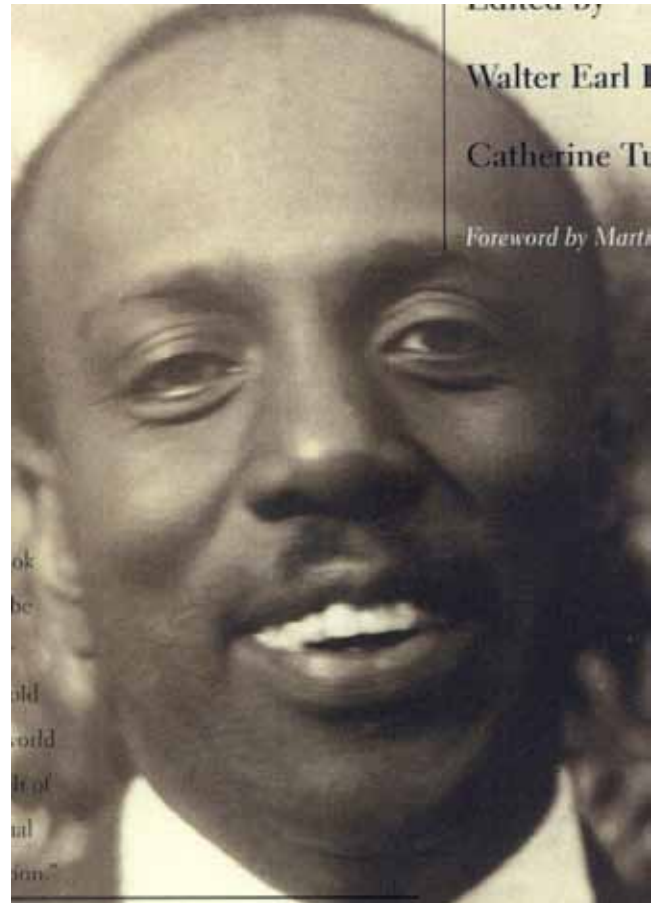
The core of my preaching has always concerned itself with the development of the inner resources needed for the creation of a friendly world of friendly men....It was important to me that individuals who were in the thick of the struggle for social change would be able to find renewal and fresh courage in the spiritual resources of the church. There must be provided a place, a movement, when a person would declare, "I choose!"
(With Head and Heart)

In 1947 was the first black man to be invited give the Ingersol Lecture at Harvard Divinity School. Topic: The Negro Spiritual.

The genius of the slave song is their unyielding affirmation of life defying the judgment of the denigrating environment which spawned them....These slave singers... take their place alongside the great creative religious thinkers of the human race. They made a worthless life, the life of chattel property, a mere thing, a body, worth living! They yielded with abiding enthusiasm to a view of life which included all the events of their experiences without exhausting themselves in those experiences. To them this quality of life was insistent fact because of that which deep within them, they discovered of God, and His far-flung purposes. God was not through with them and He was not, nor could He be, exhausted by any single experience or any series of experiences. To know Him was to live a life worthy of the loftiest meaning of life. Men in all ages and climes, slave or free, trained or untutored, who have sensed the same values, are their fellow-pilgrims who journey together with them in an increasing self-realization in the quest for the city that hath foundations whose Builder and Maker is God.
(With Head and Heart)

In 1949 published most famous book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, "which deeply influenced leaders of the Civil Rights struggle in the 1950s."

I had continued to struggle with the central issue, which was the apparent inability, the demonstrable failure of Christianity to deal effectively with a system of social and economic injustice with which it existed side by



side throughout the Western world....My quest for an answer reminded me again and again of my need to preserve, at all costs, the inspirations and the strength I drew from my commitment to the religion of Jesus.
(With Head and Heart)

Living in a climate of deep insecurity, Jesus faced with so narrow a margin of civil guarantees, had to find some other basis upon which to establish a sense of well-being. He knew that the goals of religion as he understood them could never be worked out within the then-established order. Deep from within that order he projected a dream, the logic of which would give to all the needful security. There would be room for all, and no man would be a threat to his brother. "The kingdom of God is within." "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor." The basic principles of his way of life cut straight through to the despair of his fellows and found it groundless. By inference he says, "You must abandon your fear of each other and fear only God. You must not indulge in any deception and dishonesty, even to save your lives. Your words me be Yea-Nay; anything else is evil. Hatred is destructive to hated and hater



alike. Love your enemy, that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven.

Fear: A man's conviction that he is God's child automatically tends to shift the basis of his relationship with all his fellows. He recognizes at once that to fear a man, whatever may be that man's power over

him, is a basic denial of the integrity of his very life. It lifts that mere man to a place of pre-eminence that belongs to God and to God alone.

Deception: ...be simply, directly truthful, whatever may be the cost in life, limb, or security. For the individual who accepts this, there may be quick and speedy judgment with attendant loss. But if the number increases and the movement spreads, the vindication of the truth would follow in the wake. There must always be the confidence that the effect of truthfulness can be realized in the mind of the oppressor as well as the oppressed.

Hate: Above and beyond all else it must be borne in mind that hatred tends to dry up the springs of creative thought in the life of the hater, so that his resourcefulness becomes completely focused on the negative aspects of his environment. The urgent needs of the personality for creative expression are starved to death. ...Jesus rejected hatred. It was not because he lacked the vitality or the strength. It was not because he lacked the incentive. Jesus rejected hatred because he saw that hatred meant death to the mind, death to the spirit, death to communion with his Father. He affirmed life; and hatred was the great denial.

Love: It was upon the anvil of the Jewish community's relations with Rome that Jesus hammered out the vital content of his concept of live for one's enemy....To love them means to recognize some deep respect and reverence for their persons. But to love them does not mean to condone their way of life. The religion of Jesus says

to the disinherited: "Love your enemy. Take the initiative in seeking ways by which you can have the experience of a common sharing of mutual worth and value. It may be hazardous, but you must do it."

In so great an undertaking it will become increasingly clear that the contradictions of life are not ultimate. The disinherited will know for themselves that there is a Spirit at work in life and in the hearts of men which is committed to overcoming the world. It is universal, knowing no age, no race, no culture, and no condition of men. For the privileged and underprivileged alike, if the individual puts at the disposal of the Spirit the needful dedication and discipline, he can life effectively in the chaos of the present the high destiny of a son of God.

In 1953 moved to Boston University at invitation of President Harold Case to become Dean of Marsh Chapel and professor of Spiritual Disciplines and Resources in the School of Theology.

Three Degrees of Separation

Active Retirement

Formerly retired from Boston University in 1965 and returned to San Francisco where he founded the Howard Thurman Educational Trust, a charitable foundation that supported religious, charitable, scientific, literary, and educational programs. Also housed Thurman's private library and more than "800 tapes of meditations, prayers, sermons, lecture and discussion covering



Grandma Nancy Ambrose

over forty years of Thurman's spiritual pilgrimage." Howard Thurman Listening Rooms were established throughout the U.S. and in seventeen foreign countries. (HTET now housed at Morehouse College in Atlanta.)

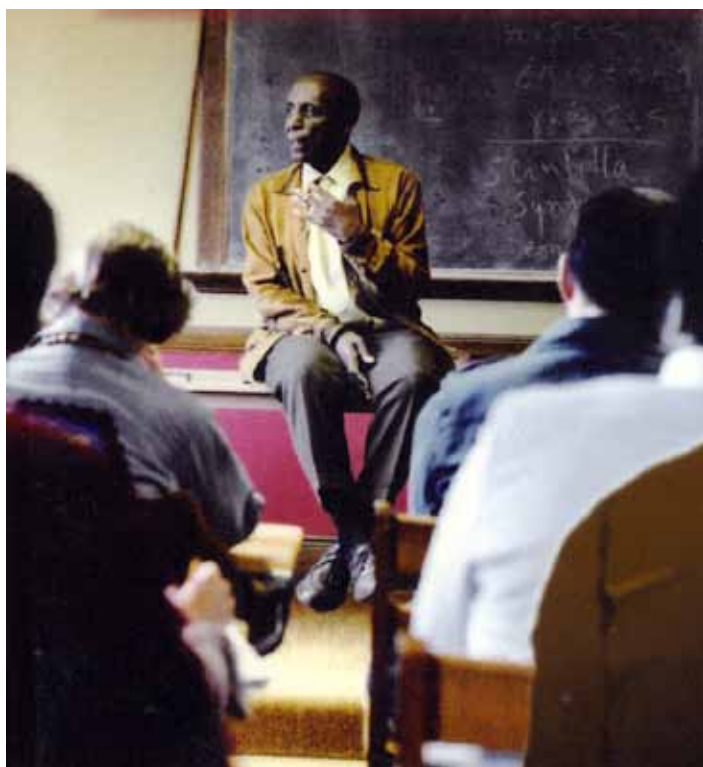
Traveled around the world. Thurman was teaching in Nigeria when John Kennedy was assassinated and, at the request of the American Ambassador to Nigeria, gave the eulogy at the memorial service for Kennedy in Lagos.

Died after a long illness on April 10, 1981, at his home in San Francisco.

Selected as one of twelve outstanding preachers in America by Life magazine in 1953. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. listed him, along with Winston Churchill and Albert Einstein, as one of the "ten greatest men of the twentieth century."

Spoke at more than 200 American and Canadian institutions, including University of Chicago, Yale, Princeton, Harvard. Received honorary doctorates from eleven colleges and universities

"...arguably the most thoroughgoing integrationist of his generation, a pastor who brought the integration ideal right into the institutional heart of black and white society: the church worship service."



Dr. William H. Hinson

"...articulated the vision of spiritual discipline that later informed the intellectual and moral basis of the black freedom movement in the South." "...always preferring quiet pastoral counsel and intellectual guidance to political visibility."

"For the quiet counsel and reflection he offered to Martin Luther King, Jr., Vernon Johns, James Farmer, Whitney Young, Vernon Jordan, Jesse Jackson, Otis Moss, and a host of other passing through the "dark night of the soul" in the thick of social struggle. Thurman was widely recognized as the pastoral leader of the Civil Rights movement."

Thurman's work: Emphasis on character, civility, and community...public language filled with hope and possibility...Thurman's intellectual vision of human community and American democratic renewal...the ground of a hopeful future. Thurman's steady insistence on the search for common ground between diverse cultures finds creative resonance at this critical impasse of American history. (Fluker and Tumber)

Arthur Ashe: Days of Grace: A Memoir

Influence of Howard Thurman: pages 320-238

Howard Thurman's Voice of Hope

The most natural thing in the world for man, then, would be to keep open the lines of communication between him and the Source of his life, out of which he comes and into which (it is my faith) he goes.

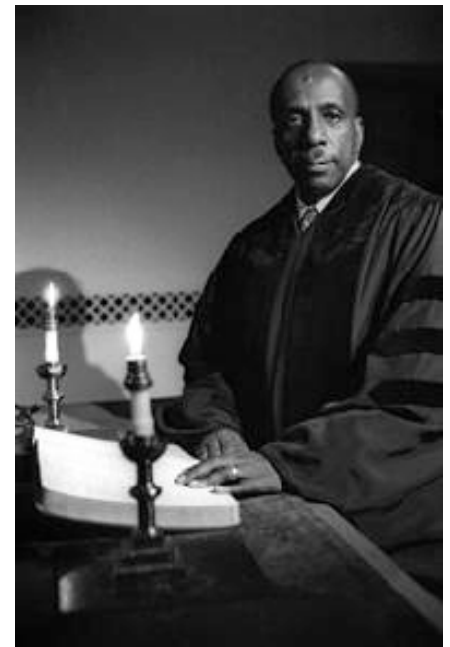
The important thing, however, is the fact that beyond the zero point of endurance there are vast possibilities...this simple fact of revitalizing human endurance opens a great vista for living...it is often at such a point that the spirit in humans and the spirit of God blend into one creative illumination.

The assumption is that we individuals are ever in immediate candidacy to get an “assist” from God—that we are not alone in our quest. Through prayer, meditation and singleness of mind our lives may be invaded by strength, insight, and courage sufficient for our needs. Thus we need not seek refuge in excuses but can live our lives with ever-increasing vigor and experience... and with an ever--deepening sense of fulfillment. (From *Meditations of the Heart* and other collections of Thurman’s prayers and meditation.)

Certain landmarks...represent discoveries sometimes symbolizing the moment when we became aware of the purpose of our lives; they may establish for us our mem-

bership in the human frailty; they may be certain words that were spoken into a stillness within us, the sound thereof singing forever through all the corridors of our being as landmarks; yes, each one of us has his own. No communication between people is possible if there is not some mutual recognition of the land-

marks...To know a man is to know somewhat, of his landmarks. For these are the points of referral that stand out beyond and above all the traffic of his life, advising



and tutoring him in his journey through life and beyond. In the language of religion, these are the places where the Eternal has been caught and held for a swirling moment in time and years.

There seems to be a vast stirring of energy, malignant and unstructured, that catapults to the surface all kinds of disharmonies, conflicts, and disorders... The stirring of energy in myriad forms of unstructured malevolencies may well be the spirit of Life, of God at work on behalf of new life and perhaps a new creation on this planet. We must find our place in the areas of the new vitalities, the place where the old is breaking up and the new is being born. What a moment to be alive and, more importantly, to be aware! Of course, this we cannot do unless we are able to gather unto ourselves the wise caution of Fenelon, “Accustom yourself to remain at peace in the depth of your heart, in spite of your restless imagination.” God grant this for each of us. (Howard Thurman’s book *For the Inward Journey*)

How Good to Center Down!

How good it is to center down!

To sit quietly and see one’s self pass by!

The streets of our minds seethe with endless traffic;

Our spirits resound with clashings, with noisy silences,

While something deep within hungers and thirsts for the still moment and the resting lull.

With full intensity we seek, ere the quiet passes, a fresh sense of order in our living;

A direction, a strong sure purpose that will structure our confusion and bring meaning to our chaos.

We look at ourselves in this waiting moment—the kinds of people we are.

The questions persist: what are we doing with our lives?—what are the motives that order our days?

What is the end of our doings? Where are we trying to go?

Where do we put the emphasis and where are our values focused?

For what end do we make sacrifices? Where is my treasure and what do I love most in life?

What do I hate most in life and to what am I true?

Over and over the questions beat in upon the waiting moment.

As we listen, floating up through all the jangling echoes of our turbulence, there is a sound of another kind—

A deeper note which only the stillness of the heart makes clear.

It moves directly to the core of our being. Our questions are answered.

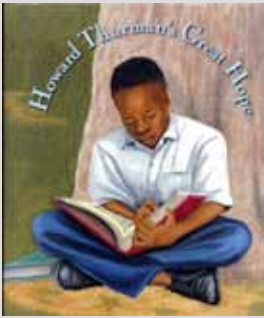
Our spirits refreshed, and we move back into the traffic of our daily round

With the peace of the Eternal in our step.

How good it is to center down!

Resources

The Sound of the Genuine: The Papers of Howard Thurman (first of three volumes, edited by Walter Fluke and Catherine Tumber) will be published in the spring of 2009 by The University of South Carolina Press.



Howard Thurman's Great Hope by Kai Jackson Issa (a children's picture book)

A Strange Freedom: The Best of Howard Thurman on Religious Experience and Public Life (Fluke and Tumber, editors)

For an annotated bibliography of the works of Howard Thurman: www.howardthurmanfilm.com/thurmanbooks.html

Documentary Howard Thurman film close to completion: www.howardthurmanfilm.com

www.fellowshipsf.org

