Syllabus for “Wading in Troubled Waters”

Description:
The poetic metaphor “at the heart of life there is a Heart” that Howard Thurman used to interpret the spiritual “Wade in the Water” evokes imagery of a resonance that crosses religious, cultural, time, and place boundaries to powerfully illustrate both Thurman’s concept of “common ground” and Charles H. Long’s suggestion that “theologies opaque” might deconstruct “theology as a powerful mode of discourse,” perhaps into sensitive modes of perception. This course uses analogies from the physical sciences to visualize Thurman’s poetic resonance as well as analogies from music and math along with diverse historical, cultural, and creative references, to proceed step-by-step through an octave of eight spirituals highlighted in Thurman’s Deep River and The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death, essentially as a textbook for community work presenting Thurman’s “Heart” metaphor as a potentially healing yet oft-suppressed resonance for creating “beloved community” in life’s troubled waters.

Learning Goals:
- Explore Howard Thurman’s interpretations of the “Negro Spirituals” as examples of Charles H. Long’s opaque theology
- Connect the Spirituals with other expressions of music, spirit, and community throughout the African Diaspora
- Trace such expressions back to African and indigenous roots common to all of humanity
- Obtain inspiration, perspectives, and resources for transforming psychological shackles into instruments of healing (wading in troubled waters) in modern times

Course Requirements:
- Attendance is very important. No more than two excused absences are allowed.
- Weekly reflection paper (2-3 pages) or creative interpretation of a relevant work
- Participation in class activities and discussions, which includes singing and other music making
- A working paper (5-7 pages) or creative work that proposes transforming psychological shackles in the student’s real, contemporary, and local world will be due the last week of the semester.

Required Readings (The purpose of the extensive reading list in this course is to provide both breadth and depth for visualizing conceptualizations that will be presented in class, as well as familiarity with resources for students interested in building upon this project):
- Deep River and The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death by Howard Thurman; Richmond, IN, Friends United Press 1975
- Negro Slave Songs in the United States by Miles Mark Fisher; New York: Carol Publishing Group 1990
Week One and Two: “Wade in the Water”
During the first week of class we begin with a brief course introduction and then launch into an exploration of “resonances” among Howard Thurman’s interpretation of “Wade in the Water,” his formative life experiences described in his autobiography, and his lifelong search for “common ground.” We also explore ethnographic interpretations of the spirituals and West African resonances from Yoruba culture.

Required Readings:
**Week One:** Chapter Seven of *Deep River*; Chapter One of *With Head and Heart*; Preface and First Chapter of *The Search for Common Ground*; Chapter One of *Negro Slave Songs in the United States*. **Week Two:** Chapter Two of *Negro Slave Songs in the United States*; Preface and
chapter Three of *Yoruba Culture*; “Death of the Gods” and “Religious Life in the Slave Community” from *Slave Religion*.

Weeks Three and Four: “The Blind Man”
During the third and fourth weeks of class, we will explore additional resonances, this time adding Thurman’s interpretation of “The Blind Man,” along with Thurman’s distinction between Christianity and “the religion of Jesus,” Carter G. Woodson’s “religion of the strong,” and Charles H. Long’s “opaque theology.” This will prepare us, by the end of the fourth week, to layout a spiritual roadmap for the rest of the course in transforming what Thurman described as a “psychological shackle” into an instrument of healing.

Required Readings:
**Week Three:** Chapter 2 of *Deep River*; Chapter 2 of *Negro Slave Songs in the United States*; Chapter 4 of *With Head and Heart*; Chapter 1 of *Yoruba Culture*; Chapter 1 of *Jesus and the Disinherited*. **Week Four:** Part 3: “Shadow and Symbols of American Religion” in *Significations*; Chapter 2 of *Yoruba Culture*; Poem and Chapter on Sango in *Black Gods*.

Week Five: “Motherless Child”
During the fifth week of class, we take on a scientific, musical, cultural, and ecological engagement of popular emotional illiteracy that shackles white and black imagery to good and evil emotions. We open this class with Thurman’s Ingersoll Lecture topic that touches on numerous spirituals including “Motherless Child.” Then we examine the physics of light and darkness, before passing through healing indigenous ecologies from West African and North America, and closing with resonances from Brazilian Samba.

Required readings:
*The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*; Chapter 3 of *Negro Slave Songs in the United States*; Chapter 4 of *Yoruba Culture*; *The Sacred Tree*; Chapter 2 of *The Search for Common Ground*; Pages 43-49 in *The Healing Wisdom of Africa*; Chapter 3 in *Soul Force*.

Weeks Six and Seven: “Heaven”
During the sixth weeks of class, we will dive into Thurman’s discussion of truth and deception, and relate that to modernity’s perspectives on rational discourse vs. mythology. In week seven we will continue the theme from week six, while drawing deeply upon resonances from the history of Haiti, particularly to the Ages of Enlightenment and Revolution.

Required Readings:
**Week Six:** Chapter 3 of *Deep River*; Chapter 4 of *Negro Slave Songs in the United States*; Chapter 3 in *The Search for Common Ground*; Chapter 4 of *Yoruba Culture*. **Week Seven:**
Chapter 5 of *Negro Slave Songs in the United States*; Chapter 5 in *Yoruba Culture*; Part 1 of *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*

Weeks Eight and Nine: “A Balm in Gilead”
During the eighth week of class, we explore “materiality,” beginning with Thurman’s interpretation of “A Balm in Gilead,” and proceeding through Jackson’s *Christianity Before Christ* into traditional balm gardens on the African continent and in the Diaspora. During the ninth week, we apply resonances from *The Psychology of Learning Mathematics* to a problem that also arises in communicating theology, and we close with the music, spirit, and community of central African Forest People.

Required reading:
**Week Eight:** Chapter 4 of *Deep River*; Chapter 6 of *Negro Slave Songs in the United States*; Chapters 3 and 11 of *Christianity Before Christ*. **Week Nine:** Chapter 2 of *The Psychology of Learning Mathematics*; Chapter 7 of *Negro Slave Songs in the United States* by Miles Mark Fisher; Chapter 4 of *The Search for Common Ground*; Pages 86-93 in *Soul Force*.

Weeks Ten and Eleven: “Jacob’s Ladder”
During weeks ten and eleven we dive into culture as language, beginning with resonances from Thurman’s interpretation of “Jacob’s Ladder,” continuing through African talking drums, West African vs. European perspectives on music, and a contemporary search for cultural democracy. Then we close with two examples of transformational music, spirit, and community on the African continent: one in the North and the other in the South.

Required Reading:
Chapter 6 of *Deep River*; Chapter 8 of *Negro Slave Songs in the United States*; Pages 1-39 in *African Music*; Chapter 1 of *The Information*; Introduction to *Cultural Democracy*; Chapter 5 of *The Search for Common Ground*.

Weeks Twelve and Thirteen: “Deep River”
Weeks twelve and thirteen open with resonances that connect Thurman’s interpretation of “Deep River” to obvious African roots and also to an ecological sense of human identity that Some describes in his West African Dagara culture and that seems appropriate the theme of “Identity” in the closing chapter of Thurman’s *Search for Common Ground*. African Diaspora music, spirit, and community resonances this week come from Rastafarian culture and music.

Required Reading:
Chapter 5 of *Deep River*; Chapter 9 of *Negro Slave Songs in the United States*; Chapter on Yemoja in *Black Gods*; Appendix to *Yoruba Culture*; Chapter 8 in *The Healing Wisdom of Africa*; Chapter 6 of *The Search for Common Ground*; Chapter 9 of *Cultural Democracy*. 
Week Thirteen: “Slavery Chain Done Broke at Last”
This week opens with a reflection on the idea of theology as sensitive modes of perception rather than a powerful mode of discourse: taking responsibility for our own human processes of perception rather than declaring the nature of the universe or of God. It closes with the beginning of final student presentations.

Required Reading: Chapter 1 of Deep River

Week Fourteen: “Lift Every Voice;” Completion of final student presentations