

Preliminary Draft Syllabus

Howard Thurman: Mystic, Pastor, Prophet • Spring 2017

Starr King School for the Ministry • Graduate Theological Union

Instructor: Rev. Liza J. Rankow, MHS, PhD

NOTE: This 1.5 credit class will meet every other week beginning the week of 2/6/17

Course Description:

Howard Thurman was a 20th century religious leader and thinker whose prophetic vision and quiet mentorship were instrumental to Martin Luther King Jr. and other activists of the Civil Rights Movement, and beyond. Thurman's writings and sermons are rich with the poetics of mystic spirituality, yet reveal insightful social commentary on racism, militarism, and suffering that is as relevant and revolutionary today as it was during his lifetime. Through readings, discussion, creative activities, and video and audio recordings of Dr. Thurman, we will dive deep into his life and teachings and explore their application to our own spiritual development, ministry, and commitment to social justice and transformation.

ECO / Thresholds:

The life and legacy of Dr. Howard Thurman provides a rich and fitting context to further SKSM's commitment to "educating to counter oppressions and create just and sustainable communities." Thurman's philosophical, intellectual and pastoral contributions were formative to the Civil Rights Movement, and his "liberating spirituality" (as Vincent Harding has termed it) stands as a precursor to Black Liberation Theology. In the laboratory of Fellowship Church, Thurman honed his theories about the deconstruction of oppression and the development of a community based on reverence for every individual as one with the universal life of God. These commitments were given eloquent witness in his writing, teaching, preaching, pastoring, and in how he moved and interacted in the world. Howard Thurman is a valuable guide for seekers of any faith tradition, and a profound mentor for those on the path of ministry and spiritual service.

Because Thurman, himself, crossed Thresholds as a pastor, prophet, mystic, counselor, preacher, teacher, scholar, artist and activist, this course will organically incorporate most of SKSM's Threshold Areas. Our particular emphasis will be on *Prophetic Witness* and *Spiritual Practice & Care of the Soul* as essential to understanding Thurman in a meaningful way.

Class Format:

The intention of the course is to provide a wholistic engagement with the material – not only studying the intellectual content of Thurman's works, but employing his commitments to building community, incorporating the creative arts, and developing the "growing edge" of one's own spirituality. A highly interactive lecture-discussion format will be liberally supplemented by audio and video recordings of Dr. Thurman. Each class meeting will begin with a centering meditation, usually keyed to the subject of that session, and end with prayer. This is, as the title of Thurman's autobiography suggests, a course of both head and heart.

Instructor Contact Information:

The best way to reach me is by e-mail to: rankow@onelifeinstitute.org. Please put "SKSM Class" as the subject line so I will be able to recognize it as coming from you. You may also leave a voice message on the OneLife Institute voice mail line (510.595.5598); I am the only one who receives those messages. From there we can arrange to meet by phone, skype, or in person, as needed.

Learning Outcomes:

Through full and committed participation students will be able to:

- Identify key points in Howard Thurman's theology
- Explain the personal and historical context out of which Thurman's work emerged
- Describe Thurman's definition of "spiritual disciplines" and relate it to their own life and practice
- Articulate the relationship between spirituality and social transformation
- Discuss the dynamics of oppression and the power of love as presented in *Jesus & the Disinherited*
- Develop and/or deepen some form of regular personal spiritual practice (of their own choosing)

Student Expectations:

- Attendance and active participation in class discussions and activities
- Timely completion of assigned readings
- Brief (2-3 pg) thought papers (5 total) reflecting on readings and evidencing your thoughtful engagement with the materials. Note that since there is no full-length paper assigned for this class, these shorter papers are how I get to know your work. Please bring your best to them. (Semester total 10-15 pg.)
- Final project – a creative expression in any medium (visual art, poetry, song, dance, spoken word, video, etc) demonstrating your engagement with the course content and how you have been impacted as a result. For example, how have you been stretched, informed, inspired, or challenged through your encounter with Thurman? These will be presented to the class as a whole. The length of time available will depend on class size, but expect approximately 5-10 minutes each.
- Keep a "reader's journal" of ideas, insights, questions, revelations, disagreements, aha's, resonances applications, quotes, etc to fuel and focus class discussions, thought papers and final project.
- Optional – field trip to attend a Sunday service at Fellowship Church in San Francisco

Course Evaluation:

Assessment will be based on the quality and depth of your engagement with the material and learning community as evidenced by class participation and contributions, preparation, thought papers, and final project. Please let me know within the first two weeks if you will need a letter grade for your particular program of study, otherwise the course will be conducted on a pass/fail basis, with narrative evaluations as required for SKSM students.

Required Texts:

Fluker, W.E. and C. Tumber, ed. *A Strange Freedom: The Best of Howard Thurman on Religious Experience and Public Life*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1998. [SF] ISBN 0-8070-1057x / \$21

Thurman, A.S., ed. *For the Inward Journey: The Writings of Howard Thurman*. Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1984. [FTIJ] ISBN: 0-15-132656-8 / \$24

Thurman, H. *Jesus and the Disinherited*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996. [JD] ISBN: 0-8070-1029-4 / \$16

* Note: These books can be found less expensively online, new and used

Required Articles, etc (available on Moodle):

Bennett, L. "Howard Thurman: 20th Century Holy Man." *Ebony* (February 1978).

Fluker, W.E. "Dangerous Memories and Redemptive Possibilities: Reflections on the Life and Work of Howard Thurman" (2004)

Harding, V. "Dangerous Spirituality." *Sojourners* (January/February 1999).

Smith, J.A. "Howard Thurman: Thoughts from a Student." *Creation Spirituality* (March/April 1991).

Smith, L.E. "Companion for the Journey: The Works of Howard Thurman." *Sojourners* (Dec. 1993).

Thurman, H. "We Are One" and "All Life Is One" in *Meditations of the Heart*. Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1976.

Thurman, H. *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1979. [excerpt]

Thurman, H. "Mysticism & Social Change." *Lawrence Lectures* (1978)

Recommended Resources:

Dixie, Q. and P. Eisenstadt. *Visions of a Better World: Howard Thurman's Pilgrimage to India and the Origins of African American Nonviolence*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2011.

Harding, V, et al, eds. *The Living Wisdom of Howard Thurman* (audio collection). Sounds True, 2010.

Smith, L.E. *Howard Thurman: The Mystic as Prophet*. Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1991.

Thurman, H. *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1979.

Preliminary Course Outline:

Specific reading assignments will be included in the final syllabus

- Week 1 **The Life and Legacy of Howard Thurman****
Introductions. Overview. Thurman video.
Readings: Articles by Bennett & JA Smith; Foreword in *SF*; Intro in *FTIJ*
- Week 2 **Deep is the Hunger / The Growing Edge****
Readings from Thurman's autobiography. Selected meditations.
Assignment: 2-3 page thought paper reflecting on readings for the week
- Week 3 **Disciplines of the Spirit****
Essays on Commitment, Suffering, Prayer
Assignment: 2-3 page thought paper reflecting on readings for the week
- Week 4 **Spirituality and Social Justice****
Mysticism & Social Action; Dangerous Spirituality
Assignment: 2-3 page thought paper reflecting on readings for the week
- Reading Week***
- Week 5 **Jesus and the Disinherited – part 1****
Hounds of Hell: Fear, Hate & Deception
Assignment: 2-3 page thought paper reflecting on readings for the week
- Week 6 **Jesus and the Disinherited – part 2****
Love and Reconciliation
Assignment: 2-3 page thought paper reflecting on readings for the week
- Week 7 **A Journey of Head & Heart****
Final project presentations. Looking back & looking forward.