Howard Thurman: Mystic, Pastor, Prophet • RSSP 4569
Starr King School for the Ministry • Graduate Theological Union
Instructor: Rev. Liza J. Rankow, MHS, PhD
Spring 2017 • Mondays 2:10 – 5pm

NOTE: This 1.5 credit class will meet every other week beginning the week of 1/30/17

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? What will you take with you as you journey forward in life? 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:


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

Articles posted on Moodle – designated as (M) in Course Outline:

(Asterisk (*) indicates a required reading, others are recommended)


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

*Thurman, H. “Mysticism & Social Change.” Lawrence Lectures (1978) [excerpt]

Recommended Resources:


Course Outline:

Week 1  
The Life and Legacy of Howard Thurman  
Jan. 30  
Introductions. Overview. Thurman video.  
Readings: Foreword in SF; Intro in SF  
Recommended: Articles by Bennett, JA Smith & LE Smith (M); Intro in FTIJ

Week 2  
Disciplines of the Spirit: The Growing Edge / Commitment  
Feb. 13  
Assignment: 2-3 page thought paper reflecting on readings for the week

Week 3  
Disciplines of the Spirit: Suffering / Prayer  
Feb. 27  
Readings: FTIJ (5-, 27-, 47-, 88-, 90-, 91-, 93-99, 182-, 293); SF (35-54; 303-)
Recommended: FTIJ (50-52, 116-118, 287,288, 292); SF (80-96)
Assignment: 2-3 page thought paper reflecting on readings for the week

Week 4  
Spirituality and Social Justice  
March 13  
Mysticism & Social Action; Dangerous Spirituality  
Readings: SF (108-130); FTIJ (4-, 42-, 112-); Lawrence Lecture (M);  
Thurman Meditations (M); Harding, “Dangerous Spirituality” (M)
Assignment: 2-3 page thought paper reflecting on readings for the week

March 27  
Reading Week – no class meeting

Week 5  
Jesus and the Disinherited – part 1  
April 3  
Hounds of Hell: Fear, Hate & Deception  
Readings: JD (Foreword, Preface, Ch 1-4)  
Assignment: 2-3 page thought paper reflecting on readings for the week

Week 6  
Jesus and the Disinherited – part 2  
April 17  
Love and Reconciliation  
Readings: JD (Ch 5, Epilogue); FTIJ (29-, 81-, 177-195)  
Recommended: SF (163-184 – essay on Reconciliation, excerpted in FTIJ)
Assignment: 2-3 page thought paper reflecting on readings for the week

Week 7  
A Journey of Head & Heart  
May 1  
Final project presentations. Looking back & looking forward.  
Readings: Please review all course reading assignments. Take this opportunity to fill in any gaps and identify areas in need of further discussion. Bring questions, discussion points, “leftovers,” etc.
Assignment: Final creative project

** Please Note: In the course outline above, I have used the convention of a single page number with a short hyphen (for example: 112- or 6-9-) to indicate brief readings (usually Thurman’s meditations) that complete on the next page.