



# The Fierce Urgency of Now and the Disciplines of the Spirit: Life Lessons from Martin Luther King Jr. and Howard Thurman

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**T**oward the end of his life, Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–1968) most personally and existentially confronted questions about the future of the freedom movement in the midst of the advance of the Vietnam War and the retreat from the War on Poverty. Of the latter, he said it had not even been a skirmish. Meanwhile, one of King’s mentors and inspirations, the theologian and philosopher Howard Thurman (1899–1981), contemplated what was necessary on the “search for common ground,” as he entitled his last theological work. Considering these two giants of African American religious history together provides important spiritual food for thought. King’s hallmark phrase, in his latter years before his assassination, looked to the “fierce urgency of now.” Thurman’s, by contrast, was the “apostle of

*Martin Luther King Jr. and Howard Thurman shared a vision of spiritual development and social justice as interrelated commitments. This essay puts the lives of King and Thurman in dialogue, showing that Thurman’s contemplative approach influenced the nonviolent direct action at the heart of the civil rights struggle, where the discipline of nonviolence required cultivating internal spiritual resources.*

sensitiveness,” ever looking to expand our capacities for spiritual reflection and growth even in the midst of sometimes tumultuous social struggles.<sup>1</sup>

Neither leader in the realms of spirituality and social justice serves as a complete model without considering the other; and both moved significantly in their own thinking about the purpose and role of anger and passion in confronting injustice. In considering the two together, we may productively contemplate how to respond to the prophetic urgency of the now while attending to individual and communal spiritual lives. The relationship between Thurman’s mysticism and King’s activism provides a fascinating model for how spiritual and social transformation can work together in a person’s life, and in society more generally.

Martin Luther King spoke eloquently, and famously, of the “fierce urgency of now.” He wrote memorably on how the mere passage of time solved nothing, but instead was just another way of saying “wait” yet again to African Americans who sought their freedom now. For African Americans who grew up with the legacy of segregation, disfranchisement, lynching, and violence, retreat from social struggle was unthinkable. And for King, that social struggle grew ever broader and more urgent as he pressed some of his former allies in the American government about the connections between racism and militarism evident in the Vietnam War era.

Martin Luther King Jr. also had learned how to integrate spiritual growth and social transformation from Howard Thurman. And yet, as one observes King’s last few years of frantic activity, and his frequently expressed desire for a moment of peace and reflection, it appears painfully obvious how much he sought moments of peace and spiritual rest that forever eluded him.

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Born in 1899, Thurman was thirty years older than King—the same age, in fact, as King’s father. Through his sermons and teaching at Howard University and Boston University, he influenced intellectually and spiritually an entire generation that became the leadership of the civil rights movement. One of his most significant contributions involved helping to import and spread to the movement ideas of

<sup>1</sup> All quotations from King come from *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperCollins, 1986); and for Thurman, from Paul Harvey, *Howard Thurman and the Disinherited: A Religious Biography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), which draws from the five published volumes of Thurman’s papers and various compilations of his sermons and addresses.

nonviolence and active resistance through civil disobedience. Following a trip to India and meeting with Gandhi in 1935–36, Thurman and an early generation of thinkers, philosophers, teachers, and activists incorporated the principles of nonviolence in the African American freedom struggle. At the close of his meeting with Gandhi, which was long highlighted by Thurman as a central event of his life, Gandhi reportedly told Thurman that “it may be through the Negroes that the unadulterated message of nonviolence will be delivered to the world.” King and others repeated that phrase during the early years of the civil rights movement in the 1950s.

Thurman and King were both steeped in the black Baptist tradition. Both thought long about how to apply their church experiences and theological training to challenging the white supremacist ideology of segregation. However, initially their encounters were brief. Thurman had served as dean of Marsh Chapel at Boston University from 1953 to 1965. King was a student there when Thurman first assumed his position in Boston and heard the renowned minister deliver some addresses. But King was about to leave Boston to assume his pulpit in Montgomery, Alabama, and thus the two had little time to develop a personal relationship beyond a few conversations at social gatherings.

But their most serious personal encounter—the one that gave Thurman his opportunity to influence King personally and help prepare him for struggles to come—came as a result of a tragedy, when a mentally disturbed woman stabbed King during a book signing in New York City in September 1958.

While recuperating in the hospital afterward, King received a visit from Thurman. While there, Thurman gave the same advice he gave to countless others over decades: that King should take the unexpected, if tragic, opportunity to meditate on his life and its purposes, and only then move forward. Thurman urged King to extend his rest period by two weeks. It would, as he said, give King “time away from the immediate pressure of the movement” and the chance to “rest his body and mind with healing detachment.” Thurman worried that “the movement had become more than an organization; it had become an organism with a life of its own,” which potentially could swallow up King. King wrote to Thurman to say, “I am following your advice on the question.” And he did—for a short while, before returning to the frenzy of activity that would consume his life until his assassination.

King and Thurman were never personally close. But Thurman left a profound intellectual and spiritual influence on King. King, for example, reportedly carried his own well-thumbed copy of Thurman’s best-known book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, in his coat pocket during the long and epic struggle of the Montgomery bus boycott.

In his sermons during the 1950s and 1960s, King quoted and paraphrased Thurman extensively. Drawing from Thurman’s views, King understood Jesus as friend and ally of the dispossessed—to a group of Jewish followers in ancient Palestine, and to African Americans under slavery and segregation. That was precisely why Jesus was so central to the struggle.

Thurman was not an activist, as King was, nor was he one to take up specific social and political causes to transform a country. He was a private man and an intellectual. He saw spiritual cultivation as a necessary accompaniment to social activism. As Walter Fluker, editor of the Howard Thurman Papers Project, has explained, the private mystic and the public activist found common ground in understanding that spirituality is necessarily linked to social transformation. Private spiritual cultivation could prepare the way for deeper public commitments for social change. King himself came to feel that the stabbing and enforced convalescence was “part of God’s plan” to prepare him for greater things to come in the struggle against southern segregation and American white supremacy. In a larger sense, the discipline of nonviolence required a spiritual commitment and discipline that came, for many, through self-examination, meditation, and prayer. This was the message Thurman transmitted to the larger civil rights movement. Thurman combined, in the words of historian Martin Marty, the “inner life, the life of passion, the life of fire, with the external life, the life of politics.”<sup>2</sup> The prison cell in Birmingham, Alabama, where in mid-1963 King penned his classic “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” also accidentally but critically provided much the same spiritual retreat for reflections that helped transform America.<sup>3</sup>

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## THE FIERCE URGENCY OF KING’S NOW

King’s most important late-life address happened at Riverside Church in New York City. It was April 1967, early in the development of an anti-war movement. King’s statement on the war alienated the presidential administration of Lyndon Johnson and numerous centrist and liberal allies. But King had moved beyond that kind of consensus politics. As a seminary student and young pastor, he had spoken out against imperialism and the violence of state-sanctioned political domination. In that sense, his epic address “A Time to Break Silence” was not necessarily new. The difference now was that he was Martin Luther King Jr., the Nobel Prize winner and African American celebrity; he was not just a black preacher or even regional civil rights leader, but he stood as a primary voice of the American liberal-left. The times were “revolutionary,” he announced, for “all over the globe men are revolting

<sup>2</sup> Washington, *A Testament of Hope*, reviews.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” (April 16, 1963), [https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles\\_Gen/Letter\\_Birmingham.html](https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html).

against old systems of exploitation and oppression and out of the wombs of a frail world new systems of justice and equality are being born.” He continued, “We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now,” with the immediate choice of “nonviolent coexistence or violent co-annihilation.”

King knew well all the critiques he faced. The critics thought, “Peace and civil rights don’t mix.” But those who so spoke knew nothing, stated King, of “my commitment or my calling.” And that was a commitment that encompassed peace and justice at home and abroad, a peace that could not be won through violence directed against African Americans at home or Vietnamese abroad. The war in Vietnam was the violence of American state power and white supremacy made manifest, and the war destroyed the hopes of a war on poverty that so far had amounted to little more than a skirmish. The demographics of the actual war-fighting symbolized the same inequality, as young black men bore a disproportionate share of fighting in a war for a society that already had crippled them, a war to “guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in southwest Georgia or East Harlem.”

King knew too that the war confronted him with an unanswerable question coming from angry residents of ghettos. He had tried to insist to them of the efficacy of nonviolence, but they had an unanswerable counter: “What about Vietnam?” As King put it, “I knew I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today—my own government.” The unfree of America would not be freed by the violence of the wars abroad. On the contrary, “if America’s soul becomes totally poisoned, part of the autopsy must read Vietnam.” For King, his calling was to “speak for the weak, for the voiceless, for victims of our nation and for those it calls enemy, for no document from human hands can make these humans any less our brothers.”

The church’s role was clear: to raise its voice “if our nation persists in its perverse ways in Vietnam.” The church had to speak against the “far deeper malady within the American spirit,” one represented by the unjust exercise of American power in Latin America, Southeast Asia, and South Africa. Without a “radical revolution of values,” the nation would remain beholden to the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism, “for a nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.” King denounced income inequality, advocating for a guaranteed annual income; he condemned police violence disproportionately directed against African American men; and he urged a massive investment in economic development and education in communities that had been deliberately redlined, segregated, and excluded from American prosperity. King, of course, denounced segregationists as political “fossils,” but he condemned as well northern liberals who were willing to go only so far and had abandoned the struggle the minute it seemed to involve sacrificing something more than the symbols of segregation. In short, King targeted the injustices and evils that our more recent generation of protesters, activists, and scholars have highlighted. In effect, King

said that until black lives mattered, racial injustice would reign supreme. His now is our now, because King's message is as current as the headlines in our newspapers during the summer of 2020.

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#### THURMAN AND THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES OF THE NOW

At the height of the nonviolent civil rights movement, Howard Thurman continued his philosophical explorations into the ideas he had been so important in fostering and spreading. In 1963, he published *Disciplines of the Spirit*, parts of which explored the history and purpose of nonviolence. Like others, he insisted that "non-violence is not a negative attitude—it is a positive act of resistance. It is not passive; it is positive and creative." It once was considered weak and cowardly, but no longer was so after the life of Gandhi and the dramatic developments within the United States during the civil rights years.

Nonviolence, Thurman insisted, was not "merely a mood or a climate, or even an attitude," but a "particular kind of art or technique." It was not simply the choice of the only available tool. That was because, if so, it simply participated in the very order it was struggling against; in this case, it would have "the same moral basis as violence and [could not] be separated from it in essence." But nonviolence could be one of the "great vehicles of reconciliation because it tends always to create and to maintain a climate in which the need to be understood and cared for can be honored." Those practicing nonviolence could be full of rage, of an internal will to violence, but nonviolence was a rejection of both the physical and the psychological tools of violence. The tools of nonviolence were those aimed not merely at changing a situation but requiring "a man to face *himself* in his action—to see how he looks to himself in the violent act itself without regard to what he hopes the violent act will accomplish." The tools of nonviolence placed upon men "the demand to absorb violence rather than to counteract it in kind," something that profoundly challenged people to face naked fear: "There is rioting in the streets of the spirit, and the price of tranquility comes terribly high. Order and reconciliation must be restored within—it is here that the major conquest must be achieved." As with

Martin Luther King, Thurman saw nonviolence as a fundamental philosophical principle, not just a stratagem.

That spirit had become apparent in recent years, he said, and was evident in Supreme Court acts, in the quiet tramping of feet on the streets, and in every place where people sought justice where “injustice abounds, to make peace where chaos is rampant, and to make the voice heard on behalf of the helpless and the weak. It is the voice of God and the voice of man; it is the meaning of all the strivings of the whole human race toward a world of friendly men underneath a friendly sky.”

Some contemporaries of Thurman, and nearly all scholars since, have pondered the paradox that Thurman was a mentor of the movement but not really deeply involved in its everyday workings; he was not a movement man. That is, he educated a generation in precepts of nonviolence and a kind of internal transformation that would lead to a societal revolution, but he himself stayed in the background. As he told *The Christian Century* in 1973, “I didn’t have to wait for the revolution. I have never been in search for identity, and I think that [all] I’ve ever felt and worked on and believed in was founded in a kind of private, almost unconscious autonomy that did not seek vindication in my environment because it was in me.”

Thurman’s vision of the church emanated from that. As Thurman saw it, individuals in the thick of the struggle should have a place to “be able to find renewal and fresh courage in the spiritual resources of the church. . . . The true genius of the church was revealed by what it symbolized as a beachhead in society in terms of community, and as an inspiration to the solitary individual to put his weight on the side of a society in which no person need be afraid.” As his wife and pioneering African American historian Sue Bailey Thurman later expressed, “We had a feeling that those who were leading in the civil rights movement had to have some place to rest their hearts at night. They had to fight all day, all day long. And then at night, they had to go somewhere and find their rest, or find their peace that the next morning would bring renewed energy. So he pastored to civil rights people.”

Thurman maintained friendships and fiercely respectful dialogues with many who espoused ideas with which he fundamentally disagreed, even when he understood where those ideas came from. Whitney Young, Jesse Jackson, Vincent Harding, and others from that generation revered Thurman. They understood his long history in the movement, what he had done in years past that had prepared the way for the 1960s. Otis Moss, a minister and organizer in the movement, said of Thurman that he was not in the marches, but that Thurman “participated on the level that shaped the philosophy or creates the march—without that, people don’t know what to do before the march, while they march, or after they march.” Or as Thurman described himself, “It’s the way the grain in my wood moves.” The grain in the wood defined and gave a texture to a piece of furniture, without anyone specifically taking note that it was there.

Thurman continued his correspondence with Martin Luther King through the 1960s, with frequent plans for a visit or for one to preach from the other’s



pulpit. As it turned out, those plans never came to fruition. In their last correspondence, in September of 1966, King thanked Thurman for his latest donation and expressed his regret that they hadn't seen each other over the years. "I do hope that the day will come soon when we can sit down together several hours and discuss many of the concerns close to our hearts. More and more I feel the need for retreating. My life is given so much to endless activity that I often fail to get the kind of spiritual refueling necessary to carry on." Here, King was repeating, in effect, the advice Thurman had given him in 1958. King still carried that kernel of Thurman's advice with him. King concluded by noting, "I do manage to find a few minutes occasionally to communicate with you through your books," finding in them "my most abiding means of meditation" during a time that was particularly difficult for proponents of the philosophy of nonviolence.

Tragically, shortly thereafter, while in San Francisco Thurman would lead a memorial service for King on April 7, 1968, three days after the assassination. Thurman saw King as someone who was "able to put at the center of his own personal religious experience a searching, ethical awareness." For him, segregation and discrimination were not just un-American and undemocratic, but in fact sins against God.

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Thurman reflected on his relationship with King, relatively distant as it was, at Boston University. For Thurman, his primary concern was the state of King's spiritual life. And for Thurman, what was most profound about King was that he saw that nonviolence "could not become for him a technique merely for social change." It was possible to embrace the techniques of nonviolence as a manipulative force, to remain personally uninvolved. King saw that, but "insisted that always coupled with nonviolence there must be the other words: direct action. There must be confrontation; there must be always the test, the checking out so that nonviolence would not degenerate either into a philosophy merely or into a metaphysic or even into a manipulating ethic." And now, in the face of King's assassination, it was easy to think that "what you experienced in the light is no longer true because you are in the darkness. What you experienced in the light remains true and you must hold this until the light breaks again. And if you do that, you will discover . . . that it is the intent of life that we shall all be one people."

Thurman's life message was about spiritually preparing one's self for the now, such that the exigencies of the now would not consume a person's soul, because that person's soul would be strengthened and disciplined through spiritual practices. King's message, of course—at least one of them—was that the evils of the



now had to be dramatized through civil disobedience and confronted politically and socially. For a person of spirit seeking discernment on how to conceive of and act in our now, both parts of these messages can inform, sustain, and empower. ⊕

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