

The Activist & The Mystic

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One of the legacies of our free, progressive faith tradition is social action. Many UUs are drawn to this social justice ministry as an avenue whereby they can put their faith into action. Many times I as your minister have said that if one wants to change the world, one must begin by changing oneself, for as within so without. For some but not all, this is a hard saying. Yet, it is not an either/ or premise but both/ and. I am a mystic and by that I mean that I draw my spirituality from encounters that I have had with at time visible and invisible energy. I do not say that everyone has to but I do. I believe that genuine transformation, of the society and the individual must occur from within. One of my favorite sayings is the Rumi quote, "yesterday I was clever and wanted to change the world. Today I am wise so I am changing myself. I have discovered that I co-create my world as I am connected to all of it. And so if I want more peace, I must be more peaceful. If desire more love, I must be more loving. If I want more forgiveness, I must be more forgiving. You get the point. I cannot be lulled to sleep by the illusion of separation from other beings. I am the solution and the problem. I am not saying this is for everybody but simply that it works for me. My being a mystic in a denomination with many social justice activists prompted me to write this sermon, because I believe that everyone may not be a mystic, but everyone is certainly called to take action at times for justice and to also cultivate and to excavate their own inner lives as well. This is the spiritual journey, the inner journey, the journey without distance.

Needless to say we are in uncharted waters here in our nation but we have seen some of these happenings before in other countries. Perhaps it is now our turn to experience some new and uncomfortable events, at least for now to enable us to really bring clarity to the kind of people and nation we say we want to be. When I look at the Kings and Gandhis of the world (and perhaps this is why there are so few) they encouraged their followers to always see the humanity of their opponents and not just their ideology. Yes, this is oftentimes difficult but it is vital to any type of social change. When I was a young man, Dr. King was my idol, my hero, and he still is in many ways. Yet, I was not so much drawn to the activism of his day and he did what he was called to do, but his deep sense of inner strength. I had to find my own theology and my own identity as a member of the clergy. One of the great things about mysticism is that one does not have to be religious. One need not identify with any faith tradition at all and still be a mystic. Yes, I have marched and written letters to public officials, and will continue as I see fit, yet I needed something else to fill the void where I could still appreciate and enjoy my life with all of its challenges; I didn't want my struggle to become my identity. During my journey I ran across the writings of a man by the name of Dr. Howard Thurman. His life and writings were like an oasis in the theological desert I was traveling through as a young man. His life and writings became for me a lifeline in finding my own identity and

search for truth. Mind you he was not the only one, but he was and still remains an important guide for me.

You see Thurman (a mystic) knew the connection between spiritual renewal and social change. He knew about the unity, or interdependence as we refer to it, and the building of community and the search for common ground. Thurman challenges us today, just as he did with Martin Luther King, Jr. and other clergy of this time to never lose their roots or training in spiritual practices, such as prayer, meditation, singing, celebration, worship, and silence. This was difficult for many to accept during the times of the civil rights movement (just as it is today for many of us in the present day) and yet those times are upon us again as we now label our movement as a human rights movement. But the labels don't matter really. Thurman knew, what it took me years to really understand, and that is that I had to bring together the inner life, the life of passion, the life of fire, and to connect it with the external life, the life of politics. Many mystics, including Thurman were criticized for not personally marching or getting more visibly involved in the civil rights struggle. People thought Thurman was going to be the Moses of African Americans, but they were disappointed as he said, he's into this mystical stuff. Yet Thurman, like The Buddha before him, Rabbi Jesus, Gandhi, Krishnamurti, and countless others, believed that social change would only come through personal transformation and spiritual disciplines such as meditation. He was able to go deep inside himself and to reach out and teach other people how to transcend the limits of their own so-called, everyday practical existence.

This enabled him to build bridges across racial, cultural, and religious boundaries. This was also a way to build community. Dr. Thurman inspired me to embrace my mysticism and to always acknowledge the good in life and to be grateful for it. I have heard for instance that those who do not march are simply wrong. Well, who is to decide what other people choose do with their time and their lives? Who is to say who or what is wrong. If they are wrong, people have a right to be wrong. I have found in myself and many other activists that we tend to forget the good in our lives, and so there are times when if the only tool you have is a hammer, most everything looks like a nail. It seems to me that activism and spiritual work are one in the same. I came to see after many years of soul searching that my ministry, my role if you will, was and is to call individuals who chose the activists path of struggle and action, back to the question of what is your point? What is it that you really stand for and to help remove some of the obstacles on that journey. I am called to remind you of the eloquence of silence, because in the stillness we can answer those questions of identity, compassion, and justice. Meditation is letting time evolve into timelessness and we can shut out the noise, we can listen and watch our "selves" pass by.

The journey of life is supposed to make us more fully human because the silences we can find, if we are willing, can open our hearts to more love, thereby drawing us ever closer to all peoples, all cultures, and all faiths. By learning to be still we wait and listen for the sound of the genuine in us.

I have found this to be true in my personal life. My quest for meaning, understanding, and purpose in the midst of tragic existence has been discovered. I now have the tools because it is alright to become a seeker but one must remember that those who seek want to find something; that's the whole point. They are not seeking just for the sake of seeking. Life is much more than that.

Thurman said, "The person concerned with social change must not only understand the materials with which he or she must use, but must also understand the things which he or she is trying to manipulate, reorder, or refashion, but again and again her or she must be open to changing one's mind with each new experience. This must be done so that in the quest for social justice, one's vision of society never becomes dogmatic and is always modeled by the inner transformation going on within the individual. Those engaged in social action must continually examine and reexamine the sources of their motivation and their spiritual pilgrimage. The primary questions for leaders involved in social transformation are: What are you trying to do with your life? What kind of person are you trying to become. Ernest Hemingway said it in a much more cutting way. "I have little patience for those who want to change the world without first finding out what the world is about in the first place."

Thurman said this at the funeral of civil rights leader Whitney Young in 1971: *"The time and place of a person's life on earth is the time and place of his body. But the meaning and significance of that life is as far-reaching and redemptive as the gifts, the dedication, the response to the demand of the times, as he or she wills it to be."*

Like other mystics before him, Thurman often asked, what does it mean to live life seriously (not to take life too seriously), to live freely unencumbered by the necessity of always conforming to external things that limit our potential to be authentically human in the world.

Thurman believed, as do I that this way of life demands a journey into the interior, into those places we have sealed off and placed no-trespassing signs around. The mystic takes the inner journey into dangerous territory where the real issues of life and death must be confronted, where the angel with the flaming sword greets us and will not let us enter until we are willing to yield our ego and sense of pride in the self.

Mysticism reminds us that it's not as if human beings have not experienced times of fear and despair in our existence. They know that human beings have always fought wars, struggled to survive, faced injustices, experienced loss, dealt with violence and greed, and been caught up in historical movements beyond their control. The mystic doesn't shy away from facing the pain of the human condition, but at the same time, he or she learns not to shy away from the beauty and value of life as well.

The mystic also realizes that genuine spiritual practice is political. Unless we learn to love there is no path to lasting change. You don't have to like everyone. But you can learn to love everyone. It's the very thing that bridges the spiritual, mystical life and the activist's life.

What is needed is the combination of the activist and the mystical traditions, a combination of the mind that wants to change the world if that is your calling and a mind

that is steady, clear seeing, and seeks to change from a place of love, rather than from a place of anger. It's not just one or the other; either we like and agree with people, or we're against them and we have to hate them. The question is how do we exist in that space where we hold both of these dualities at once.

You see anger can be a great motivator but in the end it cannot be sustained. Yes, many movements are born of a righteous anger, but eventually they burn out. Besides, as King, Jesus, Gandhi, and the Buddha taught, when you want to create a just society, you want what's good for yourself and your opponent. You want what's good for you and President Trump, and those who voted for him. That's the key. And you can't get there without going inward, being still, stopping the noise.

Then we get to see ourselves, warts and all, and perhaps we can begin to love ourselves a bit more today than yesterday. Perhaps we can accept ourselves a bit more and then perhaps I can accept you a bit more today than yesterday.

We have an unprecedented opportunity in our nation and the planet today to create the world we want our children to live in. It will take work and a lot of frustration. I believe that in order to create this world, we will need to journey inward. We must be the peace we say we want in the world. I wanted to let you know as your minister where I am coming from in my sermons and justice work, which at times may be less outward focused than yours. Fortunately, as my mother reminds me, it takes all kinds to make a world.

Again, the words of Dr. Thurman from Meditations of The Heart:

"There is in every person an inward sea, and in that sea there is an island; and on that island there is an altar; and standing guard before that altar is the 'angel with the flaming sword.' Nothing can get by that angel to be placed upon that altar unless it has the mark of inner authority. Nothing passes the angel with the flaming sword to be placed upon your altar unless it be a part of your consent."

This journey into the interior, according to the mystic and to Thurman, is not extraordinary; in many respects it is far removed from religion as we define it. The so called "angel with the flaming sword" is encountered in the mundane, earthly experience of living and being in the world.

Often in struggle, in crisis, in the heat of suffering and trial, one encounters this angel, the truth about oneself, and the stereotypes we hold about ourselves and others. In facing this angel, in facing this truth about ourselves, we begin the transformation of ourselves and the world.