

Coming to Howard Thurman for Spiritual Direction

Howard Thurman (HT): You wrote me to ask if I was the right spiritual director for you as a multiracial person. That is a question you will need to decide. Thank you for coming. I am always glad to see young people seeking to embrace their spiritual life.

Multiracial Person (MP): Thank you for being willing to see me. Maybe my worrying about my multiracial background is the wrong starting point for our conversation.

HT: Nothing is ever the wrong starting point. Whatever is most on your mind is the best place to begin.

MP: Thank you for your understanding. I came to you because I know you began the first interracial church in America and my hope is you might understand my dilemma.

HT: Yes, Alfred Fisk and I started the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in 1944 on Russian Hill in San Francisco. Not only was it interracial it was also interfaith. Our focus was not on theology as much as the experience of love in community.

MP: Well, I have never been to California, but I understand the church you founded is still going. Barbara Holmes in her book *Joy Unspeakable* talks about the moving experience she had there during the opening meditation in the service.

HT: Word of Professor Holmes' work has gotten around. I am glad you have read her.

MP: Her book really impacted me in a way that exacerbated the tension that brings me here. My father is white and my mother is part African American. She has wonderful caramel skin. I land somewhere between my father and mother in complexion.

I grew up in integrated schools in an integrated neighbor. When I hang out with my white friends and their charter school white friends, everyone accepts me as white. When I hang out with my black friends in their homes, they accept me as black. In a way it is wonderful. I know that. But it is also a bit schizophrenic. I can deal with it in my everyday life. As my mother and father tell me it just is what it is. Where I am having difficulty is my spiritual life. I need wholeness in my spiritual life, and I feel I am somehow splintered spiritually by the choices before me.

HT: Martin Luther King, Jr. observed decades ago that one of the most segregated hours in the United States occurs on Sunday mornings when we attend church services. I am afraid that is still true all these years later.

MP: I understand from your writing and Barbara Holmes that worship is a community affair and while white churches are more oriented toward individualistic salvation, for the most part they have a community focus also.

HT: So you are having trouble finding a church home that accepts you for who you are?

MP: The problem is a bit more complicated than that. I can be accepted at a mainline white church or in the black church. But in either one it seems I have to leave a piece of me behind. There are black people, at least a few, in mainline white churches and white people are welcome in most black churches. It is not that. Rather it is that the format, the liturgies, the kind of community created in each is different. The white church is more head centered. The black church more in the body and heart. There doesn't seem to be a format that speaks to all of a mixed race person like me.

HT: We tried to do that at the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples.

MP: From what I have read I believe you did, but there are not any churches like that around where I live. I can get carried away on good old fashion black spirituals or a Bach pipe organ piece. I don't know where to get both.

HT: (chuckles) What a good problem to have. People of color were still sitting on the back of the bus when we started the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples. The truth of the matter is most people in this country are mixed race and, unless they are from outer space, the origin of each person leads back to the heart of Africa.

MP: I understand that there has been much progress and there is so much further to go for there to be true equality in this country. But I am longing to find a spiritual home now.

HT: I believe we always have to start with what is. Like your parents have told you. What exists right now, with a few exceptions, are parallel church formats, a white and a black. We don't have a format that addresses the multicultural reality that you are a part of and, truthfully, we all are.

MP: Right!

HT: Both the white church and black church have a formulas for a worship service and community. They don't want to give up these to become the white and black church, even though their theology is the same Christian theology that says we should all love each other. For the black church to survive slavery, Jim Crow, and white privilege this need to hunker down together in community was not an attempt to isolate it was necessary for survival. On the other hand, progressive white churches' failure to adopt a more multicultural worship service stems from the implicit bias of white privilege. It allows the white church to say we are open to all, but take no actions to dismantle the form of service of a segregated white church. By leaving in tact barriers to a multicultural church, only serving religion up in a starched white format, many African Americans, like you perhaps, are never fully able to relate and never attend.

Now the biggest irony of all is that in these voluntarily segregated white and black churches there is never any opportunity to learn, not just in the head, but in the body and heart what it means to obey God's commandment to love. This can only be done by

being deeply in community with diverse people. Otherwise we are not learning to love another as much as being like Narcissus admiring his own reflection.

What do you like most about either the white church or black church form of service?

MP: I like the music and body movement of the black church, it can take me to an altered space of deep centeredness. And I like the Centering Prayer practices offered in the white church. These, too, can take me to a deeply centered place where I experience God's presence.

HT: Wonderful, you have experienced two of the primary ways to connect with God, through bodily movement, music and chant, on the one hand, and silence and stillness, on the other. Both allow for the false self, the part of the ego that is seeking for power and control, esteem and affection or security and survival, to drop away and the present moment to be experienced in a way that allows us to interact with God's presence which is actually part of what we call the present moment. Both paths are enhanced when they are done in community.

MP: So you are saying I am stuck with my original problem.

HT: No, I am saying that these two paths to God are always going to attract two groups of people and that I don't think these two groups are easily divided by race. Black church and white church have adopted their worships service formats differently primarily because of other factors. The black church had to rely on chants, call and response and other more bodily and heart openings because pre-civil war, reading was illegal in the South. Mainline white Protestant churches became more head centered because Protestants as protestors were trying to distinguish themselves from their Catholic origins. Interestingly, the Catholic church has tried to retain a more bodily focused service with its emphasis on liturgy, bells and smells being the shorthand reference. But for many, particularly African Americans, Catholic rituals seems too wedded to a system of religious hierarchy and breaking free of white hierarchy has always been a quest of African Americans.

MP: Are multiracial people always going to be outside of the religious forms in our culture?

HT: No, not really. You used the right word — form. Everyone can get stuck inside or outside (in opposition to) a religious form, a type of worship, a type of religious community. This problem is also your opportunity. Since there is no form that lands just right for you as a multiracial person, you have a head-start on going deeper into your spiritual journey not to be hindered by form. We need the form to deliver the content, but the form is not the content, the form helps lead us, especially initially, but it is not the Spirit which cannot be contained in any form.

Once you have done your inner work you will be in a place to create the new forms so badly needed in your country in order for people to actually learn God's commandment to love.

MP: I am still feeling like I am stuck.

HT: Only in the sense that, at a younger age than most, you are being asked to go deeper in your spiritual life. From what you have told me you have already made a good start with your contemplative practices.

MP: So you are saying it is good for me to feel spiritually not at home, restless about where the spiritual community is that suits me best?

HT: Absolutely. One of the many things my wife and I learned out of our experience with Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples was that it makes no sense to talk about God's commandment to love one another unless a community also creates a chance for people to experience loving one another. I learned that preaching about or talking about racism with progressive white people soon finds us all in agreement about its evils, but does nothing to break down the barriers of implicit bias we all have until there is a shared community experience of a common life together.

Our worship experience at Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples increasingly became not a white church form or a black church form but simply a celebration of life among a widely diverse range of people.

MP: So what is the best way for me to learn about the Commandment to love.

HT: What I have learned about God's commandment to love is that it requires us to not just accept others who are different, but to open ourselves to understanding them and being understood. We learn to see from the heart. This is hard because it requires a significant degree of vulnerability. We all have experiences in our lives where we vulnerably sought understanding and acceptance and were rebuffed. These rebuffs created barriers to love. We all have them. In His commandment to love, God is asking us to take our barriers down. This is not easy, but it is contemplative practices that allowed me to know "[s]omewhere deep within was a 'place' beyond all faults and virtues that had to be confirmed before I could run the risk of opening my life up to another. To find ultimate security in an ultimate vulnerability, this is to be loved."

We are not trying to teach people to be compassionate to those less fortunate, this simply reinforces our perception that we are better, smarter or whiter than another group. This is the opposite of love. Rather we must learn to be with others different from ourselves in all our vulnerability and accept our and their brokenness as fellow human beings and in that instance the relationship itself transforms into love.

MP: So you are saying the form of worship doesn't matter, it is whether a faith community provides the kind of safety for me to open up and be vulnerable to people

different from me — this will teach me and them God's love in a way it can actually be experienced.

HT: The form is important if it encourages the kind of contemplative practices that allow you to feel grounded in God's love so that you can be secure in being vulnerable with others about who you truly are. In that experience each of us is unique and in the tonic of God's love we are all beloved.

MP: Thank you for letting me come talk with you. I am not sure which church I will attend, but I believe I see more clearly what I am looking for.

HT: You will come to realize what you are looking for can be found within any form as long as that form allows people to truly open to seeing and understanding each other with the eye of the heart.

Thank you for coming. I hope you will come back. Peace and God's blessings on you in your journey.