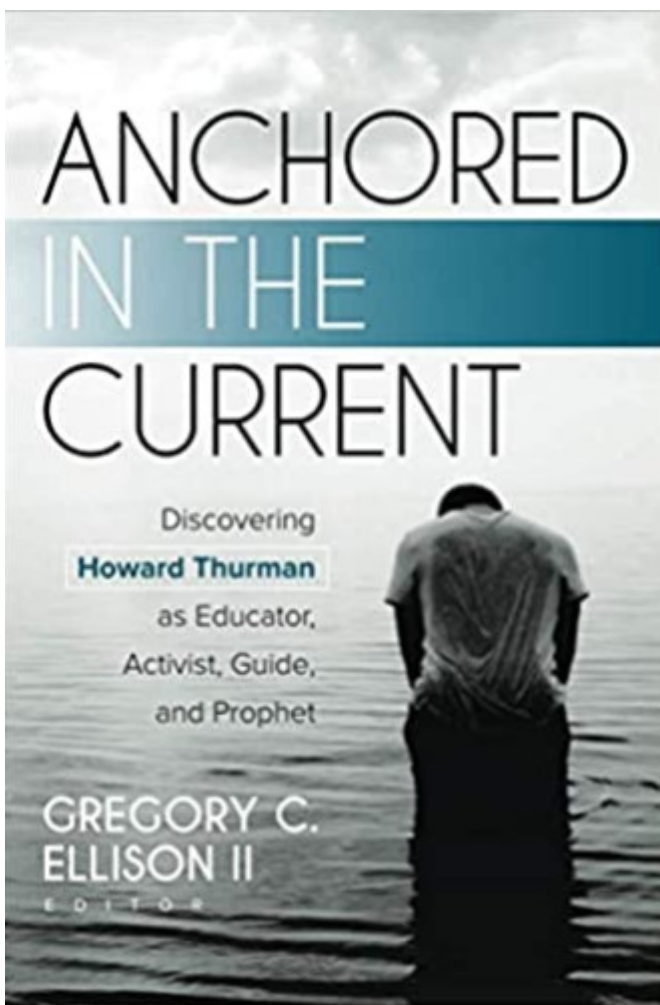


Drawing close to Howard Thurman

Two new books invite us to learn from what others have loved about the civil rights icon.

by [Heidi Haverkamp](#) in the [June 30, 2021](#) issue

In Review



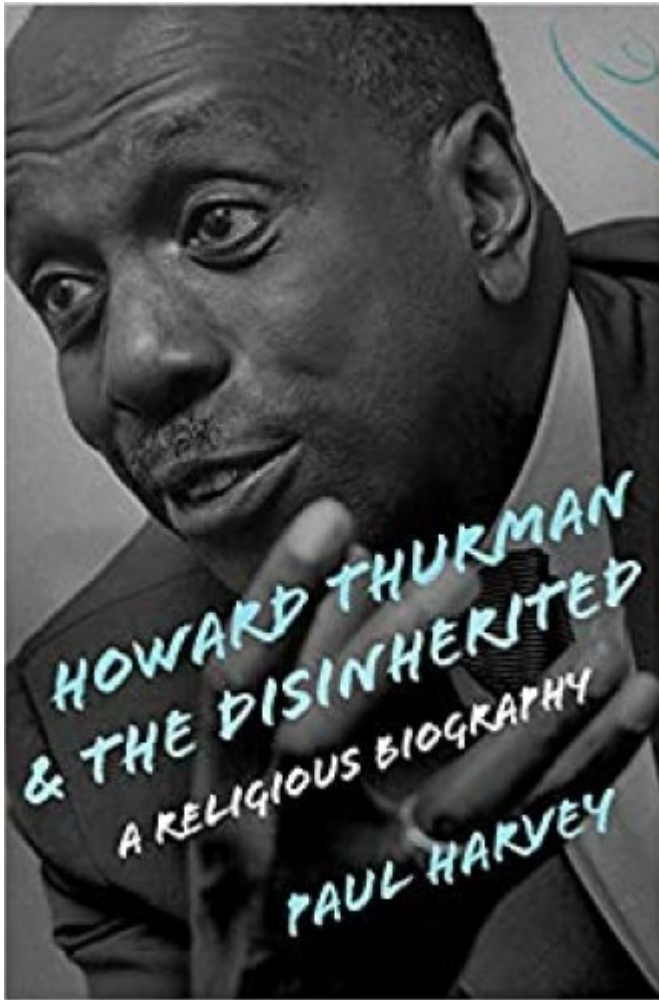
Anchored in the Current

Discovering Howard Thurman as Educator, Activist, Guide, and Prophet

Edited by Gregory C. Ellison II

Westminster John Knox Press

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Howard Thurman and the Disinherited

A Religious Biography

By Paul Harvey

Eerdmans

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It was by fluke that my husband, my mother-in-law, and I ended up visiting Howard Thurman's childhood home in 2019. We were on the airplane to Florida when I remembered that Thurman, a man often called the spiritual mentor of the civil rights movement, grew up in Daytona Beach. He spent his childhood close to the ocean, watching storms roll in, attending the segregated schools, going to church, working

odd jobs, and confiding in the oak tree in his backyard.

Today, Daytona is a town where cars drive on the sandy beaches, a racetrack seats over 100,000 people, and Trump flags still fly everywhere. It's still pretty segregated. Thurman's home, hidden away in a residential neighborhood that is still predominantly Black, is one of those tiny museums run on a shoestring. We made an appointment for a tour.

I'd first encountered Thurman a decade earlier, when a colleague shared that he was listening to a multidisc set of Thurman's talks and sermons (*The Living Wisdom of Howard Thurman*) while driving cross-country. Even this brief mention of Thurman stirred up in me an irresistible interest and curiosity, so I bought the set myself and began to listen to it. It was mesmerizing. Some tracks I listened to again and again over the years. I began to read more of Thurman's books and to quote him in my own work. His words and voice were like none I'd ever heard—and yet, they were somehow so familiar. I shared a sentiment about Thurman that Parker Palmer describes in *Anchored in the Current*, the feeling that “I knew him well, and he knew me.”

Many of us likely feel the same about Thurman. But to continue to learn from a spiritual hero, we must also learn from what others have known, noticed, and loved about him—from scholars, colleagues, friends, students, family members, and even fellow members of Thurman fandom. Both of these books invite us to do just that.

Anchored in the Current is a collection of essays and poems by 17 writers testifying to the influence of Thurman's work and writings on their lives and work. Editor Gregory Ellison organizes the book around four themed sections: vocation, education, activism, and spirituality. While a few of the contributors spend more paragraphs describing their own work and experiences than their connection to Thurman, most share powerfully about his legacy and the works that have touched them most.

Luke Powery writes about Thurman's poem “The Growing Edge,” exploring how its tracing of the line between life and death speaks to his work and worship as a parish pastor. Shively Smith writes her essay, “Thurman-eutics,” on the basis of Thurman's metaphor of a clothesline as an image of a spiritual life, where “feelings, thoughts, and desires” can all be pinned side by side. Palmer focuses on Thurman's phrase “the sound of the genuine,” from a 1980 commencement speech at Spelman

College, and reflects on both Thurman's and his own understanding of discernment and true self.

The exciting group of writers represented in this collection initially gathered for a retreat at the former home of author Alex Haley, now a center owned by the Children's Defense Fund. These are devoted writers of different races and different professions. They range from the nationally known, like Marian Wright Edelman and Barbara Brown Taylor, to the scholars who first collected and published Thurman's papers, Walter Earl Fluker and Luther E. Smith, to those who have famously shared Thurman's work through other media, Liza Rankow (who produced that CD set I have listened to so many times) and filmmaker Martin Doblmeier (who produced and directed an excellent 2019 documentary on Thurman). Other contributors include a poet, a meditation teacher, the creator of a start-up "accelerator," and a church planter.

There are a few awkward moments. The words *anchored* and *anchor* are often (but not always) featured in all caps, which I found puzzling and distracting. The essays of two famous White writers are featured before any others, which could be mistaken as an indication of their greater importance.

Regardless, anyone looking to join a cloud of witnesses sharing testimony to the power of Thurman's writings and ideas across the church, the academy, the arts, activist movements, and beyond will find good company in Ellison's heartfelt collection.

Paul Harvey, a historian at the University of Colorado with a specialty in southern religious history, has written a new biography: *Howard Thurman and the Disinherited*. I must admit here that I have a deep and personal affection for Thurman's autobiography, *With Head and Heart*. I hear his warm and stirring voice loud and clear in that book, the same voice I hear in his recordings. So I do not fully understand the criticisms Harvey tells us that book received when it was published. Harvey echoes these concerns, writing that Thurman "did not reveal himself fully" and "the autobiography leaves one at some remove" (this at the end of the emoting, bare-all 1970s).

I find Thurman's autobiography to be chockablock with moving and humorous personal anecdotes, frank accounts of painful encounters with racism, and plenty of sideline commentary. He is not a confessional writer; he does not trace the contours

of his emotional life or connect each childhood pain to an adult behavior. He was a person of a different time, where sharing that much simply was not done. And as a Black man, perhaps he guarded his inner life as a sacred place where he could be free and safe, a place the American public was not privileged to access. Still, his autobiography is the reason, in addition to his recordings, that I feel I've met and known Howard Thurman and that, somehow, he knows me.

Regardless, Harvey offers us a broader view of Thurman's life than Thurman could have done himself, in accessible language but with clearly meticulous scholarship and a sense of the import and significance of Thurman's ideas, travels, relationships, and influence. Harvey provides thoughtful distance and perspective, with insights from historic and personal papers and interviews, including many anecdotes and details that Thurman himself might not have been comfortable or able to share.

Harvey is clear-eyed in sharing Thurman's mistakes and weaknesses: his early neglect of his first wife and daughter, his near constant work and travel (often to the point of exhaustion), his stubborn resistance to the expectations and direction of administrators at Howard University and Boston University, his often perilous financial straits, and his meddling in the life and leadership of Fellowship Church after his departure as its senior pastor. Harvey also notes that this magazine published one of the most thorough treatments of the history and organization of Fellowship Church in 1951, in an article by Harold Fey—who would go on to serve as the *Century's* editor from 1956 to 1964.

Even though I have a great affection for Thurman's autobiography, I would recommend Harvey's biography for those looking to expand their knowledge of Thurman's life and influence most easily and quickly. *Howard Thurman and the Disinherited* leaves readers with a full appreciation of just how influential and gifted this preacher, mystic, writer, pastor, and civil rights mentor truly was. Thurman's autobiography is more humble, sometimes rambling, and perhaps best read by those who want to hear his story in his own voice. For those who want to delve into some of Thurman's writing beyond the autobiography, there's a vast canon to choose from. *Jesus and the Disinherited* is the most famous and influential, but one of his own favorites was *The Inward Journey*.

There is something about Howard Thurman, even 40 years after his death, that stirs in many people a desire to feel that we, too, are spending a few hours with him in his study or sitting and listening to him preach. These two books invite us to do that

and more. They help us to see Thurman in a broader historical and theological context, on the national and international stage, and as a gentle but mighty cornerstone in the spiritual foundations of the civil rights movement, especially its practice of nonviolence.

Our visit to Thurman's childhood home in Daytona Beach has stayed with me. He felt close by in those few pieces of furniture, some family photographs, and a playful collection of penguin figurines (his favorite animal). But it felt like Thurman was standing right next to me when Qasim, our guide, pointed out the oak tree Thurman had loved as a child, still alive and towering overhead, there in the yard. I stood under that oak, dumbstruck, remembering the words Thurman wrote in *With Head and Heart*: "I needed the strength of that tree, and, like it, I wanted to hold my ground. . . . I could talk aloud to the oak tree and know that I was understood." Just like that tree and house, still standing and welcoming visitors, Thurman's life and work continue to stand, welcome, and inspire.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Drawing close to Thurman."