FRUITS OF LOVE:
SELF AND SOCIAL CRITICISM IN JAMES BALDWIN
AND HOWARD THURMAN

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Abstract

Most accounts of prophetic social criticism in the United States focus on its history and politics. By treating James Baldwin and Howard Thurman as prophetic exemplars, my dissertation carves out an ethic to guide such practices. It argues that Baldwin and Thurman can be helpfully understood as models of self-care, as critics of domination, and as practitioners of freedom. Both model the dangerous possibilities of speaking the truth in love, but each does so from a differing standpoint. Baldwin mainly pursued his task as a writer and, Thurman, as a pastor. I argue that any attempt to account for their sayings and doings needs to be largely informed by their sense of vocation, their calling. Since the appraisal of virtue and vice is always a contextual affair, to appreciate the ethical significance of vocation is to get a better sense of what excellence looks like in practice. *Fruits of Love* therefore aims to offer a more nuanced treatment of the ethical insights of each thinker. By highlighting the categories of love and vocation, it further discloses the differences between their social visions, as well as the traditions of virtue, care, and freedom that bind them together.
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My parents know the painful joy of this journey, because they know something of new birth. Their steady confidence and unwavering support has seen me through nine years of graduate school. I simply hope to do justice to the gifts they've given me. My daddy, Nathaniel Earl, taught me how to think. And my mama, Elizabeth Ann, taught me how to read. Together they taught me how to love. They continue the legacy of the late Charlie Clifton Granby and the late Florence Murrill, my ancestral guides. I still hope to make them proud.

To my best friend and the love of my life, Leah: your very being inspires gratitude—and excellence. I'm not deserving of your love, but I'm better for it
This dissertation examines the ethical dimensions of social criticism in general and prophetic criticism in particular. Not every social critic counts as prophetic, but every instance of prophetic discourse involves some measure of self and social examination. Or, at least, I'm convinced that it should.\(^2\) While it is true that social critics need not think of their discourse as prophetic for their work to be counted as such, it is also true that referring to oneself as a prophet (or to one's work as prophetic) doesn't authorize such standing. Endorsement is communal. One must be responsible to a sanctioning community, with its attendant norms, principles of discernment, and modes of interpretation. Prophetic discourse is but a precinct of wider practices of social criticism.\(^3\)

Deciphering between prophets proper and false involves judgments too complicated and too historically contingent to be settled here. So much depends on the assumptions one brings to the judgment – religious, philosophical, and otherwise. That is why I'm less interested in conceptually parsing what counts as prophetic social criticism, and more concerned with the pragmatic question of how we come to judge the

excellences and deficiencies of the various kinds of criticism which vie for our assent. I'm concerned with how we come to discern the contents of such judgments amid our competing commitments as political citizens and ethical agents, as participants in various guilds and vocations, and as members of communities stratified by gender and sexuality, as well as race and economy. In this way, my project wrestles with the criticisms on offer in ordinary contexts—our judgments regarding injustice and evil, alongside the demands of cherishing beauty and preserving our loves. By focusing on prophetic figures who refuse to allow their language "to be simple in meaning" or easily captured in the form of "didactic message," I seek to address those who wish to be instructed by the richness of "prophecy not as scripture with fixed meaning but as living poetry open to infusions of new meaning." My interest therefore concerns the ethics of love and social criticism among prophetic exemplars.

A good amount of literature already addresses the historical and political significance of prophetic discourse in America. Less attention, however, has been given to its ethical underpinnings. By emphasizing the ethical, I hope to sharpen those

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7 Kaveny's essay on prophecy is exceptional in this regard. I detail my affinities and disagreements with her in the conclusion. See Kaveny, "Democracy and Prophecy," 33- 57. For an account of ethical prophecy more concerned with theological foundations than democratic practices, see Rufus Burrow Jr.,
discussions which take-for- granted an ethically viable notion of prophetic critique. My research has implications for the enactment and interpretation of prophetic criticism, not only as a site of political-intellectual work, but also as an exercise in character formation, self-examination, and democratic growth.

By ethics, I have in mind the question of how to live well, of how to go about organizing personal and communal habits of flourishing. Such an account includes questions of morality—those involving our duties, obligations, and permissible ways of relating to other persons. But it also extends beyond those spheres. Living well also concerns the quality of the lives we lead and the kinds of projects we pursue. It concerns the kind of company we keep and the sort of activities we choose to engage, the pastimes and pursuits that occupy our attention and limited affections. Such concerns wouldn't therefore be exhausted by our duties to other persons. When it comes to how a person moves about her various fields of human and spiritual endeavor, morality is but a sphere of that wider life. This is why character traits include matters of style, comportment, and personality, many of which aren't captured by morality.

Human flourishing requires assistance. We depend on the vitality and wisdom of those who have come before us, their sustenance as much as their guidance. The gifts


8 Harry Frankfurt draws attention to a more encompassing "theory of normative practical reasoning" that goes beyond the usual concerns of morality—of "how our attitudes and actions should take into account the needs, the desires, and the entitlements of other people" (7). Frankfurt seeks an account of practical reason that takes what we care about as an essential component of a well-lived life. Such an account would involve moral considerations, but it would also pertain to much more. See Frankfurt, The Reasons of Love (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 3-32.


of their living make possible our own; and justly responding to those offerings involves
the virtue of piety.\textsuperscript{11} Our most impressive elements are often encoded into the alphabet
of other characters, hence the importance of molds and models, parents and prototypes.\textsuperscript{12}
At their best, they awaken us to the possible by demonstrating the improbable.\textsuperscript{13}
Instructive models of prophetic criticism offer guidance through their efforts to discern
the critical voices of their time, while also speaking against the evils of their day.
Beyond their efforts to speak the truth in love, they also display a capacity for virtuous
listening.

And, yet, the allure of the models we choose must be handled with care. "We are
transformed by the models we find attractive," ethicist Jennifer Herdt argues, and "insofar
them in the presence of the living black community, to celebrate the power of their endurance and the
amazing, resilient force of their humanity which does so much to account for our own existence.
Celebration, of course, is not enough. But celebration which grows out of identification with and
affirmation of the intellectual and spiritual forebears of our ancestral community is not incompatible with
analysis...The deepening of our sense of identity presses us to seek, to know, to understand, to clarify the
ways and means by which our fathers and mothers carried on the struggle for integrity and freedom in their
time" (9).

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{11} Jeffrey Stout, Democracy and Tradition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 20. For Stout, piety "consists in just or appropriate response to the sources of one's existence and progress through life."
  \item \textsuperscript{12} One example would be the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah, whose model of courageous truth-telling would inspire multiple traditions of social criticism in the United States. For an account of the ways in which African Americans have taken up this trope, see David Howard-Pitney: The African American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005). For an account of the importance of caregivers, who assist in our efforts to attend to ourselves more wholesomely, see also Valerie C. Cooper, “The Importance of Passing Things On,” Journal of Religious Thought 50, no. 1 and 2 (fall-spring 1993-94): 116-120.
  \item \textsuperscript{13} See David Walker, Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World ed. Peter Hinks (Penn State University Press, 2000). Walker’s affinities with the jeremiad are also well-noted, see David Howard-Pitney, The African American Jeremiad, 11-12. For an attempt to interpret Walker’s rhetoric of appeal beyond the custodial politics often associated with the black Jeremiadic tradition, see Melvin Rogers, “David Walker and the Political Power of the Appeal,” Political Theory March 2014, 1-26. DOI: 10.1177/0090591714523623. Accessed online July 17, 2014 ptx.sagepub.com via Princeton University Library. Walker’s call would also inspire generations of black nationalists to come. He would significantly influence the Black Panther Party, which seems to have had an unnoted influence on Foucault’s thinking during the 1970s. For the depth of the BPP’s influence on Foucault and the reasons for this erasure, see Brady Thomas Heiner, “Foucault and the Black Panthers,” City 11: 313-356.
\end{itemize}
as we are drawn to imitate these models, it is vitally important that our attention be
directed toward models of true goodness.\textsuperscript{14} Vice, like virtue, can be contagious.\textsuperscript{15}

This dissertation takes as its models the exemplary witness of James Baldwin and Howard Thurman.\textsuperscript{16} It draws inspiration from the Judeo-Christian injunction to ground ethics in love, specifically Paul's recognition of the necessity of being responsible to our talents, gifts, and the communal needs that summon our response (Eph. 4:11-13). Not only does this inform one's relationship to religious community (for Paul, the church), it also orients one's responsibilities to society at large.\textsuperscript{17} Emerson puts the matter this way:

There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till.\textsuperscript{18}

At the outset, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-82) figured more prominently in the dissertation. But the scope of this project, alongside the complexities of Baldwin and Thurman in their own respects, demanded that Emerson remain in the background. Yet

\textsuperscript{14} See Jennifer Herdt, \textit{Putting On Virtue: The Legacy of Splendid Vices} (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008), 47.

\textsuperscript{15} This formulation owes to conversations I've had with Jeffrey Stout and to the influence of certain biblical proverbs and imageries (Prov. 22:25; 1 Cor. 15:33). The imagery and drama of the King James Bible holds a significant place in the black wisdom and vernacular traditions which shaped me as a child. Many of those sensibilities inform the present work. James Baldwin and Howard Thurman acknowledge similar debts throughout their writings.


\textsuperscript{17} On the idea of vocation, I've been deeply influenced by: Vincent Harding, "The Vocation of the Black Scholar and the Struggles of the Black Community," 3-29; Parker J. Palmer, \textit{Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation} (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000); and Peter J. Gomes, "Before It's Too Late" 2004 Baccalaurate Address to Williams College.


\textsuperscript{18} Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in \textit{Collected Essays and Lectures} (New York: Library of America, 1983), 259. All references to Emerson's essays are from this edition, unless otherwise noted.
his influence still lingers. Emerson's criticisms of organized religion and social domination,\(^{19}\) his emphasis on the virtue of democratic individuality,\(^{20}\) and his call for the translation of our ideals into embodied practical life are essential to my renderings of Baldwin and Thurman.\(^{21}\) To varying degrees and at different times, each saw himself as a scholar, writer, and pastor.\(^{22}\)

Throughout this dissertation, I offer close readings of Baldwin and Thurman as models of self-care, as critics of domination, and as practitioners of freedom.\(^{23}\) Both model the dangerous possibilities of speaking the truth in love, but each does so from a differing standpoint. Each speaks and writes from the perspective of what he values most (and fears and worships and hates too); each does so from the view of his unique sense of vocation; and each bears witness from his specific location in time, space, and body. Thus, it is the particularity of their prophetic critiques of self and society that I seek to put

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\(^{19}\) See especially Emerson's "Harvard Divinity School Address," 75-92; and "Self-Reliance," 259-282.


on display, a task which requires a deeper investigation into their ideals and self-understandings.²⁴

My project hinges on the claim that Baldwin engaged in this task primarily as an artist and writer, and that Thurman largely pursued his work as a pastor. To be sure, I’m not reducing the complexity of their lives and projects to a singular "office"²⁵ or "function."²⁶ I only want to maintain that any account of their sayings and doings—of their attempts to fashion and sculpt their particular visions of self and society—needs to be largely informed by their sense of vocation.²⁷

Baldwin chose to leave the pastorate not only because of his frustrations with the dominating tendencies of institutionalized religion, but also because of his sense of calling. And callings, particularly prophetic ones, usually have much to do with crisis.²⁸

Recognizing the tendency of religious collectives to stifle personal and social

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²⁴ For Elizabeth Anderson, “the grounds of a person’s reflectively held values (if she has any) lie in her conceptions of what kind of person she ought to be, what kinds of character, attitudes, concerns and commitments she should have…such self conceptions…are objects not merely of desire but of aspiration.” According to Anderson, “Ideals set the standard of conduct and emotion people expect themselves to satisfy with regard to other people, relationships, and things...The core of an ideal consists in a conception of qualities of character, or characteristics of the community, which the holders regard as excellent and as central to their identities.” See Elizabeth Anderson, Value in Ethics and Economics (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 6.

²⁵ George Schulman, American Prophecy, 5-13.


²⁷ With Robert M. Adams, I recognize that vocations are often seen as callings from God. But as Adams rightly argues, many notions of vocation are not God-centered, since one can have a sense of vocation without having a notion of God. Adams, however, does think that vocations must be understood in terms of “love for the good.” Conceptions of goodness furnish the set of projects “we make our own.” Ideally, these projects ensure that our “responsibilities are proportioned to our capacities.” In this way, vocations make claims on us. They’re live options that can help to explain the source of conflicting values and goods. We may have the capacity to pursue a number of goods, but we cannot be actively responsible to all such goods in the same way. See Robert M. Adams, Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 300-15.

development, Thurman sought to transform corporate religious experiences into ongoing, ever renewing rituals of freedom and divine encounter. The crisis that inspired Thurman’s unique ministry had everything to do with the experience of hearing his “daddy” being preached into hell at the age of seven, alongside his “deep feeling” about the exclusive and segregated nature of the church.29

That Emerson, Baldwin and Thurman began their work as Christian preachers is not insignificant. Each worried about the violence that institutionalized religion could inflict on an individual’s personality, psyche, and general perspective on the world. Examples of these worries include, but are not limited to: the stiffening of one’s individual powers of creativity and self-fashioning; the idolatry of past histories and present identities; and the worshiping of a “God” who blinds persons from reality as opposed to sensitizing them to it—a God, who in Baldwin’s words, inclines believers to be less free and less loving. Emerson’s response to these worries was to leave the church altogether. Baldwin’s response was more complicated. Though he refused to maintain formal ties with any religious sect or institution, his father’s Baptist and his own Pentecostal roots shaped the rest of his life’s work.30 Thurman, for his part, took many of his troubling experiences as a call to pursue a ministry that avoided such vices. His reply to the question of religious identity was the prophetic reply of his grandmother: to emphasize the religion of Jesus.31

31 Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996), 30-31. Thurman recalled having to read the bible aloud to his grandmother Nancy Ambrose several times a week as a boy. He initially found it odd that she had him avoid Paul’s letters, with the exception of 1 Cor. 13 on rare occasions. He later realized that this had to do with his grandmother’s experiences as slave. Nancy’s master
Thus, the order in which I examine Baldwin and Thurman can be read as
increasing variations on the redemptive potential of organized Christianity. These
thinkers can also be read in terms of the increasing significance each places on communal
practices of living, practices which significantly help to determine the realization of
human power and vitality. While communal practices of habituation are more prominent
in Thurman than Baldwin, both are sensitive to the limitations and possibilities of our
being creatures of history.

Baldwin and Thurman also recognize the significance of beauty, its role in the
crafting of meaningful lives and the creation of just societies. Historical wounds bind
them both to the earthiness of resurrected potential, and their scars link them to the bodies
of serrated beauty. Baldwin explicitly dwells with the power of beauty time and again.
And while Thurman rarely touches the idea directly, he assumes it in his style and
sensitivity to the aesthetic dimensions of ethical life. "My interests in creature needs
must be genuine and practical," Thurman writes, "but I must see these needs as things

would read passages from the Pauline epistles in an attempt to justify the institution of slavery. So her
aversion to certain Pauline texts was an act of resistance. It was also grounded in her faith in Jesus, not
Paul, the "first great creative interpreter of Christianity" (31).

For an account of the ethical significance of aesthetic judgments regarding beauty, see Elaine Scarry, On
Beauty and Being Just (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). For an insightful perspective on the
importance of beauty for the leading of meaningful lives and the growth of significant relationships, one
that resists any attempt to link aesthetics to justice or morality, see Alexander Nehamas, Only the Promise

“What will happen to all that beauty? For black people, though I am aware that some of us, black and
white, do not know it yet, are very beautiful.”; also see, Howard Thurman, The Search for Common
Ground: An Inquiry into the Basis of Man’s Experience of Community (Richmond, IN: Friends United
Press, 1986), 92. “The bodies of Negroes remember, and their psyches can never forget this vast
desecration of personality.”

now aware of certain aspects of that journey for the first time. For instance, I have always wanted to play a
musical instrument. More than wanting to play an instrument, I wanted to make music. It is an expression
of beauty with all the subtle nuances of meaning from the ear that can listen, to hear. Certain of its sounds
are only open to the exquisite hunger of the self."
which may stand clearly in the way of the realization of the higher ends of life. Feed the hungry? Yes, and always. But I must know that man is more than his physical body. There is something in him that calls for beauty and comradeship and righteousness."35

To my mind, the ethical visions of Baldwin and Thurman share the conviction of philosopher George Santayana, that "the sense of beauty has a more important place in life than aesthetic theory has ever taken in philosophy."36 Like Santayana, both thinkers labor to give beauty its proper due.

My dissertation is written from the perspective of a philosophical pragmatist on matters of language, practice, method.37 But it is also written from the perspective of someone deeply shaped by Afro-Protestant church traditions.38 My title, “Fruits of Love: Self and Social Criticism” conveys this tension.39 I am not interested in constructing an

38 I trace this to the influence of my recently deceased great-grandmother, Florence Murrill (1913-2014), a church mother at Harrison Chapel A.M.E. church, where I first attended "Sunday School." This also comes from my being reared in a Baptist infused, black Churches of Christ (CoC) faith tradition, where my grandfather, Charlie Clifton Granby (1930-2010) was a living exemplar of wisdom and spirituality. The A.M.E church understandably sits at the heart of most accounts of African American church history, while black involvement in the CoC is less appreciated. For the untold story of black Churches of Christ, see Wes Crawford, Shattering the Illusion: How African American Churches of Christ Moved from Segregation to Independence (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2013).
39 Cornel West's notion of "prophetic pragmatism" captures the challenge well. See West, The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989),
exclusively Christian ethic, though I’m interested in thinking about what Baldwin and Thurman may have to contribute to such discussions. That I couch my analysis within an ethic of care speaks to my attempt to find common ground with those who’ve come to see the necessity of justice in love, of giving each his due, not merely with respect to calculated fairness, but also in the light of the care that is essential to human flourishing and healthy practices of growth and development. I do not think religious institutions and their participants have a monopoly on virtue and truth. My engagement with Baldwin (and Emerson to a lesser degree) is an attempt to make good on this confession.


insofar as such details help to illumine their ethics of self and social criticism. Since I’m not in search of the “real” or “authentic” author, I’m less interested in offering an exacting account of what these thinkers meant or ultimately intended to say. I’m more interested in what their texts might allow us to say in the light of the questions that motivate my project. In saying this, I do not mean to devalue the importance of accurately interpreting their texts. I mean only to signal the motivations that situate my hermeneutic. These questions include: What are the most fruitful ways of imagining Baldwin as writer and truth-teller, and Thurman as a pastor and prophetic exemplar? Why were both thinkers so worried about religious institutions as sources of domination? How might each invite us to care for ourselves and our world in the light of the opportunities before and the powers within us? In what ways do they call us to journey and ascend toward our higher selves? How can we more responsibly imagine the task of prophetic criticism in their wake?

Pursuing these questions uniquely positions my project to make a contribution to virtue theory in general, as well as to the study of each thinker in particular. I hope to demonstrate the ways in which our love of specific goods—or even, the good—informs

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44 By virtue, I have in mind the tradition of ethical philosophy that descends from Aristotle, where emphasis is placed on one’s character, goodness, and wider contexts of ethical formation and social activity. This is to be distinguished from the kind of algorithmic, procedurally driven ethics that one finds in traditional Kantian and Utilitarian approaches. See, for example, G.E.M. Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” Philosophy 33 (1958) 1-19; John McDowell, “Virtue and Reason,” Monist 62:3 (1979:3); After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory, 3rd edition (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007); Robert M. Adams, A Theory of Virtue: Excellence in Being for the Good (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006).
and directs criticism. My emphasis on vocation aims to highlight not only the ways in which ideals of excellence can orient. It also stresses why goods often embroil us in conflict, not only with each other, but also with ourselves. One’s responsibility to craft and calling may be in tension with one’s commitment to family and friends. Such goods often make competing demands on our already limited capacities.

Another central claim of my dissertation is that the ethical task of self-formation is not unrelated to the political climate in which such shaping (or work, or character development, or care of self) occurs. In other words, one cannot properly tend to oneself without caring for one’s society and one cannot properly tend to one’s society without caring for oneself. Given the philosophical and religious force of “fruits of love” and “self and social criticism,” much more needs to be said about my intended use of these concepts. Sketching the wider ethic of self-care that frames my project will help to make those details more clear.

Michel Foucault’s lectures on the ethical and political dimensions of self-care weigh heavily on this project. Throughout many of his lectures in the early 1980s, Foucault returns to the interplay of self and society. Our ethical lives not only have

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47 This idea of self-fashioning aligns in general with what other commentators have referred to as an aesthetics of existence or the project of self-formation or the art of living. See Kevin Thompson, “Forms of Resistance: Foucault on Tactical Reversal and Self-Formation,” Continental Philosophy Review 36: 113-138, 2003; Alexander Nehamas, “Foucault on the Care of the Self” in The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1999), 157-188.
political ramifications, for Foucault, they also say something about our political condition.

By political, I have in mind spheres of living that extend beyond what we usually term as politics. For Foucault, any theory of politics that aims solely at these conventions is too narrow, because the state is “far from being able to occupy the whole field of actual power relations; and, further, because the state can only operate on the basis of other, already-existing power relations.” Power isn’t so much created by institutions and subjects as it is carried through them. With Foucault, I agree that institutions of government suppose ‘already existing’ social relations of force. These structures include relations of “body, sexuality, family, kinship, knowledge, and technology.” So the political is more basic than politics. “It refers to a certain mode of organizing the human practices that structure social interaction and the dynamics of collective action in history, but also, by extension, the interests, beliefs, and ideologies of individual actors.”

What Foucault points out is that some practices and institutions can be dominative (Think: slavery, Jim Crow, and mass incarceration; or sexist, racist, and market ideologies). So that ethics largely becomes an attempt to live well under conditions that threaten or undermine such flourishing. This is one way in which ethical practice can never be divorced from the political. Since contexts largely determine our ethical options, the task of ethics—of how best to live—involves properly assessing the climate in which that effort occurs. Such accuracy depends on our confrontation with the truth of our condition, its possibilities and constraints, its outer surfaces and its inner details. In

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this way, the quality of our ethics depends on the quality of our vision. And vision is at once descriptive and prescriptive: it allows for us to see the world as it is and it permits us to see the world as it should be.\textsuperscript{51} Where criticism sharpens vision,\textsuperscript{52} love illumines what we see.\textsuperscript{53}

But living well requires more than just vision; it also demands action. To care for oneself is to engage in activities that transform and contribute to the ethical life of one’s environment, one’s ethos.\textsuperscript{54} Such practices also contribute to the development of one’s own character, the working out of one’s own freedom and potential.\textsuperscript{55} To care for oneself is to care for one’s society; and (within any context of domination) to care for oneself is also to engage in practices of freedom.\textsuperscript{56} Foucault’s engagements with ancient Greek and early Christian texts inform many of the assumptions that bear on my project.


\textsuperscript{52} See John Dewey, \textit{Art as Experience} (New York: Penguin Groups, 2005), 338. “The function of criticism is reeducation of perception of works of art; it is an auxiliary in the process, a difficult process, of learning to see and hear.”

\textsuperscript{53} According to Troy Jollimore, “love functions as a source of illumination, in the sense that it helps us to see what we could not see otherwise, so that the rest of the world must present itself to us in its light (or what seems equally correct, in the light of the beloved.” See Troy Jollimore, \textit{Love’s Vision} (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2011), 3; also 25-27. Iris Murdoch put the point this way: “Goodness is connected with knowledge…with a refined and honest perception of what is really the case, a patient and just discernment and exploration of what confronts one, which is the result not simply of opening one’s eyes but of a certainly perfectly familiar kind of moral discipline.” In Murdoch, \textit{The Sovereignty of Good}, 37.

\textsuperscript{54} Ethos also implies a relationship with others, insofar as the care of the self enables one to occupy his rightful position in the city, the community, or interpersonal relationships, whether as a magistrate or a friend. And the care of the self also implies a relationship with the other insofar as proper care of the self requires listening of the lessons of a master. One needs a guide, a counselor, a friend, someone who will be truthful with you. Thus, the problem of relationships with others is present throughout the development of the care of self” Michel Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom” in \textit{Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume 1: Ethics}, P. Rainbow ed. (New York: New Press, 1997), 287

\textsuperscript{55} Take for example the practice of letter-writing. For Foucault, “the act of writing for oneself and for others” is one practice in a host of other practices (e.g abstinences, memorizations, meditations, silences, and listening to others) aimed at self-fashioning or self training. Writing, in many ancient contexts, was thought to be “an agent of the transformation of truth into ethos”, or communal ways of living and behaving. See Foucault, “Self-Writing” in \textit{Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume 1: Ethics}, P. Rainbow ed. (New York: New Press, 1997), 208-209

\textsuperscript{56} Both Foucault and Augustine agree that practices of domination are pervasive and far reaching. See J. Joyce Schuld, \textit{Foucault and Augustine: Reconsidering Power and Love} (Notre Dame, IN: University of
The upshot of my dissertation promises three things. The first is an exposition of the ethical philosophies Baldwin and Thurman (on matters of love and criticism) in a way that is instructive for debates about the nature of care and virtue ethics. Second, I hope to show how ethical projects of self-making are always bound to political practices of organizing power, persons, and potentialities. In this way our ethical practices unavoidably have political ramifications. We can organize better or worse practices of freedom and justice making. Third, I want to construe criticism as an ethical practice of self and societal care. It is within this wider context of living well that my reading of Baldwin and Thurman searches for an ethic of prophetic social criticism.

My dissertation pivots on the assumption that we can judge the differing emphases (and errors) of particular critics in relation to what they tend to love (or to be preoccupied with the most). This helps to explain why Baldwin could advocate the eschewing of twisted ideologies while still being tied to a self-wounding sense of manhood. A related claim is that we can better engage in the task of interpreting (and judging) such criticism by attending to the vocation which gives rise to it. What emerges from this analysis is a more concrete awareness of the pluralism of prophetic practice: the fact that there is more than one way to be prophetic.

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For a similar approach to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s intellectual work, which focuses on "power, provocation, and personality," see Cornel West, The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989), 35-41.

Baldwin’s response to Eldridge Cleaver’s attack in Soul on Ice demonstrates the point. There Baldwin tries to distance himself from being “confused…with the unutterable debasement of the male— with all those faggots, punks, and sissies, the sight and sound of whom, in prison, must have made him [Cleaver] vomit more than once.” James Baldwin, “No Name in the Street,” 459. In other places, Baldwin’s perilous sense of black masculinity often elides the uniqueness of the suffering visited upon black women. The little that was published from his longer conversation with Audre Lorde captures this dynamic. See James Baldwin and Audre Lorde, “A Revolutionary Hope,” Essence 15 (December 1984): 72-74, 120-123, 133.
And yet the ethic that I want to recommend also acknowledges the extent to which one’s prophetic message can be life-giving or life-choking, a source of fresh insight or a reservoir of deeper delusion. Not every prophet helps us interpret ourselves and our gods and our ethical task more perceptively and more compassionately. In some cases, the excellence of one’s prophetic calling requires the interpreting and unmasking of false prophets, a task which often includes the undressing of one’s own pretence. My dissertation argues that the work of prophetic love can only begin with a critical approximation of oneself. This is the ethic of self and social criticism recommended by Jesus of Nazareth:

Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?...You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye (Matthew 7:3,5 NRSV).

*Summary of Chapters*

In order to ground a more robust account of James Baldwin's ethical insights, chapter 1 begins with his sense of artistic vocation as a writer, focusing on the complexities of vision and the interplay between darkness and light. Chapter 2 examines those vices which, to Baldwin's mind, frustrate our efforts to encounter our worlds of experience with intelligent passion and critical imagination. Here Baldwin's engagement with Harriet Beecher Stowe, Richard Wright and the passing of his father receive attention. What emerges is an account of the dangers of sentimentality, fear, bitterness, hatred, and abusive forms of categorization. With the conceptual framework of the first two chapters in place, chapter 3 offers a reading of Baldwin's most famous work, *The Fire Next Time*, giving special attention to its articulation of freedom, love, and truth.
The two letters that compose *Fire*, "My Dungeon Shook" and "Down at the Cross," offer concrete examples of what it might mean to speak the truth in love. Each contains its own measure of pastoral warmth and prophetic fire.

Part II follows a similar structure. It begins by probing Howard Thurman's sense of calling as a minister, before examining the details of his thinking about the ethics and politics of love. Chapter 4 gives an account of the role of pastoral vocation and the example of Jesus in Thurman's life and thought. The next chapter examines the place of religious experience and the centrality of love in ethical, social, and religious life—offering what I take to be Thurman's most intricate statements on social criticism and the role of moral imagination. Chapter 6 looks at the way Thurman situates his understanding of self and communal care within wider ecologies of life – personal, social, and environmental. On this view, disciplines that tend toward personal growth are never to be separated from the historical grounds in which they take root. Being properly attentive to oneself also requires carefully tending to one's environment. Here habits of commitment, growth, and love receive primary treatment. Chapter 7 takes up the question of utopia. It examines Thurman's vision of a communal life—a beloved community—at once inclusive of individual expression, but also rich in social character. Careful attention is given to Thurman's criticisms of American exceptionalism and black separatism.

My conclusion reflects on the lessons and shortcomings of Baldwin and Thurman; it highlights the relevance of their love-ethics for debates about the role of prophetic criticism in public life; and it also suggests how ordinary citizens (not just scholars, writers, and pastors) might engage that task more responsibly.
Chapter 1

James Baldwin and the Vocation of Writing

Art is here to prove, and to help one bear,
the fact that all safety is an illusion.59

The following chapters, which constitute Part I of my dissertation, provide an interpretation of James Baldwin's (1924-87) ethic of love and social criticism. Because of the range and extent of Baldwin's written work, the account that I provide depends largely on his non-fiction essays. Given the constraints of this dissertation, special attention will be given to essays found in Notes of a Native Son, Nobody Knows My Name, and The Fire Next Time. Although limited in scope, my project will I hope remain instructive for interpreters of Baldwin who choose to begin elsewhere or others who are inclined to pursue different topics.60

An additional virtue of this project would be to open the way for new questions to be posed in Baldwin's direction and, even, for familiar ones to be asked with fresh perspective.61 My interest in Baldwin concerns his resourcefulness for ethicists and

61 Baldwin's work is commonly described as prophetic, see Bloom, “Introduction” in James Baldwin, 1-9; Stephen Marshall, "(Making) Love in the Dishonorable City: The Civic Poetry of James Baldwin," in The City on the Hill from Below, 128-168; Louis H. Pratt, "The Fear and the Fury: Artist, Prophet, and
ordinary citizens alike. In the broadest and most general of terms, my project wrestles
with the ancient question of how to live well: of how to secure and preserve individual
and communal flourishing. For Baldwin, the task of ethics lies within and amid the
present—and nowhere else. It is here—in the comings and goings of ordinary life—that
we are "to work out our salvation" (Phil: 2:12). Construing responsibility in this way
bears on how persons choose to organize their lives. This is true not only for political,
social, and personal associations, but also for how ethical agents come to make and
refashion themselves, for their styles and manners of creating life and enduring loss.

The question of how to live well has everything to do with the kind of person one
wishes to be, which for Baldwin is never to be separated from the self that presently
obtains. It is irresponsible to talk of (human) being without also talking of (human)

Revelator," James Baldwin (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), 31-49; Schulman, "James Baldwin and the
Racial State of Exception: Secularizing Prophecy?" in American Prophecy, 131-174; and Will Walker III,
"Prophetic Articulations: James Baldwin and the Racial Formation of the United States" (PhD diss.,
Princeton University, 1999).

62 I have in mind Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, itself an examination of the conditions of human
flourishing (eudaimonia) in the life of a virtuous person – the one who displays excellence (aretê).
Aristotle concludes NE with a call to examine the political arrangements which would be most hospitable
to persons of excellence aiming to live well. For a critical appraisal of alternative accounts of virtue and
For an attempt to link Augustine to wider philosophical traditions of human flourishing, see Joseph Clair,
"Discerning the Good in the Letters and Sermons of Augustine" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2013);
Ethics, 138-136. The relationship between Aquinas and eudaimonia (often by way of Aristotle’s influence)
is well established. See, for example, John Bowlin, Contingency and Fortune in Aquinas’s Ethics
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); and David Decosimo, Ethics as a Work of Charity:

63 James Baldwin, "Faulkner and Desegregati

64 James Baldwin, "What It Means To Be An American," 141.
65 James Baldwin, "Mass Culture and the Creative Artist: Some Personal Notes," The Cross of Redemption:
trapped between what we would like to be and what we actually are. And we cannot possibly become what
we would like to be until we are willing to ask ourselves just why the lives we lead on this continent are
mainly so empty, so tame, and so ugly." See also, James Baldwin, "Nothing Personal," 694-5. "And this
terror has something to do with the irreducible gap between the self one invents—the self one takes oneself
becoming; and to become more or less human is also and significantly to endure and to perpetuate, the actions of others and those of one's own choosing. This holds even in those cases where the doing involves abstinence, pause, or refusal. The nature of our being consists as much in what we refuse as what we accept, willingly or unwittingly, freely or by necessity. Such a perspective helps to explain why Baldwin rejects the assumptions that underlie static and monistic labels: they are untrue to life, traitors to complexity and truth. Fluidity and malleability are much better in this respect, since they are more accommodating to the discursive life at the heart of our efforts to become: to achieve, even, ourselves and our country.

With such a heavy emphasis on change and transformation, one needs a critical way of engaging in practices that bring about conversion. Criticism not only calls for transformation, it aims to divest us of the delusions, idols, and blind spots which so often block the way. But we shouldn't expect all critics to go about their task the same way, since each operates under a particular set of constraints and obligations, with various audiences in mind and different tasks at hand. Assessing the strengths and weaknesses of any social critique must therefore consider the station of the critic. This explains my approach to Baldwin's ethic of self and social criticism, one that emphasizes the practice, craft, and vocation of his writing.

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as being, which is however, and by definition, a provisional self—and the undiscoverable self which always has the power to blow the provisional self to bits."

66 James Baldwin, "Every Good-Bye Ain't Gone," 776. "Circumstances, furthermore, are complicated, simplified, and, ultimately, defined by the person's reaction to these circumstances—for no one, no matter how it may seem, simply endures his circumstances. If we are what our circumstances make us, we are, also, what we make of our circumstances. This is, perhaps, the key to history, since we are history, and since the tension of which I am speaking is so silent and so private, with effects so unforeseeable, and so public."
I aim to demonstrate how and why Baldwin speaks the truth in love throughout his essays. Or better: why Baldwin essays and tests his—as much as our—commitments in love. What might we learn from his manner of approach and where he chooses to place the emphasis? And what are we to make of those familiar themes to which he always seems to return? I want to suggest that Baldwin pursues his task from a particular place, not only in terms of time, space, and body, but also in the light of his sense of vocation. Baldwin writes and speaks to us as an artist who takes his calling to be that of a writer. My first chapter therefore begins by sketching Baldwin's sense of artistic and writerly vocation. The second moves to an analysis of the ethical and methodological commitments found in his early essays. I conclude Part I by turning to the models of love and social criticism found in *The Fire Next Time*.

Examining Baldwin's meditations on love also demands grappling with the vices that menace it: sentimentality, hatred, ignorance, innocence, illusion, safety, superiority, pride, deception, violence, and callousness—to name a few. These are the difficulties that love aims to resist and works to overcome—counterweights, we might say, to the freedom, justice, and care that human flourishing requires. These are also the threats Baldwin was forced to encounter, however imperfectly, throughout his own life. Only by working through such dangers can we glimpse the character of Baldwin's social criticism, the sense of light and life that informs it, and the sort of death and darkness that hangs over it. The criticism of self and society found in Baldwin's non-fiction essays, I argue, is guided by his concern for freedom, his commitment to truth, and the necessity of love. In all his writings and recommendations, Baldwin wants us to grow in the knowledge and
care of the selves and societies most worthy of our humanity. This is the crown he places above our heads, the gift he would have us accept, less from him than from ourselves.\textsuperscript{67}

Writing as Artistic Vocation

Taking seriously Baldwin's understanding of vocation purchases a deeper sensitivity to the motivations and aims of his social criticism. When we consider the way Baldwin tethers his artistic commitments to an ethic of careful examination and courageous, frank speech, we see a remarkable amount of continuity\textsuperscript{68} throughout his writings, not the precipitous decline that some have suggested.\textsuperscript{69} Of course, this still leaves open the question of whether one should accept Baldwin's view of what his vocation as a writer entails. My work here neither argues nor speculates about such questions; it aims only to convey a sense of how Baldwin conceived of his task. His was a general vision of self and social examination that I'm compelled to endorse. Though it isn't the only legitimate way to pursue one's vocation as a writer, it may have been the only way Baldwin could be true to himself and to the humanity of those others, like us, who would encounter the words of his witness. In this respect, Baldwin's motivations

\textsuperscript{67}In her eulogy for Baldwin, Toni Morrison writes, "'Our crown,' you said, 'has already been bought and paid for.' 'All we have to do,' you said, 'is wear it.'" See Morrison, "James Baldwin: His Voice Remembered; Life in His Language" in Toni Morrison: What Moves at the Margin, Selected Nonfiction ed. Carolyn C. Denard (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 94.

\textsuperscript{68}Consuela Francis questions why anyone would be surprised to find a shift in Baldwin's writing between the publications of Fire (1963) and No Name in the Street (1972). She grounds her case in the "prophetic tone of The Fire Next Time," and in Baldwin's "personal growing frustration with American race relations, not to mention the actual state of American race relations in 1972." See Consuela Francis, The Critical Reception of James Baldwin 1963-2010 (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2014), 112.

were only as artistic as they were moral: "Art would not be important if life were not important, and life," Baldwin affirmed, "is important."\footnote{James Baldwin, "An Interview with James Baldwin," with Studs Terkel in \textit{Conversations with James Baldwin} ed. Fred L. Standley and Louis H. Pratt (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989) , 21.}

Baldwin's first set of published essays was entitled \textit{Notes of a Native Son} (1955) and consisted of previously published works from 1948 to 1955. The title signals a blend of influences: both Henry James's \textit{Notes of a Son and Brother} (1914) and Richard Wright's \textit{Native Son} (1940) are invoked.\footnote{David Leeming, \textit{James Baldwin: A Biography} (New York: Knopf, 1994), 101.} Given Baldwin's frustration with the portrait of black humanity tendered by Wright's novel, we can read the invocation of James's autobiographically styled work as way of adding the kind of fleshly detail and complexity, those tensions within and between our inner and outer lives that Wright's protagonist—at least on Baldwin's score—lacked. In \textit{Native Son}, Baldwin charged, Wright had written a novel that failed to account for the human complexity of its own author.\footnote{James Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," 2. "...the reality of man as a social being is not his only reality and that artist is strangled who is forced to deal with human beings solely in social terms; and who has, moreover, as Wright had, the necessity thrust on him of being the representative of some thirteen million people...The unlucky shepherd soon finds that, so far from being able to feed the hungry sheep, he has lost the wherewithal for his own nourishment: having not been allowed—so fearful was his burden, so present his audience!—to create his own experience."} In many ways, Baldwin cast Wright's shortcomings as a prelude for his own bravura, the consequences of which he would later regret.\footnote{See James Baldwin, "Alas Poor Richard," 247-268.}

\textit{Notes of a Native Son} counsels against finality through its candid display of partiality and incompleteness. The writer's choice of form is itself a guide for readers. There's much more to Baldwin's story than he is able to tell, which is why he returns to the act of telling and retelling time and again. Such a device brings to mind the style of
Augustine's *Confessions*. For the vulnerability of confession is not unlike our humanity: both are unavoidably naked and wounded, yet gloriously unfinished and incomplete. Both demand a returning to and a refashioning of ourselves and our work, of the stories which capture our attention and the visions which summon our energies. This is a truth to which Baldwin would dangerously cling throughout his writings. We cannot separate the passion of his witness from the humanity of his confession. In Baldwin's eyes, "All art is a kind of confession, more or less oblique. All artists, if they are to survive, are forced, at last, to tell the whole story, to vomit the anguish up. All of it, the literal and the fanciful." 

The first thing to notice about Baldwin's approach to writing is the prominence of the autobiographical, the way his essays involve the confronting, probing, examining, and even critiquing of himself. Baldwin writes about his own self-work, his own ascesis and self-fashioning, even as our reading of his conversion(s) occasions the possibility of our own. Baldwin writes with love about love, with freedom about freedom. In doing so, he invites us to possess our higher selves as he journeys towards his own. He seeks to keep us from falling, even as he admittedly slides in and out of his own pits of despair, fatigue, and frustration. It is not difficult to appreciate the pastoral qualities in such

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75 The link between confession and humility also has roots in Augustine. See Jennifer Herdt, *Putting On Virtue: The Legacy of Splendid Vices* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008), 45-58. “It is finally only the honesty of humility that can for Augustine guarantee that virtue is not simply a cunning mask worn by superbia” (58).


77 James Baldwin, "Nothing Personal," 701. Acknowledging the difficulty of love, Baldwin writes, "...sometimes at four AM, when one feels that one has probably become simply incapable of supporting this miracle, with all one's wounds awake and throbbing, and all one's ghastly inadequacy staring and shouting from the walls and the floor—the entire universe having shrunk to the prison of the self—death
confessional practice: a caring for the souls of others, alongside a concern for one's own integrity and growth.

In his opening essay, "Autobiographical Notes," Baldwin acknowledges the difficulties of being a writer. Here he notes the challenges of coming to terms with his own reality, confessing that “the most difficult (and most rewarding) thing in my life has been the fact that I was born a Negro and was forced, therefore, to effect some kind of truce with this reality.” To be sure, Baldwin didn’t think himself particular in this regard. For him, any writer who examines his own development “finds that the things which hurt him and the things which helped him cannot be divorced from each other; he could be helped in a certain way only because he was hurt in a certain way.” Baldwin’s challenge, then, was to find a way to understand his present condition, which involved utilizing the furnishings of his historical lot, while not being entirely defined by them.

According to Baldwin, being a writer requires a commitment to “examine attitudes, to go beneath the surface, to tap the source.” But any effort to probe the attitudes of one’s society must begin with an accurate account of one’s own constitution. Examinations of this sort can be (and often are) derailed by hatred and.

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80 James Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes," 6-7. “I was an interloper; this was not my heritage. At the same time I had no other heritage which I could possibly hope to use…I would have to appropriate these white centuries, I would have to make them mine.”
81 Ibid., 7.
82 Ibid., 8. “…I would have to accept my special attitude, my special place in this scheme, otherwise I would have no place in any scheme.”
fear, primarily owing to their tendency to obscure and evade. Both have a propensity to hide and deny the truth of experience; and experience, for Baldwin, is the ground and soil of good writing.

One writes out of one thing only—one’s own experience. Everything depends on how relentlessly one forces from this experience the last drip, sweet or bitter, it can possibly give. This is the only real concern of the artist, to recreate out of the disorder of life that order which is art.

Part of what it means to be an artist, then, is to refashion experience in a way that affords order, style, and distinctiveness. Obviously there are challenges internal to such a project. But what Baldwin emphasizes are the external hazards, particularly when initiated under hostile, dominative conditions. In the same passage, he writes, "The difficulty then, for me, of being a Negro writer was the fact that I was, in effect, prohibited from examining my own experience too closely by the tremendous demands and the very real dangers of my social situation."

This social situation was the enduring legacy of white supremacy, “its history, traditions, customs, the moral assumptions and preoccupations.” This intractable condition of Baldwin’s inheritance pertained not only to him. Baldwin’s plight was also collective in the sense that “no one in America escapes its effects and everyone in American bears some responsibility for it.” In order for Baldwin to know and care for himself properly, he would have to give an account of this context. He could only access

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83 Ibid., 8. “What was the most difficult was the fact that I was forced to admit something I had always hidden from myself, which the American Negro has had to hide from himself as the price of his public progress; that I hated and feared white people. In effect, I hated and feared the world. And this meant, not only that I thus gave the world an altogether murderous power over me, but also that in such a self-destroying limbo I could never hope to write.”
84 Ibid., 8.
85 Ibid., 8.
86 Ibid., 8-9.
himself—his gifts, his talents, his possibilities—through his society. Wholesale escape was neither possible nor responsible.

Baldwin resisted any demands for his writing to aid (necessarily) in the resolution of social problems. He worried that such an approach would limit the resources of his imagination and over-determine the content of his work. Pragmatic concerns often threaten the preciousness of art, because of the tempting "necessity of looking forward, of working to bring about a better day." His writing was not to be used as a tool to quickly make superficial changes.

There's a sense in which catering to the fears of one's dominators—say, white people or corporate elites, for example—has significant political purchase. It could reap the immediate harvest of increased acceptance, greater access to power, or an amplified interest in "civil" and "safe" dialogue. But as Baldwin saw, it's far from clear how the experiences and truths elided by such pandering ultimately bodes well for a society made up of persons unable to see beyond their (individual and collective) myths, illusions, and fears. The risk lies in deepening confusion and expanding evasion or, worse, repeating the horrors—as opposed to emulating the achievements—of the past. This is why a writer's sense of history and perspective is so crucial and the prospect of hurriedly marching 'forward' so dangerous.

...social affairs are not generally speaking the writer's prime concern, whether they ought to be or not; it is absolutely necessary that he establish between himself and these affairs a distance which will allow, at least, for clarity, so that before he can look forward in any meaningful sense, he must first be allowed to take a long look back. In the context of the Negro problem neither whites nor blacks, for excellent reasons of their own, have the faintest desire to look back; but I think that the past is all that makes the present coherent, and further, that the past will remain horrible for exactly as long as we refuse to assess it honestly.

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87 Ibid., 7.
88 Writing of the dangers of patriotism, philosopher George Santayana observes, "Nothing is more treacherous than tradition, when insight and force are lacking to keep it warm." George Santayana, The Life of Reason (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1998), 164.
It is no accident that this passage precedes Baldwin's probing of his own historical inheritance, of the significance of Europe and Africa for his own identity, and of his being caught somewhere between the two as a Negro in America. Through that searching examination, Baldwin begins to fashion himself as a writer. He had no other choice than to acknowledge his own limitations and to make the most of his lot. The transformation of his reality required some measure of accepting it. For him, this required the use of the resources and traditions available to him, alongside overcoming his fear and hatred of white people. Both required acceptance. Without such a confrontation he could never hope to write with the love and criticality that he would demand of himself. Baldwin outlines his sense of that responsibility toward the end of "Autobiographical Notes" when he professes,

I love America more than any other country in the world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually. I think all theories are suspect, that the finest principles may have to be modified, or may even be pulverized by the demands of life, and that one must find, therefore, one's own moral center and move through the world hoping that this center will guide one aright.  

And, in the following sentence, Baldwin concludes the essay not merely with a word on vocation, but also with a remark on his devotion to it: "I consider that I have many responsibilities, but none greater than this: to last, as Hemingway says, and get my work done. I want to be an honest man and a good writer." The demands of Baldwin's own life and those exacted by his country would shift throughout his life and career. I would argue that his unswerving commitment to face the truth about himself and his society informs the stridency of his later work. His was a courageous examination of the

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90 Ibid., 9.
91 Ibid., 9.
beautiful and the terrible, of our life-stained grounds for hope and despair. The virtue of his work rests in its debt to experience—in all its glorious and inexhaustible complexity. So it is one thing to say that later works like No Name In The Street call to mind the unseemly dimensions of life, but quite another to suggest those essays unravel altogether. I'm in favor of the former, but not the latter.

This is why I think Baldwin's essays are more intelligible when situated within the context of what he took to be his duties as a writer. Most of our encounters with life are neither as seamless nor as smooth as we would like them to be. As philosopher Thomas Hobbes famously observed, life amongst rivals can be "nasty, brutish and short." And, in ways we prefer to overlook, our private lives can also ache with terror, dread, and dismay. Baldwin "recognized something that people in this country have a great deal of trouble recognizing: that life is very difficult, very difficult for anybody, anybody born." This sensitivity to the demands of our living directly informs Baldwin's sense of vocation. "The price one pays for pursuing any profession, or calling," he would write years later, "is an intimate knowledge of its ugly side."

But Baldwin does not leave us with ugliness alone. He senses the potential that hides in unseemly places, whether in muddy potholes, urine stained halls or dust-coated corners. That grime could gather as quickly in neglected social space as in the

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92 For a similar reading that accents Baldwin's grappling with loss, see Eddie Glaude, In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 11-16.
unexamined private life was a danger not lost on Baldwin nor his protagonist, John Grimes, in the largely autobiographical Go Tell It on the Mountain (1953). Thus, Baldwin took as his challenge the task of probing beneath surfaces, not merely for the terrors that appearances can hide, but for their capacities to surprise.

To understand the development of Baldwin's capacities of discernment is also to understand his spiritual journey. But grasping this lesson requires an appreciation of Baldwin's spiritual father, the artist and man who taught him to see the sublime in the ordinary and to search for the presence of light amid darkness. This was Beauford Delaney.

In Baldwin's introduction to The Price of the Ticket (1983), he describes the beginning of his writing career as coinciding with his meeting of the man he affectionately called, Beauford. It wasn't that Beauford ever lectured young Jimmy. It was more, as Baldwin later recalled, that "he expected me to accept and respect the value placed upon me." Although Beauford's personal triumph initially compelled Baldwin, his personal touch would help sustain him over the years. The sheer fact that Beauford

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98 See James Baldwin, Go Tell It On the Mountain in Early Novels and Stories ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 1-216. A particularly vivid scene emerges in "Part One: The Seventh Day," where John Grimes finds himself sweeping a dirty carpet, in a scene that references the plight of Sisyphus, whose ineffectual (and interminable) labor was hopelessly doomed to futility (24). Baldwin's description of the filth that seemed to inhabit every crevice of John's living environment is also moving (19).

99 I'm merely highlighting one significant aspect of Baldwin's spiritual journey. There are others worth noting, but my choices have been dictated by my topic (love and vocation) and those sources Baldwin takes care to mention in his non-fiction essays. Biographer David Leeming has suggested the influence of Baldwin's mother, Berdis Baldwin, as a model of love and a spiritual guide. But that influence, Leeming notes, most readily appears in Baldwin's letters (which have yet to be made public). David Leeming, James Baldwin: A Biography (New York: Knopf, 1994), 10-11

100 Beauford Delaney (1901-79) was a black 20th century painter deeply influenced by the works of Henri Matisse. He was one of the great expressionist painters of his period, though not fully appreciated during his life. His challenges as a generous and prodigious, yet wounded and deeply troubled artist are well known. For an intimate portrait of his life, see David Leeming, Amazing Grace: A Life of Beauford Delaney (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

had managed to forge a life as an artist amid unfavorable circumstances made Jimmy's own journey less improbable.\textsuperscript{102} Not only would Beauford be the embodiment of such vigor, he would also work to ensure that Jimmy understood himself to be a part of that inheritance. He would invite Baldwin to share in his excellence and to partake of the sources of nourishment that sustained him.

Beauford was the first walking, living proof, for me, that a black man could be an artist. In a warmer time, a less blasphemous place, he would have been recognized as my Master and I as his Pupil. He became, for me, an example of courage and integrity, humility and passion. An absolute integrity: I saw him shaken many times and I lived to see him broken but I never saw him bow.\textsuperscript{103}

When recalling his first meeting with Beauford as a teenager, Jimmy remembered the discerning glance of a "short, round brown man" who possessed the "most extraordinary eyes I'd ever seen." For Baldwin, the intensity of his gaze seemed like an "instant X-ray of my brain, lungs, liver, heart, bowels, and spinal cord." In the years to come, Baldwin would grow to understand that intensity as the fruit of love, of Beauford's impassioned way of being in the world. Through Beauford's tutelage, Baldwin came to appreciate the significance of color and music, of sight and sound. Beauford was a gift from above, a spiritual presence and celestial force whose manner of being brought to mind the old song: \textit{Lord, open the unusual door}. Stepping into Beauford's home at the age of fifteen was a religious-like experience for Baldwin. "He opened the door alright," Baldwin writes of Delaney. And "I walked through that door into Beauford's colors—on

\textsuperscript{102} Baldwin, "On the Painter Beauford Delaney," 720. "But the darkness of Beauford's beginnings, in Tennessee, many years ago, was a black-blue midnight indeed, opaque, and full of sorrow. And I do not know, nor will any of us ever really know, what kind of strength it was that enabled him to make so dogged and splendid a journey."

\textsuperscript{103} James Baldwin, "Introduction: The Price of the Ticket," 832.
the easel, on the palette, against the wall—sometimes turned to the wall—and sometimes (in limbo?) covered by white sheets.”

Baldwin would also come to appreciate music in fresh ways. Here again, his choice of language conveys a sense of journeying into another world, as well as the image of being immersed in it. "I walked into music," wrote Baldwin. "I had grown up with music, but, now, on Beauford's small black record player, I began to hear what I had never dared or been able to hear." In his company, Baldwin recalls,

I really began to hear Ella Fitzgerald, Ma Rainey, Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters, Paul Robeson, Lena Horne, Fats Waller. He could inform me about Duke Ellington and W.C. Handy, and Josh White, introduce me to Frankie Newton and tell tall tales about Ethel Waters. And these people were not meant to be looked on by me as celebrities, but as a part of Beauford's life and as a part of my inheritance.

Beauford also taught Baldwin how to relate to the wider spheres of life and darkness from which his paintings sprang. "Perhaps," Baldwin wonders, "I am so struck by the light in Beauford's paintings because he comes from darkness—as I do, as, in fact, we all do." This heightened awareness would extend beyond the world of black performers and artists and into the everyday offerings of nature and the casual routines of ordinary folk. But Baldwin couldn't actually see the character of Beauford's paintings until he learned how to relate these worlds of experience. Beauford was his discerning guide and the "reality of his seeing," Baldwin says, "caused me to begin to see."

Now, what I began to see was not, at that time, to tell the truth his painting; that came later; what I saw, first of all, was a brown leaf on black asphalt, oil moving like mercury in the black water of the gutter, grass pushing itself up through a crevice in the sidewalk. The brown leaf on the black asphalt, for example—what colours were these, really? To stare at

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104 Ibid., 830
105 Ibid., 831.
107 Ibid., 720.
the leaf long enough, to try to apprehend the leaf, was to discover many
colours in it; and though black had been described to me as the absence of
light, it became very clear to me that if this were true, we would never
have been able to see the colour; black: the light is trapped in it and
struggles upward, rather like that grass pushing upward through the
cement. It was humbling to be forced to realise that the light fell down
from heaven, everything, on everybody, and that the light was always
changing.\footnote{Ibid., 721.}

The rolling variations within our ordinary encounters, and the sea of revelations
they contain, this is what Beauford helped Baldwin to sense. Emerson had already
claimed, "The coming only is sacred."\footnote{Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Circles" in \textit{Collected Essays} (New York: Library of America, 1983), 413. All
references to Emerson's essays are taken from this collection, unless otherwise noted.}
In Baldwin's words, we likewise find that "the
sunset one saw yesterday, the leaf that burned, or the rain that fell, have not really been
seen unless one is prepared to see them every day."\footnote{James Baldwin, "On the Painter Beauford Delaney," 720.}
Beauford taught Baldwin to
remain awake and to sense the presence of "light." This was the hope that Beauford
bequethed Baldwin in a way that empowered him to make it his own. Yet, for Baldwin,
all of those offerings depended on whether or not a person could face reality, on whether
he \textit{himself} could take the long, discerning look. That's what Beauford's lessons in artistic
discernment did for Baldwin: they brought him closer to reality. And I venture to suggest
it's what Baldwin would've hoped his work to have accomplished for us. Of Baldwin's
aesthetic and ethical effort to cast light and channel love, I find it apt to quote what he
said of Beauford.

Well, that life, that light, that miracle, are what I began to see in Beauford's
paintings, and this light began to stretch back for me over all the time we
had known each other, and over much more than that, and this light held
the power to illuminate, even to redeem and reconcile and heal. For
Beauford's work leads the inner and the outer eye, directly and inexorably,
to a new confrontation with reality. At this moment one begins to
apprehend the nature of his triumph. And the beauty of his triumph, and
the proof that it is a real one, is that he makes it ours. Perhaps I should not say, flatly, what I believe—that he is a great painter, among the very greatest; but I do know that great art can only be created out of love, and that no greater lover has ever held a brush.\textsuperscript{111}

Nearly twenty years after first meeting Beauford, Baldwin wrote an essay published in the Partisan Review, "What It Means To Be An American" (1959), which was also included in the collection, \textit{Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son} (1961). Here again, Baldwin writes of the challenges he endured in his effort to become a writer. He recalls being "carried off to the mountains of Switzerland" after enduring a kind of psychic collapse, owing to "the discovery," as Baldwin put it, "that his props have all been knocked out from under him." In order to finish his first novel, \textit{Go Tell It on the Mountain}, Baldwin writes of having to "accept his role" in order to be "released from the illusion that [he] hated America."\textsuperscript{112} In the company of "two Bessie Smith records" he sat alone at his typewriter in the Bernese Alps, listening for the forgotten beat of his childhood language, and struggling, as it were, to craft the prose that would tell of his own experience.\textsuperscript{113} It was there that Baldwin came to see and hear what Beauford and his contemporaries had been telling him all along:

\begin{quotation}
Not only was I not born to be a slave: I was not born to hope to become the equal of the slave-master. They had, the masters, incontestably, the rope—in time, with enough, they would hang themselves with it. They were not to hang me: I was to see to that. If Beauford and Miss Anderson were a part of my inheritance, I was a part of their hope.\textsuperscript{114}
\end{quotation}

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 721.
\textsuperscript{112} James Baldwin, "What It Means To Be An American," 137-8.
\textsuperscript{113} For an exploration of the significance of this moment and the importance of listening to the blues, see Josh Kun, "Life According to the Beat: James Baldwin, Bessie Smith, and the Perilous Sounds of Love," in \textit{James Baldwin Now} ed. Dwight A. McBride (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 307-330. For a wider examination of the political, ethical, and feminist insights of blues women's singers, including Bessie Smith, see Angela Davis, \textit{Blues Legacies and Black Feminism} (New York: Vintage, 1999), especially pp. 91-119.
\textsuperscript{114} James Baldwin, "Introduction: The Price of the Ticket," 831.
Baldwin's inheritance was complicated and mixed, informed as much by Bessie Smith as by Henry James. Similar to the way Baldwin began *Notes of a Native Son*, with an emphasis on his formation and goals as a writer, so does Baldwin also begin his second set of collected essays, *Nobody Knows My Name*. Like *Notes*, the prominence of the autobiographical and the inexhaustibility of experience are readily on display. "These essays are a very small part of a private logbook," Baldwin writes in his introduction to *Nobody Knows My Name*. In doing so, we are led to believe that his writings will be an incomplete telling and, again, self-consciously so.

But incompleteness, for Baldwin, marks neither dishonesty, nor evasion, nor cowardice. Partiality isn't where he locates the vices and difficulties that threaten his work. When Baldwin writes of his growing into maturity, he points to the fear of being "divested of a crutch," of menacing social controls that "had become interior," and of the futility of safe "havens." One of those havens, Baldwin recognized, could be certain comforts associated with one's color or race (really, any ossified form of identity). "The question of color," Baldwin observes in the introduction, "operates to hide the graver questions of self." Even after his self-imposed exile in Europe, Baldwin confesses, "It turned out that the question of who I was was not solved because I had removed myself from the social forces" at work in America. "The question of who I was had at last become a personal question, and the answer was to be found in me." With his own vocation in mind, and an intimate awareness of how most folks prefer the numbing comforts of delusion, Baldwin sounds a resolutely Socratic note:

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116 Ibid., 135-136.
117 Ibid., 136.
118 Ibid., 135.
But I still believe that unexamined life is not worth living: and I know that self-delusion, in the service of no matter what small or lofty cause, is a price no writer can afford. His subject is himself and the world and it requires every ounce of stamina he can summon to attempt to look on himself and the word as they are.\(^{119}\)

The difficulty of this Socratic challenge was not lost on Baldwin. When he writes of the crumbling of his firmly established convictions, and the necessity of "the writer to reconsider many things he had always taken for granted," Baldwin admits that, "this reassessment, which can be very painful, is also very valuable."\(^{120}\) The achievement of growth, whether spiritual, ethical, or epistemic, is not to be separated from the uprooting that attends excavation. This holds for personal and public spheres alike. It is not surprising, then, to find Baldwin extending this critical self examination to a searching critique of America.

The time has come, God knows for us to examine ourselves, but we can only do this if we are willing to free ourselves of the myth of America and try to find out what is really happening here. Every society is really governed by hidden laws, by unspoken but profound assumptions on the part of the people, and ours is no exception. It is up to the American writer to find out what these laws and assumptions are.\(^{121}\)

Probing the details of those assumptions demands a careful blend of the tragic and hopeful: "Europe has what we do not have yet, a sense of the mysterious and inexorable limits of life, a sense, in a word, of tragedy. And we have what they sorely need: a sense of life's possibilities." In this endeavor, Baldwin thinks he is uniquely positioned "to wed the vision of the Old World with that of the New," for "it is the writer, not the statesman, who is our strongest arm."\(^{122}\) Notice how Baldwin situates this calling to 'wed' and 'write' within an effort to know and care for his own soul. He doesn't think it's possible to see

\(^{119}\) Ibid., 135-136.
\(^{120}\) James Baldwin, "The Discovery of What It Means To Be an American," 140.
\(^{121}\) James Baldwin, "The Discovery of What It Means To Be an American," 142.
\(^{122}\) Ibid., 142.
clearly into the flaws and contradictions of another without also taking one's own inward journey.\(^{123}\)

In this way, Baldwin's ethic of social criticism is always tied to a critical approximation of oneself. He recognizes the fluidity and co-constitution of our inner and external lives, of our immaterial and material worlds: "Though we do not wholly believe it yet," Baldwin writes, "the interior life is a real life, and the intangible dreams of people have a tangible effect on the world."\(^{124}\) The object of Baldwin's criticism, then, isn't merely limited to the realities we'd rather not face, it vitally concerns the possibilities we've yet to imagine. Our vision of the world, Emerson maintained, "is also a confession of our character."\(^{125}\) This intimate link between vision and character was one Baldwin would long attribute to Beauford.\(^{126}\) Our ways of looking, longing, and loving say quite a bit about who we are. To criticize the ideals of one's society, alongside its oversights and deficiencies, is always to examine one's own constitution. As if to provide his readers an interpretive key for the essays to come, Baldwin ends his introduction to *Nobody* with the following:

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123 Baldwin puts the question of his exile this way: "But the question which confronted me, nibbled at me in my stony Corscian exile was: Am I afraid of returning to America? Or am I afraid of journeying any further with myself?" See Baldwin, "Introduction: Nobody's Knows My Name," 136.

124 James Baldwin, "The Discovery of What It Means To Be an American," 142.

125 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Worship," 1067. The larger context of this quote speaks to vision and sensitivity. "A man cannot utter two or three sentences, without disclosing to intelligent ears precisely where he stands in life and thought, namely, whether in the kingdom of the senses and the understanding, or, in that of ideas and imagination, in the realm of intuitions and duty. People seem not to see that their opinion of the world is also a confession of character. We can only see what we are, and if we misbehave we suspect others."

126 In his chapter on Delaney's influence on young Baldwin, biographer David Leeming describes it as "a lesson in complex vision that would remain with James Baldwin the writer. Forty-three years later Baldwin, pacing one afternoon up and down in his workroom, talked about the deeper meaning of Beauford's lesson. It was not only a question of careful observation, he said; it had to do with a willingness to face ugliness in order to find what the artist has to find. And it had to do with the fact that finding the truth often involves confronting one's own fears. And finally, it had to do with the fact that what one can and cannot see 'says something about you.'" In David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1994), 34.
The questions which one asks oneself begin, at last, to illuminate the world, and become one's key to the experience of others. On this confrontation depends the measure of our wisdom and compassion. This energy is all that one finds in the rubble of vanished civilizations, and the only hope for ours.  

I view these three sentences as a touchstone for Baldwin's entire corpus, not merely the essays in *Nobody Knows My Name*. As I've tried to demonstrate in the previous section, that sense of vocation had much to do with a particular way of confronting reality, as artistically, courageously, carefully, and as lovingly as possible. Baldwin's quest as a writer demands an alertness of mind and a largeness of heart. It also calls for sensitive listening and broadness of vision (given his emphasis on the blues and light), as well as some measure of personal and social agility (given his emphasis on traveling). Baldwin invites us to participate in life vitally embodied and fully incarnate, from the crown of our heads to the soles of our feet.

When asked to describe how he thought of himself, Baldwin once replied: "I'm a witness. That's my responsibility. I write it all down." And when further pressed to distinguish between a witness and an observer, he retorted, "An observer has no passion."

To be an observer is just to say that one saw what happened, but to witness "means that I was there. I don't have to observe the life and death of Martin Luther King," Baldwin

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128 The way Baldwin explains his writing of the passage, "All art is a kind of confession" (See Footnote 11), is instructive. In a 1961 interview, he says: "Art has to be a kind of confession...The effort, it seems to me, is: if you can examine and face your life, you can discover the terms with which you are connected to other lives, and they can discover, too, the terms with which they are connected to other people." In James Baldwin, "An Interview with James Baldwin," with Studs Terkel in *Conversations with James Baldwin*, 21. A similar claim about artistic confession as a gateway to connecting is found in "The Discovery of What It Means To Be an American," 137. Writing of the necessity of leaving America, Baldwin notes, "I wanted to prevent myself from becoming merely a Negro; or even, merely a Negro writer. I wanted to find out in what way the specialness of my experience could be made to connect me with other people instead of dividing me from them. (I was as isolated from Negroes as I was from whites, which is what happens when a Negro begins, at bottom, to believe what white people say about him."
affirmed, "I am a witness to it." So when Baldwin ends his essays in *Nobody* with counsel borrowed from the wisdom literature of his childhood church, "Where there is no vision, the people perish," I think it's safe to say that he means more than just good observation. In the final years of his life, Baldwin would describe himself as a "Witness to whence I came, where I am," as a "Witness to what I've seen and the possibilities that I think I see." The vision of that witness will be explored in the next chapter.

There I give attention to the obstacles that Baldwin conceives as threatening our witness of life and love, those tendencies that frustrate our attempts to embrace the truth of our human condition. Baldwin's concern for these issues – and his sense of how to respond to them – informs the care he takes to avoid identifying too heavily with any social or religious identity. When prompted in a 1970 interview to say whether he was Christian or Muslim, Baldwin simply insisted, "I'm trying to become a human being... You work at it, you know. You take it as it comes. You try not to tell too many lies. You try to love other people and hope that you'll be loved."

Baldwin's ethic of becoming and loving in the name and for the sake of one's humanity functions as his 'moral center', one that helps to ground and 'guide him aright'. Baldwin's early essays, those contained in *Notes of a Native Son* and *Nobody Knows My Name*, provide the conceptual grounds to which his later criticisms return, revise and,

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130 James Baldwin, "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy," 285; and also, Proverbs 29:18 (KJV): "Where there is no vision, the people perish: but he that keepeth the law, happy is he."
132 James Baldwin, "Are We on the Edge of Civil War?" with David Frost in *Conversations with James Baldwin*, 93.
ultimately, extend. By introducing some of those ideas now, my hope is to convey more accurately what Baldwin takes his works of love and social criticism to be resisting and affirming in other collections.
The themes and details of *The Fire Next Time* (1963) offer insight into Baldwin's commitments and loves. But I don't think we can fully appreciate the content of Baldwin's references to love, truth, and freedom in those essays without getting a sense of his prior concerns. Assumptions about the nature of our humanity, our propensity to avoid self and social examination, our preference for safety and sentimentality, the ubiquity of myth, illusion, and fear, and a concern for the evils that lie within and without, these are some of Baldwin's procedural anxieties and they direct the choices he makes while enacting his versions of love and social criticism in *The Fire Next Time*. I say versions, because the two essays which constitute *Fire* are related, but distinct pieces. In the course of examining Baldwin's priorities, it will help to begin with the menaces which command his attention and call for our subsequent response.

At the outset, I want to note that my deployment of Baldwin doesn't depend on whether his reading of Harriet Beecher Stowe or Richard Wright is "correct," in the sense of fulfilling certain standards of hermeneutical or literary excellence. My position rests on whether those tendencies he ascribes to Stowe, Wright, and others are tendencies that we can recognize amongst ourselves and our peers—on whether, for example, the indulgence of sentimentality is something to be worried about.

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Granting, as I think we should, that Baldwin's interpretations likely contain some errors, one could reply that I can't dismiss Baldwin's inaccuracies so easily, because they call into question his acuity as a social critic. Baldwin, after all, is criticizing Stowe in public and needs to be held accountable for his oversights, especially if they can be proven to be borne of his own failure to be charitable. I concede that Baldwin's execution of his own ideals of love and social criticism are, at times, less than ideal. I even grant that he gets quite a bit wrong in some instances. Two prominent examples would be his reply to Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* and parts of his conversation, "A Revolutionary Hope," with critic and poet, Audre Lorde.\(^{134}\)

Nevertheless, the vision Baldwin affords is still exemplary, even if he himself isn't able to fully embody it, and even if the vision itself calls for revision. I take this to be a part of his enduring significance. Baldwin's theories are human and fallible; his life and application of them, even more so. This is why he admits that "all theories are suspect, that even the finest principles may have to be modified."\(^{135}\) So I maintain that there's much to be learned from the questions Baldwin raises and the criticisms he levels, largely because he's aware of just how fallible he is. I drew attention to this in chapter 1, through my emphasis on the improvisational style of Baldwin's early essays, their note-like form. I return again to similar themes at the beginning of chapter 3.

In the interim, I want to suggest that the elasticity of Baldwin's writing permits the working out of visions yet to be imagined, and that it also allows his moral thought to be flexible enough to meet the requirements of shifting needs. What Baldwin does take care to detail are the challenges that frustrate our efforts to lead wholesome lives in


communities rife with injustice—political, epistemic, and otherwise. Thus, the bulk of this chapter focuses on obstacles to love and human flourishing, as opposed to an idealized account of what loving and flourishing might entail. I think this informs Baldwin's reluctance to define any human telos or consummate end. Similar ideas can be found in his reflections on political philosophy.  

136 With such caveats in mind, I proceed with my engagement of Notes of a Native Son and Nobody Knows My Name.

In an early essay, "Everybody's Protest Novel (1949),“ Baldwin takes issue with protest novels or, to be more precise, books he classifies under the heading. In particular, Baldwin takes aim at Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin. He thinks the account of humanity presented there is deeply deficient. Baldwin charges Stowe with merely aiming "to prove that slavery was wrong," that it "was, in fact, perfectly horrible" (EPN, 12). As Baldwin sees it, Stowe takes honor in a willingness to "flinch from nothing in presenting the complete picture" (EPN, 12). But the reality she depicts, at least from his perspective, doesn't deal with what "moved her people to such deeds." It offers only an "unmotivated, senseless" account of brutality, which is all that Stowe's character, Miss Ophelia, requires to level her judgment against slavery: "This is perfectly horrible!...You ought to be ashamed of yourselves!" (EPN, 11). So the first thing that afflicts Uncle Tom's Cabin as work of art, for Baldwin, is its tawdriness of purpose, its

136 When asked, for example, to define the terms of his political philosophy, Baldwin replied: "I don't have any coherent political ideology—nothing very doctrinaire. I know more clearly what I'm against than I can state what I'm for." He continues, "I don't think one can expect most people to have a political philosophy as such. There is something in me which mistrusts that level of political indoctrination. People in some senses know better than their leaders what they need. The danger of trying to indoctrinate a population is that you cease to listen to them. The lines have to be kept open so that you can be able to hear what the junkie has to say. He may not have a political philosophy but a great deal of political wisdom. The whole point is to address yourself to the needs of the people. Any political philosophy should be open-ended—which is always evolving. The situation demands that." See James Baldwin, "Exclusive Interview with James Baldwin," with Joe Walker (1972) in Conversation with James Baldwin, 139.

myopic aim. It's closer to an "impassioned pamphleteer," than a novel. It aims to be moral even at the expense of being fully human (EPN, 12). And insofar as this is the case, the novel disfigures the very life it professes to preserve. Recall that if works of art possess any value, for Baldwin, they matter precisely because and only to the extent that life matters. In Baldwin's eyes, Stowe fails in her responsibility as a novelist:

It is this power of revelation which is the business of the novelist, this journey toward a more vast reality which must take precedence over all other claims. What is today parroted as his Responsibility—which seems to mean that he must make formal declaration that he is involved in, and affected by, the lives of other people and to say something improving about this somewhat self-evident fact—is, when he believes it, his corruption and our loss; moreover, it is rooted in, interlocked with and intensifies this same mechanization. (EPN, 13)

For Baldwin, novelists often misconstrue reality because of a failure to approach and tend toward 'a more vast reality'. Such writers merely become parrots of what others uncritically take to be the case, of what others blindly treat as given. Their waning sense of responsibility soon devolves into maintaining, even intensifying the 'mechanization' already in place, the status quo. Hence, "the 'protest' novel, so far from being disturbing, is an accepted and comforting aspect of the American scene, ramifying that framework we believe to be so necessary" (EPN, 15). But Stowe's shortcoming, her failure to fully journey into the fleshly details—the humanity—of her characters isn't merely limited to novelists.138 Her failing is also our own: "the only question left to ask," Baldwin says, "is

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138 Baldwin doesn't think that our ethical/vocational requirements are evenly distributed, but he still maintains that ordinary folk must also confront their realities, which are, as he says, 'quite enough...to bear.' See James Baldwin, "Mass Culture and the Creative Artist: Some Personal Notes," *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings* ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Vintage International, 2011), 4. "There is a division of labor in the world—as I see it—and the people have quite enough reality to bear, simply getting through their lives, raising their children, dealing with the eternal conundrums of birth, taxes, and death. They do not do this with all the wisdom, foresight, or charity one might wish; nevertheless, this is what they are always doing and it is what the writer is always describing." Baldwin goes on to affirm that, "We cannot possibly expect, and should not desire, that the great bulk of the populace embark on a mental
why we are bound still within the same constriction. How is it that we are so loath to make a further journey than that made by Mrs. Stowe, to discover and reveal something a little closer to the truth?" (EPN, 12). Thus, we might say that the problems to which Baldwin devotes attention concern those impediments to our encountering truth, while his chosen methods offer ways to embrace those details more wholesomely.

Sentimentality is one such menace. It opens the way for self-righteousness, owing to a sense of one's emotively centered, hard-won achievement. Furnishing the semblance of true feeling, it opposes genuine intimacy, knowledge, and love. And it involves a looking away from reality, not a full encounter with it. Sentimentality is an unhelpful evasion that wears the mask of virtue. As Baldwin puts it,

Sentimentality, the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion, is the mark of dishonesty, the inability to feel; the wet eyes of the sentimentalist betray his aversion to experience, his fear of life, his arid heart; and it is always, therefore, the signal of secretive and violent inhumanity. (EPN, 12)
Sentimentality not only threatens the way an artist goes about pursuing her work, it corrupts the vision toward which such work aspires. Such artificiality (and insincerity) corrodes the methods, goals, and raw materials of one's work, tainting its character. Beyond this, sentimentality poses trouble for the person who embraces such objects (in this case, protest novels) under the illusion that the encounter itself testifies to one's own willingness to confront reality, to one's own excellence. Instead of spurring self and social examination, "Whatever unsettling questions are raised are evanescent, titillating; remote, for this has nothing to do with us, it is safely ensconced in the social arena...so that finally," for Baldwin, "we receive a very definite thrill of virtue from the fact that we are reading such a book at all. This report from the pit reassures us of its reality and its darkness and of our own salvation" (EPN, 15). Here sentimentality makes for a shirking of Socratic responsibility. The security purchased by this sentiment ensures that any 'unsettling questions' are resolved in advance. Here, a subtle, even unconscious evasion has been bought at the expense of one's own humanity, one's higher self. So the sentimentality Baldwin critiques in "Everybody's Protest Novel," and the love that Baldwin recommends in The Fire Next Time, are two vastly different ways of being: the latter embraces our humanity, the former evades it.

Fear also troubles our efforts to embrace truth and, like hatred, also serves as an obstacle to freedom. Baldwin locates fear in a "medieval morality" which divides reality in terms of heaven and hell. On his reading, "the virtuous rage," of Stowe is driven "by a panic of being hurled into the flames, of being caught in traffic with the devil" (EPN, 14). Fear corrupts the heart, making for woefully misguided expressions of care and concern.

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142 Regarding Stowe's novel, Baldwin recalls someone claiming that, "As long as such books are being published...everything will be alright" (EPN, 15-16).
malice and cruelty. Yet Baldwin's Stowe "embraced this merciless doctrine with all her heart, bargaining shamelessly before the throne of grace: God and salvation becoming her personal property, purchased with the coin of her virtue" (EPN, 14). Here is an outward form of saintliness which only conceals the barrenness of a selfish heart. On Baldwin's reading, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is really about Stowe's own deliverance. It gropes to be released from the "theological terror of damnation," which is precisely what energizes her panic. Fear of darkness, and the need to be released from possible damnation, can grow to possess our inner and outer terrains—our hearts and societies.

Here, black equates with evil and white with grace; if, being mindful of the necessity of good works, she could not cast out the blacks...she could not embrace them either without purifying them of sin. She must cover their intimidating nakedness, robe them in white, the garments of salvation; only thus could she herself be delivered from ever-present sin, only thus could she bury, as St. Paul demanded, "the carnal man, the man of the flesh." Tom, therefore, her only black man, has been robbed of his humanity and divested of his sex. It is the price for that darkness with which he has been branded. (EPN, 14)

By quickly and easily dividing the world into darkness and light, good and evil, the terms of conversion, salvation, freedom, hope and love (really, any terms of value) are predetermined and set into motion. What results is an ethic of cleansing and purification, which always concerns that which is 'other', some contravening 'flesh' which needs to be mortified. Not only can writers like Stowe be overtaken with this ideology, Baldwin also thinks this mood can come to inhabit the lives of the dominated as well. "Thus, the African, exile, pagan, hurried off the auction block and into the fields, fell on his knees before that God in Whom he must now believe; who had made him, but not in His image. This tableau, this impossibility, is the heritage of the Negro in
America: Wash me, cried the slave to his Maker, and I shall be whiter, whiter than snow!

For black is the color of evil; only the robes of the saved are white" (EPN, 17).

But this is too simplistic a view: it narrows the scope of our hope and distracts us from the task, the responsibility, of making and remaking ourselves and our world. Hope doesn't reside in purity, since darkness and light can hardly be separated—whether speaking of blacks and whites, evil and good, or terror and beauty. The boundary of one usually marks the beginning of the other. Since human beings find themselves caught in the midst of variegated forces, boundaries are often difficult to demarcate. For Baldwin, "This panic motivates our cruelty, this fear of the dark makes it impossible that our lives shall be other than superficial; this, interlocked with and feeding our glittering, mechanical, inescapable civilization which has put to death our freedom" (EPN, 15).

Another challenge involves what Baldwin calls our "passion for categorization," also a form of disordered love. It is way of ranking, conceiving, and judging that maims human personality, violating the integrity of persons. Invoking language that reminds of Max Weber, Baldwin claims that "We have...in this most mechanical and interlocking of civilizations, attempted to lop this creature down to the status of a time-saving invention. He is not, after all, merely a member of a Society or Group or deplorable conundrum to be explained by Science" (EPN, 12-13). Human beings are much more than the terms that have been set for them. Humanity outpaces social facts and statistical measure. The vastness of our condition exceeds any single description or category – social, quantitative, or otherwise. For Baldwin,

...literature and sociology are not one and the same; it is impossible to discuss them as if they were. Our passion for categorization, life neatly fitted into pegs, has led to an unforeseen, paradoxical distress; confusion, a breakdown of meaning. Those categories which were meant to define and
control the world for us have boomeranged us into chaos; in which limbo we whirl, clutching the straws of our definitions. (EPN, 15)

When appropriately deployed, categories properly limit and mark off boundaries – which is, as a matter of course, necessary to get along in the world with any measure of efficiency and clarity. And yet the exploitation of this general necessity has often been a means through which domination has been perpetuated. On the one hand, there's been a tendency to propose and create a bleached, yet color-blind society composed of "neatly analyzed, hard-working ciphers." Such an imagined utopia crests with the assigning of "all Americans to the compulsive, bloodless dimensions of a guy named Joe." On the other hand, there's been the sort of categorization that serves to deepen and extend practices of racial confinement and domination. Here the focus is less on erasure than on subjection. White American society, Baldwin writes, "has the force and the weapons to translate its dictum into fact, so that the allegedly inferior are actually made so, insofar as the societal realities are concerned" (EPN, 16). Terms that evacuate particularity and champion conformity, and those that marshal and pick out identifiable characteristics for the purposes of subjugation, both pose problems for Baldwin. In many ways, the threats posed by misguided practices of naming and conceiving are unavoidable. They spring from our being the historical creatures we are – from our being thrown into material and

conceptual cultures. Our initial inheritance of norms and practices, of myths and legends, has everything to do with the choices we make and the history we create (EPN, 16).

Baldwin's awareness of the inescapable dimensions of this struggle deserves emphasis. It informs his insistence on the value of acceptance, as opposed to avoidance or denial. History isn't merely something to be wished or hoped away. We must accept in our position in the world before attempting to work for the renewal and transformation of our lot: "Not everything that is faced can be changed," Baldwin laments, "but nothing can be changed until it is faced." So any attempt to begin elsewhere, to skirt around the limitations—the material possibilities—of our historicity is doomed. Sentimentality, fear, and perverse forms of categorization menace our creative task in their refusal to embrace it. They are varieties of superficiality and strategies of evasion. They harm the freedoms we might otherwise possess and dehumanize our encounters with others: in effect, smothering the work we might do, individually and collectively. In evading the humanity which presently calls for our response, they avoid the discomforting reality that planting and burial can never be separated. The vitality of hope and the terrors of the grave both constitute our lot. Thus, when Baldwin writes of the necessity of accepting and confronting truth, he specifies his commitments this way:

...truth, as used here, is meant to imply a devotion to the human being, his freedom and fulfillment; freedom which cannot be legislated, fulfillment which cannot be charted. This is the prime concern, the frame of reference; it is not to be confused with a devotion to Humanity which is too easily equated with a devotion to a Cause; and Causes, as we know, are notoriously bloodthirsty. (EPN, 12)

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According to this passage, we should be suspicious of readymade labels and fixed destinations. They constrain human vitality and agential power, in effect over-determining our courses of action and imagination. Against their encroachment, Baldwin seeks to preserve a sense of the transformative powers within our humanity. To be human is to be more than one's affiliation, group, race, region, or group. To be human is to be "something more than that, something resolutely indefinable, unpredictable." For Baldwin, "In overlooking, denying, evading his complexity—which is nothing more than the disquieting complexity of ourselves—we are diminished and we perish; only with this web of ambiguity, paradox, this hunger, danger, darkness, can we find at once ourselves and the power that will free us from ourselves" (EPN, 13). Our desire to avoid these realities is bound up with the way human societies even come to take shape. For Baldwin, human societies are fastened together with what we imagine as safeguards. Yet those very features turn out to be menaces to our own practices of freedom and care: "Society is held together by our need; we bind it together with legend, myth, coercion, fearing that without it we will be hurled into that void...From this void—ourselves—it is the function of society to protect us..." In our failures to know ourselves more fully, we miss out on a host of opportunities for renewal and transformation: "but it is only this void," Baldwin writes, "our unknown selves, demanding, forever, a new act of creation, which can save us— 'from the evil that is in the world'" (EPN, 17).

Human salvation—which is the working out of such a vision—is bound up with our capacities of knowledge, freedom, and care. All of which, for their influence, depend on the ways we probe, preserve, and pursue those values: in essence, our practices of freedom and love. This has as much to do with our relationship to others, as how we
relate to ourselves; as much to do with the content of our values, as the nature of the visions we project. As Baldwin is careful to point out, strategies of denial and avoidance ensnare the dominated and their dominators alike. "It must be remembered that the oppressed and the oppressor are bound together within the same society; they accept the same criteria, they share the same beliefs, they both alike depend on the same reality. Within this cage it is romantic, more, meaningless, to speak of a 'new' society as the desire of the oppressed, for that shivering dependence on the props of reality which he shares with the Herrenvolk makes a truly 'new' society impossible to conceive."145 It is a mistake to think that we can ever wash off the markings of our society, our dependency, our constitution. Our challenge involves working with these materials in ways that conduce to the most suitable ends of our humanity and inheritance.

This is why Baldwin accuses Richard Wright of furnishing a portrait of black humanity that is untrue to life. On his reading, Wright merely inverts and embodies the hatred and fear of his white oppressors, turning the knife back on his dominators, so to speak. But hatred and fear do not preserve life, they merely serve as props to help one endure and evade its challenges. At the very moment Bigger engages in his consummate act of subversion, he actually reinforces the status quo. "Thus has the cage betrayed us all, this moment, our life, turned to nothing through our terrible attempts to insure it," As Baldwin puts it:

In *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas stands on a Chicago street corner watching airplanes flown by white men racing against the sun and "Goddamn" he

145 Of course, not every member within any social group, dominant or marginal, 'accepts all the same criteria' or 'shares all the same beliefs' or 'depends on entirely the same reality.' This applies all the more so to comparisons between groups. In order to be plausible, Baldwin's claim would have to be partial. On this rendering, many of the criteria and beliefs, and many of the objective features that condition certain historical realities, would be 'mainly' or 'for the most part' shared. Thanks to Professor Jeffrey Stout for bringing this point to my attention.
says, the bitterness bubbling up like blood, remembering a million indignities, the terrible, rat-infested house, the humiliation of home-relief, the intense, aimless, ugly bickering, hating it; hatred smoulders through these pages like sulphur fire. All of Bigger's life is controlled, defined by his hatred and fear. (EPN, 17-18)

He continues,

For Bigger's tragedy is not that he is cold or black or hungry, not even that he is American, black; but that he has accepted a theology that denies him life, that he admits the possibility of his being sub-human and feels constrained, therefore, to battle for his humanity according to those brutal criteria bequeathed him at his birth. But our humanity is our burden, our life; we need not battle for it; we need only to do what is infinitely more difficult—that is, accept it. The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended. (EPN, 18)

But Baldwin would choose to begin elsewhere. In his decision to assume the humanity of black persons, as opposed to arguing for it, he shifts attention to the realization of higher forms of flourishing, more wholesome ways of inhabiting time and giving life. He does this by confronting, not denying our complicated mixtures of darkness and light, of vice and virtue, and of our tendency to reside somewhere in between.\(^\text{146}\) In this way, Baldwin calls attention to the dangers of simplistic moral formulations, to the threat of sentimentality, to theological anxieties about purity and darkness, and to misleading categories that prevent us from engaging the complexity of our environs.

The following section highlights Baldwin's continued struggle for moral identity, the weight he lends it, and the way it frames his ethical and humanistic priorities. The achievement of identity sits at the heart of Baldwin's concerns. Where the previous

\(^{146}\) For a detailed discussion of mixed character traits, see Christian B. Miller, *Character and Moral Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 37-82.
section was focused on Baldwin's encounter with artists, this section delves into
Baldwin's encounter with the legacy of his father – the lessons he learned and the wounds
he sought to tend. Baldwin's reflections on the passing of his father take us to the center
of these challenges.

**More Challenges to Moral Identity**

In "Notes of Native Son," pride emerges as an impediment to growth. When
Baldwin writes of the violence that surrounded his father's death during the summer of
1943, he describes it as "a corrective for the pride of his eldest son." There was much
to learn from his father's struggle, and much that he had failed to discern. This is why
Baldwin writes of a failure to know his father "very well," owing to the "vice of stubborn
pride" (NNS, 64). It was a vice they shared and it was one that prevented intimacy and
contact. The death of Baldwin's father occasioned a moment of pause, of thinking about
what this inheritance had meant to him, and of wondering what he would someday make
of it: "All of my father's texts and songs, which I had decided were meaningless, were
arranged before me at his death like empty bottles, waiting to hold the meaning which life
would give them for me" (NNS, 83). What pride had initially marked as empty now
contained fresh possibility. Searching unease hangs over an essay largely devoted to his
father's significance.

In the life of his father, Baldwin noticed cruelty and bitterness, alongside beauty
and power. His father's passing signaled "how powerful and overflowing this bitterness

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147 James Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son," 63-84. Henceforth cited in-text as (NNS, #), unless otherwise
noted.

148 For an analysis of riots in Harlem during the mid-20th century period, especially the revolts of 1935 and
1943, see Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Race, Space, and Riots in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles* (New
could be," and it also allowed Baldwin to realize the ways in which that "bitterness now was mine," one that he linked to "the weight of white people in the world" (NNS, 65). The very thing that had marred his father's life also threatened his own. In order for Baldwin to work out his own salvation, to achieve his better self, he would have to address this bitterness, as well as his pride. Baldwin would have to find a way to wrest the power and beauty that springs not only from his blackness, but also, and just as significantly, from his white brothers and sisters, who were also his oppressors. He would have to embrace and nurture the beauty and power of life in variegated forms.

Bitterness was not to have the last word. The story of his father's life told of its destructive potential. Of his father, Baldwin writes,

> He could be chilling in the pulpit and indescribably cruel in his personal life and he was certainly the most bitter man I have ever met; yet it must be said that there was something else in him, buried in him which lent him his tremendous power and, even, a rather crushing charm. It had something to do with his blackness, I think—he was very black—with his blackness and his beauty, and with the fact that he knew that he was black but did not know that he was beautiful. (NNS, 64)

Another menace to the development of one's moral identity involves the sort of rage that expresses hatred and a thirst for vengeance. This vice is distinct from the anger borne of a love for justice or an aversion to injustice. Baldwin's compares the viciousness of such rage to an invasive illness, a "chronic disease," "a pounding in the skull," and a "fire in the bowels" (NNS, 70). He thinks that such vehemence is a necessary consequence of being conscious and black in an anti-black society. Thus, when Baldwin details the consequences of this insidious rage, he turns to his own life and the night he almost lost it. Having been denied service at one restaurant, Baldwin promptly entered another establishment near Trenton, NJ, knowing that a similar fate awaited. When a
waitress informed him that he was not welcome at this second establishment, Baldwin felt an overwhelming desire to choke her, but instead settled for hurling a glass of water in her direction. In that New Jersey diner, he too "had been ready to commit murder."

His fury had led him and his would-be pursuers to the brink of death. Blurry as his vision of that night remained, Baldwin's insight into his own life increased: "I saw nothing very clearly but I did see this: that my life, my real life, was in danger, and not from anything other people might do but from the hatred I carried in my own heart" (NNS, 72). The battle for moral identity, like most else, would have to begin in the heart: with his loves, hatreds, and fears.

Such a battle would include an appreciation of paradox and complexity. "Life and death so close together, and love and hatred, and right and wrong, said something to me which I did not want to hear concerning man, concerning the life of man" (NNS, 81). One of these lessons was that most of us are rarely as pure as we'd like to imagine.

Claims to purity, on Baldwin's account, often work to protect the identities of their possessors: "No one is more dangerous than he who imagines himself pure in heart: for his purity, by definition, is unassailable," Baldwin writes. Purity grows out of pride and also shields it. Even the people who claim to hate other folks wholesale are probably mistaken, for even something as toxic as 'pure' hatred is more myth than actual: "In order really to hate white people, one has to blot so much out of the mind—and the heart—that this hatred itself becomes an exhausting and self-destructive pose" (NNS, 83). Such a claim would seem to extend beyond race as well. But the difficulty of purely hating another person, Baldwin carefully notes, doesn't entail "that loves comes easily." On the

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contrary, it points to the difficulty of loving any particular (ideal or person) well, all the more so when this effort calls for love of enemy. As for effortless love, Baldwin reminds, "the white world is too powerful, too complacent, too ready with gratuitous humiliation, and, above all, too ignorant and too innocent for that" (NNS, 83). Love requires work.

Love does not begin and end the way we seem to think it does. Love is a battle, love is war; love is growing up. No one in the world—in the entire world—knows more—knows Americans better or, odd as this may sound, loves them more than the American Negro. This is because he has had to watch you, outwit you, deal with you, and bear you, and sometimes even bleed and die with you, ever since we got here, that is, since both of us, black and white, got here—and this is a wedding. Whether I like it or not, or whether you like it or not, we are bound together forever. We are part of each other.150

Because of the co-dependency that whites and blacks share—their shared constitution in America—hatred like bitterness, is "folly." It simply isn't true to life. Not only does it aim to destroy its objects, but hatred always corrupts the life of its possessor: "Hatred, which could destroy so much, never failed to destroy the man who hated and this was an immutable law" (NNS, 84). Baldwin could not hate his father and he could not allow himself to hate white people, no matter the pain both caused. As he put it, "It was necessary to hold on to the things that mattered. The dead man mattered, the new life mattered; blackness and whiteness did not matter; to believe that they did was to acquiesce in one's own destruction" (NNS, 83-4). The important 'matters' to which Baldwin refers involve things of ultimate significance. Racial identity holds no such place in Baldwin's imagination, though given the time he spends on the topic, he clearly accords it value. But he is careful not to make an idol of any identity, racial or otherwise.

150 James Baldwin, "In Search of a Majority," 220-21.
What rests at the center of Baldwin's imagination is the formation of our moral and human identities, our practices of freedom and our capacities of care. Central to Baldwin's ethic of love and social criticism is the following claim: that the reality of our humanity cuts deeper than the values we attach to race and sexuality, to God and religion, to hatred and fear, or any number of gimmicks and distractions.

Of his father's lasting significance, Baldwin says that "this was his legacy: nothing is ever escaped." But reconciling the force of this lesson, alongside his desire to help bring about the transformation of ourselves and our society was burdensome: "This intimation made my heart heavy and, now my father was irrecoverable. I wished that he had been beside me so that I could have searched his face for the answers which only the future would give me now" (NNS, 84). Instead of reconciliation, then, it may be more accurate to speak of tension and paradox, of the rugged and conflicting demands of living well. An emphasis on practical living cautions against the smoothness of unworn ideals and the silkiness of pure reason. Such matters shouldn't be decided in advance nor are they to be confined to some other realm, since they must be applied well and adjusted spontaneously to meet the demands of our living. This is why Baldwin writes of an intense effort "to hold in the mind forever two ideas which seemed to be in opposition.

The first idea was acceptance, the acceptance, totally without rancor, of life as it is, and men as they are: in the light of this idea, it goes without saying that injustice is a commonplace. But this did not mean that one could be complacent, for the second idea was of equal power: that one must never, in one's own life, accept these injustices as commonplace but must fight them with all one's strength. This fight begins, however, in the heart and it now had been laid to my charge to keep my own heart free of hatred and despair. (NNS, 84)

While the struggle for identity begins in the heart, it calls for much more. It also involves our capacities of imagination, a willingness to confront, use, and learn from
history, a capacity to listen and care for ourselves and others, and habits of correcting for myth, illusion, and deception. It therefore demands self and social criticism, alongside individual and collective practices of transformation. Criticism conditions the practices of freedom that transformation and renewal require. In this way, the qualities of persons and pluralities are intimately linked and supersede the things they produce. As for the significance of persons working to achieve national and personal identity, Baldwin writes,

I yet suspect that there is something much more important and much more real which produces the Cadillac, refrigerator, atom bomb, and what produces it, after all, is something which we don't seem to want to look at, and that is the person. A country is only as good—I don't care now about the Constitution and the laws, at the moment let us leave these things aside—a country is only as strong as the people who make it up and the country turns into what the people want it to become. Now, this country is going to be transformed. It will not be transformed by an act of God, but by all of us, by you and me. I don't believe any longer that we can afford to say that it is entirely out of our hands. We made the world we're living in and we have to make it over.151

And as for the link between practices of critical examination and the work of freedom in love, Baldwin affirms,

Human freedom is a complex, difficult—and private—thing. If we can liken life, for a moment, to a furnace, then freedom is the fire which burns away illusion. Any honest examination of the national life proves how far we are from the standard of human freedom with which we began. The recovery of this standard demands of everyone who loves this country a hard look at himself, for the greatest achievements must begin somewhere, and they always begin with the person. If we are not capable of this examination, we may yet become one of the most distinguished and monumental failures in the history of nations.152

With these images in mind, I now turn to the examples of love and social criticism found in *The Fire Next Time*. They bring into view the necessity of self and social

152 James Baldwin, "Nobody Knows My Name," 208.
examination, and the centrality of love for such an endeavor. Where expedient, I make reference to passages from previous essays. The accounts of love and criticism found in the essays "Nothing Personal" and a "Talk to Teachers" also figure prominently.
Chapter 3

Modalities of Love: Pastoral Warmth and Prophetic Fire

We are the generation that must throw everything into the endeavor to remake America into what we say we want it to be. Without this endeavor, we will perish.\textsuperscript{153}

Having drawn attention to Baldwin's sense of vocation as writer in chapter 1, and having detailed some of the ways in which love can be disfigured in chapter 2, I now turn to the example of love and social criticism in \textit{The Fire Next Time}. I demonstrate how Baldwin might be included among those Socratic models of truth-telling championed by Michel Foucault, Alexander Nehamas, and Cornel West.\textsuperscript{154} I also reveal the political and ethical possibilities afforded by our conceiving of writing as a practice of freedom: as an act of social and political resistance. Writing about and for oneself occasions the opportunity for parrēsia or frank, courageous speech. And when initiated in a public setting, it may well equip and inspire others to care for themselves and their environments with new sensitivity – and perhaps, even, with a bit more courage.

But writing can be a practice of freedom just as much it can contribute to domination. The same might be said of hateful preaching or uncharitable teaching (really, any social practice). What we make of such opportunities is up to us—collusion


\textsuperscript{154} In his lectures in the 1980s, Foucault writes of tropes of enunciation that frame the testimony of truth-tellers. Such tropes, social in nature, constitute the “dramatics of true discourse.” On his view, “it is clear that the subject doesn’t bind himself to truth in every mode of speaking: as seer, prophet, philosopher, or scientist.” Each has a unique “way of binding themselves to the truth of what they say.” To pursue their variety, he says, is to enter an open “field for possible studies.” I take this to be another benefit of my emphasis on vocation. In Baldwin's case, this pertains to his duties as a writer, while for Thurman it involves his commitments as a minister. See Foucault, \textit{The Government of Self and Others}, 19; Nehamas, “Foucault on the Care of the Self” in \textit{The Art of Living}, 157-188; and for Baldwin as Socratic model of parrēsia, see West, \textit{Democracy Matters}, 78-86; and Joel Schlosser, "Socrates in a Different Key: James Baldwin and Race in America," \textit{Political Research Quarterly} 66 (2012): 487-499.
always beckons. As a 'dramatic of true discourse,' Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* helps us see who we are, and thereby offers unique resources for the deepening of more wholesome styles of living and more just forms of political life. His prophetic witness, like David Walker’s *Appeal*, is a call to encounter our involvement in the present and to do so with critical, unflinching resolve. For Baldwin, “We do have a responsibility, not only to ourselves and to our own time, but to those who are coming after us.” And, on his view, “this responsibility can only be discharged by dealing as truthfully as we know how with our present fortunes, these present days.”

Our challenge now is to see how his letters, his acts of self-writing, make for a more truthful encounter with our present—with ourselves—and with each other. Baldwin, like all of us, must be put to the test. This chapter aims to show the fruitfulness of interpreting Baldwin as a practitioner of freedom, a model of self-care, and a critic of domination. The ethics of his prophetic social criticism—its attentiveness and passion, its concern for beauty and its dangerous self-questioning—is exemplary. Or so, at least, I shall argue. My argument, however, doesn't entirely depend on the force of deductive reasoning. My strategy instead follows Charles Peirce in attempting to weave various

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156 *The Fire Next Time* (1963) is composed of two essays, both of which are addressed as letters. The first is "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew James on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation." The second is "Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region in My Mind." I offer a close reading of both pieces.
157 On Foucault’s reading, self-writing is “the act of writing for oneself and for others.” It is one practice in a host of other practices (e.g. abstinences, memorizations, meditations, silences, and listening to others) aimed at self-fashioning or self training. Writing, in many ancient contexts, was thought to be “an agent of the transformation of truth into ēthos”, or communal ways of living and behaving. See Foucault, “Self-Writing” in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume 1: Ethics*, P. Rainbow ed. (New York: New Press, 1997), 208-209.
threads of argument into a "cable whose fibres are...numerous and intimately connected."158

On Love and Pastoral Warmth

When Baldwin writes a letter to his nephew, James, on the “One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation,” we should not be surprised to find that care, truth, and freedom are operative. His emphasis on a love that is as tough as tender points to a distinctive sort of care; his recommendation to abjure false beliefs points to the significance of truth; and his opening and closing lines accent the social conditions of freedom.

Baldwin’s care is palpable throughout. He begins by acknowledging his concern for the accuracy of his letter and its persistent defects: “I have begun this letter five times and torn it up five times.” Like any good craftsman, Baldwin found himself in a process of testing, revising and starting again. And whatever wisdom he would share with his nephew was to come from a place of deep concern. “I tell you this because I love you,” Baldwin writes to James, “and please don’t you ever forget it.” Related to this kind of concern is the idea that love illumines. When Baldwin first addresses James, he does so with his face clearly in mind—and hence, with an acuity of sight not readily available to

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most. The knowledge afforded by such seeing, Baldwin admits, is borne of an historical intimacy with bodies in time. He writes to James:

I have known both of you all your lives, I have carried your Daddy in my arms and on my shoulders, kissed and spanked him and watched him learn to walk. I don’t know if you’ve known anybody from that far back; if you’ve loved anybody that long, first as infant, then as a child, then as a man, you gain a strange perspective on time and human pain and effort.

Love, on this view, is a particular way of relating that affords fresh angles and new visions of our world and ourselves. Love is itself a way of seeing. Baldwin recognizes that what we know has a great deal to do with what we love; and what we love has a lot to do with who, what, and how we choose to interpret—none of which is unrelated to the energy and time we invest toward enabling ourselves to perceive. Thus, it is Baldwin’s sensitivity to the “invisible tears” of his brother that allows him to assert: “I know what the world has done to my brother and how narrowly he has survived it.” More than this, Baldwin says that those who “have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives do not know it and do not want to know it.”

Baldwin reveals in this passage concerns what might be called culpable (or blameworthy) ignorance. This is to be distinguished from the kind of excusable ignorance one might attribute to contextual deficiencies, evidential constraints, or a lack

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159 James Baldwin, “My Dungeon Shook” in Collected Essays, 291. “I keep seeing your face, which is also the face of your father and my brother…Other people cannot see what I see whenever I look into your father’s face, for behind your father’s face as it is today are all those other faces which were his.”

160 John Dewey puts the point like this: “A community must always remain a matter of face-to-face intercourse. This is why the family and neighborhood, with all their deficiencies, have always been the chief agencies of nurture.” In Dewey, The Public and Its Problems (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 211). For a related point about how to understand grassroots democracy, See Jeffrey Stout, Blessed are the Organized (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 283.

161 James Baldwin, “My Dungeon Shook,” 291


of access to other relevant resources. But blameworthy ignorance is a function of insensitivity, the result of misplaced attention and absent care. It supposes a refusal to take seriously the resources that are reasonably at one’s disposal. Now I concede that this appears to make it sound like sensitivity already requires knowing or recognizing what one ought to be sensitive to. And I even grant that this would appear to put the intelligibility of blameworthy ignorance in peril.

But what I have in mind is sensitivity more broadly construed, something akin to openness, or curiosity, or inquisitiveness, or meekness. So while it is true that intimacy can only begin with some measure of sensitivity, this need not be construed as a kind of knowing wholesale. For my purposes, it need only be something like attentive inquiry or the consideration of something potentially worthwhile. This doesn’t suppose any distinctive knowledge, just openness. It only demands recognition of another’s experience as a reasonable and potential contributor to one’s own view of the world. So my position is that we should all be responsible to the experiences of our neighbors and fellows, to the humanity of those with whom we live.

Why? Because it is also true that intimacy conditions the quality of our perceptions. So that the familiarity we have with particular sorts of knowledge providers (say, for example, poor underclassed persons, or convicted felons, or drug addicts, or honest children, or indignant prophetic voices, or fair minded beneficiaries of white

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privilege and unjust labor) already inclines us to be more or less aware and hence more or less open to their potential contributions. These predispositions inform the contextual features we take to be most salient and relevant. They inform what we see and fail to see. This is why those who dominate do not care to see themselves as they are. Their intimacy, their affair is with the preservation of their own power and comfort, not with the plight of those under their abuse. Such dominators, for Baldwin, fear the exposure of their own weakness and vulnerability, but deeply desire the affirmation of their own superiority. But the love that Baldwin commends “takes off the masks we fear we cannot live without.” It refuses arbitrary power and embraces mutual vulnerability. Love sharpens perception and ranks worthwhile pursuits; and the pursuit of anything, including wisdom, requires movement.

In this way, Baldwin’s letter can be read as an act of resistance. We can interpret it as an act to enable his nephew to see things aright and, perhaps, even to move him into action. It is a subversive work of exposure. In another passage, Baldwin says to James: “I am writing this letter to you, to try to tell you something about how to handle them, for most of them do not yet really know that you exist. I know the conditions under which you were born, for I was there. Your countrymen were not there, and haven’t made it yet.” Here knowledge is conceived as traveling, as a journey that demands an intimate engagement with the circumstances of one’s coming to be. Here intimacy is a proximity to be achieved, one that often requires movement and loss of identity and

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168 John Dewey makes a similar point. “Vital and thorough attachments are bred only in the intimacy of an intercourse which is of necessity restricted in range.” See Dewey, Public and Its Problems, 212.
place. Knowing full well, on this account, involves probing beneath the surface of general attitudes and convictions. Read in this way, Baldwin’s letter emerges as work of self-care—one attempt to aid his nephew in his efforts to survive and flourish.

Taking care, on Baldwin’s view, begins with an acknowledgment of “the conditions under which you were born.” “Know whence you came,” he says to James, “The details and symbols of your life have been deliberately constructed to make you believe what white people say about you.” Caring for oneself demands a grappling with the truth of one’s historical conditions. In most cases this requires going beyond and beneath the already given – in a word, traveling. To travel along similar paths and toward similar ideals is to travel with, and this requires some recognition of those who have gone before us, some acknowledgment of the similarities that unite as well as the details that distinguish.

With care, Baldwin connects the history of James's coming into the world to a life of value and esteem that isn't exhausted by his social conditions. Baldwin calls attention to the networks of love and support that also sustained him.

For here you were, Big James, named for me—you were a big baby I was not—here you were: to be loved. To be loved, baby, hard at once, and forever, to strengthen you against the loveless world. Remember that: I know how black it looks today, for you. It looked bad that day, too, yes

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169 I have in mind the difficulty of making informed judgments given the realities of “secrecy, prejudice, bias, misrepresentation, propaganda…and sheer ignorance.” See Ibid., 209.


171 James Baldwin, “My Dungeon Shook,” 293.

172 Here “Being with” connotes either having been associated with, or presently being associated with, or toward being associated (or constituted) in a posited way.

173 Howard Thurman makes a similar point: “And then, there is the witness of others who have gone along the road we take. True, the road will mean for us something unique but not altogether unique. The generations meet and share, in ways beyond our grasp…”In Howard Thurman, The Inward Journey (Indianapolis, IN: Friends United Press, 2007), 54. The importance of the trails and tracks of our predecessors is also emphasized in Jean-Paul Sartre’s insightful analysis of “Freedom and Facticity” in his Being and Nothingness trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1984), see especially the section on ‘My Fellowman’, pp. 654-681.
we were trembling. We have not stopped trembling yet, but if we had not loved each other none of us would have survived. And now you must survive because we love you, and for the sake of your children and your children’s children.\footnote{James Baldwin, "My Dungeon Shook," 292-93.}

Here Baldwin seeks to remind his nephew of the importance of care. And he seeks to call to mind James's involvement in a procession of love that extends beyond personal well-being. Baldwin's words aim to arouse a sense of piety for the life and love that made his nephew's survival possible. James must always remember: that his coming into the world involved more than the external constraints of the Harlem ghetto. Baldwin implores James to continue in the practice of care, precisely because of the life that has already been offered for his sake. But notice how James's responsibility isn't merely to the sources that created him. For Baldwin, such responsibility also involves those who are to depend on him: his children and his 'children's children.'

Baldwin’s concern with truth emerges not only through his critique of society, but also in his relentless self-criticism. He acknowledges his own propensity to error when advising James to “Take no one’s word for anything, including mine—but trust your experience.”\footnote{James Baldwin, “My Dungeon Shook,” 293. Admittedly this statement is strong, but we can amend it, or perhaps read it less abrasively by holding that one should not take anyone’s word alone as the final and sole arbiter of knowledge and truth. Human experience is to be trusted, which would presumably include our encounters with other persons and situations, other facts and fictions. But which aspects of that experience ought to be trusted or given more weight than others, on Baldwin’s own account, would have to be those sources which offer the best account of our present condition. This would require some talk of the facts taken to be most relevant to the particular condition under consideration, which would also require some kind of socio-practical investigation. Notwithstanding the difficulties of such parsing, I take Baldwin to be articulating the pretty defensible position that justification is a holistic affair.} No claim, for Baldwin, is beyond the test of experience. And writing of the propensity of white folks to betray truth, Baldwin urges James “to remember that what they believe, as well as what they do and cause you to endure, does not testify to
your inferiority, but to their inhumanity and fear." What is significant here about Baldwin’s worry with fear is his own familiarity with its blinding and paralyzing effects. Recall that he was similarly disposed when it came to encountering the nettlesome details of his own experience.

Thus, it seems that Baldwin is calling James to a more truthful, and hence less fearful, encounter with reality. Peril, Baldwin teaches, is always our condition when experience challenges our established beliefs and identities. It is also present when we choose to prod and unsettle the convictions of others. Yet our responsibility to life demands that we proceed anyway, no matter the risk: “to act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger.” But, as Baldwin points out, "the danger, in the minds of most white Americans, is the loss of their identity." The idol of identity is one most Americans, white and black, prefer to keep safe. Baldwin writes to addresses the formation of James's identity, his need to assist in the formation of others, and his role in the making of the country.

Misplaced descriptions and unexamined words—basically, the irresponsible use of concepts—can sabotage our projects of self and social making. Baldwin thinks that the misuse of words like acceptance and integration can stunt our vision of the actions and ideals that call for our pursuit. There is a "reality" and truth "which lies behind the words acceptance and integration." Addressing the ethics of acceptance, Baldwin says,

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177 James Baldwin, "The Artist's Struggle for Integrity," The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Vintage Books), 51. “And Shakespeare said—and this is what I take to be the truth about everybody’s life all of the time—“Out of this nettle, danger, we pluck this flower, safety.”
178 James Baldwin, “Autobiographical Notes,” 8. “What was the most difficult was the fact that I was forced to admit something I had always hidden from myself...that I hated and feared white people...In effect I hated and feared the world.”
There is no reason for you to try to become like white people and there is no basis whatever for their impertinent assumption that they must accept you. The really terrible thing, old buddy, is that you must accept them. And I mean this very seriously. You must accept them and accept them with love. For these innocent people have no other hope. They are, in effect, still trapped in a history they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it. They have had to believe for many years, and for innumerable reasons, that black men are inferior to white men.  

Baldwin says that James must learn "how to deal" with white people based on who they are. He must accept the world as it is, which does not mean refusing to work for change. It means dealing with things and persons within the concreteness of their particularity. Truthfulness begins with this assessment, with the trappings of history.

As for integration, Baldwin resists the idea that this should occur on the terms that white folks have already set. There is a need to "go behind the white man's definitions." Integration cannot be on terms that already deny the humanity of black persons. Some white people, perhaps many of them, Baldwin says to James, may well turn out to be bitter enemies. And yet Baldwin affirms their humanity, and the ethical demand they have on James.

But these men are your brothers—your lost, younger brothers. And if the world integration means anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers and sisters to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it.

But living with love is a risky endeavor; and publicly enacting and expressing such love, even riskier. So I think Baldwin’s letter can also be read as a work of pastoral care, as a gesture of edification in the face of imminent peril. In it, he offers the kind of

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love that sustains,\textsuperscript{183} as well as the kind that provokes change.\textsuperscript{184} It is a work of love for the sake of freedom, one that combines elements of the tender and romantic, alongside those of the tough and rugged. For Foucault, Baldwin, and those who bear witness to Calvary, and even those who simply want principled justice: the wages of freedom may well be death. Self-offering is unavoidable.

In sum, Baldwin’s letter reveals how practices of freedom require full bodied, intimate encounters with truth. For him, there’s still much to be done in a democratic society that claims to value freedom, but is “celebrating one hundred years of freedom one hundred years too soon.” Thus, Baldwin concludes his letter to James with an ominous reminder: the condition of our own freedom and agency is always and significantly that of other persons. Care of self necessarily involves working on and through our relations with our adversaries, friends, and neighbors: “For we cannot be free until they are free”\textsuperscript{185}

\textit{On Love and Prophetic Fire}

Where the previous essay, "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew" specified the object of Baldwin's words, the second piece calls attention to its origin, "Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region in My Mind."\textsuperscript{186} The letter emerges from the tumult of Baldwin's interior life. Not only does it afford a view of his attempts at renewal and rebirth, it also invites the public to share in his hope for the country to be transformed.

\textsuperscript{183} Baldwin, “My Dungeon Shook,” 292-93.
\textsuperscript{184} Baldwin, “Autobiographical Notes,” 9. “I love America more than any other country in the world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually. I think all theories are suspect, that the finest principles may have to be modified, or may even be pulverized by the demands of life...”
\textsuperscript{185} Baldwin, “My Dungeon Shook,” 295.
\textsuperscript{186} Baldwin, ”Down at the Cross,” 296. Henceforth cited in-text as (DC, #), unless otherwise noted.
"Down at the Cross" offers an ethical discourse on coming of age, through a telling of Baldwin's personal story and that of the nation. Baldwin's concern for the making of moral identity emerges through his worry about the maturation of his own humanity and the moral excellence America has yet to achieve. But he is careful to show how the process of growth can be derailed. Among his concerns are the challenges of criminal power, religious authority, and the (ab)uses of history. In his eyes, such challenges must be faced before they can be changed. Baldwin's social criticism offers one example of how those challenges might be confronted in a way that preserves a commitment to love, freedom, and truth. Throughout the essay, the confessional and self-implicating dimensions of his social criticism emerge: the way he binds his own struggle with that of the country, his personal journey to the birth pangs of his motherland.

Baldwin begins the essay by recalling the summer of his fourteenth year when he endured a "prolonged religious crisis" (DC, 296). He chafes at the Christianity of his childhood with its emphasis on depravity and damnation on the one hand, and a secure path to deliverance on the other. What troubled Baldwin was his newly acquired fear "of the evil within" and "the evil without" (DC, 296). His religious upbringing made the discomforting heat of his teenage years all the more difficult because, as Baldwin put it, "I had no idea what my voice or my mind or my body was likely to do next" (DC, 297). The result was a sense of condemnation. In his own mind, he was "one of the most depraved people on earth" (DC, 297). Looking out on the world that surrounded him, "the wages of sin were visible everywhere" (DC, 299).187

187 James Baldwin, "Down at the Cross," 299. "...in every wine-stained and urine-splashed hallway, in every clanging ambulance bell, in every scar on the faces of the pimps and their whores, in every hapless, newborn baby being brought into this danger, in every knife and pistol fight on the Avenue, and in every disastrous bulletin: a cousin, mother of six, suddenly gone mad, the children parceled out here and there; an
Beyond the sphere of his "terrified lapses" with other youngsters, and the "grim, guilty, tormented experiments" they spawned, Baldwin became increasingly aware of the limitations of his social context. He was beginning to see that he "could become one of the whores and pimps and racketeers on the Avenue," because he, like them, "had been produced by the same circumstances" (DC, 297). Baldwin began to fear for his life. His possibilities were truncated and it was difficult to see beyond his conditions of living. "Crime became real, for example—for the first time—not as a possibility but as the possibility. One would never defeat one's circumstances by working and saving one's pennies; one would never, by working, acquire that many pennies..." (DC, 299). Baldwin knew that the increased odds of his becoming a criminal were created by a society that itself was criminal.  

Hopelessness blurs even the judgments of the discerning and well-intentioned. "The moral barriers that I had supposed to exist between me and the dangers of a criminal career were so tenuous as to be nearly nonexistent," Baldwin confessed. "I certainly could not discover any principled reason for not becoming a criminal, and it is not my poor, God-fearing parents who are to be indicted for the lack but this society" (DC, 300). The circumstances of his coming of age, those creators of social despair and racialized ghettos were to be blamed.

Negroes had excellent reasons for doubting that money was made or kept by any very striking adherence to the Christian virtues; it certainly did not work that way for black Christians. In any case, white people, who had indestructible aunt rewarded for years of hard labor by a slow, agonizing death in a terrible small room; someone's bright son blown into eternity by his own hand; another turned robber and carried off to jail."  

For a comprehensive analysis of James Baldwin's critical engagement with the law, broadly conceived as: (1) "jurisprudence, or the official history of policies and legal decisions that comprise the American legal system" and (2) "the common perception of the law as a potentially menacing regulatory force represented by police, corrections officers, juries, and prisons," see D. Quentin Miller, *A Criminal Power: James Baldwin and the Law* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2012), 4.  

Notice the way Baldwin resists the kind of arguments which reduce the life outcomes of black children to "quality of household," which is often measured in terms of fatherhood and other racist neo-liberal logics.
robbed black people of their liberty and who profited by this theft every hour that they lived, had no moral ground on which to stand. They had the judges, the juries, the shotguns, the law—in a word, power. But it was a criminal power, to be feared but not respected, and to be outwitted in any way whatever. And those virtues preached but not practiced by the white world were merely another means of holding Negroes in subjection [my emphasis] (DC, 300).

Even if a life of crime wasn’t Baldwin’s ultimate fate, it was becoming more obvious that most of the boys in his position "would rise no higher than their fathers" (298). Many of his comrades dropped out of school, owing to the futility of the time spent in such institutions and the lack of outcomes following matriculation. Although Baldwin would resist the urgings of his father to quit school and likewise begin working, he understood that public education could guarantee neither his survival nor protection, to say nothing of any wider concerns with human flourishing. At the age of thirteen, while on his way to a midtown library, a police officer demanded: "Why don't you niggers stay uptown where you belong?" And around on his tenth birthday, Baldwin says that "two policemen amused themselves with me by frisking me, making comic (and terrifying speculations concerning my ancestry and probable sexual prowess, and for good measure, leaving me flat on my back in one of Harlem's empty lots" (DC, 298).

Many of his peers soon found themselves in an endless and consuming battle against "the white man," the consequences of which were often terrible.

They began to care less about the way they looked, the way they dressed, the things they did; presently, one found them in twos and threes and fours, in a hallway, sharing a jug of wine or a bottle of whiskey, talking, cursing, fighting, sometimes weeping; lost, and unable to say what it was that oppressed them, except that they knew it was "the man"—the white man. And there seemed to be no way whatever to remove this cloud that stood between them and the sun, between them and love and life and power, between them and whatever it was that they wanted (DC, 298).
Baldwin’s worry with depravity came from a sense of religious condemnation, as well as the ugliness of his social condition. His experiences of religious and social worthlessness left him wounded. "It is certainly sad that the awakening of one's senses should lead to such a merciless judgment of oneself," Baldwin notes, "but it is also inevitable that a literal attempt to mortify the flesh should be made among black people like those whom I grew up" (DC, 301). Baldwin didn't take his experiences to be unique in this regard.

Negroes in this country...are taught really to despise themselves from the moment their eyes open on the world. White people hold the power, which means they are superior to blacks (intrinsically, that is: God decreed it so), and the world has innumerable ways of making this difference known and felt and feared. Long before the Negro child perceives this difference, and even longer before he understands it, he has begun to react to it, he has begun to be controlled by it. (DC, 302)

The superiority of white people, however feigned and unfounded, had everything to do with their holdings of power: material, social, political, and spatial. Black parents harshly reinforced these realities, in their noble effort to ready their young for the oncoming assault (DC, 302). Better for children, so the logic ran, to incur the punishment of their protective concern than the brunt of their callous oppressors. Fearing white people was a requirement of survival, but an obstacle to freedom-making.

The fear that I heard in my father's voice, for example, when he realized that I really believed I could do anything a white boy could do, and had every intention of proving, was not at all like the fear I heard when one of us was ill or had fallen down the stairs or strayed too far from the house....It was another fear, a fear that the child, in challenging the white world's assumptions, was putting himself in the path of destruction. A child cannot, thank Heaven, know how vast and how merciless is the nature of power, with what unbelievable cruelty people treat each other. He reacts to the fear in his parents' voices because his parents hold up the world for him and he has no protection without them. (DC, 302)

These passages provide a glimpse into the soul-crushing vulnerability that young black children, like Baldwin, often face. The far-reaching consequences of such powerlessness
often generated fits of paranoia, anxiety, and terror (DC, 325). Vulnerable populations had to contend with the realities and threats of bodily intrusion – which could be paralyzing, for children and adults alike (DC, 317). This is the context of criminality—the overwhelming sense of depravity within and without—that spurred Baldwin's need for safety and protection. His friends were being swallowed alive; and he was struggling to find a way to encounter that degradation without being consumed.

…the social treatment accorded even the most successful Negroes proved that one needed, in order to be free, something more than a bank account. One needed a handle, a lever, a means of inspiring fear. It was absolutely clear that the police would whip you and take you in as long as they could get away with it, and that everyone else—housewives, taxi-drivers, elevator boys, dishwashers, bartenders, lawyers, judges, doctors, and grocers—would never, by the operation of any generous human feeling, cease to use you as an outlet for his frustrations and hostilities. (DC, 299)

The realities of criminal power made the promises of safety alluring. It is not surprising that religious assurances of redemption and salvation enjoyed wide appeal, whether in the form of certain Christian traditions or in the Nation of Islam. Yet the faith of many converts, Baldwin noticed, was often sealed in desperation, not love (DC, 307). By Baldwin’s own admission, he was in search of a “gimmick,” a way to safeguard his own anxieties and fears, while also “inspiring fear” in those seeking to dominate him (DC, 301). Where his childhood religion made him feel guilty, his black body made him an object of white brutality. The world had yet to make room for his existence, and yet he was coming of age, which is to say, neither ignorant nor innocent. Baldwin would now be forced to make choices and to shoulder the responsibilities of his actions, even if he didn't create the terrible conditions of his choosing. He would have to decide the ethical terms upon which he would lead his life, the kind of human being he would strive to become. The church seemed to offer ready-made solutions to these questions or, at the
very least, some reprieve from having to search them. "That summer," Baldwin writes, "all the fears with which I had grown up, and which were now a part of me and controlled my vision of the world, rose up like a wall between the world and me, and drove me into the church" (DC, 303).

On the Abuses of Religion, Power, and History

Baldwin describes his "religious crisis" this way:

I use the word "religious" in the common, and arbitrary, sense, meaning that I then discovered God, His saints and angels, and His blazing Hell. And since I had been born in a Christian nation, I accepted this Deity as the only one. I supposed Him to exist only within the walls of a church—in fact, of our church—and I also supposed that God and safety were synonymous. The word "safety" brings us to the real meaning of the word "religious" as we use it. Therefore, to state it in another, more accurate way, I became during my fourteenth year, for the first time in my life, afraid of the evil within me and afraid of the evil without. (DC, 296)

This passage reminds of Baldwin's critique of Harriet Beecher Stowe's uncomplicated, "medieval morality." Her account was shackled, as it were, by anxieties concerning salvation and sanctity; a panic that was resolved by the assurance of being on 'God's side' and not being "in traffic with evil." But such a Manichean scheme is too simplistic for the complexities of our human involvements, knowing and unknowing, in various complicities, willing and unwilling. The term "American," and the kind of attachments involved for those who fall under the description, evidences the tension. As Baldwin here defines it, "being religious" absolves one of these associations and deeds. It is a way of being washed of sin, delivered from evil, and insulated from the challenges that afflict our efforts to live honest and fruitful lives.

Fear sits at the heart of Baldwin's crisis and the religion he sought was an inadequate defense. "To defend oneself against a fear," Baldwin argued," is simply to insure that one will, one day, be conquered by it; fears must be faced" (DC, 303). Notice that Baldwin isn't claiming that all practitioners adhere to their faith traditions in this way. His point is only that he was led to seek security and protection in such an institution. He seeks to demonstrate how religious identities, like any group or spiritual affiliation, can threaten to insulate us from the challenges of our present. They often mask the difficulties of growing into maturity, a concern that drives Baldwin's critique of certain religious forms of life, notably Christianity and the Nation of Islam. Writing of his conversion experience, Baldwin recalls:

All I really remember is the pain, the unspeakable pain; it was as though I were yelling up to Heaven and Heaven would not hear me. And if Heaven would not hear me, if love could not descend from heaven—to make me clean—then utter disaster was my portion. Yes, it does indeed mean something—something unspeakable—to be born, in a white country, an Anglo-Teutonic, antise sexual country, black. You very soon, without knowing it, give up all hope of communion. (DC, 304)

Baldwin continues:

One begins to think that it's impossible to get through life, to flourish, to love and be loved. The universe, which is not merely the stars and the moon and the planets, flowers, grass, and tress, but other people, has evolved no terms for your existence, has made no room for you, and if love will not swing wide the gates, no other power will or can. And if one despairs—as who has not?—of human love, God's love alone is left. But God—and I felt this even then, so long ago, on that tremendous floor, unwillingly—is white. And if His love was a so great, and if he loved all His children, why were, the blacks, cast down so far? Why? In spite of all I said thereafter, I found no answer on the floor—not that answer, anyway—and I was on the floor all night. Over me, to bring me "through," the saints sang and rejoiced and prayed. And in the morning, when they raised me, they told me that I was "saved." (DC, 304-5)

191 Here Baldwin confronts the question of theodicy, not by way of philosophical abstraction, but through the concreteness of black encounters with evil on this side of modernity. For the most penetrating analysis concerning the difficulty of mounting any rational or theological reply to the problem of black suffering,
But Baldwin had only been delivered from his "guilty torment," and nothing else (DC, 305). He would soon come to see that the principles which governed his congregation were not different from other churches, which were reflective of wider cultural norms and values. "The principles were Blindness, Loneliness, and Terror, the first principle necessarily and actively cultivated in order to deny the two others. I would love to believe that the principles were Faith, Hope, and Charity, but this is clearly not so for most Christians, or for what we call the Christian world" (DC, 305). Baldwin would preach vigorously for three years after his conversion, relishing the opportunity as a young minster to get away from and strike at his overbearing father. But the damage he was doing to his own soul became increasingly pronounced. In fact, he "had escaped from nothing whatever" (DC, 306). The realities of dread and despair were still nearby; and the battle for his identity was still raging in a world that refused to make room for him (DC, 308).

Baldwin's critique of the Christian church comes from within. He affirms that he would prefer to live, in principle, by the dictates of faith, hope, and love. He even suggests that he may have been able to make his peace with the church had these virtues been on display.

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192 James Baldwin, "Down at the Cross," 309. "When I watched all the children, their copper, brown, and beige faces staring up at me as I taught Sunday school, I felt that I was committing a crime in talking about the gentle Jesus, in telling them to reconcile themselves to their misery on earth in order to gain the crown of eternal life. Were only Negroes to gain this crown? Was heaven, then, to be merely another ghetto? "

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Perhaps I might have been able to reconcile myself even to this if I had been able to believe that there was any loving kindness to be found in the haven I represented. But I had been in the pulpit too long and I had seen too many monstrous things. I don't refer merely to the glaring fact that the minister eventually acquires houses and Cadillacs while the faithful continue to scrub floors and drop their dimes and quarters and dollars into the plate. I really mean that there was no love in the church. It was a mask for hatred and self-hatred and despair. The transfiguring power of the Holy Ghost ended when the service ended and salvation stopped at the church door. When we were told to love everybody, I thought that everybody meant everybody. But no. It applied only to those who believed as we did, and it did not apply to white people at all. (DC, 309-10)

Too often religious institutions, for Baldwin, extol what they've yet to embrace. Here outward forms of religion cloak spiritual malnourishment. In addition to fear, hatred, and despair, these vices include hypocrisy, deception, greed, and the evasion of responsibility (DC, 306-308). All of them are antithetical to the spiritual growth and maturation of individuals and nations. And this, the making of moral identity, is one of Baldwin's principal concerns. His is a concern for who we are and for who we are becoming. The making of moral identity crucially involves the relationship between one's beliefs and practices, one's habits of imagining particular ideals and the various ways one translates those commitments into practice. Essential to Baldwin's critique of his childhood Christianity was its failure to practice the ideal of love. "They were so self-righteous. They didn't come with real deep love, for example. The people in the Church were very cruel about many things," Baldwin recalled in his last interview.  

Part of this failure, I've suggested, derives from a truncated vision of salvation, one over-determined by a concern for one's own security and standing before God. When claims to salvation function merely at the level of belief and not embodied practice, it

breeds a kind of inaction that calls into question the relevance of saving grace for earthly living: for the life that now obtains and presently calls for response.¹⁹⁴

But what was the point, the purpose, of my salvation if it did not permit me to behave with love toward others, no matter how they behaved toward me? What others did was their responsibility, for which they would answer when the judgment trumpet sounded. But what I did was my responsibility, and I would have to answer, too—unless, of course, there was also in Heaven a special dispensation of the benighted black, who was not to be judged in the same way as other human beings, or angels. (DC, 310)

Notice the emphasis on moral action. Here moral evasion receives justification, only by admitting the very claims most accounts of black salvation aimed to guard against: the view that black people were somehow inferior to other human beings, that they would be held to a lower standard and correspondingly inherit a heaven reserved just for their kind. Baldwin's immanent criticism flows from an appreciation of the danger of unquestioned religious authority. It retains a deep suspicion of utopic images and ideals, and the accompanying visions they spawn. Ideas concerning "God," "Revelation," "Salvation" and "The Inspired Word" are not to be taken as unquestioned givens. We are creatures of histories, cultures, and traditions, many of which contain competing narratives and a plurality of perspectives. Conflict abounds. Adjudication is never to be settled by quick appeals to religious authority, since the legitimacy of those appeals must also be interrogated, alongside any relevant alternatives. Recognizing this aspect of our human condition reminds us of the need for balanced criticism.

One way to engage in this practice, Baldwin recognizes, involves examining the priorities and emphases, alongside the oversights and blind spots of various traditions –

religious, political and otherwise. Thus, Baldwin offers an historical critique of "White Christians," who often fail to recall "several elementary historical details" (DC, 312). The spread of Christianity, on Baldwin's telling, was often tied to the "planting of the flag" and other sanctified quests for power – conquests that, when successful, served as proof of faithfulness to God and of God's good pleasure with such deeds. "In the realm of power," Baldwin writes, "Christianity has operated with an unmitigated arrogance and cruelty" while simultaneously being "more deeply concerned about the soul than it is about the body, to which fact the flesh (and the corpses) of countless infidels bears witness" (DC, 313). The critical interrogation of tradition—of historically conditioned stances, attitudes, and arguments—is therefore essential, lest we become mired in a set of allegiances untouched by our own assent, yet forced upon us by our inheritance.

Contemporary theologian and religious critic, Willie Jennings has offered a compelling account of the ways in which "modern Christianity's diseased social imagination" came about by vicious means – brutal and physical, theological and cultural, geographic and economic. His book, *The Christian Imagination*, confronts the "deeper realities of Western Christian sensibilities, identities, and habits of mind which continue to channel patterns of colonialist dominance."

At one level these are the historical commanding heights imagined by Western, white, male identities, but at another level these are ways of being in the world that resist the realities of submission, desire, and transformation. A Christianity born of such realities but historically formed to resist them has yielded a form of religious life that thwarts its deepest instincts of intimacy...Instead, the intimacy that marks Christian history is a painful one, one in which the joining often meant oppression, violence, and death, if not of bodies then most certainly of ways of life, forms of language, and visions of the world.  

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At the heart of Baldwin’s criticism of Christianity, much like Jennings, is a concern for the development of human character: “It is not too much to say that whoever wishes to become a truly moral human being...must first divorce himself from all the prohibitions, crimes, and hypocrisies of the Christian church” (DC, 314). Baldwin continues and extends this critique, suggesting that "in order to survive as a human, moving, moral weight in the world, America and all the Western nations will be forced to examine themselves and release themselves from many things that are now taken to be sacred, and to discard nearly all the assumptions that have been used to justify their lives and their anguish and their crimes so long" (DC, 312). For Baldwin, misplaced reverence corrupts and unchecked commitments ensnare. They weaken our capacities of judgment, action, and imagination, ultimately impoverishing our ways of being in the world. Not only does this worry include the exalted ideals any country, it especially concerns one’s religious ideals and visions. "If the concept of God has any validity or any use," writes Baldwin, "it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him" (DC, 314). Although one doesn't find a blanket denunciation of the divine in this passage, a principled (if vague) account of the conditions under which such a "concept" would be apt does emerge, one founded in growth, freedom, and love.

Awakening to the suppositions that inform our commitments often calls for the trimming of our identities. Growth, therefore, demands more than examination. It also requires loss: a circumcision of the heart and its flawed allegiances. Our wounded, yet
receptive openness conditions growth and reproduction. Here severance, fissure, and the pain that attends them are unavoidable. This partly explains why Baldwin became disillusioned with organized religion. The church was an anesthetic. It numbed him to the pain of hard truths and the difficult work of growing in discernment, vision, and love:

It probably occurred to me around this time that the vision people hold of the world to come is but a reflection, with predictable wishful distortions, of the world in which they live. And this did not apply only to Negroes, who were no more "simple" or "spontaneous" or "Christian" than anybody else—who were merely more oppressed. In this same way that we, for white people, were the descendants of Ham, and were cursed forever, white people were, for us, the descendants of Cain. And the passion with which we loved the Lord was a measure of how deeply we feared and distrusted, in the end, hated almost all strangers, always, and avoided and despised ourselves. (DC, 310)

Although Baldwin's worries regarding fear and hatred are pronounced, he doesn't reject everything about the Christianity of his childhood. It is true that he seeks distance from its perversions, hypocrisies, and its failures to embody the virtues of faith, hope, and love. But in meditating on the positive aspects of his experience in the church, he notes the power of many adherents to face tragedy without being consumed. "In spite of everything, there was in the life I fled a zest and a joy and a capacity for facing and surviving disaster that are very moving and very rare." Amid catastrophe, and "bound together by the nature of our oppression," Baldwin recalls, "we sometimes achieved with each other a freedom that was close to love" (DC, 310).

A sensuality and force and drama animated Baldwin's experience in the church, containing within its bosom the unique power to transform: "There is still, for me, no pathos quite like the pathos of those multicolored, worn, somehow triumphant and

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196 James Baldwin, "No Name in the Street," 371. Of the "irresponsibility and cowardice of the liberal community," especially white intellectuals, Baldwin says, "the truth is a two-edged sword—and if one is not willing to be pierced by that sword, even to the extreme of dying on it, then all of one's intellectual activity is a masturbatory delusion and a wicked and dangerous fraud."
transfigured faces, speaking from the depths of a visible, tangible, continuing despair of the goodness of the Lord" (DC, 306). Those dramatic encounters of communal transcendence and spirit furnished many with the sustenance to 'go on.' And the impact of such encounters should not be missed, notwithstanding Baldwin's worries with black Christianity. If what Baldwin found in such moments was close to love, his experiences beyond the church would teach him that such love was not limited to religious spaces, sects, and creeds. It extended to other spiritual and musical and communal spaces as well.

I remember, anyway, church suppers and outings, and, later, after I left the church, rent and waistline parties where rage and sorrow sat in the darkness and did not stir, and we ate and drank and talked and laughed and danced and forgot all about "the man." We had the liquor, the chicken, the music, and each other, and had no need to pretend to be what we were not. This is the freedom that one hears in some gospel songs, for example, and in jazz. (DC, 310-11)

If concerns about the impact of fear and hatred on moral development emerge in Baldwin's analysis of the Christian church, they also surface in Baldwin's critique of the Nation of Islam. Although Baldwin disagrees with many of Elijah Muhammad's conclusions, he is not unmoved by their appeal. Baldwin's analysis aims to show why the *Nation* is at once compelling and disturbing. Where Christianity promised the fruits of divine love, the Nation of Islam offered the assurance of power. What emerges through Baldwin's encounter with the Elijah Muhammad is the necessity of linking love to power—and the tensions that characterize that union. Quests for power, Baldwin argues, must be guided by love; but love, without power, is ineffectual and toothless: "I knew the tension in me between love and power, between pain and rage, and the curious, the
grinding way I remained extended between these poles—perpetually attempting to choose the better rather than the worse" (DC, 322).\textsuperscript{197}

Part of what made the Nation of Islam a viable alternative was the limitations of Christian love in the struggle against white supremacy. As Baldwin saw it, there was a sense in which "Neither civilized reason nor Christian love would cause any of those people to treat you as they presumably wanted to be treated; only the fear of your power to retaliate would cause them to do that, or to seem to do it, which was (and is) good enough" (DC, 299). The Nation of Islam spoke to this sensibility, which inclined Baldwin to listen closely to their message. As Baldwin himself could see, "power is real, and many things, including, very often, love, cannot be achieved without it" (DC, 328).

The Nation promised access to two things that are indispensable for a worthwhile life: power and hope.\textsuperscript{198} The police had stopped being as violent and aggressive in areas where they held influence. And, on Baldwin's view, "this was not because they had

\textsuperscript{197} The tensions and interrelations between love, power, and justice emerge in James Cone's attempt to offer a theological account of a black Christianity instructed by and indebted to the concerns of the Black Power Movement, especially the insights of Stokely Carmichael. Cone's text, \textit{Black Theology and Black Power}, was published in 1969, six years after the publication of Baldwin's \textit{Fire}. With theologian Paul Tillich's claim that "It is the strange work of love to destroy what is against love" in mind, Cone offers a theological account of violent insurrection: "The violence in the cities, which appears to contradict Christian love, is nothing but the black man's attempt to say Yes to his being as defined by God in a world that would make his being into nonbeing. If the riots are the black man's courage to say Yes to himself as a creature of God, and if in affirming self he affirms Yes to the neighbor, then violence may be the black man's expression, sometimes the only possible expression, of Christian love to the white oppressor." For the Tillich and Cone quotes, see James H. Cone, \textit{Black Theology and Black Power} (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 54 and 55. For an extended treatment of the ontology and ethics of love, power, and justice, see Paul Tillich, \textit{Love, Power, and Justice: Ontological Analyses and Ethical Applications} (London: Oxford University Press, 1954).

\textsuperscript{198} James Baldwin, "Down at the Cross," 315. "The behavior of the crowd, its silent intensity, was other thing that forced me to reassess the speakers and their message. Integrity may have less value when people are so prone to believe empty, political rhetoric. Still, the speakers had an air of utter dedication, and the people looked toward them with a kind of intelligence of hope on their faces—not as though they were being consoled or drugged but as though they were being jolted."
become more human but because they were under orders and because they were afraid"

(DC, 314). Baldwin continues,

There they stood, in twos and threes and fours...totally unprepared, as is the way with American he-men, for anything that could not be settled with a club or a fist or a gun. I might have pitied them if I had not found myself in their hands so often and discovered, through ugly experience, what they were like when you held the power and what they were like when they held the power (DC, 314-15).

This made ethical living quite difficult, because the wrong assumption could land you in jail or outside in the cold. Loving other folk would demand courage and great risk.

Baldwin confesses the difficulties of his task this way:

All doormen, for example, and all police have by now, for me, become exactly the same, and my style with them is designed simply to intimidate them before they can intimidate me. No doubt I am guilty of some injustice here, but it is irreducible, since I cannot risk assuming that the humanity of these people is more real to them than their uniforms. Most Negroes cannot risk assuming that the humanity of white people is more real to them than their color. And this leads, imperceptibly but inevitably, to a state of mind in which, having long ago learned to expect the worst, one finds it very easy to believe the worst. (DC, 325)

The "worst" about white people was exactly what the Nation of Islam offered to explain and, ultimately, overcome. The Nation offered a compelling account of the problem of evil, alongside the promise of power (DC, 326-7). They offered an alternate view of God and of black suffering, one that didn't require apology. As Baldwin noticed, "very little time was spent on theology, for one did not need to prove to a Harlem audience that all white men were devils. They were merely glad to have, at last, divine corroboration of their experience, to hear—and it was a tremendous thing to hear—that they had been lied to for all these years and generations, and that their captivity was ending, for God was black" (DC, 315). Although Baldwin would concede that many of the Nation's claims
were not easily refuted by reality, he would nonetheless disagree with many of its conclusions.

One of the conclusions he rejected was that white people could not be changed: that they were by necessity, ontologically evil. Baldwin could not agree that there was "by definition, no virtue in white people...since they are another creation entirely and can no more, by breeding, become black than a cat, by breeding, can become a horse, there is no hope for them" (DC, 325). From his perspective, this was but another adaptation of the Christian doctrine he wanted to reject (DC, 327):

There is nothing new in this merciless formulation except the explicitness of its symbols and the candor of its hatred. Its emotional tone is as familiar to me as my own skin; it is but another way of saying that sinners shall be bound in Hell a thousand years. That sinners have always, for American Negroes, been white is a truth we needn't labor, and every American Negro, therefore, risks having the gates of paranoia close on him. (DC, 325)

In effect, Baldwin's critique of the Nation was that their God didn't make persons 'larger, more free, and more loving.' Power without love, in Baldwin's eyes, was idolatrous. Yet Baldwin would not defang Black folks of their political agency by taking the threat of violence entirely off the table. "When Malcolm X...points out that the cry of 'violence' was not raised, for example when the Israelis fought to regain Israel, and, indeed, is raised only when black men indicate they will fight for their rights, he is speaking the truth." Black folks constitute an exception, Baldwin argues. "The conquests of England, every single one of them bloody, are part of what Americans have

199 For a similar worry about God, see James Baldwin, "In Search of a Majority," 220. "I suggest that the role of the Negro in American life has something to do with our concept of what God is, and from my point of view, this concept is not big enough. It has got to be made much bigger than it is because God is, after all, not anybody's toy. To be with God is really to be involved with some enormous, overwhelming desire, and joy, and power which you cannot control, which controls you. I conceive of my own life as a journey toward something I do not understand, which in the going toward, makes me better. I conceive of God, in fact, as a means of liberation and not a means to control others."
in mind when they speak of England's glory. In the United States, violence and heroism have been made synonymous except when it comes to blacks, and the only way to defeat Malcolm's point is to concede it and then ask oneself why this is so" (DC, 320).

Why is it so difficult for black persons to be viewed as freedom fighters who, at times, may have to engage in acts of violent heroism? "The real reason that non-violence is considered to be a virtue in Negroes—I am not speaking now of its racial value, another matter altogether—is that white men do not want their lives, their self-image, or their property threatened" (DC, 321). But such realities are rarely, if ever, admitted. Genteel modes of decorum and decency are not gateways to freedom, though they often pacify the anxieties of many liberals, white and black. Baldwin, however, rejects this strategy as baseless: "There is no reason that black men should be expected to be more patient, more forbearing, more farseeing than whites; indeed, quite the opposite" (DC, 320-1).200

To be sure, Baldwin's rejection of Elijah Muhammad's doctrine was not blind to the achievements of the man. Baldwin writes about the virtues of Elijah Muhammad, finding much to be cherished in his way of being in the world and in the many contributions of his movement to society (DC, 316).201 Even though Baldwin may have disagreed with the account of history, and the ideas of good and evil Elijah Muhammad espoused, this did not prevent Baldwin from appreciating the life that emanated from his

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person—his contagious joy, his "marvelous smile," his buried pain, his surprising warmth, his unsung musicality. Baldwin writes about Elijah with care and criticality, honoring his humanity with loving detail (DC, 323). The beauty of his being receives its due.

I do not know what I had expected to see. I had read some of his speeches, and had heard fragments of others on the radio and on television, so I associated him with ferocity. But, no—the man who came into the room was small and slender, really very delicately put together, with a thin face, large, warm eyes, and a most winning smile. Something came into the room with him—his disciples' joy at seeing him, his joy at seeing them. It was the kind of encounter one watches with a smile simply because it is so rare that people enjoy one another. He teased the women, like a father, with no hint of that ugly and unctuous flirtatiousness I knew so well from other churches, and they responded like that, with great freedom and yet from a great and loving distance. (DC, 323)

Throughout his conversation with Elijah Muhammad, Baldwin finds himself defending the humanity of white people. "Elijah looked at me with great kindness and affection, great pity, as though he were reading my heart, and indicated, skeptically that I might have white friends, or think I did, and they might be trying to be decent—not—but their time was up." In any case, "I certainly had no evidence to give them that would outweigh Elijah's authority or the evidence of their own lives or the reality of the streets outside" (DC, 328). The difficulty of making that case was overwhelming. For every decent white person Baldwin could point to, there was the entire Southside of Chicago stretched just outside, which proved Elijah's indictment of white evil. "I knew two or three people, white, whom I would trust with my life, and I knew a few others, white, who were struggling as hard as they knew how, and with great effort and sweat and risk, to make the world more human" (DC, 328).
Any evidence in favor of white virtue was simply treated as an aberration, an exception to the rule (DC, 328). In an effort to resist Elijah's conclusions, Baldwin posits "a certain category of exceptions [who] never failed to make the world worse—that category, precisely, for whom power is more real than love" (DC, 328). These are precisely the charismatic figures, ideologues, and political groups that many find alluring, precisely because they avoid the difficulties of love, while also satisfying human cravings for superiority.202 "People always seem to band together in accordance to a principle that has nothing to do with love, a principle that releases them from personal responsibility" (DC, 333).203 Neutrality seems to promise a way of escape, but it cannot deliver: the need to take principled stands against systems and practices of injustice is simply too great.204 In environments like this, where quests for power are ultimate, it becomes difficult to imagine non-dominating ideals and utopias, those worthy of our highest aspirations: "How can one...dream of power in any other terms," Baldwin asks, "than in the symbols of power?" (DC, 332). And yet power is precisely what the powerless desire: "The only thing white people have that black people need, or should want is power," Baldwin writes, "and no one holds power forever" (DC, 341-2).

202 James Baldwin, "Down at the Cross," 337. "There are too many things we do not wish to know about ourselves. People are not, for example, terrible anxious to be equal (equal, after all, to what and to whom?) but they love the idea of being superior. And this human truth has an especially grinding force here, where identity is almost impossible to achieve and people are perpetually attempting to find their feet on the shifting sands of status."

203 Here Baldwin is talking about the responsibility we have to be better human beings. He is not talking about the rhetoric of personal responsibility frequently used to deny the difficult life options that systematically impoverished and underserviced communities face. So much of the essay condemns the inhumanity and injustice of those conditions; it does not seek to deny their significance.

204 Baldwin notes the explosive potential of awakening to the possibility that those who remain silent, neutral or indifferent in the face of injustice might also be enemies. "The subtle and deadly change of heart that might occur in you would be involved with the realization that a civilization is not destroyed by wicked people; it is not necessary that people be wicked but only that they be spineless" Baldwin, "Down at the Cross," 318.
Elijah Muhammad spoke to this need. "I've come," Baldwin recalls Elijah saying, "to give you something that which can never be taken away from you." It was an enlivening thing to hear, even transformative. "How solemn the table became then, and how great a light arose in the dark faces," Baldwin remembers (DC, 330). Baldwin knew that self-worth was crucial for living well. It was a source of empowerment, which itself required access to power. Thus, the historicizing of black excellence and the retelling of such achievements offered a wellspring of sustenance for those who could identify with such narratives. It was a practice of care and sustenance that aimed to fortify one's eroding self-worth. To be situated within a longer history of empowerment and triumph was invigorating. As Baldwin observed, "People cannot live without this sense; they will do anything whatever to regain it. This is why the most dangerous creation of any society is the man who has nothing to lose." Such persons have little regard for what they destroy or maim, including their own souls. The sacredness of their humanity and the humanity of others is no longer accessible. Care of self is therefore essential to the care of others—all the more so for persons who find their dignity relentlessly under siege. Baldwin's love letter to James, his nephew and namesake, affirmed the power of the past: of remembering "whence you came."

While Baldwin doesn't think the past is something to be fictitiously made-up, he finds something useful in (certain) brash, militant decrees that insist on the value of black people. "Years ago, we used to say, "Yes, I'm black, goddammit, and I'm beautiful!'—in defiance, into the void. But now—now—African kings and heroes have come into the world, out of the past, the past that can now be put to the uses of power. And black has become a beautiful color—not because it is loved but because it is feared. And this
urgency on the part of American Negroes is not to be forgotten!" (DC, 331). Baldwin wants to retain the beauty, power, and stridency of this tradition, but he also wants to distance himself from any perilous claims to superiority. Thus, his rejection of Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam is nuanced, but not wholesale.

*Ripened Fruits: Living Well, Loving Beauty, and Being Free*

Speaking the truth in love, on Baldwin's model, always involves sensing the presence of light amid darkness; appreciating the shared humanity—and commonality—that underwrites any disagreement; and recognizing the beauties and terrors that lurk within and without. This holds as much for enemies and friends, as for oneself and one's society. None of this implies that criticism should be sentimental. Nor does it counsel against militancy, aggression, and the bearing of hard truths. But it does suggest that our stridency need always preserve what is precious about the humanity that guides (or ought to be guiding) our struggle. Where such sensitivity wanes, so does the integrity of one's critique. Of his final moments with Elijah Muhammad, Baldwin recalls,

> It was time to leave, and we stood in the large living room, saying good night, with everything curiously and heavily unresolved. I could not help feeling that I had failed a test, in their eyes and in my own, or that I had failed to heed a warning...It was very strange to stand with Elijah for those few moments, facing those vivid, violent, so problematical streets. I felt very close to him, and really wished to be able to love and honor him as a witness, an ally, and a father. I felt that I knew something of his pain and his fury, and, yes, even his beauty. Yet precisely because of the reality and the nature of those streets—because of what he conceived as his

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205 This tracks one of the oldest debates in African American politics, the tension between nationalism and integration, or radical revolutionaries/separatists vs accommodationists. Baldwin seeks a middle ground, a kind or radical egalitarianism that embraces the power of blackness without invoking claims to superiority or wholesale separatism. On this tension and the details of these traditions, see *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001).

206 James Baldwin, “Nothing Personal,” 694. “It has always been much easier (because it has always seemed much safer) to give a name to the evil without than to locate the terror within.”
responsibility and what I took to be mine—we would always be strangers, and possibly, one day, enemies. (DC, 331-32)

For Baldwin, claims to black pre-eminence were but another expression of a lust for superiority\textsuperscript{207} and revenge,\textsuperscript{208} a way of affirming that "the the sword they have used so long against others can now, without mercy, be used against them." Baldwin saw clearly that—regardless of one's religious affiliation—"Heavenly witnesses are a tricky lot, to be used by whoever is closest to Heaven at the time. And legend and theology, which are designed to sanctify our fears, crimes, and aspirations, also reveal them for what they are" (DC, 327). Baldwin puts his critique of the Nation of Islam this way:

Yet I could have hoped that the Muslim movement had been able to inculcate in the demoralized Negro population a truer and more individual sense of its own worth, so that Negroes in the Northern ghetto could begin, in concrete terms, and at whatever price, to change their situation. But in order to change a situation one has first to see it for what it is: in the present case, to accept the fact, whatever one does with it thereafter, that the Negro has been formed by this nation, for better or worse, and does not belong to any other—not in Africa, and certainly not to Islam. The paradox—and a fearful paradox it is—is that the American Negro can have no future anywhere, on any continent, as long he is unwilling to accept his past. To accept one's past—one's history—is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it. An invented past can never be used; it cracks and crumbles under the pressures of life like clay in a season of drought. (DC, 333)

Baldwin doesn't oppose the creation of a "truer" and "more individual" basis for self-affirmation. The recognition of one's worth actually conditions (and motivates) any felt obligation to battle for alternative conditions of living. Black people are not inferior to white people, nor are they exceptional paragons of virtue because of their skin color (DC,

\textsuperscript{207} James Baldwin, "Down at the Cross," 344. "But we must avoid the European error, we must not suppose that, because the situation, the ways, the perceptions of black people so radically differed from those whites, they were racially superior."

\textsuperscript{208} James Baldwin, "Down at the Cross," 346. "I sat at Elijah's table and watched the baby, the women, and the men, and we talked about God's—or Allah's—vengeance, I wondered, when that vengeance was achieved, What will happen to all that beauty then?"
As Baldwin sees it, American Negroes are an inescapable part of this country's making, which means that they are likewise subject to the temptations of the country's dreams, idols, and illusions. They are not immunized by the color of their skin, though their experiences do lead to particular sensibilities. Thus Baldwin emphatically dispels any claims to superiority, while also seeking to maintain a sense of black particularity.

As a general rule, Baldwin thinks "White people cannot...be taken as models of how to live" (DS, 342). Most white folks have yet to break free of the blinding effects of their whiteness. They often suffer from a kind of social panic, which Baldwin posits as having to do with unresolved anxieties regarding status and rank. In certain white supremacist imaginaries, "the Negro tells us where the bottom is: because he is there, and where he is, beneath us, we know where the limits are and how far we must not fall." But "if the Negro were not here," Baldwin muses, "we might be forced to deal within ourselves and our personalities, with all those vices, all those conundrums, and all those mysteries which we have invested the Negro race." Baldwin thinks that any extended look at the myths this country has espoused regarding black people confirms his hypothesis.

Thus, when he writes in the passage below about the difficulty of white folks serving as models for how to live, we would do well to remember his worry about status and rank.

...the white man is himself in sore need of new standards, which will release him from his confusion and place him once again in fruitful communion with the depths of his own being. And I repeat: The price of

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209 James Baldwin, "In Search of a Majority," 218-19.
the liberation of the white people is the liberation of the blacks—the total liberation, in the cities, in the towns, before the law, and in the mind. (DC, 342)

Beyond a change in institutional arrangements,\textsuperscript{211} the freedom of black and brown people in the United States depends on the freedom of white persons, as well as those who are prepared to bear that weight.\textsuperscript{212} It also depends upon a reimagining of the very constitution of this country, which is itself tied to the character of the persons who comprise it. "What it comes to is that if we, who can scarcely be considered a white nation, persist in thinking of ourselves as one, we condemn ourselves...whereas, if we could accept ourselves as we are, we might bring new life to the Western achievements, and transform them" (DC, 340). But change exacts a heavy cost. For Baldwin, "The price of this transformation is the unconditional freedom of the Negro; it is not too much to say that he, who has been so long rejected, must now be embraced, and at no matter what psychic or social risk?" (DC, 340). This requires the smashing of idols: a loss of identity. In order to be free, white folks will themselves need "to become a part of that suffering and dancing country," which is, in effect, to "become black" (DC, 341). "In short, we, the black and the white, deeply need each other here if we are really to become a nation—if we are really, that is, to achieve our identity, our maturity, as men and women" (DC, 342).

Any sort of transformation, for Baldwin, will be preceded by critical examination. All persons must look at the myths they've inherited. "The Negroes of this country may

\textsuperscript{211}James Baldwin, "Down at the Cross," 335. "Now, there is simply no possibility of a real change in the Negro's situation without the most radical and far-reaching changes in the American political and social structure. And it is clear that white Americans are not simply unwilling to effect these changes; they are, in the main, so slothful have they become, unable even to envision them."

\textsuperscript{212}James Baldwin, "Down at the Cross," 337. "Furthermore, I have met only a very few people—and most of these were not Americans—who had any real desire to be free. Freedom is hard to bear."
never be able to rise to power, but they are very well placed to precipitate chaos and ring down the curtain on the American dream. This has everything to do, of course, with the nature of that dream and with the fact that we Americans, of whatever color do not dare examine it and are far from having made it a reality” (DC, 337). Continuing his criticism of the American dream, Baldwin suggests that, "We are controlled here by our confusion, far more than we know, and the American dream has therefore become something much more closely resembling a nightmare, on the private, domestic, and international levels. Privately, we cannot stand our lives and dare not examine them; domestically, we take no responsibility for (and no pride in) what goes on in our country; and, internationally, for many millions of people, we are an unmitigated disaster" (DC, 337).

It is within this context that we are to understand Baldwin's call for white Americans to 'become a part of that suffering and dancing country.' In a sense, there is and has been no other reality. White delusion involves an effort to deny the disaster that lies at the heart of the American experiment. But one must always retain a sense of the blues: a way of embracing the agony and groaning and sojourning that occurs in the midst of catastrophe. "Only people who have been 'down the line,' Baldwin says, "know what the music is about" (DC, 311). Since the North Atlantic Slave Trade, black people in the Americas have had to face and suffer such difficulties. Their conditions of living forced them to explore alternative ways of thriving – not because they were morally

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213 For an analysis of the shortcomings of the American Dream and how different racial and class groups perceive such realities, see Jennifer L Hochschild, Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, the Soul of the Nation (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).
superior, but because they had no other choice. They had to "make do" with realities that were too harsh to ignore or wish away.\(^{214}\)

Efforts to avoid darkness and death, to expunge them from one's daily encounters with life and light, are futile and spiritually immature: suffering is a part of growing up (DC, 343); and learning to dance in the face of it is essential for living well.\(^{215}\) Where such capacities do not obtain, emotive stiffness, corporeal rigidity, and sonic sterility soon follow: "White Americans seem to feel that happy songs are happy and sad songs are sad, and that, God help us, is exactly the way most white Americans sing them..." (DC, 311). But we find no such thing in the black musical traditions Baldwin lifts, at least on his telling: "In all jazz, and especially in the blues," Baldwin writes, "there is something tart and ironic, authoritative and double-edged" (DC, 311).\(^{216}\)

White Americans do not understand the depths out of which such an ironic tenacity comes, but they suspect that the force is sensual, and they are terrified of sensuality and do not any longer understand it. The word "sensual" is not intended to bring to mind quivering dusky maidens or priapic black studs. I am referring to something much simpler and much less fanciful. To be sensual, I think, is to respect and rejoice in the force

\(^{214}\) "And you make do with nothing, and you get, if you survive, a kind of authority from that. You really have to know yourself to find resources to make do with the minimum. But you wouldn't do it if you weren't forced to do it. And the moment you're not forced to do it anymore, you stop doing it." James Baldwin, "Disturber of the Peace: James Baldwin—An Interview," (1969) in \textit{Conversations with James Baldwin}, 75.

\(^{215}\) I have in mind a quote from Havelock Ellis's \textit{The Dance of Life}: "The academic philosophers of ethics, had they possessed virility enough to enter the field of real life, would have realized...that the slavery to rigid formulas which they preached was the death of all high moral responsibility...A clear-sighted eye, a many-sided sympathy, a fine daring, an endless patience, are forever necessary to all good living." As cited in Steven Fesmire, \textit{John Dewey and Moral Imagination: Pragmatism in Ethics} (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2003), 1. I've also learned much from Toni Morrison, \textit{The Dancing Mind} (New York: Knopf, 1996); and Emilie M. Townes, "Walking on the Rim Bones of Nothingness," American Academy of Religion Address, \textit{Journal of the American Academy of Religion} (2009): 1–15.

\(^{216}\) This reminds of another passage, where with the King James Bible clearly in mind (Heb. 4:12), Baldwin writes of the double-edged nature of truth. See James Baldwin, "No Name in the Street," 37. "The truth is a two-edged sword—and if one is not willing to be pierced by that sword, even to the extreme of dying on it, then all of one's intellectual activity is a masturbatory delusion and a wicked and dangerous fraud."
of life, of life itself, and to be present in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread. (DC, 311)

America, as a nation, must embrace such sensuality. It is the only way to confront disaster and survive it.

It will be a great day for America, incidentally, when we begin to eat bread again, instead of the blasphemous and tasteless foam rubber that we have substituted for it...Something very sinister happens to the people of a country when they begin to distrust their own reactions as deeply as they do here, and become as joyless as they have become. It is this individual uncertainty on the part of white American men and women, this inability to renew themselves at the foundation of their own lives, that makes the discussion, let alone elucidation, of any conundrum—that is, any reality—so supremely difficulty. The person who distrusts himself has no touchstone for reality—for this touchstone can be only oneself. (DC, 311-12)

Baldwin's recommendation, then, is for Americans of all stripes to rejoice in life, but to do so without being deluded. For this to happen pretenses will need to be unmasked and healthy forms of self-love will need to be sustained. Put differently, dominant assumptions about black people will need to be jettisoned. Baldwin rails against the view that black folks are "eager to be accepted" and "cared for" by whites, instead suggesting that they would simply prefer to avoid domination (DC, 299). He also disabuses the view that blacks expect to be given what they haven't earned, to be the beneficiaries of undeserved handouts (DC, 335-36). Such pretense affects not only how white persons view other folks, it can also impact how whites view themselves. Some

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217 This claim goes back to sensuality and the need for the erotic. Erotic encounters are tied to joyful existence and the creation of self-trusting subjects, those who have been tried and tested. Audre Lorde makes related points about the use of the erotic for the empowering of women and other marginalized groups. "Once we know the extent to which we are capable of feeling that sense of satisfaction and completion, we can then observe which of our various life endeavors bring us closest to that fullness" (54-55). The erotic also provides the "power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference (56). See Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 53-59.
find it tempting to think that "tokenism" signals a love for justice and 'progress' or that "goodwill" sufficiently absolves one of moral responsibility (DC, 336). Baldwin, however, thinks that the task of growing into maturity demands far more. Since most persons tend to be protective when it comes to their possessions, Baldwin notes a strong tendency to be conservative regarding those beliefs and passions that constitute the core of who we take ourselves to be. This is why greatness of giving often signals depth of loss, and depth of loss often reflects the greatness of what has been received. Sacrifice is a condition for growth and giving, for the sharing of life and love. In Baldwin's words,

Most people guard and keep; they suppose that it is they themselves and what they identify with themselves that they are guarding and keeping, whereas what they are actually guarding and keeping is their system of reality and what they assume themselves to be. One can give nothing whatever without giving oneself—that is to say, risking oneself. If one cannot risk oneself, then one is simply incapable of giving. And, after all, one can give freedom only by setting someone free. (DC, 336)

218 James Baldwin, "Down at the Cross," 336. "For hard example, white Americans congratulate themselves on the 1954 Supreme Court decision outlawing segregation in the schools; they suppose, in spite of the mountain of evidence that has since accumulated to the contrary, that this was proof of a change of heart—or, as they like to say, progress...Had it been a matter of love or justice, the 1954 decision would surely have occurred sooner; were it not for the realities of power in this difficult era, it might very well not have occurred yet. This seems an extremely harsh way of stating the case—ungrateful, as it were—but the evidence that supports this way of stating it is not easily refuted."


220 These remarks on sacrifice focus on the ethical and non-moral contexts of our own development as particular kinds of persons, moral and otherwise. But political theorist Danielle Allen has also noted the ways in which sacrifice is built into the nature of democracy. Citizens must be prepared to encounter 'wins' and endure 'losses.' See Danielle Allen, Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship Since Brown v. Board of Education (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006), 25-52.
Practices of renewal are significant, precisely because living and giving are so difficult. We must ever seek to find sources of replenishment, communal and individual. In other words, there is a need to engage in healthy techniques of self-care. The tasks before us are too daunting for anything less. The challenges of white Americans are the challenges of humans the world over: to love and live well—without delusion and domination. "White people in this country will have quite enough to do in learning how to accept and love themselves and each other, and when they have achieved this—which will not be tomorrow and may very well be never—the Negro problem will no longer exist, for it will no longer be needed” (DC, 299-300). Blacks and whites in this country sorely require the freedom of one another.

But even with this sense of mutual need and entanglement, Baldwin still works to retain the specificity of black perspectives. Of course this needn't be understood in the strong and untenable sense of: 'all black folks share the same perspective'. Baldwin can talk of the particularity of certain black modes of belief and perception without claiming that his observation necessarily holds for every discrete black individual. Clearly, there are cases where members of the dominant majority come to identify with the viewpoint of the downtrodden, and still others where individuals in the minority group come to take on the sensibilities of the dominant majority. Furthermore, if this standard of invariance were rigorously applied, we wouldn't be able to say anything about the experiences of any group, since every person in each group theoretically retains a unique perspective, if only because of his or her discrete socio-biological station in space and time. We need only admit that Baldwin is speaking of trends and tendencies. With these caveats in
mind, Baldwin finds something distinctive about the station of America's darker
inhabitations.

The American Negro has the great advantage of having never believed
that collection of myths to which white Americans cling: that their
ancestors were all freedom-loving heroes, that they were born in the
greatest country the world has ever seen, or that Americans are invincible
in battle and wise in peace, that Americans have always dealt honorably
with Mexicans and Indians and all other neighbors or inferiors, that
American men are the worlds' most direct and virile, that American
women are pure. (DC, 344)221

None of this should lead to a sense of superiority, however. Although Baldwin is
concerned about the political freedoms of black and brown persons, he is not willing to
sacrifice moral integrity to secure it. One cannot demonize one's brothers and sisters
without dehumanizing oneself. The scarring (or numbing) of self that ensues leads its
own set of constraints. Spiritual disfigurement brings its own limitations; and moral
monsters who repeatedly defile their live options—the life—in their midst demonstrate as
much. Such persons find themselves estranged from worlds of value and possibility—cut
off from what is good, just, and lovely—confined to a lesser estate—and bound, as it
were, to the ruin of their lot. Neither the acquisition of political freedom nor the
possession of power is a worthy end-in-itself. But the preservation of character is just
that. Although Baldwin rightly senses the danger of this formulation, he refuses to shrink
from the challenge: "It can be objected that I am speaking of political freedom in spiritual
terms, but the political institutions of any nation are always menaced and are ultimately
controlled by the spiritual state of the nation" (DC, 337). Freedom and power matter only
insofar as human lives matter; human dignity isn't something to be instrumentalized.

221 This calls to mind W.E.B Du Bois's idea of being "born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this
American world." See W.E.B Du Bois, The Souls of Black in Writings (New York: Library of America,
1986), 364.
The glorification of one race and the consequent debasement of another—or others—always has been and always will be a recipe for murder. There is no way around this. If one is permitted to treat a group of people with special disfavor because of their race or the color of their skin, there is no limit to what one will force them to endure, and, since the entire race has been mysteriously indicted, no reason not to attempt to destroy it root and branch...It is scarcely worthwhile to attempt remembering how many times the sun has looked down on the slaughter of the innocents. I am very much concerned that American Negroes achieve their freedom here in the United States. But I am also concerned for their dignity, for the health of their souls, and must oppose any attempt that Negroes may make to do to others what has been done to them. I think I know—we see it around us every day—the spiritual wasteland to which that road leads. It is so simple a fact and one that is so hard, apparently, to grasp: *Whoever debases others is debasing himself.* That is not a mystical statement but a most realistic one, which is proved by the eyes of any Alabama sheriff—and I would not like to see Negroes ever arrive at so wretched a condition. (DC, 334)

Alongside his worries with invented histories and mythical illusions, concerns about the worshipping of little gods—like status and safety—remain at the center of Baldwin's ethic. "Time and time and time again, the people discover that they have merely betrayed themselves into the hands of yet another Pharaoh...Perhaps, people being the conundrums that they are, and having so little desire to shoulder the burden of their lives, this is what will always happen." We should not read past the 'perhaps,' which signals the possibility of persons and things being otherwise. Although Baldwin entertains the reality that our fate could be sealed, he doesn't end there: "...at the bottom of my heart I do not believe this. I think that people can be better than that, and I know that people can be better than they are. We are capable of bearing a great burden, once we discover that the burden is reality and arrive where reality is" (DS, 338). Critical examination is an essential feature of growing up and of the birthing of new societies. An abiding hope in what is yet-to-come animates Baldwin's ethic. His is a faith in the unborn, in selves and societies still unknown and improbable, but not impossible.
In short, Baldwin would have us avoid idolatry. It's what motivates him to aggressively criticize the ethics and politics of race. It is "a fearful and delicate problem, which compromises, when it does not corrupt, all the American efforts to build a better world—here, there, or anywhere. It is for this reason that everything white Americans think they believe in must now be reexamined." White people must engage in such work precisely because of the power of white supremacist logics and ideals. But he thinks that claims to black supremacy are also troubling. Here Baldwin begins to hint at his utopian ideal: "What one would not like to see again is the consolidation of peoples on the basis of their color." Yet Baldwin sees that this is but a distant hope. For "as long as we in the West place on color the value that we do, we make it impossible for the great unwashed to consolidate themselves according to any other principle. Color is not a human or personal reality; it is a political reality. But this is a distinction so extremely hard to make that the West has not been able to make it yet" (DC, 345-6).

Said differently, present political conditions make it neither possible nor responsible to arrange ourselves in different terms. Baldwin thinks that we always need to be conscious of where reality ends and myth begins. For him, race concerns the political, not something metaphysical, permanent, or endemic. To be clear, Baldwin isn't advocating for a color-blind society. He just wants us to see race for what it is – and nothing more. "I know that what I am asking is impossible. But in our time, as in every time, the impossible is the least that one can demand—and one is, after all, emboldened by the spectacle of human history in general and American Negro history in particular, for it testifies to nothing less than the perpetual achievement of the impossible" (DC, 346).
Notice the way that Baldwin thinks that the historical record of human beings in general speaks to novelty and innovation. It is within his recognition of the universal struggles and historical triumphs of particular human beings that Baldwin singles out the sources of his own existence: the unique history that made possible his coming into the world, his growing sense of self-understanding, and his orientation toward the future. "How can the American Negro's past be used?" asks Baldwin. His first reply gestures toward utopia, history that can be used through the "transcendence of realities of color, of nations, and of altars" (DC, 333). Any appropriation of history we must refuse the allure of little divines.

A few pages later, however, Baldwin offers another option. There he considers the possibility of destruction and vengeance if certain thresholds are reached (DC, 345). "It is entirely possible," he says, "that this dishonored past will rise up soon to smite all of us" (DC, 345). Although Baldwin considers this option, he doesn't endorse it, precisely because of what it would destroy—namely, the preciousness of life and the beauty therein. "Dealing with my buddies in those wine- and urine-stained hallways" Baldwin recalls, "something in me wondered, What will happen to all that beauty? For black people, though I am aware that some of us, black and white, do not know it yet, are very beautiful" (DC, 346). Beauty, for Baldwin, is an invitation to love, an occasion to care. It is as integral to justice as art. Beauty binds us to the task, to the art and ethics of living well.

To my mind, the best place to go for Baldwin's account of how to use Negro history doesn't directly involve addressing the question (DC, 333 and 345). I think Baldwin's actual employment of Negro history throughout Fire as well as his previous
essays proves more instructive. There we find a host of powerful 'achievements', exemplars, and examples. Recall Baldwin's talk of coming to an awareness of his inheritance and the range of figures that included. Properly using this history 'emboldens' and empowers persons to dare the seemingly 'impossible'. It provides models for how to live, not merely because of the color of someone's skin, but because of the character of an exemplar's humanity. "I am proud of these people not because of their color," Baldwin writes, "but because of their intelligence and their spiritual force and their beauty. The country should be proud of them, too, but, alas, not many people in this country even know of their existence. And the reason for this ignorance is that a knowledge of the role these people played—and play—in American life would reveal more about American to Americans than Americans wish to know" (DC, 344). Negro history contains a reservoir of 'spiritual resilience' that needn't be saddled with claims of superiority. It contains ethical and artistic 'aristocrats' who carved lives for themselves amid unspeakable terrors, often without teaching their children to hate their oppressors (DC, 343). These ancestral witnesses guide, comfort, and instruct.

This past, the Negro's past, of rope, fire, torture, castration, infanticide, rape; death and humiliation; fear by day and night, fear as deep as the marrow of the bone; doubt that he was worthy of life, since everyone around him denied it; sorrow for his women, for his kinfolk, for his children, who needed his protection, and whom he could not protect; rage, hatred, and murder, hatred for white men so deep that it often turned

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222 Recall how Beauford Delaney introduced Baldwin to folks who were living, breathing exemplars of black excellence and triumph. See James Baldwin, "Introduction: The Price of the Ticket," 831. "I really began to hear Ella Fitzgerald, Ma Rainey, Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters, Paul Robeson, Lena Horne, Fats Waller. He could inform me about Duke Ellington and W.C. Handy, and Josh White, introduce me to Frankie Newton and tell tall tales about Ethel Waters. And these people were not meant to be looked on by me as celebrities, but as a part of Beauford's life and as a part of my inheritance."

against him and his own, and made all love, all trust, all joy impossible—this past, this endless struggle to achieve and reveal and confirm a human identity, human authority, yet contains for all its horror, something very beautiful...If one is continually surviving the worst that life can bring, one eventually ceases to be controlled by a fear of what life can bring; whatever it brings must be borne. (DC, 342-3)

The apprehension of life here so briefly and inadequately sketched has been the experience of generations of Negroes, and it helps to explain how they have endured and how they have been able to produce children of kindergarten age who can walk through mobs to get to school. It demands great force and great cunning continually to assault the mighty and indifferent fortress of white supremacy, as Negroes in this country have done so long. It demands great spiritual resilience not to hate the hater whose foot is on your neck, and an even greater miracle of perception and charity not to teach your child to hate. The Negro boys and girls who are facing mobs today come out of a long line of improbable aristocrats—the only genuine aristocrats this country has produced. I say "this country" because their frame of reference was totally American. They were hewing out of the mountain of white supremacy the stone of their individuality. (DC, 343)

Part of what we also see when we embrace Negro history is that life is tragic. Over and against our futile efforts to deny the realities of death, living well requires that we confront and, sometimes, embrace it. Death conditions spiritual growth, which is also to say, that, new birth is the fruit of transformation through loss. The question of how to live is inseparable from the challenge of learning how to die. All our life should be baptism, Martin Luther maintained, following St Paul's admonition to die daily (1 Cor. 15:31). Baldwin similarly writes,

Life is tragic simply because the earth turns and the sun inexorably rises and sets, and one day, for each of us, the sun will go down for the last, last time. Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, which is the only fact we have. It seems to me that one ought to rejoice in the fact of death—ought to decide, indeed, to earn one's death by confronting with passion the conundrum of life. One is responsible to life: It is the small beacon in that
terrifying darkness from which we come and to which we shall return. One must negotiate this passage as nobly as possible, for the sake of those who are coming after us (DC, 339).

Baldwin continues,

It is the responsibility of free men to trust and to celebrate what is constant—birth, struggle, and death are constant, and so is love, though we may not always think so—and to apprehend the nature of change, to be able and willing to change. I speak of change not on the surface but in the depths—change in the sense of renewal. But renewal becomes impossible if one supposes things to be constant that are not—safety, for example, or money or power. One clings then to chimeras, by which one can only be betrayed, and the entire hope—the entire possibility—of freedom disappears. And by destruction I mean precisely the abdication by Americans of any effort really to be free. (DC, 339)

Properly attuned love is the passion through which we confront life—and death. It rests at the center of who we are becoming, as well as the selves and societies we fail to achieve. To love one's country is to refuse to be tame, to be willing (again and again!) to disrupt "spiritual and social ease." "This is probably," Baldwin says, "the most important thing that one human being can do for another—it is certainly one of the most important things; hence the torment and necessity of love." In Baldwin's eyes, it is one of the most important gifts the "Negro has made to this otherwise shapeless and undiscovered country," the gift of discomfort (DC, 335).

The unsettling of the comfortable is the work of the prophetic in love, while the comforting of the afflicted is the work of the pastoral through care. Baldwin provides both in the two essays that compose Fire. The opening letter leans more toward the pastoral, serving as an aide to James, while also being prophetic. The second leans more

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224 This formulation is indebted to Raphael Warnock. "We pastors have a two-fold role: priestly and prophetic. On the priestly side, our job [sic] is [to] comfort the afflicted. On the prophetic side, our job is to afflict the comfortable. And the question becomes how can one remain true to both in this moment." See Michel Martin, "In Troubled Times, Does 'The Black Church' Still Matter?" NPR Interview (December 7, 2014), accessed May 6, 2015: http://www.npr.org/2014/12/07/36859135/in-troubled-times-does-the-black-church-still-matter
toward the prophetic in its impulse to destroy and strip us of all illusion, while also being pastoral. I read both essays as fruits of Baldwin's caring for himself and his society. At the center of both essays is Baldwin's own development, his own maturation alongside the achieving of our country. For criticism to be honest and forthright, one must give an account of oneself and one's society. Excavation, Baldwin teaches, is a condition for the growth and glory of persons and collectives.225

And yet the results of such scrutiny can be painful,226 since criticism may lead to the discovery that "the self one has sewn together with such effort is all dirty rags, is unusable, is gone."227 The challenge of self and social making amid the griminess of human existence naturally leads Baldwin to ask: "out of what raw material will one build the self again?"228 Failure to pose and respond to this challenge, for Baldwin, is a failure to respond to life as it is. It is to be "simply condemned to eternal youth, which is a

225 The metaphor of digging calls to mind Foucault's call for archeological as well as genealogical investigations. See Michele Foucault, "Lecture One: 7 January 1976," in Power/Knowledge Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977 ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 78-92. "If we were to characterize it in two terms, then 'archaeology' would be the appropriate methodology of this analysis of local discursivities, and 'genealogy' would be the tactics whereby, on the basis of the descriptions of these local discursivities, the subjected knowledges which were thus released would be brought into play" (85). In her landmark text, Black Feminist Thought, Patricia Hill Collins borrows the language of subjugated knowledge from Foucault, but revises it to ensure that the agency of black women isn't understood as some less than scientific (or merely naive, narrow, or insulated) response to white patriarchal hegemony. She thinks that there are a host of cultural influences that don't take patriarchy or dominant modes of whiteness as their point of departure. See Collins, Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment 2nd edition (New York: Routledge, 2000), 13.

226 James Baldwin, "Notes for a Hypothetical Novel," 230. "...this collision between one's image of oneself and what one actually is is always very painful and there are two things you can do about it, you can meet the collision head-on and try and become what you really are or you can retreat and try to remain what you thought you were, which is a fantasy, in which you will certainly perish." The inescapability of pain also finds expression in West, himself a prophetic figure of sorts, see "Introduction," The Cornel West Reader (New York: Civitas, 1999), xiii. "My painful quest for wisdom is an endless journey that tries to delve into the darkness of my soul to create a more compassionate and more mature person."


228 James Baldwin, "Nothing Personal," 695.
synonym for corruption." Thus, on Baldwin's view, to grow into maturity is to journey in vision and love:

All of us know, whether or not we are able to admit it, that mirrors can only lie, that death by drowning is all that awaits one there. It is for this reason that love is so desperately avoided. Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word "love" here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace—not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring growth. (DC, 341)

Love is a deeply erotic affair: the mark of mature perception and a fearless involvement with the world. It is vulnerable and open, courageous and rugged. It isn't merely a mode of relating to persons, but also a way of being bound to the visions of one's country, religion, or inheritance—racial, political, and otherwise. Of course, the notion of 'being bound' doesn't necessarily connote a sense of endorsement. It more aptly implies common fate and a sense of being linked and responsible to something else. It is a kind of dutifulness borne of necessity. One can be bound to criticize certain loyalties, while another might sense an obligation to deepen one's commitment to them. So much depends on the ordering of our loves, and the influence of those "little foxes that spoil the vine" (Song 2:15), those menaces to love and freedom that Baldwin so carefully details.

Human agency carries with it a freedom which principally concerns how to deal with the limitations that condition choice, whereas domination involves the unconstrained power to impose one's arbitrary will on others. Domination issues in the

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230 James Baldwin, "An Interview with James Baldwin," with Studs Terkel in Conversations with James Baldwin, 19. Commenting on filmmaker Ingmar Bergman, Baldwin says, "he impressed me as being free because—and this is a great paradox about freedom—he'd accepted his limitations, limitations within himself, limitations within his society. I don't mean that he necessarily accepted all these limitations, or that he was passive in the face of them. But he recognized that he was Ingmar Bergman, could do some things and could not do some others, and was not going to live forever..."
unjust walling off of options and goods and, is therefore, an incursion on human vitality and potential. But one cannot shirk the responsibility of being more or less bound to something, whether some principle or ideal, or simply one's ego and desire. We are bound to this humanity: what we make of it and, it, likewise of us. The same might be said of the inhumanity of other persons and societies – their economic institutions and political systems, their codes of punishment and their courts of law. They too are ours.

Baldwin thinks we are ethically required choose life, to be responsible to it.231 Ours is way of being toward life in, and, through death,232 a way of being toward death in, and, through life.233 Lives depend on the work we've yet to do, that surging vitality and potential now in our midst and still yet to come. "Everything now, we must assume, is in our hands" since "we have no right to assume otherwise" (DC, 346). Tarrying at the altar alone won't do. "Freedom is a very dangerous thing," Baldwin warns, but "anything else is disastrous...You've got to make choices. You've got to make very dangerous choices. You've got to be taught that your life is in your hands."234

231 This idea shares affinities with H. Richard Niebuhr's ethic of responsiveness. Although Niebuhr writes from the perspective of a Christian on ethical matters, he thinks the "object of the inquiry is not...simply the Christian life but rather the human moral life in general." For him, "All life has the character of responsiveness...We interpret the actions to which we respond differently, to be sure, but we do respond whether we interpret them as actions of God or of the devil or of a blindly running atom." See H. Richard Niebuhr, The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 45-46.
232 James Baldwin, "Nothing Personal," 700. "It is a fearful speculation—or, rather, a fearful knowledge—that, one day one's eyes will no longer look out on the world. One will no longer be present at the universal morning roll call. The light will rise for others but not for you....Since, anyway, it will end one day, why not try it—life—one more time. It's a long old road, as Bessie Smith puts it, but it's got to find an end. And so, she wearily, doggedly informs us, I picked up my bag, baby, and I tried it again."
233 James Baldwin, "Nothing Personal, 700-01. "It is the miracle of love, love strong enough to guide or drive one into the great estate of maturity, or, to put it another way, into the apprehension and acceptance of one's own identity. For some deep and ineradicable instinct—I believe—causes us to know that it is only this passionate achievement which can outlast death, which can cause life to spring from death."
Beyond the trappings of hatred and fear lurk the perils of delusion and safety, for Baldwin. They reside in the questions we do not ask of our rituals, creeds, and constitutions. They hide beneath the examinations we do not perform on our dark deceptive hearts – "down there at the foot of the cross" (DC, 306). For Baldwin, we must bear the complexity of our lives, and be vigilant in our efforts to avoid little gods, even as we remain awake to what is larger and more loving, to freedoms uncharted and fulfillments unknown. This is the hope of those who awake to the work of each day,\textsuperscript{235} which is always our struggle: to be alive and more human.\textsuperscript{236}

If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country and change the history of the world. (DC, 346-7)

There are no guarantees of renewal and change, "but nothing can be changed, unless it is faced."\textsuperscript{237} That is why self and social criticism, speaking the truth in love is so essential. More than just a permissible activity, increasing the consciousness of others—through bold and courageous, yet loving and impassioned acts—is a necessity. The fruitfulness of our lives, and the flourishing of so much beauty, depends on it. Criticism opens the way for things to be otherwise through the unleashing of activities dreamt up by renewed minds and pursued with fervent hearts. Criticism is a practice of freedom and care, and it is vital to the transformation of hearts, minds, and public institutions. "If

\textsuperscript{235} James Baldwin, "Nothing Personal," 700. "Four AM can be a devastating hour. The day, no matter what kind of day it was, is indisputably over; almost instantaneously, a new day begins: and how will one bear it?"

\textsuperscript{236} James Baldwin, "Nothing Personal," 700. "And what we are struggling against is that death in the heart which leads not only to the shedding of blood, but which reduces human beings to corpses while they live." Or as, my grandfather, Charlie Clifton used to say: "Don't die before it's your time" (Eccl. 7:17).

we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, re-created form the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us," Baldwin writes. "God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!" (DC, 347).

Conclusion

As a writer and artist, Baldwin was a practitioner of freedom, a model of self-care, and a critic of domination. To my mind, his work belongs among those spiritual aristocrats and ancestral witnesses who help to nourish our journey – through the increase of our courage, the chastening of our faith, and the deepening of our loves. The previous chapters have tried to make good on this claim.

But the case I’ve been offering for Baldwin isn’t without precedent. His significance as a model of self-care has been noted by a prominent writer of African-American letters and novels. In 1987, when commemorating the power of his life in eulogy, Toni Morrison noted Baldwin’s significance as artist, writer, and friend. She described Baldwin offerings—embodied and written—as gifts of love. Among her most treasured gifts were Baldwin’s language, courage, and tenderness. Through them, Morrison came to care for herself and her world a bit better. “Like many of us left here I thought I knew you,” she writes of Baldwin, but “now I discover that in your company it is myself I know.”

The gift of Baldwin’s self was the gift of one to oneself; and the gift of Baldwin’s prose was also the gift of truth and freedom. Writing of, to, and through her friend, Morrison affirms that:

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No one possessed or inhabited language for me the way you did. You made American English honest—genuinely international…You stripped it of ease and false comfort and fake innocence and evasion and hypocrisy. And in place of deviousness was clarity. In place of soft plump lies was a lean, targeted power…in place of intellectual disingenuousness and what you called “exasperating egocentricity,” you gave us undecorated truth. You replaced lumbering platitudes with an upright elegance. You went into that forbidden territory and decolonized, “robed it of the jewel of its naïveté,” and un-gated it for black people so that in your wake we could enter it, occupy it, restructure it in order to accommodate our complicated passions—not our vanities but our intricate, difficult, demanding beauty, our tragic, insistent knowledge, our lived reality, our sleek classical imagination—all the while refusing “to be defined by a language that has never been able to recognize [us].”  

So Baldwin enabled Morrison and (countless others) to perceive their possibilities more imaginatively and to articulate their encounters more fully. He also empowered others to enter into realms of intimacy previously unoccupied and hostile. But notice this: the formulation of Baldwin’s language also required courage. Not only did it make possible, but it also informed and saturated the content of his prose. For Morrison, Baldwin’s courage was something to dwell and share in – a virtue that would arouse and unite long after his expiration. Baldwin gave Morrison the “courage to transform the distances between people into intimacy with the whole world; courage to understand that experience in ways that made it a personal revelation for each of us…the courage to live life in and from within its belly as well as beyond its edges, to see and say what it was, to recognize and identify evil but never fear or stand in awe of it.”

Baldwin helped Morrison ‘go on.’ And I’m convinced he helps us travel, too – perhaps, even, together and toward higher views. The parrēsia of Baldwin still inspires.

239 Ibid., 91.
240 Ibid., 92.
As less proximate readers of Baldwin, we too have been furnished a model of artistic vocation, of care and self-fashioning: one expressed through language as much as life, one sustained by love as much as courage. Self-care makes possible more than it limits. If Morrison is right, then Baldwin’s treasures are sure to be found in other vessels, and sounds of his call sure to be heard in other voices. What Morrison says of Baldwin we can say of our most noble exemplars.

You knew, didn’t you, how I needed your language and the mind that formed it? How I relied on your fierce courage to tame wildernesses for me? How strengthened I was by the certainty that came from knowing you would never hurt me? You knew, didn’t you, how I loved your love?  

I have not argued that a politics of self-care ensures political pluralities of a certain sort. Nor have I shown that care of self directly or necessarily leads to political transformation. My point has been to show that meaningful pluralities require the kinds of persons who do, in fact, care for themselves. Through Baldwin (and with Foucault in mind), I’ve argued that care of self requires work on and against, or sometimes with and in defense, of a particular ethos or way of life. To care for oneself, I’ve argued, is to engage in practices of freedom. I took this claim to follow from an account of what it means to respond to the present condition of one’s historical suspension within matrices of power, freedom, and domination – and to do so truthfully and courageously. When conceived as a work of self-care, and employed as a trope of truth-telling, letter writing (or essaying) is a vital practice of freedom.

I think truthfulness is the language of our accurate accounts of the world and its bearings. So the evasion of any relevant context is a less truthful encounter. And since

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many contexts involve risk, proper response often demands courage. Much of what I’ve written in this section leans on the assumption that there are no distinctive facts entirely, but only facts and their accompanying relations—those wider webs of involvement and inferences of established use. As Baldwin once put it, "To define ourselves means defining a great many other things." Holism is our necessity because of our relational condition; and care of self, as I see it, offers one way of encountering that whole more honestly and less evasively.

We care for ourselves by caring for our world and our particular place in it. And such a place, Baldwin reminds us, is not to be separated from those who are coming after us: their calling, no less than the testimony of those behind and beside us, is a guide to our vocation – our work. That is why working and caring for one's society demands a growing awareness of the experiences of others. Knowing is a practice of care, but care need always be guided by knowledge. For Baldwin,

...if one really wishes to know how justice is administered in a country, one does not question the policemen, the lawyers, the judges, or the protected members of the middle class. One goes to the unprotected — those, precisely, who need the law's protection most! — and listens to their testimony. Ask any Mexican, any Puerto Rican, any black man, any poor person — ask the wretched how they fare in the halls of justice, and then you will know, not whether or not the country is just, but whether or not it has any love for justice, or any concept of it. It is certain, in any case, that ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have [my emphasis].

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244 James Baldwin, "To Be Baptized," in No Name in the Street, 445. Thanks to Professor Imani Perry for calling attention to this passage.
Chapter 4

Pastoral Vocation and the Love of Jesus

I have had to wrestle with many spiritual crises growing out of what seemed to be the contradictory demands of love and hate, of vengeance and mercy, and of retaliation and reconciliation. In all of these experiences there is a part of me that seeks ever for harmony, for community, for unity and creative synthesis in conflicting relations; and an equally articulate urgency within me for withdrawal, for separateness, for isolation, and for aggression.245

The next four chapters, which constitute Part II of the dissertation, examine Howard Thurman’s ethic of love and the kind of criticism that flows from it. In order to explore and appraise his thinking on this topic, I offer an account of the sense of calling that inspired his work as a pastor.246 Here I return to an earlier theme in the dissertation: the claim that callings, especially prophetic ones, are often initiated in the midst of crises.247 In this way, I’m inclined to agree with Jewish mystic and civil rights activist Abraham Joshua Heschel: prophetic undertakings tend to be direct, urgent responses to palpable needs and disabling injustices.248 Chapter 4 begins by offering a glimpse of Thurman’s sense of pastoral vocation, specifically in relation to the set of concerns that animated not

247 Howard Thurman, *The Search for Common Ground* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1986), xiv. Reflecting on the origins of his final book, Thurman finds that a number of "questions become a personal crisis for a black man living in American society in the last decades of the twentieth century."
248 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: First Perennial Classics, 2001), 3. "To us injustice is injurious to the welfare of the people, to the prophets it is a deathblow to existence: to us an episode; to them, a catastrophe, a threat to the world."
only his social context, but also his personal and emotive life. The chapter concludes with an account of love among the disinherited. Chapter 5 provides a more detailed account of Thurman’s love ethic, giving special attention to religious experience, the role of imagination, and the need for self and social examination. Chapter 6 emphasizes the importance of spiritual discipline in our attempts to love well. In doing so, it draws attention to our habits of growth, commitment, and love. Chapter 7 considers Thurman's vision of utopia, and the ethical and spiritual artistry required to transform those ideals into practical life.

What emerges from my analysis is an account of the ways in which speaking the truth in love requires sensitivity to one’s own inadequacies, and more pointedly, a way of perceiving one’s complicity in the institutions and environs under scrutiny. One has to be prepared to approach what is true of oneself and one’s society. As a form of critical engagement, speaking (or preaching or writing or essaying) the truth in love is always tied to the conditions of living that surround and inform it. The criticism on offer turns out to be a work of love for the sake of an individual’s highest good, as well as one’s highest hopes for society—both of which, for Thurman, are rooted in God’s ongoing creativity and movements in the world, as revealed in nature, community, and the

249 Ibid., 31. For Heschel, our common ways of describing a prophet's task do not properly consider "the overwhelming impact of the divine pathos upon his mind and heart, completely involving and gripping his personality in his depths, and the unrelieved distress which sprang from his personal involvement. The task of the prophet is to convey the word of God. Yet the word is aglow with the pathos. And one cannot understand the word without sensing the pathos."

250 French essayist Michel de Montaigne was well aware of the challenge: "There is no description equal in difficulty, or certainly usefulness, to the description of oneself." He continues in another passage: "I hold that a man should be cautious in making an estimate of himself, and equally conscientious in testifying about himself—whether he rates himself high or low makes no difference." See Montaigne, "Of Practice," Complete Works: Essays, Travel Journal, Letters Trans. Donald M. Frame (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 331 and 333. Thurman thinks that the difficulty has a lot to do with pride: "Pride and arrogance are always with us seeking to exert their pernicious influence in what we say and how we say it...Pride causes one to exaggerate his significance or insignificance, either by claiming for himself more than he knows to be true or by claiming for himself less than he knows to be true." Howard Thurman, Deep is the Hunger (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 2000), 103.
yearnings of God's children. Thurman's ethic of criticism, the sort recommended in this project, aims not only to denounce misguided practices and institutions, but also to revitalize and rebuild them. Thurman's spiritual genius lay in his ability to offer a template of how individuals might come to achieve their highest potential with care and creativity, while maintaining a robust sense of community—of legible, even necessary, connectedness. His is an outward concern that begins with an inward journey.

On Pastoral Vocation

Thurman's pastoral vocation turns out to be deeply instructive for how we frame his ethics of love and social criticism.\(^{251}\) It was one of the most important contexts\(^{252}\) in which he pursued his "life's working paper."\(^{253}\) We should therefore resist any attempt to reduce the pluralistic nature of Thurman's witness to a singular office or function. Luther E. Smith Jr., one of Thurman's early interpreters, describes him as a "Holy Man," "saint,"

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\(^{251}\) My specific interest in Thurman concerns his resources as an ethicist engaged in the practice of self and social criticism, of speaking the truth in love about oneself and one's society. This distinguishes my project from others who have already drawn attention to the ethics of Howard Thurman: as it relates to liberation theology, see Carlyle Fielding Stewart III, *God, Being, and Liberation: A Comparative Analysis of the Theologies and Ethics of James H. Cone and Howard Thurman* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989); as a resource for womanist thought, see Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 159-175; as a basis for the ideal of community, see Walter E. Fluker, *They Looked for a City: A Comparative Analysis of the Ideal of Community in the Thought of Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989); and as a guide for leadership, Walter E. Fluker, *Ethical Leadership: The Quest for Character, Civility, and Community* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009).


"spiritual innovator," "one of America's greatest preachers and religionists," "prophet," and "spiritual mentor." Such descriptions, Smith says, "are but a few of the titles and labels used to characterize Howard Thurman." To my mind, attending to this ministerial backdrop helps explain the form and content of Thurman's wisdom, and, for my purposes, the ethic of love and social criticism at work there. Several experiences emerge as decisive challenges to Thurman’s sense of mission and his decision to accept this calling: the realities of death, degradation, and division. For Thurman, the three are intimately related but noticeably distinct.

Born at the turn of the 20th century in Daytona, Florida, Howard Thurman (1899-1981), placed death at the center of his narrative even when recounting his childhood life. “Death,” says Thurman, “was no stranger to us. It was part of the rhythm of our days.” In times of sickness and disease, stillness would pervade his community and play was kept to a minimum: “Life came to a long moment of pause, for hours, sometimes days. Waiting, Waiting.” In the wake of human loss, families would typically bathe the body of the deceased, usually without embalming. Locals in the neighborhood would often pitch in to pay for unexpected expenses, and a church would usually host most funeral services, since there was no other place to hold such a gathering. White undertakers refused the bodies of dead Negroes.

Thurman well knew the scarcity of funeral options because his father passed away when he was seven years old. Since his father died an unbeliever or, as the saying went, “out of the church,” leaders at the local congregation initially refused to allow a memorial

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254 Luther Smith, *The Mystic as Prophet*, 1.
255 Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 4.
service to be held on the grounds. Thurman’s grandmother eventually convinced a leading deacon to permit the service, but the pastor of the church steadily refused to perform the rites. So it was an itinerant preacher, Sam Cromarte, who preached his “Papa’s funeral.” But Cromarte, Thurman recalls, used that sacred occasion as a platform to announce the plight of those who died outside the church. In tears and agony, young Howard “listened with wonderment, then anger, and finally mounting rage as Sam Cromarte preached [his] father into hell.” Grief stricken, the boy silently made a pledge to himself he wouldn’t keep: “When I grow up and become a man, I will never have anything to do with the church.”

Seventeen years later, Thurman found himself alone in a parsonage and on the receiving end of a call from a hospital nurse in search of a chaplain. At the time, Thurman had just finished his first year at Rochester Theological Seminary and was assisting the minister of the First Baptist Church of Roanoke, VA. The lead pastor, Rev. Arthur L James, was away for the month, and this was Thurman’s first night serving in his stead. Anticipation and distress must have swept over him at the sound of the nurse’s call and request: “There is a patient here who is dying. He’s asking for a minister. Are you a minister?”

Thurman hurriedly left the parsonage that night and went to the hospital. Yet he would arrive without his bible, and with few words to accommodate a dying man’s request. When prompted to offer a departing, final word, Thurman met the vacancy of human language: “I bowed my head, closed my eyes…and straining to reach God…I whispered my Amen.” At the conclusion of his silent prayer, Thurman and the nameless

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257 Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 5-6.
gentlemen managed to open their eyes together, touching, and communicating with one
another, almost imperceptibly. The man’s grip would soon loosen and, as Thurman
noted, “he died with his hand in mine.” Through the ministry of touch, Thurman
carried out—he embodied—his reply to the nurse’s inquiry. “Yes,” he had told the nurse,
“I am a minister.” Years later, Thurman wrote of the exchange as “a decision of
vocation” in which “I felt again the ambivalence of my life and my calling.” This
abiding awareness of death, rupture, and grief—and our personal (as well as the church’s)
responses to these exigencies—sits at the heart of Thurman’s life and work. His was a
ministry of presence. With the ancients Thurman would agree: life is but a preparation
for death: a laboring and groping and chanting unto, even through, death.

Thurman’s encounters with degradation also formed his sense of calling. As a
young boy Thurman remembered raking leaves for a well-to-do local white family, folks
for whom his grandmother had once supplied domestic work. The family had a little girl
about four or five years of age, who often made work difficult by scattering leaves
Thurman had already raked. When Howard pleaded with the girl to stop and threatened
to report her mischief to her father, she became angry, and quickly poked him in the hand
with a straight pin. “Have you lost your mind?” Thurman recalls exclaiming. The little
girl fired back, “Oh Howard, that didn’t hurt you! You can’t feel!” From her inherited
perspective (clearly she was too young to have created and authorized it herself), pain

258 For a discussion of the relationship between touch and the “magic” of human encounter, see Suzanne M.
No. 4 (Winter, 1989), 299-322. On the general significance of touch, see Ashley Montagu, Skins: The
259 Howard Thurman, With Head and Heart, 3-4.
260 On this point, see Howard Thurman, Deep River and The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death
(Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1990). For a recent appropriation of Thurman’s position, see Corey
D.B. Walker, "The Race for Political Theology: Toward a Political Theology of Freedom" in Race and
261 Howard Thurman, With Head and Heart, 12.
and pleasure were apt for other sentient creatures, but not little black boys. No wonder Thurman later described feeling pushed into ministry, less by a sense of religious calling, than by his suffering the “violences of racial conflict.”\textsuperscript{262} Even though the dangers of violence were somewhat tempered by the tourism of Daytona Beach, Thurman recalled his life becoming “more and more suffocating because of the fear of being brutalized, beaten, or otherwise outraged.” In fear and trembling, cries were lifted and a calling received, or, as Thurman himself writes of the situation:

\begin{quote}
In my effort to keep this fear from corroding my life and making me seek relief in shiftlessness, I sought help from God. I found that the more I turned to prayer, to what I discovered in later years to be meditation, the more time I spent alone in the woods or on the beach, the freer became my own spirit...Here at last was something I could do with my life. But it would call for a different emphasis in the religious life and experience from that which I saw around me in the community.\textsuperscript{263}
\end{quote}

Thurman would seek to transform how Christian ministry was conducted. His “decision to go into the Christian ministry came at the end of a period of severe crisis.”\textsuperscript{264}

The particularities of that crisis involved three concerns: the violence the institution of religion had done to his father’s life and memory, the divide between those who belonged to the church and those who didn’t, and the segregated nature of the church itself. Thurman’s efforts to respond to these worries informed his approach to ministry, and likewise his ethic of self and social criticism.

While a graduate student at Rochester Theological Seminary, organizers denied Thurman the opportunity to serve as a pallbearer in his friend’s funeral, on the grounds

\begin{footnotes}
\item[262] Howard Thurman, \textit{Footprints of a Dream: The Story of the Church for the Fellowship of all Peoples} (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1959), 16.
\item[263] Ibid., 16.
\item[264] Ibid., 17.
\end{footnotes}
that his presence would “embarrass the family of the deceased.”

This experience forced Thurman to appreciate the geographical and institutional reach of depraved racial and religious thinking. Even though Rochester Theological Seminary was a long way from Daytona, FL., Thurman soon came to realize that racism still found a home in the hearts and practices of peoples and institutions, even those seemingly removed from his southern context, and even among those who claimed to be Christian leaders.

Thurman recalls,

It was then that I was forced to raise the question of the source of authority for the racial exclusiveness of the church. Was the church merely a secular institution in society? Was its behavior a reaction-response to the environment?...Finally, was there a distinction to be drawn between ethnic exclusiveness and religious-experience exclusiveness. These were some of the questions that were moving around in my mind clamoring for solution as I was preparing myself to enter the Christian ministry.

And still more questions for Thurman.

Where did Jesus of Nazareth and his gospel stand in all of this? Did the church part company with the Master in this particular emphasis on racial exclusiveness or not?...I had to find out for myself whether or not it is true that experiences of spiritual unity and fellowship are more compelling than the fears and dogmas that separate men. And if these experiences can be multiplied over a time interval of sufficient duration, would they be able to undermine any barrier that separates one man from another?

Thus, it isn't surprising to find Thurman's commentary on his most famous and oft-quoted work, *Jesus and the Disinherited*. For Thurman, it was a text "which

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265 Ibid., 20.
266 For an historical assessment of Jim Crow attitudes and practices in northern states, see historian C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow: A Commemorative Edition* with new afterword by William S. McFeely (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 17. "One of the strangest things about the career of Jim Crow," Woodward argued, "was that the system was born in the North and reached an advanced age before moving South in force."
267 Thurman, *Footprints of a Dream*, 20.
embodied my convictions that the segregated church as such was a reaction response to the environment, and not inherent in the genius of the Christian faith itself.”269 Death, degradation, and division were not regarded as final. The principled possibilities—really, the spiritual realities—of life, potential, and unity were too fundamental.

What then did Thurman take to be the central themes and requirements of Christian ministry? In an essay, “Let Christian Ministers be Christian!,” published sixth months before his ordination in 1925, Thurman argued that pastors had a duty to speak with bold, frank speech (parrhesia), a virtue he associated with Socrates. “The minister,” wrote Thurman, was required “to encourage, to comfort, to inspire and to bless; but he is dedicated, also, to serve as the gad-fly to a slothful, thoughtless, sin-bespattered generation.”270 Yet Thurman thought most preachers had failed to properly execute their task. Offering a critique of his own guild, Thurman maintained that “much of the false emphasis” and one-sidedness in Christian understanding and practice can be “traced to the door of the ministry.” Parishioners were often provided twisted examples, he lamented, “by those who stand in the shoes of prophets but who utter the soft, satisfying words of the Status Quo.”271

If preachers were to speak boldly, they needed to do so with more than an image of Christ in focus. They also needed the Spirit of Christ to be in effect. As Thurman saw it, the pastorate has suffered from a profound

failure to recognize that to follow Christ means that all of life, not a segment here and there, must be increasingly permeated with the Spirit of Christ. There is no such thing as Christian living or even full time

269 Howard Thurman, Footprints of a Dream, 21.
271 Ibid., 44.
Christian service, for that matter, apart from the ordinary business of our living. Our “Christianity” has been so shut up in water-tight compartments that scarcely a drop of it has been allowed to seep through to give strength and vigor to the thirsty, dying plants of Brotherliness in the garden of everyday living.\footnote{Ibid., 43-44.}

For Christian ministry and practice to be fruitful, the Spirit of Christ must flow beyond the boundaries erected by fear, insecurity, and pride.\footnote{See also, Thurman, \textit{Jesus and the Disinherited}, 12-13. “It is the sin of pride and arrogance that has tended to vitiate the missionary impulse and to make of it an instrument of self-righteousness on the one hand and racial superiority on the other. That is one reason why, again and again, there is no basic relationship between the simple practice of brotherhood in the commonplace relations of life and the ethical pretension of our faith.”} It rejects the view that Christian life exclusively applies to beliefs and rituals in high and holy places, and not those involving ordinary life.\footnote{Thurman makes a similar point in “The Perils of Immature Piety,” also published during his year of ordination in 1925. “Dedication to God is worth and is demanded of all, but not in the sense that such a dedication divorces one from the obligation to carry out its implication in the common walks of life and daily experience. Any conception of ‘full time Christian service’ that does not synthesize all of life around that ideal is barren. In the normal workings of life, in the commonplace of experiences of ordinary living, in the simplest daily contacts, we must find God—we must find the spiritual power of which we feel so sorely.” See Howard Thurman, “The Perils of Immature Piety,” \textit{The Papers of Howard Thurman vol 1. My People Need Me, June 1918-March 1936} ed. Walter E. Fluker (Columbia, SC: The University of South Carolina Press, 2009), 49.} According to Thurman, there were many leaders in the Church who thought “its only aim [was] to save the individual soul…that it has nothing to do with economic ills, political corruption, and social injustice.” But in Thurman's eyes, spiritual ideals and utopic visions required not only close scrutiny, but also human traction. Not only were our loftiest ideals to be embodied and enfleshed,\footnote{For an exploration of this theme that takes the lives and bodies of black women as a starting point for analysis, see M. Shawn Copeland, \textit{Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being} (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).} they were to have their legs and “feet…planted steadfastly in the great world of human experience.”\footnote{Howard Thurman, “The Sphere of the Church’s Responsibility in Social Reconstruction,” in \textit{The Papers of Howard Thurman vol. 1. My People Need Me, June 1918-March 1936} ed. Walter E. Fluker (Columbia, SC: The University of South Carolina Press, 2009), 42.} Thurman saw the need for a Jesus-centered way of being in the world, one adequate to the bumps and bruises of our common calamities—institutional and personal. That is
why for him the “Story of the Good Samaritan is a matchless example of the Christian attitude geared to the road of life.” From the outset of his ministry, Thurman was convinced that “much of the hell in the world and especially in America is deliberate!”

Writing of, to, and for himself, Thurman offers a meditation on Matthew 25 and, with it, an accurate forecast of his Christian vocation. If “God identified with human life!” he reasoned,

Who dares to preach and teach and live such a revolutionary gospel? Do those words mean that every time a negro is lynched and burned God is lynched and burned? Do they mean that God is held as a peon in certain parts of this land of “liberty”? Do they mean that God is discriminated against, segregated and packed in Jim Crow cars?

From Thurman’s perspective, these and a host of other institutional practices were fundamentally at odds with the Spirit of Christ—hence requiring struggle, not accommodation. In opposition to such injustice, Thurman believed ministers were constantly to affirm: 1) the sacredness of human personality, 2) the interdependence of men, 3) supremacy of righteousness as the quality of life which gets Divine approval, and 4) the necessity for all acts to be motivated and actuated by passionate good-will or love. Such themes lay at the heart of the ministry and work of Jesus.

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277 Thurman rightly expresses a well-placed concern for the dangers of examples, mainly their tendency to stand-in for the hard work of grappling with our own experience, thus blocking access to the vast store of revelations and responsibilities on offer. Exemplary models entice us to “forget the great span of experience that separates them from us. We are utterly unmindful of the price that such persons have paid for the faith that is in them...By imitation we try to assume a thing the power of which we recognize, the need of which we feel, but the clue to which we do not have.” See Thurman, “The Perils of Immature Piety,” 50.
278 Howard Thurman, “Let Minister's Be Christians!,” 44.
279 Ibid., 44.
280 Ibid., 45. Thurman also mentions a host of others issues, including unfair tax policies, poorly paid teachers, underfunded schools, and the systemic disadvantages confronting “negro children” at the level of basic civic planning.
281 For a wider discussion on these themes and their grounding in Christian Personalism, see Rufus Burrow Jr., Personalism: A Critical Introduction (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999).
But Thurman’s preacher wasn’t merely called to be a voice of God, he was also to perfect the capacities and characters of his listeners, and likewise, to improve himself.\textsuperscript{282} Refurbishing his own vessel was an enduring necessity. Thurman appreciated the fact that our routines shape us as well as the character of the experiences we encounter. Thus, with William James, he would affirm that discipline and habit influence those streams of experience which constantly fund our identities, while also positioning our minds and hearts to filter experience anew. Some actions and experiences more readily flow because of habit, while others seem hardly available.\textsuperscript{283} Hence the wealth or poverty of a pastor’s disciplines—her habits—significantly influences the character of her voice, mainly by altering the quality of her experiences, religious and otherwise.\textsuperscript{284} Never was a minister to see his task as final or complete, instead he was to embrace its ongoing process and fluidity: “His must be the Voice of God that calls the peoples to repentance and challenges them to a higher life in experience than they have achieved already. Above all he must urge men by precept and example and teaching to see life whole and to make it increasingly Christian by actually following Jesus both in attitudes and in achievement.”\textsuperscript{285} And such an achievement, for Thurman, wasn’t merely social and political. It was vitally internal and individual, personal as well as spiritual.\textsuperscript{286} “The salvation of the world,” Thurman believed, “depends upon individuals who are willing to

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{282}] Howard Thurman, “Let Minister's Be Christians!,” 46.
\item[\textsuperscript{284}] Thurman recognized the tendency of echoes to substitute for voices, especially in the pulpit: “The presentation of words without the possession of the experience which the words imply is another way of assuming an attitude which does not grow out of the richness of our own lives. As long we merely try to imitate someone else in our devotion, our piety and our living, so long will we be superficial, ineffective and incomplete...” Howard Thurman, "The Perils of Immature Piety," 50.
\item[\textsuperscript{285}] Ibid., 44.
\item[\textsuperscript{286}] Ibid, 50. “I must live deeply and effectively all the phases of my life if I would know God. I must be most myself if I would know what it means to follow Jesus... “Only, we must let our steps be guided by the truth as we have attained.”
\end{itemize}
pay the debt they owe to their dignity as human beings by fighting out the battle within
themselves, until they possess their own souls.”

The Christian minister, like everyone, is required to look at and work on herself. My approach assumes that Thurman approached all of his writings and sermons with this unique sense of pastoral vocation.

So whatever the strengths and defects of Thurman’s love ethic, we need always keep in view the existential variables that informed his sense of mission. They color and shape, texture and touch, the life and ministry he often referred to as his “working paper.”

Notice how Thurman’s formulation—working paper—counsels against any conclusive or seemingly exhaustive account of his views. They too were in progress. His sayings and doings were just one man’s attempt to confront the issues of his time with intellectual creativity and moral integrity.

Through his example, I think we see opportunities for our own betterment, for a fuller engagement with the resources of our own experience. His struggle, “to mingle his strength with the forces of history and emerge with a name, a character, a personality,” is our own. His preaching and praying, his essaying and testing, his words and his witness, Thurman’s fruits, replenish the weary wrestler, teaching him or her to confront the evils of this world with visions spiritual and a love supreme. It is to the contents and objects of that love that I now turn.

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287 Ibid., 46.
289 Howard Thurman, The Search for Common Ground, xiv. “This book is one man’s statement of how he deals with the ambiguities created by the existential period in which his life must be lived.”
290 Howard Thurman, Jesus and the Disinherited (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996), 111.
Love of Jesus among the Disinherited I

We get an initial glimpse of Thurman’s ethic of love in his early writings about the “religion of Jesus.” Characterizing love as a response to “human need across the barriers of class, race, and condition,” Thurman goes on to write that “Every man is potentially every other man’s neighbor. Neighborliness is nonspatial; it is qualitative. A man must love his neighbor directly, clearly, permitting no barriers in between.”

The immediate challenge for Thurman, then, doesn’t involve specifying what we owe our neighbors as much as it entails determining who we take our neighbors to be. Here the key distinction is that every human person is “potentially every other person’s neighbor,” but it isn’t the case that we’re all neighbors. Love is a constellation of beliefs, actions, and dispositions—of visions, imaginations, and intentions. Love is a way of inhabiting the world.
One reason Thurman frames his discussion in terms of neighbors and non-neighbors concerns the biblical text itself: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord: and though shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all they might,” (Deut. 6:5/Lk. 10:27) and “thy neighbor as thyself” (Lev. 19:18/Lk. 10:27). After acknowledging the command to love God and one’s neighbor, the lawperson doesn’t inquire into the precepts of love, at least not according to the gospel of Luke. Focusing neither on its requirements nor its decision procedure, the lawyer does not ask the question of how love works. Instead he asks another question: to whom does this love apply? He wants to know who has a claim on him in the first place: “Who then is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29).

Another reason why Thurman begins this way involves his own social moorings. Thurman thinks that neighborliness (or brotherliness) is a constitutive feature of most people’s lives. Most of us do receive care from—and most of us do care about—a limited set of “somebodys,” our friends and family, our neighbors and colleagues, our teammates and allies – in short, those with whom we share natural cause or common interest. So his initial challenge isn’t so much that of specifying the people we claim to care for, as much as tracking our failure to notice and appreciate persons and ideals resist Nygren’s hard distinction, which holds that “Eros and Agape are not merely two theoretical ideas that invite comparison, but different attitudes to life, different tendencies, which are in actual conflict with one another.” In Anders Nygren, Agape and Eros trans. Philip S. Watson (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1969), 56. I’m closer to the position advanced by Timothy Jackson in The Priority of Love, which shows sensitivity to the insights of various feminist, liberal, and naturalist critiques. For Jackson, “agape may be seen as something like a marriage of classical eros and modern justice. Like eros, agape is passionately concerned with concrete individuals; unlike eros, however, agape does not premise its commitment on the perceived (and mutable) excellences of these individuals. Agapic love attends to others for their own sakes but is constant and unconditional.” See Timothy P. Jackson, The Priority of Love: Christian Charity and Social Justice (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 68.

294 Howard Thurman, With Head and Heart, 11. “In our tiny neighborhood within Waycross, we were what today is called an extended family. The children were under the general watch and care of all the adults. If we were asked to do an errand by any of the older members, it was not necessary for us to get permission from our parents.”

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worthy of love in the first place. He thinks that there are plenty of situations where we
don’t even view other persons as worthy of love or, even, morally relevant.²⁹⁵

Thurman is apt to recommend his own descriptions and prescriptions about what
love requires. But his initial inquiry concerns who counts as loveable. Here I find his
methodological point to be worthy of emphasis: the details of what love requires have
everything to do with the person to whom love responds, as well as the person from
whom love flows. Both need to be properly discerned – the various relationships that
obtain between lover and beloved must be probed, their unique contexts acknowledged.

Christian ethicist Oliver O'Donovan helpfully puts the point this way:

...the loving subject stands in a complex and variable relation to the reality
which his love confronts. Pluriformity is imposed upon his love from
outside by the pluriform structure of reality...He may find himself
dependent or depended upon, equal or unequal, commanding or under
command; but these are not things that he controls, and his love must still
be love in whatever relation to its object it may find itself. Thus we do
well to speak of "aspects" of love rather than of "kinds" and to remember
as we differentiate them that we have to do not only with subjectivity but
with the complex order of reality that is love's object.²⁹⁶

Such concerns are particularly acute, not only for those who dominate, but also
for the disinherited. So while Thurman may agree that “it is part of the wisdom of the
Judaeo-Christian ethic that all men are enjoined to love God and to love one another,” he
acknowledges the reality that most of us are inclined to “admit categories of exception
and extenuating circumstances,” thus lessening the sphere of moral obligation.

²⁹⁵ Oliver O'Donovan recognizes the challenge of properly ordering one's love to the goodness on offer. He
maintains that loving one's neighbor properly "presupposes the value which God, as Creator and Redeemer,
has already set upon the object before the subject stumbles upon him." Oliver O'Donovan, The Problem of
In other words,

One of the central problems in human relations is applying the ethic of respect for personality in a way that is not governed by special categories...For instance, if a man is committed to a reverent view of life, does he rule out high regard for life that threatens or seems dangerous to him? If a particular man, by definition, is not human, then may not the ethical behavior that usually applies be suspended? Does a man tend to become immoral and irreligious as his security is threatened?²⁹⁷

His reply to this question is an emphatic “yes.” Understanding why this is so requires delving into the set of circumstances that surround the lover.

Here we see the first inkling of how Thurman’s ethic of love and criticism will proceed, one that gives attention to the particularities of the selves and societies involved. Like the prophet Jeremiah, Thurman focuses on himself, and his own people, alongside his criticism of other polities.²⁹⁸ He wants to ensure that he acknowledges the demands of this insight in the work of interpreting and caring for his own wounds and the pursuit of his own excellence. Writing of his own childhood growing up in Florida, Thurman confesses that,

It never occurred to me, nor was I taught either at home or in church, to regard white people as falling within the scope of the magnetic field of my morality. To all white persons, the category of exception applied. I did not regard them as involved in my religious reference...Behavior toward them was amoral. They were not hated particularly; they were not essentially despised; they were simply out of bounds.

²⁹⁸ Kaveny makes a similar point concerning, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his standing the tradition of Jeremiah, "Reverend King sees himself as part of the community to whom he is issuing the indictment, he suffers not only with African Americans whose just claims he advocates, but also the American people as a whole, who have been harmed by the sin of racism." See Kaveny, "Prophecy and Democracy," 52.
Again acknowledging the difficulty of his relation to white folks, Thurman notes that

They were tolerated as a vital part of the environment, but they did not count in. They were in a world apart, in another universe of discourse. To lie to them or to deceive them had no moral relevancy; no category of guilt was involved in my behavior. There was fear of their power over my life.²⁹⁹

Now it’s still an open question as to whether or not such a person with “their back against the wall” is obligated to always be truthful. And Thurman will have some interesting things to say about these instances later. But surely there’s something amiss when an entire group of human beings, and the concrete individuals that comprise it, don’t even emerge as morally relevant. Furthermore, even if one accepts the view that those who exercise inordinate amounts of power and demonstrate sustained patterns of abuse thereby forgo any claim to the sincere and accurate testimony of their victims, it still doesn’t follow that every member of a dominant group is to be regarded in such a fashion, because every person in the dominant group isn’t vicious in quite the same way. For “all white persons” to be regarded as moral exceptions is to deny such persons their own measure of human dignity, their own concreteness and individuality. It is to miss significant details about what constitutes the uniqueness of every human being, of his or her being an inimitable “thou.”³⁰⁰ What results is a predetermined failure to be responsive to their agency and personhood.³⁰¹

In saying all this, I don’t think Thurman intends to unfairly judge the moral imperfections of his childhood community. He merely wants to acknowledge them for

²⁹⁹ Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness*, 3.
what they are and confess his own implication in such practices. This is why he carefully
accents the distinctiveness of his set of circumstances from those of his white
counterparts.

What was true for me as a boy was true also of any little white boy in my
town with an important and crucial difference! The structure of the
society was such that I was always at his mercy. He was guaranteed by
his society; I was not. I was always available as an outlet for his hostility
whatever may have been the cause of his hostility…Thus I was taught to
keep out of his way, to reduce my exposure to him under any and all
circumstances. I lived in a segregated world in which he could come and
go at will; but into his world I could go only when directed or on
business. 302

White folks on Thurman’s account were permitted a kind of fluidity in their existence
that he could not enjoy. He was stuck, “frozen” as it were, in a status of perpetual
insecurity, since “the very existence of law was for the protection and security of white
society.” His environment was one in which violence and the threat of it were routine.
In this sense, Jim Crow laws and statues were only outward signs of a far darker reality:
That as a black boy living in America you were not protected and never safe, that
“always and everywhere you were strictly on your own and your life depended upon the
survival techniques you had learned in the living.” 303

Thus Thurman would face the acute and perpetual temptation of casting aside the
“demands of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, especially with respect to the meaning and
practice of love.” 304 What Thurman describes as deeply tragic about his situation was
that he didn’t even feel the urge to criticize this area of his ethical life. He was at times
unconscious of the conflict altogether. In other words, his politically and socially

302 Thurman, Luminous Darkness, 3-4.
303 Howard Thurman, Luminous Darkness, 4.
304 Ibid., 3.
“frozen” status also numbed his moral sensitivity, which “made for a peculiar kind of self-righteousness.” White folks didn’t have any religion nor morality, and by implication he obviously did. Thus it was not expected that whites would treat him fairly or with any dignity, and neither was it demanded of him to do the same to them. White people were not “regarded as worthy of a Christian response.” Thurman describes his quandary, struggle, and hope like so:

It was a cruel dilemma; the price paid for a kind of inner balance that would make for some measure of peace of mind was the rigid narrowing or restricting of the Christian ethic. The struggle was to try to achieve a sense of self in a total environment that threatened the self.\footnote{305}

At a minimum, his efforts to achieve a higher self would demand withholding “the inner sanction of [his] spirit” from his surrounding environment.\footnote{306} Insofar as possible, he would have to guard the fluid area of his consent, his inner sanctum.\footnote{307} What Thurman did concede to his circumstances, however, concerned the centrality of strategy. For Thurman to survive and flourish under oppressive conditions, the virtue of adaptability was required. It allowed him to “bend with the wind and keep on living.”\footnote{308} But since any virtue mismanaged and misapplied soon turns vicious, care was required. So adaptability, for Thurman, didn’t include conceding those principles at the center of value. One must always distinguish between adaptability and the betraying (or giving up) of one’s most cherished commitments and values. Compromises of this latter sort, when vicious, result in the scarring, maybe even the death of one’s ethical and spiritual identity. Thus, there are some values for which one must be willing to take a stand, to risk danger,\footnote{309}
and even death. But in those cases the self is not entirely destroyed, quite the opposite is true.

So long as one's ultimate bundle of commitments remains intact, so long as one’s "life working paper" remains legible, death may well solidify the integrity of one’s example, meaning, and force. Meeting this kind of fate isn’t so much a finality as it is a consummation, a wedding of one’s innermost parts with one’s highest ideals. Such examples and models often emit radiant forms of power, giving birth to new and revived forms of life—propelling others, as the New Testament suggests, from faith to faith, and from glory to glory. Life’s most emphatic reply to tragedy and death, Thurman maintained, is new birth.

For Thurman, then, escaping death wasn’t the supreme value, since there were some principles and values worth dying for, and still others that (when marred) might rob life of its significance: “A careful examination of any man’s life would reveal that, at one point he bends with the wind and keeps on living, while at another point he defies the wind and is quite prepared to be brought crashing to the ground.” Thus, Thurman thought it necessary to reserve “a place in me untouched by these pressures on my life.” The preservation of this inner sanctum would serve as a place of power,

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309 Howard Thurman, *The Creative Encounter: An Interpretation of Religion and Social Witness* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1972), 123. "...the martyr may be regarded as a man who arrives at a point in his experience of God in which the estimate that he places upon his physical existence becomes secondary...He must make a choice. He will choose rather to do the thing that is to him the maximum exposure to the love and therefore the approval of God, rather than the thing that will save his own skin. Perhaps this is what Jesus meant when he raised the question as to what a man would give in exchange for his life."

310 Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 110.

311 Romans 1:17 (KJV)

312 2 Corinthians 3:18 (KJV)


314 Howard Thurman, *Deep is the Hunger*, 14.

regeneration, and struggle against those forces seeking to intrude, dominate, and determine. Engaging in disciplines and practices of self-care offers a way to perfect and strain toward one's higher aspirations: a way of empowering the participant to love freely, speak boldly, and see one's place in the world—and in God—more clearly.

In my discussion of Thurman so far, I hope to have made the case that his arguments and anxieties are intimately bound up with his personal struggles. Therefore, attending to Thurman’s existential context should help to situate his work throughout the remaining sections. It should assist our efforts to understand why Thurman chooses to begin with some questions before others, and to notice why in some cases he creatively works to find nimble resolutions, while in others, he refuses to offer any reprieve. With this mind, it is important to see what now comes into view in *Jesus and the Disinherited*. My focus on this text will be primary, but not exclusive. Related writings and recordings will also be incorporated where appropriate.

*Love of Jesus among the Disinherited II*

Published in 1949, the contents of *Jesus and the Disinherited* emerged over the course of many years. These included Thurman's time in Atlanta, initially as a student at Morehouse College in the 1920s and later as a professor in the early 1930s. As Quentin Dixie and Peter Einstadt point out, these years were marked by racist organizations regularly parading "down Peachtree Street with signs such as 'Niggers Back to the Cotton Fields—City Jobs are for White Folks." They were also marred by the slaying of Dennis Hubert, a Morehouse undergraduate, during the summer of 1930, "supposedly for insulting a white woman." The house of Hubert's father was also burned down, and an
attempt was made to kidnap Hubert's uncle, Charles, a friend of Thurman's. This is just a glimpse of the terror that surrounded Thurman's lectures on "The Life of Christ" at Spelman College, a course which emphasized the historical dimensions of the life and work of Jesus. Thurman also delivered a series of lectures on "The Significance of Jesus" in 1937, which show his debt to early 20th century scholarship on the historical Jesus.

We should also bear in mind the significance of Thurman's trip to India, Burma, and Ceylon in the fall of 1935. One of the stories that Thurman would often repeat concerned a presentation he delivered in Colombo (at the time Ceylon, now Sri Lanka). He recalls having a private conversation with a lawyer afterwards, who invited Thurman to give an account of his own standing as a member of a Christian faith tradition that – at least from afar – seemed to be aimed against the humanity of black people. More than this, Thurman had traveled across the world on a pilgrimage of friendship as a "Negro American Christian." This raised a number of concerns in the mind of the inquiring attorney, many of which called into question Thurman's integrity and sanity. Thurman recalls the lawyer inquiring:

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317 Of the six lectures he delivered on "The Significance of Jesus," Thurman wrote five of them in advance: (1) Jesus the Man of Insight, (2) The Temptations of Jesus, (3) Love, (4) Prayer Life of Jesus, and (5) The Cross of Jesus. The sixth lecture was not titled because it was not prepared in advance. All of the lectures are collected in Howard Thurman, *The Papers of Howard Thurman*, vol. 2. *Christian, Who Calls Me Christian? April 1936-1943* ed. Walter E. Fluker (Columbia, SC: The University of South Carolina Press, 2012), 44-91. Although my dissertation doesn't address the details of Thurman's lecture on love, its focus on the "social and impersonal" aspects of sympathy and its critique of personal property and our human propensities for selfishness is noteworthy. Love demands that we give up the economic security often procured by self-serving tactics. As Thurman put it, "The demand, therefore, of Jesus that men love each other is in fundamental opposition to the grounds of security for men in the modern world. It attacks private property, for it demands the willingness to renounce all personal claims to possession if the need arises" (64-5).

"What are you doing over here?...More than three hundred years ago your forefathers were taken from the western coast of Africa as slaves. The people who dealt in the slave traffic were Christians. One of your famous Christian hymn writers, Sir John Newton, made his money from the sale of slaves to the New World...The name of one of the famous British slave vessels was Jesus.

The men who bought slaves were Christians. Christian ministers, quoting the Christian apostle Paul, gave the sanction of religion to the system of slavery. Some seventy years or more ago you American Negroes were freed by a man who was not a professing Christian, but was rather the spearhead of certain political, social, and economic forces, the significance of which he himself did not understand. During all the period since then you have lived in a Christian nation in which you are segregated, lynched and burned. Even in the church, I understand, there is segregation. One of my students who went to your country to study sent me a clipping telling about a Christian church in which the regular Sunday worship was interrupted so that many could join a mob against one of your fellows. When he had been caught and done to death, they came back to resume their worship of their Christian God.

I am a Hindu. I do not understand. Here you are in my country, standing deep within the Christian faith and tradition. I do not wish to seem rude to you, but sir, I think you are a traitor to all the darker peoples of the earth. I am wondering what you, an intelligent man, can say in defense of your position?"319

Jesus and the Disinherited offers part of Thurman's defense. From the outset, Thurman asks himself and his reader: What might the life and teachings—the example—of Jesus of Nazareth “say to those who stand, at a moment in human history, with their backs against the wall?”320 How might the love of Jesus be made to apply to persons previously considered outside his scope of moral concern? Or to put the point more vividly: 'Given all the hell I've encountered here on earth – politically, socially, psychically, physically – how am I to love those who dominate and oppress

320 Howard Thurman, Jesus and the Disinherited, 11. Further cited parenthetically as (JD, pg#), unless noted otherwise.
me?’ For Thurman, it is a question seldom asked by Christian thinkers, precisely because of the dominant tradition’s relationship to power, and more specifically, to white hetero-patriarchal capitalistic discourses of authority and domination.321

Thurman is critical of a certain set of Christian stances that have often been complicit in domination, while self-righteously emphasizing “one’s obligation to administer to human need” (JD, 13). This much we get in the very nature of the question he poses. In his view, most people live under the influence of dominating forces that threaten their lives. To overlook this point, for Thurman, is to miss the relevance of the gospel itself. For Jesus to have any bearing on the lives of the least of these he must instruct and empower: ’the poor, the disinherited, the dispossessed.’ Whatever Thurman receives and interprets from the model of Jesus surely informs the blend of care and criticism he directs toward his society and the church, and ultimately, himself. Thurman must wrestle with the example of Jesus, if he is to speak the truth in love as pastor and prophet, and embody it, as friend and neighbor. This, we'll come to see, also requires a commitment to the Master’s disciplines and habits. Through his pattern and life, we glimpse how Jesus was ”so conditioned and organized within himself that he became a perfect instrument for the embodiment of a set of ideals” (JD, 16). Through that witness, we find creative guidance for our own.

Thurman begins Jesus and the Disinherited by noting its purpose: to offer an "essentially creative and prognostic interpretation of Jesus as religious subject rather

321 The challenge holds even for Christian traditions often thought to be borne of political and theological resistance to domination – say, for example, black church traditions. For a criticism of this tradition and its complicity in larger modes of sexual and gender domination, see Kelly Brown Douglas: Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999); and also, William Hart, “Cornel West: Between Rorty's rock and Hauerwas's hard place,” American Journal of Theology & Philosophy, 19, vol. 2 (1998): 155.
than religious object" (JD, 15). This requires appreciating that Jesus entered the world as a poor Jewish minority (JD, 15-17); noticing that his scarcity of resources "placed him initially with the great mass of men on the earth"; and recognizing that his emergence can't be "understood outside of the sense of community Israel held with God" (JD, 16). As a political and social minority living under Roman domination, Jesus was relentlessly exposed to arbitrary coercions, violent persecutions, and common threats. And like most persons and groups under siege, he faced the constant challenge of securing those conditions that would make for his basic survival. But on Thurman's account, Jesus didn't allow concerns with expediency and survival to over-determine his ministry and focus. His most barbed and critical messages were often pointed at his own Jewish inheritance, the very customs and practices that structured his mode of being in the world. Though critically aware of the evils associated with the empire that surrounded him, Jesus was attentive to the spiritual well-being of his own people: that 'House of Israel', who in Thurman's words, was still "smarting under the loss of status, freedom, and autonomy" (JD, 21).

Always – and especially for those enmeshed within an increasingly unjust and ever burgeoning empire – Jesus saw the need for inner transformation and renewal. On Thurman's reading,

His message focused on the urgency of a radical change in the inner attitude of the people. He recognized fully that out of the heart are the issues of life and that no external force, however great and overwhelming, can at long last destroy a people if it does not first win the victory of the spirit against them. (JD, 21)

The passage above might suggest that Thurman misses the mark. Surely it isn't the case that external forces will be prevented from wreaking havoc and destruction simply by
radical alterations in the hearts and minds of the oppressed. Countless dreams have been crushed and millions of lives have been stunted—and even captured, tortured, and buried!—by external forces. The histories and lingering effects of Imperialism, Colonialism, Racism, and Native Conquests all bear this point. But Thurman's claim isn't that security will ever be made available by internal modifications of mind and spirit. His point is that our loves and priorities—our hearts—need to be properly ordered for us to engage in modes of resistance that aren't self-compromising. So Thurman's emphasis on the interior life comes from a recognition of those evils that often surround and invade the oppressed, not merely their physical spaces, but also their spiritual and psychic cavities. This is why in the subsequent paragraph, Thurman poses a question that Jesus and his contemporaries were forced to face, one that in Thurman's view extends to the greater masses of humanity.

The urgent question was what must be the attitude toward Rome....Rome was the enemy; Rome symbolized total frustration; Rome was the great barrier to peace of mind. And Rome was everywhere. No Jewish person of the period could deal with the question of his practical life, his vocation, his place in society, until first he had settled deep within himself this critical issue.

This is the position of the disinherited in every age. What must be the attitude toward the rulers, the controllers of political, social, and economic life? This is the question of the Negro in American life. Until he has faced and settled that question, he cannot inform his environment with reference to his own life, whatever may be his preparation or his pretensions. (JD, 22-23)

Here the claim is that decisions about our practical lives fundamentally rest on how we relate to ourselves and to those sources of rule and authority that constitute our geo-historical lots. We should not be too alarmed with Thurman's specific claim that
'Rome was everywhere,' and his imagining of Rome as a symbol of 'total frustration.' While this could sound a bit totalizing and one-sided, Thurman constantly works to highlight those moments of subversion which give life to our private and ordinary lives. Spontaneity carries with it the power of resignification and demystification. Human creativity and surprising revelations often go hand in hand. Sites of resistance inhere in every totality, since power is fluid, slippery, and slick. And yet Thurman would have us remember an important lesson about social resistance. Until one deals with one's own positionality, one's own stance, there can be no effective and conscious engagement with one's society. Resistance to domination requires a deep interrogation of one's relationship to the "controllers of political, social, and economic life" (JD, 23).

One reason why resistance requires an interrogation of one's self concerns the temptation to consent (willfully and tacitly) to those forces that dominate. In effect, this is to choose the path of non-resistance. Thurman associates this technique with a "position of imitation," where the goal is to mimic the "social behavior-pattern of the dominant group." Such tendencies result in a "profound capitulation to the powerful, because it means the yielding of oneself to that which, deep within, one recognizes as being unworthy. It makes for a strategic loss of self-respect" (JD, 23). Of course, given how self-deception addles vision and consciousness, one may not even be aware of the loss. Such persons find themselves enticed by the allure of maintaining their own position rather than rising to challenge the status quo. They enshrine the present state of affairs, worship it for the sake of their own safety, and then seek comfort in illusions and

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false narratives. Typically this choice is purchased by an imagined impasse: either become like the oppressors or be destroyed by them. Though such non-resisters might champion justice as an ideal from their lips, in their commitments and deeds, their allegiance is to their own security.

Another strategy of non-resistance, which Thurman mentions, but doesn't develop, is to reduce exposure to the enemy. In such isolationism, Thurman sees the germs of bitterness and hatred, alongside the unmarked presence of debilitating fear. Thurman thinks that this is not only a strategy of avoidance, but also a strategy of containment. On this view, "To take up active resistance would be foolhardy, for a thousand reasons. The only way out is to keep one's resentment under rigid control and censorship" (JD, 24). Notice that it is the oppressed who often constrain their own moral outrage and shock. When isolated and cut off from the dominator, the non-resister is unable to encounter and engage the particulars of her enemy, yet in the process, she is also unable to fully and freely express herself. Burdened with an aimless anger, she tempers and cages it. And with some luck, civil unrest and visible discord might be avoidable. But what bubbles beneath often boils over when a concrete encounter exposes underlying volatility. So that "one nameless incident may cause to burst into flame the whole gamut of smoldering passion, leaving nothing in its wake but charred corpses, mute reminders of the tragedy of life" (JD, 25). Isolation deepens suspicion and fosters misunderstanding, while imitation diminishes dignity and lowers self-respect. Both extremes should be avoided.

In another place, Thurman writes: "For hostility does not exist in a vacuum, hostility cannot be just hostility in general. It has to be focused on something...[but] If this hostility cannot express itself toward anybody else, then it is like a boomerang and turns upon its possessor." See Howard Thurman, *The Growing Edge* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1956), 4.
Thurman thinks that resistance is the only ethical option, though he grants that there can be multiple ways to resist domination. Some forms of resistance depend on physical arms, while others are mentally active, locally supported, and not dependent on such means. Thurman draws our attention to the sort of resistance that's tied to the crafting of one's soul, alongside the shaping of one's society. In Jesus, Thurman finds an example of someone who "recognized with authentic realism that anyone who permits another to determine the quality of his inner life gives into the hands of the other the keys to his destiny." At a general level, such a proposition would seem to hold. To cede any sphere of our lives to the will of another is to also permit their controlling influence over a range of relevant outcomes. Though I take this to be true, Thurman extends this line of thinking to unqualified lengths. He writes,

If a man knows precisely what he can do to you or what epithet he can hurl against you in order to make you lose your temper, your equilibrium, then he can always keep you under subjection. It is a man's reaction to things that determines their ability to exercise power over him. (JD, 28)

Here Thurman suggests that a loss of equilibrium is tied to continued subjection, whereas the preservation of inward stability is linked to freedom and power. To some degree, our reactions can affect the measure of power others exercise over us. I grant that the temptation to be excessively influenced by rage and frustration is troubling; and I even admit the possibility of being consumed by them is an imminent threat. But one can accept these concerns without claiming that domination is a consequence of not being calm. Being in a state of rage is much different than being a slave to rage. Slavery implies captivity, while being in a state implies a particular mode, a mood that need not be seen as rigid, fixed, or permanent. In some cases, the disequilibrium brought on by
anger may well be the appropriate response. Yet blacks in America haven't been free to fully express their humanity, partly because few have been permitted to display their justifiable rage. Such displays are usually attached to losses in credibility, decency, and safety. But outrage must always be distinguished from outright hatred. Human freedom is always bound up with humanity. And given that some abuses and violations ought to enrage human beings, it follows that persons should be able to respond accordingly, in all their vitality and humanity.

Furthermore, part of the struggle for freedom has always depended on some measure of recognition, on those who dominate confronting the fact that the oppressed have feelings (and hence, legitimate claims to well-being) too – just like everybody else. Recall how Thurman himself experienced this denial as a child. And we can additionally recall Baldwin's previous instruction: that properly channeled rage may well be the key to reducing and alleviating domination. Our political enemies and ethical adversaries can be angrily loved and shaken into consciousness, 'forced to see themselves as they are.'

My other worry with Thurman's statement in *Jesus and the Disinherited* concerns his claim that our reaction to things is a function of their power over us. To my mind, however, pistols, canines, and lynching trees have a power all their own, regardless of how a person responds. There is a basic physicality, a brutality that accompanies social domination. It would be a mistake to explain the power of such encroachments as decisions or responses on the part of the abused. Thurman needs a fuller account of how violence and gross inequalities can control the movement of bodies, limit the dissemination of ideas, and physically shorten moments of possible renewal and reorganization. Consider, for example, how unjust working conditions influence the
rhythm of an exploited laborer's life. Not everything is determined by our daily course of events, but quite a bit is. Alton B. Pollard III, a sociologist of religion, calls attention to an important passage from Thurman on this topic:

...if there be any government or social institution or whatever kind that operates among people in a manner that makes for human misery, whether of the mind through fear and despair, or of the body through the freezing of the freedom of movement, or of the spirit through the destruction of any sense of the future, such a government or such a social institution, without regard to its sanctions, is evil.\footnote{Alton B. Pollard, III, \textit{Mysticism and Social Change: The Social Witness of Howard Thurman} (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), 91.}

Thurman, then, would likely agree with many of my concerns. But he would want to linger with the idea that rage and resentment often morph into hatred. He would point out that rage must be accompanied with gentleness, because anger alone won't suffice. Although this reply strengthens Thurman's case for the importance of the inner life, it also supports my insistence on the importance of anger. Gentleness alone won't suffice, either. And yet, for the righteous indignation that I recommend to be productive and not destructive, distinctions need to be made between anger and its dangerous semblance: hatred.

In a series of sermons collected in the \textit{The Growing Edge} (1956), Thurman organizes his early homilies around the topic of loving one's enemies.\footnote{Howard Thurman, \textit{The Growing Edge} (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1956). Further cited parenthetically as (GE, #), unless noted otherwise.} Taking as his text a passage from Psalm 139:21-22, \textit{Do not I hate them, O Lord?...I hate them with perfect hatred,} Thurman proceeds to condemn this attitude, noting that "hatred is against life," "goodness," "rightness," and "God" (GE, 3). Hatred breeds insidious forms of
 isolation, which is precisely what makes it so attractive for the dispossessed. And like any feeling or mood, concept or idea, hatred possesses its own ravenous, "private economy" when housed within our hearts. Thurman reaches this conclusion by arguing that ideas and attitudes have organism-like qualities. In a similar manner, hatred "draws upon all of the energies of the nervous system" for its sustenance, and can often "come to fruition, independent of the house in which it lives" (GE, 4). For this reason, we need always beware, since hatred can "grow and develop without reference to the ends which we are seeking." Thurman takes this to be a fact about our human psychology, one rooted in various evolutionary processes: an unavoidable, yet "important act in the drama of human life. What can we do about it?", he asks (GE, 5).

Hatred, Thurman reasons, is like love insofar as it possesses a positive valence. But "hatred is positive and destructive, while love is positive and creative" (GE, 5). So it is a mistake to see hatred as the opposite of love wholesale, indifference is much closer to that. When confronting an individual that moves us toward hatred, Thurman says that we must maintain a keenness of perspective.

This means I must understand that individuals are creatures of training, background, culture, of personal frustrations and collective frustrations. They are the victims of all the forces that play upon their lives, shaping and modeling and fashioning them. I must understand this! The moment I am able to locate my hatred within a causal perspective, a kind of gentle religious wisdom begins to take possession of me. The hated one is ever a victim of the predicament of his life! This does not excuse him, but helps me understand him. (GE, 6)

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326 Expanding this point, Thurman writes, "It serves often to support the sagging self-respect that an individual has when he finds himself in an environment that is overwhelming, and against which he has no protection. He retreats within himself; burrows out a hole in which to live, and takes cover; his hatred, bitter and terrible, gives him endurance...It affirms his significance, the clues to which had been obliterated by the evil with which he was trying to cope" (GE, 5).
Thurman here recommends that we must "gently" view such an individual within the larger context of their coming to be. Such awareness widens our sense of vision which, in turn, helps to locate our frustrations in a variety of sources: not merely in choices and decisions, but also in social arrangements and political procedures. This is the "casual perspective" borne of a kind and "gentle wisdom." And such sensitivity also leads us to examine ourselves.

Second, I recognize that I am not without guilt. The vision of God enables me to see that the roots of the hatred are in me also. When I look into the eyes of a violent man, I see myself. The moment I do this, a miracle takes place. The first fruit of hatred is isolation, and now my isolation is broken. Once more, both my enemy and I stand in immediate candidacy to become members of the family. (GE, 6)

Love is at once generative and revelatory, building bridges and shedding light where hatred would otherwise demolish and obscure. Such a fate includes lover and beloved, hater and hated alike. As Thurman puts it, "If hatred finally destroys the individual, it is because an evil that operated on the outside shifts its basis of operation from outside to inside. When that happens, the soul of man is poisoned." (GE, 6)

When taken together, I think such passages readily afford a way of distinguishing anger from hatred: we can look to their fruit! Does your variety of anger create or destroy? Does it clear the way without poisoning or does it leave behind its own toxins? If hatred is in some sense positive, surely anger is too. Our task, then, is to keep track of what we create and make possible with our powers of motion and heart: the kinds of selves and societies we invite into existence and those we swipe away. My reading of Thurman opens the way for a productive rage, one tempered by a gentleness of wisdom and a love of new creations. Our quality of life depends on so delicate a balance.
With these caveats and distinctions in mind, I want to affirm Thurman's basic insight: that the oppressed must nurture and protect their inner lives. They too must work to ensure that they don't become agents of their own destruction. Where that inner life is not sutured and sanctified, wounds fester and often burst with hatred, fear, and resentment. Instead of healing, scabs simply conceal the wounds we've yet to tend, encrusted deceptions. This leads to disfigured body politics and disordered forms of self-care, often without persons even noticing. Such are the dangers that led Thurman to affirm the significance of living from within, of nurturing and protecting one's inner life.

I think that *Jesus and the Disinherited* offers an initial vision of how those caught on the underside of domination and empire might properly love their enemies, neighbors, and selves. Thurman's is a project and task that constantly requires the remaking and refashioning of oneself, through habits and disciplines that work against hatred, fear, and deception, "hounds of hell" and obstacles to love which each receive chapter length treatment. Yet this raises a question. Why would Thurman spend more time fleshing out the challenges to love than spelling out its positive content: three chapters on the 'hounds of hell,' and just one chapter on the love of Jesus? I think it has to do with his

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327 Writing of the dangers and difficulties of avoiding hatred, Thurman describes a companion of his in these terms: "Here was stark bitterness fed by the steady oozing of the will to resentment. It is clear that before love can operate, there is the necessity for forgiveness of injury perpetuated against a person by a group...Perhaps there is no answer that is completely satisfying from the point of view of rational reflection. Can the mouse forgive the cat for eating him?" (JD, 107).

328 I have in mind the image offered by writer, poet, and environmental ethicist Wendell Berry, *The Hidden Wound* (Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2010), 4. "If the white man has inflicted the wound of racism upon black men, the cost has been that he would receive the mirror image of that wound into himself. As the master, or as a member of the dominant race, he has felt little compulsion to acknowledge it or speak of it; the more painful it has grown the more deeply he has hidden it within himself. But the wound is there, and it is a profound disorder, as great a damage in the mind as in society." Berry is writing from the perspective of his own identity as a white man, but this would also presumably include his relations to black and brown women as well, albeit in distinct but related ways. Unfortunately the wounds of black and brown women have yet to receive adequate attention. It is notable that neither Baldwin nor Thurman take as their central unit of analysis the sufferings and struggles of black women. The same might be said of my project as well.

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awareness of a profoundly human (and an especially protestant evangelical and hyper-Augustinian) tendency to avoid reality. Here Baldwin and Thurman would seem to agree: we are apt to crave the heights of transcendence and avoid the darkness of our present depths. But love must engage and inhabit the hell on this earth, while not itself being consumed by it. Love can only conquer the darkness it is willing to finger beneath and probe beyond, which already supposes our abiding with and dwelling among the wretched of the earth. Anything less is an unhelpful evasion, a looking away from the graves, terrors, and evils that conspire against us all.

For Thurman, and for my attempt to sketch an ethic of love and social criticism, loving one's enemy "means that a fundamental attack must first be made on the enemy status" (JD, 97). By this, Thurman doesn't mean we need to avoid reality. He deftly acknowledges the existence of various rivals and foes and, of these, Thurman highlights three sorts: the personal enemy, the indigenous enemy, and an institutional enemy – which can be both impersonal and personal. The challenge to love our enemies begins with a willingness to avoid hating them.

The personal enemy shares in "one's primary-group life." The relationship between lover and enemy is here rooted "in more or less intimate, personal associations." Loving such a person requires reconciliation on Thurman's view, which "involves confession of error and a seeking to be restored to one's former place." But Thurman thinks that this ethic, frequently culled from Jesus's admonition to "leave thy give gift before the altar, and go be reconciled to thy brother" (Matt. 5:24), is the easiest to

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329 19th century activist and writer, David Walker wrote powerfully of the wretchedness of the slave’s condition, see Walker, *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* ed. Peter Hinks (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2000). In the 20th century, Franz Fanon’s classic 20th century text also helped to popularize the idea regarding anti-colonial struggles for liberation, see Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2005).
achieve. Here ease of execution flows from the vast number of persons with whom the lover does not share intimacy. Since most folks in the world lie outside these realms of intimacy, such a love ethic rarely applies because its range is so narrow and restricted.

The second sort of enemy concerns those among your group, or nation, or class, or race who might be deemed traitors. "There are always those who seem to be willing to put their special knowledge at the disposal of the dominant group to facilitate the tightening of the chains. They are given position, often prominence, and above all a guarantee of economic security and status. To love such people requires the uprooting of the bitterness of betrayal..." One might think of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas or, world-renowned neurosurgeon, Dr. Ben Carson. To love enemies of this sort is to "recognize some deep respect and reverence for their persons. But to love them does not mean to condone their way of life" (JD, 94-5).

The final kind of enemy involves those institutions and individuals who embody the interests of the dominating regime. For the Jewish minorities living in 1st century Palestine, this would've meant the Roman Empire and those Romans who by virtue of their standing and privilege furthered its aims. On Thurman's analysis, "The Roman, viewed against the background of his nation and its power, was endowed in the mind of the Jew with all the arrogance and power of the dominant group" (JD, 95-6). Thurman would locate this mindset among blacks in America encountering the legal, political, and social institutions of white supremacy and the white people who benefited from those arrangements. Such were the enemies of black folks. How then were the downtrodden and cast down to make an attack on the enemy status without evading such realities?
Thurman recognized a need for more creative and more frequent human encounters; and he took as part of his mission the task of organizing such meetings. In them he saw opportunities for "primary contacts," supple moments of relating that weren't over-determined by status and power relations (JD, 97). But these contacts were to be grounded in the ordinary, not in vacuous and arbitrary encounters, and not in fictionalized and "hypothetical relationships" (JD, 98). On Thurman's view, "The first step to love is a common sharing of a sense of mutual worth and value," and this "has to be in a real situation, natural, free." Yet, in order for this to occur, individuals would be required to work on and care for their ethos. For only in their "common environment" could they hope to secure "normal experiences of fellowship." Such a mandate applied to the oppressors and the oppressed. Wholesale segregation was a "complete ethical and moral evil," because it blocked the way to amelioration and the sort of intimacies that could abet racial friendship and understanding. The shared, yet transcendent experience, of encountering God in worship, Thurman believed, opened the way for unique and intimate ways of relating. Segregation, therefore, was to be resisted within and outside the church. Acknowledging its appeal among certain groups, Thurman maintained that, "Whatever it may do for those who dwell on either side of the wall, one thing is certain: it poisons all normal contacts of those persons involved" (JD, 98).

Yet the allure of segregation couldn't be dismissed so quickly. Thurman knew the appeal of segregation because the church was one of the most divided places in America, and where Protestant faith traditions were concerned, all the more so. He lamented:

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330During Thurman's time at Howard University (1932-44), he experimented with styles of worship that didn't take sermons as their focal point. Large amounts of time were set for collective silence and meditation, as well as the introduction of fine arts, like dance, as way to bring about "an experience of spiritual unity." Thurman also incorporated "living Madonnas" while arranging for different Ave Marias to be performed by members of the school of music. See Howard Thurman, *Footprints of a Dream*, 24-25.
The result is that in the one place in which normal, free contract might be most naturally established—in which the relations of the individual to his God should take priority over conditions of class, race, power, status, wealth, or the like—this place is one of the chief instruments for guaranteeing barriers. (JD, 98)

As Thurman saw it, self-segregation only deepened enmity, ignorance, and fear—to which his call for love would have to respond. Love, for Thurman, demanded a particular kind of neighborliness that neither segregation nor wistful abstractions would furnish. Love is proximate, specific, and vulnerable. Love springs from awareness and flows into good will, issuing a deep and abiding criticism of oneself, one's fellows, and the institutional and social factors that structure human life. Of course such an effort would be laden with danger. Yet Thurman's interpretation of Jesus' message to the disinherited was unrelenting: "Love your enemy. Take the initiative in seeking ways by which you can have the experience of a common sharing of mutual worth and value. It may be hazardous, but you must do it" (JD, 100). Enemies were to be seen and approached within the "context of a common humanity," that fallen, murderously imperfect, broken and tragic, yet redeemable and wondrously beautiful, self-renewing process of life and decay.

But loving one's enemy within the context of a common humanity is no easy task. It requires sensitivity to self, other, and one's variously shifting contexts of complicity and entanglement. It calls for discipline and technique, a set of habits that inform and empower. Commenting on the love ethic and its respect for human personality and potential, Thurman writes:

It has to be rooted in concrete experience. No amount of good feeling for people in general, no amount of simple desiring, is an adequate substitute.
It is the act of inner authority, well within the reach of everyone. Obviously, then, merely preaching love one's enemies or exhortations—however high and holy—cannot, in the last analysis, accomplish this result. At the center of this attitude is a core of painstaking discipline, made possible only by personal triumph. (JD, 106)

On this view, love involves a unique set of disciplines and habits. It aims at our growing in awareness of where we currently stand in relation to the ideals to which we aspire. Although I deal with the details of this difficult and abstract formulation in Thurman's later texts, in the interim, it is important to note how Thurman approaches this task in *Jesus and the Disinherited*.

There we find him emphasizing respect and reverence for human personality, a manner of acknowledgment that would ideally extend to all we encounter – strangers, enemies, neighbors, and friends alike. In practice this meant that,

Each person meets the other where he is and there treats him as if he were where he ought to be. Here we emerge into an area where love operates, revealing a universal characteristic unbounded by special or limited circumstances. (JD, 105)

To better explain the ethic at work in this formulation, Thurman returns to the example of Jesus. Using a narrative found only in the gospel of John, Thurman describes the erasure and loss of human personality suffered by a woman who was caught in an act of adultery (John 8:1-11).331 According to Mosaic law, the penalty for adultery was supposed to be death (Lev. 20: 10; Deut. 22:22).332 In the eyes of her accusers, Thurman imagines, "the

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331 It is important to remember that this selected passage wasn't a part of the original constitution of the Gospel of John. Scholars agree that the passages (from John 7:53 – 8:1-11) were added later. There are divergent approaches as to whether the passage should be ignored, treated as separate, or canonical. See Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1975), 219-20;
woman was not a woman, or even a person, but an adulteress, stripped of her essential
dignity and worth."

Notice here that on Thurman's reading, Jesus models how we might go about
engaging in social criticism. Before rendering judgment or engaging in a public act of
criticism, Jesus instructs his listeners—and, by extension, those who would follow him—
to consider first their own shortcomings, what manner of man or woman they are: "He
that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone." After courageously confessing
one's own faults and errors, such a person would then be in a better position "to throw
stones," just as forcefully and accurately (I presume) at oneself as any other person or
collective. Thurman surmises the pericope like this:

The quiet words exploded the situation, and in the piercing glare each man
saw himself in his literal substance. In that moment each was not a judge
of another's deeds, but of his own. In the same glare, the adulteress saw
herself merely as a woman involved in the meshes of a struggle with her
own elemental passion. (JD, 105)

Jesus did not see her crisis as final, but as one phase in her much longer and larger
development. Her situation was redeemable, open-ended, incomplete, uncertain, and
ameliorative—if she could but take the next step with some measure of power and hope,
instead of receiving condemnation. According to Thurman,

This is how Jesus demonstrated reverence for personality. He met the
woman where she was, and he treated her as if she were already where she
now willed to be. In dealing with her he "believed" her into the
fulfillment of her possibilities. He stirred her confidence into activity. He
placed a crown over her head which for the rest of her life she would keep
trying to grow tall enough to wear. (JD, 106)

Notice that Jesus not only addresses the woman in her particular situation, but he
also confronts and criticizes lesser styles of judging. His task is to make sure that critics
of all stripes begin with their own humanity. Secondly, he charitably reached beyond the confines of his own perspective to see and imagine life from the peculiar flesh of the beloved. He journeyed, as it were, to her vantage point, to the conditions surrounding her. Third, Jesus recommended a higher perspective—a more noble way of life—than what was accessible to the woman held in judgment. His message was shot through with edification and hope, with improvement and fresh life, but not lacking in edge. "Go and sin no more" was surely a commandment rooted in censure and disapproval. And yet his critical message was also constructive: deeply aware and sensitive to the possibilities of the individual he met. Jesus spoke to the details of the present with a vision of what a larger and more loving future might be. He inspired a kind of courage, a confidence through which she might pursue "the crown" now placed above her. Her priesthood was declared through a criticism that affirmed her potential, yet still confronted evil. Even high priests, the gospel of Luke reminds, must grow in wisdom and stature (Luke 2:52).  

In concluding and summarizing the main themes of *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Thurman notes that loving one's enemies and friends and critically caring for those who rule and betray will demand "the clearest possible understanding of the anatomy of the issues facing" the parties involved. Clarity of vision is paramount. Whosoever wishes to love in concert with the religion of Jesus...

...must recognize fear, deception, hatred, each for what it is. Once having done this, they must learn how to destroy these or to render themselves immune to their domination. In so great an undertaking it will become increasingly clear that the contradictions of life are not ultimate. The disinherited will know for themselves that there is a Spirit at work in life.

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333 Thurman also makes mention of Jesus' growth and development: "It was said of Jesus that he increased in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man." Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, 46.
and in the hearts of men which is committed to overcoming the world. It is universal, knowing no age, no race, no culture, and no condition of men. For the privileged and underprivileged alike, if the individual puts at the disposal of the Spirit the needful dedication and discipline, he can live effectively in the chaos of the present the high destiny of a son of God. (JD, 108-109)

What remains to be assembled are the interior workings of such a vision, and their particular function within the life and witness of Thurman's pastor and critic. So far I've offered a quick sketch of how this might appear. In the sections to come, my goal will be to deepen and layer the portrait suggested here. I begin with Thurman's take on the origins and necessity of love, as argued in his Merrick Lectures, given at Ohio Wesleyan University in March of 1954, and published under the heading, The Creative Encounter: An Interpretation of Religion and Social Witness. After this, my focus shifts to what I view as Thurman's most profound and penetrating statement on love, his 1961 Rufus Jones Lecture, published that same year as a pamphlet entitled, Mysticism and the Experience of Love. Along the way, I'll again make reference to Thurman's meditative bits, letters, speeches, prayers, and sermons on related themes.
Chapter 5

The Experience of Love

The experience of love is either a necessity or a luxury. If it be a luxury, it is expendable; if it be a necessity, then to deny it is to perish. So simple is the reality, and so terrifying.  

We're provided a window into Thurman's understanding of love in the final chapters of The Creative Encounter. There Thurman devotes his attention to two ideas that bear on my project: "The Inner Need for Love" and the "Outer Necessity of Love." Earlier I mentioned that Thurman thought the church could serve as a place of "primary contacts," and thereby enrich communities of care and understanding. As we'll see in the following section, much of this has to do with the value Thurman places on religious experience, of human encounters with the divine, sacred presence of God. Experiencing God's love empowers the lover to strain toward, work with, and care for her beloved and herself in

334 Thurman, Disciplines of the Spirit, 127.
336 The concept of religious experience is a vast and complicated one. And given my emphasis on the kind of ethics that might flow out of such encounters, I do not delve into the metaphysical, epistemological, and theological assumptions that ground Thurman's use of religious experience and the problems that attend it. This is why I don't engage the first two chapters of Creative Encounter ("The Inwardness of Religion" and "The Outwardness of Religion") which offer (in very broad terms) Thurman's influences. Here the legacy of Friedrich Schleimacher vis-a-vis William James's account of religious experience should be noted, as well as the influence of various mystical and personalist traditions on Thurman's thinking. For an account Schleimacher's view of religious experience, see Wayne Proudfoot, Religious Experience (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); on William James, see David Lamberth, William James and the Metaphysics of Experience (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). On the connection between William James and Thurman, see Anika Jones, "Religious Experience According to William James and Howard Thurman" Journal of Moral Education 32 (2003): 429-434. On the role of religious experience in black theologies of liberation and Thurman's contributions to such work, see Luther E. Smith, Jr., "Black Theology and Religious Experience" Journal of ITC (Fall 1980): 59-72. For a generative effort to extend many of Thurman's insights on religious experience in a pragmatic modality sensitive to the lessons of Heidegger and Wittgenstein, see Victor Anderson, Creative Exchange: A Constructive Theology of African American Experience (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), especially 111-143.
new ways. Thurman carefully argues for the centrality of love in our attempts to flourish, in ways personal, internal, and private—and others social, external, and public.

*On the Power and Necessity of Love*

Each of us, Thurman believes, has a deep and abiding urge to love and be loved. This can be traced from infancy to adulthood, and Thurman cites the psychological literature of his day to support this view. Combining the insights of those studies with his own experience, Thurman affirms that "the need for love is so related to the structure of personality that when this need is not met, the personality is stunted and pushed or twisted out of shape" (CE, 101). So our capacities of love (of receiving, responding, and imagining) obtain their shape and character locally, especially through our first encounters with caregivers, in a word, through our experiences of love: "This childish love is the pattern for all later love relationships. The ability to love, like other human faculties, has to be learned and practiced" (CE, 97). But where there is no experience of relatedness, persons will find difficulty establishing and maintaining it. Occasions for fellowship must therefore be created.

For Thurman, our first practices of care fund a "pattern of response to other human beings that makes possible all forms of community and of relatedness between human beings." As we mature, Thurman thinks we all have a desire to be understood and cared for in the light of who we are, our intrinsic worth. That is why he distinguishes intrinsic value of this sort, from the kinds of concerns often attached to what we do and

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how we perform. It is a gift to be known beyond one's faults and virtues. For such an understanding can't be achieved by mere exposure and contact. To be ourselves without pretending, to be uniquely embraced as untidy works in progress, requires a freedom in intimacy only purchased by genuine fellowship.

Here the need is for being understood, for being accepted in terms of one's intrinsic worth rather than merely for what one does or does not. It is a hunger for counting solely for one's self, rather than because of what one has to contribute or share, or because of one's status, one's parents, one's background, or any of the other trappings by which personality seeks on various occasions to express itself. There is no feeling quite comparable to the adult feeling that someone cares for you as you without any extras involved. (CE, 106)

From the passage just cited, one wouldn't readily notice Thurman's robust view of human partiality and the limitations of such finitude. But Thurman does possess such an outlook: a view grounded in the conditions of history, space, time, and context, but not over-determined by the necessity of these starting points. For Thurman, the power of religious experience rests in its promise to enable outward forms of love which call for the casting aside of idolatrous partialities, especially those tied to our preferences for comfort and security, nation and clan, dogma and ideology—in a word, our self-interested attachments. "Growth in Godlikeness, spiritual maturity," Thurman writes, "demands continuous sacrifices on the part of the individual. In the religious experience certain demands are made upon the individual" (CE, 117). Those who meet God in

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338 Thurman used this phrase to describe the kind of attentive care he received from his professors during his time at Morehouse College as an undergraduate. See Thurman, With Head and Heart, 41.
339 "Each person longs for the kind of relationship with others in which it is no longer necessary to pretend in any sense whatsoever. In other words there is the deep need to be dealt with in some sense that is total, that is all-inclusive, that is completely complete" (CE 106).
340 "... there are those qualities of personality, those attachments to things, those desires that succeed in blurring the vision and limiting the sense which I must have of being totally and completely encompassed by the love of God" (CE, 121).
religious experience must also greet the unseemly portions of their own souls. Such barriers prevent honest communication with God in what Thurman calls, 'the trysting place.'

Religious encounters with God permit the participant to be known without pretense and mask: "Here the individual is laid bare, stripped of all facade. This is the essence of the meaning of the love of God. In the presence of God, at last, a man is relieved of all necessity for pretending. He can stand clean in the sense of being undisguised and utterly without shame" (CE, 115). Thurman, of course, takes care to note that persons often feel ashamed in the presence of God. But he sees these feelings as revelations and spurs for self-transformation. As for such feeling ashamed, Thurman believes that "something must be done about it. There is no substitute for a thoroughgoing honesty in facing it. Here I cannot run the risk of even a seeming deception. I must admit all down to the final quiver of my own spirit" (CE, 118). To encounter God is to face God's knowledge of us, God's infinite understanding of and compassion toward our plight, as well as our latent possibilities. Thurman's favorite Psalm speaks of this sort of meeting, Psalm 139. As the Psalter suggests, this is a place of intense examination and exposure. But it is also, Thurman admits, a place of pain, which is often a condition for new birth and growth.

It is for this reason that there is inevitably associated with religious experience some aspect of crisis. There is the tension created by the response to grow, to be, and to become more Godlike, and the terrible pull to remain as one is. All of the things in one's life that meet secondary needs must be constantly scrutinized in the light of the demands of the experience itself (CE, 118).

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342 Thurman preached his trial sermon from Psalm 139. The title of his book, *Luminous Darkness*, also comes from the twelfth verse.
Such an experience can be gut-wrenching. Thurman points to less quoted, but very strenuous teachings of the Master that emphasize the difficulty of self-surrender and sacrifice.\(^{343}\) Attaining such spiritual maturity, like Bonheoffer's costs of discipleship, isn't cheaply borrowed or mimicked. In order to achieve the sort of vision that comes through divine communion, one must grow "more and more sensitized to the things that blur its beauty and holiness." Here the worshiper's motivation revolves less around fearing God's judgment, and more directly concerns her own sanctity, sense, and step. With what is holy lighting his path, and also, what is beautiful touching his feet, gradually such a person begins to notice that "this, or that, or the other thing blurs his vision" (CE, 119). The basis of such an awareness can be found in the searching encounter with God's all-encompassing love, a love that exposes and covers a multitude of imperfections and shortcomings. Here God's love also shapes second-order desires, by giving life to "the desire to desire to give up more and more [of] that which impedes my growth and my development in the knowledge and the love of God" (CE, 122).\(^{344}\)

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\(^{343}\) Matt: 6:24 NASB. "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth"; Mark 9:45 NASB "If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame, than, having your two feet, to be cast into hell."

Also in Thurman's own words, "In the presence of God all of the things that stand between me and the total exposure of myself to His love must be systematically or radically gotten rid of" (CE, 121).

\(^{344}\) It is surprising that Thurman doesn't think such transformation is best described as sacrifice or "giving up." He tends to see things as a more positive union with the divine approval of God (CE, 122). But I wonder if Thurman's formulation attends fully to the difficulty of shaping desire in the light of entrenched habits. It seems that if such change were to occur quickly, instead of being the result of habituation, then at least in the mind of the convert, there would be some sense of loss, relative to the depth of her previous attachments. While I'm persuaded by Thurman's claim that "No man can look on God's face and remain as he was," I'm not convinced that the transformation is as seamless or as painless as Thurman implies. If the history of racial and gender domination in Christian churches is any clue, detachment from various modes of whiteness and masculinity is hard to come by. Thurman may reply that such persons just haven't encountered God, but then this raises the skeptical question of why so few Christians would seem to have encountered God. Things are even more confounding when one considers clergy. The tension between Thurman's mysticism and pragmatism calls for deeper investigation. This is the challenge of immediate
From such an experience, the individual is led to work on and improve his or her surrounding environment, for "what is disclosed in his religious experience, he must define within community" (CE, 124). How then might one's religious encounters with God begin to take on social significance? Thurman's inner need for love, when met by God, propels outward forms of organizing and gathering. The goal is to realize this divine ordering of love and exposure within the context of human, everyday encounters. Experiencing God's love now becomes a basis for encountering others.

Thurman's final chapter in *Creative Encounter* considers this very theme. What kind of impact, he asks, might religious experience influence a person to have on her culture—on the issues, problems, and patterns of her time? Thurman thinks transformations can occur with the institution of fresh habits. Observing that various kinds of cultural patterns influence the development and possibility of human flourishing, Thurman reasons that social change can occur by 'weighing in' on these cultural patterns. Different cultures are marked by differing modes of valuation and arrangement whose authority, Thurman believes, consists in their record of securing and providing goods essential to well-being. The account of well-being on offer in each culture will determine which goods need securing and to whom they should be made available. Following child psychiatrist James Plant, Thurman offers a short list of entrenched cultural patterns. His catalogue includes God-centered cultures that focus on an individual's personality and potential only to the extent that they involve service to God; family centered cultures

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conversion through religious contagion versus the slow, arduous process of sanctification—those changes that accompany spiritual ascesis and habit formation.

James Plant taught courses at the Rutgers, Yale, Columbia, and NYU. His work influenced a generation of scholars, social workers, and other public servants. See James Plant, *Personality and the Cultural Pattern* (New York: Commonwealth Fund; London: Oxford University Press, 1937); and for a quick biographical sketch, see Dr. James Stuart Plant 1890-1947 *Social Service Review* Vol. 21, No. 4 (Dec., 1947): 540
which submerge individual aims and interests to those which support the family; and state and profit-centered cultures that do likewise.

In all these cases, Thurman thinks individual needs for security and relatedness are prime values. Too frequently, however, these patterns become idols around which we organize life. In such cases, the life from and for which social arrangements were initially established is forgotten and undervalued. In the "human tendency of giving life itself to what are essentially symbols of life," the needs and dreams, the vitality and energy, the life and blood of human persons and their communities are violated (CE, 129). Here our personal habits and shared social practices no longer serve human flourishing, yet our sense of what constitutes human excellence is rendered in terms of service to the current order. Persons become things, tools for a pattern divorced from their own power and particularity. Thurman thinks that religious experience empowers persons to resist this tendency. Ossification is a vice to be resisted.

But Thurman keenly senses the ways in which religious experience may itself become the site of encrustation. In particular, he sees a temptation to exalt one's own religious sect, denomination, or wider 'frame of reference' in ways that are contrary to the example of Jesus: "The separate vision of a denomination tends to give to the individual who embraces it an ultimate, particularized status, even before God" (CE 140). To some extent, Thurman admits, titles and labels are unavoidable. Religious traditions, organized rituals, and established ways of belief are all necessary. Yet Thurman thinks their value rests in the experiences they afford: that which they dispose us toward. They are not in

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346 As will become evident, Thurman thinks that religious institutions possess their own and very troubling patterns of arrangement. "But when the church, even within the framework of the principle of discrimination inherent in denominationalism, further delimits itself in terms of class and race, it tends to become an instrument of violence to the religious experience" (CE, 141-2). Of course this list could obviously be expanded to include gender and sexuality.
themselves preeminent, ultimate destinations. Religious affiliations should open and invite, like entryways; not be closed and final, like coffins.

Inasmuch as the individual brings to his religious experience his context, it is perfectly natural and mandatory that he will enter his religious experience with his particular denominational frame of reference. That is the door through which he enters (CE, 140).

Here Thurman points to the folly of trying to deny the histories we bring to God. We are creatures of history and context. Our notions of self and consciousness depend for their content on such factors. And, yet, Thurman wants to distinguish this necessity from the vice of treating these starting points as endpoints. Often the folks who stake exclusive claims to God—whether through dogma, charisma, or experience—are the people who misrepresent God the most. Such false witnesses (and prophets alike) are quick to tell of what they’ve seen and heard, but less likely to expose and measure themselves against the light they claim as their own. Therefore, it becomes increasingly important to highlight the outlook of those who fail to grow from their religious experience in God.

In the encounter with God in the religious experience, however, the denominational frame of reference receives its true status, which is a frame of reference, without standing, as such, in the ultimate meaning of the experience itself. To make the frame of reference...take on the life-giving character of the experience itself and thereby become binding as a principle of discrimination in the wider context of living and experiencing is to blaspheme against the experience itself. This, in my judgment, tends to undermine the integrity of the church as the promoter and inspirer of religious experience (CE, 141).347

347 Ralph Waldo Emerson worried about the ways in which religious rituals, practices, and creeds—especially those concerning the person of Jesus—could actually do violence to the sparks of divinity within our own humanity. Here “the friend of man is made the injurer of man. The manner in which his name is surrounded with expressions, which were once sallies of admiration and love, but are petrified into official titles, kills all generous sympathy and liking…the language that describes Christ to Europe and America, is not the style of friends and enthusiasm to a good and noble heart, but is appropriated and formal…Accept
In this way, Thurman's worry with the propensity of social groups, especially the church, to stiffen human capacities of discernment and feeling resonates deeply with the anxieties of Emerson and Baldwin. “Jesus Christ,” wrote Emerson, “belonged to the true race of prophets. He saw with open eye the mystery of the soul.” Too often the forms and symbols of religious experience receive undue authority, a kind of blinding power. In such cases, it becomes easy to mistake the incidental for the essential, to mistake outer coverings for deep, inner workings. Such hegemonic frameworks, in turn, diminish the vivacity of experience and reduce it to stone: walling out the possibility of fresh sustenance and novel streams. For Thurman, the framework "becomes coextensive with the religious experience," when it "by definition precludes...the availability of the religious experiences under [other] auspices..." (CE, 146).

How then does Thurman try to salvage the virtue of religious experience from such perils? His first move is to suggest that religious encounters "must have a quality of intrinsic significance that transcends the frame of reference or context" (CE, 146). Thurman thinks this is possible when the particular context or purveyor of religious experience encourages higher forms of self-consciousness among its participants. Ideas and experiences—when properly welcomed and digested by eager, child-like minds—take on a generative life of their own. When a powerful idea, like the love of Jesus, is actually experienced, it occasions an opportunity for growth and transformation. Growth, however, isn't automatically guaranteed, since some, undoubtedly, "would destroy it because it threatens or challenges or even becomes destructive to other forms regarded as

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the injurious impositions of our early catechetical instruction, and even honesty and self-denial were but splendid sins, if they did not wear the Christian name.” See Emerson, “Harvard Divinity School Address,” in Essays and Lectures (New York: Library of America, 1983), 81.

Ibid., 81.
worthful" (CE, 138). So Thurman doesn't promise the survival of religious experience nor any new forms of consciousness. He only suggests that consciousness can be encouraged by particular contexts and communities of nurture, paradigmatically "a vital religious fellowship which is so creative in character, so convincing in quality that it inspires the mind to multiply experiences of unity..." (CE, 152). We must create those conditions which allow for growth. Likening the survival of a new idea to the miracle of new birth, Thurman says,

   Slowly it begins the long journey of growth by creating in the mind new levels of curiosity, fresh contacts with old sources, and sometimes defining all activities of the personality in terms useful to its ends. It is a wonderful sensation—to feel the growth of an idea in the mind. (CE, 138)

   Ideally, religious encounters with God would leave parishioners with a renewed sense of purpose and commitment, and a greater sensitivity to the possibilities entailed in subsequent encounters. Like the fresh, unnoticed mercies of morning dew, new revelations greet us each day. Hence, we must wake and be watchful, wonder and wander, in search of surprise—and also, the treasures of silence—knowing all the while, we must be still.\textsuperscript{349} Such persons, on Thurman's view, become more acutely (but not fully) aware of their function in a variety of affairs. Wholeness and integrity are sought through the interactions between environing communities and emergent characters, through the merging of public identities with private lives. In this way, "the individual is

\footnote{Thurman's is especially fond of a passage from Augustine's \textit{Confessions} 1.1. Thurman cites the Bishop of Hippo approvingly: "Thou hast made us for thyself and our souls are restless till they find their rest in thee" (CE, 122); For the Augustine quote, see St. Augustine, \textit{The Confessions} trans. Maria Boulding (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 3. In another place, Thurman also affirms, "It is very good to turn aside from the rush and the weariness and the anxieties by which these days beset and lay siege to our moments, to rest in the presence of God. It is good to pause, to make an end of so much that bothers and harasses the spirit, to assess the meaning of our lives in the light of the movement of the Spirit within us." See Howard Thurman, "To Rest in His Presence," in \textit{The Centering Moment} (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1978), 27.} 170
not merely faced with a matter of personal piety, but he is confronted with the necessity for giving expression to his life as a responsible member of his society. All of his living in the midst of his fellows becomes in a sense his religious vocation" (CE, 130).

A variety of forces influence the man or woman of religious vocation daily, but it is upon these structures of power that religious persons are to weigh. To be subject to the will of God is also to take on a level of civic responsibility that goes beyond registering for military service and paying one's taxes. A wider duty to be involved civically remains, whether through local organizing or by calling attention to silent injustices or by casting light on latent possibilities. Time and again, Thurman argues, brave voices have been able to "move the hearts of men" (CE, 132). Beyond this, it also becomes necessary for the religious believer to organize with other groups and persons "who are moved by the same dynamics which influence his life", and this is done for the sake of "making the state more and more sensitive to persons" (CE, 134). One of these groups will likely be some kind of religious fellowship, and for Christians, this is the Church.

Thurman reads Jesus' encounters with the Spirit and other persons as exemplary of the Christian walk, and therefore as emblematic of the mission of the church. Christians should therefore take their initial cues concerning the nature and significance of religious experience from Jesus. "For him," Thurman writes

350 Abraham Joshua Heschel is instructive on this point: "Piety does not consist in isolated acts, in sporadic, ephemeral experiences, nor is it limited to a single stratum of the soul. Although it manifests itself in particular acts, it is beyond the distinctions between intellect and emotion, will and action. Its source seems to lie deeper than the reach of reason and to range wider than consciousness. While it reveals itself in single attitudes such as devotion, reverence, or the desire to serve, its essential forces lie in a stratum of the soul far deeper than the orbit of any of these. It is something unremitting, persistent, unchanging in the soul, a perpetual inner attitude of the whole man. Like a breeze in the atmosphere, it runs as a drift through all the deeds, utterances, and thoughts; it is a tenor of life betraying itself in each trait of character, each mode of action... Piety is thus a mode of living." Abraham Joshua Heschel, "An Analysis of Piety" in Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), 307-8.
There were two principals in the religious experience, God and man; God and Jesus. It was his insistence that all men are children of God, and therefore stand in immediate candidacy for that experience. It was from within the moving energy of that experience that he lived, thought, functioned, died. The relevancy of the individual personality took primacy from the meaning of his religious experience...The clue to his behavior was always the same, the significance of the individual personality and its needs.

Continuing this thought, Thurman says of Jesus that

...he placed before the world, as a creative and dedicated son of Israel, the vision of a great dynamic ideal in which all peoples were involved as children of God. He suggested the vehicle or technique by means of which the ideal itself may be implemented in the common life and experience of the children of men, the vehicle which forever identified with his name and symbolic of his spirit—love. (CE, 136-7)

On this view, the significance of religious experience is fundamentally tied to the experience of God's love. By way of contagion, God becomes the enabling force and author of distinctive modes of speaking, imagining, and responding: of our living a life through love. And yet love is a "technique" in need of perfecting—an instrument by which we pursue our ideals, for better or worse, owing to our measures of grace, skill, and virtue. Loving aright therefore requires preparation and patience, alongside a teachable heart and a supple imagination. We need not despair at the difficulty of this ethical task, however. God's power is available to human beings of every sort, as a "resource...upon which they may draw for strength and power to enable them and to sustain them in the great enterprise of living on such terms" (CE, 137). The quality and "character then of a social institution whose inspiration is rooted in its commitment to that kind of religious

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351 Howard Thurman, *Mysticism and the Experience of Love*, 16. “There are some people who have the quality of 'built in awareness' of others as a special talent or special gift...there are some individuals who by constitution are born lovers, who have what a friend of mine calls 'the gift of intimacy.' ‘To be near them is to find yourself warmed by their fire.”
experience" will be known by its fruit: those "activities, functions, social attitudes, that defy all class, group, or ethnic affiliation" (CE, 148).

All of this reveals—at least, what I take to be—Thurman's understanding of the link between the religious experience of inclusiveness and one's social witness. The awakening that occasions shared religious experiences can open the way for other encounters which reveal the "experience of unity" to be "more compelling than the concepts, the habit patterns, the prejudices, and the beliefs that divide." During his tenure at the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples San Francisco, Thurman found it "possible to have experiences of unity with other human beings, which seem to undercut the sense of separateness at all levels, except that of personal individuality" (CE, 149).

Notice how Thurman puts a premium on the preservation of individuality and distinctiveness. He does not call for the erasure of particularity, but rather for our coming to see the fleeting significance of the identities we treat as ultimate—the veils, colors, and masks to which we fearfully cling and mistakenly exalt. Thurman's vision goes beyond the idols we erect and offers a way of embracing ties that bind across difference. For Christian social witness to be true and authentic, such experiences, such

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352 For example, those who attended services at the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples (CFAP) were permitted to maintain a 'dual-membership' with their previous (or childhood) religious collectives. CFAP was also characterized by a deep experimentalism, so that worship itself consisted in a kind of communal testing. Services were largely "nonritualistic" and punctuated by periods of silence and meditation, often without direction. Sometimes lay persons would interrupt clergy with their own spontaneous responses and public exhortations. And when a formal attempt to curtail such happenings was put forth, Thurman offered the following: "If the time ever comes in this church when you are no longer free to respond in deeds to the movement of the Spirit of God in your heart, then our church is no longer the church of God." As Thurman saw it, "We faced the constant danger of becoming so fenced in by the organization that the very spirit we sought to transmit was in constant jeopardy. It was necessary to test every aspect of our organization by the spirit of our central undertaking. This testing meant holding all aspects of our structure before God in worship and commitment to protect ourselves from being wedded to a plan or a scheme for its own sake alone. Testing and experimenting, experimenting and testing, this was our working paper." See Howard Thurman, Footprints of a Dream, 61-62.

353 Howard Thurman, The Search for Common Ground, xiii. "I have always tried to be me, without making difficult for you to be you."
knowledge, such intimacies, must be operative. Without them, love has neither, traction, neighbor, nor hope. That such vacancies exist in spaces which profess to be holy is not lost on Thurman. Our loves and hopes are frequently misplaced. Commenting on our human propensity for idolatry, Thurman is unusually terse: "Man builds his little shelter, he raises his little wall; man builds his little altar, he worships his little God; man organizes the resources of his little life, he defends his little barrier. All this—to no avail" (CE, 151-2).

So when Thurman makes grand professions against separateness and segregation, we shouldn't read him as some stargazing mystic in denial of difference and chaos. We need approach him as a visionary who doesn't see fractures as complete or final. We should read him as a prophetic critic seeking to infuse energy into stale, lifeless rituals and empty performances. In so doing, we are not troubled to hear Thurman profess that "in the presence of God, there is neither male nor female, white nor black, gentile nor Jew, protestant nor catholic, Hindu, Buddhist or Moslem, but a human spirit stripped to the literal substance of itself before God." In religious experience, Thurman sees the residues of new beginnings, new energies, and new visions—of genuine encounters that are creatively energizing and revelatory.

It is only such a religious experience as this that can hope to generate the kind of energy to sustain the kind of ethic that has always been and now is the dream of men of good will in every age and in every culture and of diverse faiths. It is only such a religious experience that can give to mankind a time-binding and, therefore, timeless basis for integrated action; that can inspire a willingness to sacrifice, even life itself, on behalf of its fulfillment in the commonweal; and that can give to the least significant or the most prestige-bearing individual a sense of participating in a collective destiny in which the whole human race is involved. It is in this dimension that the social witness has to be sustained. (CE, 151)
Building on the complementary notions of the inner need of love and its outer expression in community, we now turn to an examination of the specificities of love. Having reviewed several obstacles to love (in Jesus and the Disinherited), and having emphasized the necessity of love (in Creative Encounter), it remains to be seen just how love works. In broaching this topic, our portrait of love and social criticism will more visibly emerge. With the high and lofty calling of Mysticism and the Experience of Love, the lover—or in our case, the critic who speaks the truth in love—must also be willing to perfect those habits which enable the love Thurman recommends. Love of neighbor, we'll soon find, begins in a care of self that involves disciplines of the spirit. We cannot talk about love in any meaningful sense without also dealing with the spirit that inspires its actualization: the energy and force of the person who etches her works into existence.

But works of love require not only that we stencil and paint on imagined canvasses: they also require us to grope in and beneath the concrete. Of course, most realists would note that the pursuit of any meaningful ideal begins on imperfect grounds, with imperfect conditions, and far from perfect people. And yet the ethical demand of improving the imperfect still remains. Here adequacy need not be cast in terms of complete perfection. Focusing on our capacities to care for the potential in our midst is much better in this regard. For Thurman, ours is a calling to participate in the "kingdom of life" and to contribute to its "breathing, living existence." Ours is one of tending to

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354 I have in mind Tupac Shakur, The Rose That Grew from Concrete (New York: MTV Books/PocketBooks, 1999).
355 Thurman goes so far to suggest that many of our ideals are likely tainted; and any attendant claims to success, likewise: "There is often what seems to be a pardonable pride in achievement. But upon closer scrutiny, even this form of pride tends to make for arrogance. For it says that the achievement succeeded in capturing the thing envisioned. This is often the mark of low aim." Thurman, Deep is the Hunger, 102.
356 Howard Thurman, Luminous Darkness, 94.
gardens, however imperfect and weedy. Doing this well requires a unique blend of art, virtue, and touch—of balance, courage, and love. It is for and because of such life—such sacredness—that each of us must account for the shape and character of our becoming, for whom we stand and for what we kneel. This is why the realization of the beautiful and true, the just and the lovely depends on the dirty hands (and feet) of those who would bend, kneel, and plant—and try again.\textsuperscript{357} The art of realizing the ideal in the real requires cultivation and burial, alongside seed and imagination. It demands that we tend as much to ourselves as the processes and conditions of our environment. With the prophet,\textsuperscript{358} we write and sketch our visions still, knowing that by themselves utopias and colors, no, not even sacred crimsons will do.

\textit{Mysticism and the Experience of Love}

In 1961 Thurman delivered a lecture, which he slightly revised for publication as \textit{Mysticism and the Experience of Love} (1961). Sponsored by the Baltimore Friends School, the platform was established in honor of American mystic and scholar of religion, Rufus Jones (1863-1948), with whom he studied at Haverford College in

\textsuperscript{357} See Isaiah 52:7 and Romans 10:5. I also have in mind T.S. Eliot: “For us, there is only the trying -- The rest is not our business” in “No.2 East Coker” of \textit{Four Quartets}, also in Cornel West “Epilogue,” \textit{Cornel West Reader} ed. George Yancey (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2001), 353.

\textsuperscript{358} Habbukuk 2:2-3 (RSV 1946-52 edition) “And the Lord answered me, and said, ‘Write the vision, and make \textit{it} plain upon tablets, that he may run who reads it. For still the vision awaits its time; it hastens to the end – it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay.” In his exposition of the book of Habakkuk, Thurman writes of the importance the prophet's vision becoming a part of the public record: “We are in history, involved in the necessity of time-space relationships, and therefore, to say no more, often find it difficult to decipher the meaning of our personal struggles, of the struggles of our times. If, however, we could be lifted out of that context even for one swirling moment of profound perspective, then we might see the whole through the eyes of God; then with quiet courage and confidence we might walk on the earth by the light in the sky. This the prophet seeks for his times.” See Howard Thurman, “The Book of Habakkuk: Exposition” in \textit{The New Interpreters Bible} ed. George Arthur Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdom Press, 1956), 979-1003.
Thurman credits Jones with helping him see the value of cultivating an inner religious sensibility that "at its best is life affirming rather than life denying" (ME, 3). The criticism often leveled against mystics involves their lack of sensitivity to the social and political life of their times. Thurman's challenge turned on the possibilities of being a mystic who "could deal with the empirical experience of man without retreating from the demands of such experience"? (ME,3). In Jones, Thurman found encouragement for an approach to social witness that cherished the indispensability of the inner, mystical life. Thus, it is unsurprising to find Thurman's lecture pivoting on the question of how to connect mysticism with social transformation.

Prior to delivering the Rufus Jones Lecture in the early 60s, Thurman had already broached the topics of mysticism and social witness in a series of lectures at Eden Theological Seminary in 1939. Those lectures included: 1) Mysticism—An Interpretation, 2) Mysticism and Symbolism, 3) Mysticism and Ethics, and 4) Mysticism and Social Change. On Thurman's reading of Jones, mystics are inclined to engage the problems of their society for at least two reasons:

First, because much of the limitations and corruption of his own life of which he seeks to rid himself through discipline and rigorism is due to the fact of his belonging to a community of men and interest which foster the

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359 After reading Jones’s *Finding the Trail of Life*, Thurman was convinced that he needed to study with the “wonderful philosopher-mystic.” To that end, he arranged to spend a year at Haverford College with Jones. During that time, he took a special seminar on Meister Eckhart, attended Jones's lectures in philosophy, and also had regular meeting with him. See Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 75-77.


very things he discovers beclouding his vision. In the second place, in his effort to achieve the good, he finds that he must be responsive to human needs by which his life is surrounded.\textsuperscript{363}

Countless assaults and struggles besiege human life, even the life of mystics. There are biological and physical challenges, alongside cultural and collective agonies. Thurman thinks we must begin with this recognition, if we are to grasp fully the responsibility laid upon those of us who would dare to love. But what's often forgotten, Thurman says, is the "life and death struggle for the survival of the private life." We often suffer to protect it, and likewise suffer when we do not (ME, 3). So the second motivation behind Thurman's \textit{Mysticism and the Experience of Love} concerns the need to nourish our private lives. When situated in a socially denigrating and oppressive environment, attending to the quality of one's inner life may itself come to take on political significance.

In the great collective huddle, we are desolate, lonely, and frightened. Our shoulders touch, but our hearts cry out for understanding without which there can be for the individual no life, and certainly no meaning...There must be found ever creative ways that can ventilate the private soul without floating it away, that can confirm and affirm the integrity of the person in the midst of the collective necessity of existence. (ME, 4)

The final impetus behind the topic of Thurman's '61 lecture involves the "disintegration of the mood of tenderness" (ME, 3). Owing to our lack of feeling, we commonly "falter, hesitate, and become immobile in our efforts to understand each other and to treat each other sympathetically" (ME, 3). Thurman worries about the difficulty of relating to other persons with love and sensitivity, our inability to know and understand ourselves, and our failures to wholesomely encounter those with whom we are bound to

\textsuperscript{363} Ibid., "Mysticism and Social Change," 213.
live alongside. So frequently we fail to love our beloveds and, at other times, we lack even a desire to want to love those who have a claim upon us. Here the most obvious challenge is "to bring to the center of...focus a desire to love even one's enemy" (ME, 19). This is why Thurman focuses on the work of intrinsic love, the importance of knowledge through care, the role of our epistemic and moral imaginations, and the need to be diligent in our critical examinations of ourselves and those we would truly love. The enemies which frustrate human flourishing and eat away at our loves, Thurman argues, are external and private, public as well as personal.

We begin our present analysis by noting that Thurman himself describes love as "working." Thurman's version of love is itself a process and not merely to be understood as series of individuated acts. Love requires concentrated effort and scrupulous attention. One of the first discoveries the lover finds is the need "to distinguish between love as interest in another person and love as intrinsic interest in another person." For Thurman, intrinsic interest is characterized by a loving of another for her "own sake", while mere interest involves "ulterior reasons" (ME, 12).

In most of our relationships with each other, there are passing phases of interest manifested due to circumstances or the particulars of being thrown together for a limited time. We may have an interest in another person as an extension of our own preoccupation with ourselves. Enlightened self-interest is the sophisticated term used. The other person is caught up in our private process and is exploited for our own ends and needs. Usually this is done without sharing these private ends with the other person involved. (ME, 12)

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364 As Thurman confesses in a meditation, "the crux of the problem is not merely that we desire the right and find it difficult to achieve it, but it is also true that, again and again, we do not desire to desire the right." See Deep is the Hunger, 98. In another place, Thurman links this attitude to the sin of pride. "It is curious how we feel the other person must demonstrate a worthiness that commends itself to us before we are willing to want to move in outflow, in the self-giving that love demands. We want to be accepted just as we are, but at the same time we want the other person to win the right to our acceptance of him" See Thurman, Disciplines of the Spirit, 124.
Thurman notes that there are occasions when persons offer themselves to be used for the private ends of another, "with the full knowledge of what is happening" (ME, 13). But this isn't usually the way self-interested love operates. It frequently works at the expense of the unbeknownst, while simultaneously serving the dominator who hides behind the rhetoric of love. Thurman thinks it permissible to utilize the resources of other people for one's own gain. He just doesn't think we should call any of the care informed by such interests: intrinsic love. Given the flow of our shifting relations of dependence and involvement, "there are passing phases of interest manifested due to circumstances or the particulars of being thrown together for a limited time" (ME, 12). These kinds of interests and concerns are a necessary, unavoidable part of communal interaction. Contingencies of this sort include common interests, like mutual economic gain, and personal interests, like trying to expand one's sphere of influence at the expense of others. But intrinsic love has as its goal the well-being and highest good of the other, that which is the fullest of expression of their vitality. It isn't conditioned by self-interest.

Intrinsic love possesses a remarkable amount of stability. It is neither fleeting nor does it depend on "any kind of group or family closeness" (ME, 13). Of course, kinship ties "may provide a normal setting for the achieving of intrinsic interest, but the fact that two men are brothers having the same parents provides no mandatory love relationship between them" (ME, 13). Thus, for Thurman, intrinsic love marks an accomplishment, not just a natural predisposition shared by all. Even brothers must work to 'achieve' it. True, proximity might create an environment hospitable to the development of intrinsic love, but it is no guarantee. Familiarity and frequency of interaction could just as easily promote shallow feelings or, in other cases, deepen hostilities.
The distinction here is between a warm feeling of genuine sentiment, but merely a feeling moving at the surface level of involvement, and the kind of caring that goes beyond all the divisiveness of the personality to the central core of the person. It does not tarry at the level of the temperamental or occasional mood; it goes beyond any whimsical relatedness. (ME, 13)

Why is Thurman's account of love so strenuous? Why employ the distinctions between intrinsic and instrumental, enduring passion and whimsical mood, shallow feeling and the kind of caring that goes beyond? Part of the answer concerns the vision that guides his analysis. Alongside the gospel narrative about the woman caught in adultery, the Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians heavily influences Thurman, especially this passage:

My prayer to God is that your love may grow more and more rich in knowledge and in all manner of insight that you may have a sense of what is vital, that you may be transparent and of no harm to anyone, your life covered with that harvest of righteousness that Jesus Christ produces to the praise and to the glory of God. (ME, 13; Phil 1:9-11)

Through Paul, Thurman draws attention to the inseparable connect between knowledge and our being responsive to what is most "vital" in the life of others. Awareness of another's vitality begins with our coming to understand who and where such a person thrives and resides. To love and care for their vitality, their life, is therefore to be sensitive to the particularity of their flesh, the little bits and big details of their existence. On this view, it is impossible to "love in general...To love means dealing with persons in the concrete rather than in the abstract" (ME, 13). If intrinsic love is to be our true measure, we must confront other persons in the fullness of their vivacity and fact. Thus, Thurman emphatically contends, "There is no such thing as humanity. What
we call humanity has a name, was born, lives on a street, gets hungry, needs all the particular things we need. As an abstraction, it has no reality whatsoever" (ME, 15).

In doing so, Thurman resists versions of the Christian faith that emphasize abstraction and generality, by maintaining that "we should love humanity for Christ's sake" and do so in the way that Jesus did. On such a view, one is obliged to give up one's life if necessary "for Humanity" just like Jesus. But such a vision, Thurman argues, doesn't give sufficient attention to the life and earthly ministry of Jesus: to his incarnated life and dwelling among flesh. Instead it gives primacy to "Jesus Christ giving his life in the crucifixion for humanity...[as] a voluntary giving of self, devoid of all aspects of obligation or response to external demands" (ME, 15).

In opposition to this ethic, Thurman argues that Jesus intimately responded to the details of those he encountered—as we've seen, for instance, in his address to the adulteress. Writing again of that encounter, Thurman says that Jesus "took her total fact into account and enlivened her at a point in herself that was beyond all her faults." To love is to respond aptly to the facts of another.

This sense of fact means that the other person is dealt with as he is in light of the details of his life. It does not mean becoming so involved in the bill of particulars of other human being that we cannot get through to them. But it does mean defining the other person in his context establishing a perspective with regard to that context and where he is located in it. (ME, 14)

365 On the perils and limits of theological abstractions, see James Cone, "'The Contradictions of Life are Not Final:' Howard Thurman and the Quest for Freedom," in The Human Search: Howard Thurman and the Quest for Freedom Proceedings of the Second Annual Thurman Convocation ed. Mozella G. Mitchell (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), 19. “The God of the Christian faith is found primarily among the weak, the poor, and the wretched of the earth. Their lives tell us far more about the meaning of the gospel than all the books that theologians have ever written or will ever write. This point is not intended as a put down of theologians or as an encouragement of anti-intellectualism...But it is important to emphasize that the truth of Jesus' gospel is not found primarily in a theological textbook or in a well-delivered sermon. Rather it is found in life, in the struggles of poor people to survive with dignity against great sociopolitical odds.”
Thurman doesn't think that our appreciation of another person's context need blind us from reality, he only wants to suggest that we remain open to that which outruns every human fact: the possible. New possibilities course beneath the surface of unexamined contexts and freshly discovered contacts alike. Yet Thurman would have us remember that a "person's fact includes the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly...[say] for instance, that here is a person who is mean, greedy, even vicious and ungracious" (ME, 19). None of this can be ignored without being "utterly sentimental and false." Even if a "person who by his action declares himself on every hand to all and sundry...that he has no active membership in the human family. This is a fact and it is his fact. It must be taken into account" (ME, 19).

But it isn't enough to be sensitive to the facts of another person as they morph and emerge in various contexts. Thurman calls for us to meet individuals where they presently stand, while also calling for us to deal with them in the light of where they could and "should be" (ME, 14). We are bundles of potential; and such promise needs to be included in any analysis of our fact.

A person’s fact includes more than his plight, predicament or need, at a particular moment in time. It is something total which much include awareness of the person's potential. This, too, is part of the person's fact. This is why love always sees more than is in evidence at any moment of viewing. (ME, 14)

Continuing this thought, Thurman reasons,

The area of the other person's fact is an expanding thing if such a person lives into life and deepens the quality and breadth of his experience. This makes love between persons dynamic rather than static. It means further that the intrinsic interest must be informed. And constantly. This serves as a corrective against doing violence to those for whom we have a sense
of caring because of great gaps in our knowledge of their fact. This is generally the weakness in so much lateral good will in the world. It is uninformed, ignorant, sincere good will. It does not seek to feed its emotion with a healthy diet of fact, data, information from which insights opening the door to the other person's meaning are derived. I think that this is why it is impossible to have intrinsic interest in people with whom we are out of living or vicarious contact. (ME, 15)

In these passages, Thurman accents the extent to which each human life possesses inexhaustible worth and potential. Its quality and character can be deepened, like a tree and its roots; or expanded, like a vine and its fruits. If this is true, then both the lover and beloved are dynamically situated organisms. Lovers need to be informed not only about the alternating positions of their beloved, but also any crucial changes that impact their own constitution. Respect for dynamism issues in constant readjustment, lest we invite the atrophy of malformed loves and misguided wills. Ignorance, in this regard, is a great obstacle to properly ordered love: it blinds, occludes and obstructs adequate response.

But love perishes not merely from limitations or "gaps" in knowledge. Love, Thurman says, is marred by a lack of diligence, from a failure to "seek to feed" and nourish ourselves on the kinds of details which intimate understanding requires. Thus, we often fail to know the meaning and significance of who it is we claim to love. Caring without details is, in this way, blind; and love without facts, empty. Our failure to respond to the "facts" has been the cause of much terror, often in the name and on behalf of our loves.

Therefore, it is Thurman who commends "an openness" to difference, one grounded in "an inner climate or sensitiveness to the awareness of others" (ME, 16). Yet excess regularly threatens this region of tenderness, often through inflated forms of self-love, on the one hand; and deep varieties of self-disgust, on the other. In the case of the
latter, such a person frequently "insists on judging his "own unworthiness" and soon begins to "despise himself." While, in the case of the former, a "preoccupation with one's own needs, interests, [and] concerns" begins to direct and lead the lover. Such a person Thurman calls self-centered, which he distinguishes in other places from the person who properly centers down.\textsuperscript{366} The question before us now, however, is what the enabling condition of such an inner mood of tenderness might be? In order for our capacities of openness and care to flourish, Thurman maintains, "there must be developed a sensitive and structured imagination" (ME, 17).

The work of the imagination isn't just limited to artists, nor to children, nor to those who fail to distinguish its work from mere "fancy."\textsuperscript{367} Instead, Thurman thinks, the imagination shows its greatest powers as the angelos, the messenger, of God...in the miracle which it creates when one man, standing in his place, is able, while remaining there, to put himself in another man's place. To send his imagination forth to establish a beachhead in another man's spirit, and from that vantage point so to blend with the other's landscape that what he sees and feels is authentic—this it he great adventure in human relations. But this is not enough. The imagination must report its findings accurately without regard to all prejudgments and private or collective fears. But this is not enough. There must be both a spontaneous and calculating response to such knowledge which will result in sharing of resources at their deepest level (ME, 18).


He continues,

To be to another human being what is needed at the time that the need is most urgent and most acutely felt, this is to participate in the precise act of redemption. The imagination acting under the most stringent orders can develop a technique all its own in locating and reporting to us its findings. We are not the other persons, we are ourselves. All that they are experiencing we can never know—but we can make accurate soundings which when properly read, will enable us to be to them what we could never be without such awareness. The degree to which our imagination becomes the angelos of God, we ourselves may become His instruments. (ME, 18)

These passages emphasize the extent to which Thurman accounts for the limitations of human finitude. I take this to be an important and necessary point to make when interpreting statements like: "The sense of the other persons' fact must be total" and "The person's total fact has to be taken into account" (ME, 19). On a surface reading, such statements are clearly objectionable on the grounds that they aren't remotely practical from any human perspective. Each of us shares a limited and partial relationship with other persons: to be human is to be conditioned by one's own mind, body, and location. Furthermore, our capacities to know and consider the "totality" of any subject, much less a human being, are inadequate and fallible. We simply aren't in any position to know a person in their totality, nor are we skillful enough to do so. Hence, by "total", Thurman doesn't mean complete in the sense of finished, full, or entire. As he argues elsewhere, "The truth is we are never able to get our hands on all the facts in a given situation; something that is important always escapes our consideration and may lead us to a false conclusion honestly at." In other words, good intentions amount neither to love rightly enacted nor to love fruitfully imagined. "We are all creatures of limitation and it
behoves us to recognize this fact at every point" Thurman reasons. And "if this is true, then carelessness in attitudes, slovenly thinking, half-hearted attempts at understanding, all of these are simply without justification."

So what Thurman has in mind might be better described as fullness and wholesomeness. To this, we could add terms like complexity and vivacity as well. Thurman's love is a call to encounter persons in a thoroughly holistic and contextually informed manner. This includes features of a person's situation, which may be immediate and circumstantial, as well as those wider narratives influencing a person's course. It would also consider those paths of improvement and regeneration presently available to the beloved: emergent futures in view of the powers now present.

On this rendering, love becomes "something more than a balance of rewards and punishments, of merits and demerits" (ME, 19). Love goes beyond justice but also includes it. Love marks evil for what it is, "calling the deed by its true name," that the beloved might "come to an understanding of his deed both in terms of what it is doing to him as well as what it is doing to me, or to others" (ME, 20-21). Love isn't blind. And yet love also recognizes that an act, "however despicable, does not cover all that the person is." As Thurman himself confesses, "I do not want other men to deal with me on the basis of what I may do under some particular circumstance, but rather I wish to be dealt with in an inclusive, total, integrated manner. This is what it means to be

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368 Howard Thurman, *Deep is the Hunger*, 21-22.

369 Timothy Jackson captures the point well: "Like justice, agape entails an equal regard for others; unlike justice, however, agape does not premise this regard on the even-handed appraisal of rational agents and their agency. Agape sometimes gives more than is due according to reciprocal calculation, but never less." In Jackson, *The Priority of Love*, 69.

understood. This is to have the experience of freedom, to be one's self, and to be rid of the awful burden of pretensions" (ME, 21).

Love means to place the particular deed in perspective, a perspective of the other person's life. His behavior is seen as part of his personal history and his experience. Love warns that the judgment of the deed is circumscribed or limited by your lack of total knowledge of the person. As your knowledge increases, the deed finds its place of sequence in the total movement of the individual's life....Our understanding is always partial understanding because it is limited both by our lack of knowledge and by the inadequacies within ourselves through which we look at the other person....In the last analysis, therefore, every judgment of other person is importantly a self-judgment. (ME, 20)

Through love, we "must find a way to bring home to him the meaning of his deed, the meaning that transcends the intent of the deed itself." Love, on this view, informs and assists others in their attempts to see themselves as they are. And, at the same time, love also works to accomplish a similar result in the lover. The act of judging another is not to be separated from an encounter with one's own "inadequacies." Properly expressed love reflects on and interrogates its own origins.

Though we may hope to provoke our beloveds to critical modes of self-examination, it is important to note that love isn't instrumentally tied to outcomes. Whether or not a person comes to a point of reflective awareness, love still loves: "It must keep on loving. I must not ever give up, no more than I am willing to give myself up. The responsibility of love is to love. Where love persists, it awakens the mind and the imagination to a variety of insights and techniques that will run interference for the clear flowing affection" (ME, 21). To speak the truth in love is to recognize that justice isn't coextensive with what's true. Love accents 'what is more' alongside 'what is just'. This is because the possible is always a part of the real, alongside what's tragic and
beautiful and ambiguous, too. The seemingly concrete, no matter how stable and firm, has cracks and crevices. Here hope, like sunlight, bends and finds a way to peek through. Love, therefore, confronts the reality of despair, but does not make it a dwelling place.

As William James put it, "the word 'and' trails along after every sentence."371

Of course, as Thurman already noted, this also means that the lover must be prepared to confront his own blindspots and biases. What 'trails' along might not be desirable at all. Like deceitful smiles, some characters are more crooked than they appear. As agents and patients, living organisms emit and take in a variety of things – at different times, during different seasons, and under different influences. Out of the same mouth flows blessing and cursing, the writer of James records (James 3:10). To critically engage the flaws of another is also to come to terms with one's own condition. And this is no easy task: the work of revealing and unconcealing our transactions with the world.372 Yet the ethic and integrity of Thurman's criticism depends on it: "I must not allow what I condemn in my society," Thurman wrote, "to grow and flower within me."373

Success in such a venture is far from given, especially when we consider the extent to which pride clouds our estimation of ourselves, neighbors, and social entanglements.374 As Thurman himself recognizes,
It is exceedingly difficult to keep from encouraging in oneself that which
one condemns in other people. Vices are apt to take on the halo of virtues
when they are part of one's own behavior, but seen in others they are
regarded as being what in truth they are...What I would consider was a
pose or pretense in my neighbor is apt to be called genuine when I do it.\textsuperscript{375}

It is worth noting that Thurman doesn't merely see this tendency in how we relate to our
neighbors and personal contacts. He sees it in how we assess and criticize larger political
and social institutions as well: "This tendency toward self-deception appears in one's
attitude toward matters of social change. We tend to condemn in the system what we do
not recognize in ourselves." Thurman continues,

Sins do not exist in general; they are specific, concrete, carrying their
weight measured in terms of fearful accuracy. We do not sin against
humanity; we sin against persons who have names, who are actual,
breathing, human beings. The root of what I condemn in my society is
found at long last in the soil of my own backyard. What I seek to
eradicate in society that it may become whole and righteous, I must first
attack in my own heart and life. There is no substitute for this.\textsuperscript{376}

But the pride of self-deception isn't the only obstacle to love. Thurman is well
aware of another challenge, one endemic to the nature of love itself and not just flowing
from our penchant for self-righteousness. For Thurman, "there can be no love apart from
suffering." What loving another person might ultimately reveal or disclose is unknown—
hence, love exposes lover and beloved alike: "Sometimes the radiance of love blesses a
life with a vision of its possibilities never dreamed of and never sought," and so
"stimulates to new endeavor and summons all latent powers to energize the life at its
most innermost core." On other occasions, love can fail to attain what it seeks and recoil
at the sight of what it unearths. This too is a part of the "perfect work" of love, that it

\textsuperscript{375} Howard Thurman, \textit{Deep is the Hunger}, 99.
\textsuperscript{376} Howard Thurman, \textit{Deep is the Hunger}, 99.
"may stab the spirit by calling forth a bitter, scathing self-judgment." In this sense, love can't be measured or portioned, nor can it be balanced or weighed. Love is its own offering and self-emptying, its own openness to transformation. Love resists completion, because it constantly "demands that we expose ourselves at our most vulnerable point by keeping the heart open" (ME, 21).

It is the continual outpouring and openness of love, love's vulnerability, which makes for suffering precisely because of the wounds it allows. To love is to be susceptible: and to what exactly...we do not know. Reciprocity is double-edged. What love does for the beloved, it also does for the lover. Love opens, criticizes, risks, questions, illumines, imagines, uncovers, digs, envisions, exposes, ascends, climbs, enlivens, dreams, stoops, gropes, pauses, quickens, provides, cries, stirs, probes, unsettles, empowers, hopes, desires, plants, waters, feeds, clothes, names, works. Love trims and rekindles the old in order to make way for what is new. Love enhances what is vital and seeks to secure those conditions (including the knowledge) that would preserve life. Love confronts anything opposed to life and seeks to conquer it – without itself being compromised. Love therefore embraces sacrifice before the betrayal of its ideal: and even bleeds, when necessary...for the sake of new birth. Quite simply,

Love loves; that is its nature. But this does not mean that love is blind, naive or pretentious. It does mean that love holds its object securely in its grasp calling all that it sees by its true name but surrounding all with a wisdom born both of its passion and its understanding. Here is no traffic in sentimentality, no catering to weakness or to strength. Instead there is a robust vitality that quickens the roots of personality creating an unfolding of the self that redefines, reshares, and makes all things new. (ME, 22-23)

But what exactly is the sort of vitality that love aims to preserve? If Paul prayed that love may grow richer according to knowledge and for the sake of what is vital, then
surely love can wither because of ignorance and corrosion. If love works in particular ways, then we need to know which modes are more or less appropriate. We need to know which practices and dispositions condition the fruitfulness of love, not its barrenness. Exploring the vitality that Thurman's love aims to nurture adds texture to his ethic of love and social criticism. Thurman's book, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, goes a long way toward advancing this end. It reveals the kinds of habits and dispositions that enable the sort of love he recommends. My reading of Thurman shows how spiritual disciplines (read: our habits of self-care) not only enable us to love: they also guide, direct, and order our loves.
Chapter 6

Habits of Love

To love is to make of one's heart a swinging door.377

How might we attune our loves to what is vital? How might we instruct the breath behind our longings and the spirit beneath our yearnings? Thurman frequently uses terms like technique and discipline to denote styles of self-cultivation and ways of social engagement. By studying "certain specific aspects of human experience," he thinks we can learn how to be "ushered into the Presence of God" (DS, 9). This is where casting of character, molding of desire, and the serious work of self transformation occurs. Inviting us to participate in those processes, Thurman directs our attention to five areas: commitment, growth, suffering, prayer, and reconciliation. Focusing on these habits and techniques of renewal will help us appreciate Thurman's account of vitality, an idea he takes to be synonymous with life itself.378 The bulk of this section will involve trying to make sense of what Thurman means by vitality, an inquiry that directs our attention to his thoughts on commitment and growth. I conclude with an analysis of a few, albeit brief passages that deal with the topic of love.

377 Howard Thurman, Disciplines of the Spirit (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 2003), 127. Further parenthetically as (DS, #), unless otherwise noted.
378 Ibid., 14. "Life is alive; this is its abiding quality as long as it prevails. The word 'life' is synonymous with vitality."
Commitment

Thurman begins his case for commitment not simply by way of metaphor and illustration. He also constructs his argument as an astute observer and self-conscious participant in nature. Writing of nature's propensity to secure nourishment, Thurman observes, "The roots of trees spread out in many directions—seeking, always seeking the ground of existence for themselves" (DS, 13). To demonstrate his point, Thurman tells the story of a construction project which took place near his house in Oberlin, Ohio. Because of the digging, he recalls, "a large section of sewer pipe had been exposed; around it and encircling it was a thick network of roots that had found their way inside the pipe by penetrating the joints in many places" (DS, 13). Even though Thurman remembers the tree itself being more than a football field away, he describes the roots as being "on the hunt—for life" (DS, 13). On his reading, life has a way of diligently pursuing what sustains it, no matter the challenge or terrain – be it across great divides or distances, or around obstacles and challenges. Nature, like life, chases its own sustenance without pretense or prejudice, and does so with a sense of purpose: "Indeed, the most fundamental characteristic of life is its search for nourishment" (DS, 14).

For Thurman, discipline is how an organism goes about ensuring and securing "access to the source of vitality or aliveness" (DS, 15). Such governed approaches are not external or foreign to living organisms, but integral and basic to them. Thurman posits that established ways of pursuing nourishment constitute the patterns by which

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379 Thurman refuses to give an actual definition of life, citing the biologist George Wald's article in the Scientific American, "And of course we do not ever measure life. We can measure many of its manifestations accurately; and we combine those with others that we observed, but perhaps cannot measure, to make up our concept of what it means to be alive. The life itself is neither observed nor measured. It is a summary of and judgment upon our measurements and observations. What biologists do about life is to recognize it" (DS, 14).
living organisms behave. Built into such methods – if they are to be effective – is sensitivity to an organism's conditions for life and sustenance. Thus "when the conditions are met, sustenance for the process of life becomes available" (DS, 15). The persistent determination to meet and secure those conditions basic to survival is what Thurman calls discipline. To be clear, establishing those conditions for growth is not itself the source of growth: the securing of those conditions merely allows for the "magic of growth" to occur. On the surface, the process of renewal and generation seems to be natural and automatic. Yet, at the same time, Thurman acknowledges his sense of bewilderment at the miracle of life:

If we were to understand fully what is at work we might find it to be some kind of consciousness. Who knows? Jesus refereed to the earth as being automatic—it brings forth of itself. In any case, when a seed is planted in the soil, if the seed is healthy and the conditions of the soil and climate generally satisfactory, then it sprouts. Life becomes manifest. There seems to be available to the seed, at a point in time, all the energy and vitality it can accommodate in its unfolding (DS, 15-6).

The disciplines, therefore, open the way for sustenance and nourishment. Disciplines and techniques are passageways and channels to life. And, for Thurman, newly discovered routes to vitality are always emerging owing to the "essentially creative possibility" that accompanies life (DS, 16). Disciplines are not in themselves fixed. What matters is that a living organism maintains access to the springs that supply life. For Thurman, then, we come to know a form of life, not merely by linguistic analysis, but by carefully noticing how "a particular form of life is committed to a way of survival, a way of keeping alive" (DS, 16). Life pulses and throbs with its own rhythms and accents, but always toward some state, end, or ideal. Disciplines are those techniques and habits
that open the way for life, both by sensitizing us to its possibilities and by equipping us to chase after them.

To say that this is a living universe is to say that life itself is alive and that this aliveness expresses itself always in seeking—yes, in goal seeking. The expression is not teleological, but merely points to the fact that for any form of life to sustain itself, it does so with reference to ends, at its own level...The point is, then, that life wherever it is found is trying to live itself out, or actualize its unique potential (DS, 15).

For an organism to be committed—in this case, the human spirit—there must be 'a giving way' to some end or goal. This is the reference point for what is most vital, and hence a lamp to discern not only courses of action, but also places deserving pause. When we consider the human spirit, our sense of what is vital need not be couched solely in terms of survival, as in the case of the animal and plant worlds. According to Thurman, "Commitment means that it is possible for a man to yield the nerve center of his consent to a purpose or cause, a movement or an ideal, which may be more important to him than whether he lives or dies. The commitment is a self-conscious act of will by which he affirms his identification with what he is committed to" (DS, 17).

Thurman doesn't think that all commitments are equal in value and desirability: "The character of [a man's] commitment is determined by that to which the center or core of his consent is given" (DS, 17). Yet the principles of renewal and growth remain present regardless of the desired end. As Thurman points out, poison ivy and luscious strawberries flower under the same conditions, but insofar as they impact human life, they possess altogether different characters. For similar reasons, Thurman acutely sees the dangers of nurturing and cultivating evil: "when a man who has an evil heart gives the nerve center of his consent to evil an enterprise, he does receive energy and
strength....There is vitality in the demonic enterprise when it becomes the fundamental commitment of a life" (DS, 18). This is not to suggest that evil enjoys any primacy on its own accord.

On the contrary, Thurman thinks that evil alone is unsustainable precisely because it is against life itself. There is not enough support for evil to (ultimately) sustain itself because it derives its own existence from what is good and life-giving. Evil perverts power and life, but doesn't generate its own. In both cases, whether concerning evil or good, time passes during the course of a person (or institution's) coming to bear fruit. Practical bearings are not always immediate. During these periods of ripening, it can be difficult to distinguish—by appearance—those fruits that edify from the ones that poison. Jesus, as exemplar and Teacher, offered precedent for this view when he noted how wheat and tares can share indistinguishable forms (DS, 18). Nevertheless, according to Thurman, the question that each and all of us must answer is this:

What kind of ideals are you realizing? There is no neutrality here. Everybody is engaged in this activity. Is what you are realizing worth of you, or are you engaged in the realization of ideals of which you are ashamed, and before which you stand condemned in your own sight? Long, long ago, it was said by a very wise and understanding friend, "By their fruits ye shall know them"; not by their roots.380

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380 Here Thurman draws attention to Jesus' parable concerning the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 13:24-30). In other places, Thurman takes care to avoid offering any static, linear accounts of who we are as transactional actors and patients in the world. While he clearly recognizes the uncertainty involved in unfolding harvests and impending outcomes, he also acknowledges that other deposits and growths are always coming to pass: "We are always in the midst of the harvest and always in the midst of planting. The words that we use in communication, the profound stirrings of the mind out of which thoughts and ideas arise, the ebb and flow of desires out of which the simple or complex deed develops, are all caught in the process of reaping and sowing, of planting and harvesting...Living is a shared process. Even as a man is conscious of things growing in him planted by others, which things are always ripening, so others are conscious of things growing in them planted by him, which things are always ripening" See Howard Thurman, Deep is the Hunger, 180.
381 Howard Thurman, Deep is the Hunger, 21.
Given the delays that accompany every harvest, it would be difficult to offer any
final or conclusive reply to Thurman's question. The fact that even our best intentions
might be misguided and unbeknownst, however, would seem to open the way for a
probing criticism of our ideals and posited ends. On this reading of Thurman, it would
even require it: "the fact that a man can always be in error with reference to the things
that he thinks he understands most clearly is an ever present reminder of human frailty. It
is a challenge to humility even in the presence of one's deepest convictions." In
another place, Thurman reminds that when choosing to stake one's ultimate commitment,
"There is always the possibility that he may be mistaken—the victim of pride, arrogance,
and conceit. Lurking ever in the background is the threat that one has taken the easier
way out; one is doing the convenient and less costly thing." Thurman's advice is to
proceed with attentive care and due caution, fully aware that not even our posited ideals
may retain their present shape: "The goal itself," he says, "must be constantly revised and
refined" (DS, 35-6).

If we want to know what a person has committed herself to, Thurman thinks we
do best to ask three questions: "Who am I? What do I want? How do I propose to get
it?" (DS, 26). As for the first question, Thurman holds the view that we are creatures who
are made alive and given breath by the Creator: "God is the source of the vitality, the
life, of all living things. His energy is available to plants, to animals, and to our own
bodies if the conditions are met. Life is a responsible activity...." (DS, 21). Of course,
many would deny Thurman's initial claim, but there are other aspects of his view
which—in my estimate—retain broad appeal. For example, when Thurman claims that

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382 Howard Thurman, *Deep is the Hunger*, 22.
life is a 'responsible activity', he isn't simply saying that we need to feel a sense of piety to God "for sustaining providence." True (or false) as this may be, Thurman also argues that we need to possess a "deep sense of responsibility to the life that has been yielded in order that [we] may be sustained for one more day." Whether it's a vegetable that's been uprooted for our consumption or a hog that's been slaughtered for bacon, "because of the myriad yieldings of many forms of life, we are able to live and carry on." For Thurman, this essentially means that "our life is not our own.

Every minute of life, we are faced with the relentless urgency to make good in our own lives for the lives that are lost for us. Quite consciously, then, I see my responsibility to all that has gone into the making of me—not only in terms of food, but also in terms of the total contribution that has been made to my life both by the past and the present.

Our coming to be the particular kinds of persons we are has a lot to do with the fact that we are born in relation to other human beings. They furnish our most immediate sources of nourishment. For Thurman, our first interactions usually occur within the context of some sort of family unit or extended clan. To answer the question of who am I is to answer the related questions of "to whom, to what do I belong?" The nurture and care that we receive from our initial social group serves as the early foundation for our sense of meaning and place in the world. But Thurman doesn't think one comes to an awareness of these meanings until an urgent decision occasions pause. Usually the choice is less about the morality of right and wrong, and more searching in its significance for how we see ourselves in relation to others, especially the bonds that have been most crucial to our sustenance and security. The onset of our coming of age—and

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384 Howard Thurman, Deep is the Hunger, 95.
385 Howard Thurman, Deep is the Hunger, 96.
386 Howard Thurman, Deep is the Hunger, 95.
387 Howard Thurman, Deep is the Hunger, 63.
into our own—begins in taking responsibility for our commitments, which necessarily involves questions of standing. Thurman was not the first to ask: "If I do this thing, what bearing will it have on the binding relationships that give me my sense of worth, of counting in and for something? If what I am about to do will cut me off from those whose very life guarantees my own, then I think long and carefully before I do it. This is true because the human spirit cannot easily abide isolation, being cut off from those whose life sustains it" (DS, 28).

This is why responsibility emerges as a condition for growth and maturity. Failure to alter one's stance is itself a positive choice to remain and stay put, as opposed to seeking reconstitution or pursuing renewal. This "inescapable responsibility" confronts us all and drastically impacts the direction and magnitude of our growth. As Thurman puts it, "All our life long we are fashioning a private pattern made up of resolutions of the crises of growth. Such a pattern gives to each life a dominant trend which becomes an essential...part of character" (DS, 55).

It is in such human situations that we find our sense of freedom, which is itself circumscribed and given content by those responsibilities or options which come into

388 On the epistemic significance of taking a stand, see See Nelson Goodman’s “Just the Facts, Ma’am in Relativism: A Contemporary Anthology ed. Michael Krausz (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 85. “Almost always some stance or other is adopted...Where a choice of stance is more deliberate, it may involve complex considerations of simplicity, convenience, suitability to context, efficacy for a purpose, and accessibility by those we much communicate with.” On the moral significance of coming to take a stand, see Charles Taylor, “The Self in Moral Space,” Sources of the Self: The Making of Moral Identity (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 25-52. The language of 'coming to stand' has implications for Thurman's account of growth as well. He thinks that our first awareness of who we are is tied to the body. He stresses the moment a child learns to physically stand for the first time, because it's here that the "self" and "not-self" begins to be defined through the body. Here the child "stands unsupported and alone, an autonomous object in the midst of a world of objects, and there is room for movement between them. The peculiar place of the self is established—never quite to be lost again. The primary experience of the body becomes uniquely personal in standing alone. Within the walls thus established the individual makes his world and builds the fabric of his self-realization" (DS, 47). For Thurman, the distinction between self and other is crucial for the creative use of the tools afforded within one's environment, since their non-identity with one's self is already supposed in their uptake and appropriation (DS, 48).
view. To be free, on Thurman's account, is to be greeted with alternatives: live choices. But in some sense our lives are fragmented precisely because we are compelled "to live under active obligation to many other units of life," allegiances, callings, and ideals which themselves may be in tension, notwithstanding the cost each exacts from our already limited capacities of time and energy. As Thurman sees it, his ethical task involves figuring out how to "make possible the largest fulfillment of my own life plus the other lives of which I am the shared expression." The live option always on offer is also the most vital; and its recognition highlights the centrality of commitment as a spiritual discipline, as a way of ordering one's life. Of his own life, Thurman says: "I can choose the things for which I shall stand and work and live, and the things against which I shall stand and work and live." It is the "growing ministry of commitment" that grants the gift of wholeness, for Thurman: "It places upon the individual a solitary demand that pulls to one point of focus all the fragments of his life and makes him whole" (DS, 29).

This is something – Thurman confesses – that most persons resist, owing to fear, comfort, and insecurity. In some ways, it's easier to cower behind ready-made, pre-packaged identities, those bits and "fragments of the self" that shield us from reality. Most of us try to avoid any exposure "to great and tragic human need or to challenging issues" (DS, 30). We neither desire nor seek to experience such encounters, for there always looms "the possible tyranny" of surrendering to an encompassing purpose or ideal. What so often begins as a legitimate risk frequently receives undue power. Here, under the pretense of caution, we disguise our true preferences and likings: both for the

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389 Thurman, *Deep is the Hunger*, 95.
390 Ibid., 95.
feel of the familiar and the ease of blending into the bunch. Because these habits seem so natural, we often fail to take notice, much less admit, their hold on our lives. The promise of safety and comfort lures many to conformity—and convenience, too.

In short, Thurman recognizes the difficulty of realizing one's own potential and distinctiveness. To achieve a sense of self, he admits, is an "arduous process" (DS, 30). When faced with questions about our own desires, our early replies usually mirror the responses of our fellows and family: "For long stretches of time we are apt to be shadows cast by lights that are not our own," and for this reason, "experience after experience must flow through us before we get down to the bedrock of our seeking and desiring" (DS, 31). The experiences that reveal the most usually involve surprise, wonder, or sheer amazement. We are quick to embrace new lessons when plans do not go as they ought, when expectations unravel, and when dissonance forces us to listen more deeply, to pause, reflect, and wait (DS, 33). Resistance instructs.

In order to find what we most value and cherish, it is important to examine "the end sought, the want, that persists through all kinds of discouragements and reverses." Here we find, if we are to discover it at all, "what we really desire at the central place of our spirit" (DS, 32). Such a process demands that we test and experiment with various

391 The importance of the sublime, of wonder and amazement, and of beauty and grandeur—as revealed though in various encounters with the divine presence and handiwork of God—has received excellent treatment in the work of Abraham Joshua Heschel. See, for example, Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Staus, and Giroux), 24-100. Thurman himself takes his title from Heschel, "Radical Amazement," in a related meditation on these matters. See Thurman, *Inward Journey*, 19.

392 Here Thurman has Dewey in mind. In his biography, Thurman cites a course, which had as a central text, John Dewey's *How We Think* (1910), as one of the most significant influences in his spiritual and practical life. See Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 44. For Dewey, reflective thought often commences in response to an unresolved tangle, an irritable paradox, or to some other pressing uncertainty. We think reflectively in an effort to work through and grapple with problems that arise within human experience. The irritation of doubt occasions pause. See John Dewey, *How We Think* (New York: Barnes & Noble Inc., 2005), 10.
courses and pursuits—which, of course, takes time.\textsuperscript{393} Thus we sift through and shift with human experience,\textsuperscript{394} creatively gathering and collecting the offerings that bear on our condition: "the richer the resources—the more comprehensive the knowledge", "the more fruitful the suggestions—the more insight is available for solutions" (DS, 33).

Part of the reason why knowledge becomes so crucial for decision making involves Thurman's awareness of human error. With every choice, there is a chance that we may be choosing wrong. One's growth, maturity, or fruitfulness isn't guaranteed with each move. Every opportunity of growth presents an opportunity to fall short, a failure to embrace the potential that's already inherent. We are always responsible not only for that which garners our attention, but for the images to which we tend: to what we promise, and sometimes threaten, to become.

The final question which bears on the discipline of commitment concerns the means we are willing to devise and execute in order to reach our desired ends. The nature of commitment gives order and direction to the strategies we take up. Yet our ultimate commitments can govern—or fail to govern—those practices as well.

If the commitment in itself becomes more important than what I am committed to—or in other words, if the means become more important than the end—then I am prepared to be quite blind to other consequences. It is possible for a man to make an idol of commitment. We see this not

\textsuperscript{393} To be sure, certain problems require more time than others: "...I may locate a certain street in an unfamiliar city within a few minutes, or a few hours; but it may take me ten years or a lifetime to discover whether my solution to the problem of vocation was adequate" (DS, 33).

\textsuperscript{394} It is important to recall that in Creative Encounter, Thurman utilizes William James emphasis on the immediacy of religious experience for the 'individual' to frame his own position, but he does so with significant caveats – more social in kind. For Thurman, acquaintance-knowledge is "immediate experience that is purely immediate and yet experience that is purely immediate is not quite possible. The individual is never an isolated, independent unit. He brings to his religious experience certain structural and ideological equipment or tools the individual is very importantly an experiencer. All the details of his experience, that is, the raw materials of his experience, are in some very crucial manner worked over by him, assimilated by him, and thus they become parts of what he defines as his own person, his own personality, or his own self. But the individual is never completely one with his experiences. He remains always observer and participant" Howard Thurman, Creative Encounter, 20-21.
merely in regard to political or social goals or systems such as fascism, communism, or democracy. Such blindness is conceivable even on what we think is the way to the Kingdom of God. A man may be so fierce and unswerving in his commitment to what is clearly to him the Kingdom of God in the world that he does all kinds of violence to his fellows in his pursuit of it. All the tenderness and compassion of his spirit harden, and with grim vigor in his righteous dedication he may easily become a religious bigot. Simply that and nothing more. (DS, 35)

For Thurman, it is a mistake to separate chosen ends from an ethically constrained pursuit: "There must be a relation between the way I journey to my goal...and the goal itself" (DS, 35). The objects of our desire, our goals—and our methods of pursuing those ideals, our means—must constantly be scrutinized: "I must not make the mistake of subjecting the technique of my journeying...to a kind of rigor which I refuse to apply to the goal itself" (DS, 35). This demands a compelling amount of honesty and candor.

Thurman thinks that we should all choose ends and ideals that are adequate to our lot and station. But he doesn't think we should lower our sights because of the troubles that attend such pursuits. While human finitude compels all to assess their possibilities in the light of the constraints which accompany any course (DS, 45), pursuing the improbable may still have significant and practical implications (DS, 44).

Thurman thinks we need to view our work within the context of the sort of vitality mentioned before. On this view, immediate outcomes are not the sole measures of practical import and significance, life-giving vitality is: "Instead of looking forward to a rounded fulfillment or achievement of his goal, he knows that his role is but a part of the larger whole" (DS, 36). Recall how Thurman's sense of piety and care extends not just to God, but to all the sources of life that partake in the creation and emergence of oneself. In so doing, it also stretches to those who have yet, but are sure to come—those in search
of succor, strength and sustenance. If by God, or some noble ideal, one is called "to work on a behalf of a fulfillment so high that its full realization is not even in sight," one must also be prepared to die without tasting it (DS, 36). It is at this moment that a sense of inclusion in a "collective destiny" becomes so crucial. Through Olive Schreiner,\textsuperscript{395} we hear Thurman's testament:

\begin{quote}
I have sought; for long years I have labored; but I have not found her. I have not rested, I have not repined, and I have not seen her; now my strength is gone. Where I lie down worn out, other men will stand, young and fresh. By the steps that I have cut they will climb; by the stairs that I have built, they will mount. They will never know the name of the man who made them. At the clumsy work they will laugh; when the stones roll they will curse me. But they will mount, and on my work; they will climb, and by my stair! They will find her, and through me!\textsuperscript{396}
\end{quote}

Though this will surely strike some as fanciful, we should not forget the energizing power of utopic imaginings and compelling visions. The practical significance of such portraits should neither be underestimated nor overstated. What Thurman senses in his appeal to Schreiner is the danger of near-sightedness and the consequences of not giving the utopic its due. If we despair at our impotence in the face of evil, this leaves us with no hope and no cause for meaningful labor and pain.

Thurman, however, would have us stretch and tend to what is our most noble end, while at the same time, refusing to compromise on the excellence or height of our goal.

\textsuperscript{395}Olive Schreiner (1855-1920) had a significant impact on Thurman's thinking, so much so that he named his daughter after the South African novelist and activist, and daughter of white missionaries. Schreiner would later reject her religious upbringing and also become a champion for "socialism, pacifism, and feminism" (35). According to Dixie and Einstadt, Schreiner's \textit{Women and Labor} (1911) was a significant publication for the struggle "The Basis of Sex Morality: An Inquiry into the Attitude toward Premarital Sexual Morality among Various Peoples and an Analysis of Its True Basis," which was heavily indebted to Schreiner. See Quinton Dixie and Peter Eisenstadt, \textit{Visions of a Better World}, 35-42.

In the course of doing so, Thurman also reminds his readers not to glory in their own achievements. Even if we’ve somehow managed to outdo our peers or press beyond our ancestors, when our goal has been properly set, "the sense of inadequacy makes for an ever-deepening humility and corresponding heightening of concentrated effort" (DS, 37). For Thurman, "the only way we can be made whole in commitment is by finding something big enough to demand our all" (DS, 30). The key is to focus and order one’s desires in a way that meaningful organization can occur: "commitment structures a life, giving it internal and particular order. The total inner landscape becomes altered by a central emphasis" (DS, 26). In Thurman's eyes, the universe favorably responds to such persistence: "to the persistent knock at the door there is an answer" (DS, 32; Luke 11:5-13). Commitment concerns the force of our assertion and the consistency of our pursuit. It is a way of meeting resistance. The unfolding of potential, human and otherwise, depends on such work.

How does all of this relate to what we love? Commitment binds us to the loves and ideals we seek to nourish and bring to life. The quality and depth of our love depends on the quality and depth of our commitment. Commitment is the lifeline—the will—between our loves and our lives: our way of attaching ourselves to the ends and visions we deem worthy of pursuit. It is at once the energizing summons behind our straining and the guiding wind beneath our breath. To be committed to some particular end is also to become (or grow into) a particular kind of person.

You shall gather to yourself the images you love. As you go, the shapes, the lights, the shadows of things you have preferred will come to you, yes,

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397 This registers an interview by Baldwin where he eloquently defined humility as doing one's "work in the sight of God" (James 4:10). James Baldwin, source unknown, accessed May 6, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ctv85-4x8Jg.
in velerately, inevitably as bees to their hives. And there in your mind and spirit they will leave with you their distilled essence, sweet as honey or bitter as gall...

As year adds to year, that face of yours, which once lay smooth in your baby crib, like an unwritten page, will take to itself lines, and still more lines, as the parchment of an old historian who jealously sets down all the story. And there, more deep than acids etch the steel, will grow the inscribed narrative of your mental habits, the emotions of your heart, your sense of conscience, your response to duty, what you think of your God and of your fellowmen and of yourself. It will all be there. For men become like that which they love, and the name thereof is written on their brows. ³⁹⁸

Commitment alone, however crucial it may be as a discipline of the spirit, won't suffice. On Thurman's view, commitment is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for maturity. One can possess a relentless determination to care for one's loves and to realize one's ends, but still fail to appreciate the importance of managing expectations, of actively remaining patient, and of considering those relevant intrusions of time, calamity, and fortune that encroach on one's plans. Properly pursuing one's ideal requires a sensitivity to the processes of growth and the details that surround it.

**Growth**

In my earlier discussion of commitment, I briefly alluded to the ways in which bearing fruit can often take time. For Thurman, this has everything to do with the kinds of growth processes that inhere in vitality: "growth means the orderly process of development through which a form of life goes from seed to fruit, form egg to matured

animal, from cell to embryo to adult human being” (DS, 38). How then might growth be tied to a disciplined and developed spirit?

Adult maturity entails, among other things, a capacity to recognize the distance between having a desire and seeing its realization in the concrete. For the young and immature, however, "the time interval between wish and fulfillment is, in effect, zero" (DS, 39). Adults who expect all their wishes to be promptly satisfied are bound to be a burden to themselves and to others. They'll likely suffer from perpetual frustration and disappointment, given the antagonism between their expectations and the offerings of the world. Those with whom they interact are likely to be subject to the interests and inclinations of a will that has little regard for any value that lies outside it. Such a will threatens to be corrupted by its inflated self-regard. Thurman thinks we see this tragedy among powerful nation-states all the time—and with bloody consequences. Such persons (and nations alike) lack what Thurman calls an "essential discipline of their spirit," and hence "they have remained essentially babies in what they expect of life. They have a distorted conception of their own lives in particular and of life in general" (DS, 41). They seek the fulfillment of their desires immediately and by any means necessary. Deluded by their sense of entitlement, they fully expect their visions to be realized.

But the discipline of growth alerts us to the appropriateness of patience, stillness, and pause.399 For Thurman, "to know when waiting is essential to the process and to the life of the individual is to be disciplined in one's spirit. To learn how to wait is to discover one of the precious ingredients in the spiritual unfolding of life, the foundation for...patience" (DS, 42). Patience isn't always a good thing. In fact, what we call

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patience often serves as a veneer for "fear or cowardice or laziness" (DS, 42). Or, in
other instances, waiting is simply the result of bewilderment, of one's being frozen in a
state of perplexity. Thurman rightly criticizes these instances, while still maintaining that
"constructive patience" isn't inherently inert or passive. Patience, in its constructive
form, reveals itself in probing inquiry and assessment:

> In assessing the environment one may discover that the matter of time as been overlooked. The wish, the desire, may be good and worthy in itself, but the timing of its expected fulfillment is off. The wish may be premature in its application of reality. Sometimes a desire can have no significant meaning in a situation because the way has not been prepared for it. The way has to be made ready for fulfillment to honor the wish. (DS, 43)

An example of this principle can be found in personal encounter. If a social critic
aims to compel another person toward candid self-assessment and realization, Thurman
reasons, "then attention must be given to the time and place of your sharing" (DS, 43). Some truths are not readily digestible in all contexts—say, for example, those that trample on another's seemingly natural and previously unquestioned moorings in the world: truths that strike at the heart of another's ontology, or still others, that elicit deep feelings of shame and humiliation in a context where feelings might already be raw.400

400 I recall a moment during the summer of 2013 when I was teaching a NC high school class full of primarily southern, white, middle-classed millennials. George Zimmerman had just been legally absolved of any legal wrong doing in the death of Trayvon Martin. And I was supposed to lead a philosophical discussion around questions of social justice in the United States, with the film, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012) as a pretext. I wanted to shout down the injustices that black boys face in a country that professes freedom, justice, and democracy, but we had already covered similar points during a previous week with our reading of James Baldwin and Joe Feagin, which for our group was earth-shaking. Even though I knew my students were still bruised from that talk, it took everything within me to resist the urge to simply scream what I knew to be true that fateful Monday morning. But the timing wasn't right and it wasn't my place to "set the record straight." They were children, persons of value in themselves. The appropriate seeds had already been planted for their growth. They would have to go through other stages of transformation before a message (like my rant) could even be received without my losing the bit of ground I may have gained the previous week. Such a rant would've made me feel better, maybe; but it certainly wouldn't have given my students the best chance to grow. I can only hope that those students (now college
Speaking truth at certain times may lead to an occasion where the truth-teller can't even be heard and thus an opportunity for transformation lost. When a situation hasn't been prepared, and a speaker fails to consider this reality, then "even the truth becomes error" (DS, 43). Merely telling the truth isn't itself the end of all ends: God, for the believer, and the well-being of those whom he seeks to serve, is much closer to that.

In making this claim, Thurman intends to draw attention to our personal relationships and how we should go about stewarding our involvement in them – whether as gadflies and catalysts, mentors and examples, or, more generally, as vessels of care in the various roles which call for our response. In this incredibly personal and individuated sense, we find Thurman's intervention. Here Thurman agrees with Foucault and the Stoics: some truths are inaccessible to particular subjects, precisely because their coming to be appreciated demands a longer process of ascesis, discipline, and self-work. Some truths remain unnoticed and hidden to the unprepared and malformed. It is here that rhetoric becomes so crucial; speaking the truth in a style that stimulates growth and regeneration requires touch. On this view, love involves delicacy, but not timidity.

sophomores) have a broader perspective concerning the deaths of Michael Dunn, Jordan Davis, Renisha McBride, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, and countless others, named and unnamed. The irony, of course, is that even though I refused to bring up the Zimmerman verdict, I was still accused of making everything "about slavery."

401 Cathy Kaveny makes a related point about the "fire and strength" rhetoric of prophetic discourse. She thinks we need to develop a set of criteria to help parse such distinctions. I give attention to these ideas in the conclusion. See M. Cathleen Kaveny, “Democracy and Prophecy,” in Law and Democracy in the Empire of Force ed. James Boyd White and H. Jefferson Powell (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 35-36.

402 Of course this is an isolated, individuated and, hence, limited instance. Notice that the goal is for a particular individual's coming to consciousness. The situation is much different for the social critic who addresses himself to a wider audience, whose epistemic station in general, may well put them in a position to be systematically disadvantaged. The goal may not be instant conversion. It could be the leaving of a record of truth for future reference or adding to the collected store of meaning and knowledge. But notice that neither the aim nor the expectation is immediate. Such a critic has already managed her expectations by giving attention to the wider processes of growth. Thurman's concern is with our becoming defeated by a sense of impotency and a lack of results.
Of course, this isn't to dismiss those occasions that call for brazen and unabated truth-telling. Surely if the sufferings of some, and the injustices of others have been systematically ignored and rendered invisible, then there is a public need to throw light on those conditions, and to do so with vigor and force. "There are situations that must be changed, must be blasted out, there is a place for radical surgery," Thurman affirms. But while it is true that shock and agitation are often relevant and necessary means, in themselves, they aren't necessarily the most helpful for growth and flourishing. One always has to consider the public to which a critic takes herself to be addressing, or those to whom a truth-teller sees herself as primarily responsible. Again, Thurman just wants us to specify our chosen end, so that we can channel our energies accordingly. He would have us be clear about what role we take ourselves to be playing in the growth process of our peers and our society. This is why emphasizing a critic's sense of vocation becomes so valuable, both in our efforts to evaluate and model his or her excellence.

Thurman is, therefore, not committed to the view that the say-so of a truth-teller fails if it doesn't end in the immediate conversion of an audience. This would obviously go against the habits of growth and habits of constructive patience he's been recommending. Of course, shocks can be initiated without hoping for direct outcomes. They might be for the sake of a larger project or goal, or maybe for fellow and future travelers who might draw sustenance from them along their way. In either case, by arguing that truth-telling can go awry, Thurman calls for an awareness of the ways in which harsh truths won't achieve their intended effects, if preparations haven't already been made, and relevant contexts fully weighed. As the Apostle Paul planted, but rarely

403 Howard Thurman, Deep is the Hunger, 54.
baptized, and Apollos watered, but didn't build (I Cor. 3:8), Thurman would have each to be aware of her task in the growth process, as best she can. Our criticism, like our love, should be smooth and tempered when appropriate, and brash and discordant when necessary.

Thurman also sees value in moments of waiting, pause, and stillness. For him, they occasion "an opportunity for revising, refreshing, and reshaping the initial desire" (DS, 44). Not everything a person desires is the best thing for him, since "It may be that his wish is out of character for the real tenor or quality of his life." Through waiting and silence, we're permitted a chance to "assess our lives in terms of our own desires, purposes, dreams, goals." Here what Thurman has in mind concerns the difficulty of finding balance and cohesion within oneself, of aesthetically arranging one's inner life in such a way that affords direction and purpose.

Thurman recognizes that the sources of human complexity involve our mixed tendencies, our present tensions: of staying put and moving away, of being firm and staying loose, of imagining the past while nimbly adjusting to the present. As philosopher Henri Bergson saw it,\footnote{See Henri Bergson, \textit{Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic} (Rockville, MD: Wildside Press, 2008).} humor accompanies those moments which call for elasticity, but catch us stiff; those occasions which require rhythm and order, but which find us out of step and offbeat. The challenges we face and the strategies we devise, like all occurrences in time, change: we can either dance and adapt with them or risk becoming outmoded and irrelevant.\footnote{Of course, adaptation could involve an effort to break sharply from the past, or some other strategy of revising one's relationship with it, perhaps even an effort to recover what has been forgotten. In any case, an option's enduring relevance must be demonstrated among competing alternatives, which also vie for a person's limited capacities of assent. This goes as much for cultural markers of style (snap-backs and snadals, etc.) as for philosophic and religious traditions.} It is our propensity to folly as much as terror that
makes us creatures of crises, large and small. The difficulties of personal growth only crystallize this insight:

In spite of all the variations and apparent contradictions in the behavior pattern of even a single individual, the tension between the impulse to go forward and impulse to stay put is part of every man's experience, young and old alike...Such is the crisis of growth. It is resolved only when one impulse or the other is victorious. Which of them will win, and with what results for the life of a generation, a nation, or an age? (DS, 53)

Beyond this, Thurman wants to accent the necessity of specifying certain aspects of growth, due to his recognition of how human beings can be swayed in different directions by different stimuli. That is why we do best to speak of "growth in this or that respect" and to avoid talking in ways that imply some undifferentiated whole. Talk of wholesale growth is too abstract. We make concrete decisions, one way or another. Even if the choice is to vacillate, responsibility still remains. We are known and defined by that which we tend toward and grow into. Ours is a mixed, messy, and complicated lot, but ours nonetheless. What we permit to flourish (and perish) in our own spirits says as much about who we are, as the growth (and decay) in local gardens marks the character of wider communities.  

406 The soil of our environments and the seat of our souls, both play a constitutive role in the formation of our identities:

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tattoos, for example) as for philosophical modes of theorizing. Thurman shows an awareness of this challenge: "There is a relentless ambivalence for me in honoring the sources of my own integrity and inspiration while at the same time recognizing their relevance to the times in which I am now living" (CG, xiv-xv).

407 With practices of ecological care in mind, Wendell Berry writes, "The soil is the great connecter of lives, the source and destination of all. It is the healer and restorer and resurrector, by which disease passes into health, age into youth, death into life. Without proper care for it we can have no community, because without proper care for it we can have no life," Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1996), 86.

407 Ibid., 86. "It is alive itself. It is a grave, too, of course. Or a healthy soil is. It is full of dead animals and plants, bodies that have passed through other bodies....It is impossible to contemplate the life of the soil for very long without seeing it as analogous to the life of the spirit."
The response of any form of life to the impact of the environment is along the lines of a definite inherent bias. This basic bias or inherent predisposition makes leaves shape themselves a certain way, determines the development of flower and fruit, calls a halt to growth in a given time, and establishes the boundaries for each living thing. The bounds are set within. (DS, 55)

Here Thurman calls attention to the ways in which persons share a responsibility for how they respond to the conditions of their living. Human freedom resides in the essentially "creative" character of each choice. Meaningful choices are based on life options, which contain their own possibilities. Such potential, whether released or stifled, leads to consequences, unintended and intended. But human beings "can make choices which help to determine their development." Such decisions could be for better or worse, funding new sources of renewal or charting paths to destruction. This sense of freedom only emerges amid the constraints of history, time, and context. The collected store of the past funds meaning and furnishes content, alongside our creative use and remembering of it: both imbue our options with life and detail. As Thurman rightly notes, "A man may be powerless to protect himself from certain impacts that belong to his age, his period, his social or religious heritage, but he is privileged to take these into account as they register in the kind and quality of his choices" (DS, 58).

There is a deeply tragic and flawed, even sin-ridden, dimension to this predicament. Even with the best intentions (which should not mindlessly be assumed) human beings are still prone to error. This owes, in part, to the decisions we make concerning our own priorities and values; and these selections occur "on the basis of data that are never quite complete" (DS, 57). To make matters worse: the information we typically possess about the lives to be impacted by our choice is even "less complete,
[and] less adequate" (DS, 57). No matter how singular and intimate one's personal dealings may seem, "the responsibility of the individual can never be isolated or confined to himself alone: 'No man is an island'' (DS, 57). Thus, for Thurman, we are responsible for our errors and blunders. Maintaining a proper disposition of spirit, therefore, requires that one prepare for the reality of error, the inevitability of failure.

But some errors, Thurman admits, don't flow from good intentions. They flow from a will that's simply "corrupt" and "against life." Speaking in universal (yet deeply gendered) terms, Thurman affirms: "Men do sin—all men." In less glaring situations, however, error springs from an agent's quest to secure "relief from external pressures." Or, in other cases, error can issue from a "sense of injury, pain, or guilt." In this way, an agent may offer an inadequate response to her predicament, not necessarily because of a corrupt will and not merely because of human ignorance and limitation – though much of what occurs can go on without the explicit awareness of an actor. Sometimes a person is just tired and hurt, and too weak and fatigued to confront it: "error may be present because of a false or inadequate reaction to a given set of circumstance" (DS, 58). Yet Thurman would have us truthfully and adequately encounter the world and its manifold vitality, however imperfectly. The challenge is always one of appropriate response, a task that is laden with failure, though not without the hope of improvement: "To be victimized by error and at the same time keep on making choices with integrity is to grow in grace. And for the religious man, it is to grow not only in grace but also in the knowledge and experience of God" (DS, 58).

Grace permits one to keep working and trying, even when failure and success lie beyond the measure of one's influence. There are times when the ingenuity, creativity,
and power of the human spirit is trampled by "forces set in motion beyond the individual's scope of operation or control." We are at once the benefitters and the "victim[s] of circumstances" (DS, 60). Thurman therefore recommends we avoid staking our sense of final completion in the excellence of our outcomes:

There is no harder lesson to learn in the spiritual life than the fact that results belong to God. A man's responsibility is to seek before God how to purge his life of those things that make for error and wrong choices, and to act in the light of his best wisdom and most profound integrity. Beyond this, the results are in God's hands. Of course, a man is never free of the sense of responsibility for results, but this is ultimately a gratuitous concern on his part (DS, 60).

Thurman recognizes the danger of being too fixated on results. Doing so can distract in ways that – to borrow from Emerson – 'scatter your force'. It also saps our energies "markedly from the business at hand" and renders us "only partially available to its demands" (DS, 61). True, results matter; but our most pressing and immediate obligation is to work at our craft as best we can in relation to the issues presently 'at hand.' The difficulty of this burden is precisely what makes the world so unhandsome in Stanley Cavell's view. But for those men and women who would labor in the Master's vineyard: Their "task is to work for the Kingdom of God. The result beyond this demand is not in their hands" (DS, 62). Too "much energy and effort and many anxious hours are spent in anticipation of the probable failure or success of our ventures" (DS, 61), when in reality a multitude of factors determine the fruition of any cultivated ideal:

408 "He who keeps his eyes on results cannot give himself wholeheartedly to his task, however simple or complex that task may be" (DS, 62).
There are many forces over which the individual can exercise no control whatsoever. A farmer plants a seed in the ground and the seed sprouts and grow. The weather, the winds, the elements, he cannot control. The result is never a sure thing. So what does the farmer do? He plants. Always he plants. Again and again he works at it—in confidence and assurance that, even though his seed may not grow to fruition, seeds do grow and they do come to fruition. (DS, 62)

**Love**

With the fullness of our attention and imagination now free, Thurman’s thinks we can better tend to the vitality within our midst. This requires engaging in the work of reconciliation, of seeking to harmonize our relations with others (DS, 105). "Every man wants to be cared for, to be sustained by the assurance that he shares in the watchful and thoughtful attention of others....The need to be cared for is essential to the furtherance and maintenance of life in health. This is how life is nourished" (DS, 105). Love is basic to life and is essential to human flourishing.410

But Thurman also notices the dangers of disordered love: how it can be employed as way to coerce or manipulate others for one's own ends; how, in other cases, it can come to carry an impersonal (and merely academic!) significance which shares in neither the life nor realities of others. Denying love the power of its lived, embodied, incarnations often results in the severing of the "spiritual and/or religious commitment out of which it comes, by which it is inspired" (DS, 124). Note that it is also the so-called 'spiritual' or 'religious person' who can become out of touch with the source of their

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410 In another place, Thurman later writes, "The need to care for and the need to be cared for is another expression of the same basic idea...Such needs are organic, whatever may be their psychological or spiritual derivatives. Therefore, whenever the individual is cut off from the private and personal nourishment from other individuals or from particular individuals, the result is a wasting away, a starvation, a failure of his life to be sustained and nourished." Thurman, *The Search for Common Ground*, 3.
own inspiration. Thurman's critique isn't aimed directly at those who do not subscribe to his tradition. His point, rather, is to strike directly at those who merely subscribe to the ways of love in purely formal and intellectual terms. These are those for whom love "can become a moral pretension" as opposed to "a moral imperative" (DS, 124). This is why systems, doctrines, creeds, structures, and institutions often threaten the heart and pulse of Thurman's love. They tend to formalize and stiffen what ought to be fully alive and vitally responsive. As Thurman puts it, "Neither a man nor an institution can embrace an ethical imperative without either becoming more and more expressive of it in the common life or developing a kind of increasing enmity. Here is the essential challenge of the modern world to the Christian Church" (DS, 124).

In concluding his case for the importance of spiritual formation, Thurman returns to the need to grow constantly in our understanding both of ourselves and our beloveds. For Thurman, this demands an accounting of a lover's pretensions and self-interests—those concerns which prevent her from opening and emptying herself, and therefore, adequately responding to the particularity and distinctiveness of her beloveds.

Very glibly we are apt to use such words as "sympathy," "compassion" "sitting where they sit," but in experience it is genuinely to be rocked to one's foundations. We resist making room for considerations that will bend us out of the path of preoccupation with ourselves, our needs, our problems. We corrupt our imagination when we give it range over only our own affairs. Here we experience the magnification of our own wills, the distortion of our own problems, and the enlargement of the areas of our misery. The activity of which we deprive our imagination in the work of understanding others turns in upon ourselves with disaster and sometimes terror. (DS, 126)

On the contrary, for Thurman, properly channeled love seeks to create shared spaces of awareness and heightened levels of insight. Not only does this require that lovers, like
artists, use their imagination. It also demands that they, like farmers, carefully tend to their encounters with others: "I must find the opening or openings through which my love can flow into the life of the other, and at the same time locate in myself openings through which his love can flow into me" (DS, 125).

In order for such discoveries to be made, Thurman thinks we need to slow down. In doing so, Thurman appeals to his earlier insistence on constructive patience: "for most of us," Thurman maintains, "tarrying with another has to be cultivated and worked at by dint of much self-discipline" (DS, 127). Other spiritual techniques, like prayer and meditation, silence and Sabbath, become crucial for the development of such an approach. None of these habits for Thurman's lover are incidental, they are vitally constitutive of the activity and work of love. Habits and disciplines inform the character of the person offering the care and, by necessity, color the quality of the love on offer too. It is impossible to respond fully to every whisper of life we encounter. But for the souls and societies, the seeds and soils that we would tend, the depth of our love is not to be measured solely in terms of commitment and growth. The character of our time counts, too. That is why it is essential to avoid distractions and to resist, even, the comforts of vacant generalities. Such modes of theorizing (and disengaged posturing!) can themselves be distractions, self-righteous ways of hiding from one's own cowardice in the face of living misery and acute suffering. Thurman puts the matter this way:

In our religious observances even Jesus is, again and again, pushed into a category that is defined by the principle of abstraction. So long as he is held there, we absolve ourselves of the necessity for the introduction of the principle of concretion, though it was on this basis that he lived, work, dreamed, suffered, died. In the name of religion, abstractions may march

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411 For Thurman's extended thoughts on the importance of prayer, see Thurman, Disciplines of the Spirit, 86-103; also see, "Concerning Prayer," The Growing Edge, 29-53.
in good standing along with the most anti-Christian, anti-decent behavior.

For Thurman, the ministry of love is by necessity a ministry of presence in time:

"We cannot be in a hurry in matters of the heart. The human spirit has to be explored gently and with unhurried tenderness. Very often this demands...a profound alteration in the tempo of our behavior pattern" (DS, 127). Through such "waiting moments," patterns of insensitivity and blindness can be resisted and fresh ways of being discovered. The cadence of love's rhythm shifts with the needs and details of particular situations and particular people. It moves to understand, seeks to touch, and strains, sometimes in silence, to find ways of healing and hope. Thurman's life and ministry was one such effort, a pastoral calling he would affirm and renew throughout his life, especially the night he spent alone in a Virginia parsonage, the night that came after he helped another man face death.

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413 In a brief meditation on this topic, Thurman writes: "We would love but are not skilled in the art. We would give but we do not know to what or to whom." See Howard Thurman, "The Waiting Moment," *The Inward Journey* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 2007), 136.
Chapter 7

Ethos of Love

We are all artists in the sense that we are all engaged in some kind of activity by which we are realizing our ideals.\textsuperscript{414}

In bringing my discussion of Thurman's account of love and criticism to a close, I turn to the text that he referred to as his "lifelong working paper," the book that Thurman confesses to have been "writing all my life," \textit{The Search for Common Ground} (1971).\textsuperscript{415} Many of the themes which occupy this text receive extended treatment in his earlier writings. I choose not to dwell on those here. Instead I want to highlight those relevant instances where Thurman lingers with or goes beyond a theme previously touched on. My focus plainly concerns those topics which bear on Thurman's account of love and criticism.

Having already explored Thurman's ideas concerning the contents of love, it remains to be seen just what Thurman takes love to be 'for the sake of.' Our reading of \textit{Disciplines of the Spirit} suggested that life itself—vitality—was one such an object. In \textit{The Search for Common Ground}, we find Thurman expanding on this theme, giving particular attention to the role of collectives and groups in our efforts to grow in vitality, to realize the fullness of our human capacities and potential. In what follows, I draw attention to Thurman's account of community as a site of realized potential, his take on the challenges and promises of creatively forging one's own distinctiveness amidst

\textsuperscript{414} Howard Thurman, \textit{Deep is the Hunger} (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 2000), 21.
\textsuperscript{415} Howard Thurman, \textit{The Search for Common Ground} (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1986), xiii. Further cited parenthetically as (CG, #), unless noted otherwise.
persons engaged in similar projects, and his meditations concerning the significance of utopia. At a general level, we can label these topics of concern: community, identity, and utopia.

**Community**

Thurman's thinking about the nature of individual and communal flourishing reveals tension and paradox. On the side of individual particularity, there resides for him "the uniqueness of the private life, the awful sense of being an isolate, independent and alone, the great urgency to savor one's personal flavor—to stand over against the rest of life in contained affirmation" (CG, xiv). Individuality contains its own dilemmas. There's the terror that accompanies singularity and isolation, alongside the charm of possessing a unique style and character, the zest of one's particularity. "I have always wanted to be me," Thurman writes, "without making it difficult for you to be you" (CG, xiii). The statement itself hints at the difficulty of the achievement. Here fully being oneself is a projected hope now struggled for in the present and, thus, the result of much effort. The timing and circumstances of one's birth, however unique and inimitable, offer no guarantees. The non-conformist flavor of each individual must be won.\footnote{Walter Fluker has linked Thurman and King to a tradition of non-conformist resisters and leaders. The extent to which Fluker connects Thurman to the democratic individualist strand of thought found in Emerson and others isn't clear, but Fluker is quite sensitive to the Pauline moorings of non-conformity (Rom. 12:2). Drawing attention to Thurman's emphasis on the importance of inner renewal, Fluker writes: "This must be done," Thurman contended, "so that the quest for social justice, one's vision of society never conforms to some external pattern, but is 'modeled and shaped in accordance to the innermost transformation that is going on in his spirit.'" See Walter E. Fluker, *Ethical Leadership: The Quest for Character, Civility, and Community* (Mnneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 22 and 201. For an exposition of the idea of democratic individuality in American and African American political thought, see Jack Turner, *Awakening to Race: Individual and Social Consciousness in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).}
Yet in another sense, there is a profound commonality shared by all living organisms. Thurman describes this as "the necessity to feel oneself as a primary part of all of life, sharing at every level of awareness a dependence upon the same elements in nature, caught up in the ceaseless rhythm of living and dying, with no final immunity against a common fate that finds and holds all living things" (CG, xiv). What Toni Morrison describes as "the nastiness of life and the meanness of the dead" are integral to our human condition and, more widely, to the life process itself.\textsuperscript{417} Thurman summarizes the paradoxes of human collectives amid the particularity of each person's own encounters with world like this:

To experience one's self is to enter into a solitary world that is one's unique possession and that can never be completely and utterly shared. Here is the paradox. A man is always threatened in his very ground by a sense of isolation by feeling himself cut off from his fellows. Yet he can never separate himself from his fellows, for mutual interdependence is characteristic of all of life. The need to care for and the need to be cared for is another expression of the same basic idea (CG, 2-3).

None of this is terribly novel, since Thurman advances similar claims in a host of other texts emphasizing the importance of early caretakers and the necessity of nurture. He takes such practices to be essential for the development of healthy personalities.\textsuperscript{418} In \textit{Common Ground}, Thurman affirms similar positions. But he also extends this logic to ground a theory of political and social organization, calling explicit attention to his previous concern with cultural patterns. Thurman writes,

\textit{It is not an overstatement that the purpose of all of the arrangement and conventions that make up the formal and informal agreement under which men live in society is to nourish one another with one another. The safeguards by which individuals or groups of men establish the boundaries...}

\textsuperscript{418} Howard Thurman, \textit{The Creative Encounter}, 97-101.
of intimate and collective belonging are meant ultimately to guarantee self-nourishment. All of these are but social expressions of the underlying experience of life with itself. Life feeds on life; life is nourished by life. (CG, 4)

On this view, webs of reliance are integral for human subsistence. Political, cultural and familial forms of life are, at bottom, networks of care and support – spun and suspended, as it were, in time. Human social arrangements merely reflect those wider and deeper features of "dependability and continuity" that can be observed throughout nature. To think of self-reliance as atomistic self-subsistence is illusory. Various styles of living essentially involve different forms of establishing and securing the kind of care that nourishes life. This necessarily involves other sources of nurture: persons and polities, as well as plants, animals, and ecosystems. Fully aware of the multiplicity that attends any human quest for vitality, Thurman refers to styles and modes as "creative pushes." Recall how disciplines of the spirit were crucial for helping to establish, render possible, and keep open those channels (to sustenance) which might otherwise remain blocked or unnoticed.

But notice how, on Thurman's view, habits of self-care organically inspire creativity and freshness: opening the way for new modes of being. Here Thurman cautions against narrowly construing how such flourishing might take place. "It must not be thought that life is static," nor should we think of it, Thurman writes, as "something that is set, fixed, determined." Life is always in the process of seeking to actualize its potential—to vitally flourish and realize itself. Our task, then, is to be responsive to the possibilities that surround it. Alerting us to the urgency of this topic, Thurman reminds:

The key word to remember always is potential; that which has not yet come to pass but which is always coming to pass. It is only the potential,
the undisclosed, the unfinished that has a future. I find it difficult to think of life apart from the notion of potential; indeed they seem synonymous. To be sure, life is not finished yet; creation is still going on, not only in the spinning of new worlds, systems, nebulae, and galaxies in the infinitude of space, not only in the invisible world where chemical elements are born and nourished to support conglomerates of matter yet to appear at some far-off moment in time, but also in the human body, which is still evolving, in the human mind, which so slowly loosens its corporeal bonds, and in the human spirit, which forever drives to know the truth of itself and its fellows. (CG, 4-5)

Talk of potential implies the fruition which is yet to come, and with it, all the practices of hope which anticipate that future. This requires taking seriously the environmental conditions which produce good harvests. Thurman thinks that community, when carefully construed, is the best way to understand those conditions in their idealized form. The quest for community, according to Thurman, is the generative pulse of life seeking to realize itself. Community conditions the presence and constitutes the end of life. Properly understood, community is realized potential: "The degree to which the potential in any expression of life is actualized marks the extent to which such an expression of life experiences wholeness, integration, community" (CG, 4). To be sure, different families and neighborhoods and churches and collectives possess different characters. There is a unique kind of "potential that characterizes the particular expression of life" (CG, 7), so that communities reflect the various textures of vitality that comprise them. They similarly include those forces, entities, and arrangements that work against life, what Thurman calls, "the thing that destroys and lays waste" (CG, 6).
In this sense, community is at once descriptive and normative.\textsuperscript{419} The degree to which an environment possesses community determines its quality of life, most especially in those areas involving communication and coordinated efforts to achieve "harmony, wholeness and integration" (CG, 7). To what extent is an environment presently characterized by relations of wholeness and cooperation? And to what extent are the conditions for flourishing and wholeness present within a person's interior life? Such descriptive questions make claims on the present. And yet descriptive claims have implications for the particular worlds we might profitably imagine and for the practical and aesthetic maneuvers required to approximate those ends. One can only imagine and work—practically dream and live—from one's particular place in history, body, and time. That is why descriptions are normatively significant. Facts inform what we ought to do precisely because they determine what we can do. They inform which actions and habits, dispositions and deeds, meaningfully emerge as live options.

Beyond present descriptions of nourishment and deficiency, community is also a normative ideal that regulates and orients practical affairs. It is a projected state of perfection toward which human agents can aspire. This includes social policies and institutional designs which to bring about more just and more wholesome living conditions. At local levels, this primarily occurs through the taking on of particular roles and vocations, in private and familial, as well as religious and civic life. The love that courses from one to another within these given contexts flows on behalf of this larger

\textsuperscript{419} Walter Fluker, \textit{They Looked for a City: A Comparative Analysis of the Ideal of Community in the Thought of Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr.} (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989), xii.
vision. Thurman's vision of community, what others have termed beloved community, and what he himself called the quest for common ground, orders and guides his ethic of love. It is for the sake of this ideal that social critics weigh in on the status of our present conditions, revealing and opening the way for fresh paths of improvement, both for the collectives and societies that humans create, and for the individuals and selves who comprise them.

Challenges of this sort preclude neutrality. Every individual bears some responsibility for the commitments he or she undertakes. In detailing the importance of community, Thurman invites his readers to appreciate the significance of what they see in the light of where they stand. He would have us sense the multiplicity of powers that constitute our fact and possibility. In the thickness of this humanity, tensions and paradoxes and complexities abound: freedom amid necessity, individuality within community, creativity alongside conformity. It is here – in the elasticity of our constraints – that we find our creative and ethical task. This is why ethics must be tutored by aesthetics, if it is to be sufficiently nimble for practical living. Abstract formulas and stiff principles are the stuff of theory but rarely the heart of life. The form and content—the theoretical elusiveness—of Thurman's writings demonstrate his commitment to this view. With his characteristic nuance and touch, he writes,

> There is a spirit in man and in the world always working against the thing that destroys and lays waste. Always he must know that the contradictions of life are not final or ultimate; he must distinguish between failure and

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420 For an excellent account of the intellectual roots of beloved community, which takes as its point of departure the writings of Josiah Royce, see Rufus Burrow, Jr., "Josiah Royce and Beloved Community," in Martin Luther King Jr., and the Theology of Resistance (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2014), 120-133. For an account of King's appropriation of beloved community, see Fluker, "O What a Beautiful City!" in They Looked for a City, 109-138; and as cited by Fluker (236), John H. Cartwright, "Foundations of a Beloved Community," Debate and Understanding 1.3 (Semester 2, 1977).
many-sided awareness so that he will not mistake conformity for harmony, uniformity for synthesis. He will know that for all men to be alike is the death of life in man, and yet perceive the harmony that transcends all diversities and in which diversity finds its richness and significance. (CG, 6)

*Identity*

This brings Thurman to a full encounter with identity and its place in ethical life. Thurman does not argue for the blending (read: white-washing) of individual vibrancy and distinctiveness. He affirms such diversity and even finds himself critical of "conformity" and "uniformity," describing it as a kind of "death of life" (CG, 6). But even with this conviction, Thurman clings to the spiritual insight that beneath our diversities of style and appearance, a deeper commonality thrives, one rooted in the pulsing creativity of life itself. Differences do not ultimately divide.

Here we begin to see Thurman's own ethic of self and social criticism at work. Though Thurman worries about the calls for separatism that circulate within African-American communities, he also admits that such tactics might be a "necessary technique of survival" (CG, xiv). And in the concluding paragraph of the book, Thurman affirms "that the barriers of community can never be arbitrarily established, however necessitous it may be to seek to do for good and saving reasons" (CG, 104). But even with such pragmatic necessities in mind, Thurman thinks we are mistaken to view the "lines of separation between black and white...psychologically as being absolute" (CG, 104).

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421 See especially, Albert B. Cleage Jr., *The Black Messiah* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1989). Cleage's work was originally published in 1969. Thurman (1900-81) wouldn't live to see the second edition published. In the bibliography of *Common Ground*, Thurman does signal Cleage's influence on his own thought (CG, 105). One should also note that Cleage was hired as a minister at The Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco, but quickly resigned because of the social inequalities he saw among members in the church, especially Japanese-Americans who had recently been released from American internment camps.
What ultimately unites humanity goes much deeper than the incidentals that divide. For Thurman, we should never attempt to isolate the "the black experience from the American experience in general," since they both feed off of and constitute each other (CG, xiv). This tendency toward isolation and seclusion isn't merely academic, nor does it merely pertain to black-white relations. He thinks such myopia constrains how black people approach the breadth and variety of their own experiences. What Thurman describes as "perhaps the sharpest criticism...of the champions for self-determined separateness" involves their approach to history. He charges black separatists with calling for a new hermeneutics of history, while simultaneously refusing to take that history seriously. On Thurman's view, "there seems to be no recognition of the relentless logic tying present events and ideas with what has preceded them and from which they can never be separated" (CG, 101).

As Thurman neared the final decades of his life, new forms of black cultural struggle and political resistance began to challenge many of the assumptions and pieties he grew up cherishing. On the one hand, Thurman wanted to embrace the sources of

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422 Of course, not all calls for power assume that the divide between blacks and whites is absolute. Both King and Baldwin recognized the legitimate need for the securing of such political goods without falling into the traps of white absolutism or black exceptionalism. On the diversity of stances within black nationalist traditions, including revolutionary, pluralist, and culturalist approaches, see Black Nationalism in America eds. John Bracey Jr., August Meier, and Elliot Rudwick (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970); and William L. Van DeBurg, New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), as cited in Eddie Glaude, Is it Nation Time?: Contemporary Essays on Black Power and Black Nationalism ed. Eddie Glaude (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2002), 19.

423 See, for example, Kwame Ture (formerly Stokely Carmichael) & Charles V. Hamilton, "Black Power: Its Need and Substance," in Black Power and the Politics of Liberation (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 34-56; for a good historical account of the origins of black militancy in the 50s and 60s, see Peniel E. Joseph, Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: The Narrative History of Black Power in America (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006); and for a comparison between the integrationist and nationalist strands in African American political thought, as well as their tensions within the lives of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, see James H. Cone, Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012). On the ideological sources of black nationalism, see Michael Dawson, "Visions of a Black Nation: Black Nationalism and African-American Political Thought" in Black Visions: The Roots of
his own existence. But at the same time, vast changes in the conditions of black life led him to question the viability of those springs. Writing of those "ambiguities created by the existential period in which his life must be lived," Thurman reveals a "relentless ambivalence...in honoring the sources of my own integrity and inspiration while at the same time recognizing their relevance to the times in which I am now living" (CG, xiv). Thurman senses his finitude and the limitations in scope and applicability that follow from it. In doing so, he intimately wrestles with his own identity and the way it informs his efforts to speak and live the truth in love. Of his own station, Thurman admits:

As the older generation, we have suddenly become aware of our youth, as if for the first time. We are angered by their anger, even though secretly we marvel at the courage of their anger. We are frightened by their violence, even as we ponder it. We are shocked by their failure to respond to our values, even as we are humiliated by our own sense of failure and inadequacy. Nothing seems to hold. Nothing seems adequate to the crisis that is upon us. (CG, 93)

One of the aspects of identity that Thurman explores in *Common Ground* involves the significance of the human body. We cannot separate the experience of oneself from the experience of one's body. It is the locus of finitude and possibility in space and time, the site of social, cultural, and natural transactions with one's surrounding climates. As Thurman puts it,

I am a creature grounded and rooted in creatureliness. Therefore I am a participant in the life process rather than being an isolate within it. Truly, I am a space binder....there can be no sense of self on the part of the individual where there is no self-conscious experience of the body as one's own unique, private, and peculiar possession. The body is a man's intimate dwelling place; it is his domain as nothing else can ever be. It is coextensive with himself. (CG, 78)
The body is our initial and most vital site of differentiation and interaction, of boundary making and surface sharing. Power flows through the carriage of bodies and various modes of comportment. Such postures are rooted in nature and cultivated in society (CG, 83), so that human flourishing demands some measure of continuity between creature and nature, some measure of cooperation between self, society, and environment.

In this way, clefts between self and body are seen as contrary to growth and flourishing; and ruptures between body and environment, likewise. According to Thurman, it is a mistake to think of ourselves as "distinct from and over against but not a part of nature." Failure to cherish our constitution within the natural world opens the way for abuse. Viewing "nature as being so completely other" only stokes our capacity "to exploit it, plunder it, and rape it with impunity." It is not surprising to find that "our atmosphere is polluted, our streams are poisoned, our hills are denuded, wild life is increasingly exterminated, while more and more man becomes an alien on earth and a fouler of his own nest" (CG, 83).

The quest for community thus emerges as a way for Thurman to resist this kind of environmental cruelty and, in a similar way, the criminal abuse of human bodies and psyches. Acknowledged commonalities invite reverence and respect, whereas estrangement and alienation narrow the possibilities of such sensitivity. How best to relate to one's own body and the bodies of others parallels the task of tending to one's

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424 For thoughts about the significance of edges as sites of contact and difference, see Romand Coles, "Introduction: From Edge of Darkness to Ecotone," *Self, Power, and Other: Political Theory and Dialogical Ethics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 1-13.

425 Of course, there is a wider sense in which uprooting may well be necessary for life and growth (Ecc. 3:1-2). Thurman acknowledges the purchase of uprooting and planting anew in his reading of the Black Power Movement: "There began to appear new centers for black children that were not much concerned about the traditional tools of learning—reading, writing, and arithmetic—as they were about uprooting and replanting" (CG, 98).
ecological surroundings. In both cases, connectivity and cooperation are necessary. Since "the body shares with all living things the urgency to actualize its potential as a body," Thurman thinks it perfectly "reasonable to suggest that the tendency of the mind...for community is rooted in the experience of the body that in turn is grounded in all of life" (CG, 79). This is why he maintains,

...that when men wish to break the will, the inner entity of others, they resort to direct and violent cruelty upon their bodies. The aim here is to force a man to abdicate his body and thereby to become an alien in his own house. This cuts him off from the sustaining source of his own physical being; he becomes disembodied and to that extent beingless. (CG, 79)

Persons who fail to relate to themselves properly often find it especially difficult to interact with others in wholesome and healthy ways. Therefore, alienating another person from "his own body, either by shame, outrage, or brutality" makes the achievement of "community" quite challenging and, for many folks, not even a foreseeable option (CG, 78). This afflicts not only a person's relations with other people, but also her way of relating to herself.

Writing autobiographically, Thurman's emphasizes the psychic damage wrought in the "collective and individual psyche of the black man" forced to live with the "awful sense, that always, under any and all circumstances, his life was utterly at the mercy of the white world" (CG, 92). Foreshadowing the recent work of liberation theologians like James Cone, 426 Thurman declares:

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426 James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), xv. "Until we can see the cross and the lynching tree together, until we can identify Christ with a 'recrucified' black body hanging from a lynching tree, there can be no genuine understanding of Christian identity in America, and no deliverance from the brutal legacy of slavery and white supremacy."
The most vicious, cruel, and amoral manifestation of this fact was lynching. The heartrending years when hundreds of Negroes were lynched, burned, and butchered by white men whose women and children were often special spectators of the inhuman ceremony are conveniently forgotten. It is scarcely remembered how long it took to pass anti-lynch legislation. The bodies of Negroes remember, and their psyches can never forget this vast desecration of personality. (CG, 92)

Not only have the bodies of black people been subject to violence and injury, on Thurman's view, the communal goods usually afforded by familial stability and state citizenship have been systematically denied to African-Americans, as well as "the Mexican-Latin American, the American Indian, and all those ethnic strains that make up the so-called Third World" (CG, 88). Thurman goes so far as to describe American policies toward its indigenous peoples as a form of torture. He reads that violence as a fundamental attack on the vitality and communal life of 'the American Indian':

To uproot him from territory that gave him a rare sense of belonging in which he could actualize his potential within a frame of reference that was totally confirming, and at the same time to keep him in full or relative view of his devastated and desecrated extension of self that the land signified is a unique form of torture, a long, slow, anguished dying. The original insider is forced to become an outsider in his own territory. There are some things in life that are worse than death—surely this must be judged as such. (CG, 88)

With the plight of Indians in mind, Thurman argues that African-American efforts to realize their potential have been frustrated by related practices of violence and destruction. Families were often "ignored or destroyed" when bartered on the slave market. And since families are where persons usually experience communal belonging for the first time, this was a peculiarly disruptive practice to healthy habits of growth and development. Thurman's offers a genealogy of the difficulty of sustaining familial ties
from the "ravages of slavery" to the struggles of the Reconstruction period and through the damages exacted by Jim Crow segregation.

Beneath such obstacles, Thurman suggests, black folks found creative ways to forge their own communities in which "kinship by blood was not a criterion for the claim of belonging" (CG, 92). Traditional models of the nuclear family don't readily track the kinds of familial ties that these agents experienced in extended networks. Thus a child was still afforded "an immediate sense of being cared for, with positive results in his own personality" (CG, 92). To care for one's extended people in this way was itself an act of resistance, a way of pushing back and weighing against those forces which threatened. As a matter of survival, practices of care were not to be separated from the concerns of communal flourishing: "any stranger who came into the community had to be given hospitality, for all doors outside of the Negro community were closed to him" (CG, 92). Here was a sense of unity borne of necessity. In this way, race did connote a sense of family and, with it, a set of ethical dispositions and demands.

Of course, the difficulty of maintaining wholesome relations with one's body and one's family were not the only challenges to which Negroes were forced to respond. They also lived under conditions of state sanctioned domination and gross inequality. Thurman understood that when "citizens are denied freedom of access to the resources of community as established within the state, such persons are assailed at the very

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foundation of their sense of belonging" (CG, 86). Meanwhile, those who enjoy state sponsored freedom and protection are thus burdened with a peculiar "guilt", which often leads to a host of evasions designed "to keep life tolerable within the body politic in general" (CG, 86). By attending to the harms of bodily intrusion and domestic invasion, Thurman invites us to view the quest for black citizenship with greater feel and sensitivity. He also alerts us to its difficulties, notably the fear, ignorance, and guilt of beneficiaries of the status quo. Preserving (not sacrificing!) the dignity of black inner life has been integral to the struggle for political and social standing. The less celebrated battle involves those who continue to insist on the relevance of that soul life – and, by extension, the kinds of persons, policies, and polities that might spring from (and respond to) it.

All of this conspires to make the pursuit of community with white folks not only improbable, but downright exhausting, and some would even argue, self-defeating. Even with his fondness for integration, Thurman sympathizes with the motives behind certain forms of black separatism. Of the challenges that encumber the pursuit of inclusive community, Thurman writes:

The boundaries of any sense of community, the effectiveness of one's life as a person, the breakdown of the instinctual tendency toward whole-making, the personality violence from aggression, thwarted and turned in on one's self, the searching felt in the presence of the humiliation of heroes, the guilt inspired by anonymous fears that live in the environment—these are some of the shadows, the unconscious reaction to which must be understood as we as we try to find community in the presence of the grim confrontations of American society. (CG, 92-3)

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Thurman's criticism of the black power movement's call for separatism is less strident than any quick scan of his texts might suggest. I think this owes to his conceiving of the movement as a creative expression of community. While Thurman doesn't view black separatism as an ideal instantiation of community, he acknowledges the value of its insistence on the beauty and dignity of black people. Thurman's most biting critique seems to be directed at his own generation, not the nationalism of those coming after him. Thurman probes the fears and exposes the idols of his own lot. Only then does he move to an interpretation and admonishing of that new generation of rebellious and courageous youth.

Like most elders, well-established in both age and routine, Thurman's cohort tended to find fault with the rising generation. Much of the angst involved which means of resistance were deemed appropriate and whether inclusive acceptance by white Americans was even desirable. While Thurman sides with non-violence and inclusion, he takes care to examine his own sense of responsibility, not merely the faults of those with whom he disagrees. His first obligation is to understand the perspectives of the opposing side. Recall the quote from earlier: "We have suddenly become aware of our youth," he writes, "as if for the first time" (CG, 93). Here the notion of 'sudden awareness' implies that too little attention had been given to the needs of those who were to forge their way under new conditions: those who were to come after him. Thurman sensed his failure to attend to the shifting grounds of authority which black youth could no longer take for granted. Times were changing and emerging realities called for new skills and capacities that would equip black agents to engage a rapidly changing world in
their own way. This also entailed concern for the contexts of nourishment and growth that would allow for such flourishing.

Sensing his own disconnect, Thurman observed, "We are shocked by their failure to respond to our values, even as we are humiliated by our sense of failure and inadequacy. Nothing seems to hold. Nothing seems adequate to the crisis that is upon us." But even from his space of emergency, Thurman was careful to acknowledge the courage of young activists as distinct from his own: "We are angered by their anger, even though secretly we marvel at the courage of their anger. We are frightened by their violence, even as we ponder it." In trying to meet this crisis of meaning and irrelevance, Thurman saw a temptation among the old guard "to take refuge in old shibboleths that we ourselves long since abandoned." In order to make sense of and speak to the demands of his times, Thurman counseled against condemning black rebellion and sided in favor of listening to it.

At last it is beginning to dawn upon us, that at some time in the past when, we are not sure—we became separated from our absolutes. *It is from the life of our youth that we discover that we have lost our way.* We, too, have little sense of belonging; our feel for whole-making has included less and less of the world, of the wide range of human life, until we are only sure of it as touching our family, particularly our children. Now, it often seems to us, they turn and rend us because we have sought to nourish them with the sense of our failure (my emphasis).

All of this applies to the older generation of Negroes, but with even greater intensity. (CG, 93)

Part of the frustration of Thurman's generation had to do with the countless sacrifices and unimaginable sleights which they endured, so "their children might have a wider range of opportunity and a cleaner chance to actualize their potential" (CG, 94).
Yet these heroic and now aging exemplars were "faced with the bitter judgment of their own youth, denouncing them as cowards and fools because they were duped and betrayed by the very society from which they sought to protect them." For Thurman, the shortcomings of the old guard's politics were exposed by the harsh realities of ongoing white resistance to black flourishing. The classic strategies (of avoidance and accommodation) didn't deliver in full. Whether it was by "reducing the exposure of their youth" to the perils of white power or by "equipping them with a facility that might be exchanged in that society for certain prizes or immunities not available to the rest of their kind," black folks were still denied the political and social goods promised and delivered to so many (CG, 94). The battle over the "the ballot, better schools, equal schools, the same schools, the freedom of access to the total life of the community on the same basis as other citizens" was far from settled (CG, 94). And in the eyes of many younger folks, the non-violent and well-mannered tactics of the 50s and 60s were outmoded. The murders of Martin, Medgar, and Malcolm only gave credence to this view. Those sons (and daughters) of rage prophesied at the end of Baldwin's *Fire* would not be easily quelled. White folks were not to be handled gently.

In this context, a fresh basis of community was sought, one premised on a "rejection of the white community rather than being rejected by the white community."

No longer were Negroes to whisper their frustrations with white society; now they were to proclaim and brashly parade them. In some quarters, violent acts of self-defense were thought to be a live and often necessary means of resistance (CG, 99-100).\(^\text{431}\) For others,

\(^{431}\) Here the Deacons for Defense and Justice come to mind. For the importance of Charles Sims and this group to the Civil Rights Movement, see Christopher B. Strain, "The Deacons for Defense and Justice," in *Black Power in the Belly of the Beast* ed. Judson L. Jeffries (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 13-238
"any notion of inclusiveness was merest illusion, and the term 'brainwashed' was applied to anyone with a contrary point of view." On Thurman's reading, "Black now took on a new meaning and the term 'Black Power' became a fresh rallying point for a sagging self-estimate. Nothing must be as it was before in school, church, marketplace, and territory." In this way, the new movement offered two things to rising youngsters that his generation failed to provide: 1) "a basis for identity with a cause and a purpose more significant to them than their own individual survival," and 2) "a feeling of membership with others of common values with whom they can experience direct and intense communication."

This led Thurman to offer a charitable reading of a movement with whom he shared profound disagreement. As he saw it,

"Black is beautiful" became not merely a phrase—it was a stance, a total attitude, a metaphysic. In very positive and exciting terms it began undermining the idea that had developed over so many years into central aspect of white mythology: that black is ugly, black is evil, black is demonic; therefore black people are ugly, evil, and demonic. In so doing it fundamentally attacked the front line of defense of the myth of white supremacy and superiority. The point at which to start would be with the children. Thus there would be a penetration into the seedbed where ideas are planted, nurtured, and developed. There began to appear new centers for black children that were not much concerned about the traditional tools of learning—reading, writing, and arithmetic—as they were about uprooting and replanting. (CG, 98)

On Thurman's reading, black nationalists and their attendant calls for black empowerment helped to secure a positive sense of identity in the lives of black youth. By operating with this limited notion of community, one less consumed by the perceptions of white folks, black subjects were free to direct their energies toward their own

wholeness—and the creation of their own spaces of inclusiveness, support, and consciousness. They engaged in a "politics of transvaluation."  

For Thurman, this "new sense of community within self-determined boundaries seems the most realistic and immediately practical solution to a cruel and otherwise seemingly insoluble problem" (CG, 103). As Thurman rightly saw, the ability to care for one's material bodies and psychic cavities inevitably determines the quality of one's living. This is why, in his eyes, the gains secured by proponents of black power should not be forgotten: "Vast areas of society that have been aware of but not affected by Negro life have let such awareness become effective in many changes within the social patterns and structures" (CG, 100). We would do well to recall the words given by Rosa Parks at the funeral service of Robert F. Williams in 1996: "The work that he did should go down in history and never be forgotten." His militant call for armed self-defense was to be cherished.

Even though Thurman was a thoroughgoing integrationist and a staunch proponent of non-violence, his practical thinking about these matters wasn't shortsighted. Yet with militant and black nationalist agendas in view, he still argues that

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436 It is worth noting that Thurman's advocacy of non-violent resistance as a political strategy doesn't necessarily occlude the possibility of violent acts of self-defense. Thurman recalls taking a visit to the Pine Bluff, Arkansas during a time of racial unrest in 1947. He spent the night in a house guarded by persons with firearms, who instructed him to shower, rest, and then keep watch while they took turns sleeping. They were expecting to be attacked. As Thurman remembers, "...at the proper time I was awakened and I sat at the window with this shotgun, waiting...I had two choices as I saw it: one, if they turned the corner coming toward the house, I could wait and take my time and as they drew near and opened fire I would..."
separatism, as a "present solution is a stop-gap, a halt in the line of march toward full community or, at most, a time of bivouac on a promontory overlooking the entire landscape of American society" (CG, 103). Here the resonances with Martin Luther King, Jr.'s later thinking are difficult to miss. Just a few years before Thurman published *The Search for Common Ground*, King had observed that:

> What is necessary now is to see integration in political terms where there is sharing of power. When we see integration in political terms, then we must recognize that there are times when we must see segregation as a temporary way-station to a truly integrated society....There are points at which I see the necessity for temporary segregation in order to get to the integrated society.\(^{437}\)

For King and Thurman alike, we must always keep in view our sense of the utopic, even amid harsh necessities and the practical responses they call forth.\(^{438}\) Our present doings should be animated with the hopes and visions of the "prophet's dream," not stifled by a narrowness of ethical and poetic imagination, nor cast aside by the pressures of expediency.

The edges of utopias signal more than the boundaries of love: they reveal the priority of our loves, too. "In the Utopias," Thurman writes, "the created worlds were return the fire until I fell. That was one option. The other option was that if they came, I could turn the porch light on, leave the rifle at the window, and walk out on the porch in the light...I didn't know which one I would do. But they didn't come." See Howard Thurman, "Mysticism and Social Action," cited in Alton B. Pollard, III, *Mysticism and Social Change*, 101.


\(^{438}\) Thurman's thinking about these demands is nuanced. He writes: "...when all possible methods of social action have been exhausted without any appreciable relief or change in a given condition, then what does one do? I must select what seems to me to be the critical moment, when my maximum sacrifice will make my ultimate contribution to the relief of human needs and suffering. And you know, I don't think that any of us ever know what we will do under such circumstances." Howard Thurman, "Mysticism and Social Action," cited in Alton B. Pollard, III, *Mysticism and Social Change*, 102.
fashioned out of elements in the heart and yearnings of men who were part of the times in which they lived" (CG, 42). And yet Thurman is not uncritical of the ideological dangers of utopia. He acknowledges the ways in which our dreams and imaginations can serve a kind of escapism. Similar to the ways in which emphasizing the inner, mystical life of spirit can lead to unhealthy forms of social detachment, envisioning the utopic can likewise become an obstacle to our engagement with the present.

This isn't to suggest that we eschew the power of utopia wholesale. There have always been those who "turn to the inner environment," and "bring with them the articulate urgency to build out of their imagination a way of life..." Following a distinction advanced by Lewis Munford, Thurman thinks we need to distinguish between utopias of escape and utopias of reconstruction (CG, 43). "In one," Mumford says, "we build impossible castles in the air; in the other we consult a surveyor and an architect and a mason and proceed to build a house which meets our essential needs."439 Thurman's recommendation is for the latter: utopias of reconstruction.440

That is why he calls for the reconstituting and reordering of healthy communities— realized potential—at personal, local, civil, national, global, and ecological levels. His is a vision of "what the collective life of man would be like if it functioned in keeping with man's high destiny" (CG, 43).

Community as the Utopian dream is a part of the basic aspiration of the human spirit. It is not important at any particular time and place that the Utopia does not become literal fact; it reveals, however, what the imagination of man has to say about the true possibility of the human

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440 Thurman approvingly quotes Mumford. "To cultivate the soil rather than simply to get away with the job; to take food and drink rather than to earn money; to think and dream and invent, rather than to increase one's reputation; in short, to grasp the living reality and spurn the shadow. This is the substance of the utopian way of life (CG, 55). As cited by Thurman, Lewis Mumford, The Story of Utopias, 78.
spirit. This dream expresses what man sees as his potential if he were at liberty to fashion a world in accordance with his needs, his hopes, his destiny. Deep within himself he knows that if he settles for anything less than this, he denies the profound interest of his own spirit, which is one with the intent of the Creator. (CG, 55)

And in another place, Thurman affirms,

So long as there is a conviction that a potential has not been actualized either in the individual, the society, or in the world, the rational necessity and possibility of a realized future must be honored. What the Utopia does is give form and place to such actualization as a concrete existence, at least in the imagination and in the dream. (CG, 45)

Thus, it is not surprising to find Thurman, as pastor and prophet, ending the text he described as his 'life-working paper' with his own dream and vision, one he conceives as participating in the "liquid fires" of Martin Luther King, Jr. Here the lines along which he tried to lead his life are unmistakable. Here Thurman's resistance to any and all forms of enduring segregation stands affirmed, through his championing of dignity over degradation, his insistence of unity over division, and his seizing upon life amid the realities of death: "For this is why we were born: Men, all men belong to each other, and he who shuts himself away diminishes himself, and he who shuts another away from him destroys himself" (CG, 104).

This is the humanity that grounds what is common among all people: our living, breathing, pulsing, potential-laden vitality; our dependence on other sources of life for our own; our susceptibility to love and our vulnerability to death. The quality of our care for the seeds in our midst, and for those who are to flourish after us: this is what Thurman would have us examine about ourselves and our society. These are the fruits of
life and love he would have us preserve. "And all the people," Thurman imagined, said...*Amen*" (CG, 104).

**Conclusion**

The previous chapters on Thurman tried to offer a nuanced account of the ethics of love and social criticism. In doing so, I aimed to cast his model of love and Christian practice in a way that responds to the worries of religious critics like James Baldwin and, before him, Ralph Waldo Emerson. The exercise of religion is to Thurman what books were to Emerson.⁴⁴¹ For Thurman, the Judeo-Christian tradition, when aptly used, is among the best of things; yet when abused, it can soon devolve into the worst. This conviction was seared through his encounters with religious violence. It did not arise from an idle concern with scholastic conundrums.

To my mind, Thurman offers lived (not simply theoretical) resources to avoid many of the perils that religious critics decry, including but not limited to: entrenched forms of ignorance and callousness, the erosion of moral character and individual uniqueness, arrogant claims to superiority and exceptionalism, the worship of unwritten creeds and unnoticed idols, the loss of spontaneity, wonder, and aesthetic delight, and a failure to engage and be responsive to the complexity of our worlds—personal, social, ecological, and spiritual. Thurman worked to avoid such dangers, through an exacting practice of self and social criticism, one grounded in a concern for truth in love. This is what helped to preserve his integrity as a follower of Jesus. It is also what permits his witness to remain a source of inspiration for so many.

⁴⁴¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar" in *Collected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 57. "Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst."
As a critic of domination, model of self-care, and practitioner of freedom, Thurman inspired countless persons to embrace their lives with greater intimacy, compassion, and wisdom. His influence on Martin Luther King Jr. and a host of others is well documented. Shortly after Thurman's death in 1981, civil rights activist Jesse Jackson Sr. reflected on his importance in a special issue of *Debate & Understanding.* "Dr. Thurman," Jackson wrote, "was a teacher of teachers, a leader of leaders, a preacher of preachers. No small wonder, then, Martin Luther King, Jr., Whitney Young, Samuel Proctor, Vernon Jordan, Otis Moss, and those of us who are here today, sat at his feet, for we knew it was a blessing to give this prophet a glass of water or to touch the hem of his garment."  

Former Morehouse president, Benjamin Elijah Mays, a colleague of Thurman at Howard University and a close friend for nearly 60 years, fondly recalled their unity in struggle: "Howard and I were both determined that lynching, segregation, and denigration would not beat us down." To appreciate the difficulties of their living is to grasp Thurman's triumph and Mays' admiration:

Howard did not have to march to prove his freedom as a free man. Wherever he spoke, in the colleges and the universities across this land, the people knew that a free man was speaking. Those of us who have read his books knew that Howard was a free man. Freedom leaped out at you in every direction, whether in sermons, articles, books, one knew that

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443 For wider influence, see the collection of tributes collected by George K. Makechnie, "Others Follow in the Footsteps of His Dream," in *Howard Thurman: His Enduring Dream* (Boston: The Howard Thurman Center, 1998), 50-86.  
Howard was free. He walked like a free man. He wrote like a free man. He spoke like a free man.\textsuperscript{445}

Thurman bore witness to a freedom in love, one refined by discipline, earned through practice and given by God. Throughout his ministry, love and beauty were ideals to be breathed, not simply believed. For him the flesh of earthly living, life in the Spirit, demanded nothing less. The same might be said of freedom and justice, or, of Thurman's approach to theology and philosophy. Their true significance emerges from our styles of engaging, struggling, and groping with what novelist Zora Neale Hurston called, \textit{de big convention of livin}'.\textsuperscript{446} How we think is never to be separated from how we live. Each of us must be an embodied delegate to \textit{de big 'ssociation of life}.\textsuperscript{447}

What Thurman said of civil rights activist Whitney Young might also be said of the eulogist himself: "The time and the place of a man's life on earth is the time and place of his body, but the meaning or significance of his life is as far reaching and redemptive as his gifts, his dedication, his response to the demands of his times, the total commitment of his powers can make it."\textsuperscript{448} Thurman's was a ministry of presence through love: a caring for others through the gift of oneself. His was a giving of life to life. His virtue was contagious.

\textsuperscript{447} Zora Neale Hurston, \textit{Their Eyes Were Watching God}, 6.
\textsuperscript{448} See "Introduction," \textit{A Strange Freedom} ed. W. Fluker and C.Tumber (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1998), 15. For the Thurman reference, as cited by Fluker and Tumber, \textit{Strange Freedom}, 314, see Howard Thurman Papers (1984 Gift), Boston University, Department of Special Collections, Writings: Box D, "Eulogy for Whitney Young (March 16, 1971)."
Conclusion

Toward an Ethic of Prophetic Social Criticism

Is this more the generation of the prophet or that of the poet; shall our intellectual and cultural leadership preach and exhort or sing? I believe we are at that interesting moment when the prophet becomes the poet and when prophecy becomes the expressive song, the chant of fulfillment.\textsuperscript{449}

In my effort to interpret the ethics of love and social criticism in the writings of James Baldwin and Howard Thurman, I've found Cathy Kaveny's essay "Democracy and Prophecy" to be incredibly generative.\textsuperscript{450} I've also found it to be unduly limiting. Engaging her piece will, I hope, provide a richer context in which to view the contributions of Baldwin and Thurman regarding the ethics of prophetic criticism. In what follows, I begin with the differences and similarities between Kaveny's concerns and the guiding impulses behind my dissertation. I conclude with a reflection on the strengths and weaknesses of Baldwin and Thurman as prophetic exemplars.

Kaveny worries about the place of prophetic speech in the public sphere. Not only does she think that democratic forms of deliberation need to be inclusive of persons who employ religious modes of reasoning, she also wants to secure a place for the "fire and strength" rhetoric of prophetic figures who display a "heated and unwavering commitment to absolute moral truth." But giving place to such talk can be risky. In her eyes, such rhetoric can endanger "the bonds of civility that allow diverse groups to live

The divisiveness of prophetic speech haunts Kaveny.

But the worry itself assumes some measure of unity regarding matters of injustice. It suggests peaceable conditions of living for a united people. One of my concerns with Kaveny's position is that such unity has yet to obtain in any discernible American context. Neither harmonious justice nor peaceable redress has ever held sway in the United States between whites and the conquered indigenous peoples of the Americas and the descendants of African slaves who still live under intense forms of surveillance and domination. From the perspective of the disinherit ed, the politics of civility pale in comparison to the ongoing practices of cruelty: the very callousness which inspires prophetic condemnation. Where Kaveny assumes harmony, many begin with the dissonance of perpetual conflict.

Baldwin had something similar in mind when he gave an address on the importance of education in 1963. Notice how within the context of his imagined classroom, Baldwin's teachers—ordinary folk—sound like prophets:

I began by saying that one of the paradoxes of education was that precisely at the point when you begin to develop a conscience, you must find yourself at war with your society. It is your responsibility to change society if you think of yourself as an educated person. And on the basis of the evidence – the moral and political evidence – one is compelled to say that this is a backward society. Now if I were a teacher in this school, or any Negro school, and I was dealing with Negro children, who were in my care only a few hours of every day and would then return to their homes and to the streets, children who have an apprehension of their future which with every hour grows grimmer and darker, I would try to teach them - I would try to make them know - that those streets, those houses, those dangers, those agonies by which they are surrounded, are criminal. I

would try to make each child know that these things are the result of a criminal conspiracy to destroy him. I would teach him that if he intends to get to be a man, he must at once decide that he is stronger than this conspiracy and that he must never make his peace with it. And that one of his weapons for refusing to make his peace with it and for destroying it depends on what he decides he is worth. I would teach him that there are currently very few standards in this country which are worth a man’s respect. That it is up to him to change these standards for the sake of the life and the health of the country...I would try to make him know that just as American history is longer, larger, more various, more beautiful and more terrible than anything anyone has ever said about it, so is the world larger, more daring, more beautiful and more terrible, but principally larger – and that it belongs to him. I would teach him that he doesn’t have to be bound by the expediencies of any given administration, any given policy, any given morality; that he has the right and the necessity to examine everything.\footnote{James Baldwin, "A Talk to Teachers," 685-686.}

With Baldwin fiery passage in view, another concern with Kaveny's approach arises. She associates "cool reflection on carefully defined premises and delimited conclusions," with an approach that is less-than-prophetic. Here Kaveny seems to focus more on the manner in which the message is delivered, not on the actual content of the message. Thus, she can posit "Reasons calmly stated, no matter what their premises, do not usually provoke conversation partners to retaliation, verbal or otherwise. Prophetic indictments, however, do tend to attract harsh invective in return, at least from those members of the audiences who do not consider the prophetic indictment fair."\footnote{Kaveny, "Democracy and Prophecy," 35.}

Malcolm X, I think, troubles this distinction. Malcolm's prophetic indictments were extremely well-reasoned, propositionally neat, and spoken with inimitable poise. Yet Malcolm inspired far more than discomfort on the part of his conversation partners. He evoked widespread furor among the white mainstream, precisely because he was so
surgical in his analysis of white supremacist logics, many of which lay deep within the psyches of his listeners and the institutions in which they were invested.\textsuperscript{454}

"Innocently" preserving one's hold on power usually requires that such indictments be deemed "unfair" or "crazy" or "out of play." And this is precisely what Cone, Baldwin, and so many others want to resist: the claim that persons in power get to set the terms of a discourse that's ostensibly (and in good faith!) devoted to the liberation and empowering of those who have yet to secure their just portion.\textsuperscript{455} So my initial concerns about what motivates Kaveny's call for an ethic of prophetic social criticism involve: 1) her worry about being divisive, and 2) the weight she lends to calm reasoning and perceived notions of "fairness." For the downtrodden, the nature of the grievance likely entails that things are always already radically divided and that misperceptions (read: ignorances) on the part of the oppressor are likely to abound.

My third and final worry regarding what motivates Kaveny's call to constrain prophetic discourse has to do with the suggestion that prophetic indictments likely entail an 'unwavering commitment to absolute moral truth.' But the recent quote from Baldwin, with all its fire and indictment, isn't resolute in its claims to truth. The passage itself ends with Baldwin warning against the temptations of being bound to any 'given morality.' Baldwin therefore concludes by encouraging his would-be students to examine things for themselves, as closely as possible. So while it is true that Baldwin maintains a


\textsuperscript{455} James Cone puts the matter this way: "Whites want to know whether Black Power is an appropriate response to their bigotry. It is indeed interesting that they, the oppressors, should ask this question, since whatever response blacks make is nothing but a survival reaction to white oppression. It is time for whites to realize that the oppressor is in no position whatever to define the proper response to enslavement." See James H. Cone, \textit{Black Theology and Black Power} (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 20
commitment to the flourishing of human beings in all their complexity and diversity, he doesn't pretend to have the final word on what that flourishing entails nor about how that wholeness is to be achieved. He displays an openness to what is larger and more freeing and more loving, an openness that exceeds any single indictment or recommendation he might put forth. Baldwin prophetically calls us to awaken to that reality and to the idols that prevent us from living into it. He invites us to journey with him, not to arrive at his conclusions.

To be sure, I still find something resolutely prophetic in his summons, and I also think the passage seethes with 'fire and strength.' It just doesn't conform to the criteria of prophetic utterance that Kaveny associates with the Hebraic tradition. Part of what motivates my turn to Baldwin and Thurman as prophetic exemplars, then, is the delicacy and care, the nimbleness of their fiery critiques. Their care and attentiveness, to their own craft and calling, to the beauty that they would acknowledge and not destroy, to the evil that they would name, within themselves and their society, has everything to do with the character of their loves.

None of this makes the task of prophetic criticism any less dangerous, since fiery rhetoric has its perils. The dangers of vicious inaccuracy and destructive excess always loom. At a minimum, then, there are better and worse ways to go about the work of prophetic criticism. Kaveny and I just have different motivations behind our efforts to offer a guiding ethic, in part because we have different exemplars of prophetic practice in mind.\footnote{Eddie Glaude thinks we would be helpfully served by embracing the multiple functions of prophetic practice, which may require moving beyond biblical examples. This isn't to say that biblical models aren't instructive, but it is an invitation to be nourished by a wider range of examples. See E. Glaude, “On
Baldwin and Thurman as tentative models. The versions of criticism recommended by Baldwin and Thurman are more nuanced and provisional, and hence, more suitable to democratic forms of living.

But given the nature of the Hebraic tradition, and its attendant theological claims regarding the prophet's status as an unrivaled messenger of God, vested with divine authority and a nearly unimpeachable claim to truth, it is understandable to see Kaveny’s concern with the tendency of prophecy to inspire: 1) a repent or be damned approach without much space to dispute, interrogate, or revise the message on offer, 2) little opportunity for ongoing discussion or communication, hence a marginal exchange of reasons, perspectives, and competing narratives and 3) a message that's less helpful for practical living, owing to a general condemnation less tailored to fit the needs of specific contexts and the resolution of concrete problems. I think these are legitimate dangers.

Beyond this, Kaveny adds a fourth worry regarding civility. But I'm far less concerned about the civility of discourse, mainly because of what it assumes and of what it usually fails to deliver. As I suggested above, civility most often serves as a procedure for persons in power to control the terms in which they are even willing to engage in dialogue. It is absurd and violent to demand that the anger of the aggrieved be made to suit the dominator's delusions of peace and harmony. White codes of civility that refuse to accommodate black rage are therefore inhumane and indecent. These approaches betray a deeper concern for the bruised comforts of those in power than an overriding love for the plight of the dispossessed (Of course, this is often a condition for upward

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mobility and inclusion. But instrumentalism of this sort, I'd argue, is itself a form of disordered love).

Nevertheless, human beings ought to be angry about certain things: to deny them that space is also to deny them their humanity. Infant mortality rates, early childhood education, residential housing segregation, police brutality, mass incarceration, these and much else ought to kindle our anger—to say nothing of the racial sleights and micro-aggressions endured daily. The same holds for other forms of violence and domination—whether sexist, gendered, economic, or religious. The anger, as Baldwin and Thurman suggest, just needs to be borne of love. Of course, Baldwin is more accommodating to the realities of anger, while Thurman is more sensitive to the need to subdue it, not necessarily as a way to meet the terms of civil discourse, but to avoid being overcome by death-dealing hatred and joy-stealing bitterness. But even Thurman, you'll recall, found himself 'marveling' at the courage of youthful anger.

With the potential of prophetic discourse to go awry, Kaveny helpfully points out some temptations that I readily endorse. The first involves the danger of avoiding "healthy self-criticism." One must be aware of the distance between who one would purport to be and who one actually is. The second concerns the temptation to short-circuit the difficult work of actually building an insightful, historically informed, contextually nuanced position. Here the danger is just one of "pounding on the pulpit," of covering one's inept analysis with colorful indictments. Prophets are to avoid rhetorical sleights of hand that make undue claims to authority. Finally, prophetic speech can often serve as a cloak for self-righteousness, a covering for one's own exceptional status. Kaveny rightly senses the allure of these temptations for would-be prophetic
critics. But we part ways in her assertion that "prophetic indictments can also be
dangerous, threatening social harmony on a basic level."459 I know of no such harmony.

The criteria for Kaveny's ethics of prophetic criticism follow from these concerns.
She deftly argues that one's prophetic social criticism shouldn't do violence to what is
praiseworthy or laudable. Condemnation must be specific and sensitive to the details
particular situations and/or general tendencies. And a good way to keep track of this is to
be constantly aware of the ways in which one's own entitlements, commitments, and
relationships may well require scathing self-criticism. This is why she thinks that
prophets should stand "with their people" just as much as they stand "with the God whose
words" they channel. For Kaveny, "Still less should a prophet speaking to his own
community depict himself as on the side of a God who has utterly and completely
rejected them. The Hebrew prophets preached divine mercy as well as divine
judgment."460 Prophets who offer the most democratically serviceable modes of criticism
tend to emphasize "what hidden bond exists between the world of wrath and the word of
compassion, between consuming fire and everlasting love."461

Another way to put this would be to say that prophets ought to identify with the
ideals they espouse, while also being bound to the difficulties and sacrifices demanded of
such visions. Given that human beings have a propensity toward indulgence, error, and
folly, the prophet who proceeds with her own complicity in mind is less likely to "deploy
the moral chemotherapy of prophetic rhetoric without a sufficiently grave cause."462 I
agree within the need for self examination. But since I'm not operating with the Hebraic

460 Kaveny, "Democracy and Prophecy," 54.
461 See Abraham Joshua Heschel, The Prophets, First Perennial Classics Edition (New York:
model primarily in mind, I'm less inclined to see prophetic speech in so stark of terms and, therefore, I'm less inclined merely to reserve prophetic speech for "grave" and deeply troubling situations.

Here my worry involves how we come to judge what counts as grave, a concern that flows from the fact that I think the plight of indigenous peoples and the descendants of African slaves in the United States has always been grave. But the gravity of the injustices endured (and perpetuated) seems always to be understated. The plight of the orphaned, poor, and vulnerable—the least of these—has always been severe; and their grievances, disproportionately muted. None of this, however, calls for the kind of prophetic criticism that I'd want to compare to chemotherapy. The comparison is too destructive for the exemplars I've tried to lift up and, even, for my own sensibilities. Baldwin and Thurman care too much for beauty and nuance, for poetry and song.\(^{463}\)

And yet they still preach against evil and domination. They sense the darkness that can reside within one's own heart and the institutions of one's society. They possess an appreciation for life and vitality, wherever it is found, but also an awareness of the realities of death and destruction too. This is why I want to make room for the pluralism of prophetic practice: for janitors and teachers and construction workers to be able to speak truth to these beauties and terrors, wherever they are found. Prophets have always walked among the ordinary; they are often our most touchable paragons of virtue; and the necessity of their prophetic speech is always already.

Kaveny also invites us to examine the would-be prophet's intentions, motives, and ends. The prophetic critic shouldn't be motivated by greed or inflated self-regard, nor

should her task be rooted in revenge or retribution. Instead, Kaveny thinks criticism needs to be future-oriented and open to the possibilities of hope and amelioration. The future is not yet finished, which is why prophetic social critics invite us to participate in its work. I find all of these criteria to be helpful: the need to engage in self-criticism, the need for particularized condemnation, the importance of considering a prophet's motivations and ends, and the value of forward-looking amelioration.

In addition to Kaveny's criteria, Baldwin and Thurman emphasize the ways in which the value of growth should be integral to the prophet's task. In what ways does one's prophetic message make way for growth? Why does the present call for the uprooting of *this plant* (or plan or policy) and not others? Such questions are apt to shed light on a prophet's aims, motives, and ends. And, yet, growth considers more than a prophet's ideals and intentions. Growth invites us to consider who we are becoming along the way. By focusing on growth and the practices that accompany it, prophetic speech ushers us into wholesome ways of inhabiting the space between our present and the futures we might imagine, but have yet to realize. That is what makes it so essential to an ethic of love and social criticism.

A related point about the prophet's motives and ends concerns the role of vocation. This involves how prophets see their callings: the diligence with which they prepare themselves, the talent and skill they've been bequeathed, the community in which they take shape, and the particular audience or set of concerns they take themselves to be responding to. These questions are integral for how one evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of a particular critique. Such questions should also temper our expectations. It is unreasonable to expect every prophetic exemplar to be excellent at everything.
Properly discerning the judgments of prophetic social critics, therefore, entails recognizing the nature of their limitations and possibilities.

When, for example, James Baldwin fails to give sweeping sociological or economic analyses of institutional arrangements of power, I'm not terribly surprised. Baldwin, to be sure, gives attention to structures and social systems. He even inspired a book on criminal law.⁴⁶⁴ But this remains largely in the background of his work. His focus is on the interpersonal. Given that Baldwin took his calling as a writer to be that of "examining attitudes" and "going beneath the surface," I don't think we should expect otherwise. We might expect Baldwin to assist in our efforts to examine interpersonal relations or maybe to provide his expansive imagination and adroitness with language as a means to probe dynamic social relations. Given his vocational sensibilities, we might even expect to encounter analyses informed by certain humanistic and literary traditions, an appreciation of the interplay between darkness and light, and a deep valuation of African American culture and history. But all of this is much different than a sweeping analysis of political economy. My turn to Baldwin as prophetic exemplar derives from my concern with the ethics of self and social criticism, which isn't the same as being interested in the political and economic content of prophetic criticism. Baldwin offers us an exemplary model of self and social criticism, of speaking the truth in love. While the content of Baldwin's criticism is usually instructive, especially as regards racial injustice in America, we do well to remember that his offerings are far from exhaustive.

Howard Thurman took himself to be a pastor and teacher, one steeped in mystical insight and practices of meditation. This afforded him unique perspectives on the nature

of the inner life. He recognized, for example, the ways in which social maladies can threaten inner wellness, and in related ways, Thurman took care to argue for the social benefits of nurturing the private life. He rightly saw that the enduring health, of our public and social worlds, as well as our private and personal lives, depends on the wellness of the other. In this regard, I've found Thurman's ethic of self and social criticism to be extremely serviceable. His wisdom becomes all the more apparent when we consider the difficulties of speaking the truth in love, and further explore what it might mean to pursue that task within a recognizably Christian tradition—while yet being critical of that tradition, and yet still, keeping the humanity of the disinherited in view. The ethics of this impressive challenge require nothing short of spiritual artistry.

Thurman was more than a teacher of such lessons: they were the lines along which he sculpted his life.

Of course, I'm not likely to look in Thurman's direction for a nuanced account of the United States' special relationship with Israel. Chris Hedges offers far more in that regard. Nor would I go to Baldwin for a critique of patriarchy or to Thurman for the practices of "transformative resilience" that have characterized the lives of black women.\textsuperscript{465} Better suited exemplars abound: Patricia Hill Collins and Toni Morrison, Hortense Spillers and the witness of my grandmothers, for example.

When it comes to our prophetic exemplars, we have to be sensitive to their virtues and vices, their strengths and weaknesses—all of which have something to do with who they take themselves to be and how they've chosen to cultivate their endowments of time, talent, and strength. Vocation gives us a way to make sense of those proportions in a way

\textsuperscript{465} Imani Perry, \textit{More Beautiful and More Terrible}, 207.
that's sensitive to the humanity—the fleshly details—of the prophet. Baldwin and
Thurman wouldn't have it any other way. The fruits of their love nourish, but they are
not to be taken, nor are they to be instructive, for all persons, at all times, in just the same
way. That would be the death of life—and virtue, the very things they fought to preserve.


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