

**Text from the Tradition: Essential Writings of Howard Thurman** (text drawn from pp. 45-46, 57-58, 159)

*Spiritual Disciplines and Prayer*

The place and significance of spiritual disciplines and exercises cannot be overemphasized. It is important, however, to understand what that significance is. There is no *necessitous* relationship between the disciplines and the awareness of God's presence. All disciplines of this character are meant to "ready" the mind, the emotions, the spirit. They are no guarantor of Presence. This is the miracle, the heights and depths of wonder and awe. God reveals...Presence out of the mystery of being. With all of my passionate endeavor, I cannot command that [God] obey. All of my prayers, my meditation, my vast and compelling urgency or need cannot order, woo or beg God into the revealing of...Presence. Even my need and my desperation cannot command [God]. There is an overwhelming autonomy here; God does move in a mysterious way,...wonders to perform. But [God] is so full of such wonderful and heartening surprises. In the total religious experience we learn how to wait; we learn how to ready the mind and the spirit. It is in the waiting, brooding, lingering, tarrying timeless moments that the essence of the religious experience becomes most fruitful. It is here that I learn to listen, to swing wide the very doors of my being, to clean out the corners and the crevices of my life—so that when Presence invades, I am free to enjoy [God] coming to [God]self in me. In fine, I cannot command; I work at preparing my mind, my spirit for the moment when God comes to [God]self in me. When it happens I experience...Presence. When this experience becomes an object of thought and reflection, it is then that my mind creates dogmas, creeds and doctrines. These are the creations of the mind and are therefore always after the fact of the religious experience. But they are always out of date. The religious experience is always current, always fresh. In it I hear [God's] voice in my own tongue and in accordance with the grain in my own wood. In that glorious and transcendent moment, it may easily seem to me that all there is, is God (from *The Temptations of Jesus*, pp.14-15).

In the first place prayer, in the sense in which I am using it, means the method by which the individual makes...way to the temple of quiet within [one's] own spirit and the activity of [one's] spirit within its walls. Prayer is not only the participation in communication with God in the encounter religious experience, but it is also the "readying" of the spirit for such communication. It is the total process of quieting down and to that extent must not be separated from meditation. Perhaps, as important as prayer itself, is the "readying" of the spirit for the experience. In such "readying" a quiet place is very important if all not altogether mandatory. In the noise of our time such a place may be impossible to find. One of the great services that the Christian Church can render to the community is to provide spells and spaces of quiet for the world-weary men and women whose needs are so desperate .... When one has been thus prepared, a strange thing happens. It is very difficult to put into words. The initiative slips out of one's hands and into the hands of God, the other Principle in the religious experience. The self moves towards God. Such movement seems to have the quality of innate and fundamental stirring. The self does not see itself as being violated, though it may be challenged, stimulated, inspired, conditioned, but all of this takes place in a frame of reference that is completely permissive. There is

another movement which is at once merged with the movement of the self. God touches the spirit and the will and a wholly new character in terms of dimension enters the experience. In this sense prayer may be regarded as an open-end experience. Fundamental to the total fact of prayer in the Christian religion is the persuasive affirmation that the God of religious experience is a seeking and a beseeching God. The discovery of such a fact in one's experience in life is first met in the religious experience itself (from *The Creative Encounter*, pp. 34-35, 37-38).

The ultimate meaning of [religious] experience is felt in such a way that all of oneself is included. It is total, it is unified and unifying. It is not the experience of oneself as male or female, as black or white, as American or European. It is rather experience of oneself as *being*. It is at such a time that one can hear the sound of the genuine and other human beings. This is to be able to identify with them. [One's] response to the sound of the genuine in another...is to ascribe to the other...the same sense of infinite worth that one holds for oneself. When this happens, [people] are free to relate to each other as human beings—good, bad, mean, friendly, prejudiced, altruistic, but human beings. Whatever may be the nature of the shortcomings, they are seen from the view on the other side where the person lives whose shortcomings are being encountered (from *the Luminous Darkness*, pp. 98-99).

**Teaching on Text from the Tradition:** by Christine Luna Munger

It amazes me how many spiritual giants were born within a 25 year period at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century...Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, Evelyn Underhill, Thomas Keating, Howard Thurman, just to name a few! Howard Thurman was born in 1899, and among many other amazing contributions to the world that he made in his lifetime, one of them is to have co-founded with his wife, Sue, the first-ever inter-racial and inter-denominational Christian Church in the United States. Like so many other mytic-teacher-writers, his written work is not broadly available to most mainline Christians. Therefore, we include his voice in this series on practice and prayer.

**Questions for Reflection:**

- When in your history have you willed or wooed God?
- When in your history have you waited and tarried on God?
- When have you recognized the sound of the genuine in others? In yourself?