

Text from the Tradition: Essential Writings of Howard Thurman (text drawn from pp. 60-61, 43-44, 48)

Centering and Surrender

We must find sources of strength and renewal for our own spirits, lest we perish...First, we must learn to be quiet, to settle down in one spot for a spell. Sometime during each day, everything should stop and the art of being still must be practiced. For some temperaments, it will not be easy because the entire nervous system and body have been geared over the years to activity, to overt intense functions. Nevertheless, the art of being still must be practiced until development and habit are sure. If possible, find a comfortable chair or quiet spot where one may engage in nothing. There is no reading of a book or a paper, no thinking of the next course of action, no rejecting of remote or immediate mistakes of the past, no talk. One is engaged in doing nothing at all except being still. At first one may get drowsy and actually go to sleep. The time will come, however, when one may be quiet for a spell without drowsiness, but with the quality of creative lassitude that makes for renewal of mind and body. Such periods may be snatched from the greedy demands of one's day's work; they may be islanded in a sea of other human beings; they may come only at the end of the day, or in the quiet hush of the early morning. We must, each one of us, find our own time and develop our own peculiar art of being quiet. We must lose our fear of rest. There are some of us who keep up our morale by always being busy. We have made a fetish of fevered action. We build up our own sense of security by trying to provide a relentless, advantageous contrast between ourselves and others by the fevered, intense activities in which we are engaged. Actually, such people are afraid of quiet. Again, most activities become a substitute for the hard-won core of purpose and direction. The time will come when all activities are depressing and heavy, and the dreaded question, "What's the use?" will have to be faced and dealt with. The first step in the discovery of sources of strength and renewal is to develop the art of being still, physical and mental cessation from churning. This is not all, but it is the point at which we begin (from *Deep is the Hunger* pp. 175-176).

In Christianity there is ever the central, inescapable demand of surrender. The assumption is that this is well within the power of the individual. If the power is lacking, every effort must be put forth to find out what the hindrance is. No exception is permissible...Whatever stands in the way of the complete and full surrender, we must search it out and remove it. If a bad relationship is a hindrance, one must clean it up...whatever roadblocks appear, the individual must remove them. The yielding of the very nerve center of one's consent is a private, personal act in which a human being, as sovereign, says "yes." The ability to do this, to say "yes," is not the result of any special talent, gift, or endowment. It is not the product of any particular status due to birth, social definition, race, or national origin. It is not a power one can exercise only if given the right by one's [peers]. It is not contingent upon wealth or poverty, sickness or health, creed or absence of creed. No, the demand is direct and simple: surrender your inner consent to God—this is your sovereign right—this is your birthright privilege. And a [person] can do it directly and in one's own name. No special sponsorship is needed. One yields the heart to God and in doing so experiences for the first time a sense of coming home and of being at home (from *Disciplines of the Spirit*, pp.19-20).

The dynamics inherent in the surrender become immediately available to the life of the surrendered person. Life is given back at another level. Literally [one] loses life and finds it. In the surrender to God in the religious experience there is no loss of being but rather an irradiation of the self that makes it alive with “Godness.” There is awakened the desire to be Godlike. This is no vague pious wish, no moist-eyed sentimentality, but rather a robust affirmation of the whole spirit of the [hu]man. This is no casual interest in superficial goodness. It is goodness at its profoundest depth. To be good as God is good becomes the overwhelming desire. This means goodness not in contrast with evil, but goodness in terms of wholeness, for lack of a better term, of integration...There must be about God an “altogetherness” in which all conflict is resolved and all tensions merge into a single integration (from *The Creative Encounter*, pp. 75-76).

Religious experience in its profoundest dimension is the finding of [the hu]man by God and the finding of God by [the hu]man. This is the inner witness. The moral quality is mandatory because the individual must be genuine in preparation, motivation and in response. Faith must be active and dynamic. The individual enters the experience and/or the preparation for it heavy with the smell of life—all errors and blindness, raw conscious and scar tissues, all loves and hates...It is in religious experience that [one] sees [the] self from another point of view. In a very real sense, [the person] is stripped of everything and stands with no possible protection from the countenance of the Other. The things of which [one] is stripped are not thrown away. They are merely laid aside and with infinite patience they are seen for what they are. It is here that the great decision is made as to what will be kept and what will be discarded. A [person] may take a whole lifetime to put away a particular garment forever. The new center is found, and it is often like giving birth to a new self. There need not only be one single rebirth, but again and again, rebirth, until at last there is nothing that remains between [the person] and God (from *The Creative Encounter*, pp. 43-44).

Teaching on Text from the Tradition: by Christine Luna Munger

Questions for Reflection:

- The invitation to surrender can appear in the middle of a prayer session and/or in the middle of daily life activity—when have you witnessed a poignant moment of surrender in your own experience?
- In the beginning of your practice, how did you carve out time and space for quiet? How do you maintain that space over time?
- Do we really believe that centering and surrender are fundamentally human birthrights? How do we know so?