

*For the OII Course
Deep River. Nihilism &
Ethics in the Reading of
Howard Thurman*

HOWARD THURMAN

THE GROWING EDGE

All around us worlds are dying and new worlds are being born;
All around us life is dying and life is being born.

The fruit ripens on the tree;

The roots are silently at work in the darkness of the earth
Against the time when there shall be new leaves, fresh blossoms, green fruit.

Such is the growing edge!

It is the extra breath from the exhausted lung.

The one more thing to try when all else has failed,
The upward reach of life when weariness closes in upon all endeavor.

This is the basis of hope in moments of despair,

The incentive to carry on when times are out of joint
And men have lost their reason; the source of confidence

When worlds crash and dreams whiten into ash.

The birth of a child—life's most dramatic answer to death—
This is the Growing Edge incarnate.

Look well to the growing edge!

THE GROWING EDGE

1956



RICHMOND
INDIANA

438 24

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My own religious faith is insistent that this can be done only out of a life of devotion. I must cultivate the inner spiritual resources of my life to such a point that I can bring you to my sanctuary, before His Presence, until, at last, I do not know you from myself. The discipline of the heart and the mind and the desire may become a lung through which God breathes. Therefore, if I say I love God and don't love you—I lie. If I say I love you and don't love God—I lie.

Now abideth faith, hope, and love. The greatest of these is love.

Teach me, O God, our Father, that I may desire to desire to love; that my will may become the active servant in the hands of my desire; that my imagination may be the vehicle through which my will now disciplines my life and orders my environment to the end that I may be Thy child in the midst of Thy children.

Let the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in Thy sight, O God—God, our Rock and our Redeemer.

PART II

CONCERNING PRAYER

1. TEACH US TO PRAY

MEDITATION

There is something strangely comforting and reassuring about the private preteritions under which we live. It is a matter of no little significance to know that for each of us there is a world apart in which the intimacy of thoughts and feelings may be safe from attack and violation. Much of what we mean by communication is limited to the deliberate choosing of thoughts, ideas, sentiments, feelings, which we direct toward others—yielding only the meaning that we intend, which may not be the meaning that is either true or honest. In time we develop a dependence upon the impact which we make on others as the major source upon which we draw for an understanding of ourselves.

I am impressed by the accounts which have come to us con-

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cerning the life of the American Indian at a time far removed from the present. To him, so the accounts reveal, the Great Spirit brooded over all of life in general and particular. If he went hunting, prior to the journey, he invoked the Great Spirit. When crops were planted, when there were death and birth—in fine, all the common and special experiences of life were seen as being under the scrutiny and sponsorship of the Great Spirit. This meant that there was ever available the opportunity and the necessity for being genuine—the wall between the inner and the outer was very thin and transparent. The integrity of the act sprung out of the integrity of the person. With reference to so much of the common life, there was no need to pretend. One dare not pretend to the Great Spirit.

A crushing part of the sophistication of modern life is the phenomenal rise in the feeling for a protective covering that will make the integrity of the act an awkward procedure. Why is it that we are embarrassed by simple honesty and directness in our communication with one another? And yet the hunger deepens and becomes more and more insistent for ridding ourselves of the tremendous burden of pretensions. We long for relationships in which it is no longer needful for us to pretend anything. The clue to the answer is in the awakening within us of the sense of living our lives consciously in God's presence. The habit of exposing the life, the motives, the dreams, the desires, the sins, all, to God makes for the Integrity of the Person out of which there will flow more and more the Integrity of the Act.

Search me, O God, and know my Heart,

Try me and know my Thoughts.

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READING

THE ADVENTURE OF PRAYER

Prayer is being with God.

You can't choose at all about it, except just in choosing to be with Him.

Perhaps He will take you up on the mountain with Him.

Perhaps He will take you into the night with Him, or into the mist where you will not be able to see Him.

Perhaps you will be with Him in pain, or in exaltation, or in happiness, or in tiredness.

He just says: "Come to Me," and you say: "I will," or "I will not."

You make no stipulations, that is not your part; you know that He wants you, and you know what kind of wanting that is.

You know that if you say you will not come He does not leave off wanting you, so you imagine what that means.

You know that if you come to Him He will ask you to help Him about the Kingdom, that He will in the end give you that work for it that no one else can do.

You know that He will bring you into the Fellowship of His friends, and that you will be allowed to bring Him into the Fellowship of your friends.

But, of course, you will also go with Him before His enemies; and the things that they say about Him will be said about you.

And you will also go among the people who don't care, whom He is trying to arouse to a sense of His Love.

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Quite often He and you will be left desolate with the doors locked before you and the people on the other side scornful and amused.

You will find that He will ask you to do things which you can only do if you forget about yourself and the sort of person you thought you were, or He may ask you to face death or complete shame as He does Himself.

And all the time you will fail Him so often that by and by you will have no self-confidence left, only a growing confidence in Him instead, because He does not fail you.

And prayer must be fearfully difficult because it isn't easy to be with God, although it is simple.

It means that some things must go, like pride, unkindness, and self-indulgence, and self-importance.

But all the same it is a choice which the best part of you wants, so that the most glorious souls in all the ages do choose the Adventure of Prayer.

—MARGARET CROPPER



Lord, teach us to pray. . . .

Luke 11:1

It is of very great significance to me that the only specific request the disciples of Jesus made of him for themselves was the request concerning prayer. "Lord, teach us to pray." This is important because it suggests that it was in the area of his religious experience, in the area of his experience with God, that Jesus was most utterly compelling. So compelling was he that with unerring insight his disciples put their hands on this

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key to the meaning of his life, the accent, the flavor of his power and contagion.

The basic proposition underlying our need for prayer is this: We wish never to be left, literally, to our own resources. Again and again, we discover that our own resources are not equal to the demands of our living. We are made to realize this in many ways. We know that we are not self-contained. We know how utterly dependent we are upon so many things around us. Our dependence upon those we know, and upon many whom we do not know, is evident. How contingent our present life is upon life that has gone before! In the simplest aspects of our living, we see this demonstrated. Consider the words we use—yes, even our alphabet. How long it must have taken our forebears, somewhere, in some way, to fashion simple things like the alphabets out of which words are made. And the words we use? What a story they have to tell about the involvement of hundreds of thousands of minds and spirits, in successes and failures, in heartaches and trepidations, before at last, language, the miracle of communication, became possible. Thus, it is obvious that, in literal truth, we cannot be left entirely to our own resources. We do not often, however, apply our sense of dependence to our personal relationships to God. What is the most dramatic utterance that we make when pressure bears down upon us? We cry out *Something to Somebody*. Sometimes we do it in conventional ways, and sometimes in ways that are not quite conventional. But in dire necessity we always recognize the poverty of our little lives. We feel that we can't go on alone if left to our little resources, however powerful we may seem to be at other times.

Now prayer is one of the most searching, and I think one of the most comprehensive, methods for tapping resources that are beyond ourselves. We tap such resources in behalf of our

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own needs and to banish the shadows that cross our paths. We tap such resources in behalf of the needs of others. Again and again men may find themselves unable to ask for help in their own behalf, but, at the same time, they do not hesitate to ask it in behalf of the objects of their affection, or the objects of their concern. Often a man who will not pray for himself, who will not seek to relate himself to some source that can confirm and renew and revitalize his own life, will be most humble and most abject in his effort to pray for his loved one, if his loved one is threatened.

It is possible to draw upon resources beyond ourselves. You will recall the man to whom Jesus said, "This can be done, if you have faith." And the man replied, "I have faith, help thou my lack of faith." It is as part of the awareness of faith itself that the sense of the lack of faith arises. The resource that is within us is the clue to the resource that is beyond ourselves, and this we tap in the experience of prayer. Some years ago, Irwin Edman wrote a book called *Richard Kane Looks at Life*. It is a series of letters between a philosophy professor and a rather precocious student. The student was conscious of some inner insecurity and tried in various ways to find the meaning of life. At length he wrote to the professor saying that in spite of his efforts to solve his problems, the quest was still going on; he had not been able to find what he sought. Perhaps, he said, it was God he was seeking, after all. The professor in his reply suggested that the hunger itself was God. The thing within me is also that which is without. I tap the resource that is beyond me by making conscious contact with the resource that is within me. "The beyond is within" is the way Plotinus puts it.

Now, if this presents a true picture, then some preparation is very much in order. It takes time to learn how to tap the re-

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sources that are beyond ourselves. And we are all in a hurry. Our lives are moving at a rapid rate. We cannot reach to the support we need if we do not take time to "ready" our spirits, to prepare ourselves. We must have time for quiet and some place where we can have an atmosphere of quiet outside, before what is outside begins to move inside our consciousness.

In my first church there was a certain lady who sat about four rows from the front each Sunday morning. She always went to sleep. She would manage to stay awake until after the hymn before the offering and the doxology. Then she settled down and slept until the benediction. I went to call on her husband who was ill. On my way out of the house, she walked with me to the door. As I was about to go down the steps she said to me: "I know you wonder why I sleep every Sunday during your sermon. There are two reasons. The first is that it takes you so long to say what you want to say, and I simply give up; I find it too exhausting to listen to you. And the second reason is that I am so tired." As I listened, I took in her situation and said, "Now that I have visited your home and seen the kind of turmoil in which you live six and a half or seven days a week, I feel that the greatest contribution the church can make to you is to provide a quiet place, once a week, in which you can sit down and go to sleep in peace."

It is important to recognize that we cannot prescribe the rules by which spiritual power is available to us. Who are we, with our little conceits, with our little arrogances, with our little mad-nesses, to lay down the conditions upon which we will accept the resources of life that sustain and confirm the integrity of our being? No, we must learn how to be quiet; and this takes discipline. We must find, each of us for himself, the kind of rhythmic pattern which will control our stubborn and unyield-

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ing and recalcitrant nervous systems, and nourish our spiritual concerns and our growth in grace.

—◆—
Teach me to pray, O God, my Father, that I may find the rhythmic pattern of my own spirit, which will lead me to the source of all life, lest my soul perish.

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2. PRAYER AND SILENCE

MEDITATION

Whither shall I go from Thy Presence?
From Thee is there some hiding place?

The deed is a thing so private
So inside the perfect working of desire
That its inward part seems known to me,
To me alone.

The ebb and flow of thoughts
Within my hidden sea,
The forms that stir within the channels of my mind,
Keep tryst with all my intimate hopes and fears.

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becomes different and you know that, whatever awaits you,
nothing that life can do will destroy you.

—◆—
O Sabbath rest by Galilee!
O calm of hills above,
Where Jesus knelt to share with Thee
The silence of eternity
Interpreted by love!

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3. PRAYER AND PRESSURE

MEDITATION

*The Peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall
guard my heart and thoughts.*

*There is the peace that comes when lowering clouds burst
and the whole landscape is drenched in rain,
refreshing and cool.*

*There is the peace that comes when gnawing hunger finds
intimate fulfillment in food,
nourishing and life-giving.*

*There is the peace that comes when hours of sleeplessness
are finally swallowed up in sleep,
deeply relaxing and calm.*

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There is a peace that comes when what has lurked so long
in the shadow of my mind stands out in the light,
I face it; call it by its name,
for better or for worse.

There is the peace that comes when sorrow is not relieved
When pain is not quieted
When tragedy remains tragedy, stark and literal
When failure continues through all the days
to be failure.

Is all this the peace of God?
Or is it the intimation of the peace of God?
The Peace of God shall guard my heart and thoughts.

There are feelings, untamed and unmanageable in my heart:
The bitterness of a great hatred, not yet absorbed;
The moving light of love, unrequited or unfulfilled,
Casting its shafts down all the corridors of my days;
The unnamed anxiety brought on by nothing in partic-
ular,
Some strange foreboding of coming disaster that does not
yet appear;
The overwhelming hunger for God that underscores all
the ambitions, dreams and restlessness of my
churning spirit.

Hold them, O peace of God, until Thy perfect work is in them
fulfilled.

The Peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall
guard my heart and thoughts.

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Into God's keeping do I yield my heart and thoughts, yea, my
life—
With its strength and weakness
Its failure and success,
Its shame and its purity.

O Peace of God, settle over me and within me
So that I cannot tell mine from thine
And thine from mine.

READING

Not once in a lifetime but again and again, and every day, and
perhaps many times a day, it must be encouraged to come, the
restoring sacrament of pause, and it comes not easily at first
without encouragement. Later it seeks one out.

It is the moment that corrects and counteracts our many
moments that become destructive to us, snatching us away, as
they do, breaking the divine accord.

For the sake of all things good and beautiful and true in him,
for the guarding of them in all his life, a man must seek again
that lifting instant in which he rouses his soul to repair the im-
paired harmony. Back to God he must call his thought, lift his
conscience to God for correction, bid his heart express again its
chosen loyalty to God. His whole self must make an effort to
re-set and re-establish and reconfirm itself in the life and love of
God.

They harassed thee, drove thee, Lord, twisted thy sayings
and hurt thy heart; they promised thee all things and for-
sook thee; they crowded upon thee that they might hear,
but listened without understanding, plagued thee with

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stupidities, injected barren meanings into thy so hopeful words, and foiled, and balked, and darkened wisdom. And in those days of endangered vision, Lord, when men might have harmed thy spirit, when life might have disappointed thee and tamed the glory out of thee, in those days, it is said, thou didst lift up thy heart and pray.

"In those days" for him: in these days for me: days that try men's souls. And for us both the high and uplifted way of the spirit, lest the spirit die.

—OSWALD W. S. McCALL

Prayer and pressure!

We are thinking of one of the very simple and natural expressions of the human spirit when it is exposed directly to the starkness, the intimate insistence of great need and tragedy. Prayer is for many of us the act of barnstorming the gates of heaven, wanting something for ourselves, desperately wanting something for someone else; turning to God in our extremity, as indeed we may, and are privileged to do. But always the point of reference is ourselves—our need for something that will relieve the pressure on us, for something that will make our lives easier, our way smoother, for something that will turn our darkness into light, that will lift the burden from our shoulders. Very often it seems as if we think of God as One who responds only to pressure that we exert upon Him out of our necessity. Evidently, we think that God cannot make up His mind; that He is in a state of indecision until we remind Him where we are in the universe and how great is our predicament. We call His attention to ourselves, and our needs, and our desperation. We even enlist the support of other people, that we may become an organized pressure group, to wrest from the stubborn

and recalcitrant hands of an arbitrary God that which He is withholding.

Two stories from the lips of Jesus have been used again and again in this connection. They have been lifted, perhaps out of the meaning which he had in mind, but let me sketch these two stories that we may hold them before us.

One is a story of a judge, who had no fear of man, no fear of God, no fear of fear. Apparently appointed for life, he was above the political process. A certain widow needed something desperately, something that this judge could give her. Every time he came to his outer chamber, there she was. When he would start home for his lunch, she walked a respectful distance behind him, stating her case. Everywhere he went, there she turned up; always saying the same thing, "Will you do this for me?" And finally, he relented and did it, not because he wanted to, not because he cared for her in her predicament, not because of any far-flung or intimate interpretation of the meaning of justice to which he was committed as a jurist. No. He did what the woman asked just because she kept worrying him, annoying him, harassing him; in order that he might have peace, he gave her peace.

The other story is that of a man who had unexpected visitors late one night. They were overnight visitors; and they were hungry. He didn't have any food to give them. Jesus says, he didn't have any bread. But he remembered that his neighbor next door might have some bread that he could borrow. He knocked at the door and the neighbor asked, "Who is it?" He identified himself, saying, "It is very late to call; everybody's gone to bed, I know. I didn't come for a social call, I want to borrow some bread."

"But I can't get up; I don't know if we have any food; besides I was just getting off to sleep after wrestling with insomnia

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for a long time. Now you come to disturb me. Go on back home like a good neighbor." He drifted off to sleep, but the knocking came again; he was called back into consciousness. On and on that went, until finally he got up. He gave bread to his neighbor, not because he loved him, not because he cared anything about the hungry visitors. He gave the bread finally because he wanted to go to sleep. Now the picture that comes to us is that God is like that, that God has to be convinced; that He can be convinced only if we give Him no ease, until at last we bend His will to meet our private demands. Pressure! Pressure! Pressure! I think this says something about God that is unworthy; terribly unworthy! The point of the stories is not as is often indicated that God must be subjected to pressure in order to act on our behalf.

There is another kind of pressure which I think is more relevant and nearer to the real meaning of prayer. This is the pressure that human need makes upon us, which often is so unrelieved and intense in its character that we dare not present ourselves to God without including it. You remember a story that Jesus tells in this connection. Here was a man bed-ridden. His friends were deeply identified with him in his suffering and his need. They heard that Jesus was in the village and believed that he would minister to extreme need. So they thought that if this bed-ridden man could be brought into a face-to-face, primary, intimate exposure to, and encounter with, the love of Jesus, then a miracle would take place. The problem was how to get these two together. They went to the house where Jesus was and the house was packed with people standing in all the entrances. The yard, too, was crowded. There seemed no way that they could call their friend's need to Jesus' attention. Then they noticed that the roof wasn't so very high. If they worked together on it, they might jockey their friend up to the roof.

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If they could tear away some of the thatched patches, they could let him down through the roof. All this they did and their friend was brought into direct contact with the love and the vitality of Jesus.

The meaning? I respond to the pressure of human need with such utterness that I cannot separate myself from the need. Therefore, I can never lay bare my own soul to the life, to the love, to the scrutiny, to the wisdom, to the judgment of God, without including in it others' needs that keep pulling at me.

I remember visiting a certain women's college whose dean I had known for many years. In the afternoon when I was at tea with her, I met her mother who was a lady about ninety years old. After the dean had to leave to go to a meeting, the mother said to me, "I'm very glad that my daughter has left, because I want to talk to you about something. I listened to what you had to say this morning in chapel, and I want to tell you something. I have been a member of a certain church for more than fifty-five years. We have a minister at that church now whom we do not love very much. As a matter of fact, he is not able to lead us and should have left long ago. He knows we feel that he should go, but he says that the Spirit of God tells him to stay; and he is going to stay, despite all our efforts. About a week ago, I decided I must do something about it. I took the entire afternoon off in my room. I began with the day I joined the church, more than a half-century ago, and unhurriedly, I reviewed my life in relation to the church; remembering all kinds of details, things that I hadn't thought of for years and years. I brought myself and the church up to the present moment and the present crisis. I went into detail, explaining to the Lord all about us, and about the minister, and then when I finished, I said, 'Now Lord, I have given you all the facts. Take them and do the best you can. I have no suggestions to make.'"

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Pressure should not be put upon God. The right place for pressure is upon me, upon you, to bring my life, your life, in its totality, to an exposure to God. Not to give God orders. Not to presume that we are omniscient and can always understand what is best for us—tempting and natural as this is. We must ingather the fragments of our lives, the concerns of our spirits, the loves of our hearts—all of the aspects and dimensions of our living—we must ingather these and hold them in exposure to God. That is the ultimate responsibility of the human spirit. The Spirit of God, brooding over this stuff of our lives, will knead it and fashion it, infuse it with life, or withdraw vitality from some aspects of it. All of that is the divine prerogative. Our obligation is to make the exposure!

Now, this we cannot do unless we practice the habit of focusing our lives, somewhat according to the principle of recollection emphasized in historical Catholicism. There must be a conscious awareness of God in the shadow of our minds, day by day, as we handle our affairs, perform our tasks, fulfill our duties. All that we do must be referred to this point of awareness within us. We are not pursuing something esoteric and aesthetic.

We are developing the habit of holding in mind that our primary relationship and our primary loyalty, our ultimate commitment, is to God. The radical result of the conversion of the human spirit to God is that there is this riding point of referral that is always present in the things that we do, in the decisions that we make. It is in some ways like the thing that happens when a person has some kind of disease that he has to watch. He knows that he is perfectly normal in many ways; but he must never forget, in all of the details of his living, whatever the nature of his excitement and joy and enthusiasm—he must never forget that his heart isn't quite so strong as it was. Any constant

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awareness moves gradually to the center of consciousness until it becomes one with consciousness; thus all that I do and think and feel and delight in, ultimately stands or falls before the scrutiny, the judgment, and the love of God. Now if living moment by moment, day by day, as I go about my tasks and responsibilities, that is my pattern of behavior, then, when the time comes to enter the silent moment of prayer, there is merely a heightening of my experience. What I do in the moment of prayer is merely the creative synthesis of what I do always. And the pressure, the relentless pressure, is on me to live so that I desire to withhold nothing from Him—to let His life and His love and His scrutiny play over the stuff of my days. And that is enough. What He does with it, is not my affair!

O Love of God, Love of God, draw us in all the fragmentation of our splintered living, into the all-encompassing grasp of Thy Self. For us, this is enough. This is enough. Dismiss us with Thy Spirit, as Thou dost deal gently and tenderly with all the limitations of our structure and our living that we may not be alone in the way that we take, O God, our Father.