

AUDEMUS

To Members of the Board of Trustees and Close Friends of San Francisco Theological Seminary

SEPTEMBER 2016

Dear Friends,

Howard Thurman was a 20th century African American giant of a theologian, philosopher, educator, and civil rights leader. Raised by his grandmother, who had been a slave, he was ordained a Baptist minister and taught at Morehouse and Spelman Colleges in Atlanta. And during that time, he met and studied with Rufus Jones, a Philadelphia Quaker, mystic and pacifist.

When Thurman was 36 years old, he met Mahatma Gandhi in India, an encounter that continued to shape Thurman's life and theology. He taught at Howard University in Washington, DC, and then in 1944 moved to San Francisco and co-founded a multi-ethnic, multicultural church—The Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples. It was the first church of its kind in the United States.

At the age of 50 he wrote what became his best-known and seminal work—*Jesus and the Disinherited*. Because of that book and his own personal witness, it is not an exaggeration to say that Thurman provided the essential theological and philosophical underpinnings of the nonviolent civil rights movement that most people today associate with Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In fact, Thurman was the chaplain at Boston University when King came as a graduate student in the early 1950s, and they spent a lot of time together in the years that followed.

In 1956, Thurman published a series of essays and sermons as a book entitled *The Growing Edge*, which includes a meditation by the same name.¹ The seminal idea of the meditation is expressed in this excerpt:

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 a time when there shall be new lives, 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 [people] 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!"

Thurman's basic premise is that "brooding over all of life is a Presence that no single event or experience can possibly exhaust."² "No expression of life exhausts life," he writes. There is always more. This is the aliveness of life itself.

The growing edge is not simply the idea that growth happens, that small things become bigger, that children mature into adults, or that a tiny seedling can become a mighty oak. **Thurman's profound insight is that new life appears in the midst of decay and death, trauma and despair, exhaustion and resignation.** The growing edge is there even in the midst of our profound sense of being caught in and captive to systems that dehumanize, brutalize, vilify, and denigrate life in all its manifestations. It's the experience of the disciples after Jesus' crucifixion when they came to feel deep down in the very core of their being that "he who had died on the cross was not the prisoner of the event of the cross."³

Thurman also puts it in very personal terms: "So long as you recognize that no event of your life, whatever its character, can imprison you, you will not scale down your aspirations to the level of the facts in your present situation. You will let

what rides on the horizon constantly inform the event with which you are wrestling, until at last the event itself begins to open up, to yield, to break down, to disintegrate, under the relentless pressure of some force which transcends the event and tutors and informs it.”⁴

I had a parishioner who was always asking me, “Jim, how many people did you raise from the dead today.” At first I thought he was being facetious, poking fun. But then I realized that he was asking me to take my work as a minister seriously. It was his way of reminding me that the work of ministry is not just a job. It’s not just about running an organization. It’s not just about budgets and committees and meetings ... and meetings and meetings ... It’s about life and death, hope and despair—the big things. It’s about searching and finding and pointing others to ... the growing edge.

Finding the growing edge is not easy for any of us. It doesn’t lend itself to easy formulations or glib explanations. It’s the search for light and warmth in the middle of the night when storms are raging.

The church itself must look to the growing edge. And all of us are the church, whatever the state of our love-hate relationship is with this peculiar, flawed instrument of God’s love, peace, healing, and justice. The church is never going to be better than those of us who comprise it. So it is incumbent upon us to look well to the growing edge, not only for our own sakes, but for the sake of the world that God loves so much.

Seminaries must also look to the growing edge if for no other reason than the reality of life on planet earth. If we are going to be the place where the truth and power of God’s liberating Word come alive in the midst of a learning community, then we need to be attuned to the growing edge. We need to be unafraid to name the forces of that oppress peoples and deny human rights, that maintain unjust or dysfunctional systems, that promote violence and hatred, that seek to divide and conquer. But that is also not enough for a seminary or for the church of Jesus Christ. It is also essential that seminaries help students discover how to find the places and moments where life is overcoming death, where light is breaking through the darkness, where love is overcoming evil and fear, where human dignity is being restored and injustice is being redressed. Here at SFTS, we are committed to that vital task.

As we begin a new school year, we are looking to the growing edge – as persons, as a community, for the church, and for the world itself. In particular, the SFTS Center for Innovation in Ministry is taking the collective search for the growing edge as its organizing principle, its tagline if you will. You will be hearing more about this in the weeks and months to come.

It is an exciting time to be alive! Join with me in searching for and celebrating the New Thing that God is doing.

Yours in Christ,



Rev. Dr. James L. McDonald
President and Professor of Faith in Public Life

P.S. – I am trying to make Audemus an all online communication. Most of you are receiving this letter via email. Some are receiving through the U.S. postal service. If you are receiving a hard copy, would you consider providing your email address and letting us send it to you that way? You may also see this soon as a blog on our website at sfts.edu.

Thanks! I am so grateful for your support.



San Francisco
Theological Seminary

In Christ. A New Creation.

1. Howard Thurman, *The Growing Edge* (New York: Harper, 1956) reprinted by Friends United Press, 1998.
2. *Ibid.*, 176.
3. *Ibid.*, 177.
4. *Ibid.*, 179.