

## 'Psychic Screams': Reflections on a Howard Thurman Sermon

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### Abstract

The 20th Century mystic/writer Howard Thurman makes a claim that there is a symbiotic relationship between the earth and humans such that what humans experience as violence against each other is actually a reflection of the violence that humans do to the earth. The major contentions of this paper are (i) the curse as laid out in Genesis assumes that there is an intended harmony between the various elements of creation, but this harmony was disrupted ultimately by human mistrust of the divine; and (ii) that healing is possible if humans learn how to live in peace with the Earth. The paper will also explore possible ramifications for human life and for spiritual life on this planet if indeed this is the sort of harmony envisioned or entrusted to humans, animals and plant life.

'[...] I don't think that we can rape the earth without accommodating the scream of the psyche and there will be no healing, there will be no health despite all of the new advances in the great creative deeps (sic) of mind at the level of chemistry and physics and all the rest of it [...], [u]ntil the earth begins to heal and the earth can be at home in the earth' (Thurman, "Sermon").

In 1971 Howard Thurman in a sermon entitled "The Search for Common Ground" makes a bold claim. This claim is: In order for

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humans to experience healing the earth must experience healing. This claim implies that there is symbiotic relationship between the earth and humans such that what humans experience as violence against each other is actually a reflection of the violence that humans do to the earth. Thurman in his work *Search for Common Ground* expresses this idea that harmony is the intention of the creator. (Common Ground, 12-13) However, I would like to tease this out further in the Genesis. This paper will explore this claim in light of the Genesis myth as presented in the Christian Bible. It is the contention of this paper that the curse as laid out in Genesis assumes that there is an intended harmony between the various elements of creation. This harmony was disrupted ultimately by human mistrust of the divine. The paper will also contend that healing is possible if humans learn how to live in peace with the Earth. The paper will also explore possible ramifications for human life and for spiritual life on this planet if indeed this is the sort of harmony envisioned or entrusted to humans, animals and plant life. What would happen if humans were to think in terms of relationships to the planet and the impact this they would have our interpersonal relationships? What if what Thurman said was true and what if this was the intention of the creator? The paper will also explore other passages that seem to indicate an intended harmony. When I say myth I mean in a broad general sense and therefore, the Genesis story can be taken literally or metaphorically.

I have often wondered what the world would be like if there were no wars. I have wondered what kind of place this would be if there were no diseases, no famines or any natural disasters. I have thought about how wonderful everything would be if the lion truly laid down with the lamb, the hawk with the squirrel and foxes with chickens. Most of us think that wars and famines and strife between animals are all unrelated that somehow they have very little if anything to do with each other. One the other hand there are some stories in many cultures that convey the idea that the animals, earth, sun, stars, humans, wind, rain are interconnected to the point where one determines or has great affect on the other. Howard Thurman in a sermon delivered in 1971 to a congregation of Quakers in Virginia

posits something like this. He argues that no amount of science or medicine or engineering will be able to eradicate the vast problems in these areas until the earth is at peace with itself. (Thurman, sermon) He promotes the idea that human progress and civility are based on how humans treat the earth. The earth, because of our activity, is full of pain and hurt and sorrow and this is expressed in how humans treat each other. He calls it "psychic screams." I would like to explore this concept for a few moments as we talk about mysticism without borders. I am sure that the planners of this wonderful conference truly wanted to include in the discussion about borders and ideas that went beyond mere division between states in India, countries of the world, languages of nations, subject matter in disciplines, and religions of the world. I am sure they expected some of us to look at relationships between sentient beings including animal life. There are borders that we place in our minds as it relates to the earth. We in the west tend to think of the earth as a repository for our activities, or the object of research or the commodity to be used or resource to be exploited. It is far from the thinking of many that the earth feels and hurts and responds to human stimuli to the point where it affects the actions of humans.

You may ask on what grounds do you think that Thurman suggests or even you suggest that harmony is the intention of the Creator? What makes you believe or assert that when there appears to be evidence to the contrary? Humans fight each other, we kill animals to eat and we attempt to subdue the earth for our benefit. Therefore, are we not the supreme creation because of our intellect and our abilities? Have we not demonstrated mastery over practically everything? My response is: Yes those things are true. Humans do fight each other, we do kill animals to eat and we exert a lot of effort to "subdue" the earth to benefit our species. But this does not necessarily mean that we can do what we want and no one can stop us or that the disharmony that exists is necessarily the intention of the creator or the created. I want us to examine a sacred text that most of us are familiar with that might help us to expose or to draw inferences with regard to the intention of the creator. The book of Genesis of the Christian Bible and the sacred text of many Christians reveals a

story that if we can examine it and develop metaphors we might be able to glean something about the intention of the creator at least in the mind of the writer who presumes that there is a creator. In the book of Genesis we have humanity represented by a couple, Adam the male and Eve the female. They were the last creations and were put in a veritable paradise wherein all of their needs were met. Adam has been given charge not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Everything appears to be idyllic. There is no sadness, no pain, and it appears that everyone and everything is getting along. While Eve is in the garden supposedly near the tree of which she is forbidden to eat an animal, a snake questions her about the real intentions of the creator. At this point Eve does not even question the fact that the snake can communicate with her. She understands exactly what he is communicating and the snake understands what she is communicating. She does not question how the snake is able to communicate or speak or anything. The snake does not demonstrate any misunderstanding or befuddlement on its part about being able to understand the female. The snake questions Eve about the commandment of the Creator. One wonders how he knew what the commandment was unless he was told by Adam or Eve or if it was common knowledge. At any rate the snake questions Eve about what the creator really meant. She is told that she will be wise. In short she would be like God at least that is what the snake insinuates. This is enough for her to take the fruit and eat it and then she in turn gave it to Adam who was with her. At no point do we read that Adam objected to anything that had transpired. He does not say stop to Eve. He does not even question her as to where she got the fruit from. He just ate it. At that moment, according to the text, "the eyes of both of them were opened ..." (Genesis 3:7). They realized that something had happened, which is symbolized by the fact that they understood that they were naked and they sought to cover up their mistake/change of status with fig leaves. At that moment everything changed. The creator who must have taken on some sort of physical form that she could be heard walking in the garden in the evening or when it was cool.

When the couple heard this they hid but the divine knew that things were different and asked them where they were. The male answered and said that he had heard the divine walking in the garden they hid themselves because they were naked. The divine asked who would have told them that they were naked. At this point one might wonder who would care. Who is embarrassed by the nakedness of the first two people? I am sure that animals are not offended and since Adam and Eve are presented as the first two human beings no one else is around. I submit that the question indicates that there is a loss of innocence and in this loss of innocence a sense of disharmony has arisen. Thurman also noted that there is a loss of innocence as this point. (Common Ground, 27) This disharmony had far reaching implications because what ensues indicates that all beings and created things are inextricably tied together. I maintain that the divine had set-up creation in a way in which whatever happened to one would affect all. There is on real separateness in the ultimate sense of the word. The divine concludes after asking the question about being naked that they couple had eaten from the tree. And immediately the response of Adam and Even is to put the blame on someone else – disobedience to the commandment caused a rift between the created beings and the natural elements. Adam not only blames the woman but couches his language in such a way as to make the divine partly responsible for this. The divine asks the woman about her role and she blames the serpent who deceived her. At this point the curse is pronounced. However, one way to look at this is not as an active curse but a curse of consequences. In other words the divine did not curse but merely pointed out that because of the disobedience disharmony has been introduced and all are affected. The early conveyors of this story interpreted as a curse but one could argue as I am here that what the divine pronounces are the consequences of actions which caused the disharmony. If the creator made beings and elements as part of an interconnected interdependent whole then any act of disharmony would have far reaching effects on the whole. Harmony is the intention of the creator.

The serpent unable to respond is cursed more than any other animal and is consigned to crawl and eat dust and there will be animosity

between humans and animals as the snake representative of all animals. If humans will be a danger to you and animals will strike at humans. Here I argue that the relationship between humans and animal life have been affected in a negative way. What once was peaceful coexistence now becomes a cautious, tenuous and sometimes dangerous relationship. To the woman the creator says that her pain in childbirth will increase and she will give birth with severe pain. She will want her husband and he will rule over her. Here we see that childbirth perhaps was painless or at worst discomforting and now it is full of pain. Furthermore, the relationship between men and women at least as a "couple" has been affected where the woman will "want" a husband and he will "rule" over her. The relationship moves from one of mutual dependency and an equality (nowhere in the text prior to the disobedience do we see Adam ruling over Eve or even Eve somehow dependent on him—it seems that she has her own mind but they had mutual care for each other as he had his own mind) to one where the woman, at least in a coupling relationship, is dependent on the man and the man will rule (I am assuming that some sort of coercive force if necessary is in effect). All of this could be interpreted as the consequence of the disruption of harmony when the woman disobeyed the divine. Because of the Adam's disobedience the ground is cursed because whereas before the ground easily yielded food and other forms of vegetation for the benefit of humans this has now been made very difficult. Humanity will have to work very hard before the planet would yield food. Humans were created from the earth and they shall return to the earth upon their death. We see that the relationship between the planet and humans has been affected. Whereas prior to the disobedience food for human consumption grew readily and could be easily gathered by humans. Now the disharmony that was introduced has affected the relationship between plants and humans to the point where humans now have to work hard in order to sustain themselves with food from the planet. Instructive also is that the divine "properly" covers the nakedness of Adam and Eve with animal skin. One can interpret this as animals now pay the price for human sins and are used to cover up the sins of humans. (Kidner, 72)

In the story of Noah found in Genesis chapters 6-10 where humanity with the exception of one family has been destroyed by a vast flood because of its "wickedness" and it seems that the consequences of the disharmony included humans eating animals. (Kidner, 101) After the flood where Noah and his family and the animals by pairs are saved the divine makes a pronouncement. According to the text the animals including the earth bound, birds and fishes will now fear humans. The divine now puts animals into the "care" of humans and humans can now eat. "Every moving thing that liveth shall be meat for you; even as the green herb have I given you all things" (Genesis 9:3). The divine does put restrictions on how the animals are to be eaten—this indicates that the relationship between humans and animals is not totally capricious on the part of the humans. Included in this covenant is an idea of how humans are to care for each other and the consequences for not doing so. It is at this point there is a consequence laid out for those who kill other humans. According to the text the divine will require an accounting that "[w]hose sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed. . ." (Gen. 9:7). Whoever kills another will forfeit his or her life because humans have been created in the image of the divine. By this fact one could argue that humans are inextricably bound to the divine because humans reflect the divine. This can be taken to mean the humans represent the divine on earth and so this decree establishes or heightens the authority of humans. One could also read the text to mean that humans have the same attributes of the divine, the same responsibilities as the divine and therefore are responsible not only to care for each other but to care for the earth. Harmony is desired even as humans are given some "control" over the earth and its inhabitants; there is laid out for humans restrictions. However, it is possible to take this statement about being made in the image of the divine to mean that humans are separate and distinct from the divine for humans "are made in the image" and are not the same as the divine. If one reads further down the divine makes a covenant with humans, animals and implicitly the earth. It is here that the divine, after the flood which served to destroy that which was increasing the disharmony, wishes to establish harmony at least of a sort once again between humans,

animals and the earth. This harmony is incumbent on all generations. This covenant is signified with a rainbow.

The Psalms also provide a window into which we can peer and see the intention of the creator. Although these works of poetry highlight the beauty or majesty of creation among other things they also provide us with glimpse of the desire of the creator. The 19th Psalm describes nature as "declaring" or stating the glory of the divine. The text also describes and the "skies proclaim the work of His hands." The word hands have a sense of intimacy and personal. When someone creates something with the hands it indicates a personal relationship with that which is created. It speaks of the level of detail with which the creation was made. The creation in the heavens and the skies which represent all of creation display the grandeur of the creator continuously and whose affects has that of speaking. Even though these created elements have no voice with which to speak, their impact is felt every as if they were speaking. The sun which has a regular dwelling place and its effects are not merely passive but there is an excitement and passion to this display that is likened to a bridegroom who is going to meet the bride. The sun does its job from one end of the earth to the other showering its effects upon all creation. The harmonious aspects that I would like to highlight are not only inherent in the aforementioned description with its metaphors but the next lines which talk about the law of the Creator as being perfect. This laws, statutes and commands demonstrate the intended harmony of the creator in the human realm. God's law nourishes the soul and God's statutes are to be trusted for they explain things and God's commands assist humans in their understanding. True reverence for the divine is untarnished and has a lasting effect. The ordinances of the divine are proven to be successful and all of them are correct and appropriate. Just as the desire for harmony is displayed in the natural realm so also in the human realm is the desire for harmony evident in the laws, commands and statutes of the divine.

In the words of the prophets of Israel accepted by Jews, Christians and Muslims alike we find that even in the midst of war, destruction,

punishment that the goal and the intention of the creator is harmony. There is envisioned a time when there will be harmony among the created elements including humans. In Isaiah 2:4 it speaks of a time when the divine will judge and will settle disputes among the nations, indicating harmony. This is preceded by a willingness of the people to be taught by the divine. The divine will teach the people "his ways" as one translation has it so that people can follow in the direction and the way that the divine desires. This signals to me that people desire harmony and that this harmony is also the desire of the creator. This will lead to nations getting along to the point where they will exchange their weapons of wars for tools for planting and shaping plant life. Nations in a harmonious relationship will not only stop fighting but they will not even train for war. The prophet Hosea in 2:18 also speaks of a time of harmony in which the divine will make a covenant with the animals and implies that they will not be hunted any longer as the divine will "break" "bow and sword and the battle" in order that all may coexist together in peace. In this passage there is a marriage by people of the divine to the divine – this can best be explained as a mystical union. This union demonstrates the love and the commitment of the divine not only to the people but also to the earth and its inhabitants. The divine says that when this union takes place that he will "respond to the skies" which in turn will affect the earth. This response I interpret as a demonstration of harmony for the next line here (Hosea 2:22) says that the earth will respond to the grain. In others words the drought of justice and harmony will be over just as the drought indicated by the lack of rain. Here where the divine responds to the skies. The rain falls to the earth and the grain in response to of the activity of the skies of falling rain and the nurturing of the earth grows.

This idea of peace, justice and harmony is repeated in the book of Micah in chapter 4 verses 1-5 but with the added dimension of a type of pluralism. Here the language suggests not only will nations not prepare for war but everyone will sit under their fig tree. This fig tree represents a type of harmony where will people will be able to enjoy what they produce. The harmony that exists will not only be between nations but between human life and plant life. Fear will be

non-existent and this is as sure as anything because the divine has so decreed, according to the text "for the mouth of the Lord of hosts hath spoken it." The text says that nations have a choice to follow their own gods but the Israelites will follow their God for ever. One can interpret this passage to mean that there will be no punishment for those who follow other deities. This could mean that there is no real difference between the various deities so named and that all divine beings are one in the same and the distinctions among nations only indicate that there are many manifestations of the one divine source. If all of the deities share a divine source then harmony can only be the ultimate outcome and the relations between nations, people groups, the elements, plant life and animal life must also be harmonious.

In the New Testament the last book Revelations speaks of a time when there will be no more war or strife and that all will experience peace. There will be a New Heaven and New Earth and Jerusalem the Holy City and a very important city for the Abrahamic religions. Could it not be possible that Jerusalem not only represents Israel but Christianity and Islam or better yet those who lived in the city and who desired peace? For is not the divine the divine for, over, and in all creatures and all of the created elements. The picture that comes forth out of this passage is a bride awaiting the groom. The divine marries that which he desires, the divine will live among the people – there will be no more sorrow for all of the tears will be wiped away and there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain. The divine as the source of life will freely give to those who had desired peace and harmony and were humble; this of course harkens back to the Beatitudes. Those who desired peace and harmony but were men and women who were in circumstances that made them feel powerless. If they followed the teachings of Jesus they would one day experience that which is explained in the book of Revelation.

In the last chapter of this book we read about a river that is the water of life coming from the throne of the divine and the lamb. One way that one can understand this passage and how many Christians interpret this part is that the lamb represents the sacrifice of the divine on behalf of humanity and creation because as this text indicates not

only is humanity restored to a right relationship with the divine but all of creation is restored as well. There existed on each side of this river the tree of life and it bore crops of twelve fruits, one fruit for each month of the year. The very leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. The curse pronounced at Genesis will be lifted. The curse is the broken relationship between humanity and the other elements of creation. The plant life will be used to heal that which is sick in the nations. There will be a harmony between humans and others. There will be no night. The divine will be the source of all light and they will reign forever and ever. Ultimately the desire harmony of the creator will be reestablished as all of creation comes together to assist in healing the brokenness of humanity and creation. They will humans, animal and plant life and all of the other elements will help each one another to heal.

The harmony so indicated leads me to argue that there is an inherent, inextricable relationship between the planets, elements and the inhabitants so much so that what affects one affects the other -- "To whom much is given, much is required" as the saying goes and that humans represent the divine and are the divine in a myriad of ways and they are to care for the earth as they care for their own bodies because that is precisely what the earth and the elements and the inhabitants are; they are the body and therefore we must care for them in ways that we cannot always image and we may not think suits us -- but nonetheless is incumbent for when we do not we harm ourselves and our psyche screams for release from this torment of uncaring and irresponsibility.

I know that I have extended this far beyond what some expected but what I hope I have presented is an extension of the desire of I Howard Thurman and other men and women who desire peace not only with each other but with the earth and the other created elements. The idea in mysticism is that we are all inextricably tied together plants, animals, humans, earth, planets and the created forces. We depend on each other and when one hurts we all suffer but if we work together we can overcome much because that which created us imbued us with the spirit of life and that which supports life will endure. This

is what I think that Thurman was getting to in this sermon—all life is bound and that we cannot retreat into our own enclaves for when we do that which hurts is us and our psyche screams and no matter what we do we will not experience any healing until that which is hurting—the earth, experiences a harmony. I maintain that this harmony is the intention of the creator the divine source of all that there is.

### References

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