

Thematic Summary

Thurman counts *fear* as one of the three “hounds of hell”¹ that dog the poor, the dispossessed, and the disinherited. All humans are subject to fears, both multiple and various. Some fears are situational—one fears what might happen if one’s “social defenses” were removed. But for the poor—the socioeconomically insecure—he argues that fear is a “climate closing in” with “its roots deep in the heart of the relations between the weak and the strong, between the controllers of environment and those who are controlled by it” (pp. 26-27).

Thurman asserts that it is “violence devoid of contest” that makes fear so excruciating and all-encompassing for the dispossessed:

Those who are thus disadvantaged know that they cannot fight back effectively, that they cannot protect themselves, and that they cannot demand protection from their persecutors (p. 27).

While fear of death and fear that the full weight of physical violence might be brought to bear against oneself at any time, no matter how capriciously, are indeed terrifying prospects, Thurman asserts that ultimately, **for the dispossessed, it is not the body but the “inward center” that is at stake:**

*It is the deep humiliation arising from dying without benefit of cause or purpose...**The whole experience attacks the fundamental sense of self-respect and personal dignity, without which a man is no man...the contemptuous disregard for personhood is the fact that is degrading**” (p. 28).*

Thurman alleges that a distant memory (or even rumor) of violence may be enough to perpetuate the “**war of nerves**” that characterizes relations between the disinherited and the dominant classes—or their deputized representatives (see p. 32). It is worth dwelling on this phrase “war of nerves” as it recurs several times throughout this book. Imagine the nervous tension in the muscles (so tiring!), the hypervigilance to environmental threats that inhibits one from focusing deeply on or enjoying one’s chosen projects, or from offering one’s relaxed attention to children, friends, or loved ones.² Scarcity of money, goods, and time only exacerbate the tension.

While the “war of nerves” suggests tension on both sides, this breaks down very differently. The disinherited live lives of bodily restriction from childhood on, and lead circumscribed lives

¹ “Deception” and “hate are the others, which we will explore in future weeks.

² You may be interested in this study which sought to investigate the “weathering hypothesis” attributed to racial tension which includes excess “wear and tear,” and the premature aging of Black bodies, especially of Black women: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1470581/>

with respect to freedom of movement, employment—and even their dreams.³ The dominant classes may move through segregated spaces with impunity, and they take their powers of surveillance and policing with them wherever they go, potentially depriving minorities of shared spaces of ease and succor where their personhood may be recognized and affirmed. The dominant classes may experience fear and nervous tension with respect to the disinherited, but Thurman suggests that it is intermittent, rather than constant and unrelenting—and what's more, a product of the unequal separation they enforce:

This fear insulates the conscience against a sense of wrongdoing in carrying out a policy of segregation. For it counsels that if there were no segregation, there would be no protection against invasion of the home, the church, the school (pp. 33-34).

This fear of death (of capricious violence without contest) can kill the self (the inner center). **Is there any help to be found in the religion of Jesus that can be of value here?**

Obviously, if the strong put forth a great redemptive effort to change the social, political, and economic arrangements in which they seem to find their basic security, the whole picture would be altered (p. 36)

This is written as practically an aside, albeit one that is full of challenge for privileged persons. In what do we find our basic security? Are we open to redemptive change, and willing to exert ourselves to bring it about?

And yet, Thurman quickly turns back to his ostensive audience: the disinherited. What follows is a barrage of Scripture iterating the ways in which Jesus dealt with fear and asserting that the dispossessed are truly Children of God, a proposition which, if accepted, provides a dignifying identity “upon which mental health depends,” a sense of individuality, of belonging, of mattering, and a basic self-estimate that cannot be taken away:

The awareness of being a child of God tends to stabilize the ego and results in a new courage, fearlessness, and power. I have seen it happen again and again (p. 39).

To be assured [that God cares for me!] becomes the answer to the threat of violence—yea, to violence itself. To the degree which a man knows this, he is unconquerable from within and without.

³ See p. 44 in this chapter. From the standpoint of developmental psychology (Erik Erikson), parents who are shamed and humiliated by society tend to transmit these senses to their developing children, thereby reducing their children's burgeoning senses of will, agency, and industriousness, with lifelong developmental implications.

Wondering Questions:

1. Thurman credits his grandmother for imparting his identity as a child of God, his mother for instilling in him an unshakeable sense of God's care for him. Has anyone done this for you? What difference has it made in your life? Is there anyone to whom you hope to impart these truths?
2. Thurman emphasizes that what makes segregation so evil is its inherent inequality, but especially that it prevents person-to-person *encounter*; have you had any experiences of genuine encounter between persons who are often separated or segregated? Who or what helped to facilitate this experience?
3. Reflect on Thurman's idea that fear can insulate consciences against a sense of wrongdoing.

Questions for Critical Thought and Action:

- How can we comprehend the level of fear that members of racial minorities continue to experience as a result of the large and small acts of violence that they and members of their families in current and past generations have suffered?
 - As a result of disrespect and suspicion that they experience in their daily lives?
 - As a result of violence that police commit with impunity against people of color, and the threat of violence that that implies?
 - As a result of the accelerating growth of overt anti-black racism in this country?
- Thurman mentions the role of segregation in creating and perpetuating the fear that members of racial minorities experience. How does the ongoing segregation in our cities continue to perpetuate that atmosphere of fear?
- Have we observed the phenomenon that Thurman mentions of the transformation of fear experienced by members of racial minorities into humiliation, loss of ambition and sometimes self-loathing, ending in the "death of the self"?
- How can we be instruments of Christ's message to the disinherited that they, like everyone else, count as children of God?
- How can we help individuals among the disinherited reach the next stage that Thurman describes, of achieving "self-realization and fulfillment that his spirit demands" and thus the full dignity of a human being?
- Does our Christian faith require us to be such instruments and to provide such help for those who are disinherited through the experience of racial bias and its ongoing effects?

- How can we help to mobilize the message that we all are children of God in order to lift the children of the disinherited out of a sense of defeat and frustration and to achieve what Thurman calls “the inner security in which fear cannot possibly survive”?

Companion Scriptures:

Psalm 8

Isaiah 61

Matthew 6:25-34, 10:26-32

Luke 1:46-56; 4:16-30; 12:32-40