

Thematic Summary

Deception is a survival strategy of the weak and preyed-upon—one that natural selection reinforces in the animal world. Nevertheless, among people, Thurman demonstrates that the strategies of deception that seem necessary for the physical survival of the underprivileged tend to compromise one's "inner center" (soul), preclude integrity, and affect self-regard:

The question of deception is not academic, but profoundly ethical and spiritual, going to the very heart of all human relations. For it raises the issue of honesty, integrity, and the consequences thereof over against duplicity and deception and the attendant consequences. Does the fact that a particular course of action jeopardizes a man's life relieve him of the necessity for following that course of action? (pp. 51-52).¹

Recall Thurman's injunction from Chapter 1—what he believes Jesus has to say to the disinherited:

"You must abandon your fear of each other and fear only God. You must not indulge in any deception and dishonesty, even to save your lives. Your words must be Yea—Nay; anything else is evil..." (pp. 24-25).

These are hard and demanding words. Thurman knows that racial minorities, women, and the underclass have been compelled to flatter and fawn² in the presence of the more powerful, to engage in "double-talk," to speak and act duplicitously in order to survive seemingly impossible situations; perhaps the truth will only be told later, passed among whisper networks or recited in family lore. Integrity seems like a moral luxury; speaking the truth frankly or making a simple refusal requires the personal agency that many persons simply lack. Members of the underclass risk their lives and livelihoods when they openly oppose the powerful. The conspiracy of silent deception between the weak and the strong, in which both assume that the other is trying to extract advantage from them, might in fact constitute "morality"—the prevailing manners and mores of society. To reflect critically on these arrangements (ethics) is deeply destabilizing, but crucial in Thurman's estimation.

As in the last chapter, Thurman describes a variety of strategies or postures that the disinherited might take with respect to the problem of deception. Reading "between the lines," comfortable persons may recognize temptations to which they are also prone—including the temptation to compromise one's soul, to regard lies as truth, or to call good evil—Thurman believes that these

¹ Indeed, these questions are at the heart of modern philosophical ethics—in a real sense, Thurman is fleshing out Immanuel Kant's deontological (duty-based) ethics, which hold human dignity to be identical with recognizing the moral law and giving it to oneself, regardless of one's desires or extenuating circumstances. To fail to take oneself seriously as a moral actor (as Thurman shows that the disinherited are mightily tempted to do) is in some sense to deny one's own humanity or to debase oneself. Thurman shows us that the stakes are both high and of ultimate importance.

² In recent years, psychologists have begun to include "fawn" along with the "fight/flight/freeze" trauma responses. In the face of danger, some victims repress their own needs and desires in order to make themselves more appealing to the threatening person in an attempt to diffuse anger or violence, or to solicit care.

habits destroy one's capacity for value judgments, and might even constitute a kind of damnation.³

1. "It is what it is" – the disinherited might adopt a posture of amoral resignation in the face of the seemingly unchangeable powers that bear down upon them, and focus only on whatever "victories" or advantages they can extract in pursuit of survival. Considering themselves locked out of the community of equality, they judge their words and actions not to matter and ascribe them no moral significance.
2. Compromise – the underprivileged might limit moral considerations to their in-group and operate in a mode of sheer survival with respect to the more powerful, seeking to "wall off" certain parts of their life, or to "pick and choose" the battles on which to stake a sense of one's integrity, while letting most slights slide—Thurman ultimately regards this as untenable, and degrading to the morally sensitive person (p. 57).
3. A complete and devastating sincerity – "to be simply, directly truthful, whatever may be the cost in life, limb, and security" (p. 60).
 - a. Thurman observes that Jesus himself seems to have preached and lived this radical alternative to the very end.
 - b. This way of life presupposes the faith that "the effects of truthfulness can be realized in the mind of the oppressor as well as the oppressed" (60).

Wondering Questions

1. Thurman acknowledges that to be simply and directly truthful can lead to being swiftly dispatched—he nevertheless insists that we all must keep faith in the other possibility: that truthfulness can be realized in the mind of the oppressor and/or that the truth can be vindicated and spread in such a way that transformation occurs (p.60). Have you witnessed a truth-telling situation that was transformational on some level?
2. Pages 62-63 detail Thurman's ideas about how "devastating sincerity" works to foster the awareness that "a man is a man, no more, no less"—he asserts that it is awareness of this fact that marks "the supreme moment of human dignity." Sincerity is not a defense mechanism of the weak against the strong, Thurman writes, but rather the posture of a life that is lived with integrity before God.

Have someone from the group read the final paragraph of the chapter aloud, and discuss Thurman's ideas about how power differentials between persons are sustained or dissolved. You may wish to examine this passage in conjunction with Jesus' dealings with politically powerful persons as recounted in Scripture, stories of Christian saints, Civil Rights leaders, or other examples that come to mind.

³ Compare his speculations on the "unpardonable sin," p. 54. See also "the penalty of deception is to become a deception (p. 55).

3. Thurman suggests that “perhaps the greatest challenge that the religion of Jesus faces in modern life” is “to show to the disinherited the awful results of the negative deception into which their lives have been cast” (p. 58). Perhaps we could put the task positively: the greatest challenge of the religion of Jesus is to raise the eyes and consciousness of the disinherited to the dignity of their status as moral actors and to extend to them the prospect of integrity.
 - a. How might this challenging idea relate to Thurman’s convictions about what it means to be a child of God?
 - b. What might this mean for privileged people? For us?
4. Thurman introduces a powerful theme into our Lenten season of penitence, enjoining a radical honesty in our self-examination: we cannot feign sincerity to God while harboring a lack of sincerity (honesty, integrity, equality) in our dealings with other people: “man’s relation to man and man’s relation to God are one relation” (pp. 61-62). Are you noticing any ways in which God is prompting you to change your mind or amend your life in this respect?

Critical Questions for Action (John McLees)

- Thurman says that “the penalty of deception is to become a deception with all sense of moral discrimination vitiated.” Are there instances in which we ourselves are engaged in deception or self-deception about our role in perpetuating racism or in failing to act against it? If so, what effect does that have on our souls?
- Can we think of instances in which we have noticed people among the dispossessed choosing not to do battle with the limitations that they face and instead to resort to deception as a way to obtain some level of dignity and freedom from those limitations?
- Thurman says that what is necessary is working to revitalize the barren places in the souls of those who find deception to be the only available tool for survival and to create an environment for them in which they are not required to exert supreme energy into just keeping alive, to “not being killed.” How can we contribute to those processes?
- How can our Christian faith help us in resisting and surmounting the scorn and loss that can come from making such truth-telling a focus of our lives?

Companion Scriptures

Psalm 139

Matthew 25:34-46

Mark 8:31ff.