

Howard Thurman with quotations from Alastair McIntosh

Howard Thurman grew up as an oppressed citizen of the United States of America. He was not oppressed by slavery, which had finally been outlawed 34 years before his birth, but by the persisting culture of racial prejudice. His achievements must have required an extraordinary strength of character and resilience. Most African Americans in the first half of the 20th Century became members of an underclass. Many still are today. But how does this relate to 21st Century United Kingdom? The contemporary campaigner for human ecology, Alastair McIntosh, wrote this in the introduction to his celebrated book, *Soil and Soul*:

The mainstream manufactures people as a monoculture. It turns us out like cloned rows of apple trees on pesticide-manicured fields. The mainstream 'trains' people by pruning. It forces growth in standardised ways. The song that we sing from within the mainstream is thereby not our own song. It does not issue from the opened gates of the soul. And so our personal branches and cultural roots atrophy away. We yearn for connection with one another and with the soul.

He suggests that the 'mainstream', or dominant cultural values and practices, 'prunes' us so that we do not reach our full potential, we sing someone else's song, we do not come alive – or perhaps it is much harder to do so. Most of us do not realize this is happening. The oppression is much less obvious than in the USA. Subtle oppression may be even more dangerous than physical brutality because most of us do not know it is happening. The word 'soul' is used by McIntosh, not in its religious context, but in a secular sense referring to our inner being, our deepest needs. Our own inner being needs to connect with the inner being of other people and of the natural world. To come alive we need to feed our deepest needs and express ourselves – sing our own song.

McIntosh suggests that we discover this through community. The passage below comes from the end of his book *Rekindling Community*:

True communities can never be about herding, or being mindlessly subsumed into a conformist or cultic mass consciousness. The vanquished perhaps *submit*, but lovers only ever *surrender*. The one implies going under, being subsumed; the other, surfing high on a freely given yielding to the fullness of life. To have life abundant we must become *great lovers* in every sense of that expression. That is the vocation to which we are called – both in and through the experience of community

For more on this see the 'Community' section of this website.

It made even more sense to me when I learned who Howard Thurman was. He was a gifted scholar, became a Baptist minister in his 20s and later studied philosophy and theology. He wrote 20 books of ethical and cultural criticism and held prestigious posts at several universities. On his wide travels he met Mahatma Gandhi and is said to have asked Gandhi what message he should take back to the United States. The Mahatma said he regretted not having made nonviolence more visible as a practice worldwide and suggested some American black men would succeed where he had failed. Thurman went on to be a very important influence on the modern Civil Rights Movement and particularly on Martin Luther King Jr.