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REA Annual Meeting 2019

## **“To Make One’s Heart a Swinging Door”: Towards a Contemplative Pedagogy for Neighbor-Love Based on the Religious Thinking of Howard Thurman**

**Abstract:** With religio-political polarization and out-group violence on the rise, what can religious educators do to foster compassion, understanding, and charity across lines of difference? Social neuroscience research, as well as Christian tradition, suggest that empathy - the capacity to share in and understand another person’s affective and mental states – can increase our concern for others and significantly influence our behavior towards those beyond our social groups. Given the central place of empathy and compassion in the Christian life, considering how religious educators might cultivate such capacities may thus serve as an entry point to healing divisions and promoting neighbor love. That said, despite interest in the role of empathy in religious education (RE), few have considered how practices of imaginative and intercessory prayer might serve as a pedagogy for fostering empathetic connections with others. This paper contributes to research on empathy in RE by bringing together Howard Thurman’s reflections on prayer and love of neighbor, with the aim of showing how practices of prayer might serve as pedagogical “paths” towards empathy and reconciliatory love across lines of difference.

Perhaps one of the most prominent themes in both the life and literary works of Howard Thurman is that of love for our neighbors, especially the neighbor from whom we segregate ourselves. Indeed, like Gutierrez, Thurman identifies love of neighbor as the defining call of the Christian life, as well the basic condition upon which the flourishing of society and all of life depend. This perhaps comes out most clearly in his closing remarks in his well-known work, *Disciplines of the Spirit*. Reflecting on the indispensable, as well as personal nature of love for human thriving and societal health, he writes, “The experience of love is either a necessity or a luxury. If it be a luxury, it is expendable; if it be a necessity, then to deny it is to perish. So simple is the reality, and so terrifying. Ultimately there is only one place of refuge on this planet for any [person] – that is in another [person’s] heart. To love is to make one’s heart a swinging door.”<sup>1</sup>

In a century and a political context where hate crimes, violence, and polarization are on the rise, Thurman’s reflections arrive as pointed and provocative. He reminds us that love for our neighbor is neither optional nor abstract. Rather, love fundamentally takes the form of personal imperative. It requires creating spaces of welcome and refuge in our own lives and bodies for other people, especially those beyond our cultural, political, and religious circles. Critically, such love does not stop with acceptance or tolerance. On the contrary, it must manifest in reconciliation, a reconciliation that takes concrete form at the level of individual relationships and political structures.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Elizabeth Moore and Shin Myoung Kim, “Encountering Dignity: Building Human Community,” *Religious Education* 113, no. 3 (May 27, 2018): 322, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2018.1456068>.

<sup>2</sup> If conversion to God necessitates and even occurs through our conversion – our commitment to - our neighbors’ liberation, then religious educators must treat division, hatred, oppression, inequality, and segregation not merely as “problems” to be solved but as fundamental blocks to people and communities’ knowledge and communion with God. As Gutierrez underscores, “Christians have not done enough in this area of conversion to the neighbor, to social justice, to history. They have not perceived clearly enough yet that to know God is to do justice. They still do not live in one

The question is, of course, how? How do we cultivate this kind of love for neighbors, especially across lines of difference? As our current socio-political context and the history of Christianity make clear, answering this question is at once necessary and elusive. Charity and solidarity across lines of difference are not – as much as Christians want to claim – motions that proceed organically from confessions of faith. We see these limits to our love daily, especially in situations where divisions are deep or the wounds of injustice remain fresh. Moreover, even when our intentions are well-meaning, misunderstanding, implicit biases, and fear often undermine our efforts to establish trust and understanding. We thus find ourselves faced with the reality that love, much like a seed, must be sown, tended, and given time and space to grow. Identifying the steps involved in the sowing and tending of love: this is the challenge – and invitation – for religious educators today.

Significantly, Thurman’s description of love above provides a clue. He describes love as an ability to keep one’s heart an open doorway. Such ability to keep one’s heart open reflects a discipline of seeking to understand, identify with and care for another person in her need. Though Thurman does not use this language, the ability to understand, identify with, and respond to other person’s need can be understood as the correlates of empathy and compassion, respectively.

Interestingly, significant developments in the social neurosciences also suggest that empathy – the capacity to share in and understand another person’s affective and mental states – can increase our compassion for others and significantly influence our social behavior. In particular, strengthening our abilities to empathize has been found to reduce implicit biases, increase altruistic and prosocial behavior, and lead to positive appraisal of those beyond our social groups<sup>3</sup>. That said, just as there are factors that influence our love, so there are influences on our empathy. Implicit biases, social and environmental factors such as proximity and perceived similarity, and current emotional state all modulate our capacities to empathize with other people.<sup>4</sup> Critically, these influences on our empathy increase in significance when it comes to people who live on the far side of our lives, whether intentionally or due to physical constraints. In such cases, it can be a major effort to simply try to understand and appreciate – let alone love – our neighbors.

What does this imply for religious educators? On the one hand, the potential for practices of empathy to play a role in moving people towards concrete and even political forms of love remain high. Indeed, religious educators consistently identify empathy as crucial for building bridges between diverse communities,<sup>5</sup> essential for practicing compassion,<sup>6</sup> and a central feature of “encounters with

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sole action with both God and all humans.” Gustavo Gutiérrez and James B. Nickoloff, *Essential Writings* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996), 289.

<sup>3</sup> Tania Singer and Olga M. Klimecki, “Empathy and Compassion,” *Current Biology* 24, no. 18 (September 22, 2014): R875–78, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2014.06.054>; Jean Decety et al., “Empathy as a Driver of Prosocial Behaviour: Highly Conserved Neurobehavioural Mechanisms across Species,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 371 (January 19, 2016): 20150077, <https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2015.0077>; Claus Lamm, Markus Rütgen, and Isabella C. Wagner, “Imaging Empathy and Prosocial Emotions,” *Neuroscience Letters*, Functional Neuroimaging of the Emotional Brain, 693 (February 6, 2019): 49–53, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neulet.2017.06.054>.

<sup>4</sup> David M. Amodio, “The Neuroscience of Prejudice and Stereotyping,” *Nature Reviews. Neuroscience* 15, no. 10 (October 2014): 670–82, <https://doi.org/10.1038/nrn3800>; Mina Cikara and Susan T. Fiske, “Bounded Empathy: Neural Responses to Outgroup Targets? (Mis)Fortunes,” *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* 23, no. 12 (December 2011): 3791–3803, [https://doi.org/10.1162/jocn\\_a\\_00069](https://doi.org/10.1162/jocn_a_00069); Philipp Kanske, Anne Böckler, and Tania Singer, “Models, Mechanisms and Moderators Dissociating Empathy and Theory of Mind,” *Current Topics in Behavioral Neurosciences* 30 (2017): 193–206, [https://doi.org/10.1007/7854\\_2015\\_412](https://doi.org/10.1007/7854_2015_412).

<sup>5</sup> H. Edward Everding and Lucinda A. Huffaker, “Educating Adults for Empathy: Implications of Cognitive Role-Taking and Identity Formation,” *Religious Education* 93, no. 4 (1998): 413–30.

<sup>6</sup> H. Edward Everding and Lucinda A. Huffaker, “Educating Adults for Empathy: Implications of Cognitive Role-Taking and Identity Formation,” *Religious Education* 93, no. 4 (1998): 413–30.

dignity.”<sup>7</sup> At the same time, simply creating opportunities for encounter does not mean that empathy for others will naturally emerge. Again, given the persistent and even growing divisions between Christian religious communities, one begins to wonder whether empathy might require more deliberate cultivation. What kind of religious practices and pedagogies, then, can promote empathy and love of neighbor?

Again, while the notion of nurturing empathy for self and others in educational settings is not new, few have considered how prayer might serve as a pedagogy for empathetic connecting with and converting to our neighbor. On the one hand, the lack of attention to prayer as a possible path towards cultivating empathy, compassion and neighbor love is unsurprising. Skepticism regarding prayer’s contribution to building love for neighbor abound and for good reason: prayer has been deployed as a tool for division as often as it has served the agenda of peace, and public petitions to God in the face of outrageous violence are increasingly perceived as distractions or worse - forms of implicit indifference. Nevertheless, Christian tradition identifies the practice of prayer as integral to love of neighbor, and even a brief look at the lives of Christian contemplatives and revolutionaries suggests that the line between prayer and practical love of neighbor is not so sharp after all. Within the realm of Christian religious education, however, the question of whether and on what grounds prayer practices might prove a pedagogy for empathy, compassion and practical love of neighbor, especially in the face of religio-political polarization and violence, remains open. Yet articulating answers to it is pressing, given that religious educators not only teach people about prayer and the call to neighbor-love but engage people in such practices regularly, whether within the classroom or the congregation.

In the following paper, then, I explore Howard Thurman’s reflections on reconciliation, empathy, and prayer as they relate to loving one’s neighbor, with a view to how religious educators might employ prayer as an avenue for foster empathetic in religious education. I begin by tracing the connection that Thurman makes between empathy, prayer and the practice of reconciliation and love in his *Disciplines of the Spirit*.<sup>8</sup> I then examine the avenues he identifies for taking up the disciplines of empathy and love. Specifically, I highlight the connection between the development, on the one hand, of a contemplative attitude and experience of God’s assurance experienced in prayer, and the emerging capacity to pursue a discipline of empathy and love for neighbor on the other. Finally, I build on Thurman’s ideas to explore how imaginative and intercessory forms of prayer might contribute to healing divisions and promoting empathetic understanding within the context of religious education. My aim is to show that incorporating such practices of prayer alongside other modes of engagement with our neighbors can serve as part of a contemplative pedagogy for cultivating neighbor-love across lines of difference.

### **Reconciliation and Relational: Potentialities and Paradoxes**

Thurman understands this basic need to receive and give love as the crucial impulse of reconciliation, namely, the re-establishment of relationships between those who have been estranged. Though he does not use the word communion in its theological sense as Gutierrez does, the reconciliation that Thurman envisions belongs to the larger project of supporting the fundamental unity – with neighbor and with God – for which God intends us. Like Gutierrez, part of making such communion between persons and God possible is to eliminate structures of injustice and hate, as well as the ingrained patterns of thinking and political systems that prevent love’s “free-flowing

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<sup>7</sup> Mary Elizabeth Moore and Shin Myoung Kim, “Encountering Dignity: Building Human Community,” *Religious Education* 113, no. 3 (May 27, 2018): 322, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2018.1456068>.

<sup>8</sup> Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit*.

circulation”<sup>9</sup> between people. As Thurman underscores in reference to segregation, “Any attitudes, private or group, which prohibit people from coming into “across the board” contact with each other work against the implementation of the love ethic. So considered, segregation, prescriptions of separation, are a disease of the human spirit and the body politic.”<sup>10</sup>

That said, whereas many focus on direct engagement in the socio-political sphere as the main avenue for practicing love, Thurman repeatedly emphasizes the role one’s inner life and personal relationships plays in the “discipline” that is love. As he writes in his chapter, ‘Love’, in *Jesus and the Disinherited*, “Neighborliness is nonspatial; it is qualitative. A [person] must love [her] neighbor directly, clearly, permitting no barriers between.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, while love of our neighbors and commitment to the healing relations must necessarily include (and may well begin with) social and political action, Thurman sees the transformation of social structures as starting at the level of personal and mutual relationships. Specifically, he argues that establishing “primary contacts” with people – namely, contacts that are personal, mutual, and direct – are both the necessary avenues and contexts for cultivating love of neighbor and dismantling the barriers of economic inequality, social and physical segregation of communities, discrimination, and white supremacy that plagued society in his day – and continue to plague ours. In short, choosing to physically interact with and ultimately exercise love for neighbor and even “enemy” is, for Thurman, a form of resistance.

At the same time, Thurman recognizes that establishing primary contacts with people, unless they are infused with attitude of reverence and respect,<sup>12</sup> cannot foster understanding, trust, or love.<sup>13</sup> Cultivating such an attitude thus involves creating spaces where mutuality can be concretely experienced. In his words, we are to “take the initiative in seeking ways by which you have the experience of a common sharing of mutual worth and value.”<sup>14</sup> Though Thurman is addressing the “disinherited” here, his words apply equally to all persons called to practice the love-ethic of Jesus. Each of us, in short, shares the “ethical demand” to seek and foster encounters where respect and reverence for the other can be practiced.<sup>15</sup> Significantly for Thurman, the seeking and creating of such experiences constitutes a “discipline, a method, a technique, as over against some form of wishful thinking or simple desiring.”<sup>16</sup> Respect and reverence, simply put, hinge on concrete experience,<sup>17</sup> and it is our intentional pursuit of such experiences and the attitude of respect that emerges from them that that comprises our “painstaking discipline.”<sup>18</sup>

For religious educators, Thurman’s identification of the need for a discipline of encounter for cultivating this attitude of reverence and respect, what Thurman calls “respect for personality.”<sup>19</sup> The question, of course, what goes into creating interactions where people can share feelings of mutual worth and value?<sup>20</sup> On the one hand, Thurman sees the willing expression of vulnerability and need as playing a fundamental role in establishing mutual relations. Concrete experiences that bring us into encounter with other people’s need or afford us opportunity to express our own can provide the context out of which an attitude of reverence and respect can develop.

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<sup>9</sup> Thurman, 127.

<sup>10</sup> Thurman, 127.

<sup>11</sup> Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996), 79.

<sup>12</sup> Thurman, 94.

<sup>13</sup> Thurman, 96.

<sup>14</sup> Thurman, 90.

<sup>15</sup> Thurman, 96.

<sup>16</sup> Thurman, 91.

<sup>17</sup> Thurman, 96.

<sup>18</sup> Thurman, 96.

<sup>19</sup> Thurman, 91.

<sup>20</sup> Thurman, 88.

At the same time, Thurman underscores that our social and political systems, of which the segregation that continues to characterize Christian worship bears witness, frequently create obstacles to the organic evolution of this attitude of respect.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, he states directly that reverence for personality can only exist between people who no longer stand under the “heavy weight of status.”<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately, the weight of status – or lack of it – continues shape our social relationships and perceptions of other people in potent and poisonous ways. It goes without saying that Christian communities are certainly not immune to the influence of status; on the contrary, systems and practices of power, hierarchy, and privilege regularly shape our interactions with other people, whether directly or indirectly, as well as inside and “outside” the church. Finally, personal biases, political rhetoric that reinforces perceptions of “us” and “them”, and fears about expressing weakness or vulnerability, especially with people we don’t know well or trust, all work together to hinder respect for our neighbors, let alone reverence and love.

It is at this point that another question emerges: is there an even more basic attitude or practice underlying the respect for personality that can help people begin to reshape their fundamental perceptions of their neighbors? If so, how would such an attitude shape efforts to create encounters where mutual worth and value are experienced? While Thurman does not provide an answer in *Jesus and the Disinherited*, where the phrase “reverence and respect for personality” appears, it is possible to identify clue to his thinking on this topic in one of his subsequent works, *Disciplines of the Spirit*. In particular, Thurman parses out in his chapter, ‘Reconciliation’, practices and features inherent to a discipline of reconciling with and ultimately loving our neighbors. Specifically, he claims that the pursuit of reconciliation relies upon and grows out of a person’s capacity to recognize, identify with, and respond compassionately to the needs of one’s neighbor. Though he does not use this language, these three capacities align with the definition of empathy. From the Greek *empathos*, empathy means to “feel with.” To empathize with another is to consciously or even non-consciously to tune our own emotional experience to another’s so that we begin to feel what she feels or think as she does.

Significantly, as noted above, empathy plays a pivotal role in fostering prosocial behaviors, especially compassion, altruism, and inclusivity. In Thurman’s understanding specifically, the practice of empathizing lays the ground for fostering the trust, respect, repentance and forgiveness that are crucial for reconciliation. Again, while Thurman’s reflections emerge against the backdrop of the Civil Rights Movement and have in mind the relationships between blacks and whites in the United States, they offer guidance to religious persons today who confront the injustices of not only a “new Jim Crow,” but also white supremacy, anti-immigrant sentiment, and acts of targeted violence and hate against minorities. In the following section, then, we explore the practice of empathy as described by Thurman and its contribution – and crucial role in – reconciliatory and loving engagement with our neighbors.

### **Empathizing as Reconciliatory Practice: Resonating with our Neighbor’s Need**

Thurman establishes early in his final chapter of *Disciplines of the Spirit* the basic premise that supports his emphasis on empathizing with others. The power and necessity of empathy for reconciliation, Thurman claims, arises from the basic and universal need humans have to be understood and cared for. He writes, “...the building blocks for the society of man for and for the well-being of the individual are the fundamental desire to understand others and to be understood. The crucial sentence is, ‘Every man wants to be cared for, to be sustained by the assurance of the watchful and thoughtful attention of others. Such is the meaning of love.’”<sup>23</sup> The need to be listened

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<sup>21</sup> Thurman, 91.

<sup>22</sup> Thurman, 94.

<sup>23</sup> Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, 122.

to, cared for, and sustained via another's watchful and thoughtful attention: this is a crucial component for human health and thriving, as well as the establishment of just society.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, Thurman argues that when a person's need to be cared for is not met, he experiences an inner conflict that then manifests outwardly in many forms, one of which is conflict with his neighbors. Why? By hating one's neighbor or taking up violence against her, a person demands the recognition from another that she has not received or at least not experienced as real. This is especially true in situations where the validity of our being is challenged, whether through explicit violence like hate-crimes or police shootings, or subtle, systematic ones. As Thurman puts it, "Under such circumstances, hate becomes a [person's] way of saying that [she] is present."<sup>25</sup>

Importantly, for Thurman, the capacity to love, and ultimately reconcile with other people, grows out of the experience of feeling ourselves totally cared for and understood by another. "Association with others, contacts with fellowship, this is the setting in which recognition of the need to be cared for emerges and may become a part of the working purpose of the individual in defining and determining the quality of his own relationships."<sup>26</sup> This experience of being cared for and understood, in turn, enables us to do the same for our neighbor.

On the one hand, Thurman's explanation of reconciliation as emerging from an ability to recognize and respond to another's need suggests that the capacity to empathize is inherent to all human beings. By simply "living in an atmosphere of acceptance and belonging," we develop an "intent" to honor the other person's needs, as well as the skills to cooperate and work with our neighbors.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, the question arises as to how one develops and sustains this capacity to empathize, especially when the "atmosphere of acceptance and belonging" crucial to it is denied to us. What other sources, besides people, can supply us with the understanding and care required for the showing the same to our neighbor?

It is at this point that the relationship Thurman sees between the discipline of reconciliation and the discipline of prayer becomes relevant. Specifically, Thurman understands the ability to empathize with and love one's neighbors as a fundamental expression and outgrowth of experiencing God's care for us. In the following section, then, I examine the tie Thurman establishes between empathy for neighbor and the empathy from God, with a view to its implications for religious pedagogy and practice.

### **The Ground of Empathy: Prayer as Seedbed of God's Assurance**

It is necessary in discussing Thurman's understanding prayer to begin with a definition. Thurman identifies prayer as a "form of communication between God and [humans],"<sup>28</sup> the avenue by which our native hunger for God is most fully expressed and satisfied.<sup>29</sup> Importantly, this hunger to be united to the God who is the source of our identity and the basis of our being is not unique to certain individuals.<sup>30</sup> Rather, all people possess a hunger for God by virtue of their belonging to the Creator of Life.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, the hunger itself does not constitute prayer. It is only when our native yearning for God moves into our conscious awareness and becomes the deliberate focus of our energies that our longing for communion is transformed into a mode of communication.<sup>32</sup> For

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<sup>24</sup> Thurman, 111.

<sup>25</sup> Thurman, 119.

<sup>26</sup> Thurman, 110.

<sup>27</sup> Thurman, 111.

<sup>28</sup> Thurman, 88.

<sup>29</sup> Thurman, 88.

<sup>30</sup> Thurman, 87.

<sup>31</sup> Thurman, 95.

<sup>32</sup> Thurman, 96.

Thurman, then, prayer is a deliberate, self-conscious activity by which we quicken our hunger for communion with the Source of Life. In praying, we make the hunger of our hearts so “dominant and controlling” that our longing ultimately becomes a “citadel of encounter” with God, a “trusting place where the God and the soul of man [sic] meet, where they stand on common ground and the wall or partition between them has no status.”<sup>33</sup>

Yet what happens in this space of encounter with God? While we often think of communion with God itself as the goal of prayer, Thurman underscores that other fruits are born out of this space, the most significant of which is the assurance of God’s care and love. Such assurance is critical to our full humanization: we each long for “an answer that confirms [us], that establishes for [us] a basis of ultimate self-validation.”<sup>34</sup> While Thurman suggests that such confirmation may come as a fact of religious experience generally,<sup>35</sup> he intimates that it is through prayer that such confirmation is most deliberately sought and experienced. This is because prayer affords us space to share our whole self with God - our hopes and dreams, anger and anxieties, private concerns and personal failures.<sup>36</sup> This freedom to expose ourselves completely to the presence of the Creator is crucial to energizing and deepening our experience of God’s assurance. Only when we allow our full need to be exposed to God – only when we practice, in other words, vulnerability – can we experience a love which “know no merit or demerit.” For Thurman, it is precisely the “miracle” of religious experience, especially in the form of prayer, that allows us to practice such vulnerability and experience such faithful attention and care. Our experience of prayer, in sum, enables us to develop the “sense of being totally dealt with, completely understood, and utterly cared for;”<sup>37</sup> it allows us, in a word, to experience God’s empathy.

Importantly, as we have seen, this experience of being “totally understood and utterly cared for” is essential to empathizing with our neighbors.<sup>38</sup> In fact, it is such assurance, Thurman claims, that Jesus sought when he went off to pray at the end of a long day of ministry. Why? He needed to re-experience and receive anew the caring attention and concern of God, in order to offer it those around him. Similarly, the experience of having felt ourselves cared for and totally understood, which we arrive at most deeply in the space of prayer, produces in us a security that frees us attend to the needs of others and even desire unity with them.<sup>39</sup> Specifically, through prayer we cultivate an availability to fully seeing our neighbor and introducing “harmony into [her] life by sensing and honoring [her] need to be cared for and therefore understood.”<sup>40</sup>

What does the connection this connection between vulnerability, assurance and care of God experienced in prayer and the necessity of identifying with and caring for the needs of our neighbor imply? Put simply, prayer serves as one of the primary places we experience the love and total attention of God from which our capacity to empathize emerges. Moreover, by continually and intentionally revisiting God’s confirming “yes” to our presence in the space of prayer, we can find fresh strength to understand, identify with, and care for our neighbors.

At this point, then, that we arrive at question of practice. How can we channel the experience of God’s empathy and love we know in prayer into a discipline of reconciliation with and love for neighbor? In

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<sup>33</sup> Thurman, 96.

<sup>34</sup> Thurman, 82.

<sup>35</sup> Thurman, 83, 121.

<sup>36</sup> Thurman, 90, 100–101.

<sup>37</sup> Thurman’s words, “In religious experience a man has a sense of being touched at his inmost center, at his very core, and this awareness sets in motion the process that makes for his integration, his wholeness. It is as if he saw into himself, beyond all his fragmentation, conflicts, and divisiveness, and recognized his true self.” Thurman, 121-22.

<sup>38</sup> Thurman, 111.

<sup>39</sup> Thurman, 111.

<sup>40</sup> Thurman, 108.

the following, I lift up the three main avenues that Thurman identifies as inherent to the practice of empathizing with and ultimately loving our neighbors, while also drawing out the connection between them and the discipline of prayer. I conclude by reflecting on how imaginative and intercessory prayer might serve as additional avenues for fostering empathy in religious education.

### **Disciplines of an Empathetic Spirit: Practices for Fostering Neighbor-love**

Unsurprisingly, Thurman is not silent on the topic of practice. On the contrary, he argues that relying on the spontaneous expression of empathy and compassion is not enough to fully engage the work of reconciliation or the discipline of love. There comes a point at which, Thurman underscores, we must take up our care-giving, harmonizing work deliberately.<sup>41</sup> Having felt ourselves “totally dealt with” and understood, we must engage in disciplines that enable “the talent or gift [to] move forth into the life of another.”<sup>42</sup> We must, in other words, begin to develop practices and attitudes that deepen our capacity to empathize with and care for our neighbors.

For Thurman, honing our empathy starts inauspiciously, through the simple cultivation of “interest in others,” as well as an effort to identify with them in their “need, anguish, or distress.”<sup>43</sup> Though simple in practice, such activities as he explains them require a discipline of presence, availability, and attentiveness that bears similarity to contemplative practices. For Thurman, this effort to attend to and identify with others then deepens our ability to connect with our neighbor’s need. Eventually, we search for avenues by which we might relate to her more fully and thus open a door of understanding between us. Once this mutual understanding is established, we become increasingly capable of exercising empathy, even in situations where we are the subject of this person’s hatred or harm, particularly in the form of non-violence.

Eventually, however, Thurman underscores that the effort to empathize with others moves towards the ultimate goal: that of loving our neighbor, even those whom we see as “enemies.” For Thurman, such a practice of love begins with the sheer acceptance of the other person. This acceptance, which is offered without condition, requires deliberate work: we must choose to move past “all that alienates, that is distasteful,”<sup>44</sup> as well as our ideas about how the other should be or act, and try to centralize the other’s need for to be cared for and understood. Only when we have chosen to release our judgments and resentments can our primary concern become to meet her need.

It is essential to underscore that, for Thurman, choosing to “accept” the other does not in any way equate to condoning or even subjecting oneself to hatred or violence. On the contrary, acceptance of the other is the refusal to believe that the other person is somehow categorically “evil” and therefore an exception to the rule of love. In this way, choosing to love and accept one’s neighbor is a form of asserting one’s existence and worth, which we have had confirmed in experiencing the love of God.

Yet love, for Thurman, does not ultimately end with acceptance; rather, to develop a discipline of love, one must also identify “the opening or openings through which [our] love can flow into the life of the other, and at the same time locate in [ourselves] openings through which [her] love can flow into me.”<sup>45</sup> Importantly, identifying such openings relies on an “increased understanding of the other.”<sup>46</sup> It is at this point that we see the potential role that “primary encounters” might play in a pedagogy for fostering love across lines of difference. Based on Thurman’s earlier emphasis regarding the necessity of encounter in the formation of an attitude of reverence and respect for other, one

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<sup>41</sup> Thurman, 108.

<sup>42</sup> Thurman, 109.

<sup>43</sup> Thurman, 109.

<sup>44</sup> Thurman, 124.

<sup>45</sup> Thurman, 125.

<sup>46</sup> Thurman, 125.



would expect him to name face-to-face interactions as the way to both increase our understanding of others and create an opening by which our love can flow out to another person.

Interestingly, however, Thurman does not move in this direction. Rather, he suggests that one of the primary ways we can cultivate empathetic connection with and understanding of another person is to deploy our imagination. Specifically, Thurman suggests we undertake a discipline of visualizing ourselves in another person's place, looking out through her eyes and location in an effort to try to see and feel what she sees and feels.<sup>47</sup> This "disciplined use of the imagination" bears great similarity to the practice of perspective-taking, in which we attempt to guess at what another might be thinking, save one detail: Thurman's emphasis here is not on connecting with another person's thoughts, so much as her emotional state. In this way, the visualization process that he describes - what I will subsequently call imaginative inquiry - offers a way for people to practice empathizing with others without being physically proximate to them. Significantly, Thurman likens this process of imaginative inquiry as embodying the "*angelos* of God."<sup>48</sup> Indeed, in sending forth our imagination "to establish a point of focus in another man's spirit, and from the vantage point so to blend with the other's landscape that what he sees and feels is authentic - this is the great adventure in human relations" and a miracle.<sup>49</sup>

The final avenue for fostering the discipline of love, which depends, as we have seen, on the ability to empathy, is that of taking our time. Specifically, Thurman argues that we must seek to relate to others "out of a sense of leisure," of spaciousness.<sup>50</sup> Here we see the contemplative attitude emerging once again as a central characteristic of developing understanding, empathy, and ultimately love for neighbor. Specifically, Thurman's emphasis here is on the practical act of taking one's time in relating to others. In other words, loving one's neighbor, for Thurman, is not an activity that can be hurried. In fact, the very attitude of patience, attentiveness, and care that we develop and hone through prayer is the same one we must bring to our encounters with others. Indeed, as Thurman underscores, "Whatever we learn of leisure in the discipline of silence, in meditation and prayer, bears rich, ripe fruit in preparing the way for love."<sup>51</sup>

It is here that we find ourselves returning to the theme of prayer and contemplation. For Thurman, empathy and love emerge fruit as an abiding work of work of prayer. As we noted above, Thurman sees prayer as the avenue by which we experience the assurance of God's care. Such assurance, in turn, becomes the reference point for our lives and sources of strength for living and especially empathizing. Significantly, Thurman sees the assurance experienced in prayer as something that infuses a person's entire life and relationships.

The experience of prayer, as I have been describing it, can be nurtured and cultivated. It can create a climate in which a man's (sic) life moves and functions. Indeed, it may become a way of living for the individual. It is ever possible that the time may come when a man carries such an atmosphere around with him and gives a quality to all that he does and communicates its spirit to all who cross his path.<sup>52</sup>

Given the significance Thurman sees for prayer to provide us with the assurance crucial for empathizing, as well as tutor us in the contemplative posture central to its cultivation, how might

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<sup>47</sup> Thurman, 125.

<sup>48</sup> Thurman, 126.

<sup>49</sup> Thurman, 125.

<sup>50</sup> Thurman, 126.

<sup>51</sup> Thurman, 127.

<sup>52</sup> Thurman, 103.

religious educators engage prayer as a pedagogy for nurturing empathy and practicing neighbor-love? While the possibilities for incorporating prayer into religious education abound, I briefly lift up two: intercessory prayer and imaginative prayer. I argue that each practice builds upon the others identified by Thurman to provide learners with both a fundamental experience of God's care and the opportunity to develop and deepen their empathy and care for others. When incorporated regularly into our religious and educational contexts, such practices can form a contemplative pedagogy that leads us towards the sacred: the sacred presence of God in us and our neighbor.

### **Prayer as Pedagogy: Praying Our Way to Peaceable Relations**

*Intercessory prayer.* Intercession is one of the central practices of Christian communal life and one of the richest resources we have for deepening love for neighbor. Indeed, to bring the need of another before God is one of the clearest ways we can connect with that person in the space of prayer. Yet our praying for another in her moments of need must start with deep attentiveness: we slow down to see and linger with this person; we pause to contemplate and tune into her emotions, thoughts, and experience; we channel all our mental and emotional resources into the work of bringing this person before God. This kind of effort to “bring [a person] and his need clearly to mind, or into complete focus, and expose him to the scrutiny and love of God through our own thought” – which Thurman identifies as the work of intercessory prayer – can hone our capacities for both empathy and compassion. Moreover, in developing a habit of intercessory prayer for a particular person, we deepen the emotional and relational bonds we feel with him or her and thus strengthen the “mood of trust” crucial to caring for our neighbor. This is especially true when this person is a stranger, rival, or the religious or political “foe”: rather than focus on the harm done or hate between us and another person, we gradually come to recognize them as like us, needing the same care, belonging, and love. Intercessory prayer, in this way, can humanize those whom we have deemed as “other;” in fact, by praying for and attempting to empathize with this person's needs over and over, it becomes possible to slowly deconstruct our previous categories and re-perceive this person as our kin in Christ.

At the same time, intercession does not – and cannot – always take the same form. In interceding for others, particularly those who have harmed or oppressed us, our intercession may initially look much more than laments or protests than bold requests for the other's need for healing or mercy meet. We may, in fact, find ourselves interceding much more for ourselves than for our neighbors. Yet such intercession is hardly less valuable in terms of cultivating empathy than is intercession for others. On the contrary, in expressing our need to God, we have the opportunity to experience afresh the care of God that we did not receive – and deeply deserve. Only after

In the context of religious education and liturgical contexts, providing space for people of faith to intercede on behalf of people in their communities and beyond them can serve as pedagogy for cultivating empathy for others. Such intercessions can be engaged creatively, through performative activities or poetry, or through more traditional forms of verbal prayer, as well as corporately or quietly. It is essential, in all cases, however, that our intercessions are engaged with genuine emotion and are offered from a place attentiveness and presence. Finally, intercessions, when they are spoken or performed, can serve as sources of ongoing reflection and dialogue. By inviting a community to engage in critical dialogue around its intercessory prayers, we can offer people a chance to nuance and re-form their understandings of others and ourselves and thus deepen their capacities to empathize with their neighbors on ground.

*Imaginative prayer.* Imaginative praying, though not something Thurman directly addresses, offers another avenue for cultivating empathy. Much like the imaginative role taking that Thurman describes, imaginative forms of praying draw upon our creative faculties and emotional sensibilities to reach out towards God in prayer. Specifically, imaginative forms of praying involve placing ourselves

in an imagined setting in which God and/or others are present in some way<sup>53</sup> and then using our senses to imagine what we hear, see, smell, taste, or touch. Perhaps its most well-known developer of imaginative praying is St. Ignatius of Loyola, whose *Spiritual Exercises* offer a method of imaginative and dialogical prayer that rely on the imagination and the use of visual imagery and dialogue to deepen our knowing of and communion with God.<sup>54</sup>

It is essential to underscore that many in Christian history and today have disparaged the role of imagination in prayer. Some of this distaste for image-based praying is due to historical disputes internal to Christian community; some of it is simply due to the preference for empirical or “objective” knowledge. While Thurman notes that imagination is often ridiculed in his time (as often is in ours) as anti-intellectual and childish, he claims that the ability to “send [our] imagination forth to establish a point of focus in another man’s spirit,” is “the great adventure in human relations.”<sup>55</sup> Moreover, such imaginative activity is a sacred. As Thurman describes it, to take up for a moment another person’s place: this is both the imagination’s greatest power and the avenue by which our knowing can be transformed into the “*angelos* of God.”<sup>56</sup>

Practically, imaginative forms of praying for others, similar intercession, can orient our attention toward the other and arouse our emotional participation in relating to him or her, thus serving as a gateway for cultivating empathy and love for our neighbor. To engage in imaginative contemplation of one’s neighbor requires focusing our energy not on requests for the other’s welfare but on the other person herself. This can be done in many ways: by imagining ourselves, as Thurman describes, in the place and experience of another person; by observing God interact with another person whom you find hard to love; by visualizing ourselves present with the other alone; by placing ourselves on the sidelines of some moment in the other person’s life; or by calling up into memory a previous interaction with that person. Regardless of the avenue one chooses, however, the goal of such a practice is to attend fully to the other in way that helps us gain insight into her needs and emotions, her thoughts and experience. As during intercession, we must slow down to notice our or another’s emotional reactions. We take time to read wrinkled foreheads, to trace the anger in someone’s jaw, to notice the sad smile. We pause to ponder the need behind the presentation: we ask ourselves what this other might be feeling or thinking, what experiences past or present have come to shape her, and how we might show her the care and presence she needs. Imaginative prayer can serve as a kind of provocative seeing, a place where we come into deep contact with others’ pain, rage, desperation, resentment, self-hatred, or grief. In either case, imaginative praying again is a chance to cultivate a form of a contemplative practice. It requires mindfulness, involves holy listening, and openness to the present moment and person without judgement, as well as the capacity to empathize with the other person in her need.

At the same time, there is a danger in our that imaginative renderings of the other and engagements with her will not only be misguided (namely, not fully accurate) but may actually reproduce harmful historical and personal patterns of relating to others. In other words, both our imaginative and intercessory praying can, rather than guide us towards genuine connection with others,

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<sup>53</sup> While the gospels have traditionally provided the content for such scenes, any kind of meaningful or even mundane setting can serve as a starting point. In fact, many who practice imaginative prayer today comment on how some of their most significant prayer experiences have come not through contemplation of the gospels but through imagining God in one of the ordinary spaces of one’s life.

<sup>54</sup> Margaret Silf, *Close to the Heart: A Practical Approach to Personal Prayer*. (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2003), 127–29; Kevin F. O’Brien, *The Ignatian Adventure: Experiencing the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius in Daily Life* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2011), 141.

<sup>55</sup> Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, 125.

<sup>56</sup> Thurman, 126.

become “poisonous pedagogies” that conceal and reinforce dynamics of hatred, oppression, and implicit bias.

Creating opportunities for people to reflect critically upon and dialogue about their encounters with others in prayer offers one way that religious educators can address this challenge. One might, for instance, have people journal about their prayers and reflect on several things: how they constructed the scene (who was involved, what actually transpired in the course of prayer, ie. what did you do? God do? The other person or people do?), as well as their emotional reactions and any shifts in their thinking post-prayer.

Another option would be to provide people with space during a class or catechetical setting to engage in imaginative praying or imaginative encountering with people whom they normally dislike or find hard to appreciate or love. Ideally, such an opportunity would accompany an engagement or dialogue with another group. In either case, educators can create space for people to debrief and unpack their prayers in a way that both cements and nuances the experience. Much like one might do with a role play, theatre exercise, or “field trip”, religious educators can ask questions that help unearth assumptions and misunderstanding, uncover habitual yet harmful patterns of interacting, and provide opportunities for confession, hope, and the re-visioning of relationships, ideas, and systems that fuel animosity, hatred, and distrust. In this way, having people discuss their prayers aloud with others can lead to a renewing and even reconstruction of their ideas about who they and others are and thus a tool for cultivating empathy across lines of difference.

Each of these practices of prayer on their own, when incorporated in religious educational settings, offers a unique, yet complementary opportunities to help learners deepen their assurance of God’s care, as well as develop the capacity to sense and honor another’s needs. At the same time, when the practices are taken together, they offer a pedagogical pathway towards helping learners develop compassion for and convert to their neighbor. Of course, the platforms by which one integrates such practice into an educational pedagogy or curriculum can vary: for some it may entail building prayer “assignments” into a syllabus; for others it may mean creating rituals of silence or intercession; for still others it might look like joining such practices with other mediums such as music or the arts. The creative doors are wide open. The only guideline is that the neighbor remains central to the endeavor, with the goal that learners’ hearts – and ours as well – become refuges for the other<sup>57</sup> and homes in which our neighbor encounters God’s love.

### **Conclusion: Towards a Contemplative Pedagogy for Empathetic Practice**

“The whole person responds – and only responds – to what it attends to,” writes Stephen Chase.<sup>58</sup> Attention is, in short, the first step towards moral response. As we have seen above, the practice of prayer – of God and our neighbor – is ultimately an act of attentiveness. Our attentiveness to God in prayer clues us in to the abiding love and mercy of God, awakening in us assurance and bringing us into communion, an integration of our life with the life of our Creator. Our attentiveness to people in prayer, likewise, which grows out of our own assurance before God, attunes us to their particularities and complexities, their needs and hidden thoughts. For Thurman, such prayer-filled attentiveness is crucial for developing care and love for our neighbor: “Whatever we learn of leisure in the discipline of silence, in meditation and prayer, bears rich, ripe fruit in preparing the way for love.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Thurman, 127.

<sup>58</sup> Steven Chase, *Nature as Spiritual Practice* (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2011), 298.

<sup>59</sup> Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, 127.

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Christian religious education, like prayer, is a discipline in attentiveness. In this essay, I have suggested that using contemplative practices such as those identified above can become a pedagogy for a particular kind of attentiveness that leads to a conversion to our neighbor. Through experiencing the confirming care of God and others, we become liberated to attend to others' needs and begin to pray for others in ways that deepen our abilities to show empathy, compassion, and love across lines of social differences. Prayer in short pushes us outward, from the "trusting place where the soul and God" meet to the tension-rife space between neighbors until we have cultivated the skill of "tarrying with another" until our hearts becomes swinging doors. Can contemplation lead to compassion? Does prayer lead to social peace? While such questions will never be fully closed, my hope is that this paper is one, small step to clarifying the mystery. In either case, may religious educators keep us praying: for our neighbor's sake.

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