

For what it's worth, hypo and legs and all.  
 I can't complain. I'm ready to admit  
 You could have made a better-looking dog  
 From the same raw material, no doubt,  
 But, since You didn't, this'll have to do.  
 Therefore I utterly lift up my hands  
 To You, and here and now beseech Your aid.  
 I have held back when others tugged me on,  
 I have gone on when others pulled me back  
 Striving to read Your will, striving to find  
 The justice and expedience of this case,  
 Hunting an arrow down the chilly airs  
 Until my eyes are blind with the great wind  
 And my heart sick with running after peace.  
 And now I stand and tremble on the last  
 Edge of the last blue cliff, a hound beat out,  
 Tail down and belly flattened to the ground,  
 My lungs are breathless and my legs are whipped,  
 Everything in me's whipped except my will.  
 I can't go on. And yet, I must go on.

Only what is so important to you, that deep, deep within you cast your vote on its behalf; only that can get past the flaming sword that guards the altar at the center of your island in the midst of your inward sea, and when it gets past the angel with the flaming sword, it is for you the will of the only God you can worship. Failure, success, achievement, lack of achievement, disorder, frustration, all the things to which we are heir as we muddle along from day to day become surface things while underneath the churning tempest of our days is the steady rhythmic pulsing of the nerve center of our consent which rhythm moves in cadence with the movement of the Eternal. And there shall come a time when this persistent time beat will bring *order!* That is what we mean, finally, by prayer.

## THE INNER LIFE III: THE FLUID AREA OF CONSENT

February 1, 1953  
Fellowship Church

*Thurman returns to a familiar theme, the setting of personal goals and working to realize them, which he states here is "compulsory" for "the very grounds" of an individual's "self-respect as a human being."<sup>1</sup> But this goal has to be more than just a mere wish, or a soon forgotten New Year's resolution. Rather it has to be an essential part of one's identity, a purpose that "becomes related to my nerve center of consent." When this happens, and one decides to become the sort of person who can realize that purpose, and whatever happens subsequently, whatever the turns of fate, one can never, or should never, be discouraged, because the person and their purpose have become one. Thurman cautions that a life's purpose need not be heroic or world-shattering, just a determination to lead a better life and to impart this spirit to those around you. For Thurman, this is not just psychology, but metaphysics; the very structure of reality and animate life is goal-seeking and directional, and as one makes this sort of determination, one "draws upon all the vitalism and the dynamics of the universe."<sup>2</sup>*

I'd like to read as a background for this morning's thinking together from the Book of Genesis: "In the beginning God created the Heaven

1. The importance of goal-seeking was a central theme for Thurman as early as "Finding God" (1927), in *PHWT*, 1: 110–15, and "Christian, Who Calls Me Christian?" (1938), in *PHWT*, 2: 106–13, and remained a key component of his thought thereafter.

2. For Thurman on the inherent purposiveness of life, see HT, *The Search for Common Ground* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 29–41.

and the Earth, and the Earth was without form and void and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. God said, Let there be light and there was light. God saw the light—that it was good.”<sup>3</sup>

You will remember that last week we talked about the inward sea that is in every person, and in that sea there is an island, and on that island there is an altar, and there stands guard over that altar the “angel with the flaming sword,” and nothing can get by that angel to be placed on that altar unless it has the mark of your inner authority, and what gets by the angel with the flaming sword and is placed on your altar, on your island, in your sea, becomes a part of the fluid area—the nerve center—of your consent and what becomes the nerve center of your consent, links you with the Eternal.

[Now it means that it]<sup>4</sup> is only rational then, you see, for you to have a goal for your life, to have some end that you are consciously seeking, not drifting. I don’t [only] mean that. It is not only rational that you have it, but it becomes compulsory for you to have it, or undermine the very grounds of your self-respect as a human being. That’s it.

So, if life is dynamic, then it is compulsory, automatically almost compulsory for me, to deal in terms of goals or purposes, of pursuits, and I become increasingly conscious of the fact that I can hold in focus a purpose, until that purpose becomes related to my nerve center of consent; and when my nerve center of consent becomes related to the purpose, then there is created through this opening in me which is my nerve center of consent that which draws upon all the vitalism and the dynamics of the universe.

3. There is a gap in the tape at this point. The editors do not know the extent of the quotation from Genesis. The beginning of the sermon was reconstructed from memory by the transcriber until the point in the sermon noted below. The transcriber appended the following apology to Thurman: “I’m sorry—I couldn’t remember all that went before the dynamics of goals, purposes, etc.,—it’s in me head, but me head is sponge rubber and there’s no need squeezing it! Won’t come! Please forgive haste with which this was done—if it is intelligible at all we’re both lucky.” This confession extends only to the point in the transcription before the recording resumes. As for the material included for the duration of the tape break, *caveat lector*.

4. Tape resumes.

That’s why, when a man is related that way, you can’t discourage him—*Never!* You can hit him across the head, you can starve him out—you can do all sorts of things, but whatever you are doing can’t get over into where he is operating. I’ve told you about this many times, but I like to talk about it—about this feeble-minded puppy that I had who—it was the years when I was teaching in Atlanta, Georgia<sup>5</sup>—and the students would come over to the house. He was just a little puppy, and everybody liked him, but he didn’t know that, he didn’t know anything, it seemed. But he was alive, and he’d jump up on you and scratch your stockings, and you would push him off and he’d jump up on you again, and you’d take a little newspaper and strike him, and he’d yell as he’d jump back upon you. Nothing got over to where he was. If you’d put your hand in his mouth he’d bite you—you know what dogs do, they learn not to bite—but he didn’t. He just chewed away. Nothing ever seemed to get over into the area in which he was operating. Now that’s the thing that happens—now get the process because it’s very important that we understand this—when the goal, the purpose of human life, becomes related to your nerve center of consent, and it means that it has to be held there until it catches; the thing that inspires the mind with confidence in doing it is the awareness all around that we operate within a context that is itself *dynamic*—and when I hold it there I’m going to catch it—then energy, live energy, if I may be redundant, somehow becomes readily at my disposal. And the effect of that energy illumines my mind, gives me fresh attacks, new dimensions of awareness amid meanings and overtones and values, and it seems that my life now begins to take on a significance; and I become for the first time in my life, a humble human being, because *now* with this in focus, I see what kind of person I must become in order that

5. Thurman taught at Morehouse and Spelman from 1928 to 1932. A dog lover, he had many dogs as pets, most of whom, so it would seem, like the dog in this account, were barkers and biters. “Since the early traumatic experience when a dog tore a piece of flesh out of my leg,” he wrote in his autobiography, “I lived with an organic fright, but it was far outweighed by my natural love of dogs” (*WHAH*, 233). Perhaps there is an allusion to the early misadventure in “The Inner Life: The Mystery of the Soul,” printed in the current volume. For other accounts by Thurman of erratic behavior by his various dogs, see *PHWT*, 4: 226, *WHAH*, 234–37. Perhaps his ambivalent love/hate relation to dogs helped shape his best-known canine depiction, the hounds of hell, which dominates *Jesus and the Disinherited*.

in the living of my life I do no violence to this thing that has become *now* one with my nerve center of consent. And I discover that in my own way I am becoming religious, and a new kind of reverence begins to move over my life, and my values are now measured by their relevancy to this.

Now let me hasten to say before I stop: do not be discouraged by what I'm saying, because you're thinking that I am thinking about some great vision of something, some great overwhelming goal like a world government, or some other tremendously dramatic something. No! That may be—but I'm talking about what may be in the reach of each one of us. Suppose you say, what is available to me, in terms of a goal, is that I shall make of my life something beautiful. That's all. Something beautiful. So that all who touch my life will somehow be lifted up and strengthened. Not in any pious way, but when they touch my life, they find themselves responding to life. They find themselves a little more in possession of themselves. Just a little happier, a little healthier, a little less discouraged—nothing dramatic, but just a little less discouraged, a little more hopeful, just because they touched my life. Suppose a simple thing like that is your goal—not [to] become a saint—of course I think you would—not to have any heroics, and I mean that. But just where you are, with your own burdens, with all the enclosures of your life, with all your routines, all your cares, all of the duties that enmesh all your feeling-tones, just where you are.

Suppose, with this thought in mind about the dynamics of the universe, suppose, without changing a thing in your situation, without changing a single thing in your environment, without altering anything except the shifting to your center of focus, the real possibility that you, where you are, can become a whole human being and that you can hold that possibility before you with such intense clarity and [with] no fever, [an] intense clarity, until at last the fluid center of your purposes begins to take it into account more and more until now, when you're not thinking about anything, you find yourself moving in that direction. When you are thinking about something, you find that you relate it to that. Then in the moment when you're quiet, and if you are consciously a religious person, in the moment when you pray to God, you stop burdening him with all the recitals of your burdens, filling the time with all your hostilities; instead it becomes a time you check the rhythm of the fluid center of your purposes.

You check it, that's all. And once the fluid center of your purposes is a part of the great movement that undergirds and bottoms life itself, then prayer at such a time becomes renewal, becomes refreshment, becomes [a] heightening of perspective, becomes all of those things; and when you come out of it, your feet hit the sidewalk in a new way, and there's a light in your face that had never been on land or sea before. It's tremendous. And I'm very grateful to God that nobody, however humble and simple and limited, that nobody need suffer from a sense of complete and utter futility in a world that is dynamic. A world held in God's hands. So get up off the ground. Lift up your head. All of the resources of God are *yours*! But you have to work at it.