

# BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



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**MARTIN DOBLMEIER** is a filmmaker who has produced or directed over thirty films, mainly on the topics of religion, faith, and spirituality. He spoke via email to Boisi Center interim assistant to the director Jack Nuelle following the Boisi Center's February 7, 2019 screening and panel discussion of his latest film, *Backs Against the Wall: The Howard Thurman Story*. The resulting interview has been edited for length, clarity, and content.

**NUELLE:** Why make this film, and why make this film now?

**DOBLMEIER:** *Backs Against the Wall: The Howard Thurman Story* is our second installment in a series of biographical documentary films for national public television that profile seminal religious figures from the 20th century. We call the series "Prophetic Voices." The first was a film on the great American public theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr. I had the opportunity to present that film at Boston College back in 2017. The latest film is on African American theologian Howard Thurman.

In so many ways, America is only now catching up with Howard Thurman and decades after his death we see how prophetic he really was. Thurman was born the grandson of slaves who went on to become a spiritual mentor for so many leading figures in the Civil Rights Movement including Martin Luther King, Jr., Jesse Jackson, Congressman John Lewis and others. I was fortunate to be able to interview some of the remaining Civil Rights icons like Jackson, Lewis, Otis Moss, Jr. and others for the film. It was so evident from those interviews how much Thurman inspired them personally and the Movement overall.

But Thurman's legacy goes well beyond the Civil Rights Movement because his focus was always on the centrality of one's own personal religious experience as the starting place for any social



change. He would use the expression that each of us must "go deep" and discover the presence of God within. Then acting out of that discovery we will naturally seek to form community with others. And together, within the context of community, real social transformation can take root.

To my mind, Thurman is not only timely – considering how many social movements are in process today – he is also timeless.

**NUELLE:** Two of your films, *Bonhoeffer* and *An American Conscience: The Reinhold Niebuhr Story*, focus on individual religious leaders who bridge the sacred and the political. What do you see the relationship being between religion and the political world? Also, how does *Backs Against the Wall* fit with your other films?

**DOBLMEIER:** *Bonhoeffer* was our film about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran writer and pastor who joined the resistance against Hitler and the Nazis.

Reinhold Niebuhr was America's most recognizable public theologian from the last century. And now Thurman.

All three were prolific writers who have left a legacy in the written word that will be studied for generations to come. Bonhoeffer had the heart of a pastor and if his world had not been thrown into utter chaos with the rise of Hitler he may well have lived the life of a quiet pastor or university professor. His primary interest was not revolutionary politics. It was understanding Jesus Christ and discovering him in community.

Niebuhr on the other hand was in the political trenches from his early pastorate in Detroit. It was a natural fit for him. Niebuhr spent his long career bringing a faith perspective to his public critiques of the most important political and social issues of the day. Everything was fair game for Niebuhr's analytical mind and courageous pen.

Thurman was a very different character. He rarely spoke directly about particular political issues. Instead he preferred to speak to patterns of human behavior, the need for deeper personal reflection and the importance of the individual religious experience. Those who read his work or heard him speak were the ones who would then take those principals and go out and apply them to the issues at hand. Thurman understood his role as a spiritual sage – others would then put that wisdom into social transformation.

**NUELLE:** Where does Thurman fit in the landscape of civil rights leaders? Is he best characterized as a theologian, minister, or activist? Are those distinctions clarifying or unnecessary?

**DOBLMEIER:** The way I often describe Thurman's influence on the Civil Rights Movement is to make the parallel to Thomas Paine and the American Revolution. In reading Paine many of the Founders understood the deeper underlying implications of their resistance. They understood what they were fighting for was much greater than simply changing a form of government. That it was first about the denial of God-given fundamental human rights.

In the same way, the Civil Rights leaders would hear Thurman preach and read his classic works like *Jesus and the Disinherited* and understand what was at stake was far greater than themselves. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Jesse Jackson actually carried Thurman's works with them when they traveled on those marches that changed American history. What an extraordinary validation of Thurman. So despite the fact that Thurman was not out on the front lines himself, something he was publicly criticized for, he was clearly in the hearts and the minds of those who were.

How to characterize Thurman? I think so many of the great figures are significant because they defy our notions of how we classify them, how we box them. Thurman was a theologian on par with any other, yet he does not fit neatly into a theological box. He was a minister but much of his career was at major universities, not local congregations. Surround-

ing himself with students kept him spiritually vibrant and hungry. He was always in his heart a spiritual adventurer.

Thurman was an activist although again he defies our traditional understand

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of an activist who is out on the streets marching. He was one of the inspirations behind the scenes of one of the greatest social and political, non-violent transformations the world has ever seen – and that was enough for Thurman.

**NUELLE:** What are the roles of mystical theology and the mystical world-view in political activism and political change?

**DOBLMEIER:** As I point out in the film, Thurman is often described as a “mystic” although it was a title he never gave himself. I think in part that's a reflection of the times he lived in. Today we would be much more comfortable calling someone a “mystic,” but in the mid-20th century when we saw religion almost exclusively through a denominational lens, the term “mystic” would be much more suspicious than today.

As we also pointed out in the film, other black pastors were often uneasy with the idea of Thurman as a mystic. But for Thurman the idea of the mystical pointed to his emphasis on the personal religious experience – the deepening of every individual's understanding of God present within each of us. He was someone who admired the great Quaker writer, Rufus Jones, who emphasized the notion of the “inner light” within each of us. Accepting that inner light within each of us dramatically changes the way we engage others.

For Thurman, that central idea of each person deepening his or her own religious experience fits neatly into our current culture where we often hear people describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” That sentiment often follows from a disappointment with some aspect of institutional religion, but also points to the basic human hunger for the divine. Thurman understood that and nourished it in himself and everyone around him.

As a student at Rochester Theological in the 1920's, Thurman was inspired by professor George Cross who immediately recognized Thurman's brilliance. But Cross also sensed Thurman's inclination toward political and social activism. His advice to the young Thurman was that social and political issues are temporary, and with Thurman's gifts, his efforts would be more successful and enduring if he focused on the more eternal human concerns. Looking at the arc of Thurman's life and work that is exactly what he did.

**NUELLE:** What is the most difficult thing about presenting a religious leader in documentary form? What was the most difficult aspect of creating *Backs Against the Wall*?

**DOBLMEIER:** The Howard Thurman film is my 33rd documentary film on a subject of religion, faith and spirituality. Over the years we have come to accept the inherent challenges to presenting religious and spiritual concepts that live well below the surface through a medium that works best telling stories *on* the surface. Television and film are ideal for depicting things visual but our storylines are most often about the interior life.

If our films succeed, it is because I seek out subjects to interview who can help unpack some of those deeper dimensions and connect the viewer to more universal themes. Then I take that commentary along with my own writing and narration and combine it with a visual presentation that hopefully captures the audience.

For me, one of the great challenges with the Howard Thurman film was to acknowledge that most of the wider audience would not know Thurman. I

had to find a way to get a wider audience immediately wrapped into this new character and I felt the best way to do that was to “validate” him by connecting him to Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement.

Also, at the beginning of the film, I found a clip from a speech Oprah Winfrey gave at the 2013 Harvard University commencement where she quoted Howard Thurman. So even if the viewer does not know Howard Thurman, they recognize from the start how many respect and celebrate him.

**NUELLE:** What is the most rewarding, compelling, or important thing you learned during the production of this documentary?

**DOBLMEIER:** When I did the interviews with these great Civil Rights icons like Jesse Jackson, Congressman John Lewis, Otis Moss, Jr. and others, it was clear how personally they were inspired and influenced by Howard Thurman. For them, Thurman was central, not only in their own spiritual lives, but his presence was clear across the entire Civil Rights Movement.

But if you read many of the history books of the Movement you rarely see Thurman’s name mentioned. That is because he was not out marching on the streets and getting arrested. He saw his role as the spiritual sage – the pillar others came to for inspiration.

But when this last generation of Movement leaders is gone, there will be no one left to testify to Thurman’s critical role. That concern gave each of us on the production team a sense of urgency, believing we had to let people experience Thurman’s key role now so it is not forgotten.

**NUELLE:** Can you describe Thurman’s theology of the disinherited? Is it synonymous with a theology of liberation?

**DOBLMEIER:** Howard Thurman is not someone you would automatically put in the black liberation theology category like a James Cone. But Thurman – while he was not calling for the change of systems that perpetuate injustices, was offering



language and thinking that is the foundation for change.

His principal work, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, focused on how the historical Jesus was born a poor Jew and lived his life as a minority under Roman rule. Since it was first published in 1949, African Americans saw – many for the first time – a Jesus who spoke directly out of their pain and social prison. That was in itself liberating.

But Thurman was careful not to let that understanding be used to fuel anger and rage. Instead he was one of the first to champion a non-violent response, inspired by his visit with Mahatma Gandhi in 1936. And Thurman spoke

openly about a “love ethic” as the most effective tool to overcome social and political injustices.

So, for some, speaking of non-violence and a love ethic made Thurman an inspired, prophetic voice. But for others who envisioned a more strident, aggressive response to systems of injustice, Thurman was disappointing. Some saw Martin Luther King, Jr. in the same light.

**NUELLE:** What can Thurman teach us about political advocacy and working to dismantle systems of oppression today?

**DOBLMEIER:** Thurman’s example is to see political advocacy as something more than marching with banners on the street or even more than lobbying in the halls of Congress. Thurman did neither. But what he provided was a clear and universal understanding of the human condition that spoke to his generation of leaders and activists who then went out with renewed purpose. They then challenged injustices and changed the world. It takes a community of people to change systems and Thurman was clear about the vital role he played in that process of change.

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