

The Oak Remembers the Boy: In Memory of Howard Thurman

by Carmen Emerson (February 2006)

My kind have been witnesses since the Third Day...

We have borne witness since the Beginning.

We have held fruits of sustenance,

Olives and dates and pomegranates.

We have held tempting fruits,

Forbidden...preludes to falling.

We have been staffs in the hands of those who would lead,

And crooks in the hands of those who would shepherd,

And wheels on the chariots of those who would give chase,

And the smallest of weapons held by the wildest of hearts.

Overwhelmed with a need to see the unseeable Yahweh,

You drew us, instead, as Ashera.

And we bore witness, still, on walls and pots and columns,

In weavings made with loving hands near temple gates,

Witnesses to worship, and more...

We have held promise and covenant,

As ark to save the living world,

As ark of the living word that saves,

As manger.

We endured a crucifixion, holding a trembling savior.

We were spears that pierced a gasping side and signs that mocked.

We have been defiled as burning crosses, lighted by hateful hearts, broken minds,

and shattered spirits.

In the most shameful of moments we have been forced to bear the noose that broke the neck,

And stopped the breath.

We have been all of this, and more,
Whether celebrated Cedars of Lebanon, boughs stretching toward the cherished sea,
 Roots reaching for the holy river, or
Humble oaks in sandy southern soil, boughs stretching toward the Atlantic,
 Roots reaching for the Halifax River.

We have been church pews that held the taffeta laps that cradled the dreaming heads.
We have been railroad tracks that carried kind and generous strangers –
 Dream-preserving, life-saving strangers – into anonymity.
We have been pulpits held by weary hands, prayerful hands, powerful hands,
Clenched hands unafraid of pounding on us the rhythm of The Message:
 “You are children of God!”

He was a child of God, and I have been witness since his Beginning,
The small dark boy of lonely spirit, the boy seeking solace as he nestled into my roots,
 or embraced my trunk, leaning and dreaming,
 contemplating this business of living and thriving,
 while peering through my lacey branches.

I think he sought the companionship of those who would not tell him
What he could not do, who he could not be, what he must do, who he must be.

The boy and I kept good company.
The surf and I kept his confidence, bent toward one another, bearing witness, engaged in the
honored work of listening and watching as he unfolded, unpacked, unwound,
 The secrets of his heart, his most private thoughts.

We were there as he bravely examined his ambivalence,
Gingerly tended his bruises,
Gratefully celebrated his joys,
Determinedly puzzled his doubts.

We were there as he claimed with conviction the knowledge that what he did with his life
MATTERED (as this was something he had always known, perhaps it was that the
conviction claimed him).

We were there as he offered to God for the searching both the anxious thoughts of
his bright and beautiful mind, and his yearning, eager, dreaming, hoping, courageous,
loving heart.

I loved the boy. I loved the man.

Human, when is the last time you bore sacred witness to another's becoming?

When is the last time you provided rest and respite, solace and solitude,
safe space – shelter – for dreaming?

Have your strength and presence steadied someone during the sacrament of seeking?

Are you willing to bend and sway to the unpredictable rhythm and pace of soul searching?

Can you understand that the greatest gifts are simply time, presence, and often, silence?

Please, remember then, that this is the most HOLY of work.

I remember.

We have borne witness since the Beginning.