

# Webinar offers moment of rest amid chaos

By JO ANN DEASY

Earlier this month, Amy Steele, assistant dean for student affairs and community life at Vanderbilt University Divinity School, led a group of 40 ATS student administrative personnel on a one-hour spiritual reflection through the works of Howard Thurman—prominent philosopher, theologian, and civil rights leader. The webinar was a gift to those present, providing a moment of Sabbath rest in the midst of a chaotic year.



If you are also in need of a moment of Sabbath, to follow is an outline of the webinar along with some resources to guide you through your own Sabbath journey with Steele and the works of Thurman. This journey is an invitation into a time of Sabbath, communal rest, and deep listening to the approaching season of winter. It can be done individually or with a group. You may also [view the full video](#) to walk through this webinar along with Steele.

## **Introduction: mindfulness tethered to this world**

Steele began the webinar by sharing her understanding of mindfulness, contemplative practices, and the role of Sabbath in our lives. As you prepare to enter this Sabbath journey, reflect on these quotes:

*“Some religions are centrally concerned with the holiness in time. Some religions build great cathedrals or temples, but Judaism constructs the Sabbath as an architecture of time.”*

—Heschel, Abraham, *The Sabbath* (NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1951)

- If Sabbath is an architecture of time, it

requires a different sensibility that leads us to “sense” the world differently, with a different orientation. How might this Sabbath moment help reorient you?

- In Mark 1:35-36, Jesus gets up early in the morning to pray. Jesus himself recognized the importance of contemplation and prayer to the spiritual life. Notice that even when seeking solitude, people were hunting for Jesus, like people are often hunting for us. Notice as well that when he was found, Jesus answered “Let us go on...” Contemplation and prayer were not about withdrawing from the world, but rather prepared Jesus to reengage the mission.

## **Beginning the journey: navigating the chaos**

As ATS personnel, we have been experiencing and leading communities through an increasing number of crises in recent years including racialized hatred, xenophobia, unraveling social safety nets, climate change, natural disasters, and the list goes on and on. And now a global pandemic costing some their jobs, their homes, and their lives. COVID-19 has required personnel to quickly pivot to new platforms for learning, for community, and for responsible leadership—all while continuing to maintain boundaries among work, home, school, recreation, and place of worship.

As we move into this time of Sabbath, we invite you to:

- Take 15 seconds to think about the crises or headlines that have been contributing to your sense of the chaos swirling around us.
- Spend another 15 seconds writing down your answers either in a journal or in a group chat if you are doing this with others.

If you would like, [watch a short video](#) from the webinar on the crises shared by colleagues and the call by Thurman to maintain a mindful presence of the world.

While we are tempted to withdraw “from the world,” even temporarily, the challenge is to maintain a mindful presence “of the world,” awaiting revelation and emergence of divine goodness, out of which we then mobilize and engage. For, as Thurman points out, all things, even the crises we have named, are in candidacy for the glory of God.

“... the religious man [sic] may recognize that all the world is made up of raw materials which stand in immediate candidacy for the realization of the kingdom, the rule of God. This is a very far-reaching insight with profound radical implications... if God is the Creator of life in its totality, that all things are in candidacy for the achievement of the high and holy end.”

—Thurman, “The World is Too Much with Us,” *Meditations of the Heart*

## Moving into mindfulness

Now is the time to move into the stillness and contemplative moment of this Sabbath. Follow the steps below for three moments of mindfulness.

- To begin, let's practice some stillness. Find a comfortable place to sit with a place to write close at hand.
- Begin with 90 seconds of stillness. Be quiet. Be mindful of your breathing.

## Mindfulness through uncertainty

- Reflect on the following reading from Thurman's The Mood of Christmas:

### "To Be Secure"

What if the sky falls,  
The earth quakes,  
The mountain turns upside down,  
The swelling sea dries up,  
And the sun comes down,  
To one who has attained the perfect Lord?

These words from a seventh-century Tamil poet gives expression to the ultimate basis of certainty in the midst of the shifting scenes of human experience. The inference is that under normal circumstances, man (sic) establishes his sense of certainty and permanence by the presence of these qualities in the external world of nature. Always there is the sky; though there be comets, shooting stars, eclipses, lowering clouds, the sky remains with, in, and beyond all the activities in the heavens. It is difficult to measure the significance of this fact in inspiring confidence in the generations of men (sic). The earth is regarded as sure and solid. Even the phrase “terra firma” carries the meaning of the substantial, stable earth underfoot. This is one of the reasons why an earthquake is basically terrifying. The very citadel of certainty of place, moment, and position is undermined in the moment when the too too solid earth shifts and shakes.

How often in the long story of man (sic) on the planet have poets and singers appealed to the mountains for reassurance and for confidence. Each of us responds to the Psalmist, “I will lift up mine eyes to the hills.” If the mountains were turned upside down, it is difficult to structure the acute desperation that would grip the spirit of man (sic). And the sea—the source and the goal of all the waters of all the land. The sea is—ships may go down, the earth itself may shift and lose its boundaries, but the oceans continue to ebb and flow and the fears come and go. If the sea dried up—the thought is too terrible to contemplate. The poet insists, however, that if all these things happen, the spirit of man (sic) who has found deep within himself (sic) the dwelling place of God, would be secure. Why! Because certainty, assurance, is a quality of being and not in the materials of the context in which one may be living, regardless of their stability. Only such a person can abide all of experience and look out upon life with quiet eyes.

- Spend three minutes journaling about the following: With so much that is unpredictable, who or what are your anchors?

## Mindfulness through the seasons

- Reflect on the following reading from Thurman's

The Mood of Christmas:

### "The Night View of the World"

That the day view follows the night view is written large in nature. Indeed it is one with nature itself. The clouds gather heavy with unshed tears; at last they burst, sending over the total landscape waters gathered from the silent offering of sea and river. The next day dawns and the whole heavens are aflame with the glorious brilliance of the sun. This is the way the rhythm moves. The fall of the year comes, then winter with its trees stripped of leaf and bud; cold winds ruthless in bitterness and sting. Once day there is sleet and ice; in the silence of the nighttime the snow falls soundlessly—all this until at last the cold seems endless and all there is seems to be shadowy and foreboding. The earth is weary and heavy. Then something stirs—a strange new vitality pushed everything. Once can feel the pressure of some vast energy pushing, always pushing through dead branches, slumbering roots—life surges everywhere within and without. Spring has come. The day usurps the night view.

Is there any wonder that deeper than idea and concept is the insistent conviction that the night can never stay, that winter is ever moving toward the spring? Thus when a man (sic) sees the lights go out one by one, when he sees the end of his days marked by death—his death—he senses rather than knows that even the night into which he is entering will be followed by day. It remains for religion to give this ancient wisdom phrase and symbol. For millions of men and women in many climes this phrase and this symbol are forever one with Jesus, the Prophet from Galilee. When the preacher says as part of the last rites, "I am the Resurrection and the Life,..." he (sic) is reminding us all of the ancient wisdom: "Upon the night view of the world, a day view must follow."

- Spend three minutes journaling about the following:  
Gazing deep into the heart of your own experience, what vitality, if any, has been pushing you forward?

## Mindfulness through the long stillness

- Reflect on the following reading from Thurman's

The Mood of Christmas:

### "This is the Season of Promise"

Let the bells be silenced

Let the gifts be stillborn

Let cheer be muted

Let music be soundless

Violence stalks the land:

Soaring above the cry of the dying

Rising above the whimper of the starving

Floating above the flying machines of death

Listen to the long stillness:

New life is stirring

New dreams are on the wing

New hopes are being readied:

Mankind (sic) is fashioning a new heart

Mankind is forging a new mind

God is at work.

This is the Season of Promise.

- Spend three minutes journaling about the following:  
What long stillness have you witnessed? What promises have begun stirring?

## Moving back into the world

As we close:

- Let's once again practice stillness. Be still for 90 seconds.  
Be mindful of your breathing.

As we come back to the world:

- If you are doing this reflection with a group, take a moment now to share with one another any reactions or reflections you might have for the good of the group.

Steele concluded the webinar with a reading of "Look to the Growing Edge" by Thurman and a song by India Arie titled "I Am Light!" She then shared the following hopes for each of you.

"My hope is that we remain mindful through uncertainty, mindful through the seasons, mindful through the long stillness, and mindful through the arch of time."

We pray that these readings and this time of reflection can provide you a moment of Sabbath rest in the midst of the chaos. We thank God for each of you and the work you do to serve your students and institutions. You bring light to this world.



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