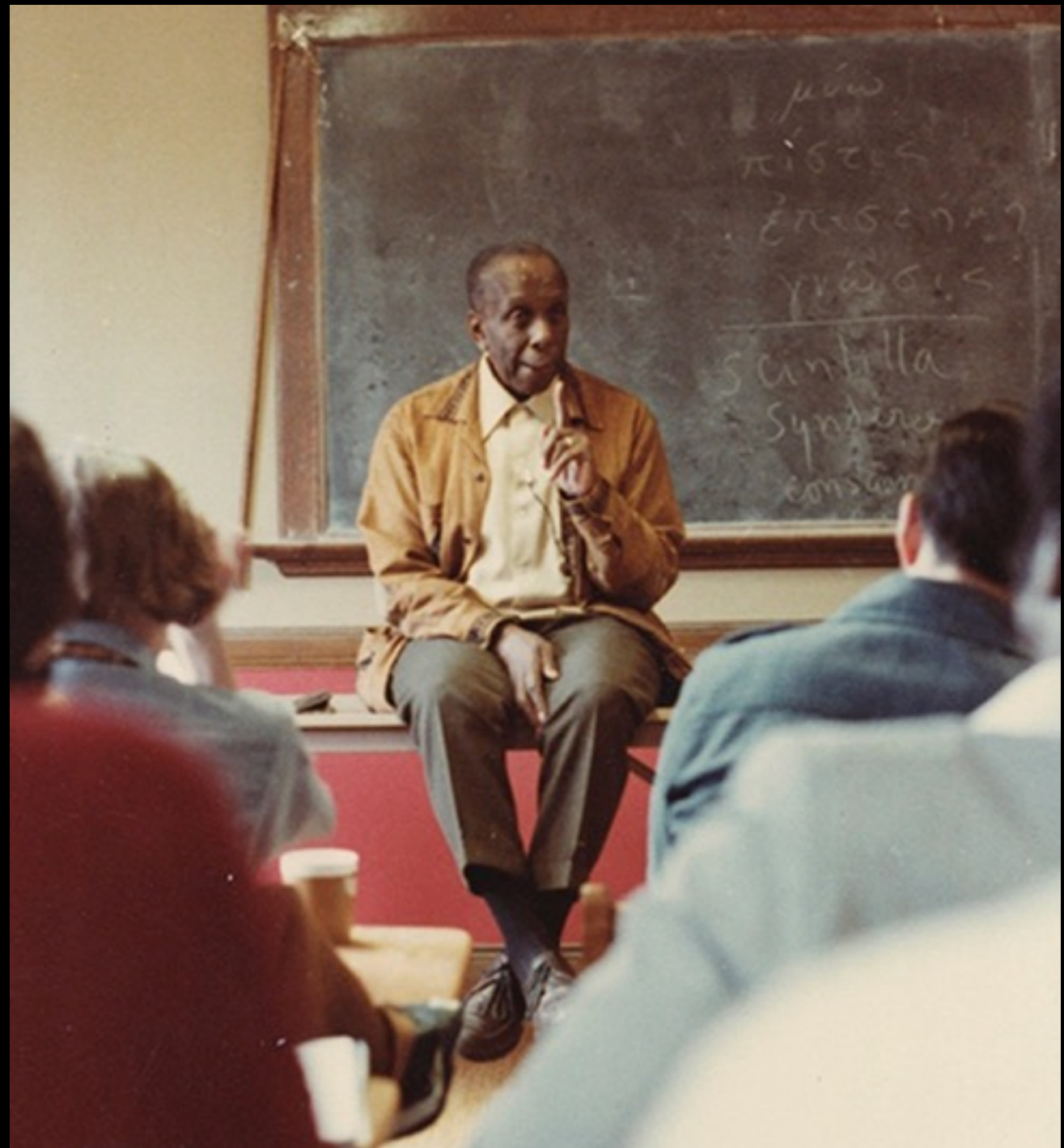


certainty, uncertainty  
and the path of  
descent

my conversation partner:

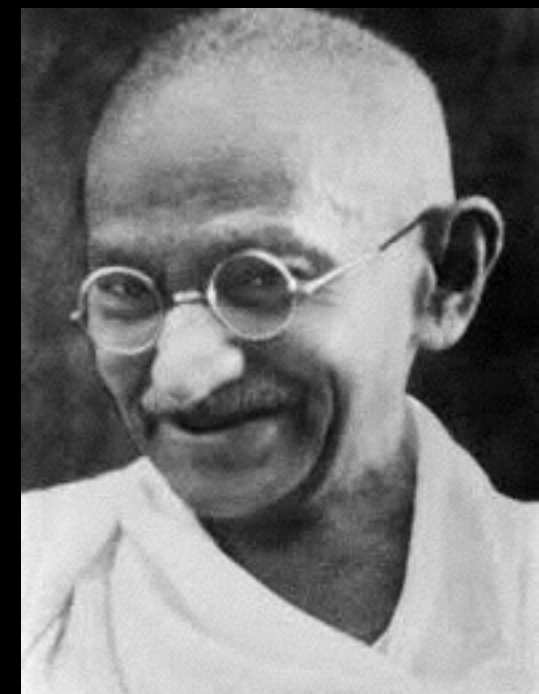






1935

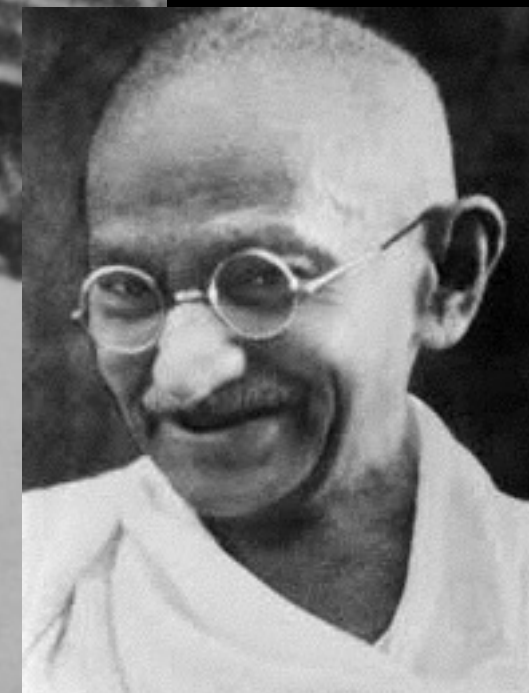




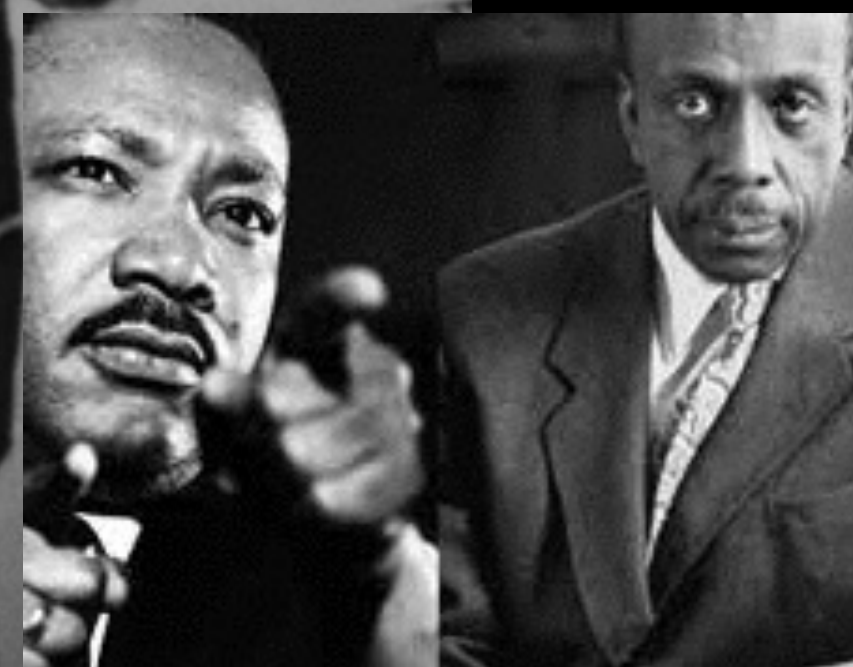
1935







1935

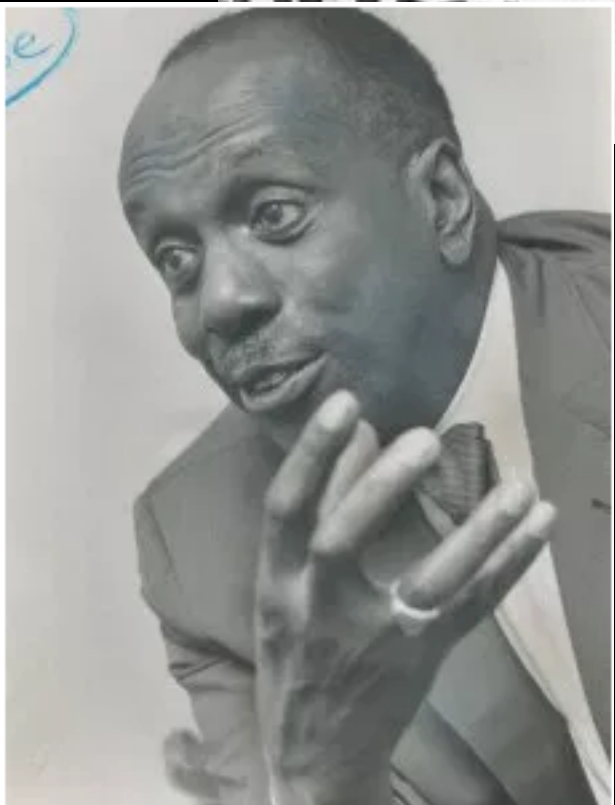
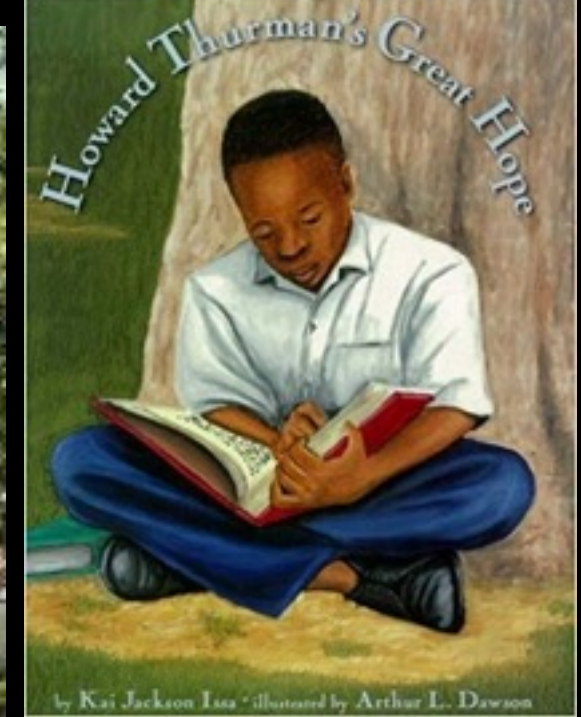




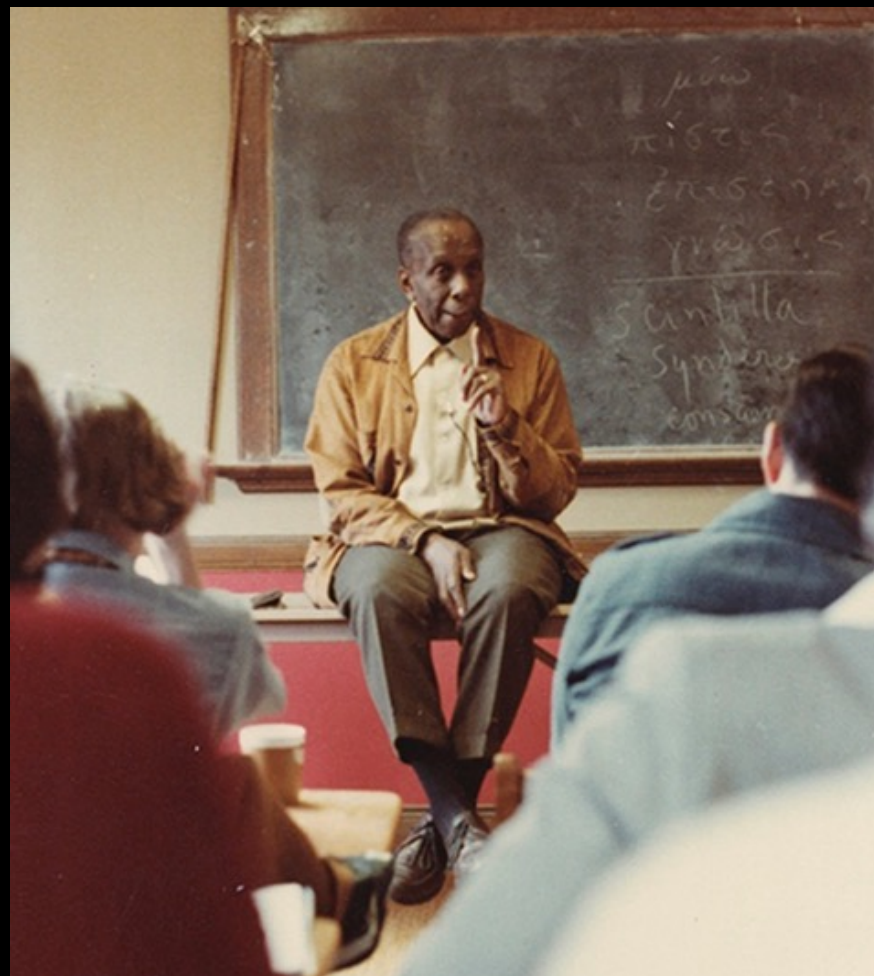
October 3, 1904 — Mary McLeod Bethune opens the Daytona Educational and Industrial Training School for Negro Girls.



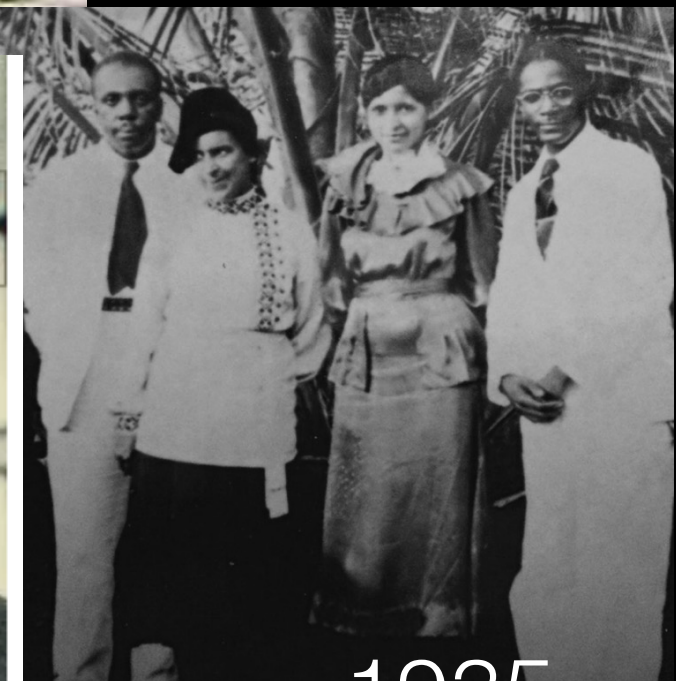
Daytona Beach



1899-1981



1949



1935



1929



1955



1906 - father died.

family pastor ... refused to conduct service for non-churchgoer

traveling minister ... “preached my father into hell.”

mother - became a domestic worker to support family

howard raised by grandmother Nancy - former slave, dedicated to the “magic” of education

Married Kate Kelly, who died 3 years later of TB

Later married Sue Bailey.

Howard experienced descent early ...



certainty, uncertainty  
and the path of  
descent



1. the logos of creation
2. the logic of authoritarianism
3. the tunnel to liberation
4. the sound of the genuine
- [brief pause]
5. descent as dissent



# 1. the logos of creation





For Thurman, the path of  
descent is written into  
the logos or pattern or  
rhythm of creation ...

in river, night, an oak, the  
sea, the soil.



As a child I was accustomed to spending many hours alone in my rowboat, fishing along the river, when there was no sound save the lapping of the waves against the boat. There were times when it seemed as if the earth and the river and the sky and I were one beat of the same pulse. It was a time of watching and waiting for what I did not know—yet I always knew. There would come a moment when beyond the single pulse beat there was a sense of Presence which seemed always to speak to me. My response to the sense of Presence always had the quality of personal communion. There was no voice. There was no image. There was no vision. There was God. (Disciplines of the Spirit)

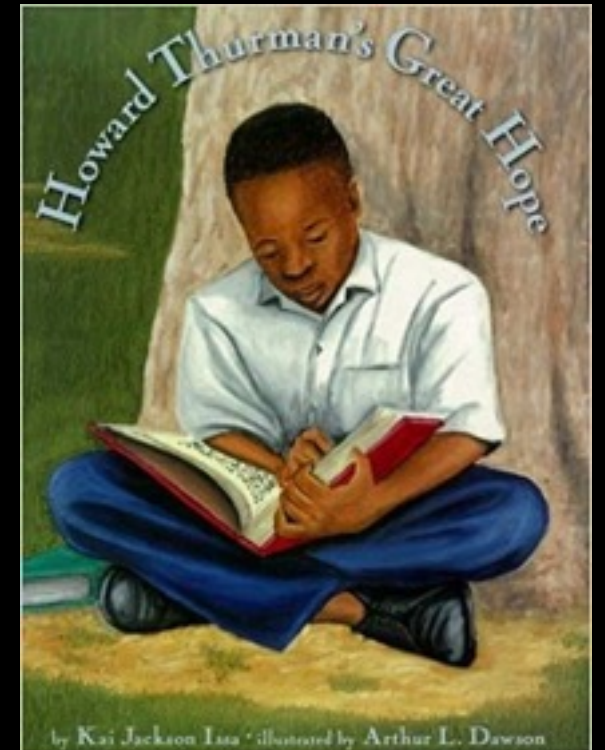






Nightfall...was a presence. The nights in Florida, as I grew up, seemed to have certain dominant characteristics. They were not dark; they were black. When there was no moon, the stars hung like lanterns, so close I felt that one could reach up and pluck them from the heavens. The night had its own language....At such times I could hear the night think, and feel the night feel. This comforted me...I felt embraced, enveloped, held secure. In some fantastic way, the night belongs to me. (With Head and Heart)

Eventually I discovered that the oak tree and I had a unique relationship. I could sit my back against its trunk, and feel the same peace that would come to me in my bed at night. I could reach down in the quiet places of my spirit, take out my bruises and my joys, unfold them, and talk about them. I could talk aloud to the oak tree and know that I was understood. It, too, was part of my reality, like the woods, the night, and the pounding surf, my earliest companions, giving me space.  
(With Head and Heart)







“Here I found, alone, a special benediction. The ocean and the night together surrounded my little life with a reassurance that could not be affronted by the behavior of human beings. The ocean at night gave me a sense of timelessness, of existing beyond the reach of the ebb and flow of circumstances ... - Howard Thurman  
(<http://fore.yale.edu/news/item/eye-on-the-sparrow/>)

The earth beneath my feet is the great womb out of which the life upon which my body depends comes in utter abundance. There is at work in the soil a mystery by which the death of one seed is reborn a thousandfold in newness of life ... it is order, and more than order—there is a brooding tenderness out of which it all comes. In the contemplation of the earth, I know that I am surrounded by the love of God. -1953 (Surrounded by the Love of God)







[For Jesus] God breathed through all that is: the sparrow overcome by sudden death in its flight; the lily blossoming on the rocky hillside; the grass of the field and the clouds, light and burdenless or weighted down with unshed waters; the madman in chains or wandering among the barren rocks in the wastelands; the little baby in his mother's arms. - 1963 (Disciplines of the Spirit)

“That the day view follows the night view is written large in nature. Indeed, it is one with nature. 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 wave. The next day dawns, the whole heavens are aflame with the glorious brilliance of the sun. **This is the way the rhythm moves.**” - Howard Thurman





**This is the way the  
rhythm \* moves.**

**\* pattern, logos**



**in the contemplative mind,  
we learn to sense the  
divine pattern, logos,  
dance, music, beat,  
meaning, light, rhythm ...**

**moving in all things.**

**this is a pattern of cyclical  
ascent, descent, ascent,  
descent ...**

**and we are part of it.**





1. the logos of creation

2. the logic of authoritarianism





in contrast to  
the  
contemplative  
mind, the  
authoritarian  
mind seeks  
control over  
creation's  
logos.





the authoritarian mind  
requires shallow  
certainty rather than a  
deep logos.



## **authoritarianism ...**

uses the threat of social punishment to reinforce conformity to the certainties of social hierarchy, social dogma, and social convention.

a crucial tactic of authoritarians is to require you to pretend to be certain about things you do not actually understand or believe.

having pressured you to perjure yourself, they subvert your genuineness and hold a mortgage on your loyalty.



In authoritarian religion, claims of certainty are required for  
unity: certainty about hierarchy, dogma, and/or liturgy/  
polity

your loss of certainty can lead to **banishment**

which creates **social anxiety**

which pressures “**false confessions**” and **insincerity**

which turns belief into **make-believe/hypocrisy**

which fosters **complicity and compliance**

which squelches **curiosity and wonder**

which leads to **spiritual death** and **social reward**.

If it weren't for doubt,

we would still believe the earth is in the center of 6000 year old universe. (We might even believe the earth is flat.)

white people would still believe they are superior. And so would men. (Sadly, some haven't come to doubt this yet.)

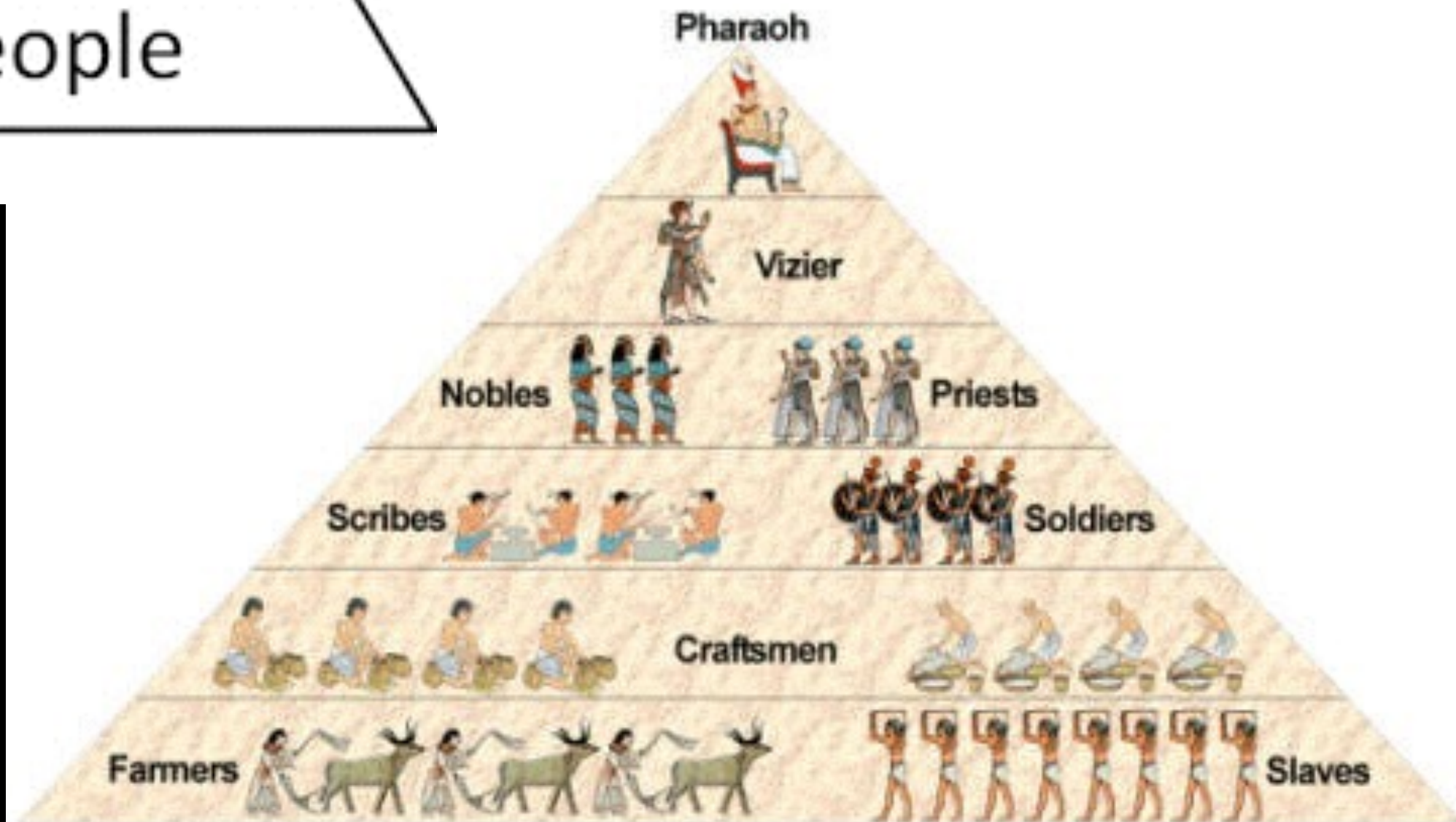
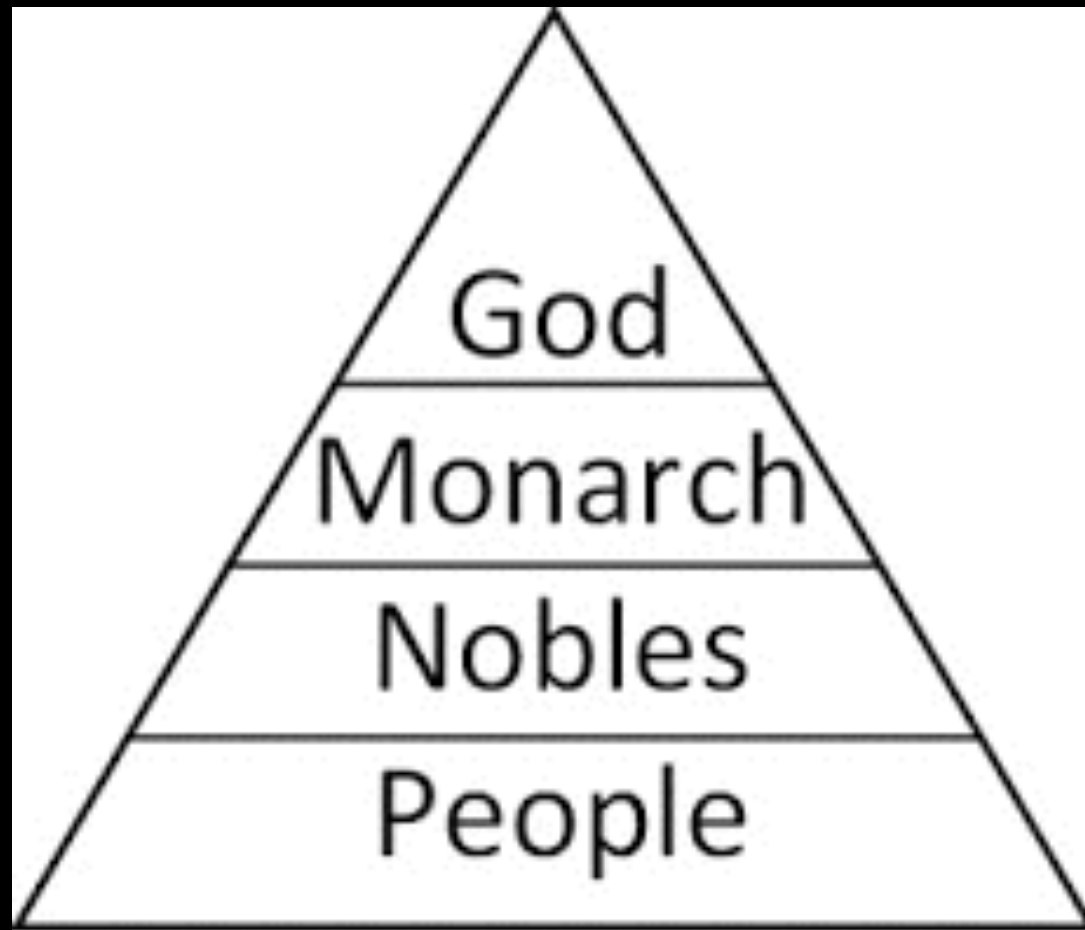
we would think diseases are caused by curses, not germs.

we would still believe in the divine right of kings and we would see democracy as a heresy.



the uncertainty of doubt is the escape tunnel  
out of authoritarian religion  
and into deeper faith.







1. the logos of creation

2. the logic of authoritarianism

3. the tunnel to liberation



the descent from cheap certainty  
to deeper wisdom  
often happens in stages.



in “naked spirituality,” i sketched  
out a four-stage process of  
descent from certainty

into a deeper non-certain/non-  
dual knowing.

(the four stages i sketch  
out sync up well with  
richard rohr’s 2 halves of  
life)

# Naked Spirit- uality

A LIFE WITH GOD  
IN 12 SIMPLE WORDS

BRIAN D.  
MCLAREN

Author of A New Kind of Christianity

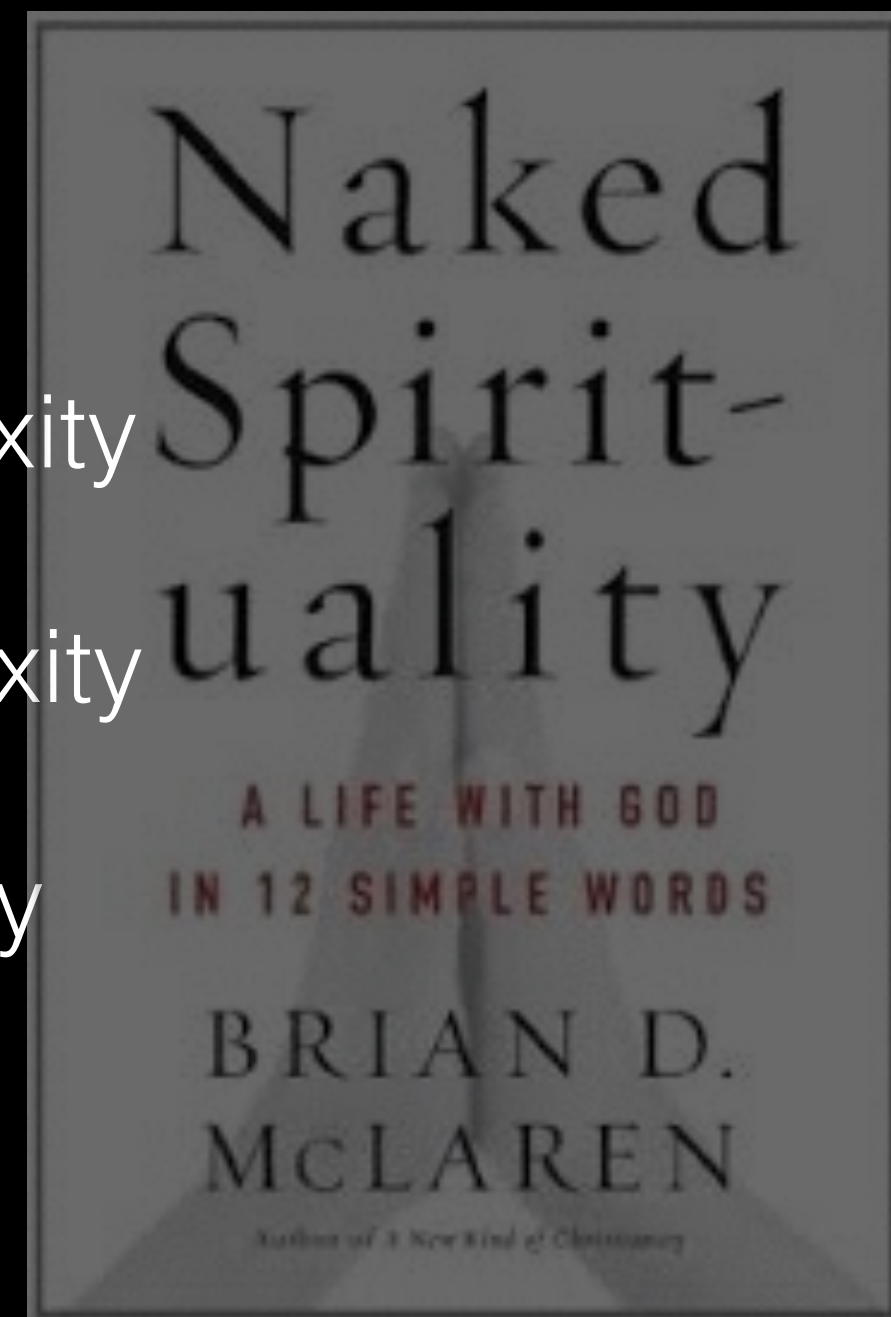
simple certainty ... spring/simplicity

complex certainty ... summer/complexity

collapsing certainty ... autumn/perplexity

naked non-certainty ... winter/harmony

and the process iterates like a spiral.





inherited/simple certainty ... spring/**simplicity**

dualism, dependent (codependent)

complex certainty ... summer/**complexity**

pragmatism, independent

collapsing certainty ... autumn/**perplexity**

relativism, counterdepeindent

stripped non-certainty ... winter/**harmony**

mysticism, interdependent

simple certainty ... spring/**simplicity**

dualism, dependent (codependent)

complex certainty ... summer/**complexity**

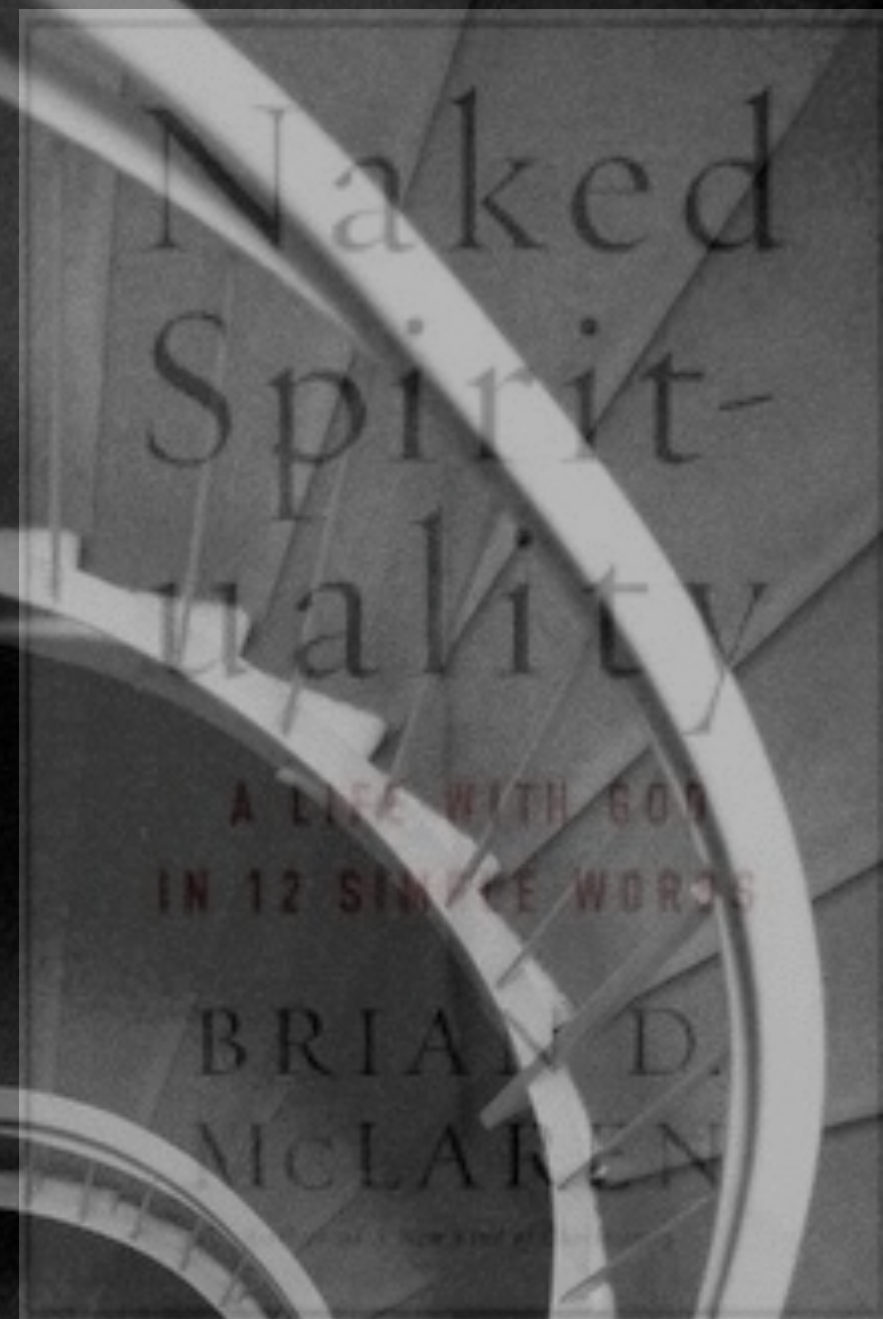
pragmatism, independent

collapsing certainty ... autumn/**perplexity**

relativism, counterdepeindent

stripped non-certainty ... winter/**harmony**

mysticism, interdependent





when you stop needing to reach  
predetermined conclusions

(because authoritarian systems require them),

when you discover “blessed uncertainty” and  
fall through its tunnel ...

you awaken to  
the sound of the genuine.

1. the logos of creation
2. the logic of authoritarianism
3. the tunnel to liberation
4. the sound of the genuine



blessed uncertainty as twilight (dusk, dawn)

... there is twilight, the creative isthmus joining day with night. It is the time of pause when nature changes her guard. It is the lung of time by which the rhythmic respiration of day and night are guaranteed and sustained. All living things would fade and die from too much light or too much darkness, if twilight were not. In the midst of all the madness of the present hour, twilights remain, and will settle down upon the world at the close of day and usher in the nights in endless succession, despite bombs, rockets, and flying death. This is good to remember.

- Howard Thurman



blessed uncertainty as the growing edge

Look well to the growing edge. All around us worlds are dying and new worlds are being born; all around us life is dying and life is being born. The fruit ripens on the tree, the roots are silently at work in the darkness of the earth against a time when there shall be new leaves, fresh blossoms, green fruit. Such is the growing edge. It is the extra breath from the exhausted lung, the one more thing to try when all else has failed, the upward reach of life when weariness closes in upon all endeavor. This is the basis of hope in moments of despair, the incentive to carry on when times are out of joint and men and women have lost their reason, the source of confidence when worlds crash and dreams whiten into ash. Such is the growing edge incarnate. Look well to the growing edge.

- Howard Thurman

blessed uncertainty as flow

I say that creeds, dogmas, and theologies are inventions of the mind. It is the nature of the mind to make sense out of experience, to reduce the conglomerates of experience to units of comprehension which we call principles, or ideologies, or concepts. **Religious experience is dynamic, fluid, effervescent, yeasty.** But the mind can't handle these so it has to imprison religious experience in some way, get it bottled up. Then, when the experience quiets down, the mind draws a bead on it and extracts concepts, notions, dogmas, so that religious experience can make sense to the mind. - Howard Thurman

blessed uncertainty as the

“i don’t know ...”

and letting go

of curiosity

that prepares the way of the Lord



blessed uncertainty is our refusal  
to settle for something less than  
the sound of the genuine.

i don't know

twilight

blessed uncertainty

refusal to settle

letting go

the growing edge

the sound of the genuine

From Commencement Speech, Spelman College, 1980

There is something in every one of you that waits, listens for **the sound of the genuine in yourself** and if you cannot hear it, you will never find whatever it is for which you are searching and if you hear it and then do not follow it, it was better that you had never been born...

You are the only you that has ever lived; your idiom is the only idiom of its kind in all of existence and if you cannot hear **the sound of the genuine** in you, you will all of your life spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls...

There is in you something that waits and listens for **the sound of the genuine** in yourself and sometimes there is so much traffic going on in your minds, so many different kinds of signals, so many vast impulses floating through your organism that go back thousands of generations, long before you were even a thought in the mind of creation, and you are buffeted by these, and in the midst of all of this you have got to find out what your name is. Who are you? How does **the sound of the genuine** come through to you...



**The sound of the genuine** is flowing through you. Don't be deceived and thrown off by all the noises that are a part even of your dreams, your ambitions, so that you don't hear **the sound of the genuine** in you, because that is the only true guide that you will ever have, and if you don't have that you don't have a thing.

You may be famous. You may be whatever the other ideals are which are a part of this generation, but you know you don't have the foggiest notion of who you are, where you are going, what you want. Cultivate the discipline of listening to **the sound of the genuine** in yourself

Now there is something in everybody that waits and listens for **the sound of the genuine** in other people... I must wait and listen for **the sound of the genuine** in you. I must wait. For if I cannot hear it, then in my scheme of things, you are not even present. And everybody wants to feel that everybody else knows that she is there.

I want to feel that I am thoroughly and completely understood so that now and then I can take my guard down and look out around me and not feel that I will be destroyed with my defenses down. I want to feel completely vulnerable, completely naked, completely exposed and absolutely secure.... that I can run the risk of radical exposure and know that the eye that beholds my vulnerability will not step on me. That I can feel secure in my awareness of the active presence of my own idiom in me.

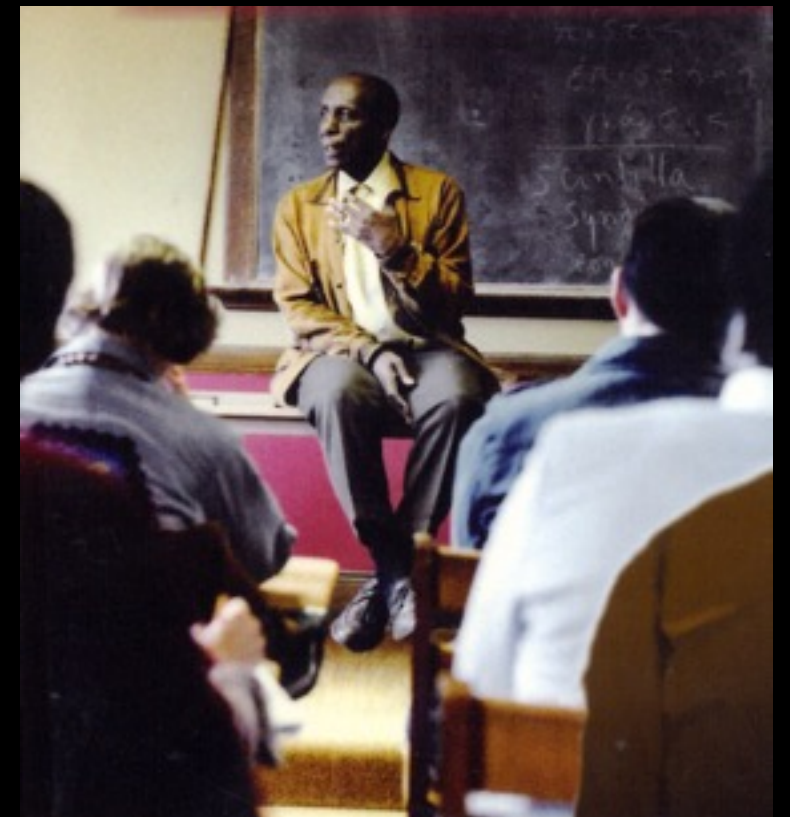
So as I live my life then, this is what I am trying to fulfill. It doesn't matter whether I become a doctor, lawyer, housewife. I'm secure because I hear **the sound of the genuine** in myself and having learned to listen to that, I can become quiet enough, still enough, to hear **the sound of the genuine** in you.

Now if I hear **the sound of the genuine** in me, and if you hear the sound of the genuine in you, it is possible for me to go down in me and come up in you. So that when I look at myself through your eyes having made that pilgrimage, I see in me what you see in me and the wall that separates and divides will disappear and we will become one because **the sound of the genuine** makes the same music.

simple certainty  
complex certainty  
collapsing certainty  
naked uncertainty  
... as we listen for the sound of the genuine

**“This is the way the rhythm moves.”**

- Howard Thurman





1. the logos of creation
  2. the logic of authoritarianism
  3. the tunnel to liberation
  4. the sound of the genuine
- [a brief pause]



# so far

what is one word or phrase,

one image or idea

that has most resonated within you as “the sound of  
the genuine?”

1. the logos of creation
2. the logic of authoritarianism
3. the tunnel to liberation
4. the sound of the genuine
5. descent as dissent





Thinking and knowing are social acts. Our individual thinking is deeply connected to our communal knowing.

So, our descent from those certainties required by authoritarian communities becomes a form of individual dissent ...

In other words, consent to “the sound of the genuine” within is dissent from the logic of authoritarianism enforced from outside.

(contemplation is inherently political.)

Sustained dissent requires we develop “the courage to differ graciously”\* with the climbing, grasping authoritarian structures of empire ...

which is at the heart of the teaching of Jesus.

When he speaks of gathering in his name, he means gathering in this identity of descent, self-emptying, and doubt regarding authoritarian structures.



“where two or three are gathered

in my identity ...

in my genuineness ...

in my depth and flow ...

in my role ...

in my descent and dissent ...

in my name ...

i am there.” - Jesus

this identification with the mind of Christ is at the heart of an early Christian hymn in Philippians 2.

The grasping of Adam to ascend to “be like God” and attain “the certain knowledge of good and evil” is contrasted with the self-emptying of Christ. Here is that hymn rendered as a simple chant:

Let this mind be in us,

Let this mind be in us,

The mind of Christ Jesus.

Christ being in the image of God ...  
Did not count equality with God

Something to be grasped,  
But he poured out himself,



By taking the very nature of an  
oppressed person,  
And being born in the human condition./

And being found in human form,

He humbled himself.

He became obedient to the point of death,

Even death upon a cross...

Even death upon a cross...

Therefore God exalted him to the  
highest place.\

God gave him the highest name of all,  
So that at Jesus' name/  
All knees should bend/  
All tongues confess/

That Jesus Christ is our leader,  
To the glory of God the Father,  
Who works in us to desire/  
And do God's good pleasure.



Let this mind be in us,

Let this mind be in us,

The mind of Christ Jesus.

Amen.

Through this path of descent,  
following Christ in downward mobility,  
we are liberated from false certainties  
to define and be ourselves apart from pyramid  
structures of authoritarianism,  
as liberated individuals.

as liberated contemplative individuals,  
we come together  
in communities of action and contemplation.  
when those communities link and flow together,  
they form  
spiritual movements of liberation,  
movements of spiritual activism.

That's why we need safe relational places - **like this conference and the CAC** - to descend with others who are learning the path of descent.

2 or 3

20 or 30

200 or 300

2000 or 3000



the movement begins when we become “soul friends” to one another on the path of descent ... journeying together from cheap certainty to deep faith and connection.

As we descend and flow together, spiritual movements may take shape, opening new possibilities in God’s ongoing story of creation.

Do you feel this call ...

to seek the logos of creation

and dissent from the false certainties

required by the logic of authoritarianism ...

to descend in the tunnel to liberation

in search of the sound of the genuine

in a spiritual movement of justice, joy, and  
peace?

Let your soul say, “I will”  
as you listen to this  
song in closing.



I Will

by Andy Gullahorn

learn more at: <http://www.andygullahorn.com/>

If you have questions,  
please write them and  
deposit them in the box  
outside the door -  
or send them in online.



I'll make these slides  
available next week at:

[brianmclaren.net](http://brianmclaren.net)

