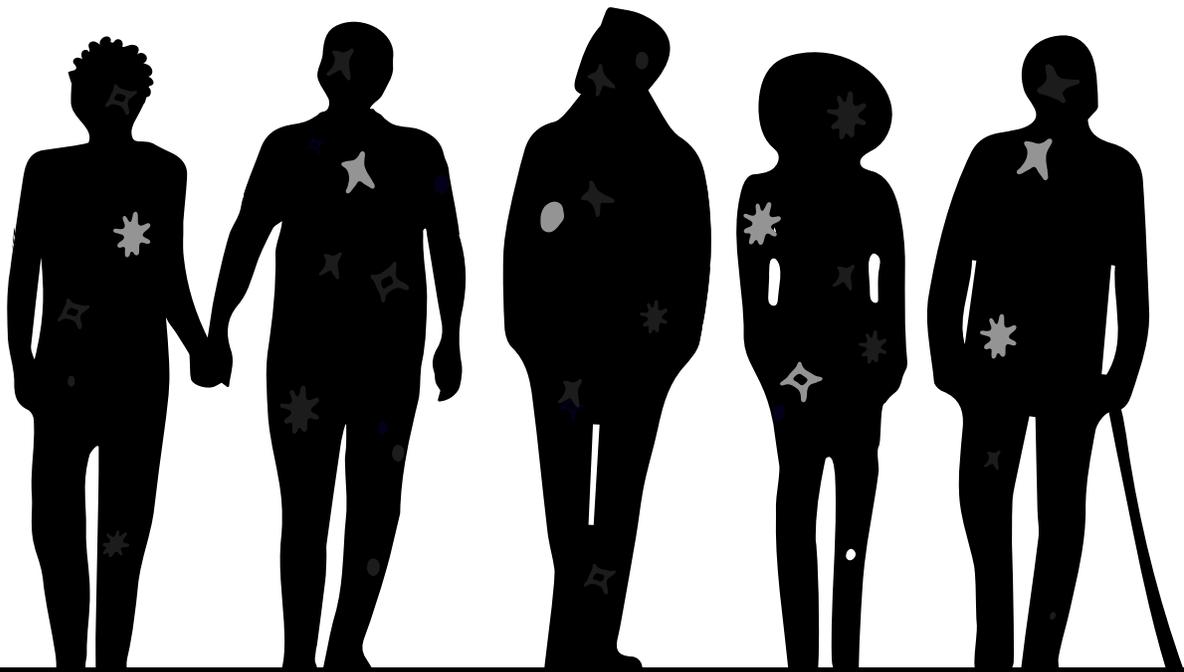


THE COSMIC WE

Episode 4:
Ritual Journeys through Grief and Joy
with Dr. Walter Earl Fluker



from the CENTER FOR ACTION AND CONTEMPLATION

Walter Fluker: I wrote Thurman a long letter, and I was going through a terrible trial, and I said, “Doc, I’m not sure what I should do next. Should I do a PhD? Or should I go on to law school where I have some real interest?” He basically told me I was like a little boy sitting on a Christmas tree with a lot of gifts, and didn’t know which one to open. Then he said, and his famous word, “You must wait and listen for the sound of the genuine that is within you.” When you hear it, that will be your voice, and that will be the voice of God.”

Walter Fluker: We hardly know the grief of our suffering, and certainly among black people, but it’s true for all of us as you think of the cosmic we and this universal moan, even creation is moaning. Why shouldn’t we?

Barbara Holmes: This podcast explores the mystery of relatedness as an organizing principle of the universe and of our lives.

Donny Bryant: We’re trying to catch a glimpse of connections beyond color, continent, country, or kinship through science, mysticism, spirituality, and the creative arts. I’m Donny Bryant.

Barbara Holmes: I’m Barbara Holmes, and this is the Cosmic We. We are delighted to have Dr. Walter Fluker with us today, a scholar, a friend, a theological giant in the field. His resume is far too extensive to share here, but I do want you to know that he was born in Valden, Mississippi, in a section affectionately referred to as Frogbottom. Near his hometown is a town where Fanny Lou Heymer sustained that merciless beating. Also, nearby is a place where Oprah Winfrey grew up. Dr. Fluker is a UCC minister, served as a chaplain in the army, and for universities, graduated from Trinity College in philosophy, and biblical studies. Received his master’s of divinity from Garret Evangelical, and his PhD from Boston University.

Barbara Holmes: He has served as professor at Vanderbilt, Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity, Morehouse and Boston University, his alma mater. Hello Dr. Fluker, so glad to see you.

Walter Fluker: Hello. I’m so glad to see you, and to be seen.

Barbara Holmes: I think the last time we were together was at the opening of the first book in the Thurman paper series. I looked around and all five were finished. It was something amazing. Tell us a little bit about your history. Tell us about how you grew up, and what it was like in Valden, Mississippi.

Walter Fluker: Well, I was born in Vaden, Mississippi.

Barbara Holmes: Vaden, thank you for that correction.

Walter Fluker: It was near Winona in Mississippi. Everything is near some other big town. Winona was the place where most of the migrants going north, points north, were able to take the train north. In 1956, my daddy took that train running from Mr. Joe Han, and the plantation economy of Mississippi, and sent for his children, my brother, Beatrice, and my mom, Zeti, to meet with my two older sisters who had already escaped.

Walter Fluker: So, I took the city of New Orleans, that train that has carried many thousands, to Chicago, and I grew up on the south side of Chicago in a neighborhood that Oscar Brown Jr. used to say, people don't live so good, where the rooms are small and the buildings are made of wood. We were members of a little storefront church, Centennial Missionary Baptist Church, and I'm still an ordained baptist. But I grew up in that small storefront church where people would stand up and give their testimony, and my mother's testimony each Tuesday night. No matter what we were doing, she would make us go to church and we would hear this litany, which was hers.

Walter Fluker: I have rose to give you my testimony. The Lord has been good to me. He's brought me from a mighty long way, etc. etc. Finally, she said Lord it's hard raising these children, but I place them in the hands of the Lord and I know that you are able to keep them from falling. That was my momma.

Barbara Holmes: Wow.

Walter Fluker: She was an usher. I write about her in the book, *The Ground that Shifted*, but she was an arthritic illiterate, but she knew Jesus in the pardon of her sins. Zeti Fluker, and my daddy was not a church goer. I think it was mainly because of the kind of respectability associated with going to church on Sunday. He'd need a suit and he'd have to act proper and all that stuff. That wasn't daddy's way of being in the world. He was a very wonderfully beautiful human being. I mean physically and personality wise, just very, very wonderful person, quiet often.

Walter Fluker: Both mom and dad were certainly of African decent, but there's a strong Choctaw Native American vein in our family. There's a little town in the Northeast corner of Louisiana. Its name is Fluker.

Barbara Holmes: Really? You get around.

Walter Fluker: So I was born about two hours from there driving, but I'm sure I'm convinced that that is the plantation out of which many of the Flukers whom you'll meet around the country had their origins in this plantation economy.

Barbara Holmes: Wow. My goodness. Before we move away from the ancestors and the elders, I want to ask you about your grandmother.

Walter Fluker: Oh Lord.

Barbara Holmes: Your grandmother Moore, you mentioned was a medicine woman.

Walter Fluker: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Barbara Holmes: Born with the veil just like Howard Thurman.

Walter Fluker: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Barbara Holmes: For those who don't know what that means, it means you see to the other side.

Walter Fluker: You can see things.

Barbara Holmes: Yes sir.

Walter Fluker: We called her affectionately Mo. That's the way it's really pronounced because it's that pigeon of this Creole mixture in Louisiana, the Mo. Mo didn't take any stuff off white people, black people or anybody. She was fearless and my folks would always say the white folks called her a crazy nigger because she didn't take no stuff. There's a legend in the family. Whether it's true or not, they came to take our family's goods when my father was working on the Mississippi levy, when the levy broke.

Walter Fluker: The boss man came to take away our goods, the refrigerator. We call it frigid air in Mississippi. Take away the frigid air and the cow. They said Mo walked out with her shotgun cocked, put her feet, boot really, on the fender of the truck and said, "Mr. Waller," wherever his name was, but Waller is what I remember, "I can spend the rest of my time in hell. How about you?"

Barbara Holmes: She must have known my grandmother.

Walter Fluker: Those are my people.

Barbara Holmes: I come from stock just like that.

Walter Fluker: Mo was a midwife. She took care of a lot of the medicinal needs of the people, the residents in the area where my folks grew up. Most importantly, as you mentioned, she could see things. I have early memories of her being stern and sweet, if there's a combination. She smoked Paul Merrills and she drank whiskey out of the side of her mouth as she did Coca Cola. But just a powerful image that remains with me at all times, my Mo and my mother.

Walter Fluker: My father is very close to me as an ancestor, but when I'm in most trouble my mother shows up. I'm so glad I'm not bound by the academy nowadays. I can always tell my story the way I like to tell it.

Barbara Holmes: Free at last. Free at last.

Walter Fluker: As they say in the church, hallelujah.

Donny Bryant: Hallelujah.

Walter Fluker: Anyway, but my mom and dad, they come to me in dreams and in vision. I've had visions of my mom when I was being assaulted. Because I grew up bullied. I grew up on the south side of Chicago. You have to understand that. I was smart. I used to carry so many books they'd laugh at me. Sometimes I'd have books on my head and others in my arm coming because I wanted to know things when I was young. It was untypical. There were other smart, smarter than I smart people, but you didn't show up in public doing that.

Walter Fluker: So I was bullied and suffered through major gang violence, lost friends in gang wars. I was not a gang member. I went to church. The church was my

sanctuary. It was the place where we were able to live and breathe. Because of that history of violence and assault and being bullied, my folks always had a way of taking care of me even though they were all so violently assaulted as Southerners in this strange new urban environment for them. But they show up now always as guides and comforters.

Walter Fluker: I'll give you one quick example. This is a podcast and I know you have ... I'm a chronic sufferer of gout.

Donny Bryant: Okay.

Walter Fluker: So was my mom and it runs in the family, but once I had a huge problem with a gout attack and I woke up and there was my momma and Ms. Henrietta. That was her best friend. Both were deceased by then, or whatever that means, but they were working on a tree. They were just showing me this tree and the bark of the tree, and that this would help my gout. I knew that's what it meant. So I went to a health food store after that and I asked about remedies for gout and things associated with bark and trees.

Walter Fluker: I'd forgotten the name of the medicine. It's important. Normally I know it, but I actually found some medicine there. That's just one instance of the ways in which they show up. They've helped me not just in the United States of America but in travels all around the world. My momma, my daddy, and some other folks just show up. It's good to be crazy. It saves you from so many other things, from stilted reason.

Barbara Holmes: I think that's the most sanity that we can adopt. I think the churches lost something when it lost its mysticism. When you think about George Floyd and the newspapers saying, oh look, he's talking to his dead mother. He thinks his mother ... No, his mother had crossed over earlier to be there when he was ready to transition.

Walter Fluker: Right.

Barbara Holmes: He wasn't making it up or going crazy. She was standing there.

Walter Fluker: I agree. I agree.

Barbara Holmes: There's such a different view of what church means when you've got that.

Walter Fluker: Oh Lord.

Donny Bryant: Yeah.

Walter Fluker: Can I say one or two other things and I'll stop.

Barbara Holmes: Sure.

Donny Bryant: Absolutely.

Walter Fluker: I'll stop this train.

Barbara Holmes: No, don't stop. Don't stop.

Walter Fluker: But listen, I moved to Rochester in the late 80s or early 90s, my family and I, Sharon, our two boys. They were very young then. I was going through this transformation. I had a deep sense I was already thinking about doing something with Howard Thurman because I had met him and studied with him in the late 70s, and did a dissertation on Thurman and King. But this was a little different. I had received a Mellon faculty fellowship at Harvard. I was teaching at Harvard. They were courting me.

Walter Fluker: But Colgate Rochester showed up and I went on there as dean of Black church studies. That's the context. During this period, it was kind of like a breakthrough. There was so much agony associated with this, you should know. One day, my family and I walk into a bookstore, and books had started talking to me by then. I walked straight up to the counter and there is a bookshelf that says buy this Malidoma Patrice Somé of water and spirit.

Barbara Holmes: Of spirit.

Walter Fluker: I purchased the book. To make a long story short, read it all night. I said, wherever he is, I've got to find him. So I called. I pulled out my little Rolodex, couldn't find him. After long weeks of searching for Malidoma, I went into meditation and I got up, went to my bookshelf, and there in my pile of notes, those little sticky notes. Obviously I had picked up his number somewhere else because it was his number, Malidoma. I called him and I said, "Hello, may I speak to Malidoma Patrice Some?" He said, "This is Malidoma."

Walter Fluker: That started a life long friendship. We're very good friends, but it was through Malidoma and then his wife Sobonfu that I was involved in a grief ritual on Cortes Island off Vancouver, British Columbia. This island, all of these people from around the world were just going through these rituals. One evening ... I'm making a very long story short, but one evening during what the Dagra people called the grief ritual, where we pay our debt to the ancestors through grief, through weeping and moaning that universal moan.

Walter Fluker: So they told us just be free. I'm kind of colored. I'm not just Black. I'm kind of colored.

Barbara Holmes: I live that.

Walter Fluker: He said just be free, so they started playing the drum and Sobonfu was hitting some kind of shaking instrument. I just started getting down. Nobody there ... I'm the only African American, you should know, but I was just getting down. All at once, out of nowhere, my father is there.

Donny Bryant: Wow.

- Walter Fluker: I fell to my knees and I cried. I said, "Daddy, we miss you." He had died in 1984. I had performed a eulogy but never mourned him. I was too busy being me. I said, "Daddy, we miss you. Mama misses you, B misses you." I just went through the whole family. When I came to myself, all of the women had taken me to a corner in the room and they were rocking me. This Japanese woman whispers in my ears. She says, "You're only five years old." I didn't know what that meant then. It was years later when I discovered, when daddy left Mississippi in a hurry, he sent for us, thanks be to God. I was five years old.
- Walter Fluker: I was still grieving my daddy's departure.
- Barbara Holmes: Wow. Oh my goodness.
- Walter Fluker: That was one of the most healing moments in my life. He was more real than even in life real. So I have no doubt that ancestors not only exist, but they are present for us. They come to us in moments of great need and trial, and they also celebrate life's moments with us. They want to celebrate with us. I'm thankful. I mentioned Malidoma. I'm thankful that it was he who introduced me to this grief ritual, which I have revised and I use it often in workshops, especially with young Black males because there's so much grief.
- Barbara Holmes: Tell us a little bit about that ritual.
- Walter Fluker: Yeah, at Morehouse College, I was asked to become the head of the leadership center, or found the leadership center at Morehouse College. So I had a laboratory where I could work things. So these young men would come in a pre college program. What we would do, the way I revised it, was to play with the idea of Plato's allegory of the cave. They'd get used to this, but they would be in a room where they could anonymously speak their truth and share their grief. So someone else would say, I stand on behalf of my brother Cline. He was raped when he was three years old and he's still struggling through this.
- Walter Fluker: Someone would speak on behalf of the other. At the end, we would go through our grief ritual in front of the shrine of Howard Thurman at Morehouse College. If you've ever been on the campus between Thurman and King. They would call out any name they wanted to name themselves while they were grieving. But everybody, you didn't escape the moment of the deep ... I learned over time, especially when I did this with South African young people, that I always needed a therapist, a clinical person on hand and available to make referrals because we hardly know the grief of our suffering.
- Walter Fluker: Certainly among Black people, but it's true for all of us as you think of the Cosmic We and this universal moan. Even creation is moaning, why shouldn't we? So that's the backdrop.
- Donny Bryant: Dr. Fluker, it's just ... For me, I'm in awe just receiving all your wisdom, but you mentioned the influence of some of the ancestors. From what I understand, and you can help us understand this, but doctor Thurman's grandmother had great influence in his life and much of his perspective, in much of how he viewed the world and his spirituality. Could you speak a little bit about that and how you understand how his

forefathers, and particularly his grandmother, like your grandmother, had an influence in his life.

Walter Fluker: Nancy Ambrose, Grandma Nancy, anchor person. He called her the anchor. I think she was the portal into the universe for young Howard. His mom was very important. Mother struggled a lot, as many women do trying to raise children, etc. But this Grandma Nancy, she was another person whom Thurman, being always careful to stay within the confines of “rationality” and a certain kind of respectability, that he was a man of his time. He needed to use this language and always show the larger culture that he was as smart as they were.

Walter Fluker: I don't think this was his deep personal need, but he knew he only had certain language signs and symbols where he could project this. But if you dig deep into his experience with Grandma Nancy, you begin to see that this was a woman who had experience, real travail. She never talked about the Mosley Plantation. Thurman says that she kept this for herself. Though she would visit once a year and she'd take young Howard with her. We've now traced the roots into South Carolina, and of course Carolina is a major port for slaves.

Walter Fluker: We believe that Nancy was probably more associated with the Gula people.

Donny Bryant: Dr. B shaking her head.

Walter Fluker: Yeah. So these Africanisms were and still are so much a part of the culture. I'm thinking about [inaudible 00:23:20] book, Walking with the Dead. She talks about this experience. So you have this kind of background with Grandma Nancy and you also have Thurman in a community of, not just formally enslaved Africans, but people who had African retentions. When he's talking about community, he's not talking about some abstract conversation on a blackboard. These people were in relation, so that when one person suffered they all suffered.

Walter Fluker: He talks about the experience of his father's funeral the death of his father, how all the community came together to care for him. When they laid him out on the winding board, as these old traditions say, people came to visit they believe who....but this is a huge piece in Thurman's formation, so that by the time you hear him give you a hint, he gives you a lot of hints. When he's in Boston in 1958 and he says, “I went to the mirror and Martin's face came before me.” This is in 1958. King has just been stabbed by this mentally ill woman and he's at the Harlem hospital.

Walter Fluker: I don't know if Thurman knew this yet, but Thurman says he also noticed that there were some marks on his ears where they had removed the veil. What is that, the amniotic veil. This is certainly a tradition longstanding amongst Shamans in different cultures, even inside the Siberian cultures. The people know that when you're born with this veil on your face that you'll see things, but they remove it because they don't want you to get confused, because you're living in two worlds.

Walter Fluker: Part of Thurman's work, therefore, I think has to be interpreted in light of these retentions. Now I'm scooting over years, but all through his writings there are places where he lets you know that he's into something else. A woman in Iowa he visits, who

gives him a word. He said he just had to see her because he heard so much about her. When she finishes ... This is an illiterate woman, by the way. When she finishes, she gives him a word that Thurman traces back to Plotinus.

Donny Bryant:

Wow.

Walter Fluker:

So this is the universe that he's a part, but he's also a modernist, and in many ways a modernist liberal. So his theological language is more in alignment with modernism, but he is also speaking out of a well that isn't given public notice with Thurman.

Donny Bryant:

Wow.

Walter Fluker:

I think that's enough to say about that given time, but there is so much. Anthony Sean Neil, I was trying to remember his name, is a young scholar in Mississippi, Mississippi State University, who is doing this kind of work. One of his books is called fragmented love, but he traces Thurman's lineage through, his spiritual lineage through, Grandma Nancy. I think there ought to be some other work that's done there around the kind of deep spirituality that is also guiding him.

Donny Bryant:

Absolutely.

Barbara Holmes:

You said you met him in the 70s. What was the occasion that you met Howard Thurman?

Walter Fluker:

I was so gifted. I'm kind of like Black Forest Gump. I just show up and I don't know what I'm doing. Honestly, I just show up.

Barbara Holmes:

I don't believe that for a minute.

Walter Fluker:

One of the best things that ever happened to me, I met a young woman when I started seminary who was my nextdoor neighborhood. She was just so gorgeous, it took the breath out of me when I first met her. It really did. She was my nextdoor neighbor. One day, after two years, she finally invited me over to her apartment, and there in her apartment was a big broad sign that says, "As long as a man has a dream in his heart, he can not lose the significance of living."

Walter Fluker:

That young woman and I have been married 40 years this month. That was Sharron Watson. She was working on her PhD at Northwestern and I was entering seminary. My Lord, Howard Thurman was her godfather.

Barbara Holmes:

Oh my goodness.

Walter Fluker:

I had read Thurman earlier when I was a chaplain's assistant, but I had no idea where my life was leading me. So it was through the Watson, Sharon's parents, who were very distinguished members of the Atlanta community. I really married way up. That I first had the chance to meet Howard and Sue Bailey Thurman in their living room. It was just, oh God he was so funny. All I can remember is that they were so funny. They laughed at everything. There wasn't anything off the table that they wouldn't laugh at.

Barbara Holmes: You don't get that impression when you hear him talking on YouTube.

Walter Fluker: Oh God, he was hilarious. Everything was funny to him. I shared with a group yesterday, most great spiritual teachers, leaders are laughing. A sure sign, because they're laughing at the fragility of our finitude and how we take ourselves so seriously. Thurman, Tutu, Dali Llama. Watch them, just laughing their heads off. Anyway, that was my experience meeting Thurman. Later, I was invited to study with him as a group of students organized by Luper E. Smith and others who were meeting with Thurman during those days.

Walter Fluker: Ours was the first cohort of six men and four women, all devoted to the religious life. We sat with Thurman for an entire week and it was life changing. That's not even a word for me, but no one spent that kind of time with Howard Thurman and just walked away and flubbed their hand. We begged him to stay. We were in San Francisco and we begged him at the end. "Can we stay? We'll clean, we'll cook." He spat out his coffee laughing at us. It was so funny.

Barbara Holmes: Have you ever written about that time?

Walter Fluker: I did something for Gregory Ellisons, but it was short. So I'm doing some memoirs now.

Barbara Holmes: Oh good.

Walter Fluker: That's why some of this stuff is fresh for me because I'd forgotten most of these things. But Thurman, I started writing him. I was in seminary. I didn't really want to be a preacher. I got tired. Again, these abstract theological conversations that I make my living off of. I didn't know that. That's how I made my living. Anyway, I had the restlessness of many seminarians and I wrote Thurman a long letter. I was going through a terrible trial, but I wrote him a long letter and I said, "Doc, I'm not sure what I should do next. Should I do a PhD or should I go on to law school where I have some real interest?"

Walter Fluker: He wrote me back in what seemed like a millennium, hand delivered a letter to me. It was hand delivered, written in his hand, and with doodles all in the margins. He's laughing the whole time. And hieroglyphics, the language was like ... but I read through it. Very quickly, he basically told me I was like a little boy sitting on the Christmas tree with a lot of gifts and didn't know which one to open.

Donny Bryant: Wow.

Walter Fluker: Then he said, "But you must," and his famous word that you now see broadcast everywhere because of Oprah Winfrey's interest, "You must wait and listen for the sound of the genuine that is within you. When you hear it, that will be your voice and that will be the voice of God." I had no idea what he meant, but it just felt good to write. One mail day later, I get three letters in the mail. The first two I can't even tell you about. I'll write about it when I go and be with the ancestors. But the first two were letters asking for forgiveness.

- Walter Fluker: Oh, I cried, I cried. The last one was a letter of acceptance from Boston University. I was so sure about Boston University. I had no doubt in my mind. I left with my parents little gift of \$115. They wanted to buy me a robe. I'd just been ordained. I said, no I could use this money. Everything, everything just fell in place, and I had no idea that I'd be going to Boston. Two years later, Thurman would pass on. A year and a half later he'd pass on, and Sue Bailey Thurman would send the bulk of his materials to Boston University.
- Walter Fluker: So I had opportunity to go into the papers, even before they were cataloged to write a dissertation. I was only going to write a dissertation on Thurman, but my advisor, bless his heart, told me that I'd have to do it on Thurman and King because there was not enough in Thurman to justify dissertation. I knew differently, but I wanted the PhD. I'd invested ... So I just wrote effectively two dissertations.
- Barbara Holmes: A wise decision, Dr. Fluker.
- Walter Fluker: Many other troubles of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him or her out of them all.
- Barbara Holmes: Wow.
- Donny Bryant: Dr. Fluker, I almost just want to have you elaborate a little more on this idea of silence and listening to that inner voice. From what I understand, Dr. Thurman had these habits of stillness that oftentimes we don't hear about or we don't necessarily know. So I wanted to see if you can elaborate a little bit more about your insights about his habits of stillness and how he practiced silence in order to hear.
- Walter Fluker: Listen to this, and you may have heard it before. It shows up in a lot of his public addresses. In quietness and in confidence shall be your strength. Long before you were born, God was at work creating the worlds of nature, people and things. God is not finished with creation. God is not finished with you. He goes on and on. So this notion of quiet I think was native to Thurman's personality or indigenous to his way of being in the world. He needed quiet. He tells you that in his autobiography, and sometimes life's challenges push you into stillness.
- Walter Fluker: So this young man whose had a really, I think, traumatic experience growing up, not just with his father's death, which is the major piece, but he tells you that he was not welcome to games by the other kids. He didn't get the company of the young women. He was awkward, he said. He said, when he'd get nervous, his right toe would rub against his left heel, so he needed quietness in a place, and this comes up in his language later, a place that he could call his own.
- Walter Fluker: It's a strange freedom to run up and down the streets of other mines where no salutation greets and there is no place to call your own. So silence for Thurman is his entry into a space that he could call his own. It's the in dwelling space for many of us who studied Thurman. It's the end dwelling space of what could be called ... he calls it presence, but it's divine intelligence. It's knowing. It's very intimate knowing because one is both ... one both knows and is known. For Thurman, it's most important to be known.

- Walter Fluker: What does it feel like to be a young Black man at the turn of the 20th Century in Daytona Beach, Florida where nobody knows your name? To have the stillness of the Halifax River, to watch the raging storm spread across the Atlantic, and to find solace in an old oak tree where he goes to commune. He's talking to the tree. I laugh always, but this is a real conversation. So silence for Thurman is not the absence of noise, and I think most of us know this. It's not the absence because he finds it in the storm.
- Walter Fluker: It's more kin to what many ancient myths and philosophies refer to as the abyss or the void. There's this hole in existence. I don't want to black hole. I don't know enough about that, but there's something in existence that is necessary for life to be generated. So Thurman was, I think ... This is a Fluker interpretation. I think he was looking for this thing which he experienced within himself but was also manifested in many ways in what he rescued, but nonetheless metaphysical terms. It's dimension, must like the Buddhist coin that says the utility of a bowl is it's emptiness.
- Walter Fluker: So to find this sort of still point, Merton loved to call it the centering moment, the still point. He called it [inaudible 00:39:54]. I know I'm getting the French wrong, but it's really the virgin point. It's that which is untested.
- Walter Fluker: Yeah, that which is untested. So experience means that you kind of get some on you. If you show up in the world and you have experience. So his interpretation of the Garden of Eden, you see it in his book *The Search for the Common Ground*. Adam and Eve, when they received knowledge, they get kicked out of the garden because they've been untested before the end. He gives a kind of psycho cultural interpretation of this myth and they're kicked out of the garden.
- Walter Fluker: When they return, there's a huge angel there with a flaming sword. Thurman uses the imagery of George Fox, the angel with the flaming sword, but it's this angel, if you get by this angel, one cannot pass this angel with the ... Because you know what the sword is going to do. It's going to dismember you, cut you asunder. So the only way one returns to paradise loss after innocence is the quest Thurman calls for goodness or wholeness or harmony. So one can never be innocent again, which I'm referencing this void, so to speak, and life becoming integrated and whole.
- Walter Fluker: One must pass this ... He said, you cannot lay it upon that alter without the fluid area of your concent. One chooses ... So there's no substitute savior there. There's nobody there going to save you. You've got the angel to deal with. When I work with young brothers and sisters, I say you're going to get your ass jacked up if you go see the angel. If you go passed the angel ... but that's what spiritual maturity is about because this doesn't happen lots. For those who dare to make that journey, you don't get saved one time and then you're fixed. No, no.
- Walter Fluker: You've got to tussle with the angel, and this angel is so much a part of your becoming. You cannot avoid it for Thurman.
- Barbara Holmes: Wow.
- Donny Bryant: Can I try to interpret that in a Donny Bryant interpretation, because that was so real and deep. So Dr. Fluker, correct me-

Walter Fluker: [crosstalk 00:42:29].

Donny Bryant: I want to do this for people who ... because what you said was so weighty and so heavy and I want to try to just rephrase it. Correct me if I'm wrong. Are you saying that for much of Thurman's work and understanding, that the journey to wholeness, the pathway to becoming, the reality of life or the spiritual transformation, the spiritual journey is a pathway that has to go through suffering, darkness?

Walter Fluker: It's the most dominant theme in all of Thurman's thought. You cannot read Thurman or read his life or his work without dealing ... Suffering is a discipline of the spirit for Thurman. So tragedy, the exigencies of existence for Thurman are given. If you want to get home, you've got to pass this angel. If you're preaching, Barbara, you could do something today, couldn't you.

Barbara Holmes: I sure could. That will preach.

Donny Bryant: That will preach. That will preach.

Walter Fluker: Yeah, this is not a friendly ... I think sometimes it's associated with Urial. There's a huge portrait. I've forgotten the American artist, but you might find it's Urial taking a rest. This huge portrait is also at the Boston University Godly Center where you have this angel, but he's there with his sword. I would be there going through the papers and there was Urial behind me. I became more and more aware when I really delved into the Quaker thought and George Fox what Thurman was doing with this imagery.

Walter Fluker: But for him, it's precisely that, that one is dismembered in order to be remembered. When I do ethical leadership training, I talk about remembering, retelling and reliving one's story, but you cannot be remembered until you acknowledge the dismemberment of your being. Life will dismember you if you show up here on the planet with the rest of us.

Barbara Holmes: That's why lament and grieving should be so much a part of our journey. We don't acknowledge that we are being dismembered as we go.

Walter Fluker: I want to get home so badly, Barbara.

Barbara Holmes: Me too.

Walter Fluker: I just want to get home. Malidoma tickles me. He says, "If you want to get home, you've got to give somebody a ride."

Barbara Holmes: Yeah, because we don't get home alone. We get home together.

Walter Fluker: I'm going to stop after this because I know you all have limits, but I had another thought that I had to tell you. I told you I'm kind of like Forest Gump. Honestly, that's a good analogy for me. I show up in South Africa with these students, Oprah Winfrey scholars. Ms. Winfrey gave us a lot of money to take these young men. They were Morehouse men at that point, but we'd have coeds by the time we built a program. Make sure we put women and everybody else in there.

Walter Fluker: But this first, we were taking these young men and I met Baba [inaudible 00:45:56]. If that's not a name that you know, you should know at some point. Baba means papa.

Barbara Holmes: Right.

Walter Fluker: Credo Mutwa, Zulu Shaman. He passed this past year. One of the most important figures in this African spirituality, but everybody all over the world would come and see Baba. I didn't know who I was meeting. So after I met him, I could pick it up. I said, "I'd like to spend some time with you." He said, "Well, let me know when you're ready Prof." I made this journey to see him while I'm there and I meet him in a little shanty. It reminded me of the places in Mississippi. They had the little chickens all over the day and I'm stepping over chickens trying to get in.

Walter Fluker: I go and sit down. His wife comes up and she was very British in protocol. She said, "You care for tea, Prof?" I said, "Oh yeah." But I'm looking at this wood burning stove right in the middle of the room. There are all these strange pieces of art, deep iconographic things like space people, stuff like that. Then Baba comes out but unlike the time I met him, in all of his Shamanistic gear. I said, eeee yayayaya. What have I got myself into.

Walter Fluker: Boy, do you know he said, "How can I help you, Prof?" A dream immediately shot into my mind that I had early in the 90s of chasing a little creature into a cave. I had the strange dream that troubled me for all this time. So I told him about the dream. He said, "Oh I know that little man." He said, "I know him," and he told me his name.

Barbara Holmes: Wow.

Walter Fluker: He could have been just pulling my leg, but I'm so glad he did because he named for me this journey I was trying to get into the cave to catch this guy. I learned later that this cave is the domain of a lot of these folks. They go to the caves. The cave of the heart, but this cave is where so much of this work is done. So when I look for the place nowadays that I call my own, I go to the cave and I sit there in silence, and I wait and listen to receive whatever I need. Every now and then I comes, but I'll sit and I'll wait in the cave because I think that we have so much more that is available to us beyond the confines of institutionalized religion and faith.

Walter Fluker: There is so much more that's being offered to us if we'd only dare let go and let the stream take us where it will. But we're so frightened that we might get lost or we might not be saved, and we're already lost and not saved.

Barbara Holmes: And clutching at nothing.

Walter Fluker: That's all I got, y'all. I know that kind of went differently.

Barbara Holmes: Oh my goodness, this has been so rich, so powerful. Dr. Fluker-

Walter Fluker: It is I.

Barbara Holmes: Who are you?

Walter Fluker: It is I. Be not afraid.

Barbara Holmes: I'm a Gullah woman from South Carolina.

Walter Fluker: Yeah.

Barbara Holmes: I just have such affinity with everything you've been talking about.

Walter Fluker: Yeah, you know those trees, don't you?

Barbara Holmes: Oh, yes I do, and how to work roots.

Walter Fluker: Oh Lord, aint nothing like a good root.

Barbara Holmes: Thank you so much. The most ... I didn't get to, but we'll get to it at some point, one of the finest books I've ever read is the Ground Has Shifted.

Walter Fluker: Wow.

Barbara Holmes: The future of the Black church in post racial America.

Walter Fluker: Ooh.

Barbara Holmes: I love this book. I recommended it. Buy it, read it, and consider all of the issues that Dr. Fluker raises about the possibility of post racialism. I don't know if you still believe that's possible, but I want to leave our listeners with the mysticism, the conjuring, the storytelling and the remembering. Thank you for everything, Dr. Fluker.

Walter Fluker: Blessings on you.

Barbara Holmes: And you also.

Walter Fluker: Donny, what a wonderful, wonderful opportunity to meet you.

Donny Bryant: Thank you. Thanks for listening. We want to leave you with a few reflections from our conversation with Dr. Walter Fluker.

Barbara Holmes: One of the things he said really struck a note with me. I love to claim my mysticism and my Gula culture, but I've become very westernized in the way that I hide grief. I have no options for lament, much like the culture that I'm surrounded by. His discussion of the grief ritual with the Dagar people was really quite astounding.

Donny Bryant: Yeah, that conversation was eye opening. His story about seeing his father resonated with me also, Barbara, as I also have experienced grief. I guess the question is for our

listeners, in the connection and the reflection that I would encourage us to experience and to look into is what trauma, what healing, what hurt, what pain that we need to be healed from could benefit from the practice of our own unique grief ritual?

Barbara Holmes: Yes, and how can the organized religious institutions, the churches, the places where we assemble to finally shed some of our arrogance, how can they help us to grieve, to lament, to begin to get free. All of that was quite amazing. What are you grieving, those of you who are listening? What are you grieving that you don't know that you're grieving? How will you process that grief? Thanks so much for being with us today.