

“And Ghosts Will Drive You On”
On the Occasion of my Retirement from
Boston University School of Theology
May 14, 2020

To Dean Mary Elizabeth Moore, Dr. Shively Smith, my faculty colleagues, my wonderful former students (who taught and continue to teach me more than they know), to Professors Keri Day, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, Luther E. Smith and Peter J. Paris; to the panel of former and active students who made me so proud, my friends and relations over the years, and to my family, my wife, Dr. Sharon Watson Fluker, and my children and grandchildren, thank you so much. I love you all. Finally, I offer a special thanks to Dr. Clint Fluker for representing the family.

“We died but you who live must do a harder thing than dying is, for you must think and ghosts will drive you on.”—Howard Thurman

Those who know me well are aware that I believe in ghosts. I know for a fact that h’ants can be trouble and they can also lead you to treasures in the field. I have experienced both. Ghosts who are working in your favor are good to have around. These ghosts are not quite like the ones with which we have become comfortable: Banquo visiting his cunning and power-hungry murderers; Hamlet’s father’s specter demanding that the young prince swear to avenge his heinous murder; Washington Irving’s headless horseman spooking the quiet village of Sleepy Hollow in Ichabod Crane’s early America; Edgar Allan Poe’s telltale heart pounding from beneath the floorboards; or ghosts gazing from the framed portraits on the walls of the staircase in Hogwarts in the Harry Potter chronicles. Rather, I like to think of these ghosts as living traces or historical familiars who speak from places reserved for the dead.

The ghosts of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Howard Thurman have driven me for nearly 40 years—beginning with my entry in the PhD program in Social Ethics at the

School of Theology and the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences in 1980. I bore the stamp of Martin Luther King, Jr. like many budding scholars of my generation. Thus seminary allowed me to conduct preliminary research that would later feed my scholarly interests in King and the black church over the years. During my early years at BU, Sue Bailey Thurman bequeathed the papers of Howard Thurman to Boston University's Special Collections (now The Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center). After the delivery of the papers my dissertation topic was settled: "A Comparative Analysis of the Ideal of Community in the Thought of Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr. (1988)." It was published as a book in the following year under the title, *They Looked for A City*. Little did I know that this work would become a blueprint for much of what would follow. During my dissertation work, I met a special person--colleague, mentor and friend, Dr. Luther E. Smith whose intellectual acumen and generosity of spirit shed light on the path that I would pursue through the remainder of my academic career.

After a short stint as Assistant Professor of Religion and University Chaplain at Dillard University, New Orleans, Louisiana where Thurman dedicated the Lawless Memorial Chapel in 1955, my family moved to Vanderbilt University where I served as Assistant Professor of Christian Ethics (1987-1991). Remarkably, before I arrived at Vanderbilt the legendary pastor, civil rights leader and close friend of Martin Luther King, Jr., the Reverend Kelly Miller Smith, had initiated the first course ever taught on Thurman, entitled, "The Religious Thinking of Howard Thurman." To this day, I have kept this title in honor of this great soul and incomparable teacher. It is no small matter that Pastor Smith was a close friend of Professor Peter J. Paris, whom I succeeded at Vanderbilt. Peter has been a cherished mentor, colleague and friend on this journey and has been an advocate for my success in ways that I cannot count here.

From Vanderbilt after a short stint at Harvard University as a Mellon Faculty Fellow where I taught a seminar on Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, I was invited to serve as the Dean of Black Church Studies at Colgate-Rochester Divinity

School/Bexley Hall/Crozer Theological Seminary (CRDS) and the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Professor of Theology and Black Church Studies and from 1991-1997. It was CRDS that two projects were birthed. One was based on the traditions that sponsored these two leaders, The National Resource Center for the Development of Ethical Leadership from the Black Church Tradition; and the second, The Howard Thurman Papers Project. CRDS was the ideal place for the launching of these two projects, serving as the seminary alma mater of Howard Thurman, Rochester Theological Seminary '26 and Martin Luther King, Jr. '51; and home to the American Baptist Historical Society. The work performed by faculty, colleagues, researchers, students and staff provided the necessary ingredients for the formation of the research and writing that would develop over the following years on Thurman, King and ethical leadership.

In the spring of 1997, President Walter E. Massey extended an invitation for me to come as a consultant and later serve as the first Executive Director of the Leadership Center at Morehouse College (renamed as the Andrew Young Center for Global Leadership). I was also appointed as Professor of Religion and Philosophy and later as the Coca-Cola Professor of Leadership Studies at that venerable institution. Morehouse was the undergraduate alma mater to both Thurman and King; and interestingly, both of their remains are in Atlanta. Thurman's ashes are entombed in the huge obelisk erected in his honor at Morehouse and King's remains are at the MLK Center for Nonviolent Change on historic Auburn Avenue next to the Ebenezer Baptist Church. While at Morehouse for nearly thirteen years, we completed both the physical building that housed the Leadership Center and the Howard Thurman Papers Project. I also taught courses on Thurman and King and the work of ethical leadership reached national and global communities in Africa, Europe, and Asia.

I was prepared to settle in at Morehouse and perhaps find a pastorate or expand my work in ethical leadership, but the ghosts of King and Thurman led me to the office of the newly appointed Dean of the School of Theology during the summer of 2009 where I met with Mary Elizabeth Moore. When she shared that the Martin Luther

King, Jr. Chair was open, I felt again the polite urgings from the old ghosts. Returning to the place of origins, at least in my mind, was fantastical, mystical, extraordinary and fated. It was as if I had completed a circular journey—a coming *home*. To be named the Martin Luther King, Jr. Chair at my alma mater was indeed the highest honor of my career, but it was more. I was initiated into a long line of pioneers who had prepared the way: Preston N. Williams, Gayraud Wilmore, John Henderson Cartwright, Praithia Hall Wynn, Chai-sik Chung, and Dale Andrews.

I counted it as a blessing to return to the very place where I studied under Professor John Henderson Cartwright and where my academic career was launched. I would also have access to the collections of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Howard Thurman; and be in a space where these titans of the spiritual and moral struggle for the soul of America had studied, taught, preached and nurtured a dream that King called “the beloved community” and Thurman called “common ground”. As the MLK Chair, I have sought to be faithful to their visions of courage, justice and compassion in my teaching, research and writings.

I am so grateful for the students, faculty colleagues at STH and throughout the university, the alumni/ae, the administration and the staff who have supported my work, which I hope has brought honor to our great tradition of learning, virtue and piety. I will miss these precious relationships, but I will find ways to still be a part of the great company and cloud of witnesses that bear the mantle of the School of the Prophets.

Walter Earl Fluker