

# “FREE FOREVER TO ACT FOR THEMSELVES”: HOWARD THURMAN AND LATTER-DAY SAINT AGENCY

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There is in every person an inward sea, and in that sea there is an island and on that island there is an altar and standing guard before that altar is the “angel with the flaming sword.” Nothing can get by that angel to be placed upon that altar unless it has the mark of your inner authority. Nothing passes “the angel with the flaming sword” to be placed upon your altar unless it be a part of “the fluid area of your consent.” This is your crucial link with the Eternal.<sup>1</sup>

Christian mystic, theologian, and preacher Howard Thurman wrote through the tumultuous American civil rights era. His attention to the anatomy of the interior being and the locus of life’s meaning influenced key figures in the movement, including Martin Luther King Jr., who is said to have always traveled with a copy of Thurman’s well-known *Jesus and the Disinherited*.<sup>2</sup> Among Thurman’s key insights is his concept of the inward sea, or soul. As a Black man growing up in the segregated American South, Thurman is no stranger to oppression and race-based violence. He well understands and writes of the creation of social identities, the energy of hate, and the formation of personhood—all things influenced if not created by external factors. His idea of the soul, however, is that it is a thing immutable, untouchable, and unchanged. Within every person is an inward sea, a soul, upon which a person can

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1. Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1953), 15.

2. Carl McColman, “Howard Thurman,” *Anamchara* (blog), June 23, 2021, <https://anamchara.com/howard-thurman/>.

find refuge if they school their mind and body to seek and dwell in it. This is his understanding of mysticism, a democratic vision wherein every being has the capacity to be in communion with God insofar as they can know the landscape of their own soul. When a person knows the landscape of their own interior being, they are enabled to take refuge in the island of peace within their inward sea.<sup>3</sup> Though a person's actions and very body may be controlled and policed, that island of peace cannot be trespassed. This is the foundation of Thurman's perspective on human agency.

Within the umbrella of Christianity considered generally, "agency" is a term with a varied usage and even more varied associated meanings. Within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, agency is the heartbeat of the religion's reimagining of the Christian story. The Book of Mormon, central to Latter-day Saint thought, begins with the tale of a mystical encounter and a prophetic construal of agency in which agency is a protected feature of the human spirit. The prophet Lehi teaches that "[humans] are free according to the flesh. . . . And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil."<sup>4</sup> This prophetic vision appears to place salvation or damnation wholly within a person's agential power to choose.

Howard Thurman, I argue, prioritizes agency in similar ways to Latter-day Saints but with a nuanced understanding that illuminates the areas where the LDS cosmic drama has grown murky. For Thurman, the importance of agency is less about capacity for moral action toward a determined end (i.e., control over salvation versus damnation) and more about awareness of one's internal landscape and the immutable language of one's eternal soul, wherein one finds spiritual power

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3. Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart*, 15.

4. 2 Nephi 2:27.

and peace. I will argue that this perspective tracks with the Latter-day Saint framework in theory but not in rhetorical practice.

### I. "Free Forever to Act for Themselves": Latter-day Saint Understandings of Moral Agency

A number of terms find synonymous expression under the blanket term "agency," including moral agency, free will, and freedom to choose. All of these terms, though often used interchangeably, mean different things, and the nuance between them is important for understanding the ways the theological framing has become confused. Theologically, agency refers to the capacity of consciously making consequential choices. Moral agency concerns the human ability of individuals to make choices based on ethical and moral feelings. Free will enters the philosophical debate surrounding determinism, positing that choice is possible over predetermination. Freedom of choice, similarly, describes an unfettered ability to make consequential choices.

In Latter-day Saint theology, "free agency" is a central concept. It is often cited in official Church addresses and teachings, but what Church members mean by it frequently draws on all of the above terms in unclear ways. Elder Bruce R. McConkie, for example, defined free agency this way in 1973:

When we dwelt in the presence of God . . . we were endowed with agency. This gave us the opportunity, the privilege, to choose what we would do—to make a free, untrammelled choice. . . . We're expected to use the gifts and talents and abilities, the sense and judgment and agency with which we are endowed.<sup>5</sup>

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5. Bruce R. McConkie, "Agency or Inspiration—Which?" devotional address, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, Feb. 27, 1973, available at <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/bruce-r-mcconkie/agency-inspiration/>. McConkie also teaches this in the book *Mormon Doctrine*.

McConkie's statement demonstrates principles of agency that have become ubiquitous in Latter-day Saint discourse: moral agency was endowed on us as a gift; freedom of choice is moral agency; and agency is associated with judgement and, ultimately, salvation. Later in the address he states,

God grant us the courage and the ability to stand on our own feet and use our agency and the abilities and capacities we possess; then let's be sufficiently humble and amenable to the Spirit to bow our will to his will, to get his ratifying, confirming seal of approval. . . . And if we so do, there's no question about the result: it's peace in this life; it's glory and honor and dignity in the life to come.<sup>6</sup>

The exercise of free agency, he is saying, is God's gift to humankind but it must be used in a particular way if one is to expect peace and salvation.

McConkie's statement represents a common understanding within the Latter-day Saint tradition. According to a published Church manual, "Agency is the ability and privilege God gives us to choose and to act for ourselves. . . . Without agency, we would not be able to learn or progress or follow the Savior." The manual goes on to state: "one purpose of earth life is to show what choices we will make."<sup>7</sup> The text is holding to a particular theological orientation in which life is a test; individual actions—the exercise of agency—are features of this test and can be answered or performed incorrectly. In short, this model assumes absolute freedom of choice and so complete responsibility for correct choices in order to ensure salvation.

The prophet Lehi's teachings have become corollary to this idea. In a sermon on the fall of Adam and Eve, Lehi teaches: "[Humans] have become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for themselves and not to be acted upon, save it be by the punishment of the law at the great

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6. McConkie, "Agency or Inspiration—Which?"

7. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Agency and Accountability," *Gospel Topics*, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/agency-and-accountability?lang=eng>.

and last day, according to the commandments which God hath given."<sup>8</sup> As McConkie and others have shown, Lehi's message has been taken to suggest that the freedom of our choices will be answered upon our own heads, sealing the theological significance of human agency to the unyielding heartbeat of justice. The use of this great gift of agency, Latter-day Saints have concluded, is therefore the ultimate test of mortal life. Use it correctly and one is ensured salvation. Use it incorrectly, Lehi assures, and one is subject to the "punishment of the law . . . according to the commandments." Correct and incorrect choices are clearly delineated according to this theological model.<sup>9</sup> The commandments of God are understood to be guidelines demonstrating correct action, and anything outside of obedience to this law is accordingly incorrect. Yes, we can use our freedom to choose, but (when considering the ultimate) we must choose correctly.

Latter-day Saint scholars like Terry Warner resist this kind of simplification of the model, however, arguing that the dichotomy between right and wrong is an essential condition of mortality: "[we] cannot avoid being both free and responsible for [our] choices." Choices, Warner argues, have natural consequences. Sinful choices bring about a captivity of the spirit. "As this happens, the individual still possesses agency in name, but his capacity to exercise it is abridged. In this sense, to misuse one's agency is to lose that agency." Warner concludes that "thus, in the LDS concept of agency, obedience and agency are not antithetical."<sup>10</sup> Obedience, or submission to God's law, is the ultimate

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8. 2 Nephi 2:26.

9. For example, Church authority Wolfgang H. Paul taught, "Instead of saying, 'I do what I want,' our motto should be 'I do what the Father wants me to do.' . . . If we make the right choice, the Lord will take care of us in His own way, which at that time is not yet known to us." "The Gift of Agency," Apr. 2006, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2006/04/the-gift-of-agency?lang=eng>.

10. Terry Warner, "Agency," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, edited by Daniel Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:26.

freedom because it floods the human spirit with Christ's salvific light. Sin, or non-submission to God's law, actually limits one's freedom because it allows the spirit to be tempted and persuaded by evil and thus lose agential capacity. Warner's defense enters into metaphysical territory, relying on a particular (Christian) understanding of the universe in which moral law rules over even physical law.

Not all Latter-day Saints have accepted the idea that submission to God is agency. Terryl Givens argues that within Latter-day Saint doctrine we must make the distinction between agency and freedom. Agency is an endowment of God to humans and is "the power to make a choice between alternatives," while freedom is "the power to put into execution that choice." He emphasizes that freedom is always circumscribed in the mortal condition, but agency is an innate capacity of the human spirit.<sup>11</sup> According to Givens, the framework suggested by McConkie and others in which freedom and agency appear to be conflated is a misreading of core Latter-day Saint doctrine.

These discussions drawing out fine distinctions in conceptual theological understandings, however, are generally far removed from a lay audience. For many Latter-day Saints, the McConkie view in which agency and free will are considered one is the operational model. This understanding has significant repercussions. Consider, for example, how Latter-day Saint women's roles are circumscribed according to an understanding of divine command. Aimee Evans Hickman writes that the "unresolved tension between what it means to exercise free will, while simultaneously aligning one's individual desires with the will of God, is often at the crux of one's personal relationship to God within the LDS Church."<sup>12</sup> Latter-day Saint teachings suggesting divinely

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11. Terryl L. Givens, "Agency and Atonement," *Meridian Magazine*, Mar. 9, 2011, <https://latterdaysaintmag.com/article-1-7616/>.

12. Aimee Evans Hickman, "Narrating Agency," in *Women and Mormonism: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, edited by Kate Holbrook and Matthew Bowman (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016), 302.

designed roles for women combined with teachings about the importance of choosing correctly for salvation necessarily circumscribe the power of unfettered choice. How is a woman to exercise her will authentically when the “right” choice is laid before her and the consequence for a “wrong” choice is clearly taught? Does she, in such a circumstance, genuinely have agency? Or, to return to the story of Lehi, what of his wife, Sariah, uprooted by her husband’s dictation of God’s will? To give a contemporary example, Hickman, the former editor of a magazine for Latter-day Saint women, recounts a submission she received detailing the circumstances of the author’s pregnancy with her seventh child. Following the birth of her sixth child, the author “Jane” experienced crippling depression. Concurrently, she felt an impression to conceive another child. Hickman writes:

Jane didn’t understand how God could ask this of her when she felt she was at her psychological and physiological limit. In desperation she turned to her bishop for counsel. The bishop assured her that if she followed the prompting, she would be blessed. With a husband in full agreement, their seventh child was soon on the way. “Thy will, not mine be done,” were the final words of her essay. In essence, the choice she faced was one of obedience to a divinely dictated order—a managed choice to fulfill God’s plan and “the measure of [her] creation”—or not, which was not really an option for Jane.<sup>13</sup>

To restate my earlier questions: can Jane freely choose if her options are between pleasing God (linked to salvation) and pleasing self (linked to sin)? Do not the threats of punishment or reward for obedience to another constrain the free choice?

From a soteriological perspective, theologian Marilyn Adams argues that a link between agency and salvation is flawed. She argues that “a realistic picture of human agency” must recognize that humans begin life incapable of choice, construct a picture of reality and of ourselves over the course of time and from the flawed influence of other

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13. Hickman, “Narrating Agency,” 305.

humans, form habits based on our influences, develop a psyche based on a particular (usually inherited) view of the world, and act out these habits for many years.<sup>14</sup> Psychological scholarship regarding agency mainly aligns with Adams, affirming that our choices are determined by factors that we are largely not free to choose.<sup>15</sup> Following Adams, a Latter-day Saint woman like Jane was never free to choose given the constraints on her freedom from the earliest time of nurture.

Scholar Catherine Brekus might argue, however, that these conclusions dismiss the lived reality of choice for Latter-day Saint women, insisting that surveying agency within the context of systems is imperative. She argues that scholars often associate human agency with those who operate against the grain, or in resistance to oppressive systems. “Because historians have implicitly defined agency against structure,” she writes, “they have found it hard to imagine women who accepted religious structures as agents. This is why there are so few Mormon women in American religious history textbooks.”<sup>16</sup> Yet Latter-day Saint women did historically and continue to make choices within structures that are considered oppressive. For Brekus, it is accordingly essential to remember that “agency takes place within structures as well as against them.”<sup>17</sup> To dismiss the choices of Latter-day Saint women, even if these

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14. Marilyn Adams, “The Problem of Hell: A Problem of Evil for Christians,” in *Reasoned Faith: Essays in Philosophical Theology in Honor of Norman Kretzmann*, edited by Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), 313.

15. David Bentley Hart, for example, argues for a metaphysical determinism of the will, noting that the conditions of the material world disallow free will in the sense of absolute ability to rationally elect consequences. *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2019).

16. Catherine Brekus, “Mormon Women and the Problem of Historical Agency,” in *Women and Mormonism: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, edited by Kate Holbrook and Matthew Bowman (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016), 24.

17. Brekus, “Mormon Women and the Problem of Historical Agency,” 34.



choices are seen as limited from an outside perspective, is to ignore the motivations that precipitate such choices for many women.

Considering these things together, one is left with a convoluted puzzle. On one hand, it is clear that agency is crucially important to the Christian faith and to Latter-day Saints in particular. On the other, it is unclear what agency really means, and popular definitions have contributed to troubling misunderstandings. It is commonplace to hear Latter-day Saints define agency as the freedom to choose, a simplistic understanding that fails to take into account the ways in which choices are curtailed by social, environmental, and genetic conditions outside our control. But, if the power of choice is necessarily and totally limited by conditions of the social and material world, is determinism the only answer? Thinkers like Warner, Givens, and Brekus argue that no, agency can exist within even oppressive structures—evoking a phenomenological approach that centers lived experience. What, then, are the differences between agency and free will? Is literal free will a myth and agency an important illusion? In particular, how are Latter-day Saints to make sense of the myriad limitations on individual freedom while preserving the theological significance of agency? I argue that Howard Thurman provides a mediating response, resonant with the Latter-day Saint view of the human spirit, that could illuminate this confused picture of human agency and approach some of these questions.

## II. Howard Thurman's Mystical Encounter and Human Agency

For Thurman, human agency has less to do with the power to act in particular ways and more to do with the acknowledgment and dialogue with one's internal world. This is a subtle but profoundly significant shift. The former is focused on future ends—especially soteriological ends. The latter is focused in the present and on internal meaning. Thurman does not write about agency directly. He writes in the language of the spirit, the internal and external, the interior being. To understand

his vision of human agency, then, it is important to locate his theology surrounding and creating these ideas. I will discuss his concepts of God, self, interior self, and self-communion with God before moving toward his central vision of consent, which I read as the core of agency.

God is vitality in Thurman's vision, the spirit of life. Less a figure (and certainly not an anthropomorphic figure) reigning above us than a wellspring deep within all living things, God is the source and movement of all life. The plant reaching toward the sun reaches with the vitality of God. The family of otters playing peaceably in the ocean play with the peace of God. Luther Smith summarizes Thurman's views: "God is the very ground of being, which means God is the creator of all existence and the source of all meaning."<sup>18</sup> God is the ultimate source and therefore ultimate truth, life, vitality, and good.<sup>19</sup> God is knowable and immanent but is not a prisoner to the world of our understanding. God transcends as well as fills the world.<sup>20</sup>

That God is knowable, immanent yet also transcendent,<sup>21</sup> is an important facet of Thurman's mysticism. God is not out of reach of the average person. One does not require theological training or academic qualifications to know God. God communicates God's self through the world and within the honest seeker after God. The encounter with God need not be mediated by any outside force, it is not limited to a particular religion, and it requires no creed or dogma. It is, however, creative. In other words, it does not usually occur by happenstance but rather through meditation and earnest seeking. To creatively seek after God is the quest of the mystic, a quest that is open to any faith seeker.

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18. Luther E. Smith, "Intimate Mystery: Howard Thurman's Search for Ultimate Meaning (1900–1981)," *Ultimate Reality and Meaning* 11, no. 2 (1988): 87.

19. Anthony Sean Neal, "Howard Thurman's Mystical Logic: Creatively Encountering Oneness—A Logical Analysis of Thurman's Theology," *Black Theology* 15, no. 3 (2017): 224–44.

20. Neal, "Howard Thurman's Mystical Logic."

21. Neal, "Howard Thurman's Mystical Logic."

For Thurman, the self is always the vehicle for encounter with God. The body is essential, not compartmentalized or devalued. All that one experiences is through the body; the spiritual and the temporal are not separate realms. When Thurman writes of the internal world, the inward sea, he is not separating this from the body a person inhabits. Bodies are schooled by social experience; America's racial caste system devalues Black bodies and teaches those with white bodies that their whiteness renders them superior. Thurman recognizes that race, gender, sexuality, and other aspects of our beings are shaped by the environment into which we are born. Indeed, in his book *Luminous Darkness* addressing American segregation he writes, "The fact that the first twenty-three years of my life were spent in Florida and in Georgia has left its scars deep in my spirit and has rendered me terribly sensitive to the churning abyss separating white from black."<sup>22</sup> Mysticism, encounter with God, is not an escape from these things or a shying away from their significance. It is something deeper. It is an insistence that all life is divinely endowed with a connecting link to the eternal and divine. Though we are limited in our social conditioning and ability to make wholly "free" choices, we are all able to know God. This is a bit of a paradox, so let me dwell here a moment longer. When Thurman talks about the inner sea and contrasts it with the outer self, he is not advocating a two-world view in which spirit and body are separate things. Instead, he is suggesting that our very beings, the source of our life force, is immutably connected to God. Attuning ourselves to our inner workings can open us up to a deepened sense of being and knowing. It is in that knowing that Thurman believes individuals will find true freedom, peace, and liberation.<sup>23</sup> Put another way, the encounter between God and human beings fosters agency. The goal of the spiritual

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22. Howard Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness: A Personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), x.

23. Howard Thurman, *Luminous Darkness*.

life for Thurman, then, has everything to do with agency. But this is an agency in different clothes, focused not on action but on inner peace. What, then, is the inner life (or sea), and how does one chart it?

### *Charting the Inner Sea*

The immutable link to the eternal, possessed by all living things, is within each being. It is the soul, or spirit—an internal world often existing without our notice. Thurman’s writings recommend dialogue with one’s internal world (which he believes to be deeper than our socialized external front) to cultivate the creative encounter with God, listening inward. For example, he writes:

There is in every person an inward sea. And in that sea there is an island. And on that island is an altar. And there stands guard over that altar the angel with the flaming sword. And nothing can get by that angel to be placed on that altar unless it has the mark of your inner authority upon its brow. And what gets by the angel with the flaming sword and is placed on your altar on your island in your sea becomes a part of . . . “the fluid area of your consent,” the center of your consent. And what becomes the center of your consent is your connecting link with the eternal.<sup>24</sup>

The internal world, the inward sea, contains each individual’s “connecting link with the eternal.” Charting the inward sea, then, is crucial to developing awareness and awakening to the divine. This is also the heart of Thurman’s conceptualization of human agency. So, he asks, “How does one chart that sea?” He answers with poignant insight:

I must do a very difficult thing: I must accept myself. . . . What am I after? . . . What is my point, anyway? . . . And then there comes stirring in your mind the fact that you are as you are because your mother was as she was, or your father was as he was, or you had a brother that bullied you. And as soon as you begin engaging in such thoughts, you

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24. Howard Thurman, “The Inner Life #2: Charting the Inward Sea,” Boston University, Jan. 25, 1952, accessed via <http://archives.bu.edu/web/howard-thurman/virtual-listening-room/detail?id=341911> on November 30, 2021.

get sidetracked. And it's wonderful because you don't have to bother anymore. But don't get sidetracked, come back. I must deal with myself. Whatever it is that I shall grow into, whatever it is that I shall become, whatever it is that I am going to do, whatever may be the ends of life, whatever may be the purposes of life, whatever may be the design and the order and the will of God. As far as I am concerned the only equipment that [God] has is what I have.<sup>25</sup>

I will return to this passage later but let me pause on one detail: for Thurman to sideline formative childhood experiences to distractions is, to some, a challenge to the Western psychoanalytic tradition. I am zeroing in here because I believe it to be a core insight to his conception of agency. He is not wholly dismissing this influence. Certainly, he says, I act in certain ways because my mother acted in certain ways. I am afraid of certain things, or wounded in a particular way, because of things I have experienced. But there is something more to the "dealing with yourself" that he is after.

Freedom of choice and action is not guaranteed. Thurman knows this firsthand from painful experience. And yet he insists that agency remains a potent, living thing within the human spirit, present in the spirituals sung by enslaved peoples; present in the rising of African American youth against the systems of segregation and oppression; and present in the older generations of African Americans living and acting within segregation.<sup>26</sup> He is not dismissing the physical and psychological effects a system of racism has had—and continues to have—on bodies. He is getting at something else: "as far as I am concerned," he writes, "the only equipment that [God] has is what I have." The inner sea is not somewhere devoid of limitations, it is not external to the body, it is not somewhere where freedom flourishes unfettered. Rather, it is within the

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25. Howard Thurman, "The Inner Life #2: Charting the Inward Sea," January 25, 1952, audio recording available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2j6bB0XRh6o>.

26. Thurman, *Luminous Darkness*, 75.

bodies of individuals whose freedom is essentially limited. Thurman's objective is not unfettered choice or power to act unrestrained but rather an unobstructed, internal encounter with the divine. This encounter has the power to liberate a person, something of great concern to a Black man living in the United States. This encounter comes from the fluid, somatic area of the spirit he calls the nerve center of consent.

### *Agency and the Nerve Center of Consent*

Thurman qualifies his picture of agency with an embodied, visceral understanding of human life. The nerve center of consent is a spiritual concept, but he understands it to be located somatically and biologically—it is embodied. He writes: “the built-in characteristic of all forms of life is to seek always to keep free and easy access to the source of vitality or aliveness in which all life finds its abiding security.”<sup>27</sup> He traces the impossibility of defining the quality of life through the impersonal definitions of biological science and characterizing an essential aspect of life: its effort at continuation. The biological center of life, the imperative toward self-preservation and continuation, is a core facet of human experience, and this he casts as the fecund fluidity of the individual's nerve center. In short, the nerve center of consent is the “conscious intent”<sup>28</sup> of life to continue on, to realize itself in fullness. It is our will toward life, our most fragile and yet most constantly human aspect.

To realize the nerve center of one's consent is thus not synonymous with typical dualistic thinking so common in Christian history, wherein the spiritual can only be accessed by isolating or subverting the physical. As discussed earlier, Thurman is not separating the inner spiritual life from the body itself. He is suggesting, instead, that the vitality of life is itself a spiritual wellspring. The nerve center of consent in its throbbing consciousness is inherently embodied. The power

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27. Howard Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit* (Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press, 1977), 15.

28. Neal, “Howard Thurman's Mystical Logic,” 240–41.

of human agency comes in relationship to this somatic center, as this allows relationship with God. It is paradoxically through submission that it occurs. Dealing with oneself, accepting oneself, thus allows one to become aware of her inward sea. In becoming aware of that sea, she becomes aware of the nerve center of her consent—her own fragile life and what she is *for*. This “fluid” area, this immutable heartbeat of the human spirit in concert with the body, is her connection to the divine. What am I after? What is my point, anyway? What am I for? What do I want?<sup>29</sup> These are a few of the many questions Thurman poses to his audiences. Really dwelling on these questions probes the core of one’s being, resisting easy answers. As Thurman says, our first impulse is to explain ourselves through our relationship to others or to things that have happened to us. To this he says: no, go deeper.

An example may illustrate what Thurman means. Desiring to chart my own inner sea, I may ask myself one of Thurman’s questions: what am I for? Well, I may begin, I am for a certain political candidate. I am for ice cream. I am for animal rights, and environmental reconciliation, and good food. To these Thurman says yes, but these are merely symptoms of what I am really for; these are objects of which I am a subject, things I can relate myself to.<sup>30</sup> Way down inside, what is my internal stance? What am I—not my money or my gifts or my mind or my body—but what am I for? So, I think, I am for these things because I care deeply about the quality of the world. I am afraid of being bad, of being unhappy, of being unworthy. I do things, I care about things, as a result of some of these fears and hopes. So now I know a bit more about myself and my motivations, but I am still not sure how to answer what I am really for. Perhaps I am for hope, perhaps the hope of my own salvation. Perhaps I am against suffering, and this motivates much of what I do and allly myself with. And so, my thinking and self-investigation

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29. Thurman, “Inner Life #2.”

30. Thurman, “Inner Life #2.”

goes on, leading me deeper and deeper. As Thurman says, “I must have great discipline to have the courage to look.”<sup>31</sup> I must, he says, see both the good and the bad in myself in order to understand who I really am and to accept all of myself. And, significantly, it is this process itself that brings spiritual power into life: “As I begin to do this, I become very quiet. Light begins to emerge over [my] landscape. . . . I begin to feel, in some wonderful way, whole. Whole. Whole.”<sup>32</sup>

### *Freedom: Submitting the Nerve Center of Consent*

As I come to investigate myself, to ponder what I am for, what I am against, who I am, I become acquainted with the nerve center of my consent. I am charting my inward sea, mapping out the architecture of my own being, that vitality within that was shaped by my environment and that was issued with the stardust of my very life. In knowing my nerve center, I can communicate with my nerve center. For Thurman, this is encounter with God. This is where the spiritual life happens. As one moves on the path of this spiritual life, one is moving toward liberation, peace, and love. The goal of the spiritual life is not salvation in an ultimate sense, nor is it repentance, self-denial, or preparation for another world. The goal of the spiritual life is liberation, peace, and love.<sup>33</sup> Toward that end, and not any other, Thurman believes one must yield the nerve center of consent to God. The spiritual being is paradoxically liberated in yielding.<sup>34</sup> To yield the nerve center of consent is to entrust one’s entire being—physically and spiritually—to God. It is not to forget oneself or deny oneself, but to *become* oneself most fully, to align the self with vitality at its highest level.<sup>35</sup>

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31. Thurman, “Inner Life #2.”

32. Thurman, “Inner Life #2.”

33. Thurman, *Luminous Darkness*, 75.

34. Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, 19.

35. Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, 15.



Interestingly, Thurman believes that the individual is acutely able to know herself in this ultimate submission. He writes, "[The individual] yields [their] heart to God and in so doing experiences for the first time a sense of coming home and of being at home."<sup>36</sup> To yield the nerve center of consent is not to submit one's sense of autonomy and self-realization. It is instead to acknowledge one's interconnectedness, one's multifariousness, one's fragmentations, one's goodness, one's ego. In yielding, Thurman writes of a great paradox: there is a great finding, a locating of the self within something larger-than. The hunger for God, which is God, is opened and also fed with the yielding. There is thus a movement toward fulfillment, growth, and deepening in the embodied practice of yielding the nerve of consent.

Returning to my example, as I ponder questions such as "what am I for?" and come to know my own core being, I hunger more and more deeply for greater understanding and connection. The yielding is the yearning, the fulfillment and answer to the hunger. How does one yield? Thurman writes: "God is immediately available to us if the door is opened to [God]. The door is opened by yielding to [God] that nerve center where we feel consent of the withholding of it most centrally. Thus, if a [person] makes [their] deliberate self-conscious intention the offering to God of [their] central consent and obedience, then [they] become energized by the living Spirit of the living God."<sup>37</sup> The door is opened to God, by which energy and life fill the human spirit, by the practice of opening that which is most tightly sealed off from investigation, the places we least want others to look, the hurts and pains and embarrassments we hope we can hide.

It is in opening our whole selves, even that which we are ashamed to bring before the source of all vitality, that we open the door to God. Anthony Sean Neal writes that this opening begins the journey toward

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36. Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, 20.

37. Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, 21.

wholeness or oneness in God, which is to “quite literally be free.”<sup>38</sup> This is an important paradox. Thurman is not advocating self-denial or asceticism in the traditional sense of the word. Rather, he is suggesting that the phenomenological experience of yielding is “where we feel consent of the withholding of it most centrally.” Opening the door to life—which for Thurman is God—comes through spiritual discipline and the yielding of the nerve center of consent to that practice of discipline. The discipline is necessary for Thurman’s mystical freedom because, as Neal notes, “there are obstacles found within the species of life, which dull the intensity or block the reception of the feeling of interconnectedness, thus hindering community development and personal transformation.”<sup>39</sup> Freeing oneself from obstacles that dull the relationship to life’s call is the practice of spiritual discipline and submission.

Agency, for Thurman, is thus central to the liberation of the human spirit. Agency is not the unfettered ability to act in wholly uninfluenced ways, something that Thurman knows to be impossible. It is rather the awareness of one’s core being, the nerve center of consent. It is the pursuit of the *spirit’s* freedom.

### III. Thurman and the Latter-day Saint Conception of Agency

I have argued that mainstream Latter-day Saint construal of agency is inexorably linked to action and salvation. Agency is about correct choice and submitting your will to God through perfect obedience (submission). This association—between agency, action, and salvation—is fundamentally flawed, and it leads us as a people toward limiting systems, habits, and rhetorical practices.

Thurman’s mystical interpretation of agency from the locus of the agent provides a helpful corrective. For Thurman, agency is not

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38. Neal, “Howard Thurman’s Mystical Logic,” 241.

39. Neal, “Howard Thurman’s Mystical Logic,” 232.

(at its core) about choices. Born of his own social location of oppression, he well understands that perfect freedom is never a guarantee. We are such as we are because of our mothers, and our fathers, and the bully in elementary school, and the systems that shape and inform our value systems, and so on. But to stop here and dismiss the question of agency *prima facie*, he believes, is a mistake. We must deal with ourselves, with our internal world—the inward sea. *This* is the bedrock of human agency, the immutable spirit within that existed for the enslaved African singing spirituals despite the severest limitations on freedom of action.<sup>40</sup> Doing the work to ask, “what am I for?” and to listen deeply for the real, often surprising, answer is the work toward freedom.

Being able to listen requires spiritual discipline and practice of tuning the spirit, but the goal of the work is not submission to something external and predetermined. Rather, the goal is yielding one’s being to something one is fully, completely, wholly *for* in a way such that life itself becomes swallowed up. The agent’s self-knowing allows a self-giving that is wholly liberative, for it answers the call of life with life. This is the difference between self-sacrifice and self-realization, a distinction that I believe the Latter-day Saint vision has sadly blundered. A self-sacrificial understanding of agency puts God’s predetermined will as the ultimate judge and dictate, subsuming personal desire. Personal and divine will are set at odds, one to be subsumed by the other in the model of submission and obedience. Moreover, God’s will is often understood to be inflexible and dogmatic, with a one-size-fits-all sort of mentality. To return to the example of Latter-day Saint women, many culturally understand the will of God for women to be motherhood in an all-consuming way. Personal desire is subsumed in favor of this will, and the resulting self-sacrifice is understood as the highest submissive act of agency.

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40. Howard Thurman, *Deep River; and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death* (Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press, 1990).

Self-realization, on the other hand, is ultimately about freedom. For Thurman, the internal work of really seeking and hearing what one's spirit is *for* most authentically must precede the active work of spiritual discipline and submission. A Latter-day Saint woman who does this internal listening, this charting of her inward sea, may find that she is wholly for honesty and that her deepest desires are to care for those who are most vulnerable. She may have the opportunity to be a mother and choose to dedicate herself to this relationship. She may find that she is wholly for honesty and that this has different implications for her personally than she previously thought. The key is that *she finds*, herself, without the external constraint of authority or dogmatism dictating the proper and necessary injunctions. That she can give her own answer, say yes to what she chooses after listening within, submit the nerve center of her consent, in an act of agency wholly—phenomenologically, somatically—her own. Importantly, this shifts the locus of concern from salvation and righteousness, which agency determines, to peace and happiness, which agency aligns within. The goal is not the ultimate action or resulting framework *per se*, the goal is the charting of the inward sea. That is the work of agency, that is the endowment of the human spirit, that is the immutable core of the being.

The implications of reconceptualizing human agency in this way within Latter-day Saint thought are broad. Focusing less on action and the controlling and manicuring of behavior toward a specific, preconceived model and more on the internal work of knowing oneself shifts the structure of authority. The ultimate authority is the individual nerve center of consent, guarded by the archangel herself. This is a disruptive framework. Additionally, this shift changes our notions of freedom. We are not all equally free to choose, to pull ourselves up by the bootstraps and create the lives we want. That is a total misreading of the doctrine of agency as it pertains to the human spirit. Rather, human beings are free to discern *what we are for*. We are free to be agents of spiritual discernment and power.

#### IV. Conclusion

Let us again consider the prophet Lehi. His story is the backdrop to the entire drama of the Book of Mormon, and it is at its core a story of mystical encounter between God and humans. Through my eyes, it is a story of a prophet asking what he is for and answering with his whole life. It is a story of his children asking and answering in the affirmative and the negative to his invitations. It is a story of a woman moving from self-sacrifice to self-realization, sacrificing her place in society and following her dreamer of a husband into the wilderness before coming to assent for herself.<sup>41</sup> It is a story of human agency. Blessing his children before his death, Lehi taught, "[Humans] have become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for themselves and not to be acted upon, save it be by the punishment of the law at the great and last day, according to the commandments which God hath given. . . . [Humans] are free according to the flesh. . . . And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil."<sup>42</sup> Latter-day Saint authority has wrested this teaching to its grave, understanding it to weld a link between obedience (predetermined action) and salvation. But with the help of Thurman's work, I am suggesting that we invite the mystical back into the story.

The soteriological lens justifies a fear-based reading of this scripture. A punitive, satisfaction theory of atonement sets up a paradigm wherein humans are inherently wicked and must prove their worthiness through obedience to divine law (and even that is not enough!). But what if, instead, we read with a lens of abundance and hope? Humans have the power to look at the world and to discern good from evil. They themselves are endowed with God's own source of being—the vitality of life. They have the ability to connect to that essence, to encounter

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41. 1 Nephi 5:8.

42. 2 Nephi 2:2–4.

and commune with God, and to align their beings with the source of all life and liberate their spirits from the woundedness of the mortal condition. Through that lens, I rethink Lehi's words for myself and for my children: you have always been connected to God. You are not far away, even though you are wounded and afraid. You may not always have the choices or circumstances you would like, but you can always be free. There is a way to experience liberty and eternal life as you live, to distance yourself from all that holds you captive and afraid. Open yourself up, show God that which you are most ashamed of, and let God love you all the same. Linger there, wholly known, wholly loved, and be free.

The gift of human agency, Thurman probes us to see, is not that our choices must submit to an external authority, but rather that humans are free to discern what they are for and to answer and live consequentially. May we continue speaking to Lehi and to Sariah, discontent with hasty conclusions. May we be dissatisfied with pithy statements and contradictions. May we greet the sea before us, and within us, and become acquainted with that nerve center guarded by the angel wielding a sword of fire. May we ask what she is guarding, and why. May we listen, may we respond, may we thus pray.

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