

DEEP RIVER
AND
THE
NEGRO SPIRITUAL
SPEAKS OF LIFE
AND DEATH

by
Howard Thurman

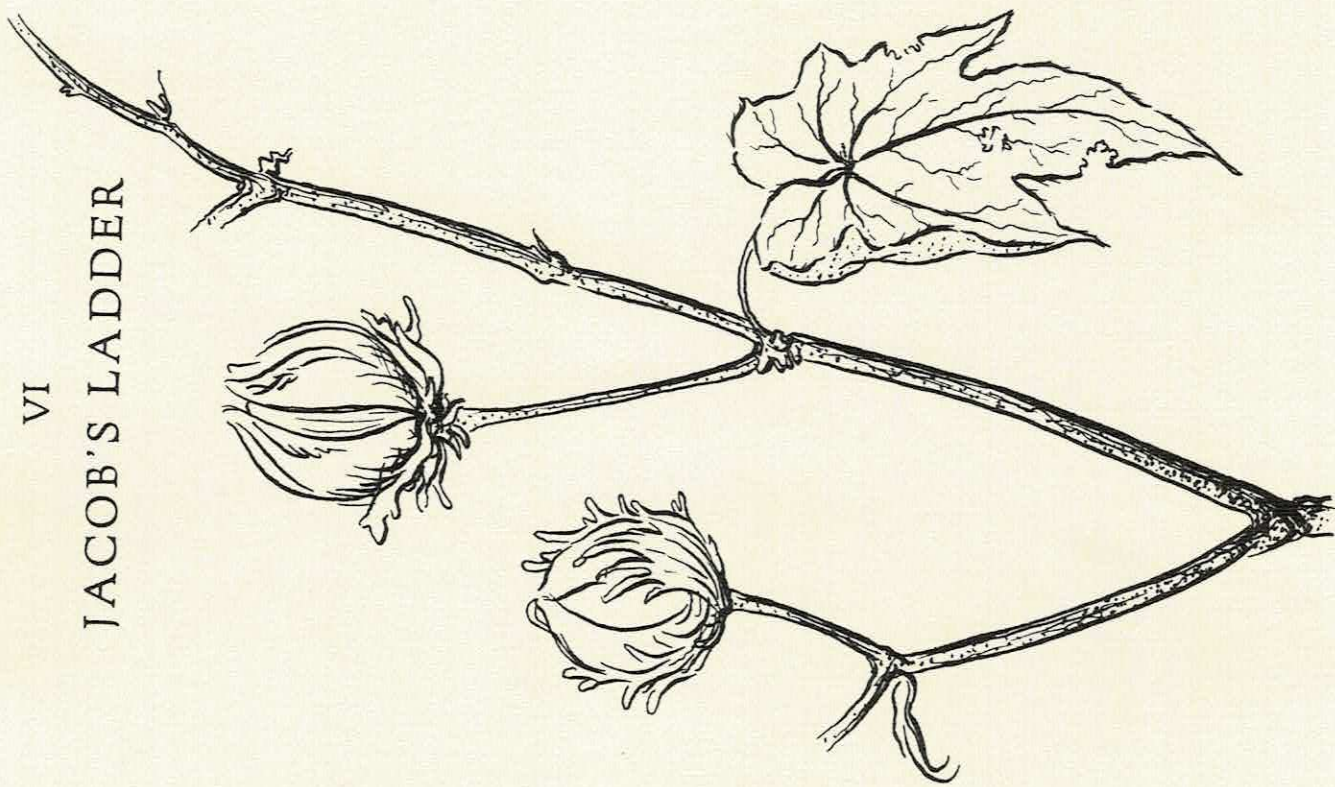
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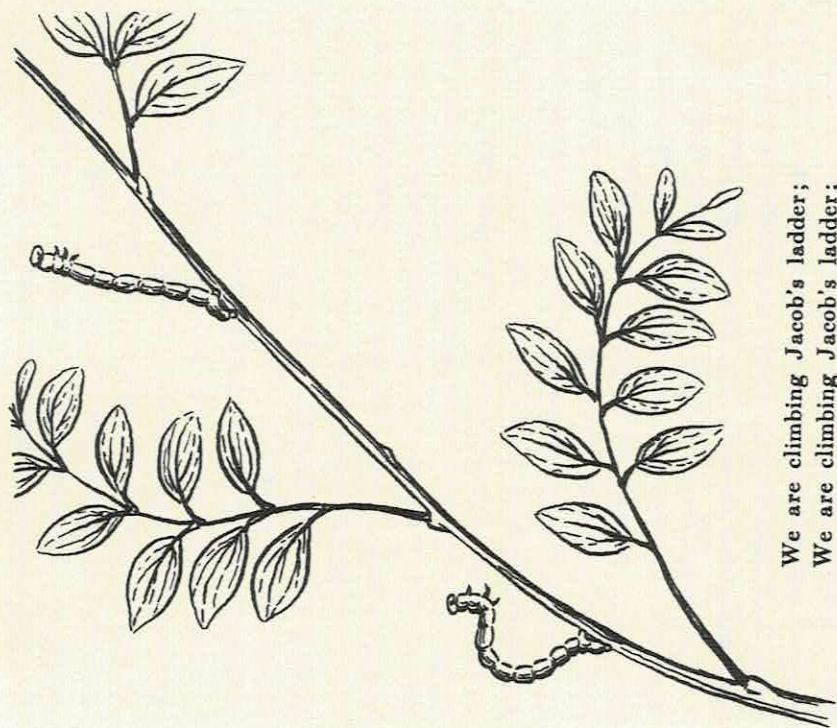
“Thou hast made us for thyself and our souls are restless till they find their rest in thee,” says Augustine. Life is like a river.

Deep River, my home is over Jordan—

Deep River, I want to cross over into camp ground.

VI
JACOB'S LADDER





We are climbing Jacob's ladder;
We are climbing Jacob's ladder;
Every round goes higher, higher.

HAVE you ever heard a group singing this song? The listener is caught up in the contagion of a vast rhythmic pulse beat, without quite knowing how the measured rhythm communicates a sense of active belonging to the whole human race; and at once the individual becomes a part of a moving host of mankind. This is the great pilgrim spiritual.

The setting for the story is not unfamiliar to those who are acquainted with the Old Testament. Jacob had succeeded in fooling his father, and for the second time in his conspiracy, he had the added genius of his mother to assist him. When he had received the blessing from his father—a blessing intended for Esau, his brother—a mighty tension emerged between these two. Esau sought to kill him, but his mother, getting wind of this, urged Jacob to pay a visit to her brother. There seemed to be a decision on her part to make Jacob's visit face-saving. It was suggested that he seek a wife in the land in which her brother lived. Jacob set out on his journey, and when night fell he was tired. He rested on the wayside, with his head soothed by the coolness of the stone he used for a pillow. As he slept he dreamed, and in his dream behold there was a ladder stretching from earth to heaven. Moving up and down the ladder were angels, and at the top of the ladder was Jehovah. The next morning when Jacob awoke with the acute impact of the dream upon him, he said, "This is a holy place—I have seen a vision." He marked the place, as was customary, with a stone. Any passer-by seeing the stone would know that the spot had been for some man a place of encounter. Such a passer-by might honor another man's experience by adding a stone to his stone. Perhaps in time such a spot would become a shrine on which an altar would be placed.

Such is the story. Out of this picture the slave singer phrased his disturbing melody, "We are climbing Jacob's ladder. We are climbing Jacob's ladder. Every round goes higher, higher." The song gathers in its sweep all the concentrated urgencies of human dreaming.

What is the insight here? Toward what is the mind of the slave poet groping? For lack of a better and a more accurate term, it seems to me that what is being named here is the gothic principle in human life. And what is the gothic principle? It is the recognition of a two-dimensional character of reality: the giant gothic cathedral, its pillars grounded firmly in the earth and its awe-inspiring vault reaching toward the heavens. Here is the time-bound and the timeless; the finite and the infinite; the particular and the universal.

This is one of the original problems of the human spirit—as old as human thought. How can a synthesis be distilled out of the particular and the general, the finite and the infinite, the time-bound and the eternal? Wherever the human mind has wrestled with ideas and with ultimate meaning, it has tried to answer this problem. In it there is a recognition that human personality itself is the ambulating epitome of the principle we are calling the gothic. Every man recognizes that he is a creature with a body, a face, a mind; and at the same time there is something in him that always wants to fly. There is something in every one of us that tries ever to reach beyond the known, the realized, the given, the particular. The struggle seems never to be resolved; man, the earth-bound creature, with his mind and spirit moving in and out among the stars. Such is the gothic principle in human life.

We see this same principle illustrated in other practical aspects of human experience. We are never able to put into words precisely what it is that we are feeling or thinking. There is no more familiar phrase than the oft-quoted one from the Book of Hebrews, "Words fail me." The living content of experience is always richer

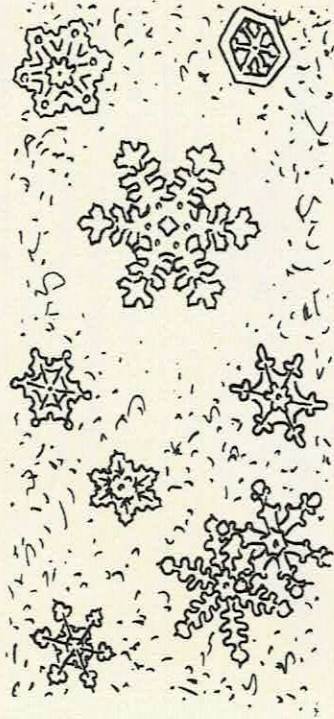
than the articulation of experience. This is one of the reasons why the language of any people is rich in meaning and overtone. Again and again mankind tries to put into words and symbols the meanings of experience that can never quite be implied by any words or symbols, however great and strategic such words and symbols may be. A simple illustration of what I mean is in the use of the three words, "I love you." Over a period of a half century one person may say that same phrase through endless days to another person, and yet at the end of his life discover what he has known all along, that he has never been able to say what he meant.

In the great Christian doctrine of incarnation we see the heart of the problem revealed in utter starkness: the great God of the universe making Himself particular in a manifold creation, depositing awareness of this fact in limited ways in all living things and in man in particular. Finally—so the doctrine insists—He was able to particularize Himself in the man Jesus, the anointed. Thus all believers feel in this Man the achievement supreme—at last God had been able to speak Himself into time and space. Thus Jesus becomes the object of religious devotion, while he himself remains always the subject of religious experience. But here again even the believers continue to try to say who Jesus is; and no explanation is the final explanation.

There is a second suggestion inherent in the insight of this spiritual. There seems to be basic to human experience a kind of incurable optimism about the ultimate destiny of man; this is true even for people who regard themselves as confirmed pessimists. Sometimes blindly, sometimes with scarce hope of vindication, often with

wild irrationality, the spirit of man dares to affirm ultimate hope. If in the present circumstances or the present world there seem to be no grounds for such assurance, there is the tendency to make immediate transfer to another period or even another form of existence or another world. This quality in human life is very important, for it is the ground of hope in times of despair, the incentive for dreams of a better day when desires are out of joint; and the "Hallelujah!" to life when worlds crash and dreams whiten into ash.

In very practical terms we see this quality at work in what out of our sophistication we may regard as the rationalizing tendency of the human mind. Here is a sick man who does not seem to be recovering according to schedule. He may say to himself, "This is the hottest summer I have ever experienced, but when the cool winds come in September I know I shall be better." And then when September comes and it is cloudy and very humid the same man may say, "What I really need is the crispness of winter." When winter comes he may say, "This is the most unseasonable winter I have ever ex-



perceived. I am sure that I shall feel better in the spring." And thus it goes. When you are ten years old the thing you seek you will find when you are in your teens. When you are in your teens it will come in your twenties. And on it goes—this basic resoluteness in the human spirit that is ever the folly of basic pessimism.

The contradictions of experience, how baffling!
Moments of transcending beauty
Sicklied over by spattering ugliness;
Goodness, radiant and triumphant,
Surrounded by the persistent menace of evil, rugged and refined;

Love, full and uncalculating,
Struggling ever with violence, fierce and logical;
Often, so much that casts down,
Often, so little that uplifts and inspires.
The contradictions of experience, how baffling, indeed!
The final vote of man's spirit—
For what is it cast?
Does the spirit of man accept these contradictions as ultimate?

Does it find in them some Eternal Drama
Endless in interval, complete in meaning?
Is this apparent tension but a projection
Of what takes place deep within itself,
And all it sees is but reflection?
Or is there something more?
The final vote of man's spirit, for what is it cast?
The growing edge of hope in times of deepest despair!
The bold trust that the contradictions of life are not ultimate!

All this man holds against every odd—

Not merely by will and resolution,
But by processes vaster than mind,
Surer than logic,
Profounder than private plan and personal desire.
Therefore,

All endurance finally glows in radiance!
All hope remains forever hopeful!
And a man can gaze without panic
Upon the withering disillusionments of life
With quiet eyes and peaceful heart!¹

The idea here may be briefly summarized by calling it a sense of tomorrow.

The insight of the spiritual is not only confined to the gothic principle and this sense of tomorrow, which are truly kindred notions, but there is implicit here that each man must face the figure at the top of the ladder. There is a goal. It is some kind of climax to human history. Every man must come to terms with the ultimate problem. How does he relate to something that is final in existence? In one way or another God and the human spirit must come together. Whatever things in life you believe to be true and valid, you and they must sit together in the solitude of your own spirit; and when you do what is on the agenda no form of pretension has any standing there. Even your most vaunting ambition may seem in such a moment to be

¹ Howard Thurman, *The Greatest of These*, p. 17.



filthy rags. The one searching item with which you have to deal is, how have you lived your life in the knowledge of your truth? This may not occur for the individual at the time of his dying, or at a moment of crisis, but as you turn the corner today in your own road, suddenly it is upon you. We are all climbing Jacob's ladder, and every round goes higher and higher. All who recognize this as a living part of their experience join with those early destiny-bound singers who marched through all the miseries of slavery confident that they could never be entirely earth-bound.

We are climbing Jacob's ladder;
We are climbing Jacob's ladder;
Every round goes higher, higher.

VII
WADE IN THE WATER,
CHILDREN

