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A Boy and a Comet

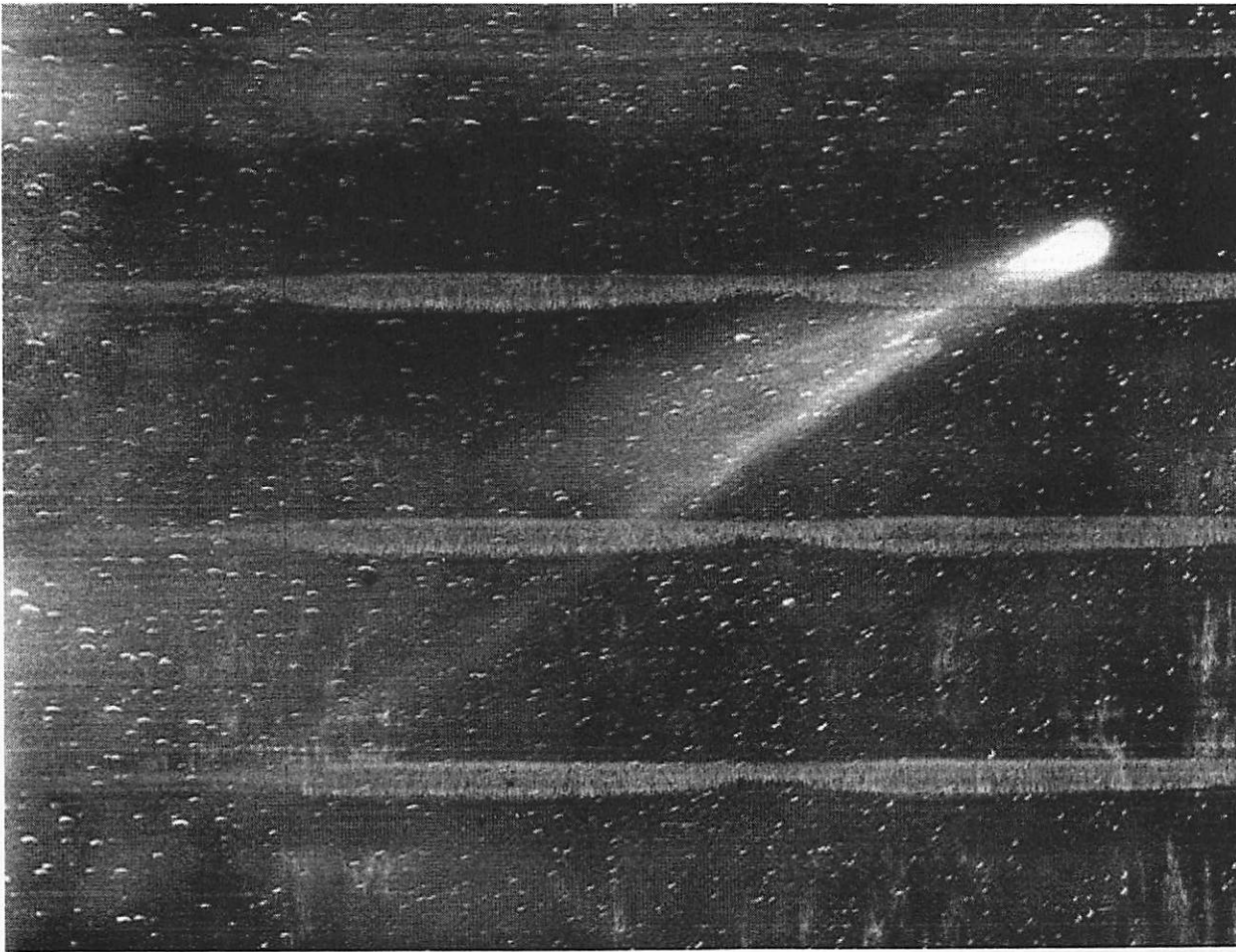
Viewing Halley's Comet as a young child kindled in me a quiet reassurance that has never deserted me.

By Howard Thurman

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IT WAS THE YEAR of Halley's Comet. I was a little boy living in a sawmill town in Florida. I had not seen the comet in the sky because my mother made me go to bed with the setting of the sun. Some of my friends who were more privileged had tried to convey to me their impression of the awe-inspiring spectacle. And I heard my stepfather say one day when he came home for lunch that a man had been down at the mill office selling what he called "comet pills." The theory was that if these pills were taken according to directions, when the tail of the comet struck the earth the individual would be immune. As I remember it, the owner of the sawmill made several purchases, not only for himself and family, but for his key workmen – the idea being that after the debacle he would be able to start business over again.

One night I was awakened by my mother, who asked if I would like to see the comet. I got up, dressed quickly, and went out with her into the back yard. There I saw in the heavens the awesome tail of the comet and stood transfixed. With deep anxiety I asked, without taking my eyes off it, "What will happen to us when that thing falls out of the sky?" There was a long silence during which I felt the gentle pressure of her fingers on my shoulders; then I looked into her face and saw what I had seen on another occasion, when without knocking I had rushed into her room and found her in prayer. At last she said, "Nothing will happen to us, Howard. God will take care of us." In that moment something was touched and kindled in me, a quiet reassurance that has never quite deserted me. As I look back on it, what I sensed then was the fact that what stirred in me was one with what created and controlled the comet. It was this inarticulate awareness that silenced my fear and stilled my panic.



Halley's Comet during its 1910 approach. Photograph by Edward Emerson.

Here at once is the primary ground and basis of man's experience of prayer. I am calling it, for the purpose of this discussion, the "givenness of God" as expressed in the hunger of the heart. This is native to personality, and when it becomes part of a man's conscious focus it is prayer at its best and highest. It is the movement of the heart of a man toward God; a movement that in a sense is within God – God in the heart sharing its life with God the Creator of all Life. The hunger itself is God, calling to God. It is fundamental to my thought that God is the Creator of Life, the Creator of the living substance, the Creator of existence, and as such expresses Himself through life. This is the meaning, essentially, of the notion that life is alive and that this is a living universe. Man himself cannot be an exception to this fact.

It has always seemed curious to me that man should investigate the external world, recognize its order, and make certain generalizations about its behavior which he calls laws; that he should study his own organism and discover there a kind of orderliness of inner behavior, which he seeks to correct when it acts out of character by a wide variety of ministrations, from drugs and surgery to hypnosis and faith – and yet that he should be inclined, at the same time, to regard himself as an entity apart from all the rest of creation, including his body. Man is body, but more than body; mind, but more than mind; feelings, but more than feelings. Man is total; moreover, he is spirit. Therefore it is not surprising that in man's spirit should be found the crucial nexus that connects him with the Creator of Life, the Spirit of the living God. The apostle is utterly realistic when he says that in Him we live and move and have our being. The most natural thing

in the world for man, then, would be to keep open the lines of communication between him and the Source of his life, out of which he comes and into which (it is my faith) he goes.

Source: Howard Thurman, *The Mood of Christmas*, (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1985). Used by permission.




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