

Rajmohan Gandhi at Howard University

Founded in 1867, soon after the Civil War, Howard University is one of America's premier historically black institutions of higher learning. It has played a significant part in American history and in the civil rights movement. On June 10, Rajmohan Gandhi spoke at the University's Rankin Chapel on the theme "Building Trust across the World's Divides – Lessons Learned from the Work and Teachings of Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. Howard Thurman and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr." Howard Thurman, an influential educator, theologian, author and civil rights leader, was Dean of Theology and of the Rankin Chapel at Howard, where his image is included in a stained glass window.

In his talk, Rajmohan offered a series of pictures: Gandhi being thrown off a train bound from Durban towards Pretoria and cared for by an unknown and unnamed African American; the 14-year-old Thurman sitting in floods of tears on a curb at a moment of desperation and being helped by another unknown and unnamed African American; Gandhi persuading the Congress party to offer a resolution condemning BOTH the Indian riot, which resulted in the deaths of five British citizens, AND the ensuing massacre of at least 379 Indians taking part in a non-violent meeting by British troops; the Thurmans at the Kyber pass in 1936, where Thurman had a vision of a color blind America; then meeting with Gandhi in Bardoli, Gujarat, and singing the spiritual "Were You There"—to which Gandhi replied after reflecting, "Well, if it comes true it may be through the African Americans that the unadulterated message of non-violence will be delivered to the world." Thurman, back in America, being told that there would be quite a few Jewish people at an occasion where he was to speak, asking himself, "What would be my reaction if I were a Jew?" and then realizing, "Instantly I felt a sensitivity I had never felt before." William Stuart Nelson, an African American minister, expert on non-violence, regular correspondent of King, and Dean of the Howard Divinity School, in response to Gandhi's request in 1947 for a prayer song, offering "O, God Our Help in Ages Past," which Gandhi translates; an African American journalist from Chicago requesting a message and Gandhi replying, "My life is my message." And in 1950, Mordecai Johnson, first African American president of Howard, speaking to a Philadelphia audience which included Martin Luther King, Jr., following a visit to India; King responding by buying half a dozen books on Gandhi's work, which he deemed a moral and practical way of addressing injustice.

From these pictures, the audience was left to draw its own conclusions—for example, that these three had a deep bond of the spirit and a quality of commitment that spanned generations, changing lives and countries; that any of us might play the role of the unknown and unnamed men who made a profound difference in the lives of Gandhi and Thurman; that deep listening and learning from others is transforming; that these men were able to walk in the other's shoes and pursued truth, no matter where it led; and that they had the courage to truly practice non-violence and love towards all.

Joining Howard University, the International Association of Black Professionals in International Affairs was a major sponsor of the event, and a number of its members attended. Jennifer Douglas, secretary of the BPIA, provided the inspired theme. Another major participant and

sponsor was the United Negro College Fund Special Programs – International Institute of Public Policy, a very competitive program drawing 25 top students to Howard's campus for a seven-week intensive program. Gandhi was invited to engage with these students before the speaking event by the Program's organizer, Dr. Jeanne Toungara, who also was moderator of the afternoon. Following this exchange with the students, the Gandhis were given a tour of the Museum of African American history by the Director of the Blackburn Center, Roberta Mcleod, a relative of Mary Mcleod Bethune, whose life is portrayed in the IofC musical "The Crowning Experience."