Chapter I

The Early Years

To Mordecai Wyatt Johnson
18 June 1918
Jacksonville, Fla.

Howard Thurman’s earliest extant correspondence is this letter of introduction to Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, who would become Thurman’s closest mentor during his early career. The inspired Thurman introduces himself to Johnson after hearing his address at the annual YMCA student conference for students of black colleges and normal schools held at Lincoln Academy in Kings Mountain, North Carolina.

Mr. Tobias knows me, also Rev. Samuel A. Owens and Prof. Joseph A. Grimes your schoolmates.

Rev. Mordecai Johnson,
Charleston, West Virginia.

My dear Rev. Johnson:—

Do not be surprised at hearing from me, for I, at the Student’s Conference of 1917, let you slip into my heart and occupy the place of a precious friend and as long as memory reproduces pictures, to me, you shall be a living inspiration. I admired your eloquence, bowed humbly before your sympathy, and rejoiced to know that you cared. I wanted to know you and wanted you to know me; I longed for a cheering word from a man like you; I yearned to tell you {of} my hopes, ambitions and discouragements, but each time something hindered, something caused me to be denied that coveted privilege. I attended the last conference but, as you remember, you were only there a few hours. I stood in the dark fully 45 minutes waiting an opportunity but Mitchell of Morehouse seemed to have had a monopoly on your time.
Listen while I tell to you my soul. My home is in Daytona Florida but I attend the Florida Baptist Academy of Jacksonville as you note. I am 18 years old. My father has been dead 11 years. He died leaving 3 small children for my mother to rear. God bless her holy name, she did her best. She toiled morning noon and night that we may be permitted to go to public school. I finished the public school, that is, during my last year I ran a fish market, studied my lessons at the market [illegible] went to the school to recite them, immediately thereafter reporting to my job. It was thus, that I [strikeover illegible] completed my grammar school education with an average of 99% receiving the first Certificate of Promotion given to the colored people of my County. During the early summer I told mother of my desire to continue my education. Her reply was this, “Son you may go but I cannot do anything for you financially, for I must care for your sisters.” I told her that I did not expect anything of her only her prayers. The fall came, I had no money and scarcely sufficient clothing for the winter. I made arrangements with a cousin in this city to let me room with him. He did so and I played off on my insurance agent in order to get railroad fare to this point. I came here, ate an average of one square meal a day and walked to the Academy to school, a distance of 2 ½ miles. On Saturday I worked from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. for 50¢. During the week I pressed clothes in the neighborhood for 25¢ per suit. My average scholarship for that year was 96 ²∕₅ %, which was the highest in the school; I won the scholarship medal. The next year I boarded in at reasonable rate, working half of my schooling. My average scholarship was 98%. (highest) Last year the same conditions prevailed my average 94 ²∕₅ %. I want to be a minister of the Gospel. I feel the needs of my people, I see their distressing condition, and have offered myself upon the altar as a living sacrifice, in order that I may help the “skinned and flung down” as you interpret. God wants me and His precious love urges me to take up the cross and follow Him. I want advice from you as to how to direct my efforts. I am scheduled to finish here next year. As you know, the war is on and young men are being snatched daily. I am patriotic; I am willing to fight for democracy, but my friend Rev. Johnson, my people need me. I want a thorough training for my work which would necessitate my taking a college course prior to Theology, would it not? If I do by the time that I am in Junior College, providing the age limit remains as it is I shall will be drafted. Hence my training cut off. What would you advise me to do? Please take a personal interest in me and guide me and God will reward you, for you are God’s trustee. Believe me when I say that you made a deeper impression upon my life than any man at the Conference either last year or this year. I am hoping that you will not misunderstand me. I come to you {for guidance}, I have no real guide but Jesus but in some things I believed that He intended for his “Watchmen” (your expression) to point out the way.

Doubtless when this reaches your home you will be in Harpers Ferry.
I thank you for your sermon, “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, in earth as it is in heaven.” Also for your famous “Skinned and Flung Down.”

Please pray for me because {almost} on every hand I am discouraged in my choice of the Ministry. Sometimes I think nobody cares but thank God, Jesus does, mother does and I believe you do.

Awaiting an early reply, I am,

Yours very sincerely,

[signed] Howard W. Thurman,
Fla. Baptist Academy.

ALS. MWJ-DHU-MS: Box 178.

Notes

1. Lincoln Academy was a normal and industrial school for black students founded in 1888 by the American Missionary Association.

2. Channing Heggie Tobias (1882–1961) received his AB from Paine Institute (now Paine College) in 1902 and BD from Drew University in 1905. In 1911, he became secretary of the Colored Department of the National Council of the YMCA and was a strong advocate for the organization’s desegregation. In 1946 Tobias left the YMCA to become the first African American director of the Phelps-Stokes Fund, an organization that supported black education. He also served as a trustee of Howard University and chairman of the board of directors of the NAACP from 1953 to 1959, receiving the NAACP’s Spingarn medal in 1948.

3. Samuel Augustus Owen (1886–1974) was pastor of Thurman’s home congregation, Mount Bethel Baptist Church, Daytona, Florida, from 1917 to 1930. Like Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, he was a 1911 graduate of Atlanta Baptist College (now Morehouse College). From 1923 to 1971, Owen was the pastor of Metropolitan Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee. He also served as the president of Roger Williams University. Owen Junior College (since 1968 LeMoyne-Owen College), organized in 1954 by the Tennessee Baptist Missionary and Educational Convention, is named in his honor.

4. Joseph Grimes was one of Thurman’s teachers at Florida Baptist Academy. Grimes attended Morehouse briefly. He received his BA in history from the University of Iowa (1934) and his MA in history from the institution (1935).

5. Mordecai Wyatt Johnson (1890–1976) was born in Paris, Tennessee, was educated at Roger Williams University (a high school) in Nashville and Atlanta Baptist College, graduating in 1911, and had his degree “validated” at the University of Chicago in 1913. At Rochester Theological Seminary, he received a BD (1916) and earned an MST from Harvard Divinity School (1922). He served as student secretary of the International Committee of the YMCA in 1916 but resigned less than one year later due to the failure of YMCA leadership to challenge discriminatory hotel arrangements for a national conference in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Even after his resignation, Johnson continued to speak at YMCA national student conferences. From 1917 to 1926, he was the pastor of First Baptist Church of Charleston, West Virginia. In 1926, he was chosen as president of Howard University, becoming the institution’s first black president. During his presidency, Johnson supervised Howard’s growth into a major university and center of African American intellectual life. His forceful managerial style was controversial and had both ardent supporters and opponents within the Howard faculty. In 1960 Johnson retired from Howard. He was one of the leading orators of his time and spoke frequently on matters of racial

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**From Mordecai Wyatt Johnson**

8 July 1918

Charleston, W.Va.

*Writing to Thurman at Florida Baptist Academy, Mordecai Wyatt Johnson responds to his questions about the preparation required for ministry, encouraging him to become a well-educated thinker and leader of his people.*

My dear Mr. Thurman:

I thank you heartily for your recent letter. I have read the story of your aspirations and your strivings with great interest and sympathy. Your industry, your perseverance under difficulty, your reverence for your mother, and your yearning to serve mark you as a God-chosen man.

By all means go on with your preparatory and college work. Meanwhile make yourself more and more acquainted with the history and biography of the Bible and with the teachings of Jesus and of Paul. It will be far better for you to enter the ministry after you have completed a college course than to make a short cut, putting a shallow course in theology on top of your preparatory work. As young as you are you should set before you the ideal of thorough preparation—a first class college course plus a first class theological training. You will be able to do this, I judge, before you are twenty-six years of age.

Keep in close touch with your people, especially with those who need your service. Take every opportunity to encourage their growth and to serve them. School yourself to think over all that you learn, in relation to them and to their needs. Make yourself believe that the humblest, most ignorant and most backward of them is worthy of the best prepared thought and life that you can give.

It is not necessary that you delay the actual work of preaching until you have completed your courses. You may have yourself licensed to preach at any time, by your local church. Rev. Alfred C. Williams,¹ now pastor of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church of Birmingham, Alabama, began pastoring when he was about your age; but he continued with his work. When he graduated from Morehouse College he was pastor of a church in Atlanta. Many young men pastor churches while they are doing their theological work. I did that in Rochester.² Prepare! Prepare! This is the one and only word for you. You need have no fear about work; you will find plenty to do both while you are in school and afterwards.

Do not allow the prospect of being drafted to deter you from your work of preparation. There are three years yet before you will be called. It is possible that the war will be closed before that time. If, however, the war continues and you
are called, you will have the joy of giving your country a superior type of service such as college men can give, and you will return from the war prepared to take your place again in the higher college classes with an early prospect of being one among the few well trained thinkers and leaders who will have the destiny of our people in their keeping.

I am glad to learn that my words at Kings Mountain in 1917 and 1918 influenced you for good. Such testimonies as yours are the most precious rewards of my work. May God bless you and keep you and make you His minister indeed!

Sincerely yours,

[signed] Mordecai W. Johnson

P.S. Under separate cover I am sending you a brief history of the People of Israel as set forth in the Old Testament. You will find it to your advantage to cultivate the historical perspective that such books can give.

M.W.J.

TLS. HTC-MBU: Box 8.

1. Reverend Alfred C. Williams (1883–1964) received his BA from Atlanta Baptist College (1912) and his MA in philosophy and religious education at the University of Michigan (1928). He served as pastor of the Antioch Baptist church in Atlanta, Georgia, until 1912. In 1913 he led the Mount Nebo Baptist Church in Pulaski, Florida, and was the pastor of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church of Birmingham, Alabama, from 1916 to 1920. He left there to go to Detroit, Michigan. See Christopher M. Hamlin, Behind the Stained Glass: A History of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church (Birmingham, Ala.: Hill, 1998), 21–22.

2. While a student at Rochester Theological Seminary, Johnson served as student pastor of the Second Baptist Church in Mumford, New York, from 1914 to 1916.

3. Johnson’s reference to a “historical perspective” probably reflected his interest in the “higher criticism,” that is, the careful study of the historical roots of Christian and Jewish religious texts and his concern that his young correspondent does not fall into an uncritical or sentimental Biblicism.

To Mordecai Wyatt Johnson

17 July 1918
Jacksonville, Fla.

Thurman expresses his appreciation to Johnson for his encouraging words and declares his willingness to undergo rigorous preparation for the ministry.

Rev. M. W. Johnson,
First Baptist Church,
Charleston, West Virginia.

Rev. Johnson:—

Your very inspiring favor also the book came in due course of mail. Permit me to assure you that those thoughts of encouragement which you so beautifully
tenderly encouched in your letter are most thoroughly appreciated. Never before had I arisen to the full consciousness of the responsibilities which must of necessity devolve upon men, if I must preach the gospel. God knows that I thank you and it is my prayer that you feel always a personal interest in me and that it is my pleasure to have you advise me at any time.

I get the weekly editions of the “Standard,” “Watchman-Examiner,” and the “Journal and Messenger,” these, I find, are very helpful, for our leading ministers contribute {to them} articles of sterling worth.¹ I have studied, most carefully, Bosworth’s “About Jesus” and a portion of Wilson’s, “The Christ We Forget;” {et al} what else do you suggest?²

I noted with much interest what you said about my beginning to preach. I am away from home working at the school, hence I cannot be licensed by my church until early fall. When you write, please explain to me how to make my application.

Thanking you for the gift of the book and assuring you that I am already an earnest student thereof, I am,

yours very truly,

[signed] H. W. Thurman

ALS. MWJ-DHU-MS: Box 178.

1. The Standard, Watchman-Examiner, and Journal and Messenger were among the leading mainstream Baptist periodicals of the time. The Standard was a semi-monthly publication of the Baptist General Conference out of Arlington Heights and Evanston, Illinois, that began in the early 1900s. The Watchman-Examiner, a northern Baptist weekly, had arguably the largest circulation of any Baptist publication, with the exception of Sunday school literature. Considered to be a “journal for all Baptists,” it was widely read by both black and white Baptists in the south. The Journal and Messenger was a weekly serial published from the 1800s until 1920.

2. Edward Increase Bosworth (1861–1927) wrote Thirty Studies about Jesus (New York: Association Press, 1917). Bosworth was a popular writer on Christology and many of his writings became standard texts of the YMCA and YWCA. While Thurman was pastor of Mount Zion Baptist Church in Oberlin, he studied the New Testament with Bosworth at the Oberlin Seminary. WHAH, 60, 70–71. Philip Whitwell Wilson (1875–1956) wrote The Christ We Forget: A Life of Our Lord for Men of Today (New York: Revell, 1917).
Dear Miss Simons:¹

Your spark of sunshine came just in time to cheer me up and make me feel real happy. I thank you for it—may I—anyway, I take the liberty.

I am resting now. Last night I was in bed before dark. You should see me—no collar, no socks, just loose sleeping, eating and having a good time. I went to the doctor, he says that I had cheated Somnus—that I owed a big big bill to Dr. Sleep. My blood pressure is too high, other than that I am all right. I am planning to remain here until the last of next week. I am not decided as to the summer.

Not long since I was telling my mother how much you really meant to me. I will not tell you all that I said because you may not believe me—just like you. I will say this much, I miss you and I find myself actually wishing to be in your company. Write me as often as you can and feel like it. Your letters mean much to me.

I was sorry to leave without seeing you but I hope to see you either in St. Augustine or Jax.²

All right now, please do not mark this letter up and send it back with this inscription: Rewrite and Put in Book E.M.S.

I am feeling fine to-day.

I have already bought and read June’s issue. I have a copy of “Rubáiyat of Omar Khayyam” and Florence Barclay’s “The Wheels of Time.”³

I have one or two things that I must say to you sometime.

Write when you feel like it.

Mother and sister send best of regards.

Yours What?

[signed] Howard Thurman

Can you read it?


2. Jacksonville.