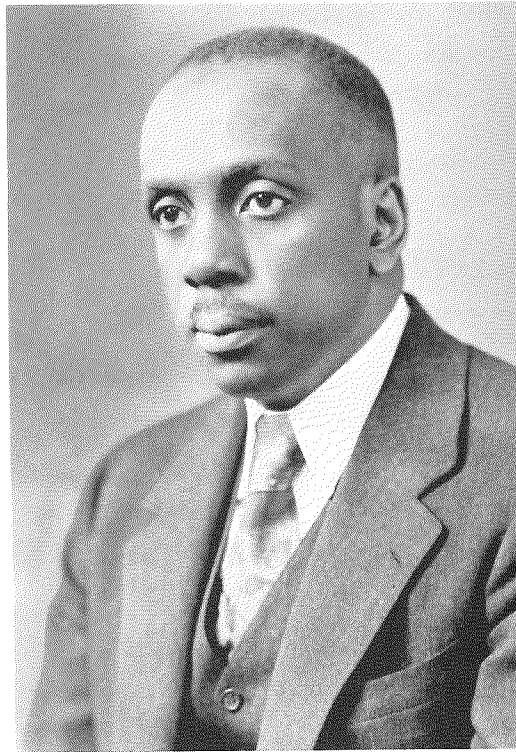


Howard Thurman,
circa 1930. Courtesy of the
Thurman family and
Arleigh Prelow/Howard
Thurman Film Project



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 Academy¹ in Kings Mountain, North Carolina.

Mr. Tobias² knows me, also Rev. Samuel A. Owens³ and Prof. Joseph A. Grimes⁴ your schoolmates.

Rev. Mordecai Johnson,⁵
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 LeMoyné-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