

I know you had a fine Xmas. Van<sup>3</sup> informed me of the trip you were to take.

It gives me much real joy to see you very active in the college affairs. This grieved me much last term because such wonderful talent was not in use. I am very proud that our friendship has reached such proportion that even the thought of a breach is unthinkable. I really believe that my success in life depends on my relations with you, God and myself alone being excepted.

Oh how I wish I could hear your oration New Year night. You will not forget to keep it I will see it when I return.

Just when I will return is still unknown to me.

Best regards to the fellows and my sincere prayer for you.

Sincerely Yours,

[signed] Clarence J. Gresham.

ALS. HTC-MBU: Box 191.

1. Clarence James Gresham (1898–1985) was a native of Atlanta, Georgia. He graduated from Morehouse College Academy in 1918 and Morehouse College in 1923. For the next three years Gresham attended Oberlin Graduate School of Theology, and following his completion of the BD he was named interim pastor of First Baptist Church of LaGrange, Georgia. In 1926 he was professor of biblical literature in the School of Religion at Morehouse. He served as pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church of Athens, Georgia, from 1937 to 1952. In 1958, Gresham began his pastorate of Shiloh Baptist Church in Atlanta, where he remained until his death.

2. Here *small pops* refers to “smallpox.”

3. George Jackson Van Buren, a Morehouse classmate of Thurman who graduated from the institution in 1923, attended summer session at Columbia in 1922.

### “OUR CHALLENGE”

FEBRUARY–MARCH 1922

*The annual Emancipation Celebration was the signature event of the Pi-Gamma Literary Society of Morehouse and Spelman colleges. Two addresses were given, one by a student from Morehouse, the other by an alumnus selected by the student body. Thurman delivered “Our Challenge” on 2 January 1922, and it was later published in the Athenaeum. Emancipation addresses to commemorate the January first anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation were a well-established tradition in early twentieth-century African American oratory, one in which the speaker had to balance the progress made by African Americans since 1865 against the distance to travel to reach full equality. The piece is a typical student effort, in very ripe rhetoric, a glimpse of a master orator learning his craft.*

Physical slavery is no more. No more too the frantic wail, the awe-inspiring groan of black men as they crouch and cower beneath their master’s lash. When Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation the die was cast for physical slavery within

the United States of America. Notwithstanding the fact that our chains have been loosed, every black man in America finds himself chained and fettered by certain racial characteristics which have their origin in a past external environment but their perpetuation in a present subjective environment. We have been told that our progress is unparalleled in history; we have been told that our loyalty is unsurpassed from Bunker Hill to Carazel; we have also been told that we are a peculiar people ordained of God to bring salvation to the world. All this, too often. The effect has been decidedly unwholesome. Instead of inspiring us to higher heights, to greater effort, these things have tended to make us fold our arms in complacency and satisfaction. We have become intoxicated with our own progress, we have fallen asleep, now we are dreaming, yes, in a nightmare and the world is working.

While we are thus sleeping, our thoughts, our attitudes, our ideas and in many respects, our destinies, all, are being shaped and planned by those who love us not. The result is that although our chains have been loosed, our minds have been more securely bound. The calamity of it all is, however, our psychic slavery is so complete, our sleep so sound, our last waking impression so satisfying, that though we are victims, we do not realize it.

The problem of arousing our people to possess the land of their possibilities is complex in its nature and perplexing in its solution. For, as we have said before, there are certain racial characteristics which conspire to hinder our advance and to perpetuate that form of psychic slavery of which we speak. In this, fellow-students, we find our challenge.

We have carried to the extreme the philosophy of the eternal Now. We have transliterated, rather than interpreted the teachings of Jesus relative to the eternal present. We have a predisposition to have no place in our philosophy of life for future responsibility. In Africa we were supplied with a cheap plenteous food and a hot climate. The result was, as a matter of survival, we developed a rather shiftless, desultory nature and almost no sense of responsibility for the future. Why should we have thought in terms of the future when in the present we were supplied with all our needs not as a result of much effort on our part, but largely as a gift of nature? We came to America as slaves. The southern white man, our sometime master, exacted of us regular labor, but we became his responsibility to feed, to clothe, to care for. Hence, for ages past in Africa and for more than two hundred years in America, we had no need to develop a sense of responsibility for the future. We have been dependent upon the white man so long for the necessities of life, we have been compelled to look to him so long for succor and for aid that to the masses of our people he partakes of the nature of a god, to be honored, adored, feared and obeyed. We have been nurtured into the belief that his will must be our pleasure and his wish our sincere desire. In this state of darkness, of corrupt belief and false conception of things that are, the masses of our people live and move and have their being.

As students, that is, as students of meager means, we have been literally stormed into developing a sort of responsibility, at least, for the immediate future; but we are held mercilessly in the thralldom of shiftless and desultory habit. This finds expression among us in our desire to get by, to skim over, or to half do our job. These things must also pass away if we would survive.

It is true that we have made some progress, that we have blazed some paths, that we have paved some highways, but the tasks, the great big achievements of our race lie in the future. For indeed "the present is big with the future."<sup>1</sup>

In our struggle for existence in the American civilization, our salvation depends upon our independency, our organization, our keen sense of responsibility for the future, and our jam-up efficiency, along all lines temporal and spiritual. It seems amazingly peculiar, but strikingly true, that our ideals are but the visual manifestations of our greatest needs. Let us therefore acknowledge the existence of our ideals or of our needs, and with that fervor which only the great big human soul which we possess can know, let us develop for ourselves an emotion of these ideals. Then, as teachers and prophets of a new era, let us go forth wherever black men live and suffer and eject into the masses this same emotion. Through a series of slow and painful processes, we, the victims will soar higher, higher and higher, above the sordid ruins of our hinderances and set our ourselves free. No one can do this for us! We have been freed, now let us be free. In the judgment hall of our own race consciousness we must be victims or victors forever. Thus will the burning worlds of our economic depression flee and lighten through immensity, will the judgment fires kindle about the pillars that stay race prejudice and rolling their smoke and flames upward, fire the entire civilized dome, and then, and only then, will the car of Negro freedom, physical and psychic, rumble on forever, over the bleak and dismal loneliness of an exterminated slavery.

*Athenaeum* (February–March 1922): 49–50.

1. From Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716): "The present is big with the future and laden with the past."

✻ "PROPOSAL FOR NEGRO SCHOLARSHIP FUND"

[1922–23?]

[ATLANTA, GA.?:]

*This undated document addressed to John Hope was most likely written during Thurman's junior or senior year at Morehouse College. The proposal calls for the establishment of a scholarship fund for black male students to pursue advanced degrees, presumably at predominantly white institutions at which they would have their degrees validated, and then "return to some designated Negro college" to teach. Thurman conceived this as an effort in black self-*

*advancement and wanted to solicit contributions from the black community until the principal of the fund reached one million dollars. This was in contrast to contemporary scholarship programs for black students, such as the Julius Rosenwald Fund or John F. Slater Fund or the later United Negro College Fund, which all relied heavily on contributions from wealthy white patrons. Thurman's proposal perhaps reflects the influence of Lorimer Milton,<sup>1</sup> a proponent of black economic advancement, who was one of the most successful black entrepreneurs in Atlanta. Milton taught Thurman economics at Morehouse, and he was one of Thurman's favorite teachers.*

*There are several reasons to plausibly assign this document to Thurman's undergraduate years. During his junior year at Morehouse, Thurman had made a similar proposal to James Gamble of the soap manufacturer Procter and Gamble, Thurman's benefactor since high school. In his proposal to Gamble, which is known about only from Thurman's autobiography, he suggested that Gamble establish a fund that would provide loans for teachers in black colleges to support their studies for advanced degrees.<sup>2</sup> Other factors supporting an early dating include stylistic elements, such as his address to "President Hope," a salutation not found in his later correspondence with John Hope, and a certain immaturity in style and content, including limiting the scholarship fund to males.*

*On some level, Thurman's concern with a Negro scholarship fund reflects the difficult financial circumstances of his own academic career, where his ability to attend college hinged on his winning very competitive scholarships. If Thurman rarely returned to explicit self-help schemes such as the one outlined here, the emphasis on developing and encouraging sound moral leadership among black college students would remain for Thurman a lifelong concern.*

It shall be incorporated under the name of the "Negro Scholarship Fund." The fundamental purpose of the fund shall be, to promote and encourage higher education among Negroes:

1. To make it possible for talented Negro men to pursue advanced courses along special lines until [word missing]
2. To especially aid Negro men who are looking toward the teaching profession that they may specialize at some designated institution. Said men will be under obligation to return to some designated Negro college or colleges as professors thereby simultaneously raising the standard of said college or colleges. The ultimate aim of such will be to bring the blessings of higher education within the reach of the average Negro youth.