

The Rise  
of the  
Begging Joints

Zora Neale Hurston

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# THE RISE OF THE BEGGING JOINTS

BY ZORA NEALE HURSTON

People have been telling me to clap hands, crack jokes, and generally cut Big Jim by the acre. I ought to look and see. Great joy was around me.

When I turned around and asked why I should jump Juba and burn red fire without ceasing, they told me, "Look! No more slavery days, and even the Reconstruction is past and gone. Aunt Hagar's chillun are eating high on the hog."

Now, there is nothing I favor more than clapping hands in drumtime, and dancing all night long, unless it is having something to clap hands and dance over. But I didn't see too clear; so I said, "Pick up your points. Tell me, and then make see, so I can dance it off."

So they told me again and often. Sometimes they said it with arm-gestures. Same thing all over again: the Reconstruction is over. Everything is fresh and new.

But I am not cutting my capers yet awhile, because I don't know for certain.

I do see a great many Negroes with college degrees, fur coats, big houses and long cars. That is just fine, and I like it. That looks really up-to-time. On the other hand, I see some things that look too much like 1875 in the lap of 1944, and they worry me.

Those Begging Joints, for instance. That is not the name they go by, of course. Some folks with their mouths full of flattery call them normal schools, colleges, and even universities. I'm sort of tie-tongued and short-patience, so I call them a functional name and let it go at that.

The "puhfessahs," principals, presidents and potentates who run these institutions seem to like them mighty fine. They will tell you without your even asking that these are "great works." Further, that they themselves are latter-day martyrs, electing to "carry on this great work for our people, so that our girls and boys may get some sort of an education." They tootch out the mouth to say this so that it oozes out in an unctuous tone of voice. There is also a ceremonial face-making, with eye-gleams, to go along with the sound. If you don't make some fast time away from there, you are going to hear all about how they were born in a log cabin. Think of that! And now, look! They have builded this g-r-e-a-t institution! The mouth-spread would take in the mighty expanse of Columbia University, but you look around and see something that would have been a miracle in 1875, but nothing to speak of in this day and year of our Lord.

The next thing you know, the talk has gotten around to funds. It always gets around to funds. Money is needed to carry on the g-r-e-a-t work. If you don't know any better, you will soon be shaking with apprehension at the prospect of this institution's closing its doors, and never another Negro girl or boy learning her or his ABC's. If you know anything about Negro education, you come out of your spasm quickly when you remember that there are such Class A seats of learning as Howard University, Fisk University, Morgan State College, Atlanta University and affiliates, Tuskegee, Morehouse, Talladega, Hampton, Florida A. and M., Southern, Bennett, Virginia State and Lincoln U. In addition, there are most all the Northern white colleges except Princeton with Negro graduates and students. For those with ambition but less funds, there are the state-supported colleges for Negroes in every Southern state. Quite a number of colored folk have even earned degrees at the leading universities of Europe, from Scandinavia to Spain.

But in spite of this, you are asked to shake and shiver over the prospective fate of some puny place without a single gifted person in its meager faculty, with only token laboratories or none, and very little else besides its FOUNDER. The Founder is the thing! And the Founder exists to raise funds.

## II

Where can one of these Begging Joints be found? There are two or more left in every state in the South.

With so many good colleges available to Negroes, why do these Begging Joints keep on existing? Because there are so many poor Negroes, and so many rich white people, who don't know very much. They not only do not know, but they are very incurious.

The colored families from which the Begging Joints draw their students know nothing about the importance of curricula for accrediting. They think that just finishing, "schooling out," is all that is necessary. Just so it is a school. Forty years ago, that would have been all right.

But, not only has the responsibility of the Negro population shifted, the concept of education has changed. Competition is keen, and every chick and child has to pull his weight in efficiency or get trampled in the rush. And that is the tragedy of promoting 1880 in 1944.

These institutions have two things to sell to the folks who are still living in the just-after-slavery aura. One of these is "Off" and the other is the equivalent of the medieval virtue belt. And both of these things take us back to the nineteenth century.

In those days, any kind of school education was something for a Negro to have and threw glitter all around the owner, even to distant cousins. To send your son or daughter *Off* to school marked you as a Big Negro, getting more like the white folks every day. So *Off* became the thing to strive for. It then brought the exalted job of teaching school, plus social preference in everything, including marriage.

*Off* has lost its glamor for the upper-class Negroes, but it still has some attraction for the lower class. Almost never will an upper-class Negro send his children away until after high school, if a fairly good school is at hand. When he does so, it is either because the local secondary school is not accredited, and will hamper the entrance to some good college, or because of some family reason. It is not because of any prestige of *Off*. But there are still those to whom *Off* is a putting-of-the-family-foot on the ladder, an offsetting of the necessity of labor over the washtub and the cookstove.

The virtue belt factor comes in like this. During slavery, there was no encouragement to continence on the plantations. Quite the contrary. So when freedom came, it is too much to expect that it would have been acquired immediately. There was little immorality really, just a lack of concept about the thing. So in the first generation or so after Emancipation, a mighty lot of girls got "ruin." Hence the first boarding schools that got started were more like reformatories with instruction on the side. You sent your daughter *Off*, if you could afford it, more to keep her from getting "ruin" than to get her educated. Naturally, even those ugly-faced, chilly, warden-like matrons were no more capable of thwarting a boy-crazy girl than her parents were. Daughter often brought her "diploma" home in her arms. Love will find a way.

The instances of this are fewer these days, but the idea is still being sold to parents—"We are not like that Howard University and Fisk. We don't allow our girls to go walking across the campus with boys. And no dancing together. No, indeed! Of course we are not so big as those places. But the students at those schools don't learn a thing! All they do is



socialize."

It is true that schools like Howard and Fisk place no ban on ordinary social contacts. It is true that there is some dancing. But what the Begging Joint Puhfessahs neglect to mention is that such colleges as Fisk and Howard run small chance of getting any under-privileged, unrestrained girls among the students. They have the pick of the nation. The instances in them of the kinds of troubles the Puhfessahs suggest fearsomely are negligible.

But the simple woman toiling over a washtub or cookstove does not understand that. So she sends her daughter *Off* to get her virtue guarded, at the instigation of the Puhfessah. It may be a locking of the stable after the horse is stolen, but that is not important to the Puhfessah. If daughter is an indifferent student, that is not important either. The "Great Work" needs students.

No students, no school. No school, no excuse to seek funds. No funds, the principal is faced with a major change in his or her way of living. A terrible loss of prestige, plus going to work with the hands. No more of giving his life and life's blood to the "doing of something for my people." The Puhfessah is in no position to pick and choose among prospective students. He must take what he can get or fold. And God forbid the folding!

So the doer of good works begs a good living for himself in the name of his people. And that is all right for him. But what about the poor black men and women bowed down over mops or standing over the white folks' cookstoves to send daughter

or son to the Begging Joint to dress the stage for the educational Fagin? And what of the students?

After two to four years, the janitor's or cook's son or daughter has a piece of paper tied up with a snatch of ribbon. He has had several years of considering himself above the commonality of Negro existence. He thinks sweat and overalls are not for him. But after many trials he finds that he can get no better employment than the boy he used to know next door. He is Jim Jones again, instead of Mr. James Jones, prospective principal of a school. He cannot meet the requirements of the state board of education. He may have learned a smattering of some trade at his school, but not enough to help him much when skilled labor is demanded. Time and money have been wasted, and in addition, he feels a bitter loss of face.

Some, pressed by necessity, adjust themselves and do what must be done. Others, just as pressed, never do. They cannot fit in where they think they belong, but will not adjust themselves to the level of their fitness. They go through life scornful of those who work with their hands, and resentful of the better-prepared Negroes. I know one man of this type who will not wear overalls, no matter how dirty the job that he has to do, because to him overalls are the symbol of the common Negro, and he fears to be so classified. The highest "position" that he has ever held since he left college more than twenty years ago has been a minor one in a 5- and 10-cent store, but he clings to his delusion of grandeur still.

But the Begging Joint does a greater disservice still to the

individual, the race and the nation. That is its perpetuation of the double standard in education. Even Southern legislators have come to realize that there must be only one, and the requirements of the Negro state and county schools are being sharply raised year by year. Beginning about 1930, the State of Florida began displacing its old-fashioned Negro teachers with more highly trained ones, preferably from the big Northern colleges. Other states have similar policies. But the little private schools are out of the jurisdiction of the state boards of education. All the state boards can do is to refuse to accredit the backward institution.

The raising of the Negro educational standard is an obvious necessity, since the inefficient are a drag on all. The city, the state and the nation need all their useful people, regardless of race and kind. There is no longer any place for the black man who "does very well for a Negro." He has got to be good these days, and I said *good*. But the Begging Joints are still doing nothing but trying to put exclamation points behind what was considered good away back in 1880 when the majority of white people thought that all Negroes were something less than human.

### III

As for the white donors to these Begging Joints, they need their heads examined. I am going to give them full credit for being friends of the Negro. But even so, why can't they be intelligent about it? If they want to do something for Negro

education, why not look into things and give where it will do some good?

Mind you, I am not seeking funds. I am not a Founder—and not consequently, a member of the Order of Higher Mendicants, as George Schuyler so aptly puts it. You were the one who said that you wanted to do something for Negro education. All I say is, if you really mean what you say, come out of the backwoods of your mind and do some figuring up. You must know that this is the greatest industrial nation on earth, and that during the last two generations the colleges have followed the trend of the nation's needs. Industry calls for scientists. They must be trained in laboratories, so colleges of any account must have these. Not only must they have them, but they must be able to make the constant replacements necessary to keep up with the latest developments. What would have equipped a whole college fifty years ago is required now for a comprehensive laboratory in chemistry, physics or biology.

Now, why give five thousand dollars a year to Chitterling Switch "college" in the backwoods of Mississippi, let us say, when it is some one-cylinder outfit with perhaps two hundred students? Five thousand is not going to be any help, not in the fix it is in. Five million is more like what it would take to bring it up to our time. Five thousand will just about pay for prexy's new Cadillac, with possibly enough over to put some chairs in a classroom.

Since you really want to do something for Negro education, give to one of the colleges which already has something to build on. You might, for instance, give to Howard University's

great medical school. It is turning out doctors and dentists who compare favorably with the best in the nation. The money could be used for laboratory replacements, or to sponsor some serious young medico who yearns to make further research.

Or if you are inclined toward literature, give to the library fund of Morgan State College, at Baltimore. It has a fine library, and aims to make it the finest possible. Or give to the school of Social Sciences at Fisk which, under Dr. Charles S. Johnson, has increased the sum total of knowledge in that field considerably in the last decade. Or send the check to Atlanta University. Its department of sociology is getting grand results.

I wouldn't put it past some of you to tell me that it is your own money, and you can do with it as you please. You are free, white and twenty-one. But you see, I'm free, black and twenty-one; and if you tell me that, I will know and understand that you have no genuine interest in Negro education. Or if you think you have, you haven't taken a sounding in the last forty years. You are way behind the times.

I have made it my business to talk with patrons of the Chitterling Switch kind of a school in the last three years, and I have been astonished at the number of persons giving money to a school without even inquiring into the curriculum or looking into the training of the faculty. They were under the delusion that the school to which they gave was at the top of Negro education. Indeed, the majority had the idea that there was no other kind for Negroes to go to. Some did not even know that there were colleges provided by the state. They fluttered about raising little sums impelled by the fear that if the little place were not kept in condition to keep on crippling

young black folks, there would be no other chance for Negroes to get hamstrung for life.

Instead of being a help, many donors have been giving aid and assistance to the defeat of those who need a chance more than anyone else in America.

What is the general history behind these little knowledge-traps? First, there were those little piney-woods schools opened by the Abolitionist church groups immediately after the Civil War. Fired by the Cause, hundreds, perhaps thousands, of pious Northerners came South and gave themselves to teach the freemen how to read and write. But the greatest emphasis was on the Bible. Those who were first taught, were urged to go forth and spread what they had learned to others.

Then the "do something for my people" era came in on the trailing clouds of Booker T. Washington. He was responsible, but he didn't mean any harm. Tuskegee was a success, with tycoons of industry and finance rolling down in their private cars to see and be awed. They saw Booker T. Washington as the Moses of his race. They donated millions to give body to the idea of Booker T. So in the black world, the man was magical. He sat with Presidents. He went abroad and stood with kings. This school-founding thing was something!

Without the genius of his idea and the surprise of its newness, hundreds of other Negroes deserted pulpits, plows, washtubs and cookpots and went out founding schools. The outer offices of financiers began to be haunted by people

"doing something for my people." There remained only one Tuskegee. But then, there was only one Booker T. Washington.

These Begging Joints were a natural part of the times when they were started and in a way they were all right for then. But they are unburied corpses in 1944. We can bury the carcasses any time we will or may. All it takes is a made-up mind.

[The end of *The Rise of the Begging Joints* by Zora Neale Hurston]