Jourdon Anderson, Letter from a freedman to his old master, August 7, 1865.

Building Context
Jourdon Anderson was an enslaved person who lived in Tennessee. Anderson moved to Ohio, where he raised his family. In August of 1865, just a few months before the final passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery throughout the United States, he received a letter from his former master. His old master asked him to come back as a paid servant. Anderson dictated this letter in response.

Essential Vocabulary

<table>
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<tr>
<th>victuals</th>
<th>Another word for food.</th>
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<td>Provost-Marshal-General</td>
<td>During the Civil War, the position of Provost-Marshall-General was responsible for managing recently liberated slaves.</td>
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<tr>
<td>recompense</td>
<td>To compensate.</td>
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Text of Source

Dayton, Ohio August 7, 1865

To My Old Master, Colonel P. H. Anderson, Big Spring, Tennessee

Sir: I got your letter, and was glad to find that you had not forgotten [me], and that you wanted me to come back and live with you again, promising to do better for me than anybody else can. I have often felt uneasy about you. I thought the Yankees would have hung you long before this, for harboring Rebs they found at your house. I suppose they never heard about your going to Colonel Martin’s to kill
the Union soldier that was left by his company in their stable. Although you shot at me twice before I left you, I did not want to hear of your being hurt, and am glad you are still living. It would do me good to go back to the dear old home again, and see Miss Mary and Miss Martha and Allen, Esther, Green, and Lee. Give my love to them all, and tell them I hope we will meet in the better world, if not in this. I would have gone back to see you all when I was working in the Nashville Hospital, but one of the neighbors told me that Henry intended to shoot me if he ever got a chance.

I want to know particularly what the good chance is you propose to give me. I am doing tolerably well here. I get twenty-five dollars a month, with victuals and clothing; have a comfortable home for Mandy (the folks call her Mrs. Anderson) and the children—Milly, Jane, and Grundy—go to school and are learning well. The teacher says Grundy has a head for a preacher. They go to Sunday school, and Mandy and me attend church regularly. We are kindly treated. Sometimes we overhear others saying, “Them colored people were slaves” down in Tennessee. The children feel hurt when they hear such remarks; but I tell them it was no disgrace in Tennessee to belong to Colonel Anderson. ...Now if you will write and say what wages you will give me, I will be better able to decide whether it would be to my advantage to move back again.

As to my freedom, which you say I can have, there is nothing to be gained on that score, as I got my free papers in 1864 from the Provost-Marshal-General of the Department of Nashville. Mandy says she would be afraid to go back without some proof that you were disposed to treat us justly and kindly; and we have concluded to test your sincerity by asking you to send us our wages for the time we served you. This will make us forget and forgive old scores, and rely on your justice and friendship in the future. I served you faithfully for thirty-two years, and Mandy twenty years. At twenty-five dollars a month for me, and two dollars a week for Mandy, our earnings would amount to $11,680. Add to this the interest for the time our wages have been kept back, and deduct what you paid for our clothing, and three doctor’s visits to me, and pulling a tooth for Mandy, and the balance will show what we are in justice entitled to. Please send the money by Adams’s Express, in care of V. Winters, Esq., Dayton, Ohio. If you fail to pay us for faithful labors in the past, we can have little faith in your promises in the future. We trust the good Maker has opened your eyes to the wrongs which you and your fathers have done to me and my fathers, in making us toil for you for generations without recompense. Here I draw my wages every Saturday night; but in Tennessee there was never any pay-day for the negroes any more than for the horses and cows. Surely there will be a day of reckoning for those who defraud the laborer of his hire.
In answering this letter, please state if there would be any safety for my Milly and Jane, who are now grown up, and both good-looking girls. You know how it was with poor Matilda and Catherine. I would rather stay here and starve—and die, if it come to that—than have my girls brought to shame by the violence and wickedness of their young masters. You will also please state if there has been any schools opened for the colored children in your neighborhood. The great desire of my life now is to give my children an education, and have them form virtuous habits.

Say howdy to George Carter, and thank him for taking the pistol from you when you were shooting at me.

From your old servant,
Jourdon Anderson
Analysis Questions

- Describe the characteristics of the man who wrote this letter?
- When was it written? What did Anderson claim was his purpose in writing it? Describe Anderson's tone. Do you believe he expects compensation? If not, why does he include that language in his letter?
- What events does he describe that give you clues about what his life as an enslaved person was like?
- Go through the narrative and circle each occurrence of a term, or variations of a given term, that is repeatedly used. Identify the term. What theme emerges in Anderson's repeated use of this word?
- What does Anderson mean by “the balance will show what we are in justice entitled to”? How would you define the term “justice” in this context?
- To what does Anderson refer with this statement: “Surely there will be a day of reckoning for those who defraud the laborer of his hire”? How does this relate to your response to question 4?
- Anderson says of his family: “The great desire of my life now is to give my children an education, and have them form virtuous habits.” What kinds of virtuous habits might he mean? What is the relationship between education and justice?
- Think of justice in the context of other virtues. Do other virtues depend on just purposes? For example, can courage in defense of an evil cause rightly be called courage? Explain whether justice should be considered a primary virtue.
- How is Anderson's vigilant stand for justice a “snapshot” of the role of individual people in maintaining a republic based on inalienable rights, liberty, and equality?
- Do you think Anderson's response to his old master was just? Explain.
- Who is V. Winters, Esquire? What role did he play in this situation? Identify and tell about a time you aided someone else in their pursuit of justice in a similar way (or when you witnessed it).
- What, in human nature, leads to injustice? What, in human nature, leads us to desire justice?