

Thursday
12-29-48

Dear John,

I began to write you a very dismal letter Christmas night, but fatigue and the remnants of good sense made me tear it up. I used to write that kind of letter often during the four years at Bryn Mawr. It made me feel a little better but it made the person who received it quite distressed; the desolation of which I wrote was always so vague or fundamental that no help could be offered. Kierkegaard has something about the egoism of such despair. I know; you do not agree.

Fortunately, I was sick for three days - not so much as to put me to bed but enough to have an excuse for the people who wanted me to talk and be nice. Only Papa and Alex were suspicious that my trouble was more psychic than physical. Then I recovered, or almost recovered. I still feel a weariness which I hope is more than spiritual. Papa took a film this morning and pumped me full of vitamins. This afternoon we will go to look at pictures in the Art Museum.

Christmas was pretty awful for me. Janet and Bob added to my sense of helplessness. They were so "cute" that I did not know how to speak to them. Yet Janet did what I have always bitterly resented that she did not do. She helped Mother with Christmas

preparations. She did the difficult organizing things while I sat in a corner and did the simple things. I felt the more guilty that I could not even thank her. A strange reversal of rôles that I should be sullenly silent as Janet used to be and that she should be efficient and animated.

It seems so simple now. Why could I not talk quite easily and naturally? I suppose one reason is that it was so long ~~the~~ since I had done anything. For almost a week I had simply built my life around what you said or felt. And the structure had been removed. That is not said reproachfully or regretfully; since you have sometimes expressed feelings of disorientation I think you should know that the problem exists for me too. I said to you in the letter I wrote before I came to Cambridge this time that I thought you should try to teach me more ideas and areas of literature which I do not know. I still think so. Your pedagogical efforts should be more academic (though I will not say less moralistic). If that had been so perhaps I would have been left with something to think about. Reading your paper helped, but there should be more of that. I need things to fasten my mind to lest it become shipwrecked among my feelings.

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Since Monday I have been trying to organize myself and my time - not very successfully. Mother said: "I've never seen you so disorganized." If I blame it on what Papa calls my "low-grade infection" I will be put to bed and that will be trouble for Mother and bad for me since I all too readily ascribe uneasiness to sickness. But some things have been done. I went to Bryn Mawr and talked to the Mannings. Mrs. Manning told me not to do more graduate work unless I was particularly ambitious to pursue some project of research. She says there are already too many female instructors in history; I should stick to secondary school. So I guess I will try to nerve myself for another year in New York. Are you aware how much my feelings have changed, and how hard that seems? Mr. Manning encouraged me about my American History class. He talked to me a long time in his low and terribly controlled voice - like an actor's.

I have spent a lot of time studying and trying to study. I think I have learned some facts and that there is some framework for the period ahead; I think I will be able to teach the material in a way that will enlighten, rather than confuse, my students.

There have been other things to do. Our gentle seamstress is making a dress for me from a material and pattern for which I searched for an afternoon. I have spent hours sitting in the kitchen talking to Joan and holding her baby. To spend time in such a haphazard way is always hard for me, and yet

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I do not think it is a waste of time. The baby is of course astonishing and wonderful like all growing things. Joan and Ken were very good and kind at Christmas. They helped and cheered Mother and smoothed over one of Janet's nastinesses.

All these small things that I have been doing give my life some structure and meaning. But none of these small particular meanings are large enough to hide from me the lack of the central meaning which I have looked for so long and not found. The words ring in my head: Ye shall seek me, and when ye shall seek me with your whole heart, ye shall find me. But where is the whole heart to be found? The more I read of Papa's religious and devotional books the more I came across the other emphasis: that God seeks and finds the worshipper, the concept of the Hound of Heaven. When I was very little Papa and I used to play a game called "You chase me, and I'll run slow". I have run slow a long time. All my reading and thinking seems so pointless, and I have the feeling that things ~~will~~^{must} get much worse for me before they will get better. It is rather like waiting for the volcano on which one lives to erupt.

Why do I write you these things. They are so vague as to be boring and muddled even to me though they are my ~~own~~ constant preoccupation.

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Do not come to see me in New York unless you really want to come. I think the pleasure of seeing you would ~~over~~ ~~balance~~ the wrench of having you go away, but I am not sure, and I will not take the responsibility, either for myself or for you, of urging you to come. So you must decide on the basis of your own convenience and wishes. If you decide to come try to write me a note (The Brearley School, 610 East 83d St.) to let me know. I probably will not come home until late Wednesday afternoon unless I hear from you. My last class Wednesday is over at 1:45. It takes me about 40 minutes to get home.

Alex has promised to bring some things over for me, so he could pick you up easily enough. You could ~~also~~ borrow his key to the apartment. Whatever happens I do not want you to spend time in that depressing corridor. It would take all the time we had together for me to get you back in a state of mind in which I could talk with you. Please do not worry about hurting my feelings by not coming. I seem to be able to ~~feel~~ ~~feel~~ fond of you even for those things that you do or think which I believe to be wrong or mistaken — and this matter of coming or not is certainly not so clear-cut.

I have been reading some poetry by a modern American poetess. ~~She~~ The poems are not exceptionally good, but they speak to my ~~and~~ condition. She refers more than once to the feminine beauty and wisdom of silence. I have thought quite a lot about it and also about my delight in listening

to your spoken exposition, its logic and clarity. If I were given my choice of the goods in your keeping I am afraid I would not choose any of the virtues which you would like to give me but rather this logic and clarity of expression. My choice is not purely utilitarian; ~~language~~ plays a very large part in my aesthetic appreciation of people. I think I could sit quite happily for hours alone with you in the same room just listening and I wouldn't need even to touch your hand - until the moment came when I had to ~~tell~~ tell you of my delight and happiness, and then I'm afraid there would be no words. This is, of course, only a half-truth, but it is one of my better half-truths.

Now, I have shirked my responsibilities long enough. It is supper time, and I must help. Write me a good letter next week if you do not come; I will certainly need a letter, ~~then~~ for I will have again made a great effort to be a good teacher - and probably failed again.

Margaret