

Fri. July 7, 1950

Bethesda

Dear John,

Thanks for your interesting letter. But you forgot to tell me whether you need that coat or not! I have lazily put off wrapping it and sending it in case I should get word from you that the end of July will do. My convulsive upheaval which resulted in getting Leslyn's things off to you almost immediately tired me so greatly that the thought of wrapping and sending that collection of coats left behind, -Blocked in the second, or family, Dynamic!! What a frightful situation! The only answer may be for you to come down, unblock me in the second dynamic, go away leaving some more goods behind, and a revitalized sister capable of facing the problem of wrapping and mailing packages without flinching. If you haven't time for that, there are still two solutions: 1), you can wait till the end of July when we go up to Flemington, or 2) I can attempt to muster the pitiful remnant of my second dynamic and try manfully to send it off by mail. I think I must have some frightful engram bringing post offices, brown paper, and stringx into my reactive mind as highly contra-survival. Or else I'm just bone lazy.

If you ever had time to read that sort of thing, I'm sure you would enjoy Thornton Wilder's "Heaven's My Destination". Perhaps you have read it at some time. It's a remarkable book, I think. It's a novel about a man who never lied and never cheated and tried his best to live according to the best precepts of Christianity. The difficulties he encountered make the novel both highly amusing and highly tragic. For one thing, practically no one understood his motives, because they were completely, utterly sincere and honest. I think it demonstrates my gradual mental or moral growth that the first time I read it I thought it was the funniest thing I'd read in ages, and when I read it again ten years later I was disappointed to find that it held the very essence of tragedy. In any case, the book illustrates forcefully some of the things you were talking about in your letter. How can we reconcile the voice of our conscience with the demands the world makes on us? Of course the answer is we must compromise in order to live. As you say, pure blacks and pure whites are so rare as to be almost unknown, and we must use judgment to discern how much grey there is in what seems black, and how much black in what appears to us to be white. Of course we must exercise kindness in dealing with other people, avoiding stepping on their corns out of charity, though charity may be the most illogical thing in the world. But in every mind there should be a barrier, and a semantic estimate of the meanings of the word "truth", which will distinguish clearly between those mental side-steps we take out of charity, and the ultimate Truth which is not a factor in petty matters. Our semantic mix-ups are always confusing us. We say, "the truth is you hat looks frightful" using the same word to say "the truth is beautiful." But I think we all recognize that there is a difference in meaning according to context. We all should, at least, recognize the point beyond which a charitable avoidance of facing a fact without great importance becomes a simple lie. I don't envy the man who is a spy evento the best cause, because circumstances have forced him to live a lie, and to cheat. No matter how he justifies himself, he is

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still cheating, and living a dangerous life inwardly perhaps even more than outwardly. I can't justify the mother who tells her children there is no more candy because she doesn't want them to eat any more. That's a lie, - small but important. For she should tell her child the true situation, and teach him by example in the smaller things that surround him that she respects the truth in the second semantic meaning. I hope I can avoid that kind of lying. I can't avoid the charitable side-stepping sort of thing which dictates that I shall tell the mother of a semi-moron that her son is tall for his age and very healthy-looking, if such is actually the case. We have as great a duty toward charity as we have toward absolute truth. I can tell the Venezuelans I meet that I think their country is beautiful and the climate of Caracas is unexcelled, but I never say I think their people are fine and a credit to the human race, in general. Rightly or wrongly, William and his colleagues work the same way. They are fundamentally unable to lie, and are convinced that the truth which might hurt now is nonetheless necessary in the long run. But charity dictates that we not keep reminding people of some truths, our judgment reminds us that in any case we may not be absolutely sure that what we think of as true actually is truth, and expediency tells us that it is necessary to present our side with whatever forceful truths we legitimately possess. In all cases, we must endeavor to keep a tight grasp on the second semantic meaning of the word Truth, in the midst of the whirlwind. And I still say that a lie is a lie is a lie, and cheating the worst means to any end. Almost any fool can see the difference between not telling a man that most of his compatriots smell bad and not telling that you have stolen some money. We all have consciences to see the difference, whether we use the conscience or not. You are trifling with words when you say that if a man is justified in saying he admires what is actually a silly hat, he is equally justified in telling a lie about some big matter in which he is interested. Lying is one of the most easily acquired bad habits, and that's why it is most important not to lie or deal in half-truths with children. I have to watch myself like a hawk to keep from saying things which resolve situations easily, but are not unvarnished truths. My aim is to be able to face my conscience with every idle word I've said, and not have to say, "well, that didn't matter much, because he never found out it wasn't true, and he wouldn't have understood any way." Not only do I want to teach Laurence to be undiatriatingly (though charitably) truthful, but even more, I want to be able to look at everything I've said and done without a blush. It's a hard road, and I don't know my way very well. One has to keep asking one's conscience whether one is avoiding the truth out of charity or self-interest. I think one usually finds the answer almost immediately. Happily, the more we ask our conscience to be our guide, the better we are able to hear what it is saying to us. I suppose when I say conscience I mean more or less what you mean by judgment, in which case I agree with you perfectly that in this ambiguous world we must train our judgment to discern the proper course. And the proper course is not cheating, nor lying. Neither is it wielding truths like bludgeons on every occasion to hurt those around us. Truth is important, so is loving kindness. Our judgment must see their joint importance, and decide for itself.

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There is perhaps one difference between the conscience and the judgment. In theory, the conscience should tell you what is the universal right, whereas the judgment might be distorted by self-interest. A Quaker might be a conscientious objector in wartime, when his judgment tells him he is acting foolishly. The Quaker will call his conscience the Inner Light, his judgment, simply his judgment. As Thornton Wilder pointed out in "Heaven's My Destination", we need both very badly. The judgment seems more capable of being aberrated than the conscience. We can more often trust our conscience, if we have one, than our judgment, if we have any. It seems to me that fanatics are people whose judgment is so firm and unyielding that it can invade their consciences, overwhelm them with justifications, and leave them in ruins. The fanatic's judgment tells him that a lie is the only way to achieve what he knows beyond the shadow of a doubt to be a good end. His conscience may whisper "Are you sure?", so he uses his strong judgment to correct the "errors" of his conscience. It happens to everyone. The only way to combat it is to let your judgment know that your conscience is watching it constantly for lies and subterfuges. And as I said last week, if you let one lie slip by without objections it gets harder and harder to prevent a flood of lies. It is hard to develop good sound judgment, and once we think we have developed it, it comes even harder to us to let our conscience act as censor to this hard-earned judgment of ours. We love our judgment, our conscience is a great nuisance.

Here I am rambling on, s&s my nasty conscience, when poor old Laurence needs to be fed. My judgment also informs me I'm hungry too. So I'm off to the kitchen.

Love,