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Wesley F. Diedrich First World War Correspondence #53

Wesley F. Diedrich

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GRAND HÔTEL DU CERF, Straus soeurs
ECHTERNACH (Luxembourg)

W. Diedrich
108 Engr
U.S.A.

Mrs. W. Diedrich
108 Glenwood Av.
Joliet Ill.
U.S.A.
My dear Son,

Your mother having written your Christmas Eve on the Soldier's Mother. I will try and write you one tonight New Year's Eve on the Soldier. I write it part from memory, part from history, part from present and part from past act. I will entitle it the Great Adventure. You may pass it to your comrades for their perusal after you read it if you so desire. I write it as the Fates of 2 boys (soldier) who are true blue and went through the mill of war using copying paper as the letters to both of you are in the same identical word, spirit and letter and carry with it my honest opinion and prediction.

The Great Adventure

The war was the great adventure of this generation. Into a scheme of life which may properly be defined as organized hordes the war brought opportunities for adventure on a scale never before approached in history. Mankind eagerly embraced it. Not patriotism but the thrill of danger, not such abstractions as making the world safe for Democracy even more than half the cause, but the instinctive love of action, daring moved the youth of America. Audacious Custer, Chatan, Thierry, St. Mihiel, the Argonne Forest to the roll of glory in American History. No man of a race that has always sought adventure and loved danger. A race which has always loved battle and exalted the heroic. Why deny our heritage. Even in the world of peace this heritage should itself. Our industries were adventurous and sought to conquer the world. But the old instinctive longing for danger and daring was not dead. Denied a direct outlet it found vicarious satisfaction in other ways notable the motion pictures. It was not accident that made the movies of violent action and blood curdling thrill the most popular of all the films. It was the desire to enjoy adventure it only in imagination that gave the motion picture its universal appeal and as long as it provided the thrill its condition and improbabilities were gratuitously overlooked. A generation ago the American youth in search of adventure went west. On the great plains there was danger he sought it. It is impossible to appraise correctly how great a part the lure of Indian fighting had in settling the West. The dangers which beset the path of the pioneer hastened rather than retarded that quick settlement of the Western plains which was one of the astonishing chapters in American history.
The settlement of the west was the great adventure of the seventies as the civil war had been of the sixties, in the fifties there had been the rush to California and its gold fields, in the forties the Mexican war. The period from 1820-1840 was a period of wide western settlement, but just before there had been the War of 1812-1815 & before that the War of the Revolution there had been the French & Indian war of 1757.

With such a tradition of adventurous activity a people could not be anything but adventurous by nature. Industrial life might dull into somnolence the instinctive desire for daring & danger, but it could not extinguish it. It was the most natural thing in the world that young America should welcome gladly the entry of the United States into the great war.

In all ages mankind has exalted the hero and admired the hero. Thomas Carlyle believed that the hero was the crystallizing force in history & gave direction to the tendency of every age. The early literature of every people but notable that of our own race is heroic.

Four hundred years the tale our race has told form generation to generation has been adventure stories & there are still the popular literature today - six Presidents of the United States have been War heroes. George Washington, Andrew Jackson, William Henry Harrison, Zachary Taylor, Ulysses S. Grant and Theodore Roosevelt and the possibility of John J. Pershing as a successor to Woodrow Wilson is great. The fighter, the man whose leadership in war makes him the supreme adventurer, embodies an ideal which lies deeply hidden in the common breast & in exalting him the common man feels that he is elevating that which is noblest.

Human "intellectuals" who will deplore this admiration for the adventurer, who will see in humanity's longing for adventure only a disorganizing and an anti-social tendency in mankind. But "intellectuals", an over-timid and distrustful of ideas that are not their own, greater was the insight of H. G. Wells' hero Mr. Britling, when he said that after all adventure is the only part of life that counts. Those who tremble lest the returning thousands of Pershing's crusaders will refuse to readjust themselves to the workaday world are over anxious. There will be some of course whose return to humdrum life will be inkeome, but for the greater part those hundred of thousands of clergymen, mechanics & farmers will settle back into civil life without any difficulty. True enough they will not be exactly the same as if they had never been "over there," they will be richer in
Experience and in memories. They will have a new perspective of life. How can the trivial tasks of everyday life be important to men who saw their comrades stricken by thousands and who themselves faced death with a smile and a song?

If the war is a great adventure, it is both physical and spiritual. William James, the most penetrating essay, "The moral equivalent of war," says that war is not wholly destructive; that with all its sacrifice it yet leaves mankind with an emotional gain which compensates in some degree for the losses which war entails.

If history is examined, it shows clearly that nations are great only as long as they are adventurous. China the greatest nation in the world in point of numbers, is stagnant and unimportant because it people have no conception of adventure.

In the larger view, conflict seems to be the motive power of human progress. Out of conflict with nature, mankind gains in wisdom and power. Out of conflict with other nations, the impulse to individual life rises the desire for adventure and the fear that these desires persist after thousands of years of increasing order and regulations in human affairs proves that adventure is a real part of the great scheme of things.

Only in adventure can men attain a true measure of themselves. Only in the face of risk can he test his courage. Only as a man knows himself to be courageous can he esteem himself. We need courage; it is the foundation of achievement. Courage is the courage to face the unknown and to conquer it if may be but courage at least to face it. Nearly all errors are the errors of fear. Nearly all the failures are the failures of timidity.

Fear has been fighting and conquering fear. As a race we have gone farther than any other race on earth. Demons no longer exist for us. The tremendous forces of nature no longer awe us. The hurricanes and earthquakes have lost their power to terrify us. We meet the devastating tidal wave with a sea wall at Galveston. We rebuild the cities of San Francisco on the site of the city that has just been swallowed. We tame the flood and we refuse to take or accept Nature's dictum that this or that area shall be a desert or that an ethnos shall bar our path to the East.
We conquer the distance with wireless, the darkness with Electricity from the harnessed current or current. We dispute the air with the Eagle & the water with the Porpoise. We have said that there is nothing we cannot do or mean it. Yet all these things are but the spirit of adventure within us. Were we not constituted as we are, were we not filled with a divine discontent we could be very comfortable & happy without them. But there is something within us that will not be denied. It is that something that won with the Mariner at Chateaux Thierry & other places for the U.S. troops. Because we adventured them in peace again in the world this New Year. Because we had the courage there is now a possibility that good will & men may become a reality. Because we have ever been willing & eager to brave death for an ideal. This nation is destined to grow in greatness in strength.

Reeling has assigned to America the role of formulating a new ideal among nations. The ideal of mutual confidence, respect & friendliness. The peace conference may not accept American ideals. If the coming conference does fail short of ideal completeness right will ultimately triumph. The seeds of justice have been sown. Some of them must germinate & grow. If it is not given to mankind to advance by great strides, it is not the least remains clear as the morning sun, that there is advance & that it is worthwhile. The optimists have been justified by the war. Humanity has gained new proof of noble purposes. This should be enough. Charity from God to Man is divine, from Man to his fellow it is less than human. Justice we now see is the only basis for peace & good will among men.

On behalf of Mother & I we wish you a Happy New Year with love & kisses.

Your loving Father

[Signature]
Grand Hotel du Cerf, Straus Soeurs
Echternach (Luxembourg)

W. Diedrich
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[Illegible signature of commanding officer]
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We came of a race that has always sought adventure & loved danger. A race which has always loved battle & exalted the heroic. Why deny our heritage. Even in the walks of peace this heritage showed itself. Our industries were adventurous & sought to conquer the world. But the old instinctive longing for danger & daring was not dead. Denied a direct outlet if found vicarious satisfaction in other ways notable the motion pictures. It was not the accident that made the movies of violent action & blood curdling thrill the most popular of all the films. It was the desire to enjoy adventure if only imagination that gave the motion picture its universal appeal and so long as it provided the thrill its crudities & improbabilities were charitably overlooked. A generation ago American youth in search of adventure went west. On the great plains there was danger & he sought it. It is impossible to appraise correctly how great a part the [[burn?]] of Indian fighting had in settling the west. The dangers which beset the path of the pioneer hastened rather than retarded that quick settlement of the western plains which was one of the astonishing chapters in American history.
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In the larger view conflict seems to be the motive power of human progression. Out of conflict with nature mankind gains in wisdom & ability. In the conflict between opposing ideas truth is tested & its validity is established. Out of the conflict between the restrictions of social life & the impulse to individual life rises the desire for adventure & the fact that this desire persists after thousands of years of increasing order & regulations in human affairs proves that adventure is a real part in the great scheme of things. Only in adventuring can a man obtain a true measure of himself. Only in the face of risk can he test his courage & only as a man knows himself to be courageous can he esteem himself.

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Fear paralyzes for perhaps a million years the human soul has been fighting & conquering fear. As a race we have gone farther than any other race on earth. Demons no longer exist for us. The tremendous force of nature no longer awe us. The hurricane & the earthquake have lost their power to terrify us. We meet the devastating tidal wave with a sea wall as at Galveston. We rebuilt a new & better San Francisco on the site of the city that has just been shaken down. We tame the flood and we refuse to take or accept nature’s dictum that this or that area shall be desert or that an isthmus shall bar our path to the East.
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Your loving father

N. Diedrich