Upon Entering My Seventeenth Year

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The past summer was, by all of the usual standards, uneventful. It was the first summer I can remember that did not include an automobile trip to the East, West, or to the beloved "north country." Instead, I attended summer school for six weeks, then suffered the worst month of absolute idleness that I have ever experienced. Although disappointing in its monotony, the vacation was not entirely without advantages. In my school course, I was introduced to a subject which interests me intensely, economics. Although totally different from the sciences I had studied previously, it fully satisfied my craving for scientifically organized knowledge. I found economics to be governed by laws as invariable as the laws of physics. I began to conceive of money, business, capital, and labor as the gears and levers of a vast machine, all operating with mathematical regularity. My curiosity was aroused on several subjects related to economics. Again favored with the advantage of an excellent teacher, I gained a basic knowledge on a subject, which, like the physical sciences, I had always hoped to understand, at least in part.

Another experience of the summer was the reading of a book, which, I believe, will never cease to be an influence on my conceptions of life. It was Tolstoy’s War and Peace. No other book, school course, or lecture has ever broadened my view of life and history so much as did that one masterpiece of literature. In its reading I made my first plunge into the bottomless abyss of philosophy, but to my unbounded satisfaction, I found Tolstoy’s treatment of the most complex problems simple and perfectly understandable. Deeply impressed by his clear logic and thought, I have since considered myself one of his followers. On several occasions I have set forth and supported his theories on history and war before my friends. For the first time in my life I feel that I have begun to grasp the true meaning of history, and to realize the endlessness of its scope. I think my knowledge of human nature was likewise extended by analysis of Tolstoy’s superbly human characters. In fact, the book upset all ideas of history and human nature I had ever formed; but it replaced many of them with what I believe are far more comprehensive viewpoints. Certainly it left innumerable philosophical questions unanswered in my mind. War and Peace was a strong stimulant that brought my mental powers from a state of inertia to one of restlessness. It not only answered questions, but presented to me many others. It gave me a new insight into the workings of life, which, I believe, will never cease to influence my thinking.

Two months ago it was with many conflicting sentiments that I contemplated entering college. I have now known six weeks of “college life,” and it is again with many conflicting sentiments that I try to determine how much college means to me. I am disappointed that I cannot concentrate much more of my time and effort in my chosen fields, science and mathematics. Also I am surprised to find in college much less evidence of careful organization than I found in high school. On the other hand, I like the extra time to study on my own which the college day affords. Escape from my high school habits of rushing to classes during the daylight hours, then studying until almost midnight, is a welcome relief.
It disturbs me, however, to feel that I am not working to my capacity in these days when many people are working beyond theirs. Somehow, in the future, I hope to adjust my program and activities so as to gain the type of education that is most serviceable in times of war and reconstruction.

In attempting to look at myself in the light of the past seventeen years, I am conscious that my weak traits have, for the most part, been conspicuous to others. To begin with, I have never gained confidence in dealing with other people. The few close friends that I have now have been acquaintances from childhood. Not only has the gaining of new friends been difficult, but the gift of easy, buoyant conversation has never been mine. For as long as I can remember I have been awkward in meeting people. I think this fault in my sense of social relationship has been the most serious handicap of my life thus far.

An important source of discontent and mental unrest, however, has lain in my disregard of present pleasures for future hopes. From the time I could think for myself, I have longed to be able to carry on the activities of my seniors. Although time has somewhat cured my backwardness in making new friends, I believe this impatience with the present, in anticipation of the future, is irremediable. No process of thought or reasoning has ever cured me of it. I am still waiting for the day when I can say, "I'm out on my own."

Among my commendable attributes I think I may list sincerity without hesitation. It is the one characteristic I admire more than any other in my fellow men, and therefore the one I have tried the most earnestly to instill in myself. I believe I am as honest and reliable as the average human being, and that I am consistently faithful to my promises. I take pride in doing my work thoroughly, although, to my disgrace, I have often been reluctant to accept extra responsibilities. If one good trait exceeds all others in prominence, however, I believe it is ambition. I am eager to learn more, accomplish more, and do it all faster than many of my generation. I have yet to know the time when I am working to my capacity at the work I like. I desire to devote all of my time and effort to the pursuit of one field of human advancement, science.

During the past year no thought has occupied my mind so much as the question of the future. What my role will be in this, the greatest of all wars, I cannot yet foresee. I am eager to assume my full share of the tremendous task of winning the victory. If I continue in college for another year, I want to obtain the most practical education possible, with skill in science my principal objective. I think uncertainty renders worthless any attempt to foretell my situation after the war. Of course, I hope to find a promising position somewhere in science. Sometime, I feel I must satisfy an urge to travel, but that again is a prospective desire that it is useless to plan for. I know, however, that a world of limitless opportunity lies ahead, waiting for me and thousands like me. That I may share not only its joys and opportunities, but also its hardships and responsibilities, with those of my generation is my supreme desire. To this end I dedicate the future.