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Dear Francis,

I got your letter yesterday, and since you saw fit to confide your problem in me, I feel entitled to comment on what you are doing. I was a good deal younger than you are when my father told me that, as I was prepared to take the consequences for my acts, I was jolly well free to do anything I cared to do, with the proviso I didn't come crying later on when the consequences proved unbearable. I have so far been fortunate enough not to have to moan to him, although on more than one occasion my mother bailed me out when things got too sticky. If that is your understanding of your status in life -- that you've thought through all the alternatives thoroughly, understand what you're letting yourself in for, and are cheerfully prepared to accept it all in the role of martyr, hero, common man or what not, well and good. For this reason, I do not want to appear to be lecturing, but merely to give you a few observations that might help you chink up the holes in your ~~ju~~ judgment, when I ask you to consider the following.

First of all, life must get very boring in Germany in peacetime. There is scarcely any question that if you had been there during the war that despite the greater danger, you'd have had no idea of getting out on the terms you now contemplate. The reason is simple: boredom is one of man's most insidious enemies, and capable of bringing out the worst of ones weaknesses, meanwhile providing the leisure to dream up all manner of rationalizations for a given course of action. During battle, so I understand from those who have been in it, there is little time for such luxuries. Nor would there be the persistent thought in an honorable man of deserting his shipmates, any more than a father would desert his helpless family, situations which are closely comparable. It is well for you to say that you oppose killing (most people do), and wishing to have no hand in furthering the war (again a proposition most share). Anyone who disputes those ideas belongs in the SS or MVD or maybe even the FBI.

The question naturally occurs to me, that while you are invoking the teachings of Jesus, Buddha and other prophets, what is your attitude toward those in whom they were most interested, ie, your fellow men? For example, should all of the young men in uniform have your curiosity and talent for barracks law that helped you dig up the chapter and verse that will help you, probably, get sprung, where would that leave the army? Do you think

that it is fair pool to sneak out, leaving your less cerebral brethern to do your job? In a democracy, one assumes that every man will do his little bit. You may decline to do yours, of course, which means that someone else will have to do the fighting when and if fighting comes, while you join the mentally incompetent, the women, the children, the very old, and the preachers at some vantage point while the poor patriotic or witless mugs make it safe for you, one day, to emerge and enjoy life. This is certainly a choice, an alternative that a number, fortunately small, of the people I know chose during the war I happened to enlist in. If that is what you want, if that is the kind of father and husband your wish to be, then by all means do what you are doing. On the other hand, I really doubt that you will want to tell your boys, who will want the chance like all kids to admire their father, that you became a c.o. through religious or moral conviction. You see, Francis, they will not believe you one day, no matter how hard they try, for the simple reason that they can demonstrate that it is not true. To be a member of any society ~~x~~ other than an outlaw, one must contribute to it in a gainful way. If you are a ditchdigger, a teacher, a farmer, you are helping to hold the group together and for your pains you are rewarded, we hope, with a living. Those who bear arms reluctantly serve in another way, and take risks they would prefer not to take. They do so because they are by their youth ~~xi~~ and endurance best-fitted to bear this particular evil, and unfortunately many of them die at their jobs. Yet they are doing ~~n~~ no more, nor less, than the farmer or the ditchdigger even though what they do seems more immediately related to the survival of their own group. Therefore when you say that you wish to avoid killing out of conviction, you are either kidding yourself or misinterpreting your function in your community: whatever you do, you are at least the man behind the man behind the gun, and are as morally involved in the decision that helps defend the community from its enemies as the soldier who pulls the trigger. The only difference is that you entail little or no risk. That, my boy, makes you a coward -- and I know that you are not a coward.

If you wish to remain a member in good standing in your society you must play the game. You can always opt out of your community. You can become a hermit, living alone and taking your chances without contact with your fellow men. It's been done; in fact that particular way of life way invented not far from here, where St. SimonStylites perched on a 60 foot column for 30 years, proving nothing but his unwillingness to ~~px~~ live. If that is what you resolve to do, I ~~am~~ ^{and} the world will consider you a very odd ball, but you will at least earn no great disrespect. If you decide, however, to break your engagement, your own freely-given word which enlisted you to serve your country for three years, that, my dear nephew, you will never live down.

Do not confuse this decision with abstract morality, philosophy, or other high-flown consideration. This is a world of people, you cannot avoid them, and you must be conscious of the regard of at least some of them. Think in terms of the reactions those people whom you've known whom you love or respect when they discover what you have done. To a man their response will be negative. Some will despise you, others forever give you the cold shoulder, and the best you can hope for is pity disguised as understanding. Believe me, no matter what any one of them may say, you will have descended in their esteem. Now, will you tell me that they are all wrong, that only you are the true Christian? And that is what you propose to face the rest of your life.

Let us consider the business of killing and of defense. To be sure the military life is stupid. It was in the days of Alexander and Caesar and so it will always be. And yet armies ~~xxxxx~~ are not created by spontaneous generation. Like all other institutions, they are created to answer some need. The need in this particular case is to guarantee the perpetuation of the culture that creates it. It is the same mechanism that makes you bat at the mosquito that plagues you, kick at the mongrel that snaps at your heels, lay hands on the bully that is giving a woman a hard time on the tram, or join the boys filling sand bags to add to the levee when flood threatens. Man's driving instinct is self-survival and self-perpetuation. It is beneath hunger, thirst, the sexual urge, the breathing mechanism. When man learned that two sticks together were a better weapon than two sticks used singly to beat off wild animals, he made the first army in microcosm. He didn't like, probably, the necessity of having to beat off the wild boar; doubtless he would have been much happier to stay in his cave, wenching and drinking fermented malt juice. But somebody had to do it, and somebody always did, just as somebody always stayed behind, making the women and making the money. Somebody still is staying behind. Do you want it to be you?

While you are about the high-flown posturing, bible-quoting, and so on, why do you not ask yourself whether you can justly benefit from the society which you refuse to defend? You speak vaguely of going back to school, getting a doctorate, and so on. Those womb-like institutions of so-called learning (I know all about them, having passed through ten of them one way or another) exist today by virtue of the superior way of life of the American people, taken as a whole and taken from the past 350 years. They wouldn't be there had not a hell of a lot of young men fought in a lot of wars. ~~That~~ Those schools are part of the legacy left by several million who died, never having been able to attend them themselves, so that you and others could. That is their gift to you and your generation. What will be your gift to the generation of your children -- an abdication of your responsibility that is so light that you have not even been asked to risk a drop of blood? God forbid. If you refuse

to get your feet wet in the race of life, that is grand, provided you don't give mealy-mouthed excuses for it, and provided you leave to one side the fruits that others have earned. Speaking of which, I presume that your chaplain applauds if he did not actually ~~inspire~~ inspire your contemplated course of action. What then is he doing in the army, where his purpose is to sustain morale, and thereby ensure that the unit goes into action with a sense of determination that it is doing the right and honorable thing?

Let me ~~make~~ make a passing mention of patriotism. Like you, I don't have a lot of use for the word. It conjures up visions of legionnaires with their go-to-hell hats and electric canes. But a respect and devotion towards ones country and people is in every nation a virtue. You will find that virtue most prominently exhibited ~~among~~ among those who have sacrificed most for their country, and least in those who have taken all and given nothing. This explains the draft-dodging spivs who could always make a deal on London street-corners in wartime, who were utterly contemptuous of their fellow-Englishmen dying in large numbers in remote corners of the world. It also explains Sir Winston Churchill, one of the great men of all time, who loved his nation more passionately each year of his life, in direct proportion to the service he rendered it. Patriotism is not a gift; it is earned by your devotion to the ideals of your country which are your heritage as nothing else is, which differentiates you from a Russian or a Chinese or a black African. It has produced a system that allows you such freedom that you can write a remarkable document which, if penned in an army of one of the nations just mentioned, would bring about your immediate demise, or worse yet, a slow one. Reflect, my dear nephew, that you have been living off the fat of the land all your life, thanks to the industry of your parents -- both of whom put in long years without complaint and considerably ~~more~~ more pain, ~~at~~ at the job you scorn and would be quit of -- made possible by the system, which whatever its defects allows one of the greatest measures of individual freedom in the world. You have so far done nothing to pay that debt or to add to the positive side of the heritage. And you propose to detract, in effect, from it. There is no question that once you begin to serve your community, your love for it will rise in direct ratio. If you wish proof of this proposition you may merely consider the ugly child of any dotting parents. There is noth~~ing~~g intrinsically endearing about a snot~~ed~~ nosed, colicky, shit-besmeared one-year-old. Yet to his parents he is the lord of the earth. Why is he to them and to no one else? Simply because they have invested their ~~labor~~ labor, and their love is their just dividend.

This c.o. business is not entirely new to me. I recall with utmost clarity an all-night stag party of bunch of us young-bloods were having just before we were due to enter the university. We were all classmates, and the

party was in the home of a bloke named Fichter. The date was September 1, 1939, and toward morning we heard over the radio that the Germans had invaded Poland. This brought about, you may imagine, a good deal of gabble. It livened the party right up. By daybreak we had taken a solemn oath, one and all, that war was hell, that we would all refuse to go, and that nothing would change our minds. Within three years everyone of us was in it. Quentin Hyde, the most gentle and unsoldierly of the lot, was killed in the invasion of Leyte; Tom McDill, now living on Glebe Road, shot down 5½ planes, was shot down himself and spent the rest of the war in Stalagluft III; and so on down the line. The Fichter boys didn't go. Bob Fichter, in my class, suddenly decided he had received the call to the cloth and that teaching school was for the birds. He spent the war in the UnionTheological Seminary, and is now so I hear a successful, well-fed cleric. His younger brother also tried the theology bit, but his conscience didn't let him get away with it, and the last I heard he has gone into another of a succession of institutions for the insane. The youngest brother, Hal, served time in jail for his c. objection; his was the saddest, for he like the others was pressured by his father, while he really wanted to do his bit. The point is, after all this time, if I saw Bob Fichter in his turned-around collar, I would doubtless greet him politely, inquire about his intervening 25 years, and pass on. Yet he would know precisely how I felt, for it would be an old story to him. He thinks about it at night. He will take that empty feeling -- the feeling that one gets when the duty is plain and he passes by on the other side -- to the grave with him, and perhaps even to heaven.

I don't know you very well, because I've seen very little of you these important past ten years. Yet I always liked you and sympathized with you in your difficult family situation. That is always a convenient crutch for whatever aberrations one displays -- I could use it myself, and so could about every third guy these days. It will deceive other people, but it won't deceive you. And you are the important one to consider now. It's your future, and a damn dank one it will be with you carrying that albatross around your neck til your dying day. For what? Principle? It is a false one. Even if it were not, there must be a positive gain for such a disastrous decision, and what is your gain except the smug assurance that by going back on your sworn word, turning your back on your buddies who have never let you down, shaming your parents and friends, and above all drawing a pall over your future which nothing repeat nothing will dispell, you are doing "what is right?"

If it were anybody but you, I would sigh and say "Shame. Nice boy. Too bad he didn't think a bit longer." But with you it is different. You took your first steps from your mother to me. And in the East, my adopted home,

the conception of family is somewhat different from that in the West, where it seems to be a collection of people who occasionally sup together and retire at the same time after the TV is turned off. As far as I'm concerned, you are my nephew and you can call on me for anything I can provide whenever it is possible, whether you get out as a c.o. or not. I will view that act with great misgivings but no greater alarm than if you had contracted a lingering and noxious disease. Anyhow, you'll need friends then more than you ever will if you are sensible and tell the C.O. to forget all about that business of the personnel action -- that you've thought it over and decided that you were precipitate, even though the views you expressed are still very much your own.

At the risk of sounding very pompous and avuncular, I might say that the hot-eyed idealism is both natural and desirable, but only so long as it does not lead to life-withering decisions. I went through the business, even as you did, of flunking out of school once; I lost jobs; I had unhappy love affairs; I went hungry on a few rare occasions; I was cold and wet and miserable. All these things are good, they lead to the development of character and above all they help you learn the dimensions of life. Anything that does this is good, providing that the experience is neither shameful nor harmful to others, nor to yourself. What you propose is both, in spades. Unlike the other ~~w~~ experiences it is irrevocable, like cutting off your arm; in a way the latter would be preferable. If you do it, do not expect it in your mind's eye to be applauded by those you respect and love, ~~it~~ as if it were a quixotic, incredibly romantic gesture. It is a gesture, all right, but a more useless, unproductive, wasteful one is unimaginable.

As you remark, it is against God's commandments to kill. It is also against life's commandments not to live, and that is the one you are about to break, for it will close innumerable avenues to you in the future, open none. Whatever you do, you will soon learn that you cannot have everything your own way, that life is not comfortable and neat (thank God for that -- it's very over-order in military life is one of the things that has caused your boredom -- that, and it's lack of challenge), and that all things, good and bad, exact their price. Think well about the price. Had this particular decision an iota of value, I would be the first to applaud it. Unfortunately, I can see nothing but harm in it for you, and that is something I hate to hear of. I am truly sorry I can give you no encouragement in this; if I did I would be lying and cheating you. If I seem brutal and uncompromising and without understanding, don't believe it. I am abrupt on the one hand and long-winded on the other only because there is so little time to make you examine your problem in the light of reason divorced from emotion, and to take the action you must if you wish to be true to yourself and your destiny as an

honorable, self-respecting man. The fact that it took you four pages to get across your point of view to the Pentagon might argue that your philosophy was tortured, or it might be that it was merely complicated. Either way, it contrasts most markedly with the brevity of the unspoken sentiments of the vast majority of your fellow Americans in the same boat: "My country needs me, and I am ready to serve it."

The main thing is that you give yourself a break by going off by yourself to a small, dark room for about fortyeight hours and think it all ~~az~~ out. The time is something you can easily afford to spend, and in the solitude you can marshall all the arguments on both sides of the proposition, and come to a decision you can live with for the rest of your years. And, should you decide that what you have done is the honorable, sensible, necessary thing, you will have had forty-eight hours preview of what the rest of your life is going to be.

Whatever you decide, you can be assured that you have friends and relatives in Beirut. Let us hear from you, for we do care.

Love,
Uncle Pete