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John N. Calhoun: Iowa Senator and Iowa Nice Guy

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A Letter to a Friend

Sergeant Hayashi’s intention in writing this rather droll letter to his apparent friend, Evelyn, is to reassure her in some sense. In the light of many recent historical events, the American psyche was affected in a way that would have motivated Hayashi to write in the way he did. How does he achieve his goals to comfort Evelyn, and, more relevantly, why? His language is succinct and colloquial, which most likely indicates that Hayashi is either generally unexpressive or corresponds with Evelyn enough to the point where he does not feel the need to frequently expand upon his emotions. Being a sergeant during the latter years of World War 2, especially one stationed on the western coast of the United States, was most likely considered at least slightly dangerous.

Hayashi’s tone is quite informal, his vocabulary is basic, and his descriptors are tame. He tells Evelyn “no fooling” and even draws a goofy face, possibly a caricature of himself. Even if he were not stationed in a combat zone, his friend may still worry that some unforeseen attack, much like Pearl Harbor, could inexplicably occur once more. He only seeks to assure his friend that normalcy was predominant in his life at the time, this idea being even further solidified with the asking of a question as unoriginal as “How’s the weather in Iowa?”

Hayashi frequently utilizes crass colloquialisms, a rhetorical technique that would likely make the recipient feel more relaxed while enforcing a preexistent casual bond. In a sense, he is referencing past moments of camaraderie to maintain this bond of theirs during his absence from her presence. Under different
circumstances, a male writing a letter to his female acquaintance may make attempts to sound impressive or cavalier, but when that man’s occupation involves leading a group of individuals specifically trained for combat during a time of war, this desire would most likely be reduced. This being the case, Hayashi makes several references to commonplaces of American culture of the 1940s to communicate to his friend that he is enjoying himself as much as possible. After telling Evelyn that “it is vacation every day,” Hayashi informs her of his time spent enjoying himself on the beach and seeing a play written about in Life magazine. No typical American could be having a better or more wholesome time.

In a time where the entirety of society was devoted to a war effort, nearly every family or social group was affected by the absence of the men who composed the nation’s fighting forces. The candidness associated with a letter this succinctly written would be appreciated by someone who is missing a fundamental component of his or her life experience, in this case a friend. Familiar wit and banter is more comforting and restorative than pretentiousness or writings of great import. Throughout his letter, Hayashi focuses on storytelling and a simplicity of language. These are both elements most strongly associated with pathos. Focusing on simplicity in conjunction with their already present bond helps to generate a state of cognitive ease that would relax Evelyn and distract her from thoughts of what may or may not be happening to him.

Roughly twenty days prior to the Sergeant writing this letter on August 12, Mussolini, the fascist leader of Italy, was arrested by his own people. Following this arrest, Italy effectively withdrew from the war effort. This changed the course of the war dramatically. One of
the three major powers involved in the war had just left the fighting. While it is true that Italy was militarily weaker than either Germany or Japan, this was still considered a huge victory by the Allies. Towards the beginning of the month, England and America staged a joint invasion of Sicily, Italy. Americans would have been feeling quite optimistic after a strategic move on their part resulted in the withdrawal of a major enemy. It makes perfect sense that Hayashi, being an officer in the American military, would be in high spirits.

On December 7, 1941, the Japanese bombed the American naval base of Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. This had been the first military action on American land since the Civil War nearly three fourths of a century ago. Naturally, this would generate a feeling of insecurity and uncertainty in America that had thought itself invulnerable to direct attack. If it were indeed Hayashi’s intention to reduce Evelyn’s level of fear, it would have been because of this reason. Even when located in a well-fortified military base in California, it would be impossible to predict every action that the Japanese would take. Even when maintaining appropriate vigilance, having absolute certainty was impossible. This idea, along with the knowledge that the country was engaged in a total war effort, factored into the American psyche in a way that would induce a quite rational type of fear.
It might seem inappropriate that both the letter’s sender and recipient seem so concerned with taking vacations while the country was devoting nearly the entirety of its resources to its forces. The populace worked tirelessly to provide all manner of supplies and aid to the Allied soldiers. During this period, many sorts of food and general supplies were unavailable, as many manufacturing plants and factories were converted into war outlets to make machines, munitions, and gear. In the midst of this years-long national commitment, it is quite understandable that at least some citizens, especially those accustomed to a certain lifestyle, would desire a vacation to escape from an environment designed to create killing machines. Hayashi may have at least known how Evelyn’s surroundings might affect her.

While writing this letter, the persona of a friend fully drives Hayashi’s intentions. He makes it his sole objective to relieve the stress of somebody he cares about who lives in the country he is risking his life for. Hayashi’s letter is not simply a relic from a bygone era, it is a testament to one of the only pure motivations humans are capable of possessing. While it may be true that the mode of transmission varies drastically from the instant communication of modern day Facebook or Twitter, the intended effect behind the writing hardly differs from effects a modern writer might want. There has not been a massive biological shift in our species; we are still the same people that we have always been in our core. And while it is certainly not the only desire we harbor, Hayashi demonstrates for us perhaps the most pure and intrinsic one. He powerfully expresses the regard of his love and friendship to someone he cares about deeply. May we all attempt the same.
Written by: Zach Stark

References:


