



John Muir Correspondence (PDFs)

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Letter from Charles Dwight Willard to [John Muir], 1912 Dec 25.

Charles Dwight Willard

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CHARLES DWIGHT WILLARD
LOS ANGELES

El Arco, San Rafael Heights,
December 25th, 1912.

My dear Friend:

A man who is well, and able to get about, is allowed the happiness of meeting his friends at intervals, but one who is tied down by long illness, as I am, may see only those that come to him. As I live in rather an inaccessible spot, and as I am not always strong enough to see people, the number I actually meet is small, and tends perhaps to grow less. Yet there never was a time in my life when I felt more dependent on my friends than now, for they are the windows through which I get most of my view of the world of action - where I once played a small part myself, but from which I am now exiled. Whether this exile is temporary or permanent I do not know. I do know that it has already lasted over four years, and that I am now in a condition where the force of disease and the power of resistance seem to hold exactly even, but leave me unable to get about, save with the utmost strain and discomfort.

However, my situation is not one that calls for sympathy. Tuberculosis seldom causes its victim much pain, and it leaves his mind free and, as a rule, cheerful. Sometimes he is even absurdly hopeful, which I believe I am not. It is my good fortune to have almost the only profession in which a man can earn a fair living and be sick-a-bed at the same time. I have a comfortable home in beautiful surroundings, and I lack for nothing that could help toward my recovery. How many of the hundreds of thousands who are afflicted with this disease are so fortunate? But after all, who are they in

this world that really deserve pity? The unlucky? No. The sick? No. The poor? No. Who then? The unhappy - they and they only. And I am not unhappy. On the contrary, but for my knowledge that those who are dear to me are often troubled with fears on my account, I could truthfully say that this is the happiest period of my life. Of the particular reason for that I will speak in a moment.

My purpose in sending you this message is to wish you all the compliments of this joyous season, and to let this take the place of the handshake and the casual words of kindness and friendship that would pass between us, if I were going about and should meet you on the street or at the club or at some public affair. I am not so churlish as to fear that I may be forgotten, but it is a comfort to be able to assure myself that I am on a direct, live circuit with my friends at least once a year.

Therefore, if you are disposed to write a word or two in response - a mere salutation and your autograph will do at a pinch in this "step lively" world - I will put it with others in a special scrap-book to be labeled "Christmas 1912", to go on the shelves as one of my most precious possessions.

Now to explain about that matter of happiness: I have discovered that four years of illness coming to one who has led a life of considerable activity has one surprising form of compensation - it gives him a chance to think. There is so much to think about in this big and wonderful world that it is a pity we can so seldom take a good crack at it. Life was always an utter mystery to me - awesome and tantalizing. At times the sense that there was something I ought to understand, and did not, half terrified me, but usually

I was indifferent about it. I had no other philosophy than that of doing today's work today - a philosophy that has this advantage, if industriously carried out: that it gives one no chance to ask himself questions. It was in the second year of my illness that the impatience began to wear away, and I was able to look on the world with calmness and in a spirit of inquiry. What followed seems almost like a miracle to me now, as I look back over it in the aggregate and analyze my changed and clarified point of view; and yet each step was natural and easy - almost inevitable. It was merely a process of mental housecleaning, a cautious thinking out of problems and matching them together to make a consistent whole - a new philosophy of life, in which happiness and hope can grow as they never could before. I do not speak of this as anything unique, for I am sure it happens to many people at one time or another of their lives. Not every one needs a long illness, as I did, to put him through such an experience. And I don't pretend to be able to communicate it to anybody - at least not by any easy and rapid method. I speak of it chiefly because I feel that when a man who has been imprisoned over four years with a wrecked body, and who has lost his home by fire, ventures to say that he is reasonably happy, and never enjoyed life so much - there is certainly some form of explanation due from him. And here you have it.

With earnest good wishes and sincere regards,

Charles Dwight Willard

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