

THEODORE DREISER

1941 - 1942

Seattle, Wash.
May 2nd, 1941

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Theodore

My dear Mr. Dreiser:

Your letter was forwarded to me here and in my column which will appear on Monday, May 5th, there will appear an explanation of the mistake which was made in the use of your name.

I am sure this mistake occurs in only one part of the country because my own copy of the column states the name correctly as Theodore Dreiser. He is the nephew of an old friend of mine, Miss Mary Dreiser, and is a professor at Black Mountain College. It may be that some one in the United Feature Syndicate thought he was correcting me, but I can not believe that that is true. I hope it was only in certain places that this mistake was made to embarrass you.

As to your feeling, there is no use, of course, of my trying to discuss that because you are undoubtedly better informed and have thoroughly canvassed the situation. All that I can do is to state my own feelings.

I have known Great Britain and the British people for a long time. I also know the bad conditions in certain places. I also know our own country very well and the bad conditions here. I know Canada and Canada. I know many Australians and New Zealanders and South Africans. The only part of the Empire that I would feel did not have full representation and independence is India and I think that will come very soon.

The conditions which you evidence are such

to be deplored, but so are many conditions in our own country. They result from world conditions and the inability of human beings to meet certain changes in civilization quickly enough to meet human needs. I think we have made some improvements. I am no more satisfied with these conditions than you are, but I do not consider that Great Britain is fighting an imperialistic war.

I do feel, however, that for the future of the world is it vastly important that Great Britain win this war and that the many Democracies that have come under Hitler's rule, be restored to independence.

I can not imagine that it would be easier in the future to move forward in cooperation with Hitler than in cooperation with Great Britain. Even Russia I think, will find this out in time. Many of us who had hoped that the Russian experiment might be an example to the world, have had to realize that the people there are unable to be this example at present and that the leadership is just as surely a dictatorship as any of the others today.

One never has the opportunity to choose perfection. One always has to choose between two things, neither of which is probably going to be all that one could hope for. This present world situation looks to me like that.

I quite understand your position and have no quarrel with it and I certainly would not want to make it appear that you are on any more friendly terms with us than you really are, and so I have corrected this impression as far as I could, although I am not respon-

sible for what I am sure is a typographical
error, or someone's desire to "correct" my
column.

Very sincerely yours,

Send Tommy
THEODORE DREISER

JTB
4/24/41
ARIC

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1015 N. King's Rd.,
Hollywood, Calif.
April 25, 1941.

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Mrs. Franklin Delano Roosevelt,
The White House,
Washington, D. C.

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt:

Only recently I have been receiving duplicate copies of your My Day column of (I judge) Wednesday, April 9. In it you say: "After dinner Mr. Theodore Dreiser showed us some of his slides of Black Mountain College, near Asheville, N. C." This, of course, is one of those unintentional errors, which, in spite of the best efforts of everybody, befall all of us. For, while I am familiar with Asheville, I never even heard of the Black Mountain College, and could no more manage an educational slide talk than I could climb Mt. Everest. I can only fear that the world is cursed with a second Theodore Dreiser, or that at best there is at large another man bearing my name, in which case I extend to him my profound sympathy.

Unfortunately, the purpose of this letter is somewhat more serious than this explanation implies, for, if there were no more involved than just a simple error in the use of a name, and the time in which we live was not so strenuous, I would not be troubling you. But the fact is that I have an individual following in America which has come to believe, and quite correctly, that I am strenuously opposed to the present views and policies of your husband, the President, in regard to England and our support of that Empire on the ground that it is not only itself democratic - which it is not - but the world's chief defender of Democracy and our own America's first line defense. All three of these contentions, as expressed by Mr. Roosevelt and his administrative associates and followers, are held by me personally to be not only erroneous but fantastically so. As I constantly insist, and as you personally must know from reading

THEODORE DREISER

any competent history of England - early or modern - that it is no more democratic than is Germany or Japan at this moment and has not been so. It has not only ignored but frustrated any dream that its own English masses (to say nothing of those of its colonials, which lack, as you know, representation of any kind) have ever had of either equality of education or opportunity, and if the same are not fundamental in any theory or practice of democracy I stand open to correction and hereby apologize for my ignorance. Personally I have been at great pains to travel on foot in England through its mining and manufacturing sections, as well as the slum districts of London, Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield, Glasgow, etc., and I assure you, if you have not done the same, that for an Empire that for one hundred and fifty years has been boasting of its dominance (Rule Britannia), its wealth and power, the condition of these regions and the English people of these same - men, women and children - is shameful in the deepest and most condemnatory sense of that word. And that any President or American official elected by the votes of the masses of this country should seek to establish as a truth in the minds of Americans that England is in this or any other crisis the foremost representative of Democracy is - (unless ignorance, and, not only that but profound ignorance, not to say deliberate misrepresentation is the basic reason of the same) beyond my understanding.

Admiring the President as I have for a number of his efforts to better the state of the American, I cannot follow him here. And I am profoundly worry to have to even suggest this in connection with one so broadly human and inquiring. However, my book America Is Worth Saving sets forth all this in much greater detail, and if I am wrong or have deliberately mis-stated anything there, I am open to libel - and thus far no libel charge has been filed against me.

It follows from the above - that is, holding these views that I do - and having expressed the same from various platforms in America - that however welcome I might be to show social welfare slides in the White House or at Hyde Park, I would not either politically or sociologically choose to do so lest my being there should infer that my intellectual opposition to your distinguished husband's political and international military and ideological

THEODORE DREISER

program in respect to England and America is not as deep-seated as it is. And I do not wish my friends to feel that way. Rather and most earnestly I wish them to understand that as much as I admire Mr. Roosevelt for some of his efforts, I feel called upon to indicate clearly and forcefully that I hold no mental part or lot with his English theories. In fact, personally, I hold that the English aristocracy and leadership, based as it is upon the mental and financial subjection and hence slavery of the English mass in England, not to mention those beyond the borders of England proper, are two things which deserve not aid from America but destruction, and that we as Americans, perfectly capable of looking after ourselves and our own ideals, should oppose rather than favor any aid to England unless and until it should definitely and finally agree to reorganize itself along purely democratic lines - agree with others, that is to free the seas of naval domination by itself or any other nation - abolish primogeniture, titles, class as opposed to mass education and to establish equal pay for equal work for all English men and women, as well as work for all, old age pensions, etc. etc., throughout England and all of her colonies. Incidentally India, Egypt and other of her slave colonies should be released and permitted to set up independent governments.

This agreed to and signed, I would be in favor of American aid to England and her truly democratized colonies - but not otherwise.

However, since this program so radically conflicts with what the President appears to have in mind most certainly I regret and personally must seek to dispel any illusion in regard to such happy social and mental accord between myself and your distinguished family and company as this erroneous, and I am sure accidental, reference to my slide showing talk in your home would imply.

Let me add, in closing, that my respect for you as a free minded and liberty loving woman is of the highest type. Among other things I may add I am deeply touched by, as well as respectful of, your sincere and so loving devotion to all of your children - come what may.

Cordially and once more, if you don't mind,
respectfully,

D:r

Theodore Dreiser

100
March 31, 1942.

Dear Mr. Dreiser:

I have your letter and the enclosure and I think it would be wonderful to put on a series such as you suggest. No government agency will dare to sponsor it now, I fear, because Congress has taken to calling all social interests, in war time, "boondoggling". Obviously, the Children's Bureau or Social Security should do it, and you might write Miss Katherine Lenroot of the Children's Bureau, and Mr. Paul McNatt of Federal Security. If they can not do it, why not get a commercial backer?

It would seem to me to be civilian mobilization work, but Dean Landis will not be able to buck Congress either, I fear.

Very sincerely yours,

Mr. Theodore Dreiser
1015 N. King's Road
Hollywood, California.

VDS

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3/31/42

I think that will be wonderful if you could
as but no agency will claim to sponsor
I feel because Congress has taken to calling all
social interests in working from toppling.

Obviously the Children's Bureau or Social Security
should step right in. I hope
that the State of Calif. will get a Commercial back

1015 N. King's Rd., Hollywood, Calif.
March 19, 1942.

Mrs. Franklin Delano Roosevelt,
The White House,
Washington, D. C.

Would
be
Landed
with
to the
letter

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt:
I am enclosing a copy of a

letter that I got up to send to Fowler Harper of
the University of Indiana in the hope that he
might interest Harry Hopkins or one of the Washington
authorities who happen to be interested in the
problem of the child in America. But it occurs
to me now, in view of the fact that the welfare of
the child in America is one of your chief interests,
that I should have sent this letter to you first.

My purpose, for some time, has
been to prepare a series of radio programs which
would demonstrate the key position of the child in
the future progress of America, and this letter
which I enclose was written in order to outline
the nature of that program and its value to America.
My thought is that if this program as outlined appeals
to you as a direct method of influencing thought in
America you might be willing to aid me in obtaining
a national government radio sponsor for it. I
think it is hopeless to take it up with local sponsors
here in California because they have commercial
backers who do not usually have the vision necessary
in connection with a plan of this kind.

My hope is that you may be sufficient-
ly interested to advise me how to get this done. The
preliminary dramatization of these scripts for radio
will be done by me, but, of course, will be subject to
such necessary revision as any particular program di-
rector would think advisable.

Sincerely,

Theodore Dreiser

D:r

C O P Y

I want to ask you if on one of your trips to Washington you would find it possible and convenient to talk to Harry Hopkins. It is about a series of radio programs I have drawn up and in which I think he will be interested. The Federal government, you probably know, has been sponsoring some really excellent programs, and as my series deals with problems that I believe are vital to the health of the nation, I want to interest the government in producing them.

I do not know Harry Hopkins, but from all I have heard of him his sympathies are deep and accessible, and he stands for the best that the administration has offered in social progress.

The government programs now on the air do not touch the material I have in mind. Mine concerns itself strictly with those hardy perennials of social injustice and neglect that thrive in and out of war. But man suddenly takes on a new value in wartime, and people are readier to see that he who is periodically called upon to defend his country must between times look to his government for help in such things as the care of his teeth, to mention but one. As was pointed out in the Supreme Court decision in the California Okie case, since poverty does not exempt a man from serving in the army in war time, neither should it restrict his movements in time of peace.

I am especially interested in the plight of children. Almost all of the following subjects are either specifically or indirectly concerned with children. I shall always see the child as the seed corn, and the everyday neglect that weakens the seed will in time weaken the crop, which is the nation. So far it has always been true that yesterday's child is tomorrow's soldier, and I propose to dramatize the conditions which have produced so much poor vision, poor teeth, bad hearts and diseased lungs and weak bones in today's soldiers or rejectees.

Say what you will, there never will be enough money in the average American home to safeguard the average American teeth. Under the best of conditions, with the wage earner employed and the children well and strong, the wife thrifty and intelligent, there are leaks in the domestic dike that appear years later in defective vision, rheumatic heart, kidney ailments. But under the run of the mill of good and bad conditions, we've got that poor one-third of a nation always with us.

For years in books, in articles and from public platforms, I have been asking why. Now why cannot the federal government ask why over the radio? Why not a series of the perennial evils, well documented and well dramatized, sponsored by the Department of Agriculture?

Let us name some of the subjects on which I have already written scripts or have sifted material preparatory to doing so.

1. Malnutrition among children.
2. Need for dental clinics.
3. Government subsidies for the middle brackets for medicine on the Mayo plan.
4. Effect of slum housing on growing children.
5. Need for municipalization of milk.
6. High burial rates effecting lower income families.
7. Delinquency among Negro children (urban)
8. Health of Negro children (South)
9. Educational neglect of migratory workers' children.
10. Children in street trades, especially newsboys.
11. Children in the fields and factories.
12. Administration of widows pensions.
13. Reform schools and colonies.
14. Need for revision of birth control laws.

These programs would cover a wide area geographically, financially, and would indicate as many different American cultures as is convenient. The Mexican family in Imperial Valley; the French Canadian in Fall River; the Italian miners in Canon City; the urban health problem and the village nutrition problem; children's teeth in a Kansas rural district; Negro maternal mortality in a Southern city; orphanage children on buses headed for the Colorado beet fields; the children of aliens picking hops, thrashing beans, thinning radishes...

The blighting of the seed corn...

Material for the scripts comes from all sides. From the "little merchant" of 12 who sold me a newspaper on the boulevard last night; from the boy of ten who hopped my car at the beach last week. He was so small that I wondered what would happen if his nimbleness ever failed him and he fell under the wheels of a car. I asked him, "what happens when you get hurt?" He laughed; he said he was too barefooted to get hurt.

So I called the publishers. "What happens when your little employees get run down by a car?" They answer, "They are not our employees -- they are independent contractors." A boy of ten an independent contractor! The newspapers will not assume responsibility for these most defenseless of all employees. What an indictment of our opinion makers.

I ask the Industrial Accident Commission, "What happens to the little newsboys when they get run down by someone, say, who hasn't any money to pay their hospitalization?" I am told that if the parents of the boy cannot pay it is usually a charity case. "Other employers pay compensation when an employee is injured, why not the newspapers?" I ask. The Industrial Accident Commission says that the newspapers have fought responsibility so strenuously that it is only in rare cases that they pay damages.

So now when a newsie hops my car I say to myself, "Well, my lad, you are willing to take your chances at being maimed for life like a man, but you've got a bunch of smart newspaper lawyers fixing up the words in your contract to permit the utmost control without making the newspaper liable as an employer. It's up to

me and other drivers to dodge you in traffic, and if we don't, it's up to the community to pay for patching you up or burying you. "May God guard you, my lad, because the newspapers won't and the Accident Commission can't."

The other day I was talking to a hookey cop who told me that there is more delinquency and more absences due to illness among boys with paper routes and selling papers on the streets. It is not unusual for boys to rise in all weather between 3:30 and 4 A. M. and to return at 7 A. M.. Often too ill to attend school, they nevertheless deliver their papers. Before going to school the boys often go back to bed for a short nap. If the mother works, which is often the case, the children sometimes sleep past school time.

I used to stop at the corner of Santa Monica Boulevard and Third Street in Santa Monica to watch a little newsie stationed there. He is a Negro boy who has lost the use of his legs and sits in a wagon with his shrunken helpless feet straight out in front of him and newspapers piled around him. There are four children in his family similarly crippled, due to a nutritional deficiency disease. Often after the newsie sells out his papers he waits for hours until one of his sisters or brothers with sound legs comes to pull him home.

When he gets home to his bedraggled short street with its many slow-moving arrogant flea-bitten dogs and the dirty shacks that overflow children into the street, he is part of the free masonry of children at play. I have seen twenty or thirty children lined up along the curb, unplanned, casually singing spirituals together, teaching the three and four-year-olds to keep on key. They turn to games, and the crippled newsie is given his turn to be it. I have seen people struggling in vain to entertain themselves, and I never watch them without thinking of the Negro kids lined up along the street singing their slow powerful songs, and their dogs scratching, and the wagon-bound newsie not excluded, but "one of them".

There are one million children below fifteen years who are picking cranberries in Cape Cod, shelling pecans in Texas, and hundreds of other jobs that bring them nothing but bent backs and piecemeal educations.

What of the children? What of the seed corn?

THEODORE DREISER

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1015 N. King's Rd.,
Hollywood, Calif.,
April 14, 1942.

Mrs. Franklin Delano Roosevelt,
The White House,
Washington, D. C.

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt:

I appreciate greatly your serious consideration of my National Child Radio Program and I most gratefully welcome your suggestions.

I met Mr. McNutt and may personally address him, although it may be wiser to allow my friend, Fowler Harper, to talk to him about it.

Meantime, if any other thought in connection with it should occur to you, I would be deeply grateful if you would advise me of the same.

Sincerely,

Theodore Dreiser

D:r