Letter from Linda Grace Hoyer to John Updike, March 4, 1951

Linda Grace Hoyer

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Dear John:

Your very fine P.B.H. poster has arrived and disclosed a grasp of human nature that my father, at his intuitive best, has never equalled. The son of Abraham, third in line with a heap of chip hats, and you (giving up your doll), the two-headed man, the nudist with water on his knee, and the saint who gave his right eye are as funny as A Garble with an Utter in its claws or a female Shriek rising out of the Verbiage to attack a Swoon. And that, I think, is pretty funny. Freddy and Walter E. Thompson have joined you on the mantle and look very happy there. We are glad you are having a chance to draw. The work you have just sent us makes me wonder whether drawing is not the better way for you to make a living after all. Could it be that writing, except in its purely, functional forms is a kind of blasphemy? Something, in other words, that only God and Ford Madox Ford were ever meant to do. (I just read his essay called Memories of Oscar Wilde.) But you may find it much easier than I do. Certainly you will have to if you are going to do it for a living and live.

Speaking of life, the Reverend Verne E. Snyder defined it for us today, as persuasively as I have ever heard it defined. Life is the sharing, he says. So, if we assume death to be the opposite of life, we may presume, simply, that death is the failure to share. (At the moment, Frankie Lane is sharing the Swamp Girl with me and Talloo. And your father, waking up on the davenport, says: "Is that Margaret?")

My chances of repeating the reverend's logic are less than one in ten thousand but I'll try because this family seems to have had more than its regular amount of difficulty with life this week. Your visit to Stillman, fantastic though it must have been, sounds of a piece with your grandfather's heart attack on Tuesday, your grandmother's conduct any day, the fate of a fine glossy muskrat that came into the yard on Friday night, and the way my head and back feel after a day with the "book."

Since the muskrat is the one who probably suffered most, I'll give him the most space. Daddy had gone to see the class play and was about due at home when Chipper began to bark in the vicinity of the blue spruce. The first flash light showed nothing except Chipper dancing. The next one revealed a perfect little beast, too small to be a wood chuck and too big to be a rat. And he played a good game of tag with Chipper. The game zigzagged toward the barnyard and I followed, waving the flashlight in a vain effort to see what was happening and talking to Chipper in a vainer effort to get him to come into the house with me. Near the gate, the three of us stopped to look at each other, the flash light glaring at the poor little animal. Out of nowhere Jolson rushed and the muskrat ran into the barnyard. There was the sound of wings beating (or carpet if you'd rather) and much faster than I can type that muskrat died.
In his really pleasant picture of the sharing that is life, Reverend Snyder left out the one that is being shared. Like all psychologically sound people, he assumed that one always shares and, when shared, is glad to submit. Personally, I am neither so sound in mind or body that all of life seems to be positive and constructive. The muskrat was sharing until he was completely outweighed. The Reverend spoke of sharing recklessly and cheerfully. And I suppose, things being as they are, everyone might as well be both cheerful and reckless. But for the only child who found himself outweighed, outflanked, and occasionally outwitted by another generation at the very start of his sharing, the carefree life is a mirage.

So, if the doctors gave you advice, take it. The only-one-more-spring idea is to be avoided at all costs. You have too much that is good to share to be careless with it or unduly apprehensive for the future. Pessimism was the real downfall of the Saracen, you know. Your heredity favors many more springs. But it is possible to be too reckless and too cheerful in the use of one's energy. Jim Burkhart's car sits in the Beckersville Garage to prove it. My mother is very eager to know whether or not you are taking medicine. The Arabs had a monopoly on "medical knowledge" in their hey-day and your grandmother's memory, racial memory that is, is excellent. But I have a feeling you have already laid all this aside for some less involved form of sharing. So, I won't tell you to stop smoking and sitting up all night. May your dreams bring sweet tomorrows. Never mind what might have been. May God bless and keep you, till we meet again. (And whenever Tallullah says these things, I cry. In fact, I've taken to crying in church, less conspicuously I hope but very much like Albert Fry did. Do you remember? And when everyone got bored with his tears they penned him up. I wonder how he liked being penned up.)

Mother

P.S. Mr. and Mrs. Ivan Zendt, your father says, miss your page in the Chatterbox. Mr. Zendt is a member of the school board.

P.S. Find Sam Delmon and平整 if you can. Forget whatever else I wanted to know. What does 'Sharing' is my sympathy for from Puss Dorem shall we say?