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Salute to Iowa

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Salute to Iowa
by
James Hearst

Salute to Iowa- a fanfare of trumpets, drums, flags?
Not this state, not now. This is the land between two rivers that wears its
working clothes to make the most of what it has. That's what we're here for
isn't it? to see what that most will be when history writes the end of this
century. What an impossible task. The crystal ball clouds over, the tea
leaves won't settle, the stars don't speak our language. Yet men and women
with hearts of good will, minds sharpened with intelligence, spirit filled
with charity try to form the shadowy shape of what we will be . . .

A little girl told her father that next month her arithmetic class would
study the dismal system. Too often the words come easily as if the dedica­
tion provides the opportunity. That is not quite true. Opportunity's door
sometimes slams shut no matter how willing our hearts and minds. Remember,
what is said and done today will have its consequences. There is no escap­
ing consequences. In the old Greek plays, fate was the prime mover, fate
controlled the lives of the characters and compelled them to action with an
iron hand. Fortunately we are not so locked in a belief in destiny. Ours
is more the spirit of adventure, the spirit that discovered America, won the
west, overcame the intricacies of the dismal system. Nevertheless situations
work out in the direction of their possibilities. The seed of what we want,
planted now, may be the plant that gives us with its deep roots, the land we
hope for.

It seems to me that we have a duty to improve the view so that the people of
Iowa in the year 2000 can take comfort in the landscape and be thankful that
we tried to give them a merry heart in place of a sad face, for as the great Preacher in the Bible said, "A merry heart driveth away care but a sad face drieth the bones."

The six point nine billion dollar income that Iowa receives from agriculture and its related affairs means a great deal to our economy but there is more to us than that. The spirit of our people is not a matter of statistics. There is the WHAT of our wants, the HOW of getting them but there is also the WHY we want what we want and this perhaps is the hardest question of all to answer. We are born with two free gifts, time and ground. So many heartbeats, and something to stand on. Until we have our cities in space we stand on mother earth whether on a farm, in a ghetto, or on top of a skyscraper, it is the earth that holds us up.

How obvious this all seems. What is not to obvious is the account we make of these free heartbeats, this floor, pavement, field that supports us. And our concern now is what account shall we take that will bring our state and its people into the open air of the good life in the year 2000. The spirit speaks for us but does the flesh answer.

It is not my habit to speak in parables, besides I don't wish to hide anything from you. Remember when His disciples asked Him why he spoke in parables Jesus said he did it so those "without" (the unregenerate I suppose) wouldn't understand, be converted and forgiven their sins. I quoted this in class once, and a student, a minister's wife, said she didn't believe it. So I said, please look in your Bible, gospel of St. Mark, Chapter 4, verses 10 and 11. She called
me up later in a flurry of confusion and said, you are right but I still don't believe it.

I think there is a lesson in the way of a seed, take a kernel of corn half as large as my fingernail: plant it, given good ground, favorable weather and in 90, 100, 120 days however it is programed, it grows into a stalk so thick, so tall, with one or two ears on it. But it is a stalk of corn, not barley or turnips and all because instructions are contained in that seed. The instructions are carried out as given. Perhaps this is why one of our renowned philosophers said the Greek writers of tragedy were the first scientists because they understood that once a situation was set in motion it moved inexorably to its consequence. This is what we are here for isn't it? to see that we plant the right seeds, set in motion the right situations so that we will hand to the people of our state in the next century a good earth for them to cultivate and harvest.

We should remember this: whatever plans we set in motion limits the possibilities of what will happen. We must therefore be careful in what we choose. For my part I constantly struggle with the conflict between the way things are, and the way they ought to be. However broad or deep the abyss may be, the relationship is never broken. It means a concern with ideals as well as matter . . .

Let me read one of my early poems when I was a struggling young farmer trying to juggle dollars with my banker. I think the young man was wrong, he needs the stars too.
The Reason For Stars

I never wonder a lot about stars.
I'm much too busy with things of this earth
That show when a season of labor is done
Just what the labor's been worth.

Stars are all right to admire like flowers,
I like to see pretty things when I'm done
Working in fields, but what do I care
Whether a star is a stone?

There's plenty to learn in the ways of a seed.
What do you get if you study the sky?
I'm greater for holding one fruit in my hand
Than a heaven of stars in my eye.
One of the important concerns is are we willing to pay for what we want. Or to put it another way, is what we want worth the cost. I hate to use the word sacrifice, it reminds me too much of the old Testament stories my Aunt Jennie read to us when we were kids. I wondered then if the Lord really enjoyed the smoke and stink of sizzling meat. When meat burned at our house Mother let us know how unhappy she was.

But in one way or another, we will pay for the ideals we have set up. And all of us will contribute or we will have no State of Iowa worth our effort. Russell Long, Senator from Louisiana, says about tax reform, we all favor it as long as it isn't for me or thee but for that fellow yonder under the tree.

Emerson said once, "the soul is no travelor, the wise man stays at home." We want a home worth staying for, a place of clean air, clear water, fertile top soil, earth where we put down deep roots and feel secure, where the opportunity to say, I live in Iowa, is a privilege.

poem -- Hog Economy
The little pig stuck his nose in the trough
But the big pig moved him over,
He started again where he left off
But the big pig moved him over,
He squealed and quivered, his whole intent
Was to find a place for himself -- he meant
To give no offence -- and protesting he went
As the big pigs moved him over.

He bristled with signs of a small pig's right
But the big pigs moved him over,
He struggled and bit with a small pig's might
But the big pigs moved him over...

In the trough was his dinner without fork or plate,
His hunger's edge warned him not to wait
(Though the pig was little, his need was great),
But the big pigs moved him over.

He trembled, the little pig did, in despair
As the big pigs moved him over,
He pushed for the trough like everyone there
But the big pigs moved him over,
He panted and wrinkled his small pig's face
There was plenty to eat, was his size his disgrace?
But the length of the trough, in place after the place,
The big pigs moved him over.
Two evils face us in our adventure toward another century: the evil of ignoring our relation to our environment and the evil of forgetting the value of where we live. It is a commonplace to say we suffer from a decline in religious beliefs, from malicious use of material power, rising birth rate among inferior people, indifference to art and appreciation. This has always been true. In the reign of King Tutankhamen there was a terrific struggle between the Modernists and Fundamentalists. Someone once said the man who had the best chance for happiness in Greek culture at its highest point say 500 B.C. would be a heavyweight boxer, not a Greek scholar. The scholar would be expected to write an ode glorifying the boxer. May be true today.

But we progress, yes we progress. Even to the point where we can say with Emerson, let us not so much have great men as great societies. It is the communal effort which brings satisfaction and growth. And wisdom is the fruit of growth. And to grow we must not only appreciate where we are and who we are, but also plow the furrow for our next crop. We must do something, not just sit and think about doing. If I were to criticize our modern education I would say it is given too much to analysis and intellectual games. Remember that in the Garden of Eden Adam saw the animals before he named them, our children today name the animals before they see them — to often we find it easier to say the word than deal with what it stands for. Of course the future is dangerous, it is the business of the future to be dangerous. But we have two aids in meeting the danger, the weapon of change and the weapon of conservation. Here is where we make the choice, will we enrich our environment and so enrich ourselves by growing better trees so that we may have better shade from a hot sun, so that we may use art — I dislike to
use the word for my broad definition -- use our creative instincts and intuitions so that we free our ability to enjoy what we have made? This is one of the great pleasures. We may know all there is to know about the sun, air, rotation of the earth and still miss the radiance of the sunset.

But I keep coming back to what I think is the important question: are we willing to pay for what we want? Is what we get worth the cost?

Which road shall we take, over the hills and far away, or stay and tend our garden. If we go over the hills we say to the coming generations, we made what profit we could out of this place, we milked her dry, you do what you can with what's left. If we stay and tend our garden, we turn over our stewardship with the feeling that we have made Iowa a good place to live.

I want to read a final poem that has nothing to do with what I have been saying except that it attempts to celebrate the simple pleasure of coming home, of having a place where your roots go down.
THE CURE

The bush at the corner of the house
explodes softly in sprays of yellow stars.
My last step ended a pilgrimage
I should never have begun, but how lucky
I am to see this forsythia
prompted by roots to its spring duty.
The time spent trudging up and down
in strange cities picked my pockets
of a promised future and led me into
blind alleys filled
with garbage cans.
Let a bellyful of journeys teach you
homesickness; trains run late though
each station chalks up time tables
and you flip a coin
whether you go or stay.
I want to say something for
cultivating the ground you stand on
before you lie in it — and when
did you see anything as lovely and familiar
as this forsythia in full bloom.

James Hearst in THE SANDLAPPER November 1977