Antidote for War

I became a philosopher early. I had to become a philosopher. I was rather badly wounded in the First World War at Soisson, France, when I was 22, and as a result, I was flat on my back for a long time. It was either get a philosophy, or crack up. My code of living is simple. It consists of three parts: 1) never be cruel; 2) always be artistic; 3) never lose your sense of humor.

Number one, I don’t believe, requires much explanation. “Never be cruel” means, of course, always be kind. I believe that kindness is the natural human instinct, not cruelty. I have no illusions about humanity. I know its faults, its frequent blindness, its capacity for making terrible mistakes. But my work as a writer takes me among all kinds of men and women, often the very rough and the very poor. Everywhere, I have found generosity and nobility—men who would have gladly given their lives for me, because I had done them some slight kindness. The vast majority of human beings will do the basically good thing if they are given half a chance.

By the second point in my code, “always be artistic.” I mean that whatever I do, I try to do with as much grace as possible. If I write a book, I want to make it as beautiful as I can. If I were a shoe maker, I would want to make shoes the same way, as perfect as possible. In our madly commercialized and mechanized world, we have lost our sense of the beautiful. I believe we need beauty in our lives just as much as we need food on our dining room tables. A world where beauty flourishes is a happy world, a world at peace.

The third part of my code, as I said earlier, is “never lose your sense humor.” I don’t like pomposity, I don’t like stuffed shirts. I’m glad I was born in a small town. It’s a wonderful antidote for smugness.

I remember years ago when I had a little success in New York with one of my first novels, there was the usual round of autograph parties and literary lunches, and I was feeling rather pleased with myself. About this time, I happened to go back to my hometown in Kentucky, and I saw an old fellow I’d known as a boy standing on the street corner. He looked me up and down a long time and remarked lazily, “How are yah, Benny? You been away a while, ain’t yah? Yah still teachin’ school?” That reduced life to its proper proportions.

I was over in Germany not long ago in the ruins of Berlin, and a reporter asked me to
give his paper a thought for the day. That was a bit of an order for me, who had been in two wars against the Germans and had very definite physical souvenirs from both. I reflected on what I could tell the Germans under these circumstances, and then I wrote, “When all the peoples of the world remember to laugh, particularly at themselves, there will be no more dictators and no more wars.”

Author, journalist, and World War I veteran Ben Lucien Burman wrote 22 books, including the bestselling “Catfish Bend” series about life in a fictitious Louisiana river town. Several of his books became movies, including “Steamboat Round the Bend,” which starred Will Rogers.

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