

June 2, 1944

Dear Sumner:

Mother and I had an interesting discussion at the dinner table last night concerning an article written by Bernard DeVoto, Editor of Harper's, which he entitled Older Than God. His thesis is that we civilians know only the superficialities of war, whereas the man in the service has experienced the stark realities; that we, therefore, will not be able to understand him any more than he us; that the process of readjustment for both him and ourselves is going to be not only very slow, painful and distressing, but almost impossible of complete success. He says:

"For as civilians we know only the fictions of war, whereas they have undergone the realities. Theirs has been the boredom, the terror, the filty and grime, the mud and snow and heat, the bombs falling, death and destruction in the sea and across the land. They have been trained to slaughter, they have been exposed to slaughter, they have slaughtered. Has all this bent and hardened them in a new shape? Can they resume the habits and tasks of peace, the thinking of civilians, the values by which we hope to live? Will the ex-soldier returning from beastliness be at best an alien speaking no language we can communicate in, or at worst an antagonist to the structure of our lives and of the life that used to be his?"

Then he says:

"But what of that strange language and shall I be able to understand him? No, not completely, or even adequately in regard to the immediate experience of war, his own private pattern of horror and survival. Love has its own intuition, and you will come to know a great deal without comprehending it. But the rest, and it is the greater part, must be forever forfeit. The need to have it shared will never leave him but he must satisfy that need among those who have been there. There is the fraternity of those who have been there, even if they fought their battles across the world from his, and only in that fellowship can he speak freely, with the knowledge that his own kind will hear. To you he can say little at best and at best little of what he says will carry its full meaning across the gulf. This is in part his pride, even his grandeur. But also it is in part his shyness, his shamefacedness, his resignation to the incommunicable.

Moreover, for a term you will be strange to him. While he traveled the seven seas, and lay in foxholes, and fought his way through destruction, you took your accustomed path to Gleeson's drugstore, the morning paper and an absorbed interest in whether the Cubs had won today and whether your neighbor had decided to plant beans. He will find your day by day activity almost incomprehensible. You are enmeshed in the life of peace, which he gave up so long ago that it has become unintelligible, perhaps absurd. Only by degrees will he find any meaning in it, even the old meanings."



Then DeVoto goes on to say that only the most fortunate of those who return will escape a time of living at loose ends, perhaps with a conviction of utility, perhaps with a fervent rebelliousness against the routine of life. After all wars the veteran of 25 or 20, has spoken of himself as "older than God." And so he paints a gloomy, dismal and far from inspiring experience that the veteran will enjoy upon his return and that the struggles for peace and in peace times is not going to be easy for any one. And he ends with this poetic phrase: "The past is the old soldier's surety that peace will not fail him and he will not fail peace, that the bugle blowing so faintly that only he can hear it is sounding not taps but reveille."

My criticism of the article lies in its generalities. With a facile pen and choice use of fine words and well rounded phrases, DeVoto talks, it seems to me, for publication and not for analytical discussion and treatment. You just cannot generalize about ten million veterans. No two are alike any more than the finger prints of any two are alike. Some veterans, sensitive souls, will have a hard time in readjustment; others will regret the ending of the war, for to them it was a venture and excitement; others will return unscarred physically and well as mentally and instantly go back to their normal daily routine, if their old jobs are available; others will claim that the world owes them a living for the rest of their lives without any effort on their part to help in the making of it; and so on and so forth. In as many different ways as you can describe and paint the human being, you can write about ~~the matter~~ and his attitude towards peace and peace time pursuits. By the same token DeVoto is fundamentally weak in trying to categorize all civilians and putting them, as it were, in one mold. We civilians, too, are of myriad breeds of cats. Some of us will be able almost instantly to get under the skin of our dear ones and resume normal and healthy and sound mental relationships and attitudes. The human personality cannot be set down in a mathematical equation.

Coming down to you and to Mother and myself, I honestly feel that whatever your experience, you will return willing, nay eager, to talk it all out with us, to go back to your goal in education and life, and to follow the pattern you and we together have set out long ago. Your experience in the war will stand you in good stead and if your outlook will have changed at all it will have changed for things even sounder and more constructive than what had been planned. But when all is said and done there will be no acres of silence between us. We will live on the same street and enjoy and understand and appreciate everything that goes on about us as well as within us.

Affectionately,