

Soldier's Heart

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My grandfather was born in Buffalo, New York in 1910, a mere 45 years after the battle flags were furled at Appomattox and the soldiers of the Army of the Potomac laid down their rifles and returned home from the Civil War. He grew up among the aging veterans of that war, joining crowds that gathered every year in cemeteries on Decoration Day to lay ribbons on gravestones, watching the parade of vets as they marched through town in their increasingly ill-fitting uniforms every July Fourth.

His great uncle fought in the blood-spattered Overland Campaign of 1864, marching with a company of death-hardened New Yorkers from the Battle of the Wilderness to the nightmarish frontal assaults on Cold Harbor and beyond. Many of his friends never made it home.

When I was a boy, Grandpa seemed like some magical time traveler bringing to me a direct connection to those who had fought a war that seemed as ancient as memory itself. I was mesmerized as he told stories about how his uncle used to march him and his sister, Evie, around in drill formation with broom handles in their hands meant to represent rifles, and how he would draw maps in the earth, recounting battles and grand strategy.

As the parades marched by each year fewer and fewer veterans showed up; those who did were increasingly frail. One year, there was only one left. I'd been transfixed as Grandpa summoned the image of a solitary old man sitting in a wooden and wicker wheelchair holding a small American flag and a dented bugle. "He was the last one," he'd said. "The next year he was gone. They were all gone."

Recently, I've been thinking a lot about that lone bugler, last witness to all who had fallen. For over 20 years as a hospice social worker I've been sitting at the bedsides of the men and women that fought World War Two. I've listened as they struggled to find words for the impact that war had on their lives, borne witness as they died. Those few who remain are in their 90s now. Soon they too will be gone.

And I've been contemplating the melancholy seriousness in Grandpa's voice when he told me about how his uncle couldn't go into butcher shops because the sound of the meat saw cutting against bone caused panic. I've

been recalling the sad look in his eyes when he spoke about the relentless pain some veterans had suffered due to injuries received on the battlefields and how some had become lost in a haze of alcohol or laudanum. Such stories often get buried beneath the idealization and sentimentality that seem to follow in the wake of war. Whether due to stoicism, social pressure, shame, a desire to protect loved ones or simply put the war behind, stories hinting at the horrifying terror and carnage of battle and the persistence of its psychological, emotional, and moral pain, typically get locked into the unspoken memory of those who survive.

I think the seriousness in Gramps' voice had to do with the responsibility that goes with realizing in a direct and visceral way how the pain and suffering of war haunts those who fought long after the guns are silent. For Grandpa, the vets of the Grand Army of the Republic were real people and the deep scars of war were palpable. I suspect there were stories about his uncle he never shared, stories which he took to the grave.

As a hospice social worker, I've learned that when men look back on combat, even wars ennobled by compelling narratives about the "Good War" or the "Greatest Generation," they see things which make others uncomfortable and about which they may have never spoken. Yes, there are often memories of duty, courage, and bonds the closeness of which is impossible for civilians to understand, but there are also intrusive images of cold brutality and trauma. Grief, rage, guilt, and troubling questions about one's identity can easily arise as old soldiers look back on their experiences in war. Sitting at the bedside, I have learned that some will look for a safe place to begin, however tentatively, to speak of the unspeakable before they die.

In the years after the Civil War many veterans struggled with unhealed psychic and moral wounds. Back then, when speaking of such delicate matters it was common to say that such men were suffering from "Soldier's Heart." Something had happened which had deeply affected their hearts, they carried something in their hearts, their hearts were changed, burdened, by what they had seen and done. I think Grandpa knew this about his uncle.

For those returning home from subsequent wars the language polite society has used in its attempt to speak of Soldier's Heart, at least when speaking could not be avoided, has been less evocative, more sterile—shell shock, battle fatigue. Or it has been laced with the stigma of psychiatric labeling—combat neurosis, post-traumatic stress disorder. Only in recent years have social workers and other helping professionals who work with veterans begun to speak of the complex inner pain beneath these labels, and to recognize that such pain may even afflict those who do not present with obvious post-traumatic stress symptomatology. Such language—moral injury, shattering of identity, soul injury or soul wound, the unraveling of character—may yet capture the morally and spiritually charged meaning implied by an earlier generation's focus on the inward beating heart.

I wish Gramps was still here so that I could talk with him about questions I've been asking myself: What responsibility do those of us who will carry such stories forward have to those who have shared them, especially after those who have shared them and all of their buddies are gone? How do we transmit these stories in ways which honor the power of their courage while being honest about the immense, often hidden pain which affected so many of this oft-idealized generation?

Grandpa watched an entire generation of warriors vanish. Now I am doing the same. Soon they will be gone forever. Once they vanish into memory it will be even more tempting to tell ourselves idealized narratives sanitizing the bitter reality of what they were asked to do, minimizing the personal cost so many paid *after* they returned home. How shall we who have touched this generation directly tell the stories to future generations? How will we speak honestly about what we have learned of the things carried inside a soldier's heart?