

No Greater Love

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Rodger Young should not have stayed in the army. I say that not because of what would ultimately happen to him, but in fact it was the opinion of the army's medical corp. Rodger Young was shorter than most of his peers, yet he excelled in sports in the small town of Tiffin Ohio; about an hour away from my own small town in Michigan. He didn't make the football team at first, but tried out the next year. He impressed the coach with his heart and determination, and was allowed to play.

Oddly enough basketball was also one of his passions. As I said, Rodger Young was short but he had tremendous hustle and would always go after the ball. Once in a game he was chasing a ball out of bounds and he slipped and fell. Unfortunately he hit his head pretty hard as a result of the play. At first he just sort of shook it off. However as time went on, Rodger discovered that he had suffered

some hearing loss as a result of his injury. Eventually he dropped out of high school because he could not hear the lessons.

When he turned twenty Rodger Young joined the Ohio National Guard. He figured his hearing would keep him out of the regular army. Eventually he would attain the rank of corporeal and was a small arms instructor for the Ohio regiment. World War Two had other plans for Rodger Young. He was shipped off to the Solomon Islands to fight in the Pacific Theater. At one point he was offered command of the regiment, but asked to be demoted down to private. He was concerned about his hearing. At first they thought Rodger was trying to get out of combat duty, but it turned out he was nearly deaf. Although he should not have gone, Rodger Young insisted on landing with his regiment at New Georgia in the Solomon Islands.

One day while out on patrol, he and twenty of his men came under fire from five Japanese soldiers in two machine gun nests. At first they returned fire, but they were hopelessly pinned down and the shooting grew intense. The officer in charge gave the order to fall back and retreat. However, Rodger Young didn't hear him. While everyone else fell back, Young went forward. The last command he had heard was to take out the machine gun nest. So he got closer and closer. He was shot twice, but kept advancing by throwing a series of grenades at

the machine gun nests. Finally the third hit proved fatal for Rodger Young, but the Japanese had been so distracted and focused on this one soldier who kept advancing on them and attacking them with grenades, that they stopped shooting at the rest of the soldiers. The other men in his regiment were able to withdraw to safety.

For his actions that day, Rodger Young was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor—the highest military honor you can receive. Indeed, his story became the stuff of legend and song; quite literally. The singer Burl Ives had a hit with “The Ballad of Rodger Young” back in the forties. The famed science fiction writer Robert Heinlein wrote probably the definitive space war novel, “Starship Troopers” which was made into a movie in the late nineties. In both the movie and the book, the eponymous Starship is named the “USS Rodger Young.”

“No greater love has a man than if he lays down his life for his friends.” In a month where we are celebrating love, it is appropriate that we recall Memorial Day. Memorial Day remembers soldiers like Rodger Young, and many other, far too many, who did not make it back home to ride in the parades and be thanked for their service. As we heard in the song America the Beautiful, the third verse is “O Beautiful

for heroes proved in liberating strife. Who more than self their country loved, and mercy more than life!”

I find stories like that of Rodger Young to be powerful testimonials of humanism. Now I do not mean to glorify war for you. I learned from my Grandfather, himself a veteran of the war in the Pacific, that one should not romanticize war. War is about death and suffering, even if one deems it morally necessary. War should not be sought out for glory. That said, there is no denying that folks like Rodger Young are heroes by any definition of the word. He met the challenge placed before him and rose to the occasion even when it meant he would die so that his comrades would live. Most of us will, thankfully, never be presented with that kind of terrible choice. Yet it is hard not to admire those who demonstrate the noblest aspects of the human spirit.

In our story this morning, George Tyger captures the realism of comrades who have been lost in war. I find his words both chilling and comforting. He speaks of the death of soldiers in a very personal way. He doesn't get into what some other person said or felt about their buddies dying in Afghanistan, and as minister he counseled them. No, Tyger's account is personal. He is the one in need of healing. He is the one hurting. The emptiness he speaks of is within his own heart. And he is a Unitarian Universalist. So he does things and thinks about things

in ways that are familiar to us. Tyger says that he finds strength and healing the stories of new people he talks to. By being open to forming those new relationships, he is able to fill in some of his emptiness. In fact he finds the presence of other people so comforting that he is even willing to rewrite the gospels (a very UU impulse I think), “No one has a greater love than this, to be there for one’s friends when they need him most.”

You know what, that is something we can do! It’s unlikely any of us are going to have to lay down our lives for our friends. Those circumstances happen rarely thank goodness. But Tyger’s statement is almost a charge to us; a challenge to live out this greater love. To be there for one’s friends when they need you the most. That situation we are faced with quite often.

Kate Braestrup learned just how powerful that love can be; when you are there for your friends when they need you the most. Braestrup’s husband, Drew, was a police officer for the Maine State Police. He was tall and handsome and strong. And her husband Drew harbored a secret desire, which he shared only with his wife: he wanted to spend the second half of his career as a Unitarian Universalist minister. Not sure what it is about the state of Maine or being a State Trooper up there would drive you into this profession, but there it was.

It was a normal Tuesday in the Braestrup household. Drew had risen early, eaten his daily cereal, and had headed out the door. Kate had slept in. Their four young children woke her with their morning routine to head out into their day and to school. At about 10 in the morning Kate got the call that her husband had been killed in a car accident just a few miles from their house.

She tells the next part of this story in a series of autobiographical essays she published entitled Here if You Need Me.

“Perhaps forty minutes after I had heard the news of Drew’s death, I was sitting in the living room with my friend Monica when the doorbell rang. The sergeant was on the telephone, so Monica sprang to answer it.

A young man stood on the front steps, clad in a spiffy dark suit, his hair neatly combed, exuding a scent of soap and virtue. Holding out a pamphlet, he beamed at Monica. ‘Have you heard the Good News?’

For a long second, Monica glared at him, not sure whether to punch him or laugh hysterically. She compromised by slamming the door.

A few minutes later, the doorbell rang again. This time, I answered it. It was my neighbor, an elderly woman I had exchanged no more than a dozen words with in the ten years I’d lived in Thomaston.

She had pot holders on her hands, which held a pan of brownies still hot from the oven, and tears were rolling down her cheeks. 'I just heard,' she said.

That pan of brownies was, it later turned out, the leading edge of a tsunami of food that came to my children and me, a wave that did not recede for many months after Drew's death. I didn't know that my family and I would be fed three meals a day for weeks and weeks. I did not anticipate that neighborhood men would come to drywall the playroom, build bookshelves, mow the lawn, get the oil changed in my car. I did not know that my house would be cleaned and the laundry done, that I would have embraces and listening ears, that I would not be abandoned to do the labor of mourning alone. All I knew was that my neighbor was standing on the front stoop with her brownies and her tears; she *was* the Good News.

'I wish I could do more,' my neighbor said, and all I could think as I gazed at her, shining before me in the electric air was what more need there be on earth than this? Than you?"

Kate Braestrup would enroll in seminary less than a year after her husband died. Her mantra was "I went because Drew couldn't." Having grown up in a secular household, some of her family, particularly her younger brother, was leery of just what she was getting

into pursuing this Unitarian Universalist ministry thing. She would go on to become, and to my knowledge still is, a chaplain with the Maine Department of Wildlife and Fisheries. She works with game wardens who do search and rescue operations when someone goes missing in the dense Maine wilderness. Kate Braestrup ministers to the parents of children they are looking for in those rescues. She ministers to them by doing exactly what George Tyger suggests—simply being with another person in one of their most difficult moments because they need someone to be with them.

Reflecting on her understanding of God, Kate writes, “‘Why are you here?’ my seminary professors asked me. ‘You don’t really believe in God, do you?’ my brother wrote in an email.

Dear professors and dear brother. It is possible that God is Drew’s arms holding me in our fertile scent; a Game Warden walking out of the woods hand in hand with a child lost, then found. It is possible that God is my neighbor with her pan of brownies standing on my doorstep. It is entirely possible, that is, that the God I serve and worship with all my body, all my mind, all my soul, and all my spirit is love. It’s enough. It’s all the God I need.”

“No greater love has a man than he would lay down his life for his friends.” One might guess that the author of those words in the Gospel

of John had in mind martyrdom. After all, Christians were being killed by the Romans with some frequency when the Gospel of John was written. It is speculation. But stories like Rodger Young's show us what the human spirit is capable of doing. With enough grit and heart and determination a short kid from a small town in northern Ohio with bad hearing won the Medal of Honor. He did not live to bask in the glory of his accomplishment. I am sure his parents, while deservedly proud, would have preferred to have their son come home safely. That is the bittersweet reality of Memorial Day—we remember the heroic sacrifices of our soldiers while at the same time mourning their death. It is a hard day in lots of ways. One of the hard things about it is knowing how to honor those departed in a way that keeps their memory alive, and yet also makes us more sensitive, more compassionate to those who are hurting.

I think George Tyger and Kate Braestrup, both Unitarian Universalist ministers, both chaplains, both authors and deep thinkers about our liberal faith and how it meets the challenge of death and loss, point the way for us. They have first-hand experience of this struggle. For them Memorial Day doesn't just happen once a year. Remembering the dead and helping people with their loss is a year round process. Both Tyger and Braestrup, through their own personal pain, have experienced this.

And their message to us is consistent and clear. No greater love is there when we are there for each other when we are needed most. Note that for chaplains in both the United States Army and the Maine Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, the job is similar. Just be there for the other person. Talk to them; not just about what they are feeling but about anything. Eventually you will start to fill the void of emptiness that they are feeling.

Having done some chaplain work in hospitals I can tell you that this is both very easy and very difficult. It is easy because all you have to do is show up and be present to their pain. It is hard because there is nothing else to do, nothing to distract you away from the pain of loss and suffering. We live for distraction in our culture; heck we have built entire entertainment industries out of distraction. Go watch the E! channel if you don't believe me. There is nothing harder in the world than to be present with someone who is experiencing loss. And that is precisely why George Tyger is right when he suggests a revision to John's Gospel, "No Greater love is there when you are there for someone when they need you the most." Hence the title of Braestrup's book, "Here if You Need Me."

I do not mean to scare you away from comforting each other. Such work is the hallmark of congregational life. I don't mean to scare

you off of it, but I also don't want us to take it lightly or brush it off as if it were irrelevant. The smallest gestures can mean the world to people, just like the old woman who brought brownies. And just like her we may wish there were more we could do. Just being there is enough. Love is enough. May it always be enough. Amen and Blessed Be.