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Gracefully Surrendering the Things of Youth

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Gracefully Surrendering the Things of Youth

Abstract

This essay is the author's reflections upon returning to civilian life following four years in the military. The essay describes the thoughts, feelings and relationships the author experienced during a deployment in Afghanistan and the uncertainty involved with returning to the US. The hopes accompanying new beginnings and a changed perspective on life are associated with what is described as a "graceful surrender of youth".

The title of this paper comes from my favorite poem, “Desiderata” by Max Ehrmann: a poem that I consider to be full of wisdom, and a tool that I use to slow down my life momentarily to perform an honest reality check on myself. Every six months or so, I revisit the piece because I enjoy the feeling that I get every time that I read it. It gently reminds me to strive to be myself at all times, to be a good person, and to remember that I have a lot of life left to live. It reminds me to keep things slow and deliberate, and to stay consistent in the way that I make decisions - with a mindset looking to the future. And above all, to remember that time changes everything, in good ways and in bad, and to strive to not let time make a victim out of me; instead, using the time that I have to make sound decisions every day so I can look back on a life well-spent, and not regret too many of the decisions made in my youth.

It’s strange to transition from being a soldier for four years, with a combat deployment to Afghanistan, to abandoning part of what makes me who I am to become a civilian again. I trusted my brothers with my life, and I knew they trusted me with theirs. We were a family, forged through war, and I was leaving them just like that. I was Specialist Conner, and I didn’t know how on earth I was going to become Travis again. I felt completely lost when I was driving the U-Haul out of the base, onto I-5, to go back to my home that I knew wouldn’t feel like home. I was excited though: it was an opportunity to do anything that I wanted. The sky was the limit, and I was happy about starting a new chapter in my life. I knew, however, that I would miss my former life since it was the life that I had come to know and love.

People talk differently in the military, especially when you’re in the infantry, living in the Taliban-infested area of the Kandahar Province. When we were working, no one had time to be polite, nor did anyone want to be or expect it of anyone else in our platoon. When I was on missions, every sentence that I uttered was laden with “fucks”, “shits”, and “Goddamns” along

with the abundant use of racial slurs, of course, to describe the locals who were off in the distance. We were a hard bunch of guys who were trained to exert our will over others in order to keep ourselves safe, and to keep situations under our control. When we weren't on missions, we would enjoy each other's company while playing a game of Spades, working out, or spending hours talking in a guard tower. We knew intimate details of each other's lives, and shared sensitive stories and experiences with each other because we were brothers.

I forced myself to think differently when I was in Afghanistan. My own safety and the safety of my soldiers were of the utmost importance. I wouldn't allow myself to think too emotionally about devastating events because I knew that it would compromise my ability to effectively accomplish the mission. Instead, I gravitated toward thinking of myself as already dead, and if I made it back that day then it would be an unexpected gift. A lot of us used that type of thinking to keep our spirits up, and not to dwell on the present situation too much and not to count all the days that we still had left in that country.

Derek was our platoon medic, and was one of my best friends. I would have to say that we are a lot alike, except he has a 6'5", 270 lb. body - but it moved just as quickly as the rest of ours did, which is an essential quality to have as an infantry platoon medic. I wouldn't have wanted to have anyone else by my side if an unfortunate event did happen to occur with me. I trusted him completely with my life. I had learned a lot from him during our four years together in the army. Derek, without a doubt, has had an impact on my life, and on the way that I think. Derek was one of the best people at doing his job.

One night, Derek put my trust in him to the test. He was messing around with his pistol: racking the slide back, reloading magazines, dry-firing the empty weapon from time to time. I

wasn't paying attention to the different sounds that the pistol was making, or if the pistol had a magazine in it, or if it were loaded. Derek said, "Here," and touched my arm with the gun, wanting me to take it from him. "Do you trust me with your life?" he asked. Of course I did; we had a lot of history together. "Yes, why?" "Enough to hold that gun to your head and pull the trigger?" Derek took everything that he said seriously. I looked at him for a few seconds, and then put the gun to my head and spoke with my action. After the gun clicked, I gave it back to him and we resumed our conversation as if the event was as mundane and insignificant as him asking me how much longer we were going to be on our shift. I knew that he wouldn't hand me a loaded gun. I knew that he wouldn't make the mistake of leaving a round in the chamber. I wouldn't have to question his sanity for asking me to perform such an action. I would be lying if I said I was completely confident that the gun was unloaded. In my mind, though, the odds of that pistol being loaded were so low that it barely registered with me as being a possibility.

Derek had these twisted ways of making us feel better about our situation. "Just tell yourself that you're going to die over here anyway so there's no reason to worry about death. Just resign yourself to it, and you can do your job even better." "Yeah, thanks man. That makes me feel so much better. You would make a great therapist, you know that?" The funny thing is that Derek's calmness would keep my thinking in perspective, and his strange, situational logic would actually work on me most of the time. "Just look at it as a long adventure, and that each day you come back through the gate is just another day you've been loaned, and be thankful for it" was another classic of his.

Derek wasn't afraid to die. An insurgent fired an RPG at us and Derek was looking in the opposite direction of the incoming grenade. The projectile went right over our heads and when I noticed that he didn't get flat on the ground when he heard it coming he said, "Dude, I was so

sure I was going to get hit that I just said fuck it, and took one last drag off my cigarette. If I'm going to die, then I'd much rather have a smoke in my mouth." "Yeah, makes sense to me," I replied. It got to the point where it was much more fun to rationalize his funny philosophies, to go along with them and to offer up my own peculiar outlooks than to waste time wondering if he really believed any of those statements of his.

One day, when many of the soldiers from the Afghanistan National Army were badly injured by an exploding fuel truck, Derek treated their wounds while acting as if it was a mere training exercise. He performed his job with complete focus and had a level of calmness about him that I had never seen from anyone over there. One of the Afghan soldiers that Derek was working on had a badly burned body, and would yell out in pain when Derek was handling him. "Ah, boo-hoo. Stop whining it's not that bad," Derek said. I'll always remember him saying that. It was a shock trying to process his carefree demeanor and his choice of words with what I was thinking and feeling about the Afghan native. He wasn't so callous with him because he was trying to reassure him in a weird way, nor was he stating a fact. I think it was just his way of separating himself away from the feelings and emotions that are dangerous for a soldier to have in a constant-combat environment: sadness and pity.

I stared at the young soldiers who were very upset about what had happened to their bodies. I looked at the unconscious Afghan who was burned from his head down to his feet, and I felt nothing. I didn't have an emotion that I could grab a hold of. I had many different feelings going through my brain, but shock was keeping them behind the scenes. One of the Afghan soldiers was recording the incident on his phone, and I stopped and wondered why he was doing it. Have his friends been reduced down to entertainment for him to enjoy at their expense? I had no idea, and didn't want to know because it made me so angry that he would have the time and

energy to waste on that when he could be doing something to help. My anger didn't last long because once Derek saw what he was doing he went up to him, grabbed his phone, smashed it, and threw it into the air and told him to "Get the fuck out of here."

I noticed that only one person was putting burn cream on an older soldier, so I took the opportunity to speed things up. Right when I touched his arm with the cream I was instantly overcome with emotion. I feared that he would be hurting badly whenever I touched him, and I didn't want to cause him anymore pain. Those feelings intensified when his glazed-over eyes met mine. I realized after a few seconds that my shock was somewhat paralyzing my ability to effectively treat him, so I snapped out of it and told myself that it's better to cause him a little more pain than to not have the burn cream applied to his arm. I told him that he was going to be okay, and that he would be well taken care of. It didn't matter that he couldn't understand what I was saying. He knew that I was encouraging him, and that I cared about him. I was angry with myself for not feeling more enraged by what had just happened to them. Was there something wrong with me? I wanted to be more upset by what had just happened, and felt that it was the only right thing I could do in a helpless situation like that.

I tried to analyze the situation later, but even to this day I still see it as a complex issue. I don't have the strong emotions anymore that I had at the time, and now I just think about the situation for what it was. The Afghan soldiers were hurt while fighting for something that they believed in, but unfortunately, trying to fulfill big dreams comes with big risks. Getting upset or angry about what had happened would not change a thing, except make me less effective at completing my job over there. There was nothing wrong with me because I didn't feel a certain *way* about it. There was no kind of cookie-cutter emotion that would have been *right* or *appropriate*. I knew how I needed to think about it, though. I recognized that any kind of tragedy

like that could have easily happened to us, and that the only course of action to take in order to prevent, or at least lessen the chances of it happening to us, would be one involving staying alert in order to stay alive.

When I was returning home from Afghanistan, I had a lot of time to think. It was mostly a long, boring week spent hanging around at different Green zone bases waiting for flights to the next destinations in our route home. My last day in the Army was four months from then, and I was spending a lot of time wondering, “Where do I go from here?” I would get back to Fort Lewis, and hang out with the guys a lot because we knew that many of us would be leaving soon. I didn’t want to give up the family that I had grown to love. I didn’t want to give up the platoon parties, and the comfort that I had in knowing that every day spent with them would be fun and interesting. I didn’t want to stop cursing fifty percent of the time I spoke. We spoke of life in raw ways: sincere and honest ways that would make the average person cower and retreat rather than contribute to our sharp, open, honest statements and discussions. I was afraid of living a boring life; a life where strangers don’t look you in the eyes when they pass by; a life of restraint and dulled emotions; a life where people talk only in generalities and care deeply about their own facades. I was afraid of becoming a civilian again.

About a week after I got back on US soil and was back home in Washington, I spent a weekend in Seattle with a few of the guys from my platoon. I was staying in a high-rise apartment building that was situated on a hill, high above the city. The building had stairs on the side of it that led all the way to the top. Late into the night, I left the room to go outside and smoke a cigarette. I took a right, went down the hall, and opened the door that led to the stairs. I was looking down on the city with the Space Needle right in front of me. This was an interesting moment for me. Seeing the city like that on a cool night, all lit up, after being away in a war zone

for a year made me feel that everything was going to be alright. I was living for the moment; my life was that moment. I didn't have any worries or thoughts about what the future might hold for me; nor did I worry about anything that happened while I was in Afghanistan. Everything made sense because I realized that there was no mystery to life. There was no secret that I had to find in order to find happiness. I found myself, and I realized exactly who I was.

I knew what kind of a life I desired to have, and it didn't necessarily involve having a good-paying job or having a picture-perfect family of my own. I wasn't hoping to achieve a lifelong goal. I just wanted to *live* every day, having a firm grasp of myself and who I am, and make my decisions in life according to that. I didn't need to hope for the future; hoping that my life goes smoothly and fearing large setbacks or tragedies that will most likely be a part of my life. I knew that those times would come, and that I could deal with anything as long as I stayed true to myself. I wouldn't have doubts about expressing my opinion. I wouldn't be afraid to show people love and kindness. I wouldn't be afraid of being wrong. I would challenge authority when it was appropriate. I would stand up for what I believed in. I felt like a new chapter in my life was beginning, and that everything was in its proper place. It felt as if all of the moments that I had experienced in my life up until that point took place with that moment, looking down at the city of Seattle, being the end and also the beginning; the time that my life tied itself back together and I could see things for how they really were.

It hasn't been easy transitioning back to a civilian life, but from the beginning I knew that I couldn't let the burden of time get to me. I knew that it would take time. I knew that one day I would be able to shed the feelings and emotions that I carried with me from my experiences in the military, and that my life would be ruled by me - with my past no longer being the reflection in the mirror. Things will work out, and I can feel myself almost adjusting fully back into a

normal life. I'm letting time work for me - not against me. I am attempting to gracefully surrender the things of my youth: my past life.