

Too Young To Write Eulogies

A grandfather and veteran ponders Iraq war's growing toll

By Glenn Saltzman

I was working on my computer recently when an IM came in from my grandson, Dan, in Ramadi, Iraq. "I need some advice," the message read.

"Hope I can help. What do you need?" "How do you write a eulogy?" he asked. "My best friend, Nick, got shot and killed last night on a mission." "That's tough to take," I replied. "Yeah, he was my best friend over here." We talked some more. About how life isn't fair, how he has seen so many friends wounded and killed, how awful he was feeling, how he would be writing Nick's parents, and how he didn't know what to say in the eulogy he had been asked to give.

I told him to tell everyone at the eulogy about Nick's best qualities, about how he could be counted on, and how he used to do some funny things, too. He said he was afraid he might cry during the eulogy and I told him not to worry about shedding tears during his talk, that that only showed how much Nick's life had meant to him. He had to go back on another mission and we had to wrap it up. Dan asked, "How do we honor someone like Nick?" I told him to think about incorporating some of Nick's best qualities into his own life and that would make Nick always be a part of his own life.

I couldn't stop thinking about that IM all day. Here is a person who volunteered to serve his country, who was involuntarily extended one year after his contract was completed and returned to Iraq for his second tour. He has seen several of his bosses and a few of his fellow soldiers killed already ... and now Nick. My grandson is too young to be writing eulogies! I have written six or eight and it was one the toughest writing jobs I've ever tackled. My eulogies were about dear friends who had lived much longer lives than Nick, but we weren't ready to have them leave us either. We loved them and selfishly wanted hem to stay active in our lives. We needed them to be here for us.

I understood when my sick mother and father died. I sort of understood when several friends died of cancer. I will never understand why our son, Jon, took his own life while in the Marines. Death is so hard to grasp. So final. Most of us think we will live forever. Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross said that most of us think we will live long, healthy lives and then succumb to a painless illness in a few weeks, after having time to say goodbye to our friends and family but that it almost never works that way. Dan is only 23 and has seen more close friends die than I have ... and I am generations older. He just wants to honor Nick in the best way he can.

This war is getting to me, as it is to many others as well. I was against going into this war without the world agreeing it was necessary. As more and more deaths accumulate, theirs and ours, the mistake seems to be growing bigger and bigger. Our leadership is so arrogant that they can't admit they have made mistakes. I read stories about the

president's daughters attending this party and that, about them not liking their Secret Service attendants following them around and I wonder what they would be saying if they were writing eulogies for friends instead.

It is so easy to be tough if you aren't the one in harm's way. I wish we had a rule that all of the children of executive and legislative members would have to serve in the combat zones of any war we entered. I feel certain, if that were to happen, we would be more careful about the various wars we would be entering. I served in the Navy and Naval Reserves for 32 years and feel more disenchanted about our leadership now than ever before. Scandals, "truthiness," arrogance ... we should be able to expect more from those in our government making the crucial decisions. I know I expect more. Every time I hear one of our leaders apologize for some errant personal behavior, I understand a little better why our country is in this mess.

Ruth and I are proud of Dan. He is doing his job, serving his country. I know he will find the words — and courage — to give the eulogy for his friend and correspond with his friend's family. He will gain wisdom from this terrible experience for, as Freud said, we can only master the things we have suffered. We hope his words give comfort to Nick's family. Nick will live on in the memory of his friends and family. We pray that this eulogy writing will stop soon. Dan, and many other young men and women, are too young to be writing eulogies.

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