

Reflections—Scrooby Club's Literary Publication

October 2019

Photo © Ronald L. Holte

Life And Death On The Western Front — *Howard Towne*

The grainy black and white photo, faded to a muddy-black and white, shows a gun crew of eight young men around their 105-millimeter howitzer. Two of the men are sitting, the other six standing, my father at the extreme right, gas mask hanging on his chest and a bag of gun powder held in both hands. The time was early May 1918. The location: near the Argonne Forest. I had received this photo, perhaps the only one existing, along with a

copy of a letter written by him to his eldest sister during the period from October 17 to November 11, 1918.

My father, Richmond Samuel Towne, was born on December 24, 1893 to Howard Towne and Hattie Hanscom, the fifth child of six, three boys and three girls. His father was a boat builder, his mother a homemaker. After two years of high school, Richmond (Dick) saw his future in the military service and enlisted in the National Guard. At the outbreak of World War I, his guard unit became a part of the 26th (Yankee) Infantry Division and he was assigned to an artillery unit and was shipped overseas sometime in 1917.

The letter, probably the only one existing, described a much different scene than the earlier photograph had shown. His unit's gun was in constant action between bursts of very heavy shelling from the German forces. Slowly his gun crew moved forward toward the German lines positioning their gun and continuing to fire.

On the morning of November 3, forty-two soldiers were sent to a hospital suffering from gas poisoning. But the American forces continued moving forward after the retreating enemy, shelling and receiving fire as they advanced.

My dad reported in his letter that in the early morning of November 9, "our No. 1 gun was hit by a 105(mm shell) killing all but Harold Webb and myself." (Webb was not identified in the photo). Dad went on to write, "We keep it up (firing other guns in the unit) day and night." The next day, November 10, "there was not much of anything doing," but early on November 11 "we started to pound again and kept it up 'til one half of eleven which was our last shot. We started running back from the front."

End of letter. And end of the Great War. And the only letter I have ever seen from my Dad on the Western Front.



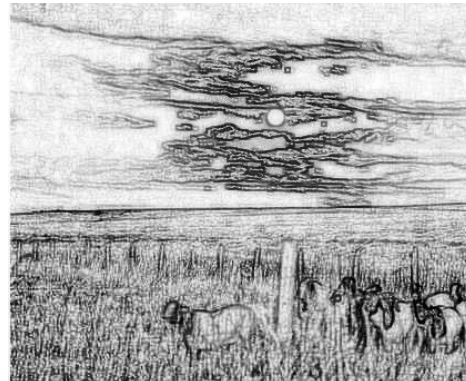
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Peace in the African Night — Anelise Smith

Four a.m. at Moanza in the Congo. It is still, so still, as I sit at my desk in the schoolroom with the Aladdin lamp lit. I am not now answerable to my husband, my children, the Zairian workers, the students. I do not have to be available to answer questions, make decisions, hear about the latest plan, create clothes, sew on buttons, teach and prepare lessons, listen to sad stories of need of poor ragged women shyly waiting at the door for me to find food, or clothes, or a hoe for them.

In the afternoon, when the school day is finished, no matter what else I am doing, I subconsciously listen to groups of kids playing soccer or volleyball in the open space. I listen to the talking or singing or drumming on the back porch and the murmurings of those playing with Legos on the front veranda or building roads and garages in the dirt under the mango trees. Always

I am listening, listening to be sure all sounds are normal. Now nothing needs to be checked on. The quick heavy tread of my husband walking



through the house on his program of the day does not jar my being. Even the soft pad of Tata Khiosi's bare feet as the cook puts away the dishes in the dining room and prepares to leave work doesn't intrude on my thoughts at this hour before dawn. It is still.

Once I sensed a presence at the window and looked up to find two

straying cows with their noses on the dark screen and their glowing golden eyes gently questioning what I was and what I was doing. Amused, I responded softly, "Hi, it's okay. I'm just writing. Did they forget to take you to the water again? Go on looking for it, but please don't turn over more than one rain barrel; we need it too. Try the one in front."

The deliberate plodding of their big feet and the soft swish of their tails told me they had moved on around the house. Again there is peace. I can read and write, cry and smile; I feel centered in the Aladdin lamp light and in the peace and stillness of the black, African bush night. I find the center in me. My felt tip pen makes the slightest of shushing noises as it glides smoothly over the paper forming silent words of beauty to be seen, pain to be screamed, stories waiting to be born.

Prevenient Grace, God's Economy, & Self-Care — Lyn Juckniess

I was given the challenge of writing only 1,000 words for the Dept. of Veterans Affairs *Spirit of Chaplaincy*, Nov 2013 issue, about my 25 years as a Navy chaplain serving the sea services: sailors, Marines, and Coast Guard personnel and their families, and my 15 years as chaplain in a Dept. of Veterans Affairs (VA) hospital. I will give examples under three guiding principles.

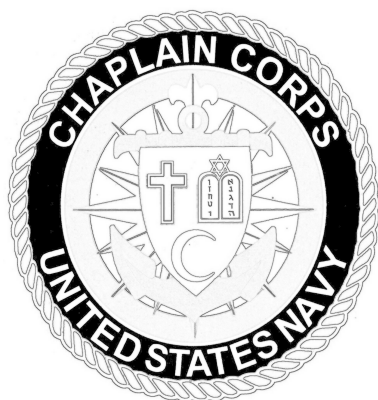
Prevenient Grace -- At Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany, the largest American military hospital outside the U.S., nurses prepared ICU rooms in anticipation of receiving wounded American service members. The specific equipment and supplies stood ready, based on advance communication from medical evacuation teams. A stunning illustration of prevenient grace. Prevenient grace describes every aspect of my

ministry. God's goodness runs ahead, inviting and preparing the way.

My marriage to a US Coast Guard officer led me into the sea services. Motivated by God's preferential option for people on the margins and my Presbyterian peace-making tradition, I followed my call to service members and their families who warranted spiritual care regardless of rank and standing in the military community. Having observed contributions as well as inequities in the institution, I designed a worship service on Good Friday, the cosmic intersection of good and evil, for my commissioning.

The Navy Chaplain Corps' practice of "provide for your own, facilitate for others, and care for all" became

a bedrock of my teaching interfaith spiritual care to CPE students in the VA. Ideas from Navy Chaplain Professional Development



Training Courses germinated and produced fruit in subsequent opportunities with service members and Veterans. Following Jesus, who was a feminist, I find all meaning within relationships - with military and family members, Veterans, and colleagues.

The use of guided autobiography essays in my Doctor of Ministry project continued into my inquiring about, valuing, and charting Veterans' narratives. Surviving an unwanted divorce led to a powerful ministry with others who lost their marriages. As a single parent, having taught my children to be independent and self-sufficient, I could trust that they could handle the sacrifices of being left home alone together during my military activations since 9/11.

Personally, experiencing and providing monthly pastoral counseling for systemic sexism, sexual harassment, and abuse in the sea services propels and equips me to contribute to the healing of Veterans dealing with Military Sexual Trauma.

God's Economy — Nothing is wasted in God's economy. God uses whatever happens. I am called to bloom where I am planted. My faithfulness is to maintain openness to the Spirit's leading. One of my two-year assignments during my active duty years was leading retreats. How wonderful that my first mobilization post 9/11 was to lead retreats again.

One of my VA clinical areas was the poly-trauma unit. So I was prepared to move up-stream to care for the most severely wounded warriors at Landstuhl in my second mobilization.

A fellow Navy chaplain at Landstuhl remarked about the rapid tempo and constant change, "Every day is a training day." With this approach I continue to remind myself to be gentle with myself and to extend forgiveness to others. I like to do what is practical and needed, trusting in the power of God to move in people's hearts. I felt inspired laying hands on vehicles in a convoy in a military training exercise to pray for protection for its occupants. I was

also inspired while blessing rooms in a Veteran's first-ever, newly obtained apartment with his substance-free peers supporting him.

On the locked mental health units of military and VA hospitals, I suggest gratitude for shelter, as an initial element of spirituality with some patients. In VA residential trauma recovery programs, I use *lectio divina* for reflective discussions based on Scripture to examine and heal spiritual wounds such as guilt, depression, betrayal, and doubt. To make the love of God tangible, I connect with poor Veterans and families by providing requested donations from charitable organizations.

We all need God's redemptive action to empower us to live abundantly. The frame around my license plate proclaims, "Going in the wrong direction? God allows U-turns." True for those we serve; true and potentially transformative for me.

Self-Care -- To love attentively and care energetically for those we serve, balance is of utmost importance. In the highly competitive world of active duty Navy chaplains, self-care meant finding colleagues to trust in new locations and assignments. Now it means choosing to debrief with chaplain colleagues about personally challenging patient and staff encounters. It also entails confiding in a bi-weekly support group with other female professional caregivers.

A Veteran parishioner sent me off on my first recall to active duty assignment with the words "God Provides" in a carved plaque. Surprisingly, that promise became the lens through which I viewed my disrupted parenting and my ministry to reservists who felt displaced. Self-care was knowing Who was in charge.

In both of my mobilizations, I looked for, found, and was blessed with the support, accountability, and friendship of a prayer partner from Cadence, International. Later I discovered with profound joy that few single women are assigned by that ministry to American servicewomen around the world. Amazingly, they were located where I was sent.

Limiting my use of a pathology-based medical model in the VA, I draw inspiration from hope-filled approaches, such as spiritual journeying, spiritual growth, positivism, stages of change, and post-traumatic growth. I employ elements of resilience learned from Joan Borysenko and have them posted on my refrigerator. A cartoon character, upright in bed, prays at night, "I guess You've noticed that most of these trespasses are reruns." Self-care is remaining humble. My word limit is passed. "That's all, folks."

Patient Advocate — Nancy Cooney

Chuck says that I “took a dive” on the pavement in front of a Warren, Ohio, civic building rather than continue the few hundred miles to his family reunion. It was the summer of 2000 and the end of my power walking for a long time. I was whisked off to a local hospital for emergency surgery on a broken hip and wrist.

The former surgeon for the Pittsburgh Steelers did a good job. He put four pins in my hip and drilled an ugly metal “fixator” onto my arm to hold my wrist in place for a couple of months. I was able to get around on special crutches and support from Chuck. We were, though, a couple of hundred miles from our home in Milwaukee. After ten days the hospital social worker came into my room and said that our insurance coverage was about to be used up. We would need to move to a motel while I continued outpatient physical therapy.

Louise heard of our plight. She was a friend and a veteran of a botched operation. She called with a solution for us. Chuck was to think of himself as my Patient Advocate when he attended an upcoming exit conference with the hospital staff and the insurance representative. The trick, Louise told Chuck, was to be appreciative of all staff except the Insurance Rep – whom hospital workers generally resent because they try to take control of patient care. It was also essential for Chuck to be convinced that we would take this action, if necessary. No empty threats.

When it was his turn to speak at the meeting, Chuck addressed the hospital staff and said: “Nancy has received wonderful care at this hospital. The doctor and

nurses have said that she needs five additional days if she is to complete enough physical therapy that she can manage a flight home without setbacks. Frankly, I can’t understand why you would undercut the work of a gifted surgeon and caring staff. I doubt that she can make much progress if she stays here for five days cooped up in a motel room, not to mention all that would be involved in getting around town with her arm and leg only partially healed.” Chuck turned and gave a steely stare to the insurance Rep. “I think this decision has to do with your company’s policies, not the patient care the staff in this hospital intends.”

“Therefore, Nancy and I will have to engage in acts of Civil Disobedience!” The little group of professionals gasped and leaned back. “What, ahem, do you intend to do?” asked the social worker.

“Before our departure, we will tell the local newspaper that we plan to resist eviction and invite them to observe. I’ll stand in front of Nancy’s hospital room and create a loud fuss. You will have to carry me out of the building. I’m not sure how you will handle Nancy, what with her inability to walk on her own and the large metal appliance on her arm. I suppose there is a chance that you will injure her and then she will have to remain in the hospital much longer than the five days the doctor says we need.”

Chuck was ushered to a waiting area outside the meeting room while the team conferred. After a suitable interval, the social worker appeared and told Chuck the good news that my stay in the hospital was extended until I would be physically able to fly home!

At our final visit with the surgeon, he asked permission to use our story in a book he was writing.

Note from John Denham, editor: The four pieces in this issue are true ‘reflections.’ A story about a loved one...a remembrance from an earlier stage in life...a review of a life of service...and a funny confession. They show the variety *Reflections* exists to share. You are invited to share your story. Send by .doc or .docx to jandmdenham@gmail.com.

