

Returning the Favor:

A Message for Veterans Day

by

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Some time ago I was browsing the ESPN website when I came across a story about a young lady named, **Carol Rodriguez**. She was a superb athlete who had made a name for herself as a sprinter representing Puerto Rico. I was struck by her story because of what she did for her family. She knew the importance of helping people. A few years ago her family fell on hard times. Her mother and stepfather lost their home and they lost their money. Her stepfather had serious medical issues. When Carol learned of their problems, she took action. She moved them into her 3-bedroom home and cared for them. Here's what she said:

"Most 25-year-olds worry about hanging out with their friends, but I have to take care of my family. Don't get me wrong, I go out and enjoy myself, but I know where my responsibility is. My mom took care of me for 18 years, and **now it's my turn to return the favor.**"

"Returning the Favor." That's the idea I want to speak about today **in** our observance of **Veterans Day**. After all, **this holiday** is designated as a day to honor and support all military personnel – all of the brave men and women – living and deceased – who honorably served the United States in all battles and all wars, as well as during peace time.

Veterans Day is about “returning the favor.” It’s about showing veterans that we care. It’s about reaching out to them. Acknowledging them. And showing gratitude. It’s about saying, “Thank you for your service.”

Veterans Day is a day that moves us. It moves us with sadness, even as it fills us with pride. It is a day, strangely enough, that evokes images of victory and memories of pain. At the same time, it vividly reminds us that the freedom we enjoy does not come without a price.

Remember the movie, “*A Few Good Men*”? It’s about a couple of Marines who got into trouble and their lawyers who worked hard to defend them. There’s a poignant moment when an attorney asks Demi Moore’s character: “Why do you like them so much?”

And she replies: “Because they stand on a wall and say, ‘Nothing’s going to hurt you tonight, not on my watch.’”

Why should we care about veterans? Why should we return the favor? Why do we like them so much? Because they have our backs.

Think about it: It is possible that at any given time...

When we’re sitting in a nice restaurant enjoying a great meal,
there’s an American soldier **somewhere** in the world standing guard.

When we’re playing sports or watching a good movie,
there’s a soldier **somewhere** training for our protection.

Somewhere in the cold, **somewhere** in the heat, somewhere in the rain,
one of our children, a husband, a wife, a brother, a sister,
is chasing down our enemies and risking their lives to protect us and
our way of living.

Somewhere, there’s a soldier bleeding.
Somewhere, there’s a soldier hurting.

Somewhere, even at this hour, there’s a soldier crying.
Somewhere there are soldiers working and serving far away from home,

away from the comfort of family and the fellowship of hometown friends.

Somewhere, an American soldier is making a sacrifice for you and for me.

When I reflect on the sacrifices of our soldiers, I am reminded of a statement shared by President George W. Bush. In October 2001, he stated:

"We must remember that many who served in our military never lived to be called veterans. We must remember many had their lives changed forever by experiences or the injuries of combat. All veterans are examples of service and citizenship for every American to remember and to follow."

Well stated.

As we acknowledge the heroic exploits of our veterans, let us not forget they're still human. Just like you and me. They have the same needs, the same dreams, the same longings.

All too often, because of Hollywood, we suffer from what I call, "the Rambo Factor." The view that our soldiers are invincible and that each one can win a whole battle as an individual. Yes, they are strong and courageous, but not invincible. They are highly skilled and incredibly resilient, but not invincible.

A few years ago my youngest son, Jeremy, served in Iraq. I asked him what it was like. He worked as a mechanic in his unit motor pool. He said there was lots of good food and lots of fear.

He said, "They fed us well. Each time we ate, we felt it could be our last meal. Then we would go out on the road. **Daddy, you can't imagine how scared we were.** We never knew which vehicle would blow up first."

I told him, "It's all right to be scared. For courage is not the absence of fear: it is doing what needs to be done in spite of the fear."

Yes, our veterans are heroic. But they are human.

Now I want to ask you:

What images come to mind when you think of the sacrifices of our veterans? Perhaps you can picture them in the Iraqi desert, or you think of them sweating in the jungles of Vietnam. Maybe you think of military burials. Or soldiers freezing in the Battle of the Bulge. Maybe you think of them returning from war and reuniting with their families. Those images are indeed noteworthy and appropriate. But I invite you to consider a few more. I invite you to think of the wounded.

I often say, "It takes a strong person to visit **Walter Reed Hospital.**" You see, you can visit a cemetery where scores of military burials have taken place and you will feel something. Something sad. Something special. Perhaps you can see a coffin and reflect on the life of the person who paid the ultimate sacrifice. But when you visit the hospital, somehow the permanent injuries have a way of making you see the sacrifice on another level.

When you see a young single mother, a black woman, who's lost both legs and an arm in Iraq; or a once-handsome 19-year-old man whose face is burned beyond recognition; or a sharp, witty, talkative intellectual who has suffered severe brain damage and now has the mind of a 6-year-old. Those images stay with you. Though gritty and graphic, such images help us to appreciate the sacrifices being made.

It is a painful thing to think about the parents who lost their sons and daughters, and the spouses who now must care for a husband or wife who is paralyzed from the neck down. **All because of war.** Yes, these brave souls have served – and are serving – this great nation of ours. And we are indebted to them. We owe them a special favor.

But where do we start? I believe there are many ways we can honor them and personally return the favor. **It doesn't take much.**

We can support a veterans organization. We can fly the American flag or participate in a parade.

We can pray for them or send them a letter or greeting card while they're serving overseas.

It doesn't take much.

We can provide support to a family of a disabled veteran. Or we can take a veteran out to dinner. Or treat a veteran to a cup of coffee.

We can buy grocery. Offer to babysit. Give the veteran a ride to the clinic. Offer tickets to a game.

It doesn't take much.

But, you may ask, "What if I'm not in a position to give money... to buy a meal... or give something in a tangible way?" If you're in such a position, you can show your appreciation by saying, "Thank you." Walk over to a veteran you know and say, "Thank you for your service."

You can say, "**Thank you** for wearing that uniform and for putting up with the hassles of deployment."

You can say, "**Thank you** for being away from your family so I can stay at home with mine."

You can say, "**Thank you** for supporting and defending the Constitution of the United States."

Say, "**Thank you** for standing guard and holding your post at the midnight hour."

Tell him, "**Thank you** for paying the price to give me freedom."

Tell her, "**Thank you** for having my back and for putting your life on the line for me and my family."

Now as I bring this message to a close, I want to share with you a poem by Joanna Fuchs. It's titled, "**Honor Our Military.**"

Honor Our Military

Let's honor our military,
The men and women who serve,

Whose dedication to our country
Does not falter, halt or swerve.

Let's respect them for their courage;
They're ready to do what's right
To keep America safe,
So we can sleep better at night.

Let's support and defend our soldiers,
Whose hardships are brutal and cruel,
Whose discipline we can't imagine,
Who follow each order and rule.

Here's to those who choose to be warriors
And their helpers good and true;
They're fighting for American values;
They're fighting for me and you.

On this Veterans Day and other days in which we honor our service members, let us do our part by RETURNING THE FAVOR.

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