

Count Your Blessings

Some psychologists want to drop the last initial in PTSD. They claim that to call PTSD a “disorder” makes the condition appear unusual. It isn’t. They claim that if you’ve been to war, you have post-traumatic stress because war is trauma.

I can’t help thinking such distinctions wouldn’t have mattered to the woman in the casket yesterday. Her husband took Nazi fire at the Battle of the Bulge and came home with a purple heart from wounds that were visible—and some that were not. “He just wasn’t the same when he came back from the war,” one of his relatives said.

Her husband died already 32 years ago, but he could have met his end twice before that, once in a snowy woods in Europe, then again by a truck accident that did everything but kill him. His wife suffered through that also. Cancer took him finally. He was always a heavy smoker.

She died not long ago, her 96 years its own issue of *Life* magazine. She’d seen more than most of us ever will, if you count the tears.

She had a baby boy in 1945, when she got word that her husband had been wounded in Belgium. I don’t know if she ever talked much about getting the news—where she was or how it came. What her family knows is that she received that telegram with a little boy in her arms.

That was the year a tornado blew their place away one night. She and the little guy took refuge in the church parsonage, her husband, a casualty of war, was still away.

The obit says she was born in Estelline, South Dakota in 1920, went to country school through eight grades, then “worked out,” which is to say moved into farm houses where the women needed help after having babies. Thirteen, she may have been, maybe fourteen, doing the load farm wives did back then, every last thing.

The good folks of Estelline in the 1920s were not an affluent bunch. Most had moved west to homestead cheap land, hoping to make a life on a landscape that didn’t tame easily. She was a child when the stock market crashed, and probably remembered when dark skies filled with Kansas dust that drifted into every corner of a farm house.

She got married eight months before Pearl Harbor, and never guessed about the war. When the man she loved returned, he was not exactly the man she’d married. But then she probably wasn’t the only woman who nursed all kinds of wounds. Back then, people just didn’t talk much about it.

She and her husband had another five boys, six in all--six boys trying to make a go of it on a hardscrabble farm.

In 1965, that oldest son of hers was killed, a passenger in an accident the newspaper described as taking place in early morning fog, a couple of trucks on highway 18.

She was at home on their farm when she and her husband got that news.

Fifty years later, she buried yet another son, after he'd been killed instantly in a construction zone on a Wisconsin interstate. He and his wife had been on their way to Minnesota to visit their kids and grandchildren. Tillie was a resident in the Rock Valley old folks home, and in a wheelchair, herself. That time, her remaining four sons delivered the news.

By a country mile, her allotment of sadness exceeded what most of us will ever know. But at her funeral, when the pastor and her family reminisced, the sweet face that appeared right there in church was smiling because she always did. One after another, her grandkids claimed her giggle was perfectly infectious. When they spoke, it echoed through the sanctuary.

One of her sons told the audience that with six rough-and-tumble boys growing up on a small farm where there was no end to work, there were weeks and months, even years, when there was no end to trouble. Once, he said, when he was in it, when he was right there in the heart of her concern, his mom looked at him, offered that smile, and said just three words: "Count your blessings."

That testimony echoes through a sanctuary all its own.

Once upon a time, in a moment that doesn't need to be detailed, she looked at her boy, one of six, and this woman who'd suffered so much sadness, so much trauma, gave him a line to live by, a line that to me, up until yesterday, when her son repeated it, seemed little more than cliché.

"Count your blessings," she told him, smiling.

Never in my life have those three words carried so much love.