

# GOLD STAR FAMILIES MEMORIAL KEYNOTE ADDRESS

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You have given all of us, every one of us the gift of your sons and daughters, your parents, your siblings, your nieces, and your nephews alike; those who are the true and rightful and most authentic and genuine of heroes of and for this great nation, on battlefields far removed from the homeland. Very few will ever understand the magnitude of the sacrifices made by your loved ones or by their families. They risked all by signing that blank check to the United States of America to give all and for a cost that few will ever understand or fully appreciate. It is not just your loved ones who made the ultimate sacrifice....you did as well as their beloved families, left to navigate your way back to some kind of meaningful life after unimaginable loss. This, by default, defines and distinguishes what giving all looks like. And this is expressly what we were all asked to do, simply because we answered that call of duty, the utmost and loftiest honor ever to befall those who proudly swore that oath of allegiance for duty, honor, selfless service and above all, for country, not ourselves. Nothing compares. Nothing ever will.

Unfortunately, while America went to the mall, many of us went to war instead. The best that most of America could do on our behalf was to stick a "support our troops" magnet on their back bumpers (Testerman, 2016). 99 percent of the American populace simply will never "get it" and the best too many of them have to offer is an insincere "Thanks for your service" or "Get over it" when we lament our losses. What has been

given up at the altar of freedom is priceless, yet few will ever rise to this occasion where dying for one's country and laying down one's life for their friends and for the cause of freedom resonates within their souls. We have too often become shameless people outside of the military and Veteran communities in failing to acknowledge or comprehend this.

It was last week that we celebrated Memorial Day, which long ago became a day of day of brats, burgers, and good deals at the big box stores, much of it unremembered in the haze of a lingering hangover after a hardcore holiday weekend of partying. For the families of the fallen, the lifelong struggles of personal loss can only be intensified, as this holiday and in fact all holidays bear down upon them (Steen, 2019). We can ill afford for the meaning of Memorial Day to be diminished or taken for granted. We who serve and those who have died in service of this nation have paid a cost beyond measure, yet this too often goes unnoticed. To offer the celebratory greeting of "Happy" Memorial Day flies in the face of decency for Gold Star Families, devaluing and mocking the passing of their loved ones. It is critical to acknowledge the somberness of this day and the gravity of such immeasurable losses and the struggles that follow. We sent our troops to war and gave the bill to the families to bear for the cost of their lives. We absolutely must show great reverence on both sides of that equation, both to the fallen and to their families. Perhaps the time is long past due to amend the focus upon how we memorialize those who have made the ultimate sacrifice....remember the fallen or never forget; nor should we.

There will never be a time when you are able to unsee, unfeel, or put aside the grief that stems from such overwhelming losses. Wounds may heal, scars may fade, but grief is not finite. Grief has no time frame and expiration date. The burdens you carry will last a lifetime. It is up to the rest of us to carry them with you and to do far better as a grateful nation to deliver that message. Despite the empty words of those at the helm, this is not a journey to be walked alone, for your losses are unfathomable. The pain, the ache, will

continue hourly, daily, forever. It may get better, but then again, it may not. The weight of such anguish, the price, and the toll of the Gold Star Family are incalculable. So is the continued mourning over the course of a lifetime. Grief will not destroy you, but it will be the most powerful of teachers. Grief takes no breaks and has no end date. You may never get over it. You just have to get through it. Do whatever it takes to heal. The need for grief and psychological support may need to be ongoing for a lifetime. Be open to this possibility (Schwartz, 2022).

The lives of your loved ones must be on all of our hands. We must speak often of the fallen and never fail to preserve them in our conversations. Hearing their names mentioned time and time again becomes a gift for these families and so we must never close the door on them and instead, give rise to such occasions (Cordova, 2017, Steen, 2019). Free reign must be given to leave open the option, to rant, to rage, to cry, and to reminisce. It is the rest of us who should be there to wipe your tears and hold your hands in ours. Make those desperately needed connections for which these families yearn, as few are willing to look them in the eye for fear of their own discomfort. Hear their stories. Listen with complete intent and resolve. The loss of a loved will jar you into a new reality that you never asked for, that you never saw coming, hurling you into the abyss of despair from which there seems to be no escape and from which you may have to dig your way out just to be able to breathe once again. This all begins with that dreaded knock at the door with the arrival of casualty affairs officers, those entrusted with the most God-awful job in the military. It seems inconceivable that life would gut/eviscerate families of the fallen in this way. There is infinite wisdom that may come from this, but the tragedy that arrived on your doorstep need not define the remainder of your lives For a long while, awful and horrible will be your constant companions. What comes next is renewal...if you allow this to take hold. You too must become a warrior to do so, to scratch your way to the top of that cavern to find that you are no longer paralyzed by what life has so brutally delivered/carried to you. This

storm will not kill you. Be the storm. There must be intention to learn all the lessons that such terrible, horrible things will teach you and above all, discover value, meaning, and purpose in the whys of fighting your way back to any iota of normalcy. Even terrible things can be transformative. Having a goal, a direction will serve as a compelling reminder that life is forever moving forward with you in it, fully engaged in the process. It has even more meaning when the actions you take are the most selfless ones, as with Jim and Leslie Groves, who played an enormous role in making this magnificent monument a reality. They have been fully involved in the recognition, honor, and presentation of Honor and Remember Flags to Service Members who lost their lives in the line of duty, from all branches of the Armed Forces and from all wars. Their efforts have seen to it that The State of Ohio designates these flags for these very purposes. They have spun gold from their tragedy in countless ways for the good of their community, the Great State of Ohio, and the nation on a grand scale.

**"For every sunset, there is a sunrise; for every dream that ends, one is born; for every door that closes, another one opens; for every love that ends, another begins; for every end there is a new beginning; for each departure there is an arrival; for every defeat there is a victory. Nothing is ever finished, as long as there is life."**

*Paulo Coelho*

There must also be a time for silence and solace. It takes time to heal from the blunt force trauma that has befallen you. Open the vault and give rise to the feelings you least want to experience. Only when one breaks their own silence can one even begin to fully heal. Give yourselves the freedom to be vulnerable, to wall off painful feelings when you need to and to put the pieces of your lives back together with the glue of those who love you. Surround yourselves with those that do. Let them into your hearts and souls,

even when you feel more like locking yourself away from the very world that pulled the rug out from under you. There is no roadmap or manual to navigate this, when everything you knew and loved about this life was ripped from your clutches. The road ahead may be treacherous, but get out the road map or the GPS. Find a new destination and get yourself there. Be open to the prospect that there is life outside of suffering and that there will be gratitude for the goodness of the people who you allow back into your life. Be merciful with yourselves. When you find yourself coming apart at the seams, find a needle and thread and suture yourself up. Give yourself permission to fall to your knees when you need to. Begin to believe in possibilities and a life that may just yield something that may flourish for you. Hunt down the joy of anticipation once again. Seek reminders that you are still walking the earth, even if that's just by mowing the lawn or going to the grocery store. Seek refuge in the hearts of those who genuinely care. The tragic end of your life plans and dreams will one day allow you to aspire toward the building of new dreams as you regain the joy of anticipation. Permit yourself once again come to walk the earth without having to remind yourself how or why. Give others the chance to walk you out of the darkness. Living will become far more than a vast wasteland of emptiness if you can be open to these possibilities. Allow rejoicing in what life may yet have in store for you. Do things outside of yourself for someone else. Even allow yourself to find humor in the ridiculous. Give yourself the chance to be inspired, to be challenged. Engaging in good works, wonderful works, will only beget much more of the same. Redirecting grief in service of others cannot help but to give rise to new life. Life may begin again to drop some gifts off at your door. It may just be okay to welcome that knock the next time around.

What it means to serve and to sacrifice is equally shared with the families who sent their loved ones off to war. Every single time your Soldier, Marine, Sailor, or Airman walked out the door, you sacrificed. Every time their flights left the ground, their ships sailed, they loaded their rucks on their backs, you had to say goodbye and they said

they had to go, you did just that; time and time again (Testerman, 2016). Never forget that it is you that cast and shaped your fallen loved ones into the valiant and brave Service Members they became. It is because of this that they were propelled to serve so selflessly for causes far greater and more noble than themselves (Testerman, 2016). It is these virtues that you imparted and the pledge that good must always and necessarily triumph over evil that drove them forward. There is little that is more loving than that. Always remember that the legacy of your loved one was this ~ "Who will go for us. Here am I. Send me." (Isiah 6: 6-8). That is exactly who they were meant to be and what will keep their spirit and their legacy alive. Let this lead you to the heritage that you have left in memory of them. And always remind yourself that finding a way to contribute may be the greatest gift you can give yourself in tribute to your fallen angels.

*May the words of President James Garfield, 20<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, resonate powerfully for each of you. They were spoken on the occasion of the very first celebration of Memorial Day, then referred to as Decoration Day. They were delivered at Arlington Cemetery on 30 May 1868. "I am oppressed with a sense of the impropriety of uttering words on this occasion. If silence is ever golden, it must be here beside the graves of fifteen thousand men, whose lives were more significant than speech, and whose death was a poem, the music of which can never be sung. With words we make promises, plight faith, praise virtue. Promises may not be kept; plighted faith may be broken; and vaunted virtue be only the cunning mask of vice. We do not know one promise these men made, one pledge they gave, one word they spoke; but we do know they summed up and perfected, by one supreme act, the highest virtues of men and citizens. For love of country they accepted death, and thus resolved all doubts, and made immortal their patriotism and their virtue. For the noblest man that lives, there still remains a conflict. He must still withstand the assaults of time and fortune, must still be assailed with temptations, before which lofty natures have fallen; but with these the conflict ended, the victory was won, when death stamped on them the great seal of heroic character, and closed a record which years can never blot."*

Never forget that those who gave their lives lived by the code of duty, honor, and country, not themselves. At the very least we owe the families of the fallen the very same allegiance they offered up to us as servants of our great nation, performing the most noble of deeds for a cause far greater than themselves, for their willingness to don the uniform in time of crisis and war, and for writing a blank check to the peoples of the United States of America, payable up to and including their very lives to safeguard and defend this nation. There is no price too high that were unwilling to pay in service of our homeland, no struggle or privation that they failed to undertake. We Service Members were borne for toil and tribulation. This is the very best of what America has to offer, the most precious and priceless of our resources, both here and over there. There is an indelible debt of gratitude to be paid on both scores and on all counts. This is what we owe our Gold Star Families, who have sacrificed far too much to be tossed aside. The cost of freedom is an enormous and enduring one. We can ill afford to turn our backs on those who wear the gold star. It is ours to form the same sacred bonds that sustained us in time of war with the families our fallen and to embrace them. Our endowment to them must be so much the greater. For our Gold Star Families, every day is Memorial Day. All gave some. Theirs gave all. Such a debt can never be repaid. With disregard for their own lives, these valiant American heroes gave their last full measure of devotion. We must never abandon those who gave their loved ones for that cause. Neither can we leave behind the families of our fallen comrades. It is time to truly become a grateful nation. Never forget. Never forget.

### **For the Fallen**

They went with songs to the battle; they were young,

Straight of limb, true of eye, steady and aglow.

They were staunch to the end against odds uncounted;

They fell with their faces to the foe.

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:

Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.

At the going down of the sun and in the morning

We will remember them.

*Laurence Binyon WWI*



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