

Heroes Among Us

By [Gregory Podell](#)

We create super-heroes as a means of illustrating the theme of hope in our lives. Be it The Incredible Hulk or Spiderman, super-heroes come into the roughest if situations, and save the day with their unique skills, like throwing a spider-web or ripping a person in two with astounding strength. But heroes don't only exist on the silver screen. In fact, they are everywhere, assuming you know where to look. For starters, turn on CNN and watch our soldiers risking their lives and often losing them while fighting a war that most no longer believe in. Pick up the newspaper and read a speech by Barack Obama, a man who has taken Martin Luther King's dreams and made them an honest-to-God reality. Or, if you want, you can look even closer, and you may be surprised at what you find.

Look to those family members sitting next to you on the couch. You may be inspired to know that these very people are capable of being heroes in their own right. It goes without saying that for me, my mother and father are heroes, not for spinning webs or flying through the air with a silly, red cape on in order to stop crime; but for both raising a tight-knit family, and maintaining a happy, successful marriage. However, the first time I saw real heroism in my own life was toward the end of both of my grandparents' lives, when I stood with my Mom and Dad and watched them deal with the fact that they were losing their parents. Watching them cry broke my heart into a thousand pieces. For years my parents showed me how to live. Now, they were showing me how to be selfless and heroic in the event of a parents' death. They bent over backwards to make the ordeal as easiest as possible for my grandparents, while simultaneously dealing with the flood of painful emotions flowing through their own bodies. In a sense, they too were at war. The war that happens as we get older, and eventually die. They were losing their parents, but the entire time they were making sure my grandparents would feel no pain, and have the best treatment. In addition, my mother and father made sure that their children, my brother and I, were okay. To cast such a wide net of concern at this moment in life, to me, was simply heroic.

I come from a generation with a volunteer army. We weren't forced to go to war to prove ourselves as heroes. In fact, I'm not sure we've ever been called on to behave like a hero ever in our daily lives. The ME Generation, as we are called, doesn't have to risk very much; our only fear is erasing our hard drives or losing our ipods. There is no great demand for us to be heroes, and for most of us, we aren't about to protest that fact. However, for each and every one of us, we will one day begin the slow, grueling, and painfully introspective process of aging. Our health will deteriorate and we will be reminded of our own mortality every time we wake up, and every time we lie down to sleep, and it is how we handle this most challenging phase of our lives, this third and final act before the curtain drops, that defines us as people capable of the most heroic of deeds.

My grandmother and grandfather both suffered from horrific forms of cancer, the black plague of our modern lives. It went from diagnosis and acceptance, to painful and intensely uncomfortable forms of treatments that, though they may extend life by months, always ended up being futile in the end. We all eventually learn that painful truth; "our arms are simply too short to box with God," and when all is said and done, when the man upstairs feels it's your time, you can't text him asking for another few days. I imagine he's stubborn like that, you know, once he makes a decision. My grandparents both learned of their conditions and, in turn, their irrevocable death sentences, and the diagnosis came complete with a ticking clock as to how many years, or more to the point, months, they have left to live. I can't imagine getting that news. How do you spend the rest of the day? How do you get through the rest of the day? My grandparents took it in stride, as though they were in the middle of a basketball game and they simply got called for a foul, but had no plans to stop playing. They both decided they were going to live with the disease, not die with it. I argue that interpreting such horrifying news in this fashion, is nothing less than heroic.

Then came the treatments. Chemo-therapy. The blessing and the curse. The blessing is that it may extend one's life; the curse is that it may extend ones life, though the quality of living is nothing short of brutal. And again, even after my grandmother moved back home with my family, and my grandfather went through it in his own house, with his loving wife by his side, they refused to let these harsh medical treatments steal any days away from them, not as long as they were still breathing. Their hair fell out. They became lethargic. They were constantly throwing up with the littlest of warnings. They slept through terrible aches and pains and sores, and woke up to experience those aches and pains and sores throughout the day. Yet, still, they both refused to let the symptoms, no matter how painful, steal a single minute of their lives. It was during this period that I was able to talk with them, be by their side, and for the first time, really get to know who my grandma and grandpa were as people. In one word, they were heroes.

Then came the end game, a game I was too young to have ever seen or experienced. The medication had extended life for as long as it could, but upstairs somebody was calling and that call had to be answered. My family knew it, and we couldn't fight the tears. However, in that cold, hallway corridor at the hospital, I paused for a minute and was troubled by the fact that, surely Grandma and Grandpa know that their ends are near, and how I would feel if I knew that about myself. I held both my grandfather's hand, and a year later my grandmother's, at the very moment of their passing. I felt like a reporter embedded in real life, because this was as real as it gets. And watching them at their final moments, I did not see fear, or cowardice, or even a struggle. What I saw was peace. My grandfather even managed a last, forever remembered smile, the image I have of him to this day. And it was in the midst of their last breaths that they taught me a lesson about facing the unknown, accepting ones fate, and going through the final curtain call while maintaining dignity, and emanating love. Maybe it sounds too poetic, or too beautiful to be believed. But this is the truth of my grandparents passing. They showed strength, dignity, and moments of love, as if these were the lasting themes they wanted to leave me with, and were successful in doing so. To maintain, to show strength and love, and to

teach, whether consciously or subconsciously, a grandchild how to face the end of life like they did; well for me, that takes a hero.

My only surviving grandmother has been suffering from Alzheimer's, one of nature's most cruel and evil diseases; one that begins slowly only to take a rapid turn to dementia like the jolt of a roller coaster on a free-fall down the tracks. My grandmother talks, but her words make no sense. She looks at me but she doesn't see. She hears me, but cannot respond. I watch her, and I wonder if she even knows what is going on behind the mask that used to be her sweet, reactive face. Maybe she does. She may not understand words, or remember who I am or who her family members are, but she must know that the end is near. And it is in facing this harsh reality with a smile and holding my hand that my grandmother, stuck between the functioning world, yet trapped within a body that is failing rapidly, that I see heroism.

Therefore, we must view aging as the most heroic feat of all of our lives. For soldiers, war is a brutal, dirty business, yet the adrenaline rush carries them through the harshest of battles. It is when they get home and the healing begins, that they face Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Traumatic Brain Injuries, the loss of limbs, that the real challenge becomes apparent. How do you live life with the certain knowledge that death is waiting right around the corner. How do you go through the process of aging without self-pity, and without letting the physical ailment translate into giving up mentally? These are the biggest challenges of our lives, and it is how we face these moments that, in many ways, defines us as people. Because we don't know what happens after death (though we have our respective beliefs), we are essentially headed at high-speeds into the unknown, and aging is the vehicle of transport. Like soldiers, we must hold our heads high, never stop fighting, and cherish every single breath we take while we are still on earth. If we face our eventual deaths in this fashion, we too will be heroes.

My grandparents lived hard-working, depression-era lives and struggled through hardships. They filled my head with colorful stories of laboring jobs, finding love, getting married and having kids, and they must have assumed that these were the moments that define them as people. Now, of course these moments are definitive of how a person has lived their life, yet I wonder if my grandparents knew that the real glimpse into whom they truly were as people began during the process of aging and culminated at the time of their passing. When you're young, you never think your grandparents, or your parents for that matter, will get older and begin to age, let alone, (I even hated to say it) die. But it was how they faced that final leg of the journey, that last lap around the track, when I began to learn the strength and dignity and love they were so full of. Yet, standing there in that hospital room on those final days, I also learned something I had always suspected, but finally got to see. They were brave. Enormously courageous, even at the hardest, most frightening time and as far as I'm concerned, that is the real essence of a hero.

Therefore, as you begin to age, and your body changes, or maybe you're diagnosed with a terrifying disease, don't just cash out and wait for the end. In fact, I imagine that if we all really stopped and realized that all of us will one day die, and we accepted that fact,

maybe we would live even richer lives. Do not be ashamed that your body isn't working the way that it used to, and do not be afraid of what comes after that final breath, because there are people watching you. Kids and grand-kids. And we are watching, while at the same time knowing we will be in that hospital bed ourselves one day. My grandparents showed me that if you've lived a full life; and if you are surrounded by those that love you; and if you cherished everyday as if it were your last, when that last day comes, you will inevitably graduate from someone suffering from the perils of aging, to someone who bravely faced their own passing, and in turn, became a real hero.

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