

Something to Talk About

Essay: Non-Biographical

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He heard them, he heard them often. “Dirty.” “Lazy.” “Worthless.” “Why don’t you get a job, old man and get off the streets?” “The police need to do their jobs and get the trash out of our town.” Words like these and many others slid through his consciousness. He heard them, and yet, he didn’t. He tried not to take offense, but it was hard. Didn’t they see him? Couldn’t they see who he was?

He'd been somebody's son, somebody's husband, somebody's father. He'd been a soldier, a good one according to the purple heart stored in a bank vault. He'd been an employee, a mechanic, somebody whom people had trusted to keep their cars running smoothly and keep their families safe while on the road. He'd worked hard to provide a good life for his family, his wife and son. He thought of them often, that is, when his brain didn't splinter off into pain-addled terror.

He remembered the good days, his wedding and the birth of his son taking the top tier of joy, but even the simplest of good memories starred in the reel of his once happy life. Teaching his son to catch a ball. Lasagna. Taking his child to his first day of school. Picnics in the park with his wife, and later their son. Walking hand in hand down the streets of his town. Meatloaf. Trips to the beach. So many happy memories. He longed to return.

But he also remembered the other, the not-so-good days: Losing his job as a result of downsizing followed by his four-year stint in the military, trying to make a financially secure life for his family. Friends and fellow soldiers killed in battle. Bombs. Gunshots. The bullet that ended his career. Trying to reassimilate into domestic life. PTSD. And then, the final straw. Ben forgot nothing. He remembered that night, that final night as a a family man as if it had been last night:

Crouching behind the wall, Ben applied pressure to his leg. A bullet had found its home, much too close to an artery. Field dressing the wound, Ben did what he was trained to do, making a makeshift tourniquet to staunch the blood. Will this be it, he wondered as bombs exploded around him and the rat-a-tat-a-tat of guns burst through the darkness. Deep into enemy territory, his gun jammed, and separated from his squad, all Ben could do was hunker down and wait, hoping and praying that this was not his time.

Another crash of artillery and Ben slunk even lower, praying for his team, praying for the gun shower to stop, and praying for daylight so he could assess the situation more thoroughly. Responsible for the men and women under his leadership, Ben wondered how things had deteriorated so quickly. Out on reconnaissance, not expecting to engage with the enemy, Ben and his unit had stumbled upon a situation that demanded immediate attention. But it had been a set-up, a way to lure the soldiers out of safety into a dangerous battle. Outnumbered but not willing to give in, Ben's squadron fought back bravely.

Searching through the darkness, Ben looked for any members of his patrol when the hair on his neck stood up. In that instinctual way that one senses when danger is near, he knew there was somebody behind him, and not somebody friendly. Slowly he turned his head, to find a gun trained on him. "That's right," a voice quietly said, "put your gun down and put your hands in the air." Then "Now!" he said, when Ben hesitated.

Seeing no way out, Ben did as he was told, hoping for a break, any chance to escape. He slowly put his hands up and stood, turning toward the enemy soldier. But as he did, a bomb exploded, close, too close, knocking him off his feet. When he regained the power of his faculties, ears ringing from the percussion, Ben realized the soldier was gone, a hole in the ground where he'd stood.

Suddenly a hand reached out and grabbed him. “Run, Sir.” It was his teammate, Kent. “Man, we’ve been looking all over for you. Let’s get out of here.” The two men ran down the street, steering towards the dark shadows between bombed out buildings.

“Report,” Ben ordered.

“Not good, Sir. So far, we’ve only found six of us, but we’re not giving up. We’ll leave no one, Sir.”

Limping on his wounded leg, Ben knew better than to suggest he go back to help. More a liability than an asset with his injury, he needed to get medical attention quickly and let his rescuer return to search for others.

Finally, they stopped. Kent pointed the direction to Ben, then Kent turned to resume his search for the others. Ben continued toward the evacuation site, then stumbled to a stop as another hand grabbed him in the darkness. So close, but not close enough. Captured. Struggling with strength he didn’t have, Ben tried to run away.

Shouting, he heard shouting. Finally, a word broke through the haze in his brain. “Dad!” Then again, “Dad, what are you doing? Dad, you’re hurting me!” Ben froze. Dad? Not Captain? Coming back to himself, Ben groaned. PTSD again. He was in his house, hail pummeling the tin roof and ping-pong on the back deck, his ten-year-old son backing away from him in fear. Looking into the eyes of one whom he loved more than life itself, he thought, that’s it. I cannot endanger my family each time I have a flashback.

“I’m sorry, Son. I’d never hurt you on purpose. I love you.” With that, Ben hugged his son, then, devastated, he walked out of the door and out of the lives of his beloved family.

That had been three years ago. His son was now a teenager, playing middle school football. Trying to stay invisible, Ben often hid in the shadows of the trees surrounding the field to catch

glimpses of his son playing the game he loved. A few times, he'd even seen his wife in the bleachers. Ben's heart yearned for those precious glimpses but broke a little more each time he walked away. He'd continue to protect them by staying away, though. He still had nightmares about the evening he'd attacked his son.

We can do better. We must do better. Mental illness has reached epidemic proportions in our country as evidenced by facts such as these:

“It is estimated that one in five U.S. adults live with a mental illness. (57.8 million in 2021)”  
“Mental Illness.” *National Institute of Mental Health*. [Nimh.nih.gov](http://Nimh.nih.gov).

“Nearly 5 million children in the U.S. have some type of serious mental illness.” “Mental Illness in Children.” *WebMD*. [webmd.com](http://webmd.com)

The National Alliance on Mental Health (NAMI) chose the “...message of ‘Together for Mental Health’ to advocate for mental health and access to care. Together we can realize our shared vision of a nation where anyone affected by mental illness can get the appropriate support and quality of care to live healthy, fulfilling lives.” “Mental Health Awareness Month.” [nami.org](http://nami.org)

We've come a long way in our understanding of mental illness and the realization that a mental illness is just as real as a physical illness. But people still tend to hide the truth or whisper in corners when dear old dad is suffering from PTSD or mom has postpartum depression. The same parent who would not hesitate to take his or her child to the hospital for a broken bone or a high fever should be equally confident to take that child if he or she is suffering with depression.

We need to say, believe, and act on the fact that it's as important to recognize, acknowledge, and treat mental illness before the condition becomes dangerous for both the patient and his or her family. People like Ben should not have to leave their homes to keep their families safe. They need help. The stigma of mental illness needs to be eradicated through education, open and honest communication, and acceptance.