

“Make Less the Depth of Grief”

A speech

by Col John McKay

On 22 February, Col McKay, USMC(Ret), gave the following speech at the Marines’ Memorial Club in San Francisco, CA, to the Annual California Gold Star Parents’ Honor and Remembrance formal dinner.

Thank you, General Huly. Contrary to what the General has just related, I was very kind to him when he visited me at HQMC. In point of fact, I was known as the “friendly infantry monitor!”

General Myatt, your efforts and significance in making this all-important event possible are both recognized and deeply appreciated. Thank you, Sir, Gold Star Parents, I am humbled before the magnificence of your courage and fortitude. You have done me a great honor. In peace, children inter their parents; war violates the order of na-

>Col McKay enlisted in the Marine Corps in early 1962. Commissioned in 1968, he was twice combat wounded. As an Olmsted Scholar, he commanded 1/9 and JTF-160 and was intimately involved in crises in former Yugoslavia. Since retirement, he conducted counter drug operations in Perú, México, and Central America; worked in West Africa; and trained Palestinian Security Forces under the 1993 Oslo Accords. He holds MAs from Georgetown University and the National War College and is currently an Adjunct Professor at California State University, Sacramento.

ture and causes parents to inter their children.

We live in a society that skirts around speaking of grief, even more so, of death. All of you are poignantly enduring one of the most tragic events in any person’s life. You are all in a dark, raw place. The meaningless flutter of platitudes, the misplaced focus of awkward proffering of condolences in the guise of others’ own—almost universally mi-

nor—trials and tribulations, more often the fumbling offerings of insensibilities that neither grasp nor can even begin to appreciate your acute pain. These gestures, well meaning in principle, offer scant recognition that you, all of you, are in an unknown and terrible twilight from which you will never entirely emerge. You are literally transformed, forever changed. And, let’s be honest, the change is lifelong and not always propitious. It is true that some degree of redemption from, a coming to grips of sorts with, the mortality of your dearly beloved, and, yes, with your very own mortality, does occur. That is but meager comfort, much less any recompense, for the irreplaceable losses you have suffered. You have an absolute right to whatever you are feeling and whenever you are feeling those feelings. It is correctly said, “To weep is to make less the depth of grief.” Absolutely no one can, nor should they ever try to, deny you your departed loved ones. They are the children you lovingly brought into the world and unfailingly stood by, the loved ones you will forever cherish, and whom you so lovingly adored. Each and every one of them has been viciously ripped from your arms, violently torn from your sides, unforgivingly rendered from you forever, physically removed from your undying adoration, from an indiscernible emotional and physi-



LtGen Jan Huly, USMC(Ret), President & CEO of the Marines’ Memorial Association and Foundation, and Col John C. McKay, USMC(Ret), Guest of Honor, at the California Gold Star Parents’ Honor and Remembrance evening reception, 21 February 2019. (Photo courtesy of the Marines’ Memorial Association and Foundation.)



Col John C. McKay delivering remarks at the closing dinner of the California Gold Star Parents' Honor and Remembrance event on the evening of 22 February 2019, Marines' Memorial Club, San Francisco. (Photo provided by author.)

cal devotion of unfathomable depth. You are driven upon your knees by the overwhelming conviction that you have nowhere to go. The heart of grief, its most difficult challenge, is not "letting go" of those who have died but, instead, making the transition from loving in the present to loving in separation. In being loved and always remembered, they are forever in your hearts. And, from your hearts, you will evermore speak of them.

I am no stranger to the loss of loved ones to abject violence. Nor will I ever be unburdened of grief. Grief is universal. Yet, and yet, grief is so intimately personal. How we grieve is who we are. And, as were your loved ones ... each and every one of us present this evening is a unique individual. And, as individuals, we grieve individually, uniquely, each within our own private solitude. That does not assuage the pain, the reality of ultimate loss, but it does give due to the fact we are each human individuals. The grave poignancy of the grief shared within this room puts on vivid display the increasingly rare type of individual your loved ones embody and represent. Yes, I intentionally use the present tense. For they have done more, and paid the ultimate price through their sacrifice, in upholding the universal legitimacy of humanism. Individuals such as your sons, daughters, spouses, or siblings aren't supposed to exist anymore, except

in our honeyed remembrances of the so-called greatest generation. Your presence this evening puts a lie to that tale. Perhaps more importantly, our gathering together on this evening of honor and remembrance unapologetically and openly displays a collective embrace of the critically important sensitivity of sharing that which all but defies sharing.

The very commemorating of your loved ones' lives provides a clear marker of the significance of each and every one of their singular presences on this earth. Though we walk together down an unpredictable, painful, draining, and exhausting path, we collectively seek hope.

We seek the courage not to forsake hope. In loss, hope hides itself. Through our gathering together this evening, collectively commemorating our losses, we are challenging hope to once again show us the way forward. Allow strength from life's surges of the cruelest kind, {cast} light upon the darkness of despair, through hope, faith, love, and the common bond of this shared evening.

I am privileged beyond description to have shared a few moments with you. Thank you.

>Editor's Note: The video of Col McKay's speech can be found at <https://www.youtube.com>.



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