



Memorial Day 2004: War, Remembrance, and Loss

A suggested Op-ed from NHPCO

As we mark Memorial Day across America on May 31, images of war surround us. The relentless coverage of the international conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan seems overwhelming. Images of veterans at the new WWII Memorial in Washington, DC, are both moving and thought provoking. The 60th anniversary of the Invasion of Normandy brings accompanying stories, photographs, and newsreel clips from the most turbulent period of the 20th Century.

For many, Memorial Day 2004 may be a bit mind numbing. Feelings of sadness, fear, anger, loss, and even ambivalence, coupled with deep patriotism seem integral to our lives. We are all affected by wars of the past and wars of the present.

The U.S. is mourning the deaths of many military veterans who bravely served in past conflicts. More than 50,000 veterans die each month. That is approximately 28% of all deaths in this country.

Memorial Day provides an opportunity to honor those who have made the ultimate sacrifice on behalf of our nation. Memorial Day lets us publicly show support for our fallen troops. Yet our commemoration is echoed by grief and loss. Losses of all kinds become real and tangible. Veterans of past wars have memories reawakened of battle and sacrifice. Some relive the pain of distant traumas. For the families and loved ones of those who have died, grief is fresh and new.

These events touch us all. Whether it is our own family, our friends and neighbors, or those living on the other side of the world, we are witnessing another's loss and we feel a sense of communal pain.

Advice from hospice professionals, who deal with loss on a daily basis, includes sharing the range of emotions we experience. Whether it is pride or shame, grief or hope, fear or fatigue, it is important to acknowledge our feelings. However, feelings of uncertainty or shattered assumptions of a just world foster a kind of prohibition against expressing our thoughts and feelings. We are called on to reign in our responses and to pull together. While this may be thought of as a protective mechanism, ultimately, it may not be healthy. We need to listen to each other, and be more tolerant and open to what others think and feel, especially during difficult times. It is a buffer against collective denial and ultimately collective trauma that are companions of war.

Support is an essential element during difficult times of our lives. Memorial Day allows us to reach out to others and share in our communal experience. Supporting those around us can be as simple as lending an ear or holding a hand.

Local and national resources are available to help those struggling with the realities of war. For example, members of military families who have suffered the loss of a loved one can find information and support from TAPS (Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors) at www.taps.org.

Hospices are reaching out, in partnership with VA facilities, to provide the highest quality of care for dying veterans, many of whom are recalling difficult experiences from their pasts for the first time. More information on hospice-veterans partnerships is available at www.hospice.va.gov/.

Locally, we all have a community treasure to help us in dealing with grief. Each day hospice programs throughout the U.S. help grieving people throughout the community come to terms with their suffering. If support is needed for someone struggling with grief, contact your local hospice to find help. Contact NHPCO at www.hospiceinfo.org or call 1-800-658-8898 for more information on hospice or to find a hospice provider across the United States.

(word count 600)

Don Schumacher, Psy.D., President and CEO
National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization
1700 Diagonal Rd., Suite 625
Alexandria, VA 22314
703/837-1500