

A Tribute To “The Greatest Generation”

Dave Tanner, July 4th, 2010

Schreiber Memorial United Methodist Church

12 years ago, I was in a Barnes & Noble in Plano when I saw a display rack filled with copies of a new book by NBC news anchor Tom Brokaw. I hadn't known that he was writing a book, and hadn't heard any reviews. But as soon as I saw the title, I had what I call a “V-8” moment (like the characters in the vegetable juice commercials who slap themselves on the forehead when they realize “I could've had a V-8!”)

The reason for my sudden epiphany was that Brokaw had called his book *The Greatest Generation*. Without even looking any closer, I knew exactly who he was talking about – the generation who survived the Dust Bowl and Great Depression, went on to pursue and win World War II on multiple fronts simultaneously, then came home and quietly went about the business of curing diseases that had plagued humankind since the beginning of time, extending civil rights to all Americans, and building our nation into an economic and military superpower. Oh yeah – *that* generation.

The miracle to me was that it had taken until 1998 for somebody like Brokaw to put an appropriate name on them, and that nobody – including me – had thought of it first.

It has been hard for my generation - the Whiniest Generation – to come to terms with what The Greatest accomplished. We are the ones who wanted to start our adult lives with every material possession they had worked and sacrificed their whole lives to own, and we wanted it *now*, if you please – on credit.

My generation did work very hard on one thing – to remain oblivious to all that our parents, the business owners, teachers, and just plain folks in our town had achieved. And at that - being unable or just unwilling to give credit where it was manifestly due - we were a stunning success. We Baby Boomers, after all, were also the very well-named *Me Generation*, far too self-absorbed to see the 3 things that earned for The Greatest that superlative e-s-t (as in the b-e-s-t.)

First of all, they had a **moral clarity**, an ability to see things in simple – if not easy – terms. They knew that there is right and wrong, and good and evil. There are things worth fighting for, and – if necessary – dying to protect. Whereas people my age tried desperately to see the world in varying shades of gray, The Greatest recognized that some things are pretty much black and white. Like I say – moral clarity.

Secondly, they also possessed **the will** to act on what they knew to be right. They didn't equivocate, and they certainly didn't delude themselves that the problems would get better, on their own. To a man, woman, and child, they shared the sacrifices, each in their own way.

And third, they had the **drive and determination** to see the job – any job, *every* job – through to its finish. After D-Day, we probably could have brought the Nazis to the bargaining table. But the Greatest didn't go into a war, only to negotiate a cessation of hostilities. They were there to win, however long that took.

There is one other quality The Greatest possessed in abundance, and it may not have helped them win The War (as WWII is *still* known, 65 years after its end), but it is a window into the character of that exceptional group. That attribute is a **becoming modesty**. Never in my life have I ever met a person who claimed to have “won” the war. Instead, without fail, individual members of The Greatest Generation will tell you, “We all had jobs to do, and we just tried to them.”

Indeed they did.

For little children, those jobs included tending Victory Gardens, enduring Meatless Tuesdays (and in some cases, Meatless Wednesdays and Thursdays, too), or collecting old and unused metal for the war effort. (An astounding **50%** of all the metal our military employed came from civilian scrap metal drives.) Boy Scouts – 11 and 12 years old – collected over *50,000 tons* of old tires to be melted down and re-born as tank treads and jeep tires. 3.5 million women, collectively known as “Rosie The Riveter”, joined the 5 million American men who were keeping the defense industry assembly lines humming.

Another half-million women were in uniform (as WACs, WAVEs and WAAFs), while still more worked with the Red Cross or USO, and drove taxis or even fire trucks.

Old wounds between North and South finally healed. We were no longer “Us” and “Them,” we were U.S. – the *United States of America*.

And the effects of so many Americans, all pulling together, were felt almost immediately. Four months after Pearl Harbor, Jimmy Doolittle led 16 B-25s off the deck of the USS Hornet to spend 30 seconds over Tokyo. In May’s Battle Of The Coral Sea, the balance of naval power in the Pacific began an inexorable tilt in our favor. Over the next two years, and on the other side of the world, the Allies proved the viability of the Domino Theory, liberating first North Africa, then Italy, and then Fortress Europe itself – from France, through Belgium, to Holland, and then into the Fatherland itself.

After VE Day, the push was on in the Pacific. It took another hard-fought and bloody 15 months, but neither those in uniform or their families at home ever flagged in their efforts. Ultimately, the “sleeping giant” awakened at Pearl Harbor triumphed, and millions of The Greatest Generation returned quietly to their homes and lives.

They returned – but they didn’t rest on the laurels they had so richly earned. Instead, they focused their attention on curing Polio, on seeing that “all men are created equal” became established law – not mere words. In these, and in thousands of other ways, they created an America that – in the space of a single generation – changed lives for the better for those at home and abroad.

Winston Churchill was talking about the RAF in the Battle of Britain when he said “Never was so much owed by so many to so few,” but his words are just as applicable to The Greatest Generation.

And at long last, as more members of my own generation discover that all those things our parents made look easy are anything *but* – some of us are finally giving

The Greatest their due. More and more of us are realizing that we can never be The Greatest – there will only ever be one.

But there is still time for us to be what I call The **Grateful Generation**, to say thank you to those whose courage and sacrifice made possible everything my generation has taken for granted as Americans.

Time, however, is not on our side. As Stephen Ambrose pointed out, shortly before his own death, we are losing The Greatest at the rate of over 1,000 each day. There is no time to waste in expressing our gratitude.

So today, and every day, I offer you this challenge. You won't have to put your life on the line, as my father did. You won't even have to miss a meal, as my mother did – often. All you have to do to be a member of the Grateful Generation is to say “thank you” – today and every day. Say it to your own family members. Say it to that veteran at your church. Drop by a senior center and say it to everybody in the room! Just say it.

“Thank you.” It's such a simple phrase. But, said sincerely, it means so much.

And never was it more deserved.