



Worth Dying For

Martin Luther King Jr. once remarked that, *if a man hasn't discovered something he will die for, he isn't fit to live*. I don't know why, but I've been thinking about those words a lot lately. Maybe it's because the fifth anniversary of my son's death is a few weeks away and my mind is occupied with thoughts of life and mortality. Or it could have been sparked by an interview I watched on cable news last week. I honestly can't say. But whatever the impetus may have been, my thoughts keep circling back to one question. Is *anything* really worth dying for?

If the emails I receive are any indication, a significant number of Americans think the answer to that question is an emphatic *no*. I hear from a lot of very earnest people who firmly believe that no cause is important enough to warrant the loss of a single human life. I always have a hard time answering those emails — not because I disagree with their views — but because I *want* to agree with them. Life is unbelievably precious, and incredibly fragile. I *want* to see it cherished and protected above all things. Unfortunately, the real world doesn't always work that way. There are some circumstances that simply don't permit everyone to go home in one piece.

A few weeks ago, a man named James Kim found himself in one of those situations. You probably saw at least some of his story on television news, or in the papers. Mr. Kim and his family took a wrong turn while driving through Oregon and their car got trapped by heavy snow on a seldom-used logging road. When it became clear that his family was in danger of freezing to death, Mr. Kim left the relative safety of the car to search for help. The terrain was rugged; the weather was vicious, and James Kim must have known that his odds for survival were not good. He struck out into the frozen wilderness anyway, and there he died.

No one can possibly know what was going through Mr. Kim's mind as he struggled to blaze a trail through the back country of Oregon. I have no idea if he'd ever read the Martin Luther King quote I mentioned earlier, or was aware of its existence. But I am absolutely confident that James

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Kim understood what Dr. King was talking about. He knew what he was willing to die for.

A few nights ago, I happened to catch a pair of familiar faces on a national news program. My friends David and Deborah Tainsh were preparing to meet with President Bush at Fort Benning, GA, and one of the cable networks ran a clip from a television interview they gave sometime before their visit. David and Deborah are Gold Star parents. Their son, Army Sergeant Patrick Tainsh, was killed by a roadside bomb in Iraq in February of 2004.

To be honest, I don't remember very much about the interview itself. What stuck in my mind was the news anchor's commentary afterward. The newscaster seemed genuinely astonished that these grieving parents do not hold the president personally responsible for the death of their son. The man went on quickly to marginalize Deborah and David's statements by implying that Gold Star parents who *don't* blame the president are in the minority. To my mind, the tone of his voice seemed to insinuate that there was something fundamentally unfathomable about not blaming the death of a Soldier on the governing commander-in-chief.

The focus of the news program shifted to another story, but my brain didn't shift with it. I was still thinking about the Tainsh family. I never had the privilege of meeting Patrick. I know him only through his letters and the memories that his parents have shared with me. But I know that Deborah and David loved him deeply, and that they still do. I have not a shred of doubt that either of them would have stepped in front of that Iraqi bomb without a millisecond's hesitation if they thought there was any chance that it would shield their son from harm. So how is it possible for them not to be angry at the president? How can they treasure their beloved son so profoundly, and not be seething with rage for the man who ordered him into battle?

It would be easy to assume that they have allowed their anger to be diffused by their personal feelings about the U.S. military presence in Iraq. But I don't believe that's really the answer. I think it's something much simpler than that. David and Deborah trusted their son. Period. They respected his character, his personal values, and his beliefs as a human being and as an American citizen. They trusted him to make the right choice.

I'm not saying that they believe in everything that Patrick believed in. I'm not suggesting that Patrick made the same choices for himself that his parents would have made for him. But they trusted him to look at the world, apply his intelligence and his personal sense of ethics to reach a decision and to act in accordance with his conscience. They trusted him to follow his own moral compass, even if the path might lead him into danger. They trusted Patrick to discover his own answer to Dr. Martin Luther King's challenge, to determine for himself what he was willing to die for.

You may have missed the Tainsh family on the news. Although they spoke eloquently and persuasively, they didn't provide the kind of carnival sideshow theatrics that draw prolonged media interest. They didn't rail at the inhumanity of the war, or cast bitter invectives at the president, or create a forest of mock headstones to symbolize fallen Soldiers. They spoke solemnly and with quiet dignity, a surefire way to lose the attention of the television cameras.

Watching the example set by Deborah Tanish naturally brought to my mind the image of her polar opposite: another woman who is also the mother of a Soldier killed in Iraq. I'm not going



to mention the woman's name here. You already know who she is, and her name has gotten quite enough attention in the media. I find much of her behavior distasteful, and I don't want to add to her fame even slightly.

As a mother who has lost a child, the woman has every right to grieve in whatever manner her heart demands. I don't fault her for that. As an American citizen, she has every right to protest the war and to criticize the government in any public forum she chooses. I don't fault her for that either. And I cannot deny that she has a right to be angry. But I can't help but wonder where the real source of her resentment is rooted.

Is she upset because her son sacrificed himself for something that he believed in? Or is she angry because he happened to select a cause that she *doesn't* believe in? Because that's not a choice that we can make for our sons and daughters. That's a choice that each of them must ultimately make for themselves.

If my son, Josh, had beaten the cancer, he'd be twenty-two years old now. He was in Junior Army ROTC when he got sick, and he couldn't wait to graduate from high school and join the real Army. If he had lived, I'm fairly certain that he would have gone to Iraq. Maybe he would have died there. I have no way of knowing because the clock ran down for Josh before that future had a chance to play itself out. But I do know that I would have been proud of him as long as he was living according to his personal beliefs, even if those beliefs didn't happen to coincide with mine.

My other son, Phillip, is nearly nineteen now. He's tall, and handsome, and smart, and everything we want our sons to be. I could talk your ear off for an hour telling you how proud I am of him. He hasn't gone beyond the thinking stage yet, but he's dropped enough hints for his mother and I to know that he's considering a tour of duty in the military. I must confess that I'm more than a bit frightened by the idea. If Phil *does* enlist, there's a good chance that he'll go to Iraq or Afghanistan. The very thought gives me chills. Because part of me wants to keep my son home and safe, as far away from roadside bombs and violent insurgents as I can possibly arrange. But another part of me understands that Phil must now make his own choices. His mother and I have done everything we can to prepare him for the world. Now it's up to him to decide what he believes in. He must decide for himself what — if anything — he is willing to risk his life for. It's not important that we always agree with his choices, and it's not necessary that we always understand them. We have to believe in our son, and in his right to draw his own personal line in the sand.

When he spoke the words I've quoted here, Dr. Martin Luther King wasn't talking about Iraq, or about any other war. He was a dedicated believer in non-violent resistance, so it's likely that he wasn't speaking in terms of physical conflict at all. But the idea behind his words is valid beyond the context of the Civil Rights movement. That idea has application even in a world that has not yet managed to live up to Dr. King's vision. Because knowing what we are willing to die for is the ultimate measure of what we believe in. And that is the only true measure of who we are.

For more columns by Jeff Edwards, visit NavyThriller.Com.