

With Dad to the Beaches

Betsy Woodman

Message for Kearsarge Unitarian-Universalist Fellowship Sunday service,
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It's 2004. June 6 approaches. My eighty-eight year old dad, Everett Woodman, very much wants to go to the 60th anniversary ceremonies of the invasion of Normandy, at the American cemetery at Colleville-sur-Mer. He was a young naval officer in that historic battle.

My mom, eighty-three, whom everyone calls Poochie, was an intrepid traveler in her earlier years. Lately, she's been having memory problems. She'd rather stay home, but always the good sport, she goes along with the plan.

There is a safety net—of sorts. Cousin Persis is going to meet the plane. A friend is going to put them on the train to Normandy. A French woman in the village of Louvières will host them.

My sister Jane and I see them off at Logan Airport.

"Where's my sweater?" My dad looks around for his shabby gray cardigan that he wears summer and winter. In fact, he has it on.

We hug them goodbye. My dad hobbles on two canes into the security line. My mom clutches a worn handbag under her arm as if her life depended on it. Maybe it does. It contains a list of emergency telephone numbers.

Jane and I dash to the Air France desk. Are there *any* seats left on the plane? They look at us pityingly. Six days before D-Day?

Bragging Rights

Growing up, my sisters and I had seen the pictures of my dad in his Navy dress uniform, impeccably handsome.

When we were students in France, we'd told French acquaintances that he'd been in the débarquement. The disembarkation.

On the 6th of June? they asked, awestruck.

Yes. Somehow that gave us lifelong bragging rights.

For forty years, my dad didn't talk much about the war. But then, the dam burst, and he talked about it all the time. He put up a little display in his basement of newspaper clippings and photographs. He was processing.

He went to Normandy for the 50th anniversary ceremonies. He was in poor health, and French schoolchildren pushed his wheelchair. He came home and narrowly survived heart surgery.

Ten years later, in 2004, at age 88, he was, ironically, in better shape, and determined to go once more to "that sacred shore." Revisiting the site felt more important than ever, and time was of the essence. His era of veterans was marching out of the line of sight.

Memories of the Invasion

Like thousands of other young Americans, Dad volunteered for the armed forces shortly after the 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbor. He trained in Boston as an intelligence officer. On his third wedding anniversary, March 22, 1944, he set sail for Europe on the Queen Mary, now a troop ship.

In Gouruck, Scotland, little kids ran up to him. "Hello, Yank! Got any gum?" They told him just what he could do to "old Hitler."

His first night's sleep in London was interrupted by an air raid. The locals said, "this is inconvenient, Yank, but don't you worry, we'll get Gerry in the end."

After a few weeks in London, he went to the secret navy camp on the Devonshire coast and then to the port of Weymouth. His orders were to join Task Force 124,

Assault Force O, Dog Green sector. O stood for Omaha. His assignment was to set up a communications post on the beach—by noon.

In the days before departure, groups of men gathered in prayer on the docks. Chaplains told them “God is on our side.”

This made my dad uncomfortable. German soldiers, he was sure, believed that “Gott ist mit uns.” The massive forces of two largely Christian nations would soon be killing each other in the name of God.

He went off alone to make a prayerful promise. If he survived, he would spend his life trying to prevent this lunacy from ever happening again.

Forward to 2004.

I call my parents’ hotel in Paris, eager to hear about the flight. Woodman? They aren’t here, says the voice at the other end.

I call cousin Persis. Nothing has gone as planned. She was late to the airport, the luggage was delayed, the first hotel didn’t work out, they went to a second. And while my dad was unpacking, my mom went down to the lobby and disappeared—in the rain.

Dad called the American Embassy. The police. Friends in Paris.

Meanwhile, my mom wandered, finally into an airlines storefront. Bewildered, she opened her handbag and showed the clerk the sheet of emergency numbers.

The next night, my sister Jane and I are on an Icelandair flight.

When we arrive, dad is white as a sheet, with dark bags under his eyes. Mom looks perfectly cheerful and rested.

In the next few days, nothing is easy. Steep staircases, confusing railway stations, ATM machines that eat your cards. How could we ever have thought the parents could manage on their own?

But dad is all smiles. His bright blue cap says in yellow letters, U.S. Navy, USS LCI 492, Omaha. People everywhere come up and say, “Merci, merci.” Kids ask for autographs. Reporters ask for interviews.

In Normandy, Louvières is a picture-book village. The houses have window boxes overflowing with flowers. The air is sweet with sun-baked hay. Marie-Thérèse Exmelin, age 74, is waiting at her door.

For dinner, she serves us homemade vegetable soup, her own salmon paté, and cheeses from Normandy. In her excitement, she spills the cheeses on the kitchen floor. I scoop them up and we eat them happily.

Sixty years earlier, 1944. On June 4th, the allied forces set sail, only to turn back an hour later because of rain and high winds. The delay was excruciating.

The next day, the seas were still rough. General Dwight D. Eisenhower agonized. The tides wouldn’t be right again until two weeks later, with hope of surprise dwindling. The word finally came: the invasion was on.

On board LCI 492, my dad, was with several dozen 17 and 18 year-old boys from the New York area. They wanted to talk to an officer about their families, their girlfriends, baseball, movies. At age 28, my dad was a surrogate father.

Many of the fellows were seasick from the heavy swells, and the deck was slippery and rancid with vomit.

As night fell, allied aircraft flew by, dipping their wings in encouragement to the troops below.

Later, Dad wrote, “Looking up at those tiny twinkling salutes high in the sky, one’s whole being surged in rhythm with the heavy, steady, ominous cadence of the drone of a thousand engines.”

“We were on strict radio silence, everybody quiet, part of an enormous silent Armada moving into history over the waves of a surging English Channel—we sensed it profoundly and permanently—a destiny kind of feeling...”

Sixty years later, on June 5, 2004, there’s a perfect blue sky in Normandy and balmy breezes.

We have a day to explore before the ceremonies. Dad shows Jane and me the beach where he landed at Vierville-sur-Mer (several hours later than scheduled.) We gasp at the steep cliff of Pointe-du-Hoc that the U.S. Army Rangers scaled, an unbelievable feat.

The American cemetery at Colleville exudes a wordless gravity. Row upon row of white crosses and stars bear the name, rank, state of origin, and date of death for the person buried there. 9,387 of them.

American servicemen and women greet us, excited about tomorrow’s event. They are beautiful young people, well-spoken, friendly, the flower of American youth. They speak of D-Day with awe. “What valor,” they say. Valor is a word we’ll hear often during our visit.

That night, Marie-Thérèse serves us a delicious dinner of chicken, with strawberries and Normandy cream for dessert. The wine flows. My mom is bearing up. Marie-Thérèse calls her “the always smiling lady.”

June 6, 1944 was D-Day and 6:30 AM was H-Hour.

Shortly before dawn, German anti-aircraft fire lit up the sky. “Jeez, ain’t it beautiful,” said one of the young men from New York. “Just like the Fourth of July.”

But the first message to break radio silence was devastating. “Entire first wave foundered.” Top secret amphibious tanks went to the bottom. Next to my dad’s craft, the sister LCI took a hit, tilted, and sank.

A mile or more offshore, soldiers tried to get into the flat-bottomed Higgins boats but fell off the rope ladders to die immediately at sea. At water’s edge, the bodies sloshed together and the seafoam turned pink.

The casualty rate for the first wave was 90%.

Nothing on Omaha Beach went according to plan. Units of men were scattered, officers separated from their men. Heavy German fire rained down and the din was hellish.

Miraculously, around midday, the course of the battle changed. Men improvised, regrouped, performed all but impossible acts of valor. The first allied troops who would liberate Europe from the Nazis were on the continent.

2004

The day of the ceremony, we’re out the door by 5:30 AM.

At the cemetery, those beautiful young service people are loading the veterans into golf carts. A row of ambulances stands ready, blue lights flashing. There’s a tentful of cardiologists.

My dad is practically falling apart. He is so anxious that having come this far, he’ll miss the proceedings.

“Soldier, soldier,” he yells. “We’ve been here an hour and a half and there’s no shuttle.” In fact, it’s been ten minutes.

As morning fog gives way to bright sunshine, my parents are spirited away. Jane and I join the spectators. The speeches begin.

President Chirac of France warns that fanaticism and the rejection of others throw us into disaster. Only tolerance and solidarity bring the winds of hope.

President George W. Bush reminds us that France was our first friend in the world. “Greater love has no man than this—to lay down his life for his friend...and Americans would do it again.”

Listening, I worry. “Oh no, will we have to do *that* again?”

After the speeches, people cluster in little groups. A man comes over to my dad and they talk about the film, *Saving Private Ryan*. The story is set on the very Dog Green Sector of Omaha Beach that my dad was assigned to. In real life, the ferocious fighting earned it the nickname “Bloody Omaha.” In the film, men lie with their guts spilling out onto the sand. Was it realistic, the man asks. Yes, says Dad. Very.

“What’s his name again?” Dad asks me afterwards. “Tom Cruise?”

“Oh, Dad. Tom *Hanks*.”

We walk through the rows of graves. We look out over the calm blue Atlantic. We peer into the German bunkers, preserved for tourists. That afternoon, the mayor of Vierville pins a medal on my dad in an intimate little ceremony. I draw a sigh of relief. Mission accomplished.

On the plane home, Air France bumps my parents from coach to First Class, and the pilot invites Dad into the cockpit for the landing at Logan. Vive la France!

The trip to France was a healing experience, a catharsis. Dad got gratitude and recognition for having been through that day from hell. But...

Ten days later, I stop by at breakfast and find him pale and shaking.

“I just had a flashback,” he says. “I haven’t thought of this for sixty years. On the beach, a tank... got blown up right next to me. A man was running...all of a sudden...he got hit...his head flew straight up into the air...”

His body hadn't forgotten D-Day.

Often, combat veterans are the most passionate of anti-war activists.

My dad struggled with contradictory feelings.

On the one hand, he had a sense of privilege and pride of having participated in one of history's extraordinary events, one of the most intense experiences and demanding tests a human can face.

On the other hand, he felt horror that anything this insane could actually take place. Thankfulness mixed with grief and fury. There was a seductive glory to those memories—but the reality had been terrifying, murderous, and obscene.

A couple of weeks later, on July 4, he gave a speech on the Hanover (NH) Green, across from his alma mater, Dartmouth College. He came down hard on our war in Iraq, calling it an "unprovoked invasion and occupation of a sovereign nation...sold by shameless rationalizations."

World War II, he felt, had been a just war for us; but most were not. D-Day had given him the right and the reason to speak out.

Combat veterans sometimes suffer from "moral injury," guilt over committing atrocious acts.

My dad termed one of his own memories "strangely comforting." It related to the Geneva Convention about how prisoners of war are to be treated.

Two days after the carnage June 6, he was ordering a group of German prisoners to load boxes of ammunition onto a truck. It was lunchtime. The Germans had had time to wash up, get warm and dry, eat American rations. One pointed to his watch and growled, "Heil Hitler."

“In a fury of rage,” Dad wrote later, “I levelled my 45 straight at him. But somehow, who knows why, I didn’t pull the trigger. The real drama of that awful moment is still deep within me. I didn’t fire. I didn’t kill him. Maybe God *was* with me.”

Two days after witnessing hellish bloodshed and destruction, he had emerged alive, and his instinct to spare a life overcame his impulse to take one. And that’s what saved his sanity and let him go on.

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Closing Words for the KUUF Service:

This is the ending of my dad’s speech on the Hanover Green, July 4, 2004. He got booed from some quarters in the audience and cheered from others.

“Now we look ahead and our prayer is that our young people and their children will develop the courage and wisdom to find victorious living in ways other than war - that their lives in a contracting world will eliminate fear of cultural differences - the mindless prejudice that often twists ...otherwise civil societies into warring tribes.

Teach our children to have faith in humanity and to know the dignity of all human beings. Reaffirm America’s basic belief that all people are created equal—that we all are children of the Universe. There is no nonsense about that—it is universally obvious and fundamentally American.”

Everett M. Woodman

Thank you to the Kearsarge Unitarian-Universalist Fellowship (KUUF) for allowing me to share these memories. Please leave comments here:

<http://www.kuufnh.org/services/service-72/>

Tax-deductible contributions to KUUF may be sent to:

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