

Born to Win

The Courageous Christian

by Ronald L. Dart

I'm always grateful when news media, whether it is television or print, give credit to people who have done *very brave things*. It's so good to see these people—to hear their voices, to see their facial expressions, to hear what they have to say about how they felt and why they did what they did. And one of the best things about it is to see them *so often* made uncomfortable by being called “a hero”—maybe even a little bit embarrassed, as true heroes often are.

I'm really jealous of Peggy Noonan; not long ago she got to attend the annual dinner held in honor of the 114 living recipients of the Congressional Medal of Honor; but I'm glad she was there to tell us what she saw and what she heard. Ms. Noonan is a remarkably sensitive *witness* of important things. She writes very well, she sees *through* things, and she cares enough to share her perceptions with the rest of us. I try never to miss one of her columns (although I'm sometimes foolish enough to disagree with her). The column she wrote about this dinner appeared in the online *Opinion Journal* and was dated Thursday, March 30th, 2006. She was able to meet and talk with several of those who had received the nation's highest military honor, and she chose to highlight one of the gentlemen named Nick Oresko. I'm quoting Ms. Noonan now:

I met Nick Oresko. Nick is in his 80s, small, 5-foot-5 or so. Soft white hair, pale-pink skin, thick torso, walks with a cane. Just a nice old guy you'd pass on the street or in the airport without really seeing him. Around his neck was a sky-blue ribbon, and hanging from that ribbon the medal.

Peggy Noonan - Patriots, Then and Now

(And just as an aside, military men don't call this “the Congressional Medal of Honor”; they just call it “the Medal”.) Continuing:

He let me turn it over. It had his name, his rank, and then “1/23/45. Near Tettington, Germany.”

Tettington, Germany. The Battle of the Bulge.

When I got home I looked up his citation on my beloved Internet, where you can Google heroism. U.S. Army Master Sgt. Nicholas Oresko of Company C, 302nd Infantry, 94th Infantry Division was a platoon leader in an attack against strong enemy positions:

Deadly automatic fire from the flanks pinned down his unit. Realizing that a machinegun in a nearby bunker must be eliminated, he swiftly worked ahead alone, braving bullets which struck about him, until close enough to throw a grenade into the

German position. He rushed the bunker and, with pointblank rifle fire, killed all the hostile occupants who survived the grenade blast. Another machinegun opened up on him, knocking him down and seriously wounding him in the hip. Refusing to withdraw from the battle, he placed himself at the head of his platoon to continue the assault. As withering machinegun and rifle fire swept the area, he struck out alone in advance of his men to a second bunker. With a grenade, he crippled the dug-in machinegun defending this position and then wiped out the troops manning it with his rifle, completing his second self-imposed, 1-man attack. Although weak from loss of blood, he refused to be evacuated until assured the mission was successfully accomplished. Through quick thinking, indomitable courage, and unswerving devotion to the attack in the face of bitter resistance and while wounded, M/Sgt. Oresko killed 12 Germans, prevented a delay in the assault, and made it possible for Company C to obtain its objective with minimum casualties.

Peggy Noonan - Patriots, Then and Now

Great writer that she is, this story was really the setup for a point she wanted to make. And it's an idea that really should resonate with every one us. She later talked to another man, same dinner. She said:

I talked to James Livingston of Mount Pleasant, S.C., a Marine, a warrior in Vietnam who led in battle in spite of bad wounds and worse odds. I told him I was wondering about something. Most of us try to be brave each day in whatever circumstances, which means most of us show ourselves our courage with time. What is it like, I asked, to find out when you're a young man, and in a way that's irrefutable, that you are brave? What does it do to your life when no one, including you, will ever question whether you have guts?

He shook his head. The medal didn't prove courage, he said. "It's not bravery, it's taking responsibility." Each of the recipients, he said, had taken responsibility for the men and the moment at a tense and demanding time. They'd cared for others. They took care of their men.

Peggy Noonan - Patriots, Then and Now

And I'll tell you, reading those words *stopped me cold*. I knew what he said was true. It's not bravery; it's taking responsibility. The reply was stunning because...and I don't know if you're familiar at all with the story of Sergeant York, but this is eerily similar to the first story that Ms. Noonan cited. If you're never seen the movie *Sergeant York*, you owe it to yourself to see it. Alvin C. York was a *pacifist* who did *not* believe in killing; and after all the battle was over, after he had performed his heroic deeds (and he did pretty much the same thing: he wiped out a machine gun nest, he killed a lot of Germans), his officer asked him, "Why did you do what you did?" Alvin York answered:

Well, I'm as much agin' killin' as ever, sir. But it was this way, Colonel. When I started out, I felt just like you said, but when I hear them machine guns a-goin', and all them fellas are droppin' around me...I figured them guns was killin' hundreds, maybe thousands, and there weren't nothin' anybody could do, but to stop them guns. And that's what I done.

Sergeant York [1941]

He took responsibility and saved the lives of *many* of his fellow soldiers. Later on (I forget from the movie exactly what the incident was), but somebody wanted him to do something *commercial* to capitalize on his fame, and he said this:

What we done in France, we had to do. And some as done it, didn't come back, and that kind of thing ain't for buying and selling.

Sergeant York [1941]

What a man. The movie will bring you to tears. And you come to, I think, understand what these men are talking about when they say it's not bravery. Not that bravery isn't required, it is, but it's not that; it's that they take *responsibility*. And that's precisely what Alvin York did.

Now, it's interesting, as I said, that most of these men are a little embarrassed at being called heroes. I can appreciate that; because in a strange way calling them heroes *diminishes* what they have done. I think of that often when I watch some talking head on television gushing over someone who *took responsibility* and calling them heroes...and watch 'em squirm a little bit when they're called that.

You know, Bible student that I am, there was a man in the Bible who came *immediately* to mind. We're so accustomed to thinking of men of the Bible as being special to God; they were a living, walking miracle and none of us could *ever* be like them. They didn't have to be *brave* because they had so much faith they just knew God would do it. Now, there may be something in that, but there also may be something else. The man I'm thinking about (actually, he was little more than a boy at the time), his brothers had gone off to war, and his father had placed him in charge of the sheep in the field. He probably felt pretty big, given that responsibility, even though his brothers in the army belittled the job. Whatever was in his mind, when he got the job the reality of the responsibility was not long in coming. He nearly lost one of his lambs; and if he lost that one, he would have lost more. Here's the way he told the story:

1 Samuel 17

NKJV

³⁴ [...] Your servant used to keep his father's sheep, and when a lion or a bear came and took a lamb out of the flock,

³⁵ I went out after it and struck it, and delivered the lamb from its mouth; and when it arose against me, I caught it by its beard, and struck and killed it.

³⁶ Your servant has killed both lion and bear[....]

You know, I hear echoes in this story of Nick Oresko and Sergeant York. *They did what had to be done. They took responsibility.* The shepherd boy, in the face of great danger, did exactly the same in hand-to-hand (or hand-to-paw) combat with wild animals. The shepherd boy's name was David. He did what had to be done. He took responsibility. If there is any way in which David is exceptional, it's because he took responsibility for what happened to his charge. Sergeants Oresko and York cared for their men. David only had sheep, but the character was *exactly the same*.

And that's not the end of David's story, not by a long shot. For David, responsibility, duty was a *fact of life*. I mention the fact that his brothers were in the army, and at that time the army was arrayed against the Philistines in something of a stalemate.

The Israelite army was in the field. They were arrayed against the Philistines so far in stalemate—they had not joined battle. The Israelites under Saul were being unmanned by the presence of *huge* man named Goliath (who passed into our language along with David). Day after day, Goliath came forth and

challenged Israel to give him a man to fight with him. It's one of those age-old methods of deciding a matter: champions fight, the outcome determines the overall winner. In this case, there was *no doubt* what the outcome would be, and the Israelites weren't having anything of it. Goliath was a *giant* of a man. *No one* could stand up to him in hand-to-hand combat and everyone knew it. Well meanwhile, David's father called him in from the field and sent him to his brothers, who were in the army, with some special rations. And it is here that the plot thickens. When David got there and took the situation in and heard all the stories, he *couldn't believe* that not one man of Israel was willing to step up...and he said so. Well, when Saul heard about this, he sent for him. You'll find the story in First Samuel, chapter 17.

1 Samuel 17

NKJV

³¹ Now when the words which David spoke were heard, they reported them to Saul; and he sent for him.

³² Then David said to Saul, "Let no man's heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine."

³³ And Saul said to David, "You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are a youth, and he a man of war from his youth."

Now this is where David cited the story of the lion and the bear, and he seems never to have had a second thought. He said [v. 26], "Who is this Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?" You see, to David it was not someone else's responsibility; it was his. It was his because he took it.

Now, I cite the examples of these three men to illustrate that what we call "bravery" has existed in all ages of man. But it isn't bravery, or foolhardiness even, that motivates these men. Bravery is required, but it is *responsibility* that motivates—the sense that I have to do this; if I don't do it, maybe no one else will. And I must confess that among Christians today there are those who are willing to take responsibility. They deserve our respect and our backing. Without them, we're not going anywhere. And unfortunately, there are just too many who aren't willing to pick it up. Paul said something interesting in his letter to the Philippians. He said:

Philippians 2

KJV

¹⁹ But I trust in the Lord Jesus to send Timotheus shortly unto you, that I also may be of good comfort, when I know your state.

²⁰ For I have no man likeminded, who will naturally care for your state.

²¹ For all seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ's.

That's in Philippians, chapter 2. That last phrase is just heartbreaking. That, too, is common in all generations: "Let someone else do it." I think the King James Version has this right: "No man likeminded, who will *naturally* care for your state." Timothy, like David—and also like Nick Oresko—wouldn't give it a second thought. *It had to be done*; and so they picked up the responsibility and carried it forward.

Courageous people are not a dime a dozen, but they may be more common than many of us think. I said earlier that for some of these men it's a bit embarrassing to be honored with "the Medal", but they accepted it as a kind of *duty*. Quoting Peggy Noonan again, she said:

Other recipients sounded a refrain that lingered like Taps. They felt they'd been awarded their great honor in part in the name of unknown heroes of the armed forces who'd performed spectacular acts of courage but had died along with all the witnesses who would have told the story of what they did. For each of the holders of the Medal of Honor there had been witnesses, survivors who could testify. For some great heroes of engagements large and small, maybe the greatest heroes, no one lived to tell the tale.

And so they felt they wore their medals in part for the ones known only to God.

Peggy Noonan - Patriots, Then and Now

It's so striking to me that even the wearing of the Medal to these men was a responsibility, and they had to bear it. One more thing that Ms. Noonan makes to make her transition, she says:

In a brief film on the recipients that was played at the dinner, Leo Thorsness, an Air Force veteran of Vietnam, said something that lingered. He was asked what, when he performed his great act, he was sacrificing for. He couldn't answer for a few seconds. You could tell he was searching for the right words, the right sentence. Then he said, "I get emotional about it. But we're a *free* country." He said it with a kind of wonder, and gratitude.

And of course, he said it all.

Peggy Noonan - Patriots, Then and Now

You know, I have to confess I think it *does* say it all. Because it is *freedom* that allows us to *be* what we are. If we weren't *free* to do these things, where would the courage be?

Now, that was not all I took away from Ms. Noonan's column. You know, we need to support and encourage all those among us who take responsibility for the things that the Christian church must do. And whatever else we do, we must never play the role of David's brothers, who put him down because he was willing to do that. Now, here's where Peggy Noonan went next with her column; and it's kind of strange in a way, but stay with her. She said:

What this all got me thinking about, the next day, was . . . immigration. I know that seems a lurch, but there's a part of the debate that isn't sufficiently noted. There are a variety of things driving American anxiety about illegal immigration and we all know them — economic arguments, the danger of porous borders in the age of terrorism, with anyone able to come in.

But there's another thing. And it's not fear about "them." It's anxiety about us.

It's the broad public knowledge, or intuition, in America, that we are not assimilating our immigrants patriotically. And if you don't do that, you'll lose it all.

Peggy Noonan - Patriots, Then and Now

Now, you've probably have figured out by now that I am trying to apply the principles of courage I learned here to the Christian church and the Christian faith. Not that I'm unconcerned about the political issues in this county. Not that I'm unconcerned about immigration. I'm very concerned. But huge principles like Peggy Noonan is bringing out here apply to nearly everything. And, sure enough,

we Christians *also* have an anxiety about us—about who we are, about our failures, about our differences, about our spats—and we let these anxieties prevent us from doing and saying things that need to be said and done; not only in church, but in the community and in the world. Peggy Noonan said we are not assimilating our immigrants patriotically, and neither are we in the Christian faith (for whatever reason). She said:

We are not assimilating our immigrants patriotically now. We are assimilating them culturally. Within a generation their children speak Valley Girl on cell phones. [...] Whether their parents are from Trinidad, Bosnia, Lebanon or Chile, their children, once Americans, know the same music, the same references, watch the same shows. And to a degree and in a way it will hold them together. But not forever and not in a crunch.

So far we are assimilating our immigrants economically, too. They come here and work. Good.

But we are not communicating love of country. We are not giving them the great legend of our country. We are losing that great legend.

Peggy Noonan - Patriots, Then and Now

Actually (this is me speaking now; not Peggy Noonan) we aren't so much losing it as throwing it away and putting it through the *shredder*. It's being "deconstructed" in classrooms all across the country, and in the Christian church we are making *precisely* the same mistakes. Sure, we have our black sheep; so does every church, every denomination, every religion known to man, every institution that man puts together. All have their black sheep. But we also have our unique *gifts*—our special contribution to make. And we need to be, well, patriotic about it. So what if Washington had wooden teeth? He was a man who took responsibility.

There are several things that come to mind when I think about how all this applies to us. God has made each of us special in our own way; but he told us not to compare ourselves with others who *differ* in various ways. It doesn't matter what *they* do; what matters is what *we* do with what God has given us that he has not, for whatever reason, given to somebody else. That part of it is none of our business. What matters is that *we take responsibility* for the sphere of influence that God has granted to us. If we do that, maybe we can be called heroes in the kingdom of God no matter how small our role is. Now, Peggy Noonan wasn't done yet. She said (and I quote):

We fought a war to free slaves. We sent millions of white men to battle and destroyed a portion of our nation to free millions of black men. *What kind of nation does this?* We went to Europe, fought, died and won, and then taxed ourselves to save our enemies with the Marshall Plan. *What kind of nation does this?* Soviet communism stalked the world and we were the ones who steeled ourselves and taxed ourselves to stop it. Again: *What kind of nation does this?*

Only a very great one. Maybe the greatest of all.

Peggy Noonan - Patriots, Then and Now

And then Ms. Noonan asked this question:

Do we teach our immigrants that this is what they're joining? That this is the tradition they will now continue, and uphold?

Do we, today, act as if this is such a special place? No, not always, not even often. American exceptionalism is so yesterday. We don't want to be impolite. We don't want to offend. We don't want to seem narrow. In the age of globalism, honest patriotism seems like a faux pas.

And yet what is true of people is probably true of nations: if you don't have a well-grounded respect for yourself, you won't long sustain a well-grounded respect for others.

Peggy Noonan - Patriots, Then and Now

End of quotation. And that, you know, is the second big idea I took from Peggy Noonan's column. We have got to learn, as citizens or as Christians, to maintain our self-respect. And this isn't easy to do in an age where self-esteem has *replaced* self-respect. Self-esteem is to think highly of yourself when you haven't any really good reason to do so; self-respect means you go out and earn it. But, you know, if we *don't* maintain our self-respect, we could *lose* the special place we hold in God's scheme of things. Too many of us have behaved like the prodigal sons that we are. We've grabbed our things and gone out on our own and we have forsaken the community of saints—the community that Jesus said he would build. We need to get over the tantrum, to stop cutting the legs off of our story, stop trashing those who came before us down this long road. For in handling too much trash, you become trash yourself. As Peggy Noonan said:

You can turn any history into mud. You can turn great men and women into mud too, if you want to.

Peggy Noonan - Patriots, Then and Now

The problem is...she didn't put it quite this way, but as you do it, you turn yourself into mud at the same time. There's one more thing from Ms. Noonan's column I want to quote. She said:

Those who teach, and who think for a living about American history, need to be told: Keep the text, teach the text, and only then, if you must, deconstruct the text.

Peggy Noonan - Patriots, Then and Now

To me this is one of the most profound things she said; because here I sit in a position with the text in my hands, and she tells me, "Keep the text." Jeremiah said:

Jeremiah 23

AKJV

²⁸ The prophet that has a dream, let him tell a dream; and he that has my word, let him speak my word faithfully. What is the chaff to the wheat? said the LORD.

The chaff is the dreams, the wheat is the word. And then he says:

Jeremiah 23

AKJV

²⁹ Is not my word like as a fire? said the LORD; and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?

This last is a challenge to me, because I know I have his word. I don't feel brave; I just feel responsible.

Transcript of a *Born to Win*
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