

## THE TRAGEDY OF FORGETTING

We stood side-by-side, my son and I, gazing at the small photograph on a tombstone. My son finally broke our silence: "Dad, he's so young!" Yes, I thought, the very same age as you. And because of him -- and so many of his companions -- we had the privilege of even being there together.

He's ever youthful in that picture, an 18-year-old soldier keeping a mute, timeless vigil over his own grave. Though we were alone that day, I've seen a woman there before, his mother perhaps. And the continual presence of flowers tells me that there is someone who can't forget ... and shouldn't.

His life came and went so quickly. He was barely old enough to drive when he died for his country. For him it's over, but not for his parents. They're the ones who will visit his grave and pose the endless questions in their minds.

What would life have held had he lived? Would he have married and had children? How would he have handled joys and tears, success and failure? Would he have achieved prominence or obscurity, wealth or poverty?

And perhaps the most difficult question of all: Why my son?

Certainly he was spared the difficult trials that come so close on the heels of youth: struggling with jobs and families, making mistakes with mates and children, feeling the hurt of rejection from family and friends, seeing health ebb away.

In one sense, he's forever held captive in the bloom of youth. Standing at attention in uniform, his picture reflects confidence, hope and courage. His is a warrior, strong and fit for battle. And that's how he'll be remembered.

The news that a child has been taken by death brings a numbing knot in the pit of the stomach. Can such a loss ever be soothed?

In November 1864, Abraham Lincoln faced that challenge. He wrote to console Mrs. Lydia Bixby, a widow who was believed to have lost five sons in the Civil War. "I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom."

The young man in the photograph is a hero. When duty compelled him to forsake all for the cause of freedom, he obeyed. In his death, someone else's son has perhaps spared me of the awful burden of loss that his family still carries. I am indebted, both to him and to them for that immeasurable sacrifice. And I thank God for him in the same breath that I ask God for a successful future for my son.

How ironic that death and life would be entwined in such a way. How tragic that we could ever forget what a great debt we owe for the freedoms we often so lightly esteem.

### MIGHT-HAVE-BEENS

Some think that war's a faceless game  
And never feel the awful cost  
Of blood that's spilled in freedom's name  
Which mounts as mothers' sons are lost.

I've seen a grave one mother tends,  
Her inner battles not yet won,  
Still clinging to the might-have-beens  
That were not buried with her son.