

The Soldier and the Saint

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Class: 2016

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"The willingness of our citizens to give freely and unselfishly of themselves, even their lives, in defense of our democratic principles, gives this great Nation continued strength and vitality."

– President Ronald W. Reagan

In his Presidential Proclamation 4878, which invited Americans to "recognize the valor and sacrifice of our veterans", the 40th President of the United States shed light upon the importance of maintaining, cultivating, and honoring the ethics of a culture of service. Though a fundamental part of patriotism, this concept of selfless service is a broad term; it applies to everyone everywhere, and at its core, is but a choice. One does not have to be a soldier or a missionary or a martyr to live a life of service. On the contrary, to limit selflessness to such colossal intimidating parameters would make anyone hesitate to commit to such a lifestyle. This is precisely why one must have resolute reasons, whether it be a call for duty, genuine faith, or a strong moral compass, to drive oneself over those mental barriers that block people from ever reaching their full potential. Throughout history, there have been many who, through a life of service, have inspired ordinary people to find the extraordinary in living outside of the self. Prime examples of these role models include Sgt. William H. Carney and St. Thérèse de Lisieux, O.C.D.

A former slave who had escaped through the Underground Railroad, Sgt. William H. Carney voluntarily chose to fight for the democratic principles he believed in by joining a local

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militia unit, the Morgan Guards, during the Civil War. This unit would eventually become Company C of the 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment. On July 18, 1863, in the Battle of Fort Wagner outside of Charleston, the 54th made heroic attacks on the garrison. When the regimental flag bearer fell, Carney, at the young age of 23, courageously took up the colors. In a flash he was grievously shot, then again, and then two bullets nicked his arm and head before he was taken to safety. With all the bullets zipping by him, hitting him, Carney refused to allow the flag to fall again. "Boys, I only did my duty. The old flag never touched the ground", he later told his comrades. His glorious actions were the first for an African American to merit the Congressional Medal of Honor. Sgt. William H. Carney exemplifies the use of selfless service in the call of duty, and illustrates how one selfless act can add value to one's entire life and to a nation's culture of service.

Following another call in a different country, a fifteen-year-old girl named Marie Françoise-Thérèse Martin overcame many obstacles to join the Roman Catholic French Discalced Carmelite Order, taking up the new name of Sister Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face. In her personal writings, she admitted that she wanted and had always wanted to be a saint, yet felt that when she compared herself to the age-old saints the difference between them and her was like the difference "between a mountain whose summit is lost in the clouds and a humble grain of sand trodden underfoot by passerby." Instead of being discouraged by the grandeur of the saint stories, she decided to put her fears behind her and trust in God. Thérèse then created what is now considered her Little Way. In it, one must simply "stay little and

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become less and less" by striving to do good kind things, no matter how small the act, to everyone, including one's tormentors and enemies. She dedicated her life to this code, and at times found herself dancing with the joy that came with helping others, even those who bullied her, and especially when her help went unnoticed. After a long struggle with tuberculosis, on September 30, 1897, Thérèse, only 24, died with her final words capturing the story of her life: "My God, I love You!" Her dream came true, and nowadays she is known as "the greatest saint of modern times." St. Thérèse's mission entirely embodies the extraordinary in the ordinary, and to this day her Little Way inspires millions to do the same.

What did the soldier and the saint have in common? They both looked somewhere outside of themselves, at the bigger picture, and strove to do the right thing. One may not be cut out for the military or missionary work, but the lesson one can learn from people like Sgt. William Carney and St. Thérèse de Lisieux is that, when one focuses less on the self, there *is* a reward. At times this reward may go unnoticed like the actions of a soldier on a battlefield or a young nun's prayers and "little" acts of love, but nonetheless it exists. If everyone in the entire nation could see this bigger picture, do something selfless no matter how small, and maintain this attitude in spite of fears or adversity, the nation's culture of service would evolve into something greater. If a nun could have the courage of a warrior, and a soldier a compassionate soul, one must stop and ask oneself, "Am I reaching my full potential?" The answer may be surprising, as the closer one gets to this full potential, the farther one gets from oneself. This answer lies not in an individual trying to be the best person he or she can be for personal glory, but in abandoning –

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renouncing – this focus, and redirecting it out. People may be tempted to say selfless service takes a great deal of effort, but they are wrong. When *my* story becomes *our* story or *His* story, the weight of it all lessens; it becomes an effortless effort.