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Clark O. Schwenke
American Public University System

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I've Done This Before
By Clark O. Schwenke

I've done this before; it shouldn't feel like this. I have been on the other side of the coin so many times I can't begin to count. I have stood as others cried, as others grieved, but now, I am looking at it from a different direction. I have often wondered what I would tell my wife, or my kids when it was someone we all knew and loved. I have been doing this for 11 years and have looked into those hundreds of faces and wondered, what will they say? Who will they call first?

Today, as I walked my daily walk, my cell phone rang. I looked at the number, knowing it, and wondering what I needed to do now to help. It has been weeks since the accident, and I have been the help the way I knew how to help, to patch up healing wounds, and help get them back on the track. I and my wife have forgone days with the kids, at the beach, or playing in the park. They needed us, like we had needed them in the past. We did what we could to make them comfortable, to ease their pain, to give them a little comfort when their discomfort was great. We brought ice packs, ran to town for an errand or two, or just sat and talked.

But today the phone call was different; there was want and need in her voice, but I didn't know what until she said it. "Clark, Jerry Died." I didn't know what to say. I had just seen him yesterday; he looked ok, up walking and talking. My son yelled from the car window when we dropped my wife off at their house to pick up her car, "Hi, Trax."

He yelled back, "Hi Buddy." It had only been a few months, but they were pals, he and my son. The man who touched my life, and the lives of the ones I live for every day, was dead.

I ran like I have never run before. I usually take note when I run, of the sights, sounds, smells, and texture of my surroundings. This was different. I didn't notice that early fall smell of earth and fallen leaves, no notice of how many more of the fallen leaves there are than there were yesterday. All of that was irrelevant. I needed to get to my wife. She didn't know yet. Even though I ran to the car, the ride home was solemn and deliberate, not fast, not slow, but paced to give me time to decide how and what I was going to say. I have done this before; why is it so hard now? I have told people that a loved one is dead, but why does this feel so different? I have done this before; it shouldn't feel like this.

I came home to find her sleeping in the chair. It had only been yesterday that she had been released from the same hospital where her future step-father now lay dead. "GET UP! Chrissy, you have to GET UP!" I didn't want there to be any question later about what I was going to say next. She woke with a start, as anyone with a six foot, two hundred and ninety-five pound man screaming at them would. I waited for her to get up and get her wits about her. She rose slowly from the chair with a look of fear and inquisitiveness on her face. I looked at her and told her what I thought it would be many years before I ever had to tell her, "Your Mom called while I was on the bike trail. It's Trax. He's dead."

I sit here now writing this and looking at that word. Dead. I realize that it is more than a word; it is a description of an event, a feeling, an emotion, and one of the hardest things I have ever had to deal with. I have done this before; why is it so hard? I have seen friends, family, and complete strangers die. I have held the hand of someone near and dear to me, screaming down the highway in the back of the squad, and had them look right at me, and die. I've done this before; it shouldn't feel like this. I

have seen about every imaginable way for a person to die. I have seen the gruesome, the gory, the peaceful, the unexplainable, not once, not twice, but hundreds of times in the past 11 years. Why is this so hard? I've done this before; it shouldn't feel like this.

When you do what I do, you don't think of the things that other people think of when someone dies. You don't think of the celebration of their lives. You don't think of the hundreds of things they have done to leave their footprints on this earth. You don't think about whether they are going to heaven, or to hell, or whether they had made their peace with God or their family. You see the unavoidable, the last thing you will ever do, Die. You don't question the person, or the process, but what you did or didn't do to help. I am a helper. I help people.

Joyce, my wife's grandmother, stood close to me outside the emergency room. I had never had much of a close relationship with my wife's family. There was open resentment at times, and often the underlying distrust, but now all that was gone. It is hard for me to wrap my mind around it right now, but I think when you see someone die that is close to you, it makes you look into yourself a little. I stood stoically, as I often do in times like these, being the Rock, the one who seems unaffected by such things. I have seen this before, but it never felt quite like this. While the others around us cried, we stood, her and I, being in the same place, for the same reason, and spoke.

She looked at me, as though to give me some consolation, as I think mothers in general can sense you need, even if it is not their own child. I never really knew what to make of anything she said. I blame myself for it a little, as I think in my own form of self hatred, I often times looked for negativity in her words, even when it was not there at all. I looked for the sarcasm, the belittling, but there was none now, and I think that there may have never been any in the first place. "It takes a special person to help other people." I knew what she meant, but to hear it come from her was something that I had never expected. I had been there from day one of the accident, to help them, Barb and Jerry, in their little idiosyncratic medical needs. Bandaging, treating skin rashes, tying on ice packs, and helping them with showers and such.

We help people; that is what we do. Barb, my mother-in-law, a former EMT, a nurse, and now a grieving fiancé; Chrissy, my wife, a nursing assistant and former EMT, now stands sobbing. We have all seen this; we know what this is. This is the Omega, the end, Death. We ask ourselves not what happened, but what didn't happen. Why? Why didn't I see this coming? I have been doing patient assessments almost every day since I graduated from high school, and before. Why didn't it tip me off, the increased shortness of breath, the pain in the chest? All things that had become a part of his daily life since the Motorcycle accident, I didn't see past the chronic pain and breathing problems. Why?

Aside from all of the drama of the event, there was still one thing I had to do. I had thought about it all day. Telling my wife was easy compared to this. She is an adult and has dealt with this kind of pain nearly as much as I, but just ahead was one of the hardest things I have ever had to do in my life. I had to tell my 5 and 6 year olds that someone they loved, their friend, their Hero, the man who had helped to strengthen the bond that had been stretched by many years of distrust and disgust, their "Papaw Trax" had Died.

I was in tears when I told them. I had wondered about the questions all day. This task had weighed heavy on my mind since I got the call. How would I tell them? My daughter, who likes to tell

everyone what I do, who has brought me dying kittens saying, "Daddy, you're a Medic, you can save it." And I always tried, no matter how futile my endeavor, to be her hero. I wondered if that would be her question. "Why couldn't you help him, daddy? You're a medic, you help people." And I guess in a selfish way, I cried because for the first time in her life, she would finally know that I can't fix everything, or everyone. The days of "my daddy can fix it, he's a medic" were gone.

My daughter, age 6, stared blankly into my tear swollen eyes as I told them the news. My son, just 5, began joking and acting a fool. My wife began to correct him, when I pulled him close to me and cried on his shoulder. For the first time ever, my little man was now the big man, and I was the crying boy that just needed to cry. I saw in him what I thought I would see in him. Me. He was trying to make us laugh, like I often do in times of crisis. Get people to laugh and they forget what they were crying about. I had done this before myself, and I saw him doing it now. He was me, and I was the one who needed to laugh, as I had been the joker trying to make others laugh when they wanted to cry so many times. He turned his little blonde head to me, as I held him close with my face buried in his chest, and said "daddy, you are crying on my shoulder now." He is 5. Where does he come up with this? He should not know that something like this would make me smile, but it did, as I shed tears onto his little shirt, he made me laugh a little. He succeeded.

What I am coming to understand is that I have often times seen death, and have put myself dangerously close to it at times in 11 years of Fighting Fire and being an EMT/Paramedic. I have seen death and can cope with death, but this is not a normal death. This is not a person I have never met, or someone who I could somehow distance myself from, no matter how close they were. I had been there to help him, as I have thousands of others in the past, but He was my friend, the person who had rode his Harley into our lives and changed the way we thought. He was a father figure, a big brother, and most importantly, he was my friend. Not a "see you every six months, how have you been" friend, but someone who I saw every day. I saw how he had healed my wife and her mother's oftentimes troubled relationship, and for that I gave him respect. I saw how much of a difference he had made in Barb's life, how she bubbled when he was around, and for that I gave him credit. I saw how he treated my children as though they were his own grandchildren, and for that I gave him compassion. And I saw how he respected me, and gave me the kind of friendship that he would have given to one of his own, and for that I gave him love. It is hard to say that after only knowing a person for a few months, but standing back and looking at all the positive he interjected into my life, I realized that I loved him, just like he did me. He cared about me and mine, and not the fake kind of care that gets you brownie points with your girlfriend, the true care that a parent gives a child, that a husband gives a wife, and that a grandparent gives a grandchild. We were not just hers, we were his too.

About Clark Schwenke: I am a 32 year old father of two. I have been a Firefighter/Paramedic for 12 years. My major is in Emergency and Disaster Management. I enjoy the outdoors and riding my motorcycle. I have always enjoyed writing, though most of my writing experience to date has been assignment based or for technical type writing associated with my line of work.

Remembering the Fallen Soldiers By Katherine Bates

There are thousands of fallen soldiers and many more wounded in action. Having been deployed twice, I have seen plenty of them. I can not say I have been in a real war zone, having only been to two support bases, but these personnel must transit through our bases to get back for care. On my last deployment in 2007, I saw the results of war. I was working at a small airport that many commercial aircrafts and some military aircrafts transited through. I did not know what I was in for until my first Human Remains (HR) Ceremony.

I was working as a security patrol securing the interior of the base perimeter. I got a call over the radio to report to spot two on the aircraft ramp for an incoming HR aircraft. I had no clue what I was about to do since I had only been working for a week. I asked my leader, Sgt Muro, what HR meant.

“HR means human remains. We go to the aircraft to give our respects and help get the caskets on the truck so the Marines can take them to the morgue.” SSgt Muro replied. My jaw dropped with awe. I knew that soldiers died in war. I knew that they got back to the United States. I just did not realize that I would see the caskets. I guess this was a wake-up call for me. On my first deployment, it was a “grave train,” as many would call it. We just guarded supplies and I did not see anything happen. When we arrived to spot two, we saw the plane coming in.

SSgt Muro explained, “When the plane stops the engines, we will all stand facing each other in two lines parallel to the back door of the aircraft. Just follow the commands given and you will be fine. Maybe next time you can learn to carry the caskets.” I was ready to help in any way. I just felt a sorrow over everyone as the plane was pulling in to spot 2.

When the pilots ceased the power to the engines, everyone quickly assembled the two parallel lines. The pilots opened the back door to the aircraft. Being the inquisitive person I am, I looked into the interior of the aircraft. I saw four silver metal caskets with US flags neatly draped over them. My stomach felt as if it were in my throat. My eyes began to water as the reality set in. Four Airmen stood aside the first casket to carry it onto the morgue truck. The commanding officer gave the command, “Flight, Attention.” We all stood up proudly with our arms pinned tightly to our sides. Nobody moved to wipe sweat or tears from their faces. At that moment, the 120 degree temperature did not matter what so ever. The casket was raised off the bottom of the aircraft and slowly moved down to the aircraft ramp. The next command was called, “Present Arms.” As the caskets passed us one by one, we stood at attention saluting these people. The whole time, I was thinking that this could have been my brother.

The ceremony ended and there was an invisible cloud of mourning over us. We did not know this person, but still felt as if we had lost a brother. In the military aspect, we really did lose a brother-in-arms. We all began talking more in-depth about the HR ceremonies.

“The third casket was light, man!” Sgt Muro said. “I felt so bad when we lifted it so easily.”

I immediately knew what he meant by a light casket. He did not have to tell me anything else. I began thinking about having to be the one to have only found a part of someone’s body. It must be

even hard to be the spouse of a soldier and hear, "Sir/Ma'am I regret to inform you that your spouse suffered an IED attack and all we could find was their leg." After that, I was finished with talking.

Throughout my deployment, I did get a chance to carry the caskets. We had a few who were too afraid they would drop them but still paid their respects in formation. We were there to salute and pay our respects for giving their lives for the freedom of others. Only the highest respects were given at these ceremonies.

There are some people who say, "I do not support the war in any way!" You do not have to support the war. Nobody signs up for the military because they want to fight. They sign only to defend the US. These fallen soldiers are also fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, and friends. We should support our American soldiers and remember those fallen who served faithfully.

About Katherine Bates: Katherine is a Staff Sergeant in the United States Air Force. She is currently working towards a Bachelors Degree in Family and Child Development.

