

THE HERO WITHIN

Suffering can leave us utterly broken,
or it can help us break out the hero within.

“I could never do what you do!”

I hear this often, when people learn I am a hospice nurse practitioner at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

“Isn’t it depressing?” usually follows.

I used to think the same way. No one told me I could find peace, joy and fulfillment in caring for people at the end of their lives. But I’ve now cared for more than 10,000 dying veterans in my 30-year career, and I have come to realize that I’ve learned lessons about peace by caring for men and women trained for war. Peace with ourselves and peace within ourselves.

As we go about the process of dying, we become fertile ground for healing: Stoic masks dissolve, illusions and denials about aging and death are penetrated, and the sacred becomes almost palpable. More importantly, people often summon the courage to die healed.

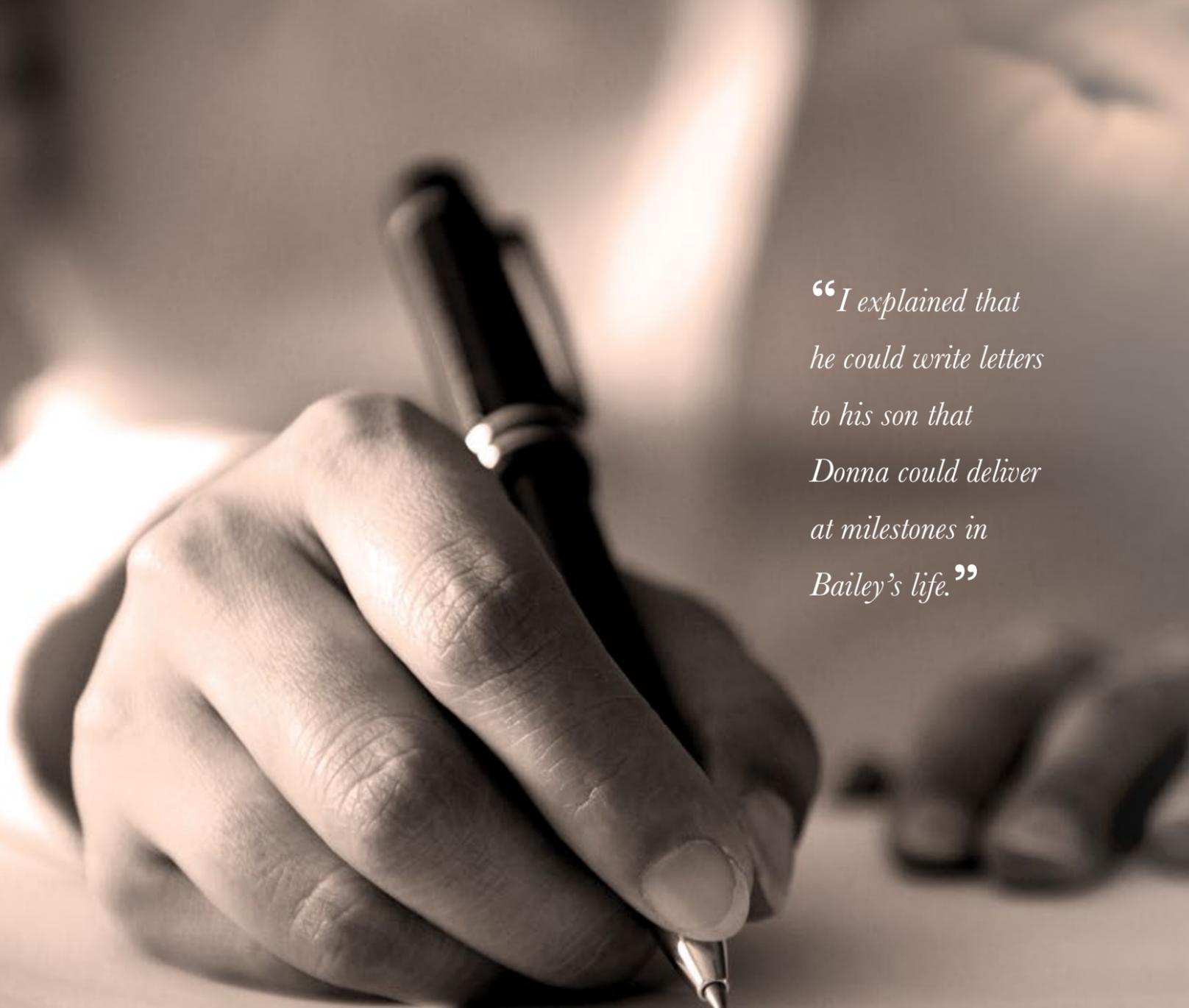
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“I’ve learned quite a lot about dying in peace from those who were trained for war.”

by Deborah Grassman

Founder and CEO of Opus Peace



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A HERO'S LEGACY

“John became Bailey’s hero.”

By most anyone’s definition, John was a failure. An alcoholic at age 13, he numbed his distressing emotions with alcohol rather than feeling the painful experiences. His stoic military training provided further reinforcement of this approach. His drinking held him back from any measurable success in his career or his relationships. He had a 6-year-old son he had never met.

Then at age 37, John was diagnosed with stomach cancer. He rocketed into despair until his failing health served as the wake-up call he needed to get his life on track.

The first thing John did was stop drinking. Sober and confronting a life-threatening illness, he saw things anew. His priorities shifted. He contacted his son’s mother, Donna, making arrangements to meet his son, Bailey.

I met John two years later when his doctor asked me to evaluate him for hospice services. Understandably, most of John’s concerns focused on preparing Bailey, then 8 years old, for his death. They had enjoyed two great years together; John and Donna had even married. Still, John felt a burning need to compress a lifetime of fatherhood into their remaining months together.

I suggested that there was a way to remain an important part of Bailey’s life in the years to come. John was incredulous but interested. I explained that he could write letters to his son that Donna could deliver at milestones in Bailey’s life. John enthusiastically jumped at the chance to not waste his suffering by guiding his son so he would not repeat his father’s mistakes.

John’s first letter urged Bailey to do well in

school; the second letter focused on puberty and the sexual issues Bailey would face. Subsequent letters highlighted marriage and childbirth. All of the letters were filled with loving, practical, poignant advice. John became Bailey’s hero. The last letter was chilling with its haunting wisdom:

Dear Bailey, This is the last letter you will receive from me. I haven’t had the wit of Johnny Carson or the love of Mother Teresa, but I do pray. I pray that in the place where there is extra love, that you will use it to shine a light on someone in the dark today who has forgotten that God is in their heart. I pray for people who want help. Since I first met you, Bailey, you told me, “When I grow up, I want to help people who are in trouble.” I hope you have continued to keep that mission, and if you haven’t, that you might reconsider it now. It will bring much peace, meaning and fulfillment to your life.

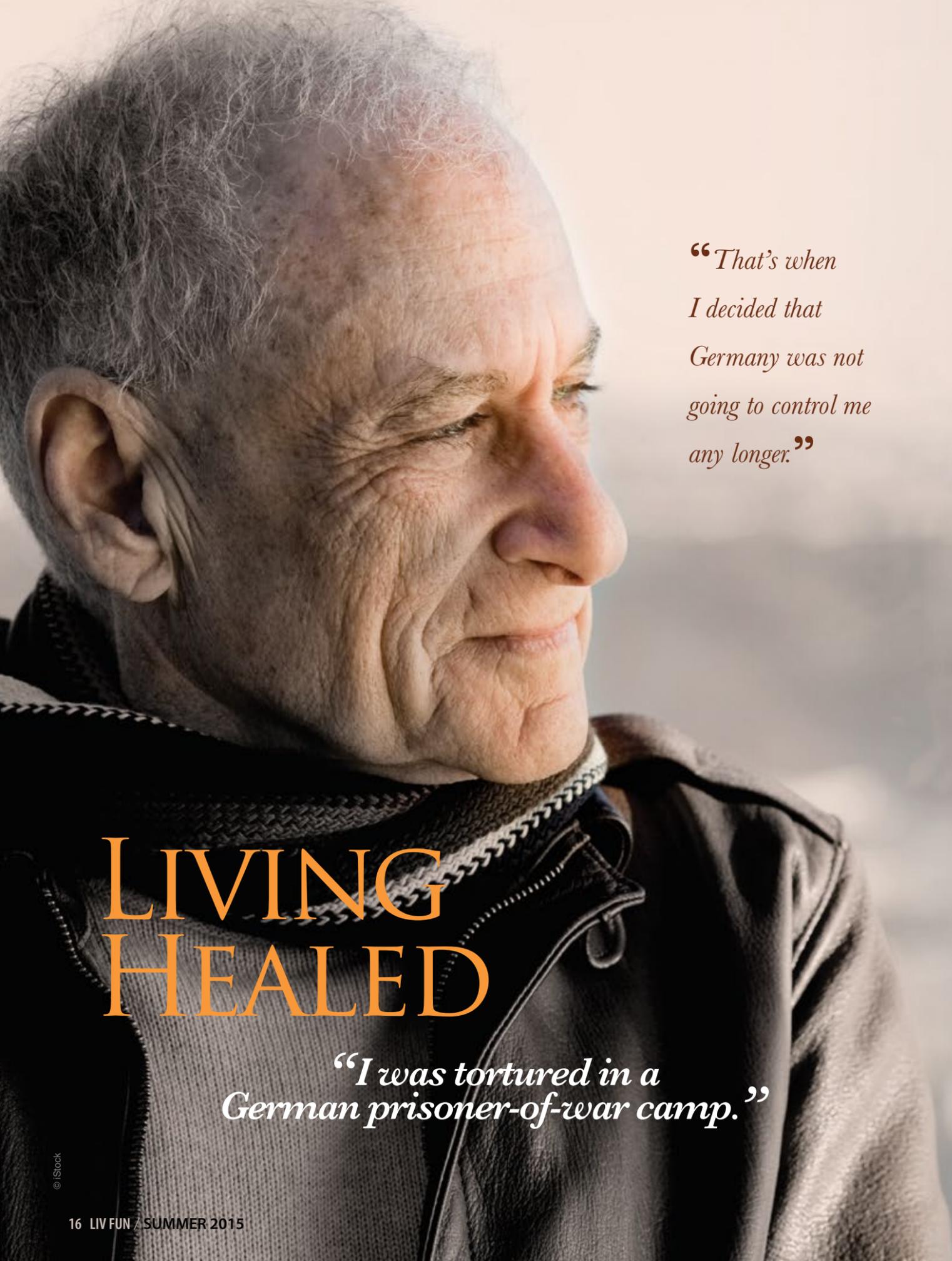
Ten years later, Donna tells me that the letters are still having a dramatic impact on Bailey’s life.

Unlikely heroes like John show us how to encounter failure. They do not “rise above” or stoically endure their hardships the way I had been taught. They are beaten down and broken by life, but at the bottom they summon the courage to use those hardships to reach deeper depths within themselves.

“Cancer saved my life,” John had told me.

If John had not allowed death to beckon him beyond his bodily limitations, there is no doubt that he would still be drinking, having never met his son, and failing to live the wisdom expressed in that last letter.

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LIVING HEALED

“I was tortured in a German prisoner-of-war camp.”

When I asked 82-year-old Milton if there was anything left unsaid or undone as he faced the end of his life, his answer left me stunned.

“Nothing at all. In fact, I feel blissful,” he said with strength, joy and clarity, drawing me into rapt attention.

“But you’re getting frail,” I protested. “Each day is becoming a struggle.”

“It doesn’t matter what is happening out there. In here,” pointing to his head and then his heart, “is bliss. It doesn’t change.”

“I was a POW you know,” he said, turning to look me fully in the eyes. “I was tortured in a German prisoner-of-war camp.”

We sat quietly together while I marveled at what he had seen and experienced.

“If those things had happened to me, I’d be bitter,” I finally said.

“I was at first,” he said. “After I was released, I wanted nothing to do with Germany or with Germans. I had moved on in my life as an art professor. I didn’t need to remember.”

Events in his life conspired to force him to remember when the granddaughter of German composer Richard Wagner phoned and asked him to be the set designer for an opera in Germany. At first he turned her down, but he could not get the offer out of his mind.

“It was a dream-come-true opportunity, but I couldn’t accept it because my resentment kept me trapped. That’s when I decided that Germany was not going to control me any longer. I called Friedlinde back and told her I’d come.”

Germany was a landmine of triggers causing flashbacks; the worst was the German language itself.

“I cringed just to hear a German word; it brought back memories of guards spitting out German words as they tortured us.”

Nevertheless, Milton learned the language so he could direct the workers on the set. Then, he was asked to become a German interpreter.

“That was the *best* thing that ever happened to me.”

I was baffled.

“To be an interpreter, you can’t just translate one word for another,” he clarified. “You have to understand the *context* of the language. To do that, you have to understand the people. In fact, you have to be a *bridge* of understanding.”

The lesson he shared with me took my breath away.

“It forced me to understand people I didn’t want to understand. It forced me to love people I had only known to fear. In doing that, I became free. It was my *real* release date from the German POW camp. If I hadn’t done that, I’d still be imprisoned today.”

Can We Die Healed?

Our affluent culture offers comforts and security that, paradoxically, lure us into imprisonment without our even realizing it. Most of us are not passionate about aging. We shy away from stating our real age. Pharmaceutical rescues, anti-aging formulations and surgical procedures pique our interest. Too many of us fail to seriously regard aging as an opportunity to cultivate wisdom, because we have become so arrogant as to actually believe that aging and death have nothing to teach us!

Liberation comes with facing our fears. It requires honesty to let go of denials and pretenses about aspects of ourselves we prefer to hide. Paradoxically, this honesty brings a humility that empowers us; we gain our real power when we let go of pride and willpower and acknowledge who we are and who we are not. We can become heroic to the people we are leaving behind, forgiving ourselves and learning to share our spirits.

Like Milton, we can choose to come to peace with what tortures us. Like John, we can face what we’ve failed to accomplish.

Like both of them, we can ask, “If I died today, what would be left unsaid or undone?”

Somehow, once we know that, we can often summon the courage to *live* the answer. ♦

Read more:

Grassman, Deborah. (2012). *The Hero Within*. St. Petersburg: Vandemere Press.