

Saving Private Ryan: Virtue and Valour Against 'Toxic Masculinity'

When my 16, 14, and 12 year-old sons asked me if they could watch *Thor: Ragnarok* for a second time, I reminded them that it wasn't likely to improve upon second viewing, and they good naturedly agreed. Their next choice was *Saving Private Ryan*. That gave me pause. I hadn't thought about that movie in a long time. I decided in spite of the intense realistic violence it would be much more worthy of their time.

When it came out in the theaters in 1998 my family took my grandfather to see it. He had been a Navy pilot during World War II and always insinuated he enjoyed an uneventful pleasure cruise around the Pacific for a few years until he finally came home from the war to Indiana to put his pilot skills to work as a crop duster.

The only surviving child of his four siblings, and the only son of a farmer who could have, for this reason, been exempted from military service, he enlisted anyway, only to return safe and sound and then proceed to terrify his mother with his aerial flying stunts like flying under bridges. Sometimes he flew so low over the neighbors' hickory trees to make the nuts rain down like sudden hail on the tin roof of the lovely brunette who would eventually become my grandmother.

Probably the most vivid memory I have of my grandfather was of his reaction to the movie *Saving Private Ryan*. Frail, and recently devastated by the loss of my grandmother, he was being supported discreetly at each elbow by two of his sons, as he moved with his unsteady shuffle out of the darkened theater, shell-shocked as the last of the credits rolled on the screen behind him.

His face was swollen and distorted by tears in a way I had only seen at my grandmother's passing. When he died not long after, my dad found his pilot log from the war which listed some of the most important battles in the Pacific theater of World War II.

But now twenty years have passed and I am watching it with my own three boys, imagining them barely qualifying as men, crouching, queasy in the landing craft of the opening scene heading straight for Omaha Beach, holding their guns in plastic bags waiting to disembark to instant death or dismemberment or perhaps to live another day in a human-made hell filled with men and parts of men.

It is a kind of emotional torture to watch and I ask myself why any sane, conscientious woman would let her kids watch it. It is certainly not *entertainment*. In the cold gray glow of the television light there are no raucous sounds of boys watching an action film. There are gulps and draws of breath that force me to conclude they are not casual gawkers at a violent spectacle. They seem almost reverent and so, I decide we should persevere together to the end.

After some time in the battlefields of France the movie shifts its focus to the fields of the American Midwest as the official black car comes up the long Iowa driveway, with the conspicuous white star on the side. Mrs. Ryan opens the door to the military man and the priest. We know she might be wondering, "Which one?" but she collapses with the weight of the news: three of her four sons are dead.

I remember the pang I felt as my teenaged self watched that scene. It was a powerful moment and I sobbed. And yet how different now as I can reach out and ruffle the hair of my son next to me on the couch? Now there is something very different happening inside me. I cannot cry. The moment is visceral. My insides experience a deep twisting pain at the thought of my three beautiful sons broken and dead.

The beach is captured and the American soldiers begin to move inland. But not before a pause above the beach where the survivors take in the ocean view: thousands of dead men lie on the beach or float and sway in the shallows of the wine dark sea. And I can't help remembering with irony the words of our would-be Commander-in-Chief, [Hilary Clinton](#), "Women have always been the primary victims of war."

When the war office makes it clear that they want the only living Ryan brother to be rescued from the thick of the Normandy invasion, for the sake of Mrs. Ryan (and unbeknownst to her), it raises serious ethical questions. Are this mother's feelings more precious than any other? One of the men who dies on the mission to save Private Ryan is himself the only son of a single mother. He dies calling out for her.

By the time the credits roll I am more confident that the investment of time is the right one though I am emotionally drained. Our modern lives are apparently so pampered that the hardest thing we might do all day could be to watch a historical movie to the end and not avert our eyes from the mere dramatic portrayal of the actual realities of our grandparents.

Upstairs, far from the fray are my daughter, 10, and two more sons, six and eight, too tender for such violence. The boys have a bunk bed but most mornings I find them together in the same bunk sleeping, arms around each other. I think of them upstairs in their bed and know that they are safe because other people chose to put their personal safety last. They have not been raised with the Nazi ideology because their great-grandfathers did their duty.

My little boys have been learning about World War II and my eight-year-old asks me questions like, "Mommy, were all the Nazi's bad people?" I struggle to make him understand what [Alexander Solzhenitsyn](#) said so well to adults:

If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?... And even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained. And even in the best of all hearts, there remains ... an un-uprooted small corner of evil...

Marxists already tried to draw that line between the rich and the poor. Nazis tried to draw that line between races. Someone always seems to be trying to draw that line somewhere other than where it should go and now there is a growing movement of those who would draw that line between men and women.

There is a lot of vague talk about so called *toxic masculinity*. But I would say, a lot of things are considered *toxic* in the wrong application or wrong dose; when it is misused or misunderstood. Fearless aggression in the right place, at the right time is very useful.

Consider [this boy](#), who saved six members of a family from a fire and died trying to save a seventh. Consider these [fifteen heroes](#) of the Las Vegas shooting. And who can forget [the heroes](#) on 9-11-01 who organized themselves to rush the cockpit of the hijacked Flight 93 and crashed the plane rather than allow it to be used as a weapon of mass destruction?

There will always be a need for the unique gifts of men, just like there will always be a need for the gifts of women. Men's aggression and insensitivity is a blessed thing not only in war but in each instance of chaos and disaster. The sensitivity and inherent agreeableness of women is a blessing in peacetime family life and no help in war and disaster. Aggression is necessary for the containment of evil and tragedy, which is not likely to simply go away, however we

arrange our society.

As women choose not to raise children, have fewer children (or just put off motherhood a long time) they spend more of their life without an understanding of the vulnerabilities of males that comes from raising a baby boy over whom you, as a mother, have supreme power to nurture or torture or even destroy.

After loving and raising a baby boy, a mother can no longer see all men as inherently toxic beings, locked in a zero sum, crooked game with women. Mothers who love their sons have a greater appreciation of the unique vulnerabilities and struggles of men than childless Women's Studies majors will ever understand.

If you are a vegetarian, it's because someone (likely a man) killed thousands of chipmunks and voles to make your lifestyle possible. If you eat seafood, someone (probably a man) risked his life to work on a dangerous fishing boat to provide for his family. If you are a pacifist that's great, but don't forget that you can make that choice because men died fulfilling their duty to provide a free country for you to exercise that pacifism in.

Don't like guns? Fine. Just remember other people (mostly men) are at your beck and call carrying guns so that you don't have to. Somebody has to have the courage to do what you would rather not. Have some gratitude.

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