



The following pieces were written in response to the Second World War novel The Young Lions by Irwin Shaw as part of the Literature and Medicine 2015 program at the VA New Jersey Health Care System – East Orange Campus (January – June 2015). Scholar: Meredith Sue Willis; Hospital Liaison: Ana Paiva; New Jersey Council on the Humanities liaison: Mary Grace Whealan.

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To Hope:

Noah became a soldier, a very good soldier. He learned the craft of being a soldier and how to survive and protect his fellow soldiers. He saved my life at least once but probably more than once.

One day, he insisted I dig my trench hole two feet deeper to protect myself. I was so dead tired, but he yelled at me to dig it deeper. It was because I dug the hole deeper than I wasn't flattened by a German tank. It rode over the top of my manhole. The dust and mud and stones tumbled on top of me but I survived and crawled out alive. That was because of Noah. Noah was my friend. He saved y life, and I will always owe him that.

– Lit and Med participant

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As you suffer the greatest sorrow of your young life, I am hoping my simple words can sustain you in days and years to come.

I am honored to have known your Noah. He was as strong as steel, had the wisdom of the sages, patience, faithfulness and perception. Noah grew up in his service to the country. He developed into a soldier without peer. His love for you and your son grew stronger with every battle and struggle he undertook.

– Lit and Med participant

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Dear Mrs. Hope Ackerman,

My condolences upon the death of your husband Noah. He was a brave man who faced a lot of adversity from his own countrymen as well as the enemy, but never faltered in his duty. I saw and admired a naive young man who believed in his own strength and goodness and put up with fellow human beings. He became a man who really believed ordinary people like Captain Green will lead and make everything alright in the world. Please tell your son that he should be very proud of his father, a man of character and courage and a hero.

Sincerely,
Michael Whitacre

– Lit and Med participant

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Michael would tell Hope how Noah saved him countless times. It was Noah who showed the most strength and sensed the impending danger and warned Michael. Noah could have been a Captain and a General if he had not died. Michael would tell Hope that Noah is the one who made him a man and a soldier. And he lived to tell his story. He understood Noah more than anyone else. Even more than Johnny Burnecker who he befriended first.

– Lit and Med participant

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“Hope, there wasn’t a day that went by that Noah didn’t bring your name up. He used to say that talking about you gave him the will to live, to go on each day. He used to say when he closed his eyes at night he could see your smiling face....”

Death is not easy to approach. You must take the approach that will make the loved one feel better.

– Lit and Med participant

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Dear Hope,

Your name “Hope” may not be what you are feeling. Maybe now...maybe never. Your beloved Noah was my friend during the war. We fought together, we talked, we watched out for each other. I know you might be thinking that I failed miserably at the task at hand. That if I had been more vigilant, your loved one would have returned home to his wife and child. I will carry that burden with me always, just as you will carry your loss.

– Lit and Med participant

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Dear Hope,

I am curious to find out how you became so courageous to follow your dreams of loving the one man your family would challenge. What aspirations did you hold that needed to remain within the deep well of your heart without audible expression?

Where would you find yourself in 2015? What travel adventures would you choose as your top ten? What would you do if your family in the U.S perished at the same time as Noah? Where would you reach out to or better stated, what coping skills would you employ to survive such sadness?

What does “core values of living” mean to you? Where do you see yourself in old age? What do you want to learn from me? Thank you for sharing your answers with me.

With warm regards,

Lit and Med participant

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A Conversation Between Michael and Hope

“There’s nothing I can say, I know, except that I was with him. At the end.”

“When he died?”

Michael nodded. “We were in the woods. There was a shot.” He didn’t know how much the Army had told her. He didn’t want to shock her, so frail and lovely.

She grabbed his arm and said fiercely, “Tell me. Tell me all of it.”

“He was so full of hope at that moment. He was talking about the future, it was like he had seen a vision of the future, and it was a good future, an American future.”

She gripped his arm tighter, as if she wanted more.

He said, “There was just one German, the very last German.”

“The German, did he get away?”

“I shot him,” Michael said, glad finally to tell it, to have it out. To feel a little proud.

“I’m sorry,” said Hope. “I’m so sorry.”

— Lit and Med participant