"What a Veteran Taught Me About America"

My father was three years old and my grandmother was six months pregnant with my Aunt Alicia when she packed everything she owned into seventeen suitcases and left Worcester, Massachusetts to meet my grandfather on his first post-Vietnam assignment with the Army. She was supposed to be escorted from Frankfurt to Munich but missed the connection and somehow made it to the train station, ordered tickets, dropped my father into the nearest stranger's lap and loaded the seventeen suitcases on the train.

My grandfather, an Army veteran of every United States conflict from Vietnam to Iraq, told me this story on a recent visit. I don't live near my grandfather so time with him is very special to me. Every visit, phone call, text message, birthday card, and story is another square in the patchwork quilt that is our relationship. It's a large quilt, colorful, full of happy memories and sad remembrances. It is a warm and durable quilt held together by the lessons my grandfather has taught me over the years. The strength of the quilt is found in the stitching, the quilting, and the binding. My grandfather has taught me the strength of the United States is found in how we value our family, serve our country, and honor our God.

Of all the things my grandfather has taught me about America, one of the most important is the value of family. My grandfather got married and shipped out to Vietnam when he was only seventeen. Through war, change of duty station, change of job, new States, and new countries, my grandparents stuck together and successfully raised four children. Joe Biden once said, "Veterans are the steel spine of this nation and their families...are the courageous heart." Family is the fuel that keeps a veteran going, and when all is said and done, the vision of a peaceful and better future for their families and others is their greatest hope. I am by no means perfect, but I try my best to follow my grandfather's guidance to be there for my family when they need me, to celebrate and grieve together, to be slow to anger, and to be quick to forgive. This is the strong stitching that keeps our family quilt together.

In word and action, my grandfather also taught me about service. He served his country with honor for sixty years. I am not yet old enough to vote, but I have seen people set fire to cities, storm the Capitol, and even commit murder because they didn't like the way others thought. My grandfather served his country through presidential administrations from Nixon to Trump by continuing to follow lawful orders even if his politics didn't align with the president's. In a smaller way, I try to emulate my grandfather in my school activities. Sometimes I may disagree with my teachers or coaches. I have to be confident enough to raise concerns but also respect their positions and authority to follow their directions. I strive to honor my school the way my grandfather honors his country. Acting peacefully and treating each other with respect is the quilting that ties us all together.

Finally, my grandfather taught me that religious freedom is the binding that holds America together. The Declaration of Independence speaks of our God-given rights and the very first amendment to the United States Constitution enshrines religious liberty into the fabric of our society. My grandfather taught me what it means to honor someone's faith. He has been to more than one-hundred countries across all continents. In those travels, he has worked with and respected people who practiced

Catholicism, Islamism, Judaism, and many other faiths. In my own life, I have tried to follow my grandfather's example. I volunteer in my own church on the worship team and in children's Sunday school. I have hosted Bible studies at my house, and I have also helped on a mission's trip doing hurricane cleanup in South Carolina. At no time did I discriminate against anyone or withhold service because their faith was different from my own.

This year, at the age of seventy-six, my grandfather retired from service for the third and final time. He was in the field training the next generation of military officers when his body, physically weakened from multiple cancers brought on by Agent Orange and other causes, could no longer keep up with the twenty- and thirty-year-olds he was training. I imagine President Barack Obama thinking of my grandfather when he said, "Whenever the world makes you cynical, whenever you doubt that courage and goodness and selflessness is possible, stop and look to a veteran. They don't always go around telling stories of their heroism, so it's up to us to ask and to listen, to tell those stories for them, and to live in our own lives the values for which they were prepared to give."

As I grow older, my quilt grows with me. All my experiences and everyone I meet are new blocks added to my quilt. In the same way, my grandfather has taught me that every American adds to the quilt of the United States. I hope that in the future the quilt that I have made with my grandfather and others can one day be bound with the quilts of other Americans. Just as the strength of this American quilt is found in the stitching, quilting, and binding, I have learned that the strength of America itself is found in its values of family, service of country, and honor of God.