

Friendly Fire

Editor's note: *In 1983, Gracie Parker Rosenberger fell asleep at the wheel and experienced a horrific car accident that has led to more than six dozen operations—including the amputation of both legs.*

In the physical therapy room at Walter Reed, my husband, Peter, and I met a young corporal who not only had lost a leg, but also had freckled bits of shrapnel still peppering the shin area of her remaining leg. The tiny fragments work themselves out over time, but can look awfully disconcerting.

Peter, harkening back to our first meeting as students on the campus of Belmont University when he candidly addressed my scarred and wounded body, didn't skirt the issue but directly asked about her injuries. Noticing the tiny pieces of metal just below the skin of her leg, he asked her with complete deadpan, "You haven't been hunting with Vice President Cheney, have you?"

The face of the young corporal lit up with laughter, and she quickly looked around the room—almost as if she was making sure it was permissible to laugh at the reference to the former vice president's famous hunting mishap. Breaking the tension of her pain and despondency, she opened up. After talking for a few moments, her voice lowered as she quietly asked, "Will I ever get a boyfriend?"

Thumbing toward Peter, I quickly let her know, "Hey, I found this guy!"

Interrupting me, Peter (with a feigned look of worry) admonished, "Gracie, we're trying to cheer the girl up. Hasn't she suffered enough?"

At that point, we all started laughing. But through the laughter, we still addressed the heart issues: *What will*

happen to me? Will I be loved? Will I be accepted?

On our next visit to Walter Reed, we reconnected with the young soldier, and she not only was walking superbly, but also looked like a different person. Her confidence, smile and general overall sense of “I’m going to get through this” seemed to flow out of her. After lots of hugs, we all knew the road ahead—although full of challenges—was bright and exciting.

But that’s not always the story for wounded warriors. So many truths are hammered home during my visits to Walter Reed. In many respects, Peter and I regard the Army hospital as one giant metaphor for the church. Highly skilled warriors struggling with devastating wounds are found not only on Ward 57 at Walter Reed, but in church pews and pastors’ offices across the country.

Some marriage issues can feel like amputations; I believe I am uniquely qualified to make that statement. Relationship discord can result in lifetime heartaches and produce many casualties. Observing wounded soldiers often provides a picture of what confronts many of today’s pastors.

One such encounter stood out during our most recent visit to Walter Reed. While visiting freshly wounded soldiers performing physical therapy in the Military Advanced Training Center (MATC) on campus at Walter Reed (I sang for the groundbreaking of that facility), we met a bitter young man whose wounds resulted from friendly fire. Although an accident, he was struck down by his own team.

In his mind, as he looks down at his amputated leg, he doesn’t even get the bragging rights to say he lost it for his country. Rather, he thinks he lost it *because* of his country. Of course that’s not true—he’s a hero for even enlisting; but those are hard feelings to fight.

Walking over to greet him, he rudely snapped at me. Lying on

his back while working out on a physical therapy table, he could only see me from the waist up. The physical therapist working with him looked embarrassed, and quickly tried to cover for me by telling the young man I was welcome there and that I had a lot of practical advice worth hearing.

Disbelieving the therapist, he snarled back with a hateful comment. Momentarily stunned, I regained my composure, and while holding on to a railing, propped my prosthetic leg near where his head rested on the low workout table.

He not only noticed my artificial foot beside him (encased in a beautiful shoe, I might add), but his eyes turned to watch me balancing on my other artificial leg as well.

"You're not the only amputee in here, big guy." I said, while looking him squarely in the eye.

The soldier in him quietly nodded at me, and he grew silent.

Ten feet away, Peter listened to a man who, although he had lost both legs, cracked jokes with a contagious sense of humor. Cutting up with him (as Peter often does), the soldier's face quickly clouded over, however, when Peter pointedly asked him how things were back home.

Looking down at his new prosthetic legs, he whispered out, "My marriage is on the rocks, and it doesn't look good." The loss of his legs didn't keep him from joking, but the wounds of his heart silenced the laughter.

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Peter asked a mother if her son's father had been up to the hospital. Looking over at her son's newly amputated left leg, as well as the halo device holding the pins piercing his right leg, her jaw tightened as she flatly said, "He left years ago, and good riddance."

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How many of us deal with deep wounds caused by those closest to us? How many of us have caused damage to the ones we love and swore to protect? Sometimes “friendly fire” wounds are compounded with the shame of the wound itself. We feel like our wounds come with dishonor, and our fists clench with a rage that wants to choke the one(s) who hurt us.

Other times, we realize with horror how poorly we treated to communicate those counting on us, and the guilt and shame fill us with despair. We can all recall those things that cause tears to pour from our eyes—the things driving us to lash out at the ones who hit us with “friendly fire.” In our pain, we might even strike at people who are simply trying to encourage us.

I propped an artificial limb on a physical therapy table to help a hurting young man gain perspective and, hopefully, see he can move past the horrific injury that altered his life. Christ is the wounded warrior who presents His own wounds, not only to communicate perspective, but also to demonstrate His love for each of us. He didn’t just prop a metal leg on the table; He laid down His life and was Himself wounded—for our sins. His wounds made it possible for ours to be healed. He never clenched His fists, but rather stretched out His hands and received the nails.

Knowing that has given me the courage to face my own “friendly fire” events, including the self-inflicted one so many years ago; even today, looking at the wounds and scars from my car accident is still difficult ... after nearly three decades.

But when I look at His wounds, I am strengthened to know that He redeemed my soul and is redeeming my wounds. He even uses my broken body and wounded heart to play a small part in the redemption of others’ hurts; maybe even yours.

For a lifetime, I’ve trusted God with my trauma and disability. Beyond my wildest dreams, He’s reached into what

most thought was a senseless tragedy and used it to comfort wounded warriors, broken hearts and many others struggling with “friendly fire.”

“But it was our sins that did that to Him, that ripped and tore and crushed Him—our sins! He took the punishment, and that made us whole. Through His bruises we get healed” (Isaiah 53:5, MSG).

Gracie Rosenberger and her husband, Peter, started *Standing With Hope*, a nonprofit prosthetic limb outreach that continues to help amputees in developing countries. Although saddled with nearly \$9 million in health care costs and ongoing severe chronic pain, Gracie has defied the odds and emerged as a powerful voice of courage and inspiration to individuals around the world. Married for 25 years, Gracie and Peter live in Nashville, Tenn., and have two sons—one of which attends the United States Military Academy Preparatory School at West Point. This passage is from her book *Gracie-Standing With Hope*, and was used by permission. © 2010 Liberty University Press.