

The Stars of the Wall

Cheryl Somers Aubin

Sergeant Lawrence Detwiler. Five months after arriving in Vietnam, he was fatally wounded by shell fragments while leading his unit on Hill 102 near the village of An Lam. Today, his name is etched on panel nineteen at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

The Vietnam War was in my time but not of my world. My family had no sons or daughters who went to this war. Each time I visited the "Wall," I felt moved, but not connected—until I learned about Sgt. Detwiler.

On my most recent visit, the Wall seemed to grow taller with each step I took. Soon enough, I came to the place where I could see my full reflection. A few steps more, and the wall was twice as tall as I. The flags reflected beautifully against the smooth black granite. I aimed my camera, focused, and took a picture.

The day drizzled a chilly rain off and on, and the slate became wet and slippery where the two sides meet—representing the years of our initial involvement (1959) and our final departure (1975). It was then that I glimpsed some flowers left there in the shape of a star. The banner read, "Gold Star Mothers." Yellow mums, fading and drooped.

Just a few steps away from the yellow star I came across a simple grapevine wreath. Green, gold, and red ribbon wrapped around it. At the top, a small American flag crossed a POW/MIA flag; an artificial daisy at the bottom completed it. On a black cutout of Vietnam, the name Lawrence Detwiler was visible in black letters against a gold background. The attached index card read:

Gold Star mother Dorothy Detwiler

By Chapter 436

Vietnam Veterans of America

In memory of

Sgt. Lawrence Detwiler, USA

KIA 22 August 1969

I suddenly imagined losing my own, my only son, and began to cry. For so long, the war, the memorial, could not reach me, but it touched me now, clenching my heart as I pondered a mother's loss, a mother's mourning.

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"Each year the Gold Star Mothers come to the Wall and other memorials the last Sunday in September," Mary Wheeler, the group's national president, explained. It is a day to honor the mothers of sons or daughters who "served and died that this world might be a better place in which to live," says a booklet produced by the Gold Star Mothers. By laying wreaths at memorials in Washington, D.C., and throughout the United States, the mothers themselves continue to serve their country and are bonded together out of their loss to aid veterans and to exemplify love of country.

Dorothy Detwiler is a Gold Star mother. Escorted to D.C. and then to the Wall by two Vietnam veterans, she once again said a prayer as she laid the wreath in front of the panel that holds her son's name.

"It is always hard to go there, but I feel a calm air sweep over me and feel as if he is with us," Mrs. Detwiler said. "It never seems to get better, but the Vietnam veterans are always there for me."

It has now been thirty-five years since the death of her oldest son, killed in Vietnam at the age of twenty-three.

"I can touch his name on the Wall and almost feel like I'm with him," Detwiler continued. "As I approach my eyes go straight to his name."

Before she leaves the Wall, she always presses her lips up to his name.

Sgt. Lawrence Detwiler...As I stepped back, the wall of names was again visible from above my head to below my knees. Side to side, the names stretched out like arms.

Just as I had earlier brought the flags into focus through my camera's lens, so, too, did this mother's wreath bring each of the names into sharp focus. Each is a mother's son or daughter lost.

When I finally turned to leave, I paused and looked again at Mrs. Detwiler's wreath, a wreath she placed there to honor her son on a day that honors her. I silently thanked her for her sacrifice and for the gift of understanding her wreath had brought to me. And I extended a prayer for Mrs. Detwiler—mother to mother.

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Baby Thoughts

Cheryl Somers Aubin

It enters my heart slowly, on little bitter steps. "Baby," it whispers. "Another baby."

I shake my head and push this thought away even as I think of bringing my son into my life and the incredible journey of these last five years. Then I tell myself, again, that I am too old at forty.

"Baby," it demands, a little stronger. I remind myself of how sick I got after Charlie was born, how the doctors told me it would probably happen again.

"Baby," more insistent now, louder. Yes, I say. Yes. I do want another baby. Yes, I want one more time to carry a baby, give birth, give my little boy the gift of a brother or sister, my husband another child. I want to hold a newborn and nurse him and watch him grow. I have this love, too, in my heart for another child.

But there are other reasons, I tell these baby thoughts—reasons why I shouldn't have another child, reasons I cannot easily share with others.

The image of my husband enters my mind, pushing the thoughts back. I see his worried face, the extra lines there now. I remember the mind-numbing fatigue we both went through at every phase of Charlie's development. I see the fear and exhaustion in his eyes and sense the concern on his mind and on his lips about how another child might affect me. He is scared.

Most of my friends think I should have another one. "Think about Charlie," they say. "He needs a little brother or sister." My friend, Bill, a stay-at-home dad, tells me that when Charlie plays at his house of three kids, he doesn't quite understand the teasing and "sibling stuff" and often dissolves into tears or yelling when things don't go exactly his way. How else could Charlie learn these life lessons without a sibling to teach him?

I love that I have both a brother and a sister, and my husband is the oldest of six. What about when we get older, I wonder. Doesn't Charlie need a brother or sister to help him with us? What is the right thing to do?

Lately I've been looking for a sign, praying about what to do, resolving "no" one day, then "yes" again for a week, and then back to "no."

My son told me the other day that he wanted to go to church to

ask God for a baby brother. Okay, I thought to myself, this is absolutely the sign I've been looking for.

Or was the truer sign a few days later? Finding myself in tears, worn out physically and emotionally with the challenge of raising a smart, active little boy, I curled up on the bed and asked myself what I would do now if I had a baby to tend, needing me as much as Charlie and my husband do, especially when I feel so depleted. My answer to these baby thoughts must be "no," because when my hands are full with Charlie's misbehaving, when my mind is stretching to find something positive to say about his behavior so I don't focus on the negatives, I think to myself, "What if I had a baby on my hip right now?"

I'm realizing that the coping skills I use to get through daily life are devoted to my son. What if I weren't getting enough sleep? What if my husband started traveling a lot and I was left with a cranky five-year-old and a colicky baby? How would I make it through?

Mostly I question my ability to mother another child because of the clinical depression that descended on me within a year of Charlie's birth. Like a heavy, wet blanket, it took me down, endangering my health, my marriage, and, at one sad point, my very life.

Looking back on that time, I realize the one good thing was that I felt I could care for Charlie. All my energy, all of life's promise and goodness were reflected back in his beautiful brown eyes. I knew I could not leave my son mother-less. I knew that he needed me.

I also know that the depression, which I am on the other side of now after several years, taught me about my own limitations. I still must cope with the hangover of depression, the way it comes close at times, then recedes, and I am slowly coming to accept that I may need to take medication for the rest of my life.

As Charlie prepares to enter school full-time next year, I feel as if my arms are emptying. Too soon, I think. Too soon for my full-time mothering days to be over! But I tell myself that we will just be entering a different phase in our lives. I know that Charlie will continue to grow and learn and frustrate and amaze me. I am honored to be his mother, and I welcome all the sticky wet kisses and hugs I can get.

So I need to turn to these baby thoughts and say goodbye. I will mourn for the child I will not hold, the moments that will not be. And I will wrap myself in Charlie's baby memories—of him lying in his crib, clutching his blue bunny to his cheek, binky working busily in his mouth, the way he would giggle at me as I performed the cheers from my college days. Sucking his toes, eyes lighting up, eyes slowly closing to

sleep—they all make up thousands of memories of those sweet baby days. I will remember all this as I ready myself to give away his baby clothes.

And I know that other thoughts will come to visit. "Writer," one now whispers in my ear. "Think of your dream of becoming a writer."

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