Dear {Salutation},

During this Memorial Day holiday, may we remember all those who have died in defense of the freedoms that we enjoy every day. The following story took place in the fall of 2000, and I thought I’d share it with you in honor of this special day. Perhaps share it with your family before dinner. It delivers a powerful message about what this day really is.

**The Boys of Iwo Jima**

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Each year my video production company is hired to go to Washington, D.C., with the eighth grade class from Clinton, Wisconsin where I grew up, to videotape their trip. I always enjoy visiting our nation’s capitol, and each year I take some special memories back with me. But this fall’s trip was especially memorable.

On the last night of our trip, we stopped at the Iwo Jima Memorial. It is the largest bronze statue in the world and depicts one of the most famous photographs in history – that of the six brave men raising the American flag at the top of Mount Surabachi on the Island of Iwo Jima, Japan during WWII. Over one hundred students and chaperones piled off the buses and headed towards the Memorial. I noticed a solitary figure at the base of the statue, and as I got closer he asked, “What’s your name and where are you guys from?”

I told him that my name was Michael Powers and that we were from Clinton, Wisconsin.

“Hey, I’m a Cheesehead, too! Come gather around, Cheeseheads, and I’ll tell you a story.”

James Bradley just happened to be in Washington, D.C. to speak at the Memorial the following day. He had just said good night to the image of his dad, who had previously passed away, but whose image is part of the statue. He was about to leave when he saw the buses pull up. I videotaped him as he spoke to us, and received his permission to share what he said from my videotape. It is one thing to tour the incredible monuments filled with history in Washington, D.C., but it is quite another to get the kind of insight we received that night. When all had gathered around, he reverently began to speak. Here are his words from that night:

“My name is James Bradley, and I’m from Antigo, Wisconsin. My dad is on that statue, and I just wrote a book called *Flags of Our Father*, which is #5 on the New York Times Best-Seller list right now. It is the story of the six boys you see behind me. Six boys raised the flag.”

“The first guy putting the pole in the ground is Harlon Block. Harlon was an all-state football player. He enlisted in the Marine Corps with all the senior members of his football team. They were off to play another type of game, a game called “war”. But it didn’t turn out to be a game. Harlon, at the age of twenty-one, died with his intestines in his hands. I don’t say that to gross you out; I say that because there are generals who stand in front of this statue and talk about the glory of war. You guys need to know that most of the boys in Iwo Jima were seventeen, eighteen, and nineteen years old.”

(He pointed to the statue.)

“You see this next guy? That’s Rene Gagnon from New Hampshire. If you took Rene’s helmet off at the moment this photo was taken and looked in the webbing of that helmet, you would find a photograph. A photograph of his girlfriend. Rene put that in there for protection because he was scared. He was eighteen years old. Boys won the battle of Iwo Jima. Boys. Not old men.”

“The next guy here, the third guy in this tableau, was Sergeant Mike Strank. Mike is my hero. He was the hero of all these guys. They called him the ‘old man’ because he was so old. He was already twenty-four. When Mike would motivate his boys in training camp, he didn’t say, ‘Let’s go kill the enemy’ or ‘Let’s die for our country.’ He knew he was talking to boys. Instead he would say, ‘You do what I say, and I’ll get you home to your mothers.’ “

“The last guy on this side of the statue is Ira Hayes, a Pima Indian from Arizona. Ira walked off Iwo Jima. He went into the White House with my dad. President Truman told him, ‘You’re a hero.’ He told reporters, ‘How can I feel like a hero when 250 of my buddies hit the island with me and only twenty-seven of us walked off alive?’

“So you take your class at school. 250 of you spending a year together having fun, doing everything together. Then all 250 of you hit the beach, but only twenty-seven of your classmates walk off alive. That was Ira Hayes. He had images of horror in his mind. Ira Hayes died dead drunk, face down at the age of thirty-two, ten years after this picture was taken.”

“The next guy, going around the statue, is Franklin Sousley from Hilltop, Kentucky, a fun-lovin’ hillbilly boy … Franklin died on Iwo Jima at the age of nineteen. When the telegram came to tell his mother that he was dead, it went to the Hilltop General Store. A barefoot boy ran that telegram up to his mother’s farm. The neighbors could hear her scream all night and into the morning. The neighbors lived a quarter of a mile away.”

“The next guy, as we continue to go around the statue, is my dad, John Bradley from Antigo, Wisconsin, where I was raised. My dad lived until 1994, but he would never give interviews. When Walter Cronkite’s producers or the New York Time would call, we were trained as little kids to say, ‘No, I’m sorry sir, my dad’s not here. He is in Canada fishing. No, there is no phone there, sir. No, we don’t know when he’s coming back.’

“My dad never fished or even went to Canada. Usually, he was sitting right there at the table eating his Campbell’s soup, but we had to tell the press that he was out fishing. He didn’t want to talk to the press. You see, my dad didn’t see himself as a hero. Everyone thinks these guys are heroes, ‘cause they are in a photo and on a monument. My dad knew better. He was a medic. John Bradley from Wisconsin was a caregiver. In Iwo Jima he probably held over 200 boys as they died, and when boys died in Iwo Jima, they writhed and screamed in pain.”

“When I was a little boy, my third grade teacher told me that my dad was a hero. When I went home and told my dad that, he looked at me and said, ‘I want you always to remember that the heroes of Iwo Jima are the guys who did not come back. DID NOT come back.’ “

“So that’s the story about six nice young boys. Three died on Iwo Jima, and three came back as national heroes. Overall, 7,000 boys died on Iwo Jima in the worst battle in the history of the Marine Corps. My voice is giving out, so I will end here. Thank you for your time.”

Suddenly, the monument wasn’t just a big old piece of metal with a flag sticking out of the top. It came to life before our eyes with the heartfelt words of a son who did indeed have a father who was a hero. Maybe not a hero in his own eyes, but a hero nonetheless.

*Michael T. Powers resides in Wisconsin with his wife Kristi. His stories appear in 22 inspirational books including his own,* Heart Touchers: Life-Changing Stories of Faith, Love, and Laughter*, where this story is included in somewhat different form. Visit* [*www.HeartTouchers.com*](http://www.HeartTouchers.com) *for a sneak peek at Mike’s work in progress, or to join the thousands of readers on his inspirational email list. You can email him at HeartTouchers@aol.com.*

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Let us never forget from the Revolutionary War to the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and all the wars in-between, that sacrifice was made for our freedom.

**Reminder:** Every day that you wake up FREE is a Great Day!

Sincerely,