

In Absentia:

The words mean "not here" in Latin as in "He's not here to receive his award so we will present it to him in absentia."

This past weekend we attended the splendid graduation ceremony of a very close young friend. She received her degree, along with 300 or so classmates, from Lawrence University in Appleton. Lawrence is a marvelous school, great faculty and dedicated, lively students. I admire their programs and applaud their results.

There were twenty or thirty graduates who, for one reason or another, could not attend the ceremony. They received their degrees in absentia. One of these absent graduates was singled out before the entire role was called. We were told that his father would accept his degree for him. We were told he had shipped out for duty in Iraq. This caused thunderous applause. When his name was called, somewhere towards the middle of the alphabet, the audience was again reminded that his father was accepting for him. His father received a mostly standing ovation.

This is enormously saddening. It is saddening for a number of reasons. It is also very difficult to write about it without sounding like one is against courage and valor and camaraderie and service. Let me address service first.

The men and women in service and especially those in combat develop and cherish a fierce sense of loyalty to their comrades. There is nothing more important to the soldier than getting his fellow warriors through the fight, to return safely home. There is no greater loss for a soldier than the loss of the soldier you are fighting beside. This bond is of the most profound order and one that those of us safe at home can only try to understand. There is no deeper feeling. It is on a level with a mother's love of her child. Soldiers have this feeling for each other regardless of the conflict they are fighting in. It exists above and apart from politics, causes, morals and opinions. That is part of the tragedy.

A soldier's love is not the tragedy. That we send our youngsters to test and prove it is the tragedy. This boy has volunteered for hell. We stand and applaud. Why do we maintain this hell to swallow him? We created it and we knowingly keep it going.

And what of the University? Why would the School single out this child to the exclusion of others? There were many students who were absent. What of the student who left early because her mother is dying. What of the student whose own health was frail and failing. What of the myriad reasons that a student might have for missing the ceremony? Why was the soldier who is headed for the sheer madness of Iraq singled out? If I thought for a minute that Lawrence was endorsing our war policy I would have been standing in the aisle booing. They don't. So I didn't. So why did they single out the soldier?

Is it because a soldier's love in service to the country is more important than love for family or the land or teaching or the sick? It is not and you know it. The longer we continue to make it so, the easier it will be to keep sending our children to die for...nothing.

No, that's not right. It's not *nothing* that they die for. They die for each other. Soldiers die for their brother and sister soldiers. That is valor. I am not against valor. I am against valor in service of, wasted on, a war created by cynical pinheads who live by books and boardrooms and theories and fear and platitudes.

So please, President Beck, esteemed Faculty, please tell me why you set it up this way.

I was moved again and again by the fellowship and joy and music of your University. The ceremony was honest and direct, deeply respectful of academic tradition. It is abundantly clear that your focus on the best liberal education possible helps to produce fabulous graduates who will move mountains in their chosen worlds.

But please, President Beck, why the heartstrings for the soldier and not the dutiful daughter or the third world volunteer? Why is a soldier called out "in absentia" and not his pacific counterpart? Why not also present the graduate who's reading overtime in a nursing home and ask her mother to accept for her?

I would have applauded them both. You make it terribly difficult when you chose only one. You make it beyond painful when you chose to showcase only battlefield valor.

In his case the possible implications of "In Absentia", the final price of valor, are too awful to applaud. I believe a moment of silence is the more appropriate homage.