

Veterans Day serves as an occasion for us to reflect upon what our lives might be like if our servicemen and women were not defending us vigilantly.

The United States Department of Defense is our nation's largest employer. It is in the business of protecting us from predators here at home and in our travels around the world and it has succeeded so well in its mission that it's not at all surprising that we often take our country's freedom for granted.

I've learned what anarchy and oppression must be like because I've met people who fled their countries to escape war and persecution back home.

**The Neighbors:** When I was about fourteen or so, I babysat for a really quiet couple with a series of dark blue numbers tattooed on their forearms who had been liberated from Nazi concentration camps in Germany.

My mother advised me not to discuss those numbers with them so I never learned anything more about the circumstances that brought them to this country beyond the fact that my mother had also said theirs was a very sad story and mentioning the numbers would stir up terrible memories for them.

What I can remember now is that they had lots of kosher food in their refrigerator and they had no relatives to babysit if I were unavailable.

**Judy:** In college a few years later, my chemistry lab partner was named Judy and it was suggested that I not inquire about her background either.

Turns out, we became good friends and she told me about it anyway.

Judy and her family had fled their home during the Hungarian Revolution. She had crawled beneath a barbed-wire fence in the dark with her family and they had all run across a field together while people shot at them. Her father was hit and I can't remember now whether she told me that he lived or died.

**Two Students:** When my son was young, I taught a course at Syracuse University. One day there was a noisy disturbance in my outer office and when I went to check, I discovered books and papers everywhere, chairs knocked over, and two young women students of mine screaming furiously at each other and fighting violently. Their rage was raw and intense.

They were just freshman, both from the Middle East. Back home, they lived in countries on opposite sides of the Arab-Israeli conflict. One was a soldier

in the Israeli military; the other had suffered the loss of family members in the conflict. Somehow, I managed to calm them but the three of us gained a very sad and unique perspective on the nature and horrors of war that day.

**Salma:** In graduate school, I made a few international friends. One day, Salma was distraught. Saddam Hussein had invaded Kuwait and American planes were flying over Jordan to get to targets in Iraq. She was from Jordan and she was terrified that the country might be attacked. Her parents were huddled in a bomb shelter there and she wanted to book a flight to get back.

We talked all afternoon. Turns out, she was not really from Jordan at all but from Palestine. She said she'd been advised not to mention that fact here and then she told me a long, horrifying story about her family's exile in Jordan.

**Carole:** She is a classical pianist who speaks three languages fluently. Back home in Lebanon, she had been named the top honors student in her country.

She had emigrated alone to Canada after fleeing Beirut on the last plane to airlift people out of there. Her parents had fled the beleaguered city to their summer residence in the area where the famous cedars of Lebanon stand.

One day, her father traveled back into Beirut on a business matter. He was turned in there by a former neighbor and captured by the dreaded Hezbollah.

Knowing the horrors that awaited him, he recalled how hard it can be to shoot and hit a moving target so when the convoy he was being transported in stopped at a checkpoint and his captors were momentarily preoccupied, he managed to escape by jumping out of the vehicle and running for his life.

**Monika:** She and her family fled Poland immediately after the suspension of Solidarity and the imposition of martial law there when leader Lech Walesa was interned because his sympathizers were being arrested and imprisoned.

We are unbelievably fortunate in this country. The privileges of freedom that we enjoy are so extensive and abundant that people from all over the world hope to come to the United States to escape conflict and tyranny.

Sadly, the blessings of freedom come at truly staggering cost to our military service members in bloodshed, suffering and disability. On this special day, set aside just once each year to honor our veterans, I hope that every one of us will find a way to express his or her deepest gratitude to an area veteran.