

March 15, 1991 (Vo. 6, no. 14)

Dear Colleague:

Thirty-seven-year old Norman Schwarzkopf, a lieutenant colonel, found himself in the middle of a mine field with a company of young soldiers in South Vietnam in May, 1970. A private who had stepped on a mine was thrashing and screaming on the ground. The men around him were terrified that his flailing might trigger another explosion. Schwarzkopf began inching across the mine field to reach the wounded private, knowing that each step he took could be his last. His legs began to shake uncontrollably, and his knees were suddenly so watery that he had to reach down and grip them until they stilled. When Schwarzkopf finally reached the soldier he found that he needed to set the boy's badly wrenched leg. He shouted at his liaison officer, Bob Trabbert, to cut some splits from a tree. Trabbert pulled out his sheath knife and passed it to a soldier, who took one step toward the tree and triggered another mine. Trabbert's left leg was blown off, an arm was broken backward to reveal the bone of the elbow socket, and a hole was gouged in his head. He survived, but the three other men with him were killed instantly.

For having tried to rescue the wounded private, Schwarzkopf was awarded his third Silver Star. He had no choice. There was his obvious duty and pride; moreover, the soldiers, not daring to move from where they stood, were watching him. But by being with the wounded boy rather than with Trabbert and the other men his life was saved. "You become terribly fatalistic in combat," Schwarzkopf said (TNR, March 11, 1991).

Not only was his life saved, but twenty years later Norman Schwarzkopf became an American hero. When President Bush mentioned the general's name to a joint session of Congress, its members rose to their feet to applaud. One step--what an enormous difference it could make! A few inches to one side could have meant grisly death, but a few inches to the other side meant survival and, in the course of time, military glory.

A deep reason for human religiosity is this awareness of the importance of chance (accident, luck, fate) in any person's life. God must exist to right the wrong of bad luck. A heightened awareness of chance in life also explains, I think, the tendency toward conservatism in old age. An old person may still believe in social reform, but he also knows with distressing clarity that no society however just can remove the ever present threat and arbitrariness of luck in life.

Best wishes,

