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Uncommon Courage In Coopersville, Michigan

In August 2009, Paul Breen, of Coopersville, Michigan, died at the age of ninety-one. It was not until his funeral that my family found out how courageous Uncle Paul had been. His courage was based on his integrity and convictions. Courage is more than bravery, which is often an impulsive act. Courage is holding to a course of action based on one's moral convictions, even in the face of difficulty.

Uncle Paul grew up on a farm outside of Coopersville, Michigan. His parents, especially his mother, were devout Christians. Every family member was required to memorize the Ten Commandments and apply them to their lives.

As a young man, Uncle Paul left the farm for a well-paid job at a General Motors plant in nearby Grand Rapids. Shortly after Uncle Paul started working there, the United States entered World War II. General Motors began retooling its plant to make parts for tanks.

During World War II, patriotism was very strong. Newspapers and radio programs gave countless examples of heroic servicemen fighting for their country. Thousands of young men enlisted. Uncle Paul's older brother Grover was the first man to enlist at Wright Township Hall, near the Breen farm. The Breen family was very proud of Grover's service to his country.

Then, Paul was drafted. Since the start of the war, Uncle Paul had privately been troubled with the thought that he would be called on to fight in a war and possibly have to kill fellow human beings. Not only had he been taught the commandment "Thou shalt not kill," but he had also been taught that man was made in the image of God. Uncle Paul thought that the United States was fighting a just war. But he also believed that he could not take the life of another person in good conscience.

During World War II, conscientious objectors were rare. Nearly everyone believed that the United States was fighting a just war. Patriotism was especially great in the Coopersville area. Many of Uncle Paul's Dutch neighbors, relatives, and fellow church members had relatives in the Nazi-occupied Netherlands. In such an atmosphere, Uncle Paul must have found it very difficult to make his appeal to the draft board, which was composed of his neighbors and friends. He knew that if his appeal was successful, he would be highly criticized by everyone who knew him. He also knew that he would lose his good job at General Motors because conscientious objectors were not allowed to work with military equipment. He would forever be branded a coward.

Despite these consequences, Paul Breen went to the draft board and told them that he could not serve in the military in good conscience. He made clear to them his love for the United States and its soldiers, who were risking their lives to preserve American freedom. He told them that he was willing to do almost anything, but he would not kill a fellow human being. The draft board must have sensed Uncle Paul's internal struggle. It released him from military duty and granted him conscientious objector status.

The consequences of Uncle Paul's decision came quickly. He lost his job at General Motors and was assigned to work on a farm near Coopersville that supplied the war effort. He worked long hours for very low pay. One can only guess at the comments that he endured from the families of military men, especially those whose sons had been injured or killed. Even his own family probably felt a sense of shame that their son and brother had seemingly shirked his duty to his country. Uncle Paul, however, worked hard and never complained. He supported the war effort in a way that did not compromise his convictions.

After the war, people eventually forgot that Uncle Paul had been a conscientious objector. But Uncle Paul's conviction that all human life is precious to God never faded. He spent the rest of his life helping others in need. For many years, he volunteered at International Aid in Spring Lake, Michigan, collecting and sending supplies to foreign countries suffering from natural disasters. He also shared the produce from his large garden with local families in need.

There was no veteran's flag next to Uncle Paul's obituary in the paper. No Boy Scouts will put a flag on his grave next Memorial Day. Yet, he was a courageous man. He held fast to his convictions even when it was very unpopular to do so. Our family has no stories to tell of Uncle Paul's bravery in war. But the story of his personal conviction and courage is an important one that must be told.