

## INSIGHTS

# The Thing: To Elevate Us All

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**Could this be the thing?** The thing that answers the call we hear within ourselves. The thing that re-ignites a passion for excellence. The thing that inspires positive action in individuals, teams, organizations, or communities. Dare I say, the thing that unites a nation? For this to happen, this thing must not just be appealing, but must feed a visceral hunger. It has to tap into something we all know in our bones is powerfully important, no matter what our journey or context. It must illuminate a path that young and old alike can follow, especially in the toughest moments. That's a tall order. But there's good news: This thing is something people want. The problem is, we've gotten disconnected from it. Until now:

## The Thing is Honor

Now, do not lose momentum on me here! I'm not talking about the feel-good, bumper sticker, nod our heads and say, "Yes, it's important" and move on, version of honor. I'm talking about the "No kidding it's important – so what are you going to do about it?" version. This is the Honor that thumps you in the chest, calls you out, challenges you to walk your talk, and dials up the moment-by-moment test in your personal and professional life. It's the Honor you can't get away from because it all counts.

Embracing the spirit of honor stirs your soul and doesn't let you off the hook because you want to be on this hook. If people connect to honor on this level, it truly has the capacity to shift the ground of personal and leadership development and change our nation.

Imagine a place where leaders are hungry to live their values at home and work. Imagine classrooms, from kindergarten to high school, where character development is not a program, but is woven into the fabric of every classroom, ballfield, lunchroom, and faculty lounge. Imagine businesses, organizations, and political parties where doing the hard, right thing is the unapologetic default. Imagine communities where citizens have a shared standard to be their best with and for each other. Do you feel that? The desire is there. Let's stop imagining and start building.

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## Defining This Thing

*Honor: Living a shared moral and ethical code of excellence*

There are a few important elements to this definition.

1. Honor is a shared phenomenon. Whether we do or don't have honor is defined through the eyes of the community to which we want to belong, even if it's with just one other person. This tribe signifies "who *we* are" and "who *we* are not." Think about it: the Boy/Girl Scout Oath, a marriage vow, a school honor code, the SEAL Creed, the Hippocratic Oath, or the Pledge of Allegiance, and on and on – all of these reflect membership in something bigger than oneself.
2. There is a "Code of Excellence" that holds the values "we" embrace as sacred. It represents the standards, the price of admission, and the expectations for membership. The code should be aspirational, pulling us to our "best selves." Violation of this code literally "dishonors" the community and should threaten membership for the offender.
3. The code of excellence must be "moral and ethical," taking off the table any option for a self-serving, deviant, or perverse version of honor.
4. All of this means nothing unless it is lived. An executive once shared an important insight: "Your values, creed, faith...mean little. Until they're tested. Then they mean everything." Valuing something, or declaring a standard is an important first step, but only to the degree that it is put into action. To *have* honor, one must *live* honor, placing the responsibility squarely on the shoulders of the individual, moment by moment.

"Honor" isn't a term you hear much anymore, but its spirit and value have never been more needed. The time has come to reconnect with the essence of honor. And we believe there are 3,519 points of entry.

## The On-Ramp to Honor

Of the 40 million people who have served in the U.S. military, just over 3,500 have been recognized as the ultimate exemplars for our values "as lived" in the chaos of battle. Abraham Lincoln commissioned the Medal of Honor in 1861 as the nation's highest and most prestigious military award for a reason. It serves as the declaration that the values we hold most dear can be demonstrated by those among us, even in the most challenging and extreme of circumstances.



True to the definition of Honor above, no one ever received the Medal of Honor for *intending* to do something. They took action and brought the values (our code of excellence) to life, in spite of all the challenges – often times by making the ultimate sacrifice. These inspirational yet humble heroes often describe themselves as "ordinary" people, who, in a critical seemingly impossible moment, did something extraordinary.

We are all familiar with the recurring Medal citation phrases like "...went above and beyond the call of duty...," "...with total disregard for his/her own personal safety...," "...selflessly sacrificed for others...," "...refused to leave anyone behind...," and "...their courage and fighting spirit inspired others to take action..." What's important here is that these phrases don't have to be reserved only for combat or Medal of Honor recipients. Adults, kids, parents, coaches, peers can all find opportunities to demonstrate

similar actions where we live and lead, in our own testable moments. We are all humans trying to struggle well through fear, uncertainty, and challenge. We can borrow insights, strategies, and clues from each other across our struggles. What helped or inspired one person may help or inspire another. What better example to learn from than those among us who have passed the test when it mattered most?

Yes, the Medal of Honor is a military award for valor in combat, but at its heart, the spirit of the Medal and the recipient stories are about answering the call to do the hard, right thing in our own life battles. There is a hero within each of us, and we are called to be “extraordinary,” bringing to life our shared code of excellence.

## The Values That Endure

The Medal of Honor embodies, at a minimum, the timeless, enduring values of Integrity, Courage, Sacrifice, Commitment, Citizenship, and Patriotism. Think about it – these are first values we try to instill in our kids because they are foundational for character. No surprise – they also matter for adults. Of course, there are countless other values and virtues that represent “our better angels,” organizational imperatives, and the promise of our nation – all worthy of pursuit. But let’s start here. These 6 enduring values are always important, serving as the foundation on which to build the people and leaders of character we desperately need today.

**INTEGRITY:** Being honest, keeping your word, and doing what is right, especially when it’s hard.

**COURAGE:** Acting despite fear, danger, or hardship.

**COMMITMENT:** An internal force that binds you to an idea, relationship, or goal.

**SACRIFICE:** Risking or giving up something of value for someone or something else.

**CITIZENSHIP<sup>1</sup>:** The responsibility to participate and contribute to your community, society, or nation.

**PATRIOTISM<sup>1</sup>:** The love, pride, and appreciation you have for your country.

We absolutely notice when these values are present, and immediately feel the consequences when they are absent. In the end, they represent the foundational “code of excellence” we should demand of ourselves, our kids, our leaders, and each other.

## The Catalyst(s) to Shift The Nation

Activating this “thing” – inspiring a nation to answer the call to live and lead with Honor, will require something special. Actually, it will start with three special things, all of which are coming to reality as we speak:

### A Monument. A Museum. An Institute

- 1. The National Medal of Honor Monument** (construction to begin after 2025): The President has authorized, and Congress has *unanimously* approved (let that sink in for a moment!) the construction of the National Medal of Honor Monument on the National Mall in Washington, DC. This iconic memorial will honor and celebrate the spirit of those who earned the Medal, those who deserved it but were never recognized, and the sacrifice that they all made to show us our shared values are worth pursuing.<sup>2</sup>
- 2. The National Medal of Honor Museum** (opening March 2025, Arlington, Texas). The iconic, dramatic Medal of Honor Museum will be a premier destination and national treasure for America (think Smithsonian-quality experience in the heart of the country). It will serve as the “vault” to protect,

<sup>1</sup> We suggest Citizenship and Patriotism can be reflected in the superordinate value of Service to a Greater Good, defined as “Dedicating time, talent, and energy to something beyond yourself.”

<sup>2</sup> <https://mohmuseum.org/the-monument/>

preserve, and present the stories of the Medal of Honor recipients. Within its 100,000 square foot footprint, the stories, voices, and artifacts of the heroes will come alive in ways that will inspire action in young and old alike.<sup>3</sup>

- 3. The National Medal of Honor Griffin Institute** (active and delivering programs now). If the Museum is the “vault to protect” the spirit of the Medal of Honor, then the Griffin Institute is the “vehicle to project” the spirit of the Medal to people everywhere. The Institute’s mission is to “Inspire, Equip, and Connect people to live the values of the Medal of Honor” through its centers focused on youth (K-12) character development, adult leadership development, and values-based thought leadership.

As the Monument and Museum continue toward completion, the Institute has already begun delivering content for youth in schools across the nation, and in adult programs, all in a fresh, relevant, engaging, and transformational way. Each intervention leverages the Medal of Honor recipient stories to introduce the spirit of honor and the values worth pursuing. And wherever possible, actual Medal of Honor recipients are integrated into the experiences, as speakers, fellow facilitators, instructors, and even honorary cohort members.

The initial Institute offerings – from middle school field trips and high school workshops, to organizational leadership development programs and executive retreats – have all touched a nerve of excitement that clearly validates the Honor “thing” is powerfully relevant and valued. To an almost shocking degree. Why? Because it’s not a hard sell. The hunger is there. People want to strengthen their commitment and courage as people and leaders. They’re desperate to live “in integrity” with their values. People know in their hearts the power of sacrifice and service.

<sup>3</sup> <https://mohmuseum.org/the-museum/>

Everyone is on their own version of the battlefield. They can relate to the “gap” between wanting to live and lead these values of excellence...and actually doing it. And they want to do better. The invitation to equip themselves and learn from our cadre, each other, and Medal recipients is one that has resonated powerfully because it travels into both personal and professional domains. This is the journey that matters.

## The Early Lessons

Although the Institute is in its early stages in delivering youth, adult, and thought leadership programs, some insights are becoming clear. The more we collectively tap into these imperatives, the more we can shift the nation and make Honor “the air we breathe.”

- 1. The values never stop being important.** Whether it’s the 6 enduring values we offer, or others that individuals embrace, the idea of defining and then pursuing a code of excellence is what pulls us toward success and significance. Whatever values you pursue, frame them as actions and behaviors you can practice to the point of becoming habits of excellence.
- 2. The 2<sup>nd</sup> bridge is critical.** At the institute, we always strive to cross “2 bridges.” Bridge 1 is where we hear the Medal of Honor story and identify the value on display. The 2<sup>nd</sup> (critical) bridge identifies where in our own life we have the opportunity to demonstrate that value. The combat battlefield is an analogy for the battlefields of our own lives: tough conversations, physical/emotional/professional fear, stepping into uncertainty, standing up to peer pressures, etc. If, in the Medal of Honor story, we see what helped the recipient live the value, it may offer a clue about how we can apply it in our own lives. If we don’t cross “the 2<sup>nd</sup> bridge” of application, we risk this experience just being hero worship, leaving us to say, “Well that’s inspiring, but it doesn’t apply to me.”
- 3. Honor is built and revealed at the Gap.** Our lives are a series of testable moments, big and small.

We constantly stand at the gap between where we are, and who we want to be. On the other side of this gap is the standard of excellence, and we've got to push through the pressures to move from decisions to action. Our program participants have found strength and hope in borrowing insights from the factors that helped the Medal recipients, to apply in their own personal and professional battles. For example, focusing on strengthening competence, confidence, and commitment (what we call the "Courage Catalysts," born from what recipients say helped them take action) offers a path to conquer the gap in their testable moments of life.<sup>4</sup>

4. **The beauty of imperfect heroes.** The Medal of Honor recipients will be the first to admit they are imperfect, ordinary people who did something in a moment. While they may have been the exemplar of courage in that scenario, they are still people who struggle with fear in other moments. It is a powerful relief when kids and adults recognize that these heroes are just like them, striving to live their values moment-by-moment. It's an even more powerful lesson when a Medal of Honor recipient joins the cohort, taking notes and striving to learn and grow as a fellow "traveler" on the climb of life and leadership.
5. **The kids "get" it.** We have been so inspired and encouraged by how the K-12 students (and their teachers) have responded to the recipient stories and the lessons of Honor. The key is to offer it up in a way that meets them where they are, relevant to their life struggles and aspirations. These young people want to be their best possible selves and have a level of maturity that is waiting to be invited to the table. (Soapbox: So often, adults complain about the youth, but do little themselves to model the values they expect. Honor is contagious.)

<sup>4</sup> For a more thorough description of the gap, please refer to: <https://jcdusafa.org/index.php/jcld/article/view/47/46>

6. **Patriotism is a natural byproduct.** Even though we emphasize that the Monument, Museum, and Institute are about the values (not the military context), we do not shy away from the swell of pride, awe, and patriotism that naturally comes from exploring life and leadership through the lens of the Medal of Honor. Visitors and participants can't help but acknowledge and appreciate the sacrifices made for the nation by the recipients (and those they strive to honor by sharing their stories). Thankfully, Honor is non-political. Just as the Monument was unanimously approved by Congress, we believe that by knowing the recipient stories and embracing the values embodied by the Medal, this could be the "thing" that connects us across countless divides.

### Call to Action

We have a flicker within us that deserves to be fanned. As we begin this journey to ignite the spirit of honor across this nation, we invite you to take action as well. There are many ways to do this. You can start by going to the website to find out more about the enduring values that were mentioned previously.<sup>5</sup> You can also dive into some of the Medal of Honor recipient stories.<sup>6</sup> You will no doubt be inspired, but take that inspiration and tell others about the story, and why it impacted you.<sup>7</sup> Finally, and most importantly, consider what you can do in your life and your circle of influence to define and live your shared code of excellence. To bring honor "to life" in the nation, bring it to *your* life, now.

We need to reconnect with the spirit and power of Honor. Could it be the thing that elevates us as individuals, teams, organizations, cities, and a nation? We believe it absolutely is. Do you?

<sup>5</sup> <https://mohmuseum.org/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://mohmuseum.org/recipient-database/>

<sup>7</sup> Don't forget to cross the 2 bridges (identify what values they displayed in their action, and think about what it would look like for you to more powerfully demonstrate it in your own life).