

The Last Days of Tomas Young

Southern California Journalism Award: First Place, Activism Journalism

[Chris Hedges](#), Columnist Nov 17, 2014 | [TD originals](#)

<https://www.truthdig.com/articles/the-last-days-of-tomas-young/>



Tomas Young reads "A Message From a Dying Veteran," his letter to George W. Bush and Dick Cheney that was first published on Truthdig, in this screen shot from [Democracy Now!](#) With him is his wife, Claudia Cuellar.

Tomas Young was shot and paralyzed below his waist in Iraq in April 2004 when he and about 20 other U.S. soldiers were ambushed while riding in the back of an Army truck. He died of his wounds Nov. 10, 2014, at the age of 34. His final months were marked by a desperate battle to ward off the horrific pain that wracked his broken body and by the callous indifference of a government that saw him as part of the disposable human fodder required for war.

Young wrote a poignant open letter to Bush and Cheney on the 10th anniversary of the start of the Iraq War (starting on p. 5 of this article). He knew that they, along with other idiotic cheerleaders for the war, were responsible for his paralysis and coming death.

Young, who had been in Iraq only five days at the time of the 2004 attack, was hit by two bullets. One struck a knee and the other cut his spinal cord. He was already confined to his bed [when I](#)

[visited him](#) in March 2013 in Kansas City. He was unable to feed himself. He was taking some 30 pills a day. His partly paralyzed body had suffered a second shock in March 2008 when a blood clot formed in his right arm (which bore a color tattoo of a character from Maurice Sendak's "Where the Wild Things Are"). He was taken to the Veterans Affairs hospital in Kansas City, Mo., given the blood thinner Coumadin and released. The VA took him off Coumadin a month later. The clot migrated to one of his lungs. He suffered a massive pulmonary embolism and went into a coma. When he awoke in the hospital his speech was slurred. He had lost nearly all his upper-body mobility and short-term memory. He began suffering terrible pain in his abdomen. His colon was surgically removed in an effort to mitigate the abdominal pain. He was fitted with a colostomy bag. The pain disappeared for a few days and then returned. He could not hold down most foods, even when they were pureed. The doctors dilated his stomach. He could eat only soup and oatmeal. And then he went on a feeding tube.

Young hung on as long as he could. Now he is gone. He understood what the masters of war had done to him, how he had been used and turned into human refuse. He was [one of the first veterans](#) to protest against the Iraq War. Planning to kill himself by cutting off his feeding tube, he wrote a poignant open "[Last Letter](#)" to George W. Bush and Dick Cheney in March of 2013 on the 10th anniversary of the start of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. He knew that Bush and Cheney, along with other idiotic cheerleaders for the war, including my old employer The New York Times, were responsible for his paralysis and coming death. After issuing the letter Young changed his mind about committing suicide, saying he wanted to [have more time](#) with his wife, [Claudia Cuellar](#), who dedicated her life to his care. Young and Cuellar knew he did not have long. The couple would move from Kansas City to Portland, Ore., and then to Seattle, where Young died.

Veterans Affairs over the last eight months of Young's life reduced his pain medication, charging he had become an addict. It was a decision that thrust him into a wilderness of agony. Young's existence became a constant battle with the VA. He suffered excruciating "[breakthrough pain.](#)" The VA was indifferent. It cut his 30-day supply of pain medication to seven days. Young, when the pills did not arrive on time, might as well have been nailed to a cross. Cuellar, in an exchange of several emails with me since Young's death, remembered hearing her husband on the phone one day pleading with a VA doctor and finally saying: "So you mean to tell me it is better for me to live in pain than die on pain medicine in this disabled state?" At night, she said, he would moan and cry out.

"It was a battle of wills," Cuellar told me in one of the emails. "We were losing. Our whole time in Portland was spent dealing with trying to get what we needed to be at home and comfortable and pain free. THAT'S ALL WE WANTED, TO BE HOME AND PAIN FREE, to enjoy whatever time we had left."

Last month they moved from Portland to Seattle. They would be closer to a good spinal cord injury unit. Also, Washington was one of the states that had legalized marijuana, which Young used extensively.

When I saw Young in Kansas City last year he told me he had thought of having his ashes sprinkled over a patch of soil on which marijuana would be planted, "but then I worried that no

one would want to smoke it.” After they moved to Seattle he and Cuellar again pleaded with the VA for more pain medication, but the VA staff said Young would have to be evaluated over a two-week period by a “pain team.” The pain team could not see him until the last week of November. He was dead before then.

“Last week I called because his breakthrough pain started happening throughout the day,” Cuellar said in an email. “I was using more and more of the morphine and Lorazepam. I was running out of pills. He had a high tolerance for pain, but it was getting bad. I called to report to the doctor that it was getting bad fast. I would not have enough pills to bridge him to the appointment on the 24th. The doctor was unsympathetic. He gave me a condescending lecture about strict narcotics regulations. I said, ‘but my husband is in pain what do I do?’ ”

Young tried to take enough sleeping pills to sleep away the pain. But he was able to rest for a prolonged period only every few days. The pain and exhaustion began to tear apart his frail body. He was dispirited. He was visibly weaker. He felt humiliated. “Maybe he got so exhausted by the enduring of it all that he took a last sleep and never came back,” Cuellar wrote. “My conclusion is that he died in pain from the exhaustion of having to endure it. Early morning Monday, when I thought he was sleeping, I heard a silence I had never heard before. I couldn’t hear him breathing. I was scared, but I knew. The first thing I did was liberate him from all the tubes and bags on his body. I cut off the feeding tube. I took off the Ostomy Bags. I removed the Foley Catheter. I cleaned his body. I played music. We smoked a last joint together. I smoked for him. I started making calls.”

“The funeral home instructed me to call the police,” she wrote. “They arrived and concluded that there were no issues, but because of his young age they had to refer this to the Medical Examiner. The Medical Examiner came. He made the determination that due to his age that they would have to perform an autopsy. I said, ‘Hey look at his body don’t you think he has been mutilated enough? Are [you] going to desecrate his body even further?’ So he was cut open some more.”

The VA called her to ask for the autopsy report.

Young’s final days, Cuellar said, were often “hopeless and humiliating.”

It is an old story. It is the story of war. Two days after the 9/11 attacks, Young enlisted in the Army, hoping he would be sent to fight in Afghanistan. He was seduced by jingoism and calls for a crusade against evil that he eventually came to realize were a mask for lies and deceit. He became a voice for other young people who bore the physical and emotional scars of war. He became our conscience. He spoke a truth about war, a truth many do not want to hear. And he condemned our war criminals and demanded justice. He wrote in his “Last Letter” to Bush and Cheney:

I have, like many other disabled veterans, suffered from the inadequate and often inept care provided by the Veterans Administration. I have, like many other disabled veterans, come to realize that our mental and physical wounds are of no interest to you, perhaps of no interest to any politician. We were used. We were betrayed. And we have been abandoned. You, Mr. Bush, make much pretense of being a Christian. But isn’t lying a sin? Isn’t murder a sin? Aren’t theft

and selfish ambition sins? I am not a Christian. But I believe in the Christian ideal. I believe that what you do to the least of your brothers you finally do to yourself, to your own soul.

My day of reckoning is upon me. Yours will come. I hope you will be put on trial. But mostly I hope, for your sakes, that you find the moral courage to face what you have done to me and to many, many others who deserved to live. I hope that before your time on earth ends, as mine is now ending, you will find the strength of character to stand before the American public and the world, and in particular the Iraqi people, and beg for forgiveness.

We must grieve for Tomas Young, for all the severely wounded men and women hidden from view, suffering their private torments in claustrophobic rooms, for their families, for the hundreds of thousands of civilians that have died in Iraq and Afghanistan, for our own complicity in these wars. We must grieve for a nation that has lost its way, blinded by the psychosis of permanent war, that kills human beings across the globe as if they were little more than insects. It is a waste. We will leave defeated from Iraq and Afghanistan; we will leave burdened with the expenditure of trillions of dollars and responsible for mounds of corpses and ruined nations. Young, and here is the tragedy of it, was sacrificed for nothing. Only the masters of war, those who have profited from the rivers of blood, rejoice. And they know the dead cannot speak.

“Did anybody ever come back from the dead any single one of the millions who got killed did any one of them ever come back and say by god i’m glad i’m dead because death is always better than dishonor?” Dalton Trumbo wrote in his great anti-war novel [“Johnny Got His Gun.”](#) “did they say i’m glad i died to make the world safe for democracy? did they say i like death better than losing liberty? did any of them ever say it’s good to think i got my guts blown out for the honor of my country? did any of them ever say look at me i’m dead but i died for decency and that’s better than being alive? did any of them ever say here i am i’ve been rotting for two years in a foreign grave but it’s wonderful to die for your native land? did any of them say hurray i died for womanhood and i’m happy see how i sing even though my mouth is choked with worms?”

A Message to George W. Bush and Dick Cheney From a Dying Veteran

<https://www.truthdig.com/dig/the-last-letter/>

To: George W. Bush and Dick Cheney

From: Tomas Young

I write this letter on the 10th anniversary of the Iraq War on behalf of my fellow Iraq War veterans. I write this letter on behalf of the 4,488 soldiers and Marines who died in Iraq. I write this letter on behalf of the hundreds of thousands of veterans who have been wounded and on behalf of those whose wounds, physical and psychological, have destroyed their lives. I am one of those gravely wounded. I was paralyzed in an insurgent ambush in 2004 in Sadr City. My life is coming to an end. I am living under hospice care. I write this letter on behalf of husbands and wives who have lost spouses, on behalf of children who have lost a parent, on behalf of the fathers and mothers who have lost sons and daughters and on behalf of those who care for the many thousands of my fellow veterans who have brain injuries. I write this letter on behalf of



those veterans whose trauma and self-revulsion for what they have witnessed, endured and done in Iraq have led to suicide and on behalf of the active-duty soldiers and Marines who commit, on average, a suicide a day. I write this letter on behalf of the some 1 million Iraqi dead and on behalf of the countless Iraqi wounded. I write this letter on behalf of us all — the human detritus your war has left behind, those who will spend their lives in unending pain and grief.

You may evade justice but in our eyes you are each guilty of egregious war crimes, of plunder and, finally, of murder, including the murder of thousands of young Americans — my fellow veterans — whose future you stole.

I write this letter, my last letter, to you, Mr. Bush and Mr. Cheney. I write not because I think you grasp the terrible human and moral consequences of your lies, manipulation and thirst for wealth and power. I write this letter because, before my own death, I want to make it clear that I, and hundreds of thousands of my fellow veterans, along with millions of my fellow citizens, along with hundreds of millions more in Iraq and the Middle East, know fully who you are and what you have done. You may evade justice but in our eyes you are each guilty of egregious war crimes, of plunder and, finally, of murder, including the murder of thousands of young Americans — my fellow veterans — whose future you stole.

Your positions of authority, your millions of dollars of personal wealth, your public relations consultants, your privilege and your power cannot mask the hollowness of your character. You sent us to fight and die in Iraq after you, Mr. Cheney, dodged the draft in Vietnam, and you, Mr. Bush, went AWOL from your National Guard unit. Your cowardice and selfishness were

established decades ago. You were not willing to risk yourselves for our nation but you sent hundreds of thousands of young men and women to be sacrificed in a senseless war with no more thought than it takes to put out the garbage. I joined the Army two days after the 9/11 attacks. I joined the Army because our country had been attacked. I wanted to strike back at those who had killed some 3,000 of my fellow citizens. I did not join the Army to go to Iraq, a country that had no part in the September 2001 attacks and did not pose a threat to its neighbors, much less to the United States. I did not join the Army to “liberate” Iraqis or to shut down mythical weapons-of-mass-destruction facilities or to implant what you cynically called “democracy” in Baghdad and the Middle East. I did not join the Army to rebuild Iraq, which at the time you told us could be paid for by Iraq’s oil revenues. Instead, this war has cost the United States over \$3 trillion. I especially did not join the Army to carry out pre-emptive war. Pre-emptive war is illegal under international law. And as a soldier in Iraq I was, I now know, abetting your idiocy and your crimes. The Iraq War is the largest strategic blunder in U.S. history. It obliterated the balance of power in the Middle East. It installed a corrupt and brutal pro-Iranian government in Baghdad, one cemented in power through the use of torture, death squads and terror. And it has left Iran as the dominant force in the region. On every level — moral, strategic, military and economic — Iraq was a failure. And it was you, Mr. Bush and Mr. Cheney, who started this war. It is you who should pay the consequences.

To read Chris Hedges’ interview with Tomas Young, [click here](#).

I would not be writing this letter if I had been wounded fighting in Afghanistan against those forces that carried out the attacks of 9/11. Had I been wounded there I would still be miserable because of my physical deterioration and imminent death, but I would at least have the comfort of knowing that my injuries were a consequence of my own decision to defend the country I love. I would not have to lie in my bed, my body filled with painkillers, my life ebbing away, and deal with the fact that hundreds of thousands of human beings, including children, including myself, were sacrificed by you for little more than the greed of oil companies, for your alliance with the oil sheiks in Saudi Arabia, and your insane visions of empire.

I have, like many other disabled veterans, suffered from the inadequate and often inept care provided by the Veterans Administration. I have, like many other disabled veterans, come to realize that our mental and physical wounds are of no interest to you, perhaps of no interest to any politician. We were used. We were betrayed. And we have been abandoned. You, Mr. Bush, make much pretense of being a Christian. But isn’t lying a sin? Isn’t murder a sin? Aren’t theft and selfish ambition sins? I am not a Christian. But I believe in the Christian ideal. I believe that what you do to the least of your brothers you finally do to yourself, to your own soul.

My day of reckoning is upon me. Yours will come. I hope you will be put on trial. But mostly I hope, for your sakes, that you find the moral courage to face what you have done to me and to many, many others who deserved to live. I hope that before your time on earth ends, as mine is now ending, you will find the strength of character to stand before the American public and the world, and in particular the Iraqi people, and beg for forgiveness.

Click on the links below to view translations of “The Last Letter”.

[Dutch \(The Post Online\)](#)

[French \(Le Grand Soir\)](#)

[French \(Le Matin\)](#)

[German \(20 Minuten Online\)](#)

[German \(Spiegel Politik Online\)](#)

[Spanish \(El Molino Online\)](#)
