

Over time, I began to notice the same ideas resurfacing in thoughtful conversations — not as theories, but as lived truths. They appeared while reading history, listening to people whose stories carried weight, and reflecting on my own life and work. At first, they seemed unrelated. Only later did I realize they formed a quiet sequence: gallantry, crucible, and the instincts beneath them — all driven by something deeper in us.

The word gallantry entered my thinking after a friend sent me an article that lingered long after I finished reading it. It wasn't about heroics or medals. It described something quieter: doing the right thing without announcement, restraint without weakness, decency without expectation.

The idea of crucible surfaced later, while reading about Harry Truman. Historians described his World War I experience as the moment that forged his confidence and judgment — the heat that revealed who he would become. A crucible, I learned, is not merely hardship. It is hardship that transforms. It is the moment when instinct meets consequence, when character is no longer theoretical.

Reading Truman alongside Lincoln made something clear to me: the leaders we trust most were not shaped by ambition alone, but by pressure endured without surrendering principle. One of my favorite authors, David McCullough, consistently admired this same quality — responsibility paired with competence — not as ideology, but as lived behavior. In his telling, progress was rarely driven by brilliance alone, but by ordinary people who accepted responsibility and proved equal to it.

Still later, a younger colleague — a millennial I admire for his clarity and humility — introduced me to the concept of conation: our instinctive way of moving into action. Not how we present ourselves, or how we feel, but how we naturally act when faced with uncertainty.

It struck me immediately how closely this aligned with everything I had been observing for years. Conation explains how we move. A crucible reveals whether that instinct holds. Gallantry determines how that movement affects others. What I had been noticing all along was not coincidence, but pattern.

I think also of my own parents, both American citizens shaped long before I ever arrived. My father was born in 1927 and my mother in 1931, growing up during the Great Depression on my grandfather's farms. Those years tested families quietly and relentlessly. Many farms failed; somehow, theirs endured. The people who carried the heaviest responsibility are usually the least interested in talking about it.

My mother, still with us, recounts those years not with drama, but with perspective — how scarcity became normal, how responsibility came early, and how resilience was learned rather than taught. She met my father after the war and came to understand, over time, his brief service in the Navy. For our sake, the war ended shortly after he enlisted. His ship never made it to Japan, turning home once the bombs were dropped. Like so many of that generation, he rarely spoke of it. What he carried forward instead was steadiness — a quiet sense that when called, you go, and when spared, you return to the work of living.

I've seen this same quiet strength even closer to home. My mother-in-law lived through her own crucible as an innocent German child. From nine to thirteen, her town was bombed relentlessly between 1941 and 1945 — a war she neither chose nor understood. In 1953, she met an American serviceman who brought her to the United States, offering the promise of peace and stability. When their children were still young, he died tragically. She faced yet another crucible — this time alone.

Carrying unspoken trauma, she did what had to be done. She raised the children with dignity and resolve, rarely speaking of the war or its scars. Only later in life, after experiencing joy through her children and the admiration of her grandchildren and great-grandchildren, did those stories begin to surface — not as grievances, but as reflections shared gently, when trust was already present.

Looking back, I see that gallantry shapes how we move, and crucible determines who we become when faced with uncertainty. These qualities surface in leaders like Lincoln and Truman, in soldiers who never told their stories, and in ordinary people who carried extraordinary burdens without complaint. They also surface in conversations with thoughtful friends, in books passed hand to hand, and in insights offered by younger generations who see the world with fresh clarity.

In the end, the people who shape our lives most aren't always the loudest or the most visible. They are the ones who step forward when something needs to be done, act with quiet decency, and endure what life places in front of them without asking for attention. Relationships are built there — not in calm moments, but in how people behave when it matters most. Long after titles fade and circumstances change, those are the bonds that last.