

A Tale of a Reluctant Pilgrim

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In 1971, I was 22 years old. I was a member of the Baha'i Faith and had registered as a conscientious objector with my local draft board. My agreement with the government was that I would perform any job to which I was assigned, as long as I was not required to carry a gun and kill people. As a result, I, like so many other "CO's" at the time, was sent to Viet Nam as an Army medic.

On the one hand I am, frankly, proud of the work I performed there. I treated men, women and children. I took care of American soldiers, of course, but also North Vietnamese soldiers, South Vietnamese orphans, Australians and anyone else in need. I felt that I was able to do some very positive things in that surreal, negative world.

On the other hand, I live daily with the unutterable horror of what happened there, the stuff of nightmares beyond words, a psychotic descent into hell from which my mind and soul recoil even now, over 30 years later.

But I was one of the lucky ones. I was not (physically) injured. I lived through the experience and have led a productive, even happy, life. I married a wonderful, beautiful woman who has cared for me, supported me and loved me into becoming the very best human being I am capable of being. We have been blessed with two children who love me in spite of myself, and who are constant reminders of the wonder of life.

I have created a small, strong iron box in the corner of my mind where the memories of Viet Nam are safely locked away. For 30 years I lived in fear that if I unlocked that box, if I looked into that repository of my most horrible memories, they would overwhelm me. I knew, in the depths of my soul, with the conviction of a child's fear of monsters under the bed, that looking at those memories would be like seeing the face of Medusa -- I would be turned to stone and lost forever.

So I carried this burden alone. Kit, who is now my wife, wrote to me each day while I was in Viet Nam, and I would write long, chatty letters to her. Yet I could never speak to her of the daily horrors of life there, either at that time or later. Except for a not-to-my-mind abnormal acrophobia, experiencing an occasional “twitch” when I heard the sound of a helicopter and a not altogether unhealthy aversion to violent movies, I have actually managed to lead a fairly normal life. And not once, since 1971, was I able bring myself to speak of my experiences there.

In the year 2000 I was living in Baltimore, Md., only 50 miles away from Washington, D.C. While I had been to many of the museums and monuments of our nation’s capital, I had never “found the time” to visit the Viet Nam Memorial there. The truth, of course, is that I could not force myself to go. The fear of forcing open the lid of that box and facing the contents was simply too great for me.

But 2000 was an auspicious year. It was the beginning of the new century, we had survived the “Y2K” non-disaster, and life was good. I had friends, a good job and a place in the world. Little did I know that on some level this year would also be the year of my liberation.

Our daughter, who was hoping for a career as an actor at the time, had been cast in a play about the Viet Nam war. As research, she asked if I had kept any pictures. I had, in fact, two albums of pictures from my time there. These were not photos of anything terrible. They were rather innocuous snapshots of friends, the countryside and some of the warm Vietnamese people whom I had met. They were the more-or-less “cleaned-up” version of life there. They were the “Everything’s fine, we’re just sitting around shooting the breeze” pictures without adding the “waiting for the next rocket attack to come and blow up the guy sitting next to me” part. They were the Viet Nam version of the “Where’s Waldo” pictures in which, if you look very closely, you might get a glimpse of the sniper hidden in the lush jungle vegetation who will be trying to kill you in about 20 seconds.

Like many fathers, I seem to have a genetic inability to deny my daughter almost any request. Therefore, it came as a bit of a surprise to both of us that when she asked me if I would be willing to meet the cast of her play at the Viet Nam Memorial in Washington D.C., I declined. When I told her that I couldn’t take the time off work, she said that they would meet me on a Saturday. When I explained that I had another engagement on Saturday (which I didn’t), they said they would meet me on Sunday. In the end, I simply ran out of excuses. I was trapped. No doubt I could have explained how terrifying the concept was -- how the idea of opening that box filled me with such unspeakable dread -- and yet I didn’t. Perhaps I didn’t want my “little girl” (who was 25 at the time) to see that her dad was so much weaker than he pretended to be. Or, maybe subconsciously I felt that it was time to peek into that box again. In any case, for whatever the reason, in the end I agreed to meet the cast at the Viet Nam memorial.

As I got into the car on that sunny, beautiful autumn day, I had an almost overwhelming sense of dread. What was I doing? Why had I agreed to this? How bad would it be if I just didn't show up? Maybe I could be "sick." With no way of contacting our daughter and her friends at this late date, though, I knew I was stuck. I reluctantly started the car and drove off. I remember thinking that, with any degree of luck, I would have a flat tire and miss our meeting.

Unfortunately, the trip to Washington was completely uneventful. Traffic was not bad, the Capital Beltway was not snarled in traffic as it usually is, we didn't get hopelessly lost and we even found a parking spot not too far from the memorial. Why is it that things only go wrong when you don't want them to?

As I walked on to the Mall that morning I remember thinking, "I can't do this!" Yet my feet continued to move. As I came within sight of the Memorial Wall, again my mind screamed, "I can't do this!" Again, my feet refused to obey my brain. I was a helpless captive, drawn by that wall of death and memories.

Before you can gain entrance to the Wall, you must walk past the "Three Servicemen." It is a sculpture of incredible realism depicting three "GI's" in battle fatigues. You feel like these are guys you might have known. They stand, like eternal guardians, at the "top" of the Memorial. They are so young, so brave, so heroic... and so very dead.

There is a poem by Alan Seeger, "I Have a Rendezvous with Death," in which he wrote, "I have a rendezvous with Death, On some scarred slope of battered hill." To be frank, that's exactly how I felt as I entered the area of the Wall. My rendezvous did not involve my own death, but rather the deaths of the thousands of men and women whose names are inscribed there.

The Wall is a stark scar on the land, devoid of sentimentality. It might be considered, like death itself, beautiful. And, like death, it is brutally honest.

Also, like death, each person brings to it his or her own meaning. For those of us who were there, we are confronted by the absurdity that some of us lived while others died. We are overwhelmed by the realization that there is no discernable reason why we should have been given years to live while others were not. We search, like the battlefield survivors we are, for friends among the dead. Finding a name we recognize brings new pain - a new experience of the nightmare. Not finding a name brings a sigh of relief, a small prayer of gratitude for that mercy and a thought of "I wonder what they're doing now?"

Each pilgrim comes for a different reason. They are spouses, parents, children and grandchildren who were unborn when those remembered died. Some come out of curiosity for a war that is, to them, ancient history. Others of us come to mourn, to remember, to promise the dead they will never be forgotten. We leave notes, flowers, stuffed animals, tributes, memorial tokens. Each person who comes to the Wall has his or her own rendezvous with death -- they are confronted by the enormity of the losses, by the horror of war and, ultimately, by the inevitability of their own death.

Adjacent to the Wall is the Vietnam Women's Memorial. Where the Wall is a reminder of the brutality of war, the Women's Memorial shows the caring that can happen in the face of that brutality. Where the Wall is static, the Women's Memorial is dynamic. The Wall is abstract; the Women's Memorial is so lifelike that you can trace the veins on the hands of the people depicted in the sculpture. It shows three women in battle dress with a wounded soldier. While one comforts the soldier, another kneels in thought or prayer. The third looks to the skies -- perhaps for a medevac helicopter, or possibly to God. It is the "sister" to the Three Servicemen statue that guards the Wall, yet it stands by itself.

This was the part of the experience to which I related on the most personal level. The gender of the caregivers in the sculpture was irrelevant. As a medic, I knew that these were my people. This was the monument to me and mine. This was the part of the memorial that said to me, personally, "Yes, you did make a difference. The pain of the people you helped there was physical. Yours was in your eyes when you saw how many of us were in need. We remember you who were there for the men during a time when no one else was, who attempted to stop the blood, to heal the wounds, who tried to help us die in peace."

As I stood there in the presence of the living and the dead, tears streaming from my eyes, mourning the loss of friends and my innocence, I began to feel something shift. I was still overwhelmed by the ghosts of that terrible past, but I was also very much aware of how grateful I am for my life. I felt an overwhelming pride to have been a part of that care giving, compassionate group represented by the statue before me. I was reminded once again that life is a gift, and during the time I spent in Viet Nam I tried, to the best of my ability, to give that gift to others. I can and must remember the dead, mourn them, live with those ghosts of the past, but I can't bring them back. What I can do is be grateful for the role I was given in that horrible drama played out all those years ago. I may have seen it as only a small contribution, but this memorial made me realize how important that contribution was for those who survived, and even for those who didn't.

I have often thought of my time in Viet Nam as a kind of curse- a punishment for some unnamed, unknown sin. It was a strange, man-made purgatory where I was forced to atone for being the

flawed, imperfect person that I am. I felt guilty for having survived when so many died, guilty for not using the additional time given to me in some more meaningful, more productive, some better way.

Being there in the presence of this monument, though, made me realize that I have a choice. I can look at my time in Viet Nam as a curse, but possibly, it was a gift. It was a horrible experience, but it was also an opportunity to be gentle, kind, caring and compassionate. It can be looked at as a time of grace when I could be completely “present” for others. I’m not brave, I’m not heroic. Yet I can look at my experience in Viet Nam as a moment in time when I was doing something brave and heroic (in a very small way). The choice is mine to make.

I lifted my hand and touched the hand of the one of the women in the statue. It was warmed by the sun and, of course, hard. It occurred to me what a perfect metaphor it was. This sculpture is a depiction of an intense, intimate moment in the life of these caring, kind, gentle people. Yet this moment of grace and gentleness is forged from materials of incredible strength, power and, yes, hardness.

We are all wounded, we are all in pain. The gentleness forged from the strength of the human spirit, the kindness brought into existence by the power of love, the warmth generated by our acts of caring for one other -- these things have the ability to heal us.

The expressed purpose of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is to help heal the wounds of that war. There, in the presence of my three “sisters of mercy,” I knew that I could choose to unlock that iron box of terrible memories I had carried for almost 30 years. I could begin the process of looking into that box, knowing that they were there to give me aid, comfort and support. I felt their caring, loving presence in the face of my wounds. Somehow, I knew that with them to watch over me, those memories would not have the power to overwhelm me. I could look on the terrible Medusa face and not be turned to stone.

So there, on the grass beside the Memorial, in the watchful, caring presence of comrades both living and dead, as that beautiful autumn day cast its golden glow on the faces of those children unborn when the events took place, I opened the iron box and began to speak. I told them of some of the things I saw. How it felt and what it looked like to be in the presence of so much pain and horror.

And my bronze, eternally memorialized sisters listened patiently as I told my tale. They have, after all, heard and seen it all before. This was not a new tale for them. Millions of soldiers and former soldiers come every year to tell their stories to these sisters. Much as we did in Viet Nam, they give comfort where they can and accept that not all can be saved.

It was, and still is, more painful than I can say to speak of the terrible things I experienced there. I can still feel the fear that these memories generate. But whenever I feel that fear, I remember my three “sisters of mercy.” They understand the pain. They, too, have shared the horror. I know they watch over me still. They are incredibly strong, and their strength sustains me.