Beyond Death's Grey Land

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“Soldiers are citizens of death’s grey land....”

Siegfried Sassoon, 1918

“How was it?” asked a friend when I first returned from Vietnam. Not wanting to talk about the leeches, the ambush patrols, the nights without sleep, the stress without relief, the bodies without legs, I wanted, I tried to explain the power of friendship under fire and struggled to recapture the pleasures of self-discovery, wanting, almost desperately, to extract some positive value to an experience that terrified, aged, enraged, and saddened me.

“I don’t want to hear that,” Joe snapped, throwing his welcome home gift at me.

“But why?” I asked, still feeling the need to explain.

“The war is wrong,” he declared without equivocation. “Period.”

In his classic study of American Civil War literature, Patriotic Gore, Edmund Wilson said that the unanimity of men at war is like a sky-darkening flight of grasshoppers which, all compelled by one impulse, will descend to consume the crops” (Wilson, xxxii). A nation facing defeat by a minor third world country, after claiming imminent victory for 10 years, is equally intolerant. I eventually learned, like other veterans, to accommodate the demand for silence. War stories were an embarrassing reminder of national failure; and after the invasion of Cambodia, My Lai, Kent State, and Watergate, the American people, eager for consensus, disliked moral ambiguities and politicians with excuses, journalists with revelations, and veterans with complaints. Samuel Johnson, two centuries before, summarized the current mood well: “I know not what is the more to be feared after war, streets full of soldiers who have learned to rob, or garrets full of scribblers who have learned to lie.”

I too was uncomfortable. There were many disturbing questions coming out of Vietnam. Besides, I wanted to move on with my life, my career. But the

questions endured, and, eventually, after a few years, I found myself alone in a theatre watching “Apocalypse Now,” struggling for satisfactory answers for the first time.

At one point in the film, a squadron of helicopters, preparing to attack a Viet Cong village, swoops into view accompanied by Wagner’s “Ride on the Valkyries,” splendidly dramatic music from an opera. Suddenly, I remembered the thrill of riding in the open helicopters, sitting on the floor with my legs dangling out, my senses intoxicated by the brisk, fresh air, and views, strangely beautiful, of rice paddies and defoliated hills. From the sky and before the shooting, the land seemed pure and the mission heroic. When I realized that I was enjoying the scene on film because of its power to evoke a fond memory, I felt ashamed and profoundly confused. As a conscientious objector who served in Vietnam as an infantry medic, I wasn’t supposed to enjoy war.

What had Vietnam done to me? What had war done to us all? I started to read.

The Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C., that black granite wall of 58,110 names that cuts like two giant blades into the earth, is a fitting symbol of what the best of the post-war books and articles can do. When I stood, at a distance, before the wall, I was impressed but unmoved, but when I felt the chiseled name of John W. Foreman, a young lieutenant who, one week before he died, stopped me from stepping on a land mine, I cried. Like this participatory monument, some books can help us see and feel the face of war beyond statistics and policy statements. Guides to a Medusa who will not turn our hearts to stone, the books and studies recommended here will not comfort either. The war you will see is ugly, brutal and without political idealism; its soldiers fight to survive, believing, as one remarked, “We are the unwilling, working for the unqualified to do the unnecessary for the ungrateful” (Goldman and Fuller, 1). And yet these accounts, most often told or written by veterans and journalists, illumine the precarious road to wisdom, and possibly peace, by describing pain. “He who learns must suffer,” said Aeschylus. “And even our sleep pain that cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, and in our despite, against our will, comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God.”

The Vietnam War was not an abstraction; it was, as Al Santoli points out, a human ordeal. What the reader discovers as he reads Everything We Had, Nam, Charlie Company, Bloods, Dispatches, Winners and Losers, Friendly Fire, A Rumor of War and Fire on the Lake, are individuals who when tested reveal the best and the worst of human qualities, with the worst prevailing because ruthlessness flourished in a war of snipers, booby traps, undefined enemies, and lies; a war fought by children under 20 years of age. Nurtured by this condition, a kid can shoot a girl in the head, “just to put her out of the picture,” and participate in this: “After we got finished shooting her, we start kicking and stomping. That’s what the hatred, the frustration was. After we raped her…after we shot her in the head, you understand what I’m saying, we literally start stomping her body. And everybody was laughing about it….We kicked the face in, kicked in the ribs and everything else. Then we

start cutting the ears off. We cut her nose off. The captain says, 'Who's going to get the ears? Who's going to get the nose? So-and-so's turn to get the ears' " (Baker, 191-92).

Another young man offers a fascinating insight into such behavior by observing, "I was enjoying the feel…I had a sense of power, a sense of destruction. See, now, in the U.S. a person is babied. He's told what to do….But in Nam you had the power to take a life. You had the power to rape a woman and nobody could say nothing to you. That godlike feeling you had was in the field. It was like I was a god. It was like I was a god, I could take a life, I could screw a woman. I can beat somebody up and get away with it" (Baker, 171-72).

Moral chaos produces idolatry, and when boys become gods, they kill, laughing. The object of such rage and frustration cannot be ignored. American soldiers often hated the Vietnamese because the Vietnamese were unknown, deliberately inscrutable, fighting in armies of the night and receiving American aid by day. Their villages accepted medical supplies and also hosted Viet Cong when the Americans departed. Their children would ask for a candy bar and, after getting it, throw a grenade into a crowd of Marines. So they became the "V.C.," "Charlie," "gooks," symbols easy to kill. Even a nurse, treating the wounded in a hospital, could not resist the need to abstract and depersonalize. "You know what your head does, the way you think to survive…is different," she observed. "I did not consider the Vietnamese to be people. They were human, but they weren't people. They weren't like us. So it was okay to kill them. It was okay to hate them" (Santoli, 143).

Frances Fitzgerald's brilliant study Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam clearly demonstrates that though the U.S. supposedly waged war to save the Vietnamese from communism, ignorance, and disease, its strategic plans and military operations willfully ignored Vietnamese history and culture. We wanted to win their allegiance, but we did not want to know them. In fact, the entire structure of military life was organized so as to maintain American ignorance. The Vietnamese became invisible even when they washed, cleaned, and cooked all around us in small support bases and vast installations. They were often treated like slaves, yet we feared them, as masters feared blacks in the antebellum South: the unspoken dread was that one day the nightmare would come true and the grinning Mama-San, enraged by the destruction of her land, would poison our food or slit our throats while we slept.

Occasionally, circumstances allowed us a glimpse of the Vietnamese people, and the effect was sometimes devastating. On the morning after my infantry company ambushed a squadron of North Vietnamese soldiers the night before, the discovery of six bodies was a noteworthy event. Few had seen enemy soldiers dead or alive. The pleasures of novelty quickly soured when the bodies and satchels were searched. We found wallets with pictures of families, wives, girlfriends, children. Folded in neat squares were letters, some stained or moist from the constant rain, a few coins, paper currency, trinkets. Behind me a man groaned, another started to cry, then another. "They're like us,"

someone said, shocked as he stumbled backward. Those Vietnamese men had also hoped to return home, had talismans for protection, and probably were just as frightened as we were when the shooting started.

For what seemed a long time, we stood aimlessly around as if immobilized by a vision of our own shattered bodies on the low grass. Then someone cracked, “Hey, they were going to kill us if they had the chance.” Soon the Vietnamese became “gooks” once more and the fighting continued.

The fighting could continue because the dehumanization of men continued, war being the ultimate denier of the oneness of humanity. As Bahá'ís, we delude ourselves if we believe that we are immune from the dehumanization that occurs during war. Fear, depression, frustration, grief, exhaustion undermines restraint. I was glad I didn’t carry a weapon.

Dispatches, by Michael Herr, accurately described as an “impressionistic hybrid of journalism and imagination,” captures the psychological ambience of war suggested here more successfully than any other book I have read. A curious but compelling combination of street talk, soldier slang and professional rhetoric, the language of Dispatches reveals truths like flash bulbs illuminating a darkened room. “The nights were very beautiful,” Herr writes. “Night was when you really had the least to fear and feared the most. You could go through some very bad numbers at night. Because, really what a choice there was; what a prodigy of things to be afraid of! The moment that you understood this, really understood it, you lost your anxiety instantly. Anxiety was a luxury, a joke you had no room for once you knew the variety of deaths and mutilations the war offered….Everyone feared the wound of wounds, the Wound. Guys would pray and pray — Just you and me, God. Right? — Offer anything if only they could be spared that: take my legs, take my hands, take my eyes, take my life, you Bastard, but please, please, please don’t take those. Whenever a shell landed in a group, everyone forgot about the next rounds and skipped back to rip their pants away, to check, laughing hysterically with relief even though their legs might be shattered, their knee caps torn away, kept upright by their relief and shock, gratitude and adrenaline” (Herr, 133-34).

The denial, the bargaining, the anger, crudity, blasphemy, hysteria, the brutal honesty of war are summoned up here in one precise paragraph. And when Dispatches concludes with that now famous invocation, “Vietnam, Vietnam, we’ve all been there,” you know the emotional landscape.

A different kind of truth is explored in Friendly Fire by C.D.B. Bryan, who examines one families’ confrontation with lies. When the son of Peg and Gene Mullen of Black Hawke County, Iowa was killed by U.S. Army artillery, what the government called “friendly fire,” the Mullens asked, “Why?” like all grieving parents. In their search for answers they, starting as loyal patriots with unquestioning faith, found duplicity an essential part of American policy. Their ensuing war with a government unwilling to be honest about American casualties in Vietnam reflected the growing disillusionment of a nation and its

soldiers who were sent to fight an increasingly unpopular war. It took months for the Mullens to learn what a grunt humping the field learned in a few days: the U.S. Command in Vietnam was committed to a “psychotic vaudeville,” victory by body count. Often the reported statistics had no factual basis. One night my unit, the 2nd 14th Infantry Company, was sent to assist another company almost wiped out by enemy soldiers protected by underground bunkers. After the many Americans killed and wounded had been evacuated, the company was directed to remain in the perimeter of the battle zone while the U.S. dumped tons of bombs throughout the night. As we prepared to enter the bombarded area the next morning, the U.S. Army radio, broadcasting from Saigon, proudly announced that the 2nd 14th Infantry had found 40 enemy dead! We laughed at this anticipatory hope before proceeding into the bush to search for bodies. When we completed our mission, accompanied by news cameras and colonels on tanks yelling, “Keep the lines straight, keep the damn lines straight,” we had nothing. If any North Vietnamese soldiers had been killed, they left no evidence for our purposes. I’m sure the U.S. government did not announce a retraction.

Made cynics by such lies, soldiers in Vietnam also turned against officers who, for Bronze Stars and glory by body count, volunteered their troops for dangerous missions. Many veterans confessed their knowledge of, or participation in, the murder of sergeants, lieutenants, and captains, shot in the back during confusion of a fire fight. The smart officers simply avoided “contact,” preferring survival. As Robert Santos, a platoon leader interviewed in that devastating oral history, Everything We Had, acknowledged: “When it came to survival we just avoided stuff. I didn’t kick off ambushes when I could have. There was no reason to. Killing them meant nothing. It was just stupid” (Santoli, 127). Contributing to this hostile, poisonous environment was the knowledge that thousands of soldiers in Vietnam never experienced the War; that Vietnam was an extension of home, just another base with taco stands, ice cream trucks, officers with air conditioning, water coolers and carpets, bowling alleys, clubs, swimming pools, and pizza parlors. “I didn’t see the ugly part of the war. I enjoyed the war ‘cause I was at Cam Ranh Bay,” comments Radarman Dwyte Brown in Bloods, a fascinating collection of accounts told by black veterans. “Cam Ranh Bay was paradise, man….I had every luxury in my room. Complete stereo with reel-to-reel tape. TV. Three foot refrigerator full of beer and booze. I tell you I aint even know it was a war if somebody didn’t tell me” (Terry, 258-59). Literally thousands never heard a shot fired. Thus infantrymen, who sometimes marched with pounds on their backs for weeks at a time, hated “rears.” Likewise, support staff, appalled by men who ate out of cans and didn’t shower for days, despised “grunts.” And each envied the other, we wanting their safety and comfort, they wanting our thrilling involvement.

Underlying these ambivalent realities is an emotion about which all combat soldiers testify, and that is comradeship, that bonding born of mutual dependence; a sentiment of belonging to each other which one observer claimed was the “one decent thing we found in a conflict otherwise notable for its

monstrosities" (Caputo, xvii).

Such acceptance inspired a devotion which surprised me. But it was not until I was able to accept the men of my company as brothers, see them as comrades, beyond the profanity, alcohol, ethnocentrism, ignorance, and rampant sexuality, could I serve them with the spirit of a Bahá'í servant. Ironically, they accepted me immediately. I was their "Doc" who would be there whenever they need to cry "Medic!" They didn't care why I didn't carry a weapon; they had no interest in the religious faith which motivated me, frustrating my plans to convert them all. But they cared for me in countless ways, giving me the goodies out of their C rations, always inviting me to their parties or small huddles when cards and storytelling relieved the tension, protecting me whenever the firing started. "They treated me like gold," said another corpsman in Everything We Had. "And I know if I had been hit and there was no way to get out of there, they would have grabbed me up in a poncho and carried me a hundred miles if they had to. There was that kind of feeling. This was above and beyond any kind of politics" (Santoli, 75).

I was humbled by that feeling, learning from these teenagers from Tennessee, the streets of Chicago, and the Nebraska plains the true meaning of brotherhood. As a Bahá'í, I was deepened by them. When I encountered a couple of American Bahá'í "rears" who did not see my friends as I saw them during a "stand down" (a 2 day respite for showers, sleep, 3 hot meals a day, drinking, and sex) I did not even want to pray with these Bahá'ís. Dehumanizing us, they saw animals who formed a line for sex with a lone prostitute; and they were shocked that I didn't do more than excuse myself from the queue. I should have condemned them they argued. But I couldn't. My buddies meant more to me because together we confronted death, knowledge of ourselves and life's ultimate value with a level of intensity unknown to them. At the time this was difficult to explain, and I did not see the irony of having joined an exclusive club, the club of those who had been there. Books and articles written since have helped me to understand and articulate my emotions. Philip Caputo, who has written probably the best single non-fiction account of the Vietnam War by a combat veteran, A Rumor of War, explained, "Anyone who fought in Vietnam, if he is honest about himself, will have to admit he enjoyed the compelling attractiveness of combat. It was a peculiar enjoyment because it was mixed with a commensurate pain. Under fire, a man's powers of life heightened in proportion to the proximity of death, so that he felt an elation as extreme as his dread. His senses quickened, he attained an acuity of consciousness at once pleasurable and excruciating. It was something like the elevated state of awareness induced by drugs. And it could be just as addictive, for it made whatever else life offered in the way of delights or torments seem pedestrian" (Caputo, xvi-xvii).

William Broyles, Jr., the founding editor of Texas Monthly and another veteran, plunges even deeper into the spiritual essence of this awareness, noting how "There are other, more troubling reasons why men love war. The love of war stems from the union deep in the core of our being, between sex and

destruction, beauty and horror, love and death. War may be the only way in which men touch the mystic domains in our soul. It is, for men, at some terrible level the closest thing to what childbirth is for women: the initiation into the power of life and death. It is like lifting off the corner of the universe and looking at what's underneath. To see war is to see into the dark heart of things…" (Broyles, 61).

For lovers of peace, this fatal attraction must be understood and then superseded by more powerful claims to our allegiance. It is simply naive to assume that if we hear or read enough war stories peace becomes preferable. Bill Moyers, a journalist who once worked in the Johnson White House and participated in the making of key war decisions, said to a group of veterans, "Had we been able to hear what some of you have had to say, I think some of those decisions would not have been made" (Goldman and Fuller, 306). I doubt it. Many of the most committed to waging war have their own war stories to tell; and time, healing all wounds, engenders sentimentality, a legal drug for visions of the halls of Montezuma and the shores of Tripoli without maggots. We are also dazzled by the technology of war, watching air shows for sleekness of design and speed of movement. We play war games from childhood, pressing parents for more and more complicated and expensive engines of fake destruction. And death, always followed by playground resurrections, becomes neat and clean. War is, therefore, not so bad. Drop a bomb, solve a problem. It's that simple.

However, our love of peace must be stronger; it must overcome the seduction of war because peace, denying the ultimate power of death celebrates the value of life. Peace can give us the opportunity to explore, discover, and nurture that which is best about ourselves. When supported by religious faith, it then provides that intensity of experience which the war lover attributes exclusively to combat.

On the night of June 20, 1969, a soldier came into my bunker as I listened to Walter Cronkite describe with hushed, almost reverential, tone Neil Armstrong's walk on the moon. That "giant step for mankind" soon seemed trivial as I heard this young man tell me, as he cried, that he was just sick of killing people: "I'm tired of killing, Doc, just tired. When is it going to end? I don't want to do it no more."

His was a plea which neither I or Neil Armstrong or Walter Cronkite or President Johnson could answer. He was not just hoping for a mere cessation of hostilities; he wanted the consolation of knowing that he was not a killer, a votary of death. The books I've read about war, my war, reveal the essential idealism of the combat soldier. Despite all the brutalities and atrocities which war inspires and justifies, there remains an abiding sense of betrayal in the heart of darkness. We believed that we deserved better, that we could do better. We had succumbed to war's enticements, but its temporary pleasures did not blind us. We were angry and sad because we knew the truth which war tries to obscure—we knew that peace, however fleeting, is our natural condition, our birthright, and that it will survive because we are worthy of

nothing less.

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Letter to the editor, in dialogue 1:4, p. 6 (1987)

THE BURDEN OF AMERICAN DREAMS

American intellectuals seem to be confirmed believers in the magic of words, being themselves experts at conjuring up things you never dreamt were there, and making other things disappear altogether. Some prime examples of this verbal sorcery are now being provided by dialogue. In S. Edward Morrison’s article “Beyond Death’s Grey Land,” to take one example, an important dimension of the Vietnam war, which surely should come to its right in a globally oriented magazine, seems to have all but vanished into thin air. While it is easy to sympathize with the plight of the American soldier, fighting a war he despised, you sometimes wonder what was happening inside the Viet Cong, many of them mere children, fighting a vicious and relentless aggressor, and whether we will ever read such touching expositions about their personal feelings of agony and desolation.

Even more astounding is the fact, that in spite of the collective mental

therapy (to which the American intelligentsia, in its role of a psychoanalyst and an absolving priest, has subjected its nation) genuine insight, which almost always inspires a genuine change of heart, never seems to have been gained. “They have forgotten nothing and learned nothing,” said Napoleon of the Bourbons. Its wounds just beginning to heal, the U.S. invades another Third World country and starts perpetrating the same crimes with even more sophisticated methods, only this time callous professional assassins, euphemistically known as mercenaries, carry the heat. This is also why the American aggression in Nicaragua will in all probability not generate a bulk of self-propping apologia, the “why-were-we-here?” literary masterpieces, so generously quoted by Morrison.

At the summit in Iceland, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev quoted an old Russian proverb, obviously referring to President Reagan: “Sometimes you stand eye to eye with someone, but you can’t see his face.” Since Vietnam, Americans have been looking at themselves in a mirror, scrutinizing their motives, ideals and dreams, determined to get to the bottom of it all. When they do, and they will, it will come as a great relief to the rest of the world.

Edvard T. Jonsson
Faroe Islands

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Letter to the editor, in dialogue 1:4, p. 6 (1987)

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