

ONE NIGHT IN JANUARY

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On a dark, bitter evening in January 1990, I found myself standing with a small group of students, faculty, and townspeople on the mall in front of the university bookstore. I was cradling a small white candle inside a paper cup, trying to prevent an icy wind from blowing out the tiny fragile flame. The two dozen or so folks huddled around me were subdued, silent, nearly stunned. No one was speechifying. No one was chanting. No one was even carrying placards.

Most of those in the little crowd were too young--thankfully--to know how to effectively plan or execute a peace demonstration. So it was mostly by word-of-mouth and common concern that we had gathered together that night; because once again, the United States was stumbling into a big war. And once again, some of us ordinary citizens felt angry, helpless, and disheartened.

The shock effect of America's newest military adventure was especially jarring for me, as I'd just returned the day before from a month-long trip through Vietnam, my sixth such visit to S.E. Asia since serving there with the 25th Infantry Division in 1967-68. It was as a direct result of my Army experience that I became a writer and teacher, and I've been actively involved in Indochina Scholarship and reconciliation work for over two decades, including such projects as: Vietnam Veterans Against the War; 1st Casualty Press (publishers of *Winning Hearts & Minds*, and *Free Fire Zone*); The William Joiner Center for the Study of War and Social Consequence; The U.S.-Indochina Reconciliation Project; The Indochina Arts Project; etc.

For the past six years, I've been a member of the English faculty at Southwest Missouri State University, where in addition to introducing and teaching Vietnam Literature, I've also helped establish the Southeast Asia-Ozark Project. SEAOP's mission is the promotion of educational, cultural, and humanitarian dialogue and exchange between the United States and Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. For example, last year we took a college film crew to Hue, where we shot a video documentary. "The Bicycle Doctors: Life in a Vietnamese Hospital."

On every trip to Indochina, I've continued to search out indigenous written works, music, and films to enhance my teaching curriculum and personal research; materials designed to facilitate additional student insight into the Vietnam War, and the people--both Western and Asian--who fought or were affected by it. I have devoted my entire adult life to the pursuit of peace and understanding, convinced that my efforts both as a witness and teacher could make some contribution to the manner in which the new generation would think and act about war.

But while the restless ghosts of nearly 60,000 American soldiers and over a million Indochinese still haunt shopping malls and rice paddies . . . there I was, standing with a few shivering souls in the freezing night air of Missouri, holding my small candle, and wondering if my life's work had all been for naught. Since it was a spontaneous gathering, there was no rally leader, and no pre-planned

agenda. We stood quietly, each of us lost in our own sadness. Finally, a young coed, wanting to make some type of statement of unity and peace, but uncertain about what might be considered proper in the face of the overwhelming war hysteria sweeping the country, began to softly sing "America the Beautiful." Most of the rest of the group joined in, their thin ragged voices mostly lost in the winter wind.

It was--by then--late in the evening, and the campus was virtually deserted. However, even before the song was finished, our presence began to attract attention. At first, the few late-night passersby just glared at us, some shaking their heads as if to ward off a bad dream. One student spat defiantly in our direction. Suddenly, a bunch of girls appeared in the windows of a nearby dorm, and started chanting shrilly, "Death to Hussein!" and "Love It or Leave It!"

Quickly, the commotion began to spread, and before long, an openly-hostile crowd of young men and women--including some of my own students--started to congregate on the sidewalk across the street from our location. Some of them had yellow head or arm bands. Others were waving or were wrapped in large American flags. Many were wearing "Nuke Saddam" or "I'd Go 10,000 Miles to 'Smoke' a Camel" type t-shirts, etc. Several were carrying signs: "War is Sexy!"; "Kill the Ragheads;" and "Screw Peace!"

At first, they were content to mutter at us, or give us the finger. But as their numbers increased, they became bolder, and their taunts became more vocal and nasty: "Pinkos!"; "Wimps!"; "Chickens!"

From my position near the rear of the rapidly dwindling peace group (who were fleeing in the face of the growing and unexpected hostility), I watched with profound sadness and incredulity. I almost couldn't believe what I was seeing and hearing. I couldn't shake the feeling that it was all just a surreal dream; some kind of 60s apparition gone mad. But I knew better.

I wanted to leave too. Needed to flee. But I wouldn't allow myself to abandon my little patch of frosty grass. Couldn't bring myself to snuff out my feeble candle. Refused to abruptly surrender my oh-so-hard-won outpost of idealism.

MY MIND AND HEART WERE WRENCHED BACK TO THE JUNGLES OF CU CHI, AND TO THE PALE-FACED YOUNG LIEUTENANT WHO WAS KILLED ON HIS VERY FIRST PATROL IN VIETNAM; A MISSION I'D SENT HIM ON . . .

While fifty feet away, a college student, his face contorted with hate, yelled "Traitors! Traitors!"

I WAS RECALLING THE TERRIBLE GRIEF AND GUILT I FELT WHEN WRITING TO THE LIEUTENANT'S PARENTS ABOUT HIS DEATH . . .

While just across the street, a young girl draped in an American flag screamed, "Communists! Communists!"

I WAS REMEMBERING THE ANGRY ACCUSATIONS OF THE LIEUTENANT'S FIANCE, WHEN I ENCOUNTERED HER LATER IN NEW YORK CITY . . .

While nearby, underage fraternity brothers, swigging cans of beer, bellowed, "Faggots! Faggots!"

I WAS MOURNING THE NAMES OF THE 58,175 AMERICAN SOLDIERS ON THE VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL; AND THE TWENTY-FOUR OF THEM THAT I'D KNOWN FAIRLY WELL . . .

While just a dozen yards away, a growing rabble of unruly students chanted in unison, "Cowards! Cowards!"

Even though they didn't necessarily represent the total tenor of campus opinion, at that moment, I hated those kids. Hated them nearly as much as I hated the government that had contrived a nice big war for them, and then given them the xenophobic mandate to hate Arabs (as well as fellow Americans) so openly and unquestioningly and proudly.

And just as criminal, my own nation was forcing me--once again--into the absolutely untenable position of either loving the warriors and publicly embracing their war; or abandoning my soldier students and colleagues, in the face of near-total social and academic ostracism.

Part of me wanted to wade into that mob of righteous smart alecks and try to knock some sense into them. Another part of me wanted to reach out to them with truth and history and reason. But even from across the street; even in the near-dark; I could see that either of those two approaches was hopeless. The burning brightness of their eyes and the earnest innocence of their faces told me that they were already way beyond the reach of any teacher. Despite our best intentions, we had somehow failed them; and now, although barely old enough to vote, their ignorance was permanently unassailable.

They'd never heard of Norman Morrison or Allison Krause or Thich Quang Duc or James T. Davis. Their war heroes were Oliver North and Sylvester Stallone and Chuck Norris and, now, Norman Schwarzkopf. Those kids wanted blood, and they wanted it now! No Viet Cong or North Vietnamese soldiers I ever faced were so unreasoningly fanatic, nor frightened me so deeply.

For a long time, I stood rooted to my small patch of lawn in the coldness of that January night, clutching my candle, and feeling a resurgence of the rage I thought I'd conquered years and years ago.

Finally, I slipped into the shadows, and left the campus quietly. For blocks, I could still hear the mindless incantations of the still-growing pro-war throng, as they echoed through the crisp night air.

And sometime during the long walk home, my candle went out.

The next morning, after a restive, sleepless night, I got up early, took a cold shower, drank two cups of extra strong coffee, and returned to campus to resume classes. Clearly, there was a lot more teaching to be done. . .