

CHAPTER THREE: On Becoming a Peacemaker

Vietnam

"Damn, you had PTSD even without seeing combat!" Lance Dickson told me.

Lance was one of a dozen American veterans of the Vietnam war that Dr. Ed Tick had invited to travel to Southeast Asia with him for "peacemaking and reconciliation" with the Vietnamese people.

I was at first kinda sheepish.

"I was a veteran of the anti-war movement."

But the PTSD was very real.

Must have been 11 years old when I asked my mom "Will I have to fight in war?"

"Probably," she said.

So I prepared in terror.

My recurring nightmare throughout my adolescence:

In a cold sweat I'd awake from a fire
In a cold sweat I'd awake from a fire
Gun in hand

It was a matter of killing and/or being killed.

"That's the way it is," said Lance.

Because of my MS gimp, in Vietnam I was often asked, "Wounded by the Viet Cong?"

One young Vietnamese man and his American girlfriend asked me about my wound.

"Oh no, I was in the anti war movement"

"Were you the only one?"

Smiled to myself thinking of shaking my solitary fist at Richard Nixon.

"No there were many of us."

I felt very alone. I was aware that in Vietnam and subsequent conflicts that I lived in a country I could never understand because of it's love of war.

At 16, I was an illegal alien in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan since it was so obvious to me that the recurring nightmare of "my fire" was just around the bend.

"You were of the "ROTC" clan were you (Run Off To Canada)?" asked Lance.

Getting ready to be "draftably" eighteen, was homeless for three years. I'd gather with other homeless folk for hope of day labor. One time, comrade Jimmy arrived ecstatic. I knew Jimmy to be a member of the VVAW -- the Vietnam Veterans Against the War.

"Cambodia has been liberated!" Jimmy announced.
We homeless joined him in his ecstasy.

It would be a few years before anybody could understand what "liberation" meant for Cambodia.

Traveling in Vietnam with American veterans was a revelation. I had long said I'd never be at home in the US until we grieved the genocide we visited on South East Asia. I came to see that veterans grieved deeply -- that in fact we required that of them, and it drove many of them nuts.

I trespassed under the cover of night onto the White Sands Missile Range to bury a figurine of Kwan Yin, the Buddhist emblem of limitless compassion, at Ground Zero, Trinity Site. This is where the US tested the first atom bomb shortly before leveling Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Before dawn I burnt a handful of papers - each representing the renunciation of "enemy making."

It was evident that this "American disease" was intimately my own as well.

The harsh reflection were between my training as a terrorist and my initiation as a peacemaker in post-apartheid Zimbabwe.

It was very direct, my change from being a terrorist to being a peacemaker.

Could start anywhere, really, but I think starting with that lovely morning when I was bombed in 1988 by the American Air Force, right after doing my rite of renouncing enemy making.

I will tell that portion from a poem written the same evening.

Near Trinity Site the day after the June Moon went full

When a swallow flies toward the face of a cliff, it's wings cut the air with an effortless violence

And so it was

When the jets flew over, the stunning grace as they curved against the embankment of the Sierra Obscura, shuddering along the spine of the yucca.

And beneath the roar
I also shuddered
with the dull gray beetles
that cluster
on the scat of coyotes.

When the bombs began dropping
I thought, this cannot be

I thought
El Salvador
and not long ago
a small hamlet in Vietnam
the fire, the wailing of mothers
over dead children

There was no place to hide

I became a dusty fetus
curled up amongst cacti
with only a small prayer
in a small voice.

Please, if I die now
regard the life of my daughter with kindness,
tend to her heart.

When the bombing paused
I stood up and walked hurriedly north,
my back to where the mushroom cloud
first lifted poison to the sky.

The largest tiger swallowtail
I had ever seen alighted on the rugged
blue flower of a thistle

My God, this life.

And then the bombs
began dropping again
and an antelope looked up from its grazing
and held my gaze for a long moment
then ran off to where the earth still smoked

What must it think?

In 1945, two herds of antelope scattered to those mountains
when the first nuclear bomb
was tested here

Later that day, J. Robert Oppenheimer
a man not unfamiliar with kindness

found
a turtle turned on its back near Ground Zero.
He set the turtle back on its feet.

Three weeks later, the Bomb
the Japanese would call Original Child
leveled Hiroshima,
and then, Nagasaki

In the world
to frighten a butterfly
will never mean very much.
To bake the underside of a slow
reptile or to shatter the
minds of a herd of beasts
to burn to the ground
a whole city of children
has become the ordinary labor of ordinary men

Have mercy on us.

Trying to make Peace with the Hermit

Mr. Hermit SS: (short and snooty)
Peace?
Trying?

Me - Attempting

SS - You who kiss ass WE see right through you.

Me - We?

SS - All of us

Me - What? All? - you dumbfucks who never got it that Adolf offed himself?

SS - Cut it out. Just leave Adolf alone. He was a misunderstood kid.

Me - OK Mr. SS. I'll back off. What do you have to say?

SS - (and chorus) Our asses are blistered with hickeys. You only kiss the asses of those you want something from. And this F word - trying to pass as the junior high cool kid or what?

As I said, trying to make peace with Mr. Hermit. This morning awoke to *lojong* practice of cultivating loving kindness.

Fifty-nine slogans. The slogan this morning, "Don't speak of injured limbs. Don't talk about faults."

Chogyam Trungpa's commentary. "Because of your arrogance and your aggression, you prefer to talk about other people's defects as a way of building yourself up."

And the Zen priest, Norman Fischer, elaborates. "And just as we don't criticize someone for having an injury like that, although we recognize it as an injury, and note the limitations that come from it, we aren't critical of the person with an inner injury that is the ultimate cause of the person's poor conduct."

And so it is, Mr. SS and homies.

Me - By way of peacemaking, Mr. Hermit, I've exhibited great egotism in calling you on egotism.

Mr. Hermit - No shit, Sherlock.

Me - No shit. And calling you arrogant and aggressive when I'm being arrogant and aggressive. Shall we make peace?

Mr. Hermit - If you don't make me gag on your politeness. You're the boss.

Lojong nails me again. Will not name names - except Mr. SS. MOH has been horrific in aggression and arrogance.