THE HEALING THAT PEACE DID NOT BRING: SECOND GENERATION STUDIES OF THE VIET NAM WAR

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"Why are all these academic pukes
interested in the Viet Nam war now?"

- a Viet Nam veteran

Immediately after 9/11, teachers across the country were consulting with each other on how best to help their students deal with the horror of the event. On September 13th, via a composition list serve, a syllabus was published for a course designed "overnight" to help high school students learn about the history of terrorist organizations in the Middle East. Within a week of the disaster another teacher disseminated a list of web sources providing alternative views to television newscasts. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* published two special discussion sections, "The Fractured Landscape" in its September 28th issue, "Teaching, Reading, and Writing in the Fractured Landscape" appearing a week later—both gold mines of learning opportunities. The *South Central Review* released a special issue of essays dedicated to 9/11 built around presentations at its annual conference in Tulsa held in November 2001. The editors of the journal explain that the purpose of the issue was to encourage continued dialogue, "[b]ecause 9/11 is of such importance,

because it stirs powerful emotions for everyone, and because the discussion of its implications and meaning are far from exhausted" (1).

Like the entire country, the academic community mobilized quickly in response to this national tragedy. Treating 9/11 as an educational opportunity makes immanent sense. What could be more relevant in a writing class? Still, I offer this essay as a cautionary tale, having taught for many years a first-year writing and research course on the Viet Nam War, and Viet Nam War literature courses in upper-division English classes.[1] In such courses the trauma of war, as captured in war literature and testimonies, is an important component of what the students witness and examine. But what is more challenging for me is the trauma of the students themselves, trauma that we might presume to be fresh and still unexplored in the case of 9/11 but that proves surprisingly subterranean and disturbing in the case of the Viet Nam War.[2]

I originally selected the war as a subject for several reasons, not the least of which is my own interest and involvement (as I will make clear presently), having grown up in the 1960s and known many people who served in Viet Nam. Just as formative a factor is that in my classes anywhere from 1/4 to 1/3 of the students have family members and friends—fathers, grandfathers, uncles, cousins, high school and college teachers—who were involved in the war as soldiers, nurses, or protesters. Yet for the most part our students are enveloped in a conspiracy of silence about the war. Family members won't talk about it. Teachers run out of time at the end of the history course and can't cover it.

In any given class, students' interests and attitudes toward the topic are far-ranging, beginning with indifferent ignorance.[3] "It happened before I was born," as one student explains, "and I was lucky enough not to have a father or uncle killed in it." There is also detached curiosity: "Viet Nam was basically a mystery to me," another student put it. There is the ever-versatile spirit of academic investigation: "The war is primarily an historical event of political and military significance," a different student observes.

But there is also profound personal investment: "I've watched my father drink himself nearly to death," says a very honest student. "I feel robbed and don't know why this had to happen."

In my experience, even the most detached students are willing to engage with the subject of Viet Nam, and engagement facilitates what George Hillocks terms "inquiry": reflective writing that focuses on concrete data of a defined topic involving specific rhetorical strategies (*Research* 180-81).[4] For Hillocks, inquiry is necessarily expressed through the rhetorical craft of argument:

> As we set out to conduct an inquiry, we necessarily conduct an argument, an argument whose claim is continually reshaped by our changing perceptions of the problem, its data, and its context. The more we work with a problem, the more likely we are to deconstruct and reconstruct our thinking about it. This is part of the recursive composing process, part of revising. (*Teaching Writing* 129)[5]

I use the term inquiry, then, as a pedagogical approach wherein a complex topic or problem is examined through extensive research, analyzed through a variety of rhetoric strategies, and articulated in a hard-earned, reflective argument.

Over seven years I have collected compelling evidence of the kind of critical thinking and sophisticated writing that can be produced through inquiry. As will become clear through the testimonies of my students, Viet Nam War materials provide fruitful ground for inquiry.[6] Why might that be? Philip D. Beidler believes that the Viet Nam War is a "sign" and its literature a means of revising America's self-myth through "radical self-critique" (3). Thomas Myers also believes war narratives form and reform the "national mythos" (10-22).[7] Tobey Herzog sees the war as a state of mind: "a moral, political, emotional, and even artistic touchstone for people living through the Vietnam experience." Soldiers and civilians are both "veterans," in this sense (1).[8] As a true war story, Viet Nam is "about us all" (Beidler 8).

As compelling as the subject is, there are potential dangers, not the least of which may be the instructor's own passion. As Philip Jason notes,

> There is a danger in the materials we teach that grows, in part, out of our passionate concern for them and in part out of our various agendas for fostering the better world that we hope our students can build. That danger is to begin with conclusions, to cut off the possibilities for genuine inquiry, to bully the students into attitudinal submission, either through the very slant of the reading list or through our approach to the literature. (157)

The corrective to such a temptation is the process of inquiry itself, a process whereby students become immersed in the subject, continually reflect upon, imagine beyond, and interrogate the evidence, the instructor's view (if voiced), and their own perspectives, feelings, and conclusions.

But there is a second danger—the potential trauma experienced by the students engaged in the inquiry process. The risk is serious and the cost is real, as the following testimonies make clear. But avoidance (whether a wise strategy or not) may not be possible. The tragic fact is that we don't have to address topics like 9/11 or Viet Nam to stumble upon trauma. As Robert Jay Lifton observes, "trauma these days is everywhere, and post traumatic reactions are world wide.... Nowhere are people exempt from feeling assaulted by forces that seem out of control" (*The Protean Self* 215). Even an innocuous writing assignment such as "People I have Forgotten" can evoke confessional essays, as Holocaust scholar Lawrence Langer warned years ago.[9]

In this essay I will tell four stories to illustrate the kinds of traumatic impact so-called "academic" subject matter can have, how problematic such impact can be for the teacher and student, and possible applications for the classroom. These stories capture and compare the experiences of two pairs of students, the first involving two males (both in the military at the time) enrolled in

my writing and research course a year apart. The second pair involves two females taking the same English capstone course, one a veteran of the Canadian military, one the wife of a Viet Nam veteran and sister to a young man killed in the war.

Set in such relational positions, these four students express conflicting and thought-provoking messages that contribute to the scholarship of "teaching Viet Nam" and other subjects of inquiry that study, reveal, awaken or evoke traumatic experiences.

The evidence I offer is not collected from the formal argument papers produced in my courses. Indeed, the writers' own trauma did not surface in this venue, which is to admit that my purpose is less to document evidence that supports inquiry as an instructional method (the scholarship of Hillocks and others has already done so) and more an argument about what happens when we give voice to students *in the process* of their inquiry. My students' trauma emerged in ancillary assignments: reflective cover letters, learning/reading logs, and response journals—projects often assigned as "pre-writing" exercises. If teachers are interested in the paths their students take in order to produce their final, formal arguments, then additional writing exercises will open windows into that process.

Assigned such exercises, students inevitably tell stories about their own experiences—as a way to find and articulate connections, to incorporate the subject into their lives, to make sense of and find meaning in the material they study. Rather than pitted against each other, I believe that the rhetorics of narrative and argumentation are contingent and complementary, with narrative acting a means to question, explore, and reimagine meaning unearthed in research materials, then as a way of testing and revising an argument that articulates that meaning.

The rhetoric of story-telling is well-suited to my purpose. "A teacher is, among other things, a story teller," Milton J. Bates rightly observes (216). We talk with our students. We talk to each other about our students. And perhaps we tell stories of our students to each other in order to carry on the dialogues that occur but hopefully don't terminate in our semester-long classes.

Because my own story stems from my students, theirs must come first.

Lee's story

Lee enrolled in a second-semester research and writing course for first-year students during spring 1998. (See Appendix I for the sequence of research and writing assignments.) Lee was in the military—a fact he had to convey during the first days of the course since his superiors indicated his unit might be called up at any moment for service in Bosnia. But in fact Lee was able to finish the class, producing extensive and thoughtful analyses throughout the semester. In his final portfolio, he reflected on the class. Initially Lee had been excited about learning new information, and his research about the war provided in-depth knowledge about such topics as the military and the media, and the machinations of the Paris Peace Accords. But by the end of the course he resisted coming: "I really did feel like I was coming to a funeral." He explains:

> *My reaction to this class is based on my own experience and personal beliefs. It is not necessarily the age difference that makes me react this way. I had military experience. I know what a soldier feels and goes through every day he serves his country. Taking up military service means killing. . . . Like it or not, the military is a corp of professional, legal killers. Killing is our business and business is good. . . . Soldiers are not supposed to think, they are supposed to act. That was one of my problems: I was starting to think, and I began to be cynical about the military.*

Lee's conflicted feelings about the military were at odds with his clear and adamant loyalty to his fellow soldiers. "*I have formed a bond with my fellow servicemen that civilians will never, ever understand. Some things you just have to experience yourself, and only those who have shared that experience truly understand you.*"

Given his maturity, his military record, his world travels, and his views, Lee felt out of place with his classmates and asked that

details about his life be kept confidential. But his sense of isolation stemmed more directly from his relation to the subject matter—perhaps because it brought back too many memories. "*During my time in the service, I saw too much sorrow and death was always a possibility*," Lee explained. "*I experienced things that I am still trying to comprehend.*" Thus in his final reflections on the course, he states:

> *As important as this Viet Nam subject is, I really am tired of all this death and dying. There is too much sorrow in this world, and this class just brings out more pain and anger that I really don't want to deal with right now. I just want to be happy. . . . Do you know what the most depressing thing about this class is? It is the fact that we cry so much for a war that killed so many two decades ago, and we forget that soldiers are still dying today! American soldiers are dying in Bosnia, in Africa, in the Middle East, in Croatia. . . . We worry so much about the past that we have lost sight of the present.*

How should a teacher respond to such a personal, thoughtful response? I "listened" to Lee's hand-written reflections slipped into the final section of his end-of-the-semester portfolio. But I also felt Lee deserved a personal, honest response (slipped into the back of his portfolio). Why *do* I assign this topic? Part of my apologia to Lee:

> Learning and finding out the truth about the Viet Nam War helps me find the equilibrium I lost in high school and college. When I talked about the Tim O'Brien stories—about veteran Tim trying to save pre-war Timmy with a story—I am also explaining why I keep going back to this topic. Viet Nam both gave me something and robbed me of something . . . .

I also spoke of how my high school and college years were shaped by a series of events, including Viet Nam, which accumulated into

(if not trauma) at least a harsh "coming of age": the assassinations of Martin Luther King and the Kennedys, Watergate, etc. I remember several times in high school the nuns coming into class and taking one of the girls out into the hallway to inform her that her boyfriend or brother had just been killed. The sobs. I lived in a town near a B-52 base and our house was on the landing path. At night those huge bombers would fly over so low the house would shake. Many were not new, silver-colored but camouflage green. Why does one generation pay so high a price for hard-earned wisdom only to hide it from the next? More words to Lee:

> The more students discover the truths of this way (and they are many and complex) then the meaning of it won't be lost or forgotten, but will in fact continue to be defined. You aren't like other students, and keeping your age and military background a secret doesn't camouflage you entirely! Everyone knows (from your comments and papers) that you are on a level they are trying to reach. When younger students balk at this (or any other serious subject) because they don't want reality to seep into their youthful world, that's quite another problem. This generation will soon have the opportunity to shape those events. It doesn't seem possible that they could do a worse job than my generation did.

At the end of Lee's course reflections, he wrote: "*I can endure, and I can survive.*" Now I wonder if eventually he was posted to Bosnia or Kosovo. I have not seen Lee on campus since our class.

Michael's Story

In another of my composition sections (spring 1997) was a veteran of the peace-keeping effort in Haiti. Still on active duty and expecting to be assigned from week to week, Michael had a variety of medical problems the army was trying to treat. I regarded him as an expert in military history: he knew a great deal about battle field strategy, history of the Green Berets, and so on.

Because of his background, I found myself watching his facial expressions in class, using his reactions as touchstones, or reality checks, for my own understanding. He became especially attentive when we would talk about guerrilla warfare—the hidden enemy, the constant fear, the arbitrariness of death.

Gradually, Michael began to offer windows into his own life. In his writing journal, for instance, he would talk about guilt: "*It never goes away . . . it is always hanging just overhead, just out of reach.*" About halfway through the semester, he came to the office and talked about his own experience in Haiti. He had been critically wounded in the stomach from a grenade carried by a guerrilla fighter. In self-defense, Michael had killed the enemy—a ten-year-old boy. And as he confessed in his cover letter to his paper on Medal of Honor heroes:

> *You have to understand that every time I sit down to write one of these papers I see that boy and those DAMN trees everywhere. . . . It took me three years just to tell my wife of the ten-year-old boy, and it nearly destroyed my soul, let alone my marriage and family. Every day I deal with the fact that I stopped a young life before he had a chance to repent. Am I godless? No, but I do lack the trust and belief that I once held.*

I wrote a letter back to Michael and talked about my own crisis of trust and belief that may have been precipitated by the war but surfaces continually with various historical (and rhetorical) events since then:

> This course has been extremely painful and significant for a lot of us, especially those with fathers who are veterans. One student in the earlier class has been writing about his Green Beret father all semester. In this second paper he intended to write about his father as a recipient of the Medal of Honor. He discovered in his research that his father was not on the list of awardees, confronted him about it, and found out that his father had lied to him all these years. He

> still wrote his paper about his father as a hero-figure in his life. That takes courage. Painful journeys . . . . I admire your honesty and your refusal to spare yourself as you proceed through these assignments. Pace yourself a little, you've got some battles ahead.

Just about this time, during one of our classes, we read a short story by Ronald Anthony Cross called "The Heavenly Blue Answer." In this story a character named James lives in present day Los Angeles; he is suffering from flashbacks of the war with increasing intensity and frequency. It has gotten to the point that the jungle is literally enclosing him. "The jungle was here to stay now. He was sure of that. He would never force it all back into his head again. It was too big for that" (156). There is a character in this mental jungle, an old Vietnamese who in the real war some 20 years before had come out of his hut just after James' squad had been attacked by a sniper and his best friend Oogie had been killed. As Cross describes in his story:

> And the old man, empty hands...long scraggly grey beard and big, big brown eyes...says, in English... "I...am..." And just as he is saying this, holding out his hands, empty hands. Just as he is getting to the good part...[James] squeezes off the trigger and blows him away. (151)

In the flashbacks, the old man reappears: "'I am....'" he begins. "'I am what?'" James cries. But he keeps squeezing the trigger before the old man can complete his message. Finally, sitting in the gutters of L.A. and staring into a discarded Coke bottle, James is told by an old drunk: "'It's my blue heaven. I see every answer to every question. I see God. I see myself. Here, have a look'" (157). James peers into the bottle and sees the old Vietnamese: "'I . . . am . . . you'" the former enemy, the former demon tells him. "'I am you.'" James begins to weep, and the war for him is finally over.

I relate this story within a story to explain an insight into Michael's motives in writing his third paper. Initially he wanted to research the Pol Pot regime, and actually wrote his first draft on that topic. But when I opened his second draft to read and comment on, I was surprised to find Michael had changed his topic to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a heroic decision since it forced him to write about what he was actually going through. After reading his second draft, which was full of excellent but detached information, I wrote on his paper: "This draft has a dialogue or debate-like quality, like you're addressing somebody behind me I can't see." After class Michael came up and asked what I meant. I couldn't explain beyond what I had written. But he stood there for a moment, then said, "You're right—I think I'm speaking to my daughter." In his cover letter to the final paper, Michael revealed his motives for writing about PTSD:

> *I told you it was my daughter. I know this sounds a little odd, and believe me it wasn't what I was expecting...my wife, the boy, myself, maybe—but my daughter? There is only one way I can express why . . . one day she is going to have questions. As of now I just have no solid answers for her. You see, when I came home I was a wreck. I was always angry, jumpy, and to this day I sleep with a dim lamp on in the bedroom. I guess the things I say in these papers are to prepare myself for the questions she will have one day. I feel as though I really turned my back on my family for well over a year after I came home, and I feel regret for not showing her more attention. My answer to myself was always the same thing, "How can you love a child after you've killed one?" I took it too far. I didn't remember that she, my own daughter . . . is me. She is . . . me. It makes sense now.*

Given that these words introduce a research paper on PTSD, I have no doubt that Michael understood the symptoms of his own distress: the nightmares, the disassociation or detachment from his family, the lack of trust, the shattered sense of his own integrity. Doubtless he had already diagnosed himself; the paper did not

reveal something new about himself, only provided scientific and psychological terms for what he was experiencing. In his final portfolio he told me, the composition course "*dared me to challenge my own internal demon.*"

Kathy's story

During the Fall 2001 semester, I taught our English capstone course, a meta-cognitive study of literature in various genres produced by moments of crisis in the past century: World War I, the Depression, World War II, the Holocaust, and the Viet Nam War. Kathy, a student in that class, is a born journaler and story-teller. As she reflected on our readings, she gradually revealed details of her life: her youth growing up in a German family in Canada, her marriage and divorce, her dramatic role in Shirley Lauro's play *A Piece of My Heart*. In the days immediately following 9/11, a motif appeared in her journal, reflecting her new focus on military rhetoric in the press, which in turn evoked memories of her experiences in the Canadian armed forces. Kathy found the unit of Viet Nam War readings (see Appendix II) especially demanding.

> *I've been crying a lot, and actually feeling physically nauseated, too, by some of the things I'm reading and seeing. This class goes beyond any other class I've taken, way beyond. It's really physically draining, to go through such emotional extremes. There's plenty of intellectual work to do in this class . . . . but the part that's really draining is the emotional impact of what we're reading.*

In identifying the intensity of the experience, Kathy noted several causes. Perhaps one cause was the type of injuries soldiers were able to survive, perhaps the heightened, graphic descriptions of those injuries (as in Ronald J. Glasser's chapter "I Don't Want to Go Home Alone" from *365 Days*). "*That's what I've been advocating all along, I guess*," she reflects. "*If something's horrible, tell us it's horrible, don't gloss over it. Maybe then if we're aware of how horrible war*

is, then we'll avoid putting ourselves in that situation again." Yet Kathy paid a price for her understanding:

> *Reading about these horrifying things leaves me feeling like I've just been run through my Mom's old wringer-style washing machine a couple of times. Being soaked and battered around in the washer drum, then rinsed and flattened by the wringer rollers is somehow a pretty good analogy for how I'm feeling after reading some of these pieces. Frankly, that's just a little bit too hard on me - that's more involvement than I expect to have with a class.*

The cause of her distress was perhaps deeper than the reading that seemed to trigger it.

> *As a child I cried when I felt alone and scared and unhappy; in a situation I didn't want to be in, and powerless. And now I'm crying as I read about things that are very horrible and sad, and I'm powerless to change them. I think it's as much the "powerless-ness," at least as much as the awful-ness of the situation, that makes me cry. Suffering and death - I think death makes us all feel powerless. If it's an injury or an illness, maybe I can do something to help. But death is different, there's no helping there. And suffering that I'm powerless to do anything to help alleviate, that's right up there, too.*

In response to these entries, I wrote back to Kathy, asking if I should adjust the reading selections given their intensity. But Kathy thought that, despite feeling so emotionally drained, "*It's been sort of therapeutic for me to write about them . . . . even so I'm still a little surprised about the way I'm pouring everything into this journal, from my childhood traumas to my experiences as 'Kathy, the Girl Soldier' and beyond. I guess reading these pieces sort of awakened a need in me to talk about (or write about) those experiences.*" Perhaps this sort of course is not an aberration in a normal undergraduate curriculum, but a necessary opportunity for writers to relate events of their

own lives, events that might otherwise seem removed from academic study.

Nora's story

Nora was in the same capstone course with Kathy. The unit on Viet Nam precipitated a personal crisis for her. After a war veteran came to the class (he is a member of our psychology department—someone who has no sense of piety about words like "heroism" or "patriotism"), Nora was extremely offended and as a response revealed this story about her brother in her journal.

> *Joe Ramos Jr. was killed in Viet Nam on November 27, 1967. The army unit in Corpus Christi, Texas, sent an officer and a priest to my parents' house to notify them of the death. My parents were alone at home, building a new car port for my brother's 1966 Chevrolet Super Sport. My brother bought the new car before leaving to Viet Nam. My parents wanted to take care of my brother's prize possession, so they were building the car port to surprise him when he returned home. Three hundred sixty-five days. My brother needed three more months to serve out his time in Viet Nam. We lived in the Mexican part of town (barrio) in a small but happy home. My other older brother and I were in high school on the day of "notification." We were driving home after school let out, and when we neared our home, there were many cars parked in our driveway and in the new car port. Before nearing the house, my brother said to me, "Nora, I think something is wrong. Don't be scared—I think something happened to Junior." We parked across the street from our home and walked towards the entrance of our home. Once inside, we saw our parents crying. Relatives were crying. My brother said, "Mom, what happened?" No answer. My Dad hugged us and said, "Junior is dead." I said to my Dad—it's a mistake, it can't be. Then my brother hugged me and said, "We have to be strong for Mom and Dad." It was the worst day of my life, and I'll never forget it.*

Following these lines, Nora tellingly reflects: "*Here I'm having a flashback to the day of notification.*" She goes on.

> *My cousin, Jesse Ramos Jr., already in Viet Nam, was the last relative to see my brother alive. He escorted the body home. At the funeral, the emblem of the Infantry and crossed rifles were on the coffin—military honors, etc. My cousin was angry and distraught over the death of my brother, as the family was. The next day after the funeral, he took a plane and returned to Viet Nam. He was wounded several times in Viet Nam. Today my cousin walks with a brace on his leg and does not have the use of one arm (shrapnel). He is not the same person we once knew before Viet Nam. He carries so much mental baggage as a result of Viet Nam.*

And again she reflects: "*I write this before confronting my own emotional baggage.*" As she told me after class one day, her family had not dealt with the memory of her brother's death for over 30 years. His belongings had been sealed in a trunk and taken to the attic, remaining untouched after all this time. Until now.

As these details unraveled, I understood her anger after the class interview and realized the context of her proposed class presentation on her brother and the war. For several more weeks Nora worked diligently on her project, even learning PowerPoint so that she could provide visuals as she told her brother's story to her fellow students. Such visuals included copies of pictures he had sent home to the family from Viet Nam, photographs of his Purple Heart and Bronze Star Award "for heroism in ground combat in the Republic of Vietnam on 27 November 1967," and a picture of the family receiving those awards posthumously.

Ultimately, Nora decided she could not complete her project and speak to the class about her brother. She was afraid she would break down in public: "*I have lots to say about Viet Nam, but the words just don't come out in class.*" So she gave me copies of her materials—to keep. On one of the PowerPoint slides she wrote: "*Viet Nam remained a guarded topic within my family. NO LONGER. I'm here today to honor my brother's memory.*" That need to speak, to

honor her brother (who in effect was buried twice over) explains why she also provided to me copies of her journal pages. At the end of the course, Nora wrote in her journal: "*I'm not so angry now.*"

Since our capstone class, I have spoken with Nora about her experience. After reading a draft of this article, she wrote to me:

> *Before entering college, it never even occurred to me that someday I would have to confront the subject of Viet Nam in class. However, this is exactly what happened when I took your capstone class. What specific problems might students encounter in discussing this particular subject or any other war? If a student has a personal connection to the subject matter, it can be difficult to relive the event as I did. For example, the subject of Viet Nam had lain dormant in my mind for over thirty years. For the second time in my life, I was reliving the event of my brother's death. As a result, human emotions of tension, anger, and sadness resurfaced within me. I was no longer that mature forty-nine-year-old college student; instead, I was that sixteen-year-old listening to the horrors of Viet Nam. All the emotions that I had bottled-up were now resurfacing in a college classroom. It was like reliving the second funeral of my brother's death. Have you ever had the misfortune of losing a relative to combat warfare? I can tell you that cries of pain still reverberate in my heart when the subject of Viet Nam is brought up for discussion.*
>
> *I dreaded going to class, because I knew one day I would just breakdown and start crying. I found it difficult reading Viet Nam literature because it was so graphic. Even more difficult was listening to our Viet Nam guest speaker because his approach on the subject left me numb and angry. I just wanted the subject of Viet Nam to be over so I could find inner peace during my last semester at college.*

"*I wish Viet Nam hadn't been part of the course*," she concludes.

Yet in our later discussions, Nora talked about taking a few tokens from her brother's trunk, some Vietnamese coins that he

had sent back home. She keeps them in her purse, and occasionally thinks of how her brother had those same coins in his pocket. As we discussed drafts of this article, she assured me that "*my parents and the rest family will be honored that you will finally tell our story.*"

Nora is standing second from the left at the posthumous award of the Purple Heart and Bronze Star to Jose Ramos, Jr. on December 5, 1967. Used with permission.

Conclusion:

The implications of these stories touch all of us, no matter what topics emerge in our classes. Any complex event or phenomenon—even what appears on the surface to be appropriately academic, historical, and impersonal—may tap into the personal emotions of our students, and those emotions, in turn, may emerge in their writing. While I do not assign personal essays, I am inviting personal testimonies (so I have learned) merely by assigning a particularly complex and powerful subject or, in the case of literature courses, selecting certain texts for class discussions, then inviting students to engage with those texts in their reflective writing, learning or reading logs, and response journals. Whether we are aware of it or not, students react in

dramatic ways to course content. When we assign texts such as Holocaust or war testimonies, students feel at a loss, uprooted and disoriented, profoundly shaken (Felman & Laub xvi). Their reaction can even be traumatic, both in the sense of allowing previous or already-existing traumas to surface, and of evoking or generating new traumatic reactions.[10]

Some years ago, Dan Morgan posed this question: whether writing teachers should "turn personal crises, traumas, or past suffering into teachable objects, or should we perhaps try instead to prevent or strongly discourage such self-disclosing papers from being submitted in the first place?" ("Ethical Issues" 319). Some instructors insist that students can only become invested if they write what they know, and, as Morgan notes, more and more students lead "nontraditional lives" (321).[11] Yet the four cases I have detailed are offered not by students who have lived on the fringes of society but who are models of what we value: people who are serving their country, a student on her way to a prestigious law school, a mother who has successfully launched her family and is embarking on a teaching career. The real rub, as Morgan notes, is that the content of writing courses (and perhaps also literature courses) is often the students' own writing, and so interactions between students and teachers are more personal (321).

But I must emphasize that the four cases I have cited emerged in courses dedicated not to personal writing but to intellectual, academic inquiry, organized around carefully sequenced assignments that require students to formulate arguments buttressed by evidence and reflection. The subject of inquiry was not their own writing, even in their journals. But they brought themselves into their learning, immersing themselves in the subject of Viet Nam in personal, dynamic, even traumatic ways. Their need to do so has prompted me to investigate studies about trauma itself. Here is what I have learned.

In *Writing and Healing*, editors Charles M. Anderson and Marian M. MacCurdy note in their introduction, "PTSD has become a central, material fact of our time. We are all

survivors" (5).[12] While many of us (teachers and students) may not characterize our life experiences as traumatic since the term connotes resulting mental instability ((MacCurdy 161), we still may harbor feelings of powerlessness (as Kathy has)—an effect of trauma—that demands gaining control as part of healing (Anderson & McCurdy 5). "Control" involves appropriate grieving, time to reclaim the self and its agency, to integrate the wounded self back into the community, to represent the wounded self as (still) a person of integrity (6).

This sense of control can come with writing and rewriting the event. Indeed, writing plays a crucial role in the process of healing because trauma (involving both physical and moral violation) shatters a sense of meaningfulness of self, of world, and of connections between the two (Shay 180, 208). "By writing about traumatic experiences, we discover and rediscover them, move them out of the ephemeral flow and space of talk onto the more permanent surface of the page," Anderson and McCurdy argue. "As we manipulate the words on the page, as we articulate to ourselves and to others the emotional truth of our pasts, we become agents for our own healing" (7). Teachers of writing are not therapists by trade. But teachers can use their expertise "to help students create texts that embody their lived experience, the clearest expression of it, and whatever understanding of that experience is available to the student and the community within which the student lives and writes at the time of the writing" (9). Narratives can transform involuntary reexperiencing into memories that can be controlled, i.e., reordered, clarified, amended, made to cohere (Shay 192).

Just as important as speaking or writing is the response of the audience to those acts. Jonathan Shay emphasizes the importance of "communalization" in healing from trauma: "being able safely to tell the story to someone who is listening and who can be trusted to retell it truthfully to others in the community" (4). The traumatized must have a trustworthy community of listeners who are strong enough to receive the story without suffering injury themselves. The listeners cannot deny the reality of the witness's

experience nor blame the victim. The listener must be ready to experience some of the terror, grief, and rage. And finally, the listener must respect the story teller, refraining from judgment about the speaker being "defective" (187-9).[13]

Precisely because I don't assign personal essays, I can relate to Michelle Payne's observation that students who write about traumatic issues are not eager to express themselves, but paradoxically feel compelled to do so. They have written about their trauma "*regardless* of the kinds of assignments required in their first-year writing course," surprising (and confounding) the teacher who is not motivated to require personal revelations (Payne 120). As Michael Blitz and C. Mark Hurlbert argue in *Letters for the Living: Teaching Writing in a Violent Age*:

> We are under no illusion that our composition classes are "pain clinics"; we are neither physicians nor counselors. We are teachers of writing who are in the mire of living complicated lives and learning a difficult craft. We are teachers of writing and writers who write to work our own way through the difficult times. This is what we can share with our students. But there can be no pretending that pain is not at the center of too many of our students' lives . . . . For us, writing is always also living, and as teachers who prize the writing our students do, we can't help but prize the lives of the writers. This is what we are burning to tell you: that we must teach for the living. (166)

Dan Morgan's warning should follow upon such an observation: "Obviously, much caution is needed . . . no matter how well-intentioned and open a teacher may be, or how caring, that does not necessarily make him or her qualified *or able* to address major issues in students' personal lives" ("Response" 495).[14]

Judith Herman makes the point that trauma is "unspeakable"—a violation of the social compact too terrible to utter aloud. Paradoxically, "[r]emembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of

the social order and for the healing of individual victims" (1). Victims of sexual and domestic violence, political terror, and combat veterans all work toward the same stages of recovery: "establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma story, and restoring the connection between survivors and their community" (3). Herman's insights alert us to both our responsibility and role—the role in evoking traumatic experiences, the responsibility in knowing how to be receptive to those experiences as they emerge in writing.

My cautionary tale must end with this observation. Avoiding disclosures like those of Lee, Michael, Kathy, and Nora would be simple enough. A teacher can simply stick to the "real" assignments of formal papers and thereby avoid journaling and self-reflection. But if I had done so, these four individuals would still have undergone trauma, but may not have been able to make sense of it for themselves. True, I could protect myself from knowing about it. But the knowing has changed my understanding of what learning entails and what I am requiring of students in my assignments. *Learning changes lives.* There are no innocent assignments, no purely "academic" experiences. If I believe there are, then my willed ignorance is the result of my own refusal to allow the learning and reflective experiences of students to be voiced.

Notes

[1] I am using Renny Christopher's distinction between "Viet Nam" the country and "Vietnam" the war, or alternately, "an entity composed of country and war together where only evil resides" (xiii, 5). She argues that "as part of the meta-war, U. S. usage has colonized the name of the country as a stand-in for the name of the war" (7).

[2] "Trauma" is defined as "an event that is outside the range of usual human experience and that would be markedly distressing to almost anyone" [qtd from the 3rd edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (1980) in Shay 166]. Within this definition fall not only victims but witnesses to such experiences, including threat to life or physical integrity, harm to

family members, destruction of home or community, and violent accidents (166).

[3] Personal statements have been gathered and used with permission from individual students in composition and research courses (spring semesters, 1997-2002), a senior-level course on Literature of the Viet Nam War (summer 1997), and a senior-level English capstone course (fall 2001).

[4] George Hillocks' meta-study found such writing "significantly superior" in either "pre-to-post effects, in experimental/control effects, or in both" (*Research* 186).

[5] Argument disconnected from inquiry is quite another animal. As Hillocks acknowledges: "Many who argue avoid the process of inquiry. They seem to begin with arguments picked up from various sources regarded as authoritative, with claims and sometimes grounds, warrants, and backing in place, but unexamined and shrouded in a Teflon coat that wards off even the most persistent warnings of need for further inquiry" (*Teaching Writing* 130).

[6] I recommend Barry Kroll's *Teaching Hearts and Minds: College Students Reflect on the Vietnam War in Literature,* which provides another discussion of the kind of thinking and writing that argument-based inquiry about the Viet Nam war can produce. Kroll organized his course around four distinct modes of inquiry. The first is connected inquiry, or "a quest to understand the Vietnam experience by finding emotional and personal connections with it" (22). Through what Kroll calls literary inquiry, students debated the importance of "authenticity" versus "artistry" as they examined personal narratives, factual reports, novels, and poems. With critical inquiry, Kroll helped students recognize "specific kinds of distortions and discrepancies that pervade most war stories" and some ideas from "the psychology of memory" (76). And finally, through ethical inquiry, his students analyzed the morality of certain decisions and courses of action by weighing various factors such as responsibility to comrades, impact on civilians, and distinctions in war between killing and murder.

[7] Literary analyses of the war have proven as contentious as the event itself. In direct opposition to these views, Renny Christopher sees this literature as advancing an "ongoing meta-war" that writes the history of Viet Nam in America's image to the exclusion of the Vietnamese victors (2, 4). Both Andrew Martin and Jim Neilson point to the rise of the Viet Nam publishing industry as part of Reagan neo-conservatism of the 1980s. Thus Viet Nam war literature "has received cultural sanction," Neilson believes, because it makes

only "a limited and modest critique of U. S. militarism in Indochina, one consistent with the liberal-pluralist values of American literary culture" (54).

[8] Mark A. Heberle and Kali Tal argue adamantly against such inclusiveness, emphasizing the gulf between literature by combat veterans and literature by "wannabe" civilians. Any fiction written by a combat veteran, Tal argues, is qualitatively different from fiction by a nonveteran, since the veteran always and everywhere writes out of his or her trauma (217).

[9] Lawrence Langer recalls a situation wherein a woman who had cheated the death camps at the age of 14—now a women of 40 enrolled in a composition class—finally wrote about her parents for a paper called "People I have Forgotten." Her mother and father had disappeared ("their fate we can imagine," Langer comments), and she had managed to set their memory aside until this point in her life, when she took a tremendous personal risk and broke her own silence. She wrote:

> Until now, I was not able to face up to the loss of my parents, much less talk about them. The smallest reminder of them would set off a chain reaction of results that I could anticipate but never direct. The destructive force of sadness, horror, fright would then become my master. And it was this subconscious knowledge that kept me paralyzed with silence, not a conscious desire to forget my parents....I needed time to forget the tragic loss of my loved ones, time to heal my emotional wound so that there shall come a time when I can again remember the people I have forgotten. (Langer 32)

The instructor, herself walled behind what Langer calls "the tired, tired, language of the professional theme-corrector," complained that the writer's theme was not clear, her subject undeveloped. "'You talk around your subject.'" The fruit of this writer's efforts to break out of her wall of silence was a D-minus. According to Langer, the grade reflects the instructor's insulation from "honest prose" (32), and perhaps as well the transcendent and precarious nature of such profound suffering.

[10] I am assuming a real distinction here between suffering a traumatic event oneself and of empathizing with the testimony of a trauma victim (often called "secondary trauma"). A deconstructive approach to trauma theory would deny this distinction. Dori Laub, for instance, argues that it is impossible to "witness from the inside" in the sense that the victim cannot grasp or experience the actual event, but can begin to understand his/her experience in the act of testifying. Laub believes, therefore, that the listener becomes the Holocaust

witness before the narrator/victim does (69). That is, the listener 1) receives traumatic testimony and thereby participates in the trauma, and 2) records and preserves traumatic history. See Ruth Leys and Amy Hungerford for counter arguments.

[11] Jeffrey Berman has published several books on his use of personal or "risky" writing in his English courses. Noting scholars who deny that critical analysis and personal/confessional writing can co-exist, Berman argues that self-discovery and self-creation are near of kin, and that a writer's life and his/her self-representation can be fruitfully joined (28). It is interesting to note that despite his extensive precautions, Berman discovered through course evaluations that 14% of his students "became at risk as a result of writing" (236). Another 11% felt at risk hearing other students' essays, reading assigned materials, and listening to class discussions (236).

[12] Berman notes that sixty-nine percent of his students have suffered from some kind of trauma, a figure corroborated by studies of lifetime trauma (19).

[13] Berman echoes this advice, calling teachers to empathize with their student writers and never pretend to be authorities in terms of traumatic experiences or the guilt/innocence of the writer (29, 32). Teachers can, however, help students to do their best work, improve their writing skills, and raise questions for further writing (36).

[14] Marilyn Valentino emphasizes that students often write personal essays when such revelations are unsolicited, because they "just want someone to listen" (279). Valentino cautions teachers about assigning journal writing, which "especially encourages confessional writing" (277). She urges teachers to 1) "learn about your legal responsibilities and the support available in your institution and community," 2) "indicate support services in your syllabus," 3) "devise alternative assignments" if students feel uncomfortable with a subject, and 4) develop reflective ways of responding to journal entries (278).

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Appendix I

Writing Assignments for English 1302

Assigned text:

Edelman, Bernard, ed. *Dear America: Letters Home From Viet Nam*. New York: Pocket Books, 1985.

Paper Assignment #1

General topic for research: Major Events of the Second Viet Nam War

With this paper, you will use Marilyn Young's timeline to select an important event, then research and write about it. Your basic purpose is to **summarize** for your reader the material of your research in order to demonstrate an important feature of the war (length, confusion, tactics, weaponry, type of fighting, involvement of civilians, the antagonists) or an important characteristic of American policy. You can choose to write about one of the following events:

- Battle of Dienbienphu (1954)
- Gulf of Tonkin incident and Resolution (1964)
- Siege of Khe Sanh (1967-68)
- Paris Peace Accords (1973)
- Coup against President Diem (1963)
- Battle of Ia Drang Valley (1965)
- My Lai Massacre (1968)
- Tet Offensive (1968)

or you may write on another example, with previous approval. In your paper, include the following information: what kinds of forces were involved? Are there key individuals you can name? Where is the location of the event? Is there controversy involved? What is its significance in terms of the war? In terms of long-range military and political impact? Make sure that your paper has a frame—a main point that is introduced at the beginning and restated at the end.

Paper Assignment #2

General research issue: Causes of and motives for involvement in the Viet Nam War

With this paper, you will analyze conflicting arguments addressing why the U.S. became involved in Viet Nam in the 1950s and why we continued our involvement through the 1960s. Because U.S. policy changed with each administration, it will be helpful to focus your research by selecting one of the following presidents.

- Dwight D. Eisenhower (1950s)
- John F. Kennedy (early 1960s)
- Lyndon B. Johnson (1960s)
- Richard Nixon (late 1960s-early 1970s)

You will research reasons/policy decisions regarding involvement in Viet Nam during the years your president was in power, paying close attention to the context as well as the nature and ramifications of those decision. Each president is associated with specific decisions. You will begin your research by consulting the following "foundational" documents:

Eisenhower: Declaration of the Geneva Conference July 1954; NSC 5492/2, "Review of U.S. Policy in the Far East," August 20, 1954

Kennedy: State Department correspondence August-October 30, 1963 on U.S. support of coup against Diem. See specifically correspondence between George Ball, Henry Cabot Lodge, Dean Rusk, McGeorge Bundy, and Gen. Paul Harkins.

Johnson: Excerpts from Pentagon Papers (such as NSAM 273 of Nov 26, 1963, Oplan 34A of Dec 1963, , memo from Joint Chiefs March 18, 1964) and the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, August 7, 1964

Nixon: "Vietnamization" speech (Nov 3, 1969) and Invasion of Cambodia speech (April 30, 1970)

You will develop a **formal argument** of your own that defines 1) what the public reasons for involvement were, 2) what the unstated reasons for involvement were, 3) the accuracy of or problems with official statements, and 4) your conclusion about U.S. motives for involvement. Note: this is a fact-finding assignment. You are not tackling the question of whether we should have become involved or should have remained involved. You are defining why we *said* we were, and (if this is different) why we *really* were.

Paper Assignment #3
General research issue: Policies and methods during the Viet Nam War.

With this paper, you will craft a formal policy argument concluding what should or should not have be done with respect to your subject. Choose one of the following issues or check with me about another topic you would like to pursue:

- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- Paris Peace Accords
- Use of Agent Orange
- Use of Napalm
- Secret invasion of Cambodia
- Bombing of North Viet Nam
- Anti-war movement
- Pentagon Papers/Daniel Ellsberg
- OSS or CIA covert operations
- POWs or MIAs
- Special Forces
- Hmong or Montagnards
- Pardon for Draft Dodgers
- "Children of the Dust"
- Medal of Honor recipients
- Rand Corporation

Your argument will be based on 1) your assessment of the need or problem that this method or policy tried to answer (this will necessitate providing some background for the reader), 2) the solution it provided, 3) the disadvantages of this method or policy, and 4) its advantages.

Paper Assignment #4
General research issue: the legacy of the Second Viet Nam War

With this paper, you will write a **formal, evaluative argument** addressing how the Viet Nam War Memorial (The Wall) might illuminate the creation of (or obsession with) other memorials such as

- Ground Zero in New York City
- the Morrow Building in Oklahoma City
- the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC.
- D-Day Cemetery in France

or other examples you might think of.

As a starting point, we will study the history, purpose, controversy, and impact of The Wall. Your research can address the following points: Jan Scruggs (the dreamer), Maya Lin (the designer), Ross Perot (the critic), the Nurses Memorial, Visitors, Offerings at the Wall, Maintenance and Funding. As you analyze the Wall's original purpose and if it has taken on a more symbolic significance in the past decade, address 1) what ideals or lessons can be applied to the larger issue concerning the lessons of and recovery from the Viet Nam War, and 2) how these ideals or lessons can apply to other memorials.

Appendix II

Reading list for ENGL 4351 - Capstone

(Viet Nam War component)

Butler, Robert Olin. "A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain." in *The Viet Nam War in American Stories, Songs, and Poems*. ed. H. Bruce Franklin. Boston: Bedford Books, 1996. 181-193.

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