



Home from the War

VIETNAM VETERANS
Neither Victims nor Executioners

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CHAPTER 9

Transformation II: Learning to Feel



—Yet when we came back, late, from the hyacinth garden,
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
Looking into the heart of light, the silence. . . .

—T. S. Eliot

I feel like hiding out in my own head.

—Vietnam veteran

Once you were a strange, alien name. . . .
then you were a small, damp green
hostile land
where . . . I . . . nearly died

Now you are . . . a part of me

—Jan Barry, "Viet Nam"

BEYOND JOHN WAYNE-ISM and maleness, the men have been deeply preoccupied with love and intimacy—ultimately, with the capacity to feel. These struggles involved all of the veterans in the rap group. They were usually immediate, often traceable back to early childhood, and always related to Vietnam.

When exploring questions of intimacy, for instance, the men talked a great deal about how much they suffered when they lost close buddies, how the knowledge that “anybody might die” would cause them to try to limit and routinize their friendships. Yet the very nature of the combat situation made such restraint impossible. As one veteran explained:

When I was cold, *everyone* was cold. We were all hungry *together*. We were all scared shitless. When we were out of water, we were all out of water.

In contrast, there was something distant and isolated about life in civilian America: “Here, everyone’s doing their *own* thing.”

One is reminded of a passage from *All Quiet on the Western Front*, describing two men sitting by a fire, during a lull in the fighting, preparing a stolen delicacy:

We sit opposite one another, Kat and I, two soldiers in shabby coats, cooking a goose in the middle of the night. We don’t talk much, but I believe we have a more complete communion with one another than even lovers have.

We are two men, two minute sparks of life; outside is the night and the circle of death. We sit on the edge of it crouching in danger, the grease drips from our hands, in our hearts we are close to one another, and the hour is like the room: flecked over with the lights

and shadows of our feelings cast by a quiet fire. What does he know of me or I of him? Formerly we should not have had a single thought in common—now we sit with a goose between us and feel in unison, and are so intimate that we do not even speak.¹

Whatever its romantic excess, Remarque's passage captures the intensity of combat intimacy and its relationship to—I would say, source in—the "circle of death" behind and around it.

But although the World War I soldiers of Remarque's novel experience great disillusionment and elements of absurdity and guilt, one cannot detect in them the collusion in corruption we have observed in Vietnam. There, even authentic intimacy and love had to be in some degree contaminated by the counterfeit universe, had to be a little distrusted. Just as men felt that "Whenever you tried to be human you got screwed," so one of them added: "If you got close you got burned."²

Vietnam had absolutized (or totalized) the whole question of intimacy for its American survivors. Having experienced a particularly poisonous version of the "end-of-the-world" image that characterizes extreme situations, they distrusted, feared, and could not believe in, the renewed human ties they desperately craved as a psychological basis for reconstituting that world.³ The death-dominated imagery they retained had to do with disintegration, stasis, and separation.⁴ The overall sense of disintegration (physical, psychic, moral) associated with the Vietnam environment is internally maintained in approaching the environment back home. The stasis or cessation of feeling derived from extreme psychic numbing in Vietnam leaves one with an image of a world that neither lives nor moves. Vietnam's extreme element of separation—from familiar landscapes of any kind and especially from purposeful or viable images and symbols—results in an inability to find or catch hold of anything with which one can authentically connect.

* Other World War I writings do suggest considerable inner corruption, perhaps glossed over by Remarque's romanticism, but the circumstances of that war, murderous as they were, permitted intimacy with relatively less contamination than did Vietnam.

Toward potentially intimate relationships the men at first brought a sense that any such promise of renewed life was counterfeit. This intense suspicion of counterfeit nurturance—a form of "taunted dependency" in which love and help are equally strongly sought as a personal need and resented as a sign of weakness—also had direct origins in the counterfeit universe of Vietnam. There, as the men recalled all too readily, any form of help, nurturing, or love was equated not only with the weakness of the blind-helpless giant but with the corruption of the executioner-victim. To be sure, the men brought to Vietnam earlier imagery of a similar kind involving suspicion and doubt concerning love and nurturing they craved. But that negative imagery, present from all childhoods, ordinarily combines with alternative images of trust enabling one to respond to love and care with the mixed capacities characteristic of all adult life. In Vietnam, however, the negative inclination—the image of the counterfeit—is likely to be aggravated to the point of dominating one's entire psychic life—which is why we can speak of the totalizing of conflicts around intimacy, love, and nurturing.

The men revealed their sense of the importance of these issues in their energetic criticism of one another for maneuvers of any kind that seemed to be flights from intimacy—whether these took the form of shifting the discussion toward safely distant matters, telling shallow war stories, or suddenly shifting into revolutionary diatribes or leaden silences. Adept as they were at exposing these maneuvers, none was free of profound individual conflict concerning intimacy.

Associating Vietnam as they did with their parents' generation, ultimately with the whole of American society, their shared sense was something like, "After Vietnam, what could you trust of anything?" Or as one of them actually said:

You found out that your country—your parents, and the people you believed—told you a whole pack of lies.

A man with unusually profound difficulties with intimacy (exceeding but touching upon those of the others), he seemed to

lapse into puzzling understatement when he went on to conclude: "People aren't perfect" and "People are fallible." But what he really meant, as his subsequent behavior revealed, was that unless people (and all relationships with them) *were* "perfect" they were threatening, untrustworthy betrayers.

An engaging person with a certain talent for human relationships, his pattern of keeping people at a considerable emotional distance was interrupted by his falling in love with an attractive young married woman. He enthusiastically described to the group their plans to save money in order to buy a Volkswagen bus and drive around the country together. But at subsequent meetings he seemed much less certain and talked of going south alone for a couple of months in order to earn the money for the trip. He said also that he wanted to "test the relationship" in various ways in order to find out "whether two people can really get along when they are with each other twenty-four hours a day."

It was he who had the garbage-dump dream, and in it he was expressing (in addition to the themes already described) his fearful sense that all claim to love and intimacy was counterfeit, filthy, "garbage." Others in the rap group pointed out that he was being hopelessly absolute about the relationship, that *nobody* could stand *anybody* for twenty-four hours a day, that he was "manipulating" arrangements with the girl, "preparing a time bomb" and "setting things up for a break." He denied none of this, and was even willing to explore sources of his distrust, but nonetheless insisted upon doing things his way. He went further and said, "If I can't love her, then I don't think I'll be able to love anyone." And when one of the men gently commented, "Most of us are afraid to love," he answered with a poignant question, "How do you tell when you feel love?"

He was soon to prove the men right: before long the relationship dissolved. But he went on insisting upon "complete independence—being able to get along without needing anybody." His all-or-nothing approach to relationships—the totalitarian

spoke of before—was discussed extensively both in connection with the Vietnam experience and his own psychological development. He did not, during the six months or so I knew him, overcome either this totalitarian or his profound and generalized sense of distrust. But he did open himself a bit to his own feelings and to glimmerings of insight; and the rest of the group seemed to benefit greatly from what they learned about themselves through him.

Falling in love, or feeling oneself close to that state, could be especially excruciating—an exciting glimpse of a world beyond withdrawal and numbing; but also a terrifying prospect. A typical feeling, when growing fond of a girl was "You're getting close—watch out!" The most extreme emotion of this kind expressed was:

If I'm fucking, and a girl says I love you, then I want to kill her . . . [because] if you get close . . . you get hurt.

Love or intimacy, in other words, posed the threat of still another form of corruption and disillusionment, of still another 'death.'* It was much easier to avoid that risk and stay numb (remain in an evenly deadened state)—"I feel like hiding out in my own head," was the way the same man expressed it.

But the men did of course fall in love. When that happened, especially if soon after returning from Vietnam, they would find themselves breaking off relationships because "I couldn't go through with it" or "I didn't want to be tied down to anything." What they meant was that their psychological work as survivors was so demanding as to preclude, at least for a certain period of time, sustained intimacy or long-range personal commitment.

* It is possible that he and many others continue to associate the nakedness of sex with Vietnam images of grotesque bodily disintegration—as did Guy Sajer, with memories from the German Army experience of World War II: "As soon as I saw naked flesh [in a beginning sexual encounter] I braced myself for a torrent of entrails, remembering countless wartime scenes, with smoking, stinking corpses pouring out their vitals."⁴

That state was well described by the former naval NCO in response to pressures toward marriage coming from a girl he became close to soon after his return:

I'd say, I can't make a decision—not for the rest of my life—in the shape I'm in now . . . [after] what I've gone through. . . . I said I'm going to need—this was a very prophetic thing I kept saying last year—I'm going to need a year just to dry out after all this. I somehow had the sense of just how much torment was going on even though I didn't seem to acknowledge it.

"Drying out" meant getting over one's habituation (if not addiction) to the disintegration, numbing, and separation of the Vietnam environment—including, by implication, the attractions, or at least escape elements, of that environment. Again his erotic impulses propelled him toward feeling. While still in Vietnam he had been drawn to a woman there temporarily in a way that permitted him

to talk . . . and put down this spy business. Then I began to feel better—not only because I had a friend and woman and we liked each other very much and spent a great deal of time together but . . . because I was invested in something, somewhere, and there was something new about that.

Upon returning to the United States he became involved in a series of sexual relationships, in which he groped toward a clearer idea of authenticity and love. Throughout, the idea of sustained commitment, and especially marriage, remained a threatening source of conflict. Yet each time he took steps to limit or end a relationship, he would experience a profound sense of loss, which on one occasion left him close to an emotional breakdown.

The general dilemma of these veterans had to do with the extraordinary intensity of both their need for and difficulty with sustained intimacy. Breaking off relationships was as painful as it was necessary. On many occasions entire rap groups were devoted to such closely related themes as: the general problem

of fidelity, notably sexual fidelity*; the hunger for love and nurturing and the sense of being chained by sustained intimacy in a relationship; and the powerful influence of Vietnam corruptions with their residual fear and guilt of great magnitude—extending backward and forward into old and anticipated corruptions of holding on and breaking off contained a continuing dialectic between persistent death imagery and imagery of life renewed. But the men came to realize that the equation was never simple: holding on could take the form either of revitalizing intimacy (life renewed) or of numbed distance in proximity (a new death), and breaking off could be a pathetic need to reject the intimacy one craved (a self-inflicted death) or a liberating opening out to deeper experience and greater self-knowledge (renewed life). Over the course of time most of the men increased their capacity for intimacy, but that dialectic would simply not go away.

These conflicts gave poignant intensity to expressions of intimacy within the group itself. During one meeting, after a veteran had spoken at length in pained tones of his inability to feel close to anyone and his fear of any kind of intimacy, another man responded by saying that he himself felt very close to the veteran and had wanted to touch him to show him that he did, but had not quite been able to do so. Then, as if to say, "Why not?" he walked across the room and embraced him. The two met in a hugging that was both manly and childlike. Both became tearful, and several others were on the verge of tears. As the first veteran went on describing how his closest friend in Vietnam had been

* I use the term fidelity here to suggest more than loyalty, though loyalty itself was of great importance. Also involved was authenticity—in sexual matters, for instance, the genuineness of an impulse to find a new partner at precisely the time that an existing relationship showed promise of deepening intimacy. Fidelity thus involved being true to, having faith in, the animating principle of the new self being formed. It included overcoming fears that one's residual destructiveness and death taint would not harm or contaminate others.⁵

"shot full of holes," another man put his arm around him and the whole group moved, almost imperceptibly, into a tighter, protective circle. I had the impression that the men had never felt closer to one another, and rarely to anyone, than at that moment.

At a later meeting, the first veteran remembered experiencing a certain amount of discomfort in the incident because of its homosexual undertones. He had also clearly been pleased by it, and afterward seemed much more at home in the group—to the point of becoming, for a bit, one of the coordinators of the rap group program. Overall, the men came to value this form of hard-won intimacy, whatever its erotic overtones. Their capacity for it had much to do with the softening we have described in their subversion of the John Wayne warrior ethos, as well as with the pervasive spirit of youth culture. But to men who felt themselves to have returned from the land of the dead, that kind of simple expression of intimacy toward one another could be experienced as a significant breakthrough on the way to rebirth.

During that same earlier session, another veteran who rarely opened himself to the group (though he was an articulate and regular member) also spoke of his difficulty in establishing intimacy or, for that matter, experiencing any kind of genuine feeling. Another man then referred sympathetically to the *struggle to feel*:

That's being *alive*, man! Much better than being the robot I used to be.

This encouraged the first veteran to speak further of his shortcomings, including a tendency to be dishonest—"I lie a lot"—to tell stories around the office, often about the war, that simply were not true. But he also spoke of having recently met a girl he felt so drawn to that "I had to tell her things about myself I never told anyone before." When he told her of this tendency to lie, she answered very simply that she preferred him the way he is now rather than the way he used to be. To which he added, this time to the group:

I'm getting to be the kind of person I want to be—the kind of person I like. I didn't like the kind of person I was.

When he went on to express doubts about whether the relationship could last, the men did nothing to dispel these doubts; instead they pointed out to him how much he had grown in his capacity for authentic emotion, and emphasized that this personal growth would continue, whether in this or in other relationships. It was the reassurance he sought, fearful as he was that this new capacity depended entirely upon another person. As the discussion continued, he became tearful, apparently overwhelmed by his own revelations—and one of the other men embraced him and kept his arm around his shoulders as the two sat down. Toward the end of the meeting he became more calm, told how relieved he felt, and added that he wished the other two professionals (who had had to leave a few moments before) had been there to see (and by implication share in) what had happened.

On many other occasions men moved their chairs closer to someone they saw to be suffering. Both nonverbally and with words, they tried to express their intimacy, sometimes to the point of speaking openly of their love for one another. These physical and verbal manifestations of love and intimacy would have been unremarkable had they occurred during Esalen-style encounter groups, where they tend to be explicitly encouraged. But the rap group had no such tradition (even if one can say that it was affected by these experiential currents in American culture in general). Our group was both more conservative and in a way more experimental, and such expressions of intimacy came as one of the many surprises of our trial-and-error method. They meant all the more for that, and for the expression of shared pain and glimpse beyond that pain that they represented. But these high moments were few; for some intimacy remained beyond grasp; in none did distrust fully disappear.

Struggles with intimacy were part of a more general process of learning (or relearning) to feel. We observed the painful

efforts these men made toward experiencing their own guilt. They had to make similar efforts in connection with virtually every other kind of feeling as well. On the most basic levels they raised questions about what emotions they actually experienced, did not experience, or should experience—about when one should laugh, when one could cry.

One veteran, who had experienced a severe breakdown and had been recently discharged from a VA hospital, complained on several occasions that “I can’t cry. I would like to cry.” Some time later he announced triumphantly that, when moved by a friend’s description of having been greatly helped by an experimental psychiatric program (which he himself was considering entering), “I cried for the first time in four years.” Crying for him was linked with hope, with the possibility of renewal.

The men also talked of their need to scream, to find ways to be alone to give expression to that need. Or of their own and others’ inability to laugh—the tendency (as one man commented about someone else in the group) to “cackle” instead. They pressed toward nothing less than a reeducation of the emotions—as suggested by the question that had been asked: “How do you tell when you feel love?”

They were alert to the dodges they all used to hide their feelings, or hide the fact that they couldn’t feel. Thus, one told how I became a freak—because when I am a freak, I don’t have to say what I feel.

They spoke of various forms of dissembling—feigning indifference when actually they were deeply upset, or pretending to feel what one did not; in either case, they were unable to make appropriate (in their own eyes) connections between event and feeling, and between feeling and expression.

The most politically and ethically conscientious among them would raise questions about their right to pleasure. One, for instance, criticized his own tendency to be so totally absorbed at rock concerts—so lost in ecstatic response to the music—that

all thought about the war or responsibility of any kind dissolved. Yet on the whole one could not describe them as an unusually aesthetic group. They could be lively and humorous, and quite capable of enjoying their whiskey or dope. But their survivor struggles with guilt and numbing prevented them from accepting fully the pleasure they pursued.

All this could lead to much confusion about feelings. For instance, the veteran-coordinator of the rap groups was much appreciated for his sensitive help to others (whether introducing them to the group or referring them for individual therapy), but was sometimes criticized for avoiding his own feelings in the process. One of the men put it in the form of a challenge: “You helped me—now I’d like to see you help yourself.” After some sharply-worded interpretations both by professionals and veterans, he began to feel unappreciated and unjustly attacked. He asked angrily:

(Charlie, do I have to throw a fuckin’ fit for people to think I’m human?)

Later he said he had felt himself goaded into anger, and that the group more or less required and demanded anger from him—which in a way some of its members had in their effort to jar him out of his intellectual armor. The group then heatedly debated whether this tendency in him should be viewed as a significant problem for him to overcome, or whether it was simply (as one of the men put it) “George’s style.” Undoubtedly both views were true, and (again the mediator) I said so. I also emphasized, and others readily took up, the theme of emotional complexity: that focusing on other’s feelings could be in part a way of avoiding, in part a path toward, one’s own; and that combining that focus with sensitive and needed help was an ethical act that contributed to the emotional capacities of all concerned.

Some of the men seek a double liberation from the related entrapments of the warrior ethos and suppressed sexuality. One

veteran, for instance, described in an interview a sustained relationship with a girl soon after his return from Vietnam, in which both discovered their bodies and explored ways of living that might free them of oppressive conventions. But the relationship collapsed under the pressure of her fear of pregnancy and the effective opposition of her mother—leaving the veteran much more capable of intimacy than he had been and generally wiser, but also puzzled about his inaccurate perceptions of both the girl's and her mother's feelings. He came to recognize the connection between sensitive response to others' emotions and getting in closer touch with his own.

Months later, his exposure to the rap group seemed to release emotions of every kind:

That first session when I went down there, I almost couldn't drive back to New Jersey. Every song that came on the radio, you know, now I feel it. . . . If I hear . . . about something beautiful, I just want to cry . . . because [I] get so sensitized that I can't even function. . . .

He was describing the lifting of psychic numbing: the uneven process of gaining access to previously blocked feelings around loss, death, and the possibility of joyous life. This formulative struggle of the survivor—in this case a struggle for feeling related to form—has many parallels with what Freud called the "work of mourning." But it is a more generalized process of resymbolization, involving the entire psyche and the inner images and forms built up (and broken down) over a lifetime.

The same veteran went on to tell how he would sometimes recall pleasant childhood memories ("Howdy Doody and kids and things"), only to be caught up short: "I [would] remember . . . what we've done [in Vietnam]." As he explained further:

So it's very difficult to deal with . . . and yet . . . I feel a lot better about it. . . . I'm looking inside myself. I'm able to get deeper inside myself and deal with it, which is ultimately what I want to do. . . .

The process of getting "deeper inside" oneself meant achieving not only the capacity to feel but the right to feel as well. It had to include the kind of animating confrontation with guilt we have previously described. The process also required a vision of experience worth feeling. Hence the same veteran (like many others) placed great stress upon involving himself with groups (the rap group, VVAW, youth culture) in which

people [are] not pressuring me or saying, "You're a war criminal," but just saying "Life is really great when we treat each other as human beings."

But his words seem to have double meaning: his need for freedom from pressures toward self-lacerating guilt; but also his retained guilt ("You're a war criminal" may be partly his own inner judgment) along with his ambivalence about pursuing questions around guilt and the war in general.

Overcoming psychic numbing meant transforming a "dead self" into one infused with life. Until they can begin to do that they find themselves in that survivor state of death in life that is not quite the one or the other—a state movingly described by Y. S. Eliot:

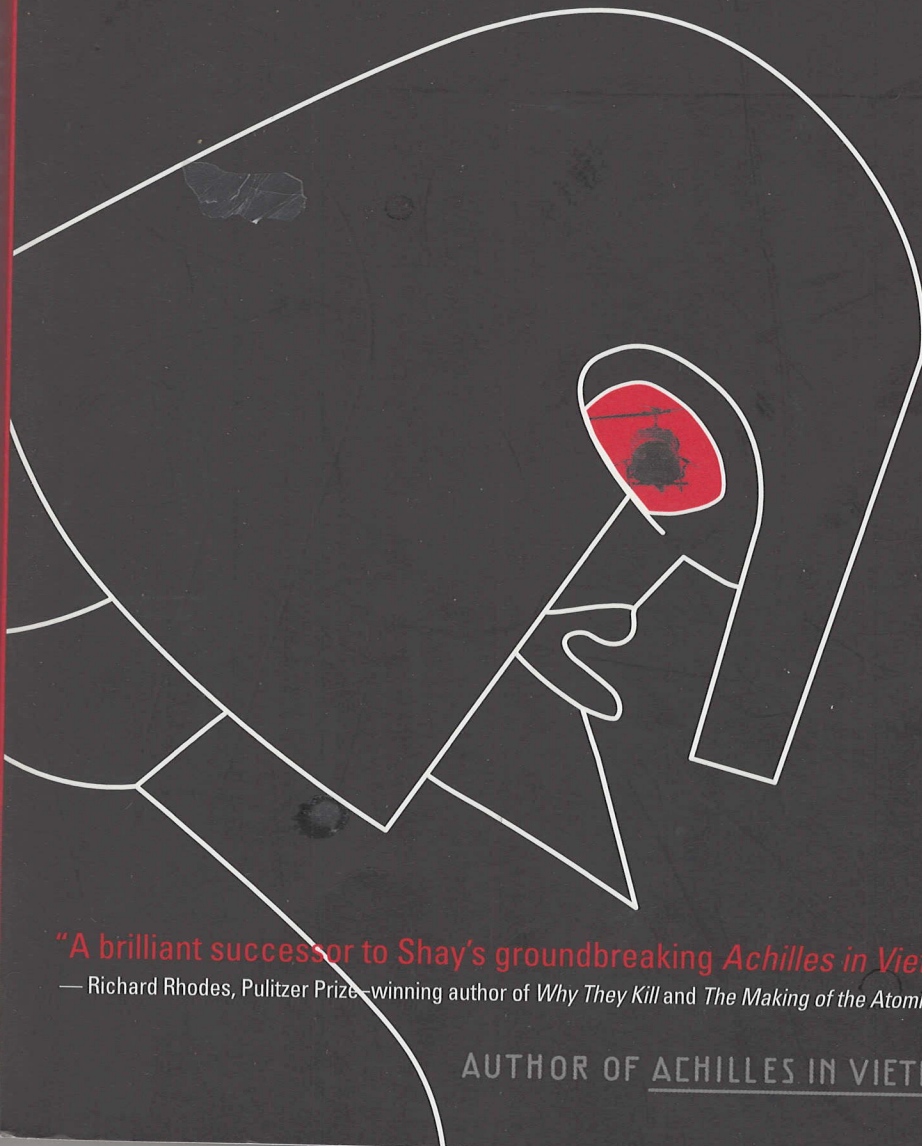
—Yet when we came back, late, from the hyacinth garden,
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
Speak, and my eyes filled, I was neither
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing.
Looking into the heart of light, the silence.⁶ . . .

If Eliot spoke for an entire epoch, as we have come to believe, then we know that this group of men has had to struggle not only with the numbing of Vietnam but with the everyday absence of feeling that, midst our large and small dislocations, forms the basis for so many lives. That is, to overcome their war-linked numbing, the antiwar veterans have had to go far in transcending the ordinary kind as well.

ODYSSEUS IN AMERICA

COMBAT TRAUMA AND THE TRIALS OF HOMECOMING

JONATHAN SHAY, M.D., PH.D. FOREWORD BY SENATORS
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