"UU Principles Learned in a Time of War"

by Wilson Hubbell

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It was Christmas Eve when I received a letter from President Lyndon Johnson. "Greetings," said the President. "You are hereby ordered to report for induction into the armed forces of the United States of America."

I was being drafted.
Merry Christmas to me.

The letter was not a surprise; many of my friends had received the same letter and many more would receive their letters in the months to come. In those days the military Draft had become an American institution: My father's generation was drafted during WWII and my Uncle served during the Korean War, and later, some of my older cousins were drafted to serve in Germany and Okinawa during peacetime.

For many of us in my hometown, serving in the military was a right of passage. It was something you did on your journey to being an adult, and once you put on the uniform, you were considered to be an adult.

And, most of us who were drafted did not see going into the military as an act of patriotism. It was more like a civic obligation, something like jury duty – only more serious and time consuming. Hey, even Elvis got drafted, right?

It was, for me, my first serious act of service to my community.

I became a Private in the United States Army and was sent to Fort Bliss, Texas – a most inappropriately named place – for basic infantry training. Fort Bliss was my first experience living away from my parent's home and it was also the first time I'd lived and worked in close quarters with young men who came from all parts of the country, all socio-economic conditions and all racial and ethnic backgrounds. In the Army, I learned a lot about people I might never have met otherwise.

Thousands of us poured into Fort Bliss where we were divided into individual groups of 112 soldiers called companies, and each 112 member company was comprised of 4 platoons containing 28 soldiers each. As a company, and as a platoon, we were forced to learn how to live together, to function as a team and to rely on each other for our well being.

We learned how to march carrying 80 pounds of gear, how to fire a rifle at a distant target, how to salute, how to do push ups, how to mop floors and how to throw a hand grenade. We trained using live ammunition and real explosives.

If one member of a platoon failed to accomplish an assigned task, the entire platoon – or even the entire company of 112 soldiers – could be punished for that one soldier's mistake.

Because, in a true combat situation, if one of us failed, all of us could be placed in danger. So we became a community in order to succeed both collectively and individually - or else we could all fail together and suffer the consequences.

I left Fort Bliss wondering if or when I might use some of what we had learned in an actual combat situation.

I was then sent to Alabama and Virginia for aircraft maintenance and flight crew training on Army helicopters. It was the summer of 1966 and there was no mistaking what would happen next – I was going to Vietnam.

I arrived in Vietnam just after Thanksgiving – and it was not what I expected. Most people with aircraft maintenance and flight crew training served at conventional airfields in South Vietnamese cities like Saigon and Da Nang, but I was sent to the helicopter maintenance unit of the Army's First Cavalry Division located in a remote part of Vietnam's mountainous Central Highlands (Robert Duvall, Apocalypse Now – Mel Gibson, We were Soldiers Once). There we lived in tents, made do with an outhouse and worked outside in the sun, rain, wind, mud and – when necessary – the dark.

We came from diverse backgrounds and had to function as a community, as we had been trained. All we had was each other and not much else – and sometimes our very survival could be at stake.

We did not struggle for a cause or a country, we struggled for each other and we learned about life and living and surviving under difficult circumstances.

I came to know some of the Vietnamese people of the Central Highlands. To me, it seemed that many of them just wanted the fighting to leave their hamlets and villages so they might farm in peace.

The needs of the political leadership in Washington, Moscow, Beijing, Saigon or Hanoi did not really matter to the villagers. They had seen other empires and armies: Chinese, French, Japanese, Viet Cong, South Vietnamese, and now American.

Most of the villagers considered the fighting to be a power struggle among giants that was played out in a war zone – which happened to be where they lived. Their lives and way of living had not changed in hundreds of years regardless of what governmental authority claimed them as citizens or subjects.

I also came to understand and respect those who did not share my Judeo-Christian background. The people of the Central Highlands are predominantly Buddhist and their beliefs are as important to them as whatever our beliefs are to us. For me, the fact that their religious beliefs were not mine did not make them heathens.

I shared a tent with a man named Keith Reitz. He and I would have conversations about the things we missed – like pizza and Mexican food – and all the things we would do when we got

home. (Imagine being a guy age 21 and spending a year or more without Mexican or Italian food!).

One thing we never discussed was the possibility of our not getting home. We just worked hard, kept our heads down and counted the days until we could leave.

It is said that you can learn more from your mistakes than your accomplishments. I began to fear that our very presence in Vietnam would eventually be a mistake. There were many questions:

Who is our enemy and who is our ally?
How can we tell the difference?
Why do our Vietnamese allies seem to lack motivation?
Why do our Vietnamese enemies fight so well?
If we Americans were not here, what would happen?

By necessity, the helicopter parking areas, maintenance facilities, fuel supply and mechanics were in fixed locations. These became enemy targets because the most effective way to attack a helicopter unit is to assault its helicopters, fuel supply and mechanics on the ground – at night when most or all of the helicopters are there. So we worked every day and feared an attack every night.

But we were not attacked every night. In fact, our experience could be described as ***hours of boredom, moments of terror.*** Still, there were times when some of us were wounded and some of us died without ever seeing the enemy.

I recently went to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington DC to look for names on a long black wall. Some were the names of helicopter mechanics who never fired a shot in anger.

We were not soldiers, we were not warriors; we were just targets. That is all.

I was transferred to a helicopter flight unit in another part of Vietnam. I was put on flight status and became a flight engineer and door gunner on an Army CH-47 Chinook helicopter, like those currently used in Afghanistan and Iraq. Now I lived at a conventional airfield with luxuries like a regular roof over my head and plumbing. It was, and still is, a nice place along the coast of the South China Sea. Palm trees and a warm inviting ocean – a good place to visit if there was no war going on.

I became involved in what we called the 8-to-5 war. We lived in fairly decent and safe surroundings at night and would fly off to war during the day. It was like a regular job - except that we might kill someone, or someone might kill us, at the office.

We came to know fear and we came to know violence. We might see our friends die, and then we might be sent to do the same job in the same place where they had been killed the day before. As a defense mechanism, we became numb to it all – or at least we thought we did.

It was during this time that I saw acts of courage, acts of cowardice, acts of compassion, and acts of cruelty. For me, the war was now up close and personal – in the daylight. Some of these events are seared into my memory, and even now they visit me in my dreams.

It was also during this time when many of us came to doubt the existence of God. My friend Rev. Bill Mahedy served as an Army Chaplain and describes this phenomenon as "John Wayne and Jesus Christ died in Vietnam." He says, "The horrors of war did not fit our preconceived beliefs of right and wrong, as represented by movie actor John Wayne, and no God that we had ever known would allow these terrible events to happen, if they could be stopped. So, John Wayne and Jesus Christ must not exist."

But I came to believe that human beings are endowed with free will and can decide to do right or do wrong. We can pray for divine guidance, and we can search for truth and meaning, but, ultimately, our actions are our own.

Reverend Mahedy also describes what he calls "American Civil Religion and the mythology of war", as practiced by certain religious and political leaders in the United States. The mythology goes like this: "Americans are God's chosen people in all that we undertake, and America has a divine mandate to evangelize the world to our own political and economic systems. War is the sacred instrument whereby this mission is achieved."

I came to believe that a country which has a political and economic system unlike ours is not necessarily a bad country, nor is it necessarily a good country. I also came to believe that war does not determine who is right, it only determines who is left.

One of our helicopter flight crew members was a man named Chris Leal. He was a bit more philosophical than the rest of us and once said: "You know man, this is real adventure – both the bad times and the good times. We will remember these days and we will remember each other for the rest of our lives." He was right.

Chris Leal did not have long to remember anything because he died a few weeks later.
Then Keith Reitz was killed.

But I survived, and I did not know why.

It ended – badly.

Nearly 60,000 of us were dead, hundreds of thousands of us had been wounded, and many more of us bore the scars of what we had seen, what we had done, and what had been done to us.

The war also ended exactly the way it would have ended if we had never been there. All that blood, all that suffering, all those lives of Americans and Vietnamese, and the only thing we did was make the war last longer.

Vietnam veterans having a somewhat contradictory expression for this: "It don't mean nothing." The literal translation is: it DOES mean nothing.

America wanted to forget about this war – and forget about us: A stereotype emerged of the battle crazed, drug addicted, venereal disease carrying, Vietnam Vet now running amok in the American heartland. This was more than just our imagination – after holding a series of hearings on job discrimination, Congress added "Vietnam era veteran" to the list of protected classes under the Civil Rights Act.

So: The President orders us to report for induction into the armed forces, we go to Vietnam under the flag of the United States and when we return we need protection under the Civil Rights Act from unlawful discrimination? Welcome Home…

We felt the <u>injustice</u>, and we felt betrayed. We felt that we were being blamed for a war we did not start and did not ask for.

So what did we do? We let our hair grow long, we went back to school or the workplace, and never told anyone we were in the military or in Vietnam. Try and forget it ever happened – if only we could.

But it was always there: In the sound of a helicopter, the smell of jet engine exhaust every time you go by the airport, the words of the Star Spangled Banner and dreams of friends lost long ago.

We wondered why the memories would not fade away. The reason is that many of us have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and some of us, including me, decided to do something about it when it began to seriously disrupt our lives.

I met other veterans through this process and I met Professor Walter Capps who was teaching a UCSB class entitled "The Impact of the Vietnam War on American Culture and Religion." Professor Capps invited Vietnam Veterans to attend his class, but we were skeptical: "Who is this UCSB Professor, and what does he think he knows about the Vietnam War?"

Walter Capps gained our trust by telling us that what <u>we</u> know about the Vietnam War is important, and he was trying to learn about it from us, and others, and together we could educate his students. He wanted us to help him.

By being a source of information for a new generation, we could again perform a community service. Maybe that is why <u>I</u> survived: To be a resource and to serve. You see, if someone can learn something from my experience and the experiences of people like Chris Leal and Keith Reitz, maybe <u>it does mean something</u> after all.

So we volunteered to help Walter with his class at UCSB, and we learned that there were many things about this war we did not know. For most Veterans, our knowledge was based on what we were doing, where were at, when we were there, in Vietnam. At UCSB we were presented with a much broader picture of the war and what it meant to us and our country.

Although Walter is no longer with us, the class he started still continues. The focus has now expanded to include how current wars compare and contrast with Vietnam, the struggles faced by a new generation of veterans (some of whom are enrolled in the class), the Vietnamese American experience and the current relationship between the United States and Viet Nam. And I still volunteer.

Now, I've come to better understand what all this means to me: My war time experiences, and my experiences as a veteran returning from war, directed me toward many Unitarian Universalist principles long before I knew what UU is.

These include:

1. "The inherent worth and dignity of every person" – no matter where they are or what their station is in life. Some of the best people on earth are rice farmers in remote corners of Southeast Asia.

2. "Justice, equity and compassion in human relations" – I've seen injustice, inequity and indifference. I pledge to challenge it when I see it.

3. "Acceptance of one another" – I believe that every person is endowed with the Spirit of Life and that we should treat each other accordingly.

4. "A free and responsible search for truth and meaning" – For me, faith is not a destination but a continuing journey of discovery and enlightenment. I can do that here at Live Oak.

5. "A <u>community</u> with peace, liberty and justice for all" – Community is more than just a gathering of people, it is a source of support, encouragement and much, much more.

6. "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part" – War does not determine who is right, it only determines who is left.

7. "A responsibility to tell others what we have learned" – and to try and make this world a better place for all.

It DOES mean something.

May it be so.