

Building Compassion One House at a Time

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Published in *For the Love of Life*, Spring/Summer, 2006, pp 8-10.

During the Vietnam War, Al served as a military policeman guarding the large American air base in Da Nang. Arriving in 1967, Al spent months quietly walking his rounds or drinking in the PX on what the GIs named “Freedom Hill.” Cooperative and hulking, Al was promoted to sergeant and made a squad leader. He had no combat experience. But with a placid service on a huge installation, Al thought he would pass his tour doing boring chores and drinking with his buddies. But on Jan. 30, 1968, everything changed.

It was Tet, the lunar New Year. That night, and continuing with less intensity for an entire year, Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army Regulars staged surprise and well-coordinated attacks on American, southern, and allied installations, large and small. They famously attacked and occupied the U.S. Embassy in Saigon for several hours. They also attacked Al’s base.

Al was suddenly in charge of a dozen inexperienced men with orders to reconnoiter the surrounding jungle and search for enemies. For Al, the ensuing day was a blur of terror, remorse, and adrenalin. He led his patrol through the jungle. He saw and heard chaos, shooting, screaming. His squad was attacked by their helicopters three times. Their bullets pounded the dirt inches from his nose. One of his men was separated. Al searched the jungle with so much fear his voice still shakes to tell it. At one point, he came upon three Vietnamese men – two Viet Cong and a civilian. He doesn’t know exactly how it happened, but suddenly, explosively, a beast roared out of him. He attacked the small group, first killing the two Viet Cong soldiers, then the third – an innocent. Still the beast did not settle down.

After the initial offensive, things quieted down on Al’s base again. He was not in combat again, but now, beyond his comprehension, he was given to sudden rages. He had trouble sleeping and was bothered by nightmares. He began drinking heavily, not for recreation or relaxation but to forget the men he killed, to kill his pain and guilt, and to put the beast to sleep.

It didn’t work. Al came home and, like so many of his fellow veterans, developed Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. He continued drinking through several marriages and divorces, through numerous jobs, through rages and loneliness and alienation.

Al was luckier than many. He found a men’s group and studied spirituality and archetypal psychology. Other vets provided support and guidance. Together the men studied the warrior tradition and practiced sweat lodges and wilderness rituals to cleanse and connect them.

As part of his healing, Al decided to return to Viet Nam on one of my annual healing journeys. I guide veterans and others to Viet Nam to immerse in its culture and spirituality. We return to sites of combat to replace the images of destruction with new ones of green jungles, thriving farms, happy and forgiving people. We meet with Vietnamese veterans and other war survivors to exchange forgiveness and share a new

identity as brothers and sisters who have survived hell. We participate in Vietnamese Buddhism, which is a living force informing the entire people, enabling them to live in the present and not resent or blame the past, and nurturing acceptance of fate and the practices of community and peacemaking. Al had found support in his men's group but no peace. He needed stronger medicine.

America suffers terrible psychological and spiritual consequences of the Vietnam War. But Viet Nam suffered far more physical damage. While we lost over 58,000 troops, the Vietnamese lost about 2.5 million. While we had 300,000 wounded, the Vietnamese had over 4 million. Our economy was damaged such that we are still paying the bills. But Viet Nam's infrastructure – thousands of bridges, hospitals, schools, pagodas and churches, and a quarter million thatched huts – people's evidence is around every bend in the road.

Psychological counseling is not enough to heal wounds to the soul or country caused by war. There can be no healing without reconciliation and restoration. Thus every journey I lead to Viet Nam includes a philanthropic project. In the last five years, with the help of veterans, travelers, and generous Americans at home, we have built a nursery school in the Mekong Delta, gifted sampans to destitute families and water buffalos to impoverished villages. We conducted an emergency medical drive that provided life-saving brain surgery to a poor farmer in the north. And we help poor Vietnamese children attend school.

Al had taken life in Da Nang. Because he discovered his inner beast and it acted unjustly, and because friendly fire had almost killed him, Al felt unworthy and banished from the human race. On this journey, we traveled to Da Nang, the place it happened, to offer our restoration project.

Uncountable thousands of people throughout Viet Nam live beneath plastic tarps or in rickety stick shacks easily destroyed by bad weather. Many of these people are war disabled or orphaned. Many are sick with Agent Orange diseases and disabilities. They try to work – dirt farming, peddling, or scavenging. Their families remain in tact. But they have no hope of saving the few thousand dollars it would take to lift them out of poverty. As a one-at-a-time remedy, Viet Nam has a project called Compassion Houses whereby donated money is used to build sturdy, stable, weather-proof homes. One Compassion House costs between \$1,000 - \$1,200 US.

My group spent several days in Da Nang. Al visited the places he had fought and saw that houses and farms now stand where devastated and sprayed jungle had been. Viet Cong veterans embraced Al as a long-lost brother and took him up Freedom Hill. They stood together before a war memorial that looks strikingly our Wall in Washington, D.C. The new monument on Freedom Hill lists the names of 3,500 Viet Cong killed in the region during the war. Al and his new brothers prayed together for all the war dead.

Then we traveled to a village. We bumped down rutted roads. Pigs, chickens and children scampered out of our way. We passed families living under tarps. Then we arrived at a new home.

The family we gifted was chosen by the local Red Cross and Da Nang Street Children's Project from among community's neediest. The husband is a disabled veteran. The wife scavenges in the city dump 12 hours a day in hopes of earning one or two dollars. They have four beautiful children in elementary school.

Their new house was ready to dedicate on our arrival. Our funds built a home of two large ground floor rooms – living room and kitchen – with a sleeping loft. Its cement foundation and walls and tin roof make it storm-proof. We also built an outhouse, provided electrical hookup, and purchased some furniture. We included two pigs so the husband could raise livestock. All this cost \$1,000.

Al made a dedication speech. This shy, alienated man stood before the family, elders and entire Vietnamese community he had once helped harm. He wiped his eyes and struggled to find words that would free his soul from its ancient war-pain. “During the war I came here to destroy,” he began. “I killed some of your people and never forgave myself. Since Tet, 1968, I haven’t felt part of a community or the human race. Until today. I’m honored to give this house to your family. I’m honored to help restore and create instead of destroy. Since the war, I’ve never felt at home in America. But at this moment, I rejoin the human race and become part of a community again. Yours.”

Al was surrounded by the family, the elders, and dozens of children, smiling and laughing. Then Al distributed several duffle bags full of clothing, toys, and school supplies that our group had brought. This veteran who had killed near this very village looked like a sweating Santa Claus.

We too can help restore Viet Nam. In so doing we make peace in our souls, heal both our countries, and contribute to international friendship and reconciliation. Please help us build a Compassion House in Viet Nam. We will tell you who the recipient family is and how their lives have been changed. It takes a village to raise a child. It takes our love, help and compassion to restore the village. Together we create the future.