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## THE MOVING WALL

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[We] cannot live in associations with the past alone . . . if we would be worthy of the past, we must find new fields for action or thought, and make for ourselves new careers. But, nevertheless, the generation that carried on the war has been set apart by its experience . . . in our youth our hearts were touched with fire.

Oliver Wendall Holmes, Jr.  
Memorial Day, 1884  
Quoted by John Wheeler  
Vietnam Veterans Memorial  
Memorial Day, 1984

. . . Vietnam, Vietnam, Vietnam, we've all been there.

Michael Herr  
Dispatches, 1977

The Vietnam War cuts across American history like a sword. Not one person in this country was untouched by the war, whether he or she served in Vietnam, protested against the war on a campus in the United States, or went unthinkingly on with his or her life. Children too young to remember the war are touched by it even today--college for the students I teach is a different experience than it was for me--and the chasm that lies between us is Kent State. For the veterans, men and women, who served in Vietnam, and their families, the scars and the pain are most obvious: physical and psychic wounds, PTSD, the long struggle with Agent Orange. For the families of the MIA's, the war has never ended. And there are other families with missing children--the sons who are still living in Thailand and Sweden.

For other Americans the pain is different, but very real. One Memorial Day at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Sal Lopes watched a young woman who fell to the walkway as if she had been hurt. When he went over to help her, she was weeping uncontrollably, saying that she had protested against the war, without ever thinking of what had happened to the young men who

fought it. I have met many people who regret, not that they opposed the war, but that they treated the returning warriors unjustly. It is a hard thing to realize that because you, your son, or your brother was able to evade the draft, someone else had to go, and perhaps to die. Perhaps the most bitter form of survival guilt is the realization that you just didn't care--you watched the war on the six o'clock news and got on with your life.

On Veterans Day, 1982, the Wall in Washington DC was dedicated--the Vietnam Veterans Memorial that Jan Scruggs built to heal a nation. It gave this country more than a tribute to its dead and missing sons and daughters--it gave the people who were wounded in this war, by no means all of them in combat, a place to meet, to find each other again or for the first time, to give comfort and strength to each other, and to forgive. It is the place where we can lay down a burden that many of us have carried for twenty years, where we can finally come home from Vietnam.

The highly polished black granite walls of the Memorial are like mirrors, catching every changing mood of the sky. They face south, to catch the maximum sunlight, and even after sunset the stone is warm, almost alive, to the touch. Behind the soft veil of the names we can see the colors of sunrise and sunset, the moving patterns of the clouds, and the outline of the trees. We can also see ourselves, reflected among the names of the dead and missing. Maya Lin, who designed the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, said that she intended to create the impression that the earth had been cut open like an geode and polished, making an interface between the present world and the world beyond.

Visitors caress the names as if they were alive--I remember watching while a guide found the name of a friend for a veteran, who cried joyfully, "There he is!" This sense of being able to communicate with the dead means that we are able to complete our mourning--to say goodbye . . . I'm sorry . . . I miss you . . . I'll always love you. Mothers leave toys that belonged to their sons, veterans leave medals, C-ration, photographs and cans of beer for their buddies. Last Veterans Day a nurse left a poem for her young patients. Children write letters to fathers they have never seen.

The Wall is also a place where living friends meet. The veterans who came to the first and second salute to veterans, in 1982 and 1984, were looking for buddies from their old units and many found them. A woman who served as a nurse in Vietnam and is now a volunteer guide at the Memorial has met several men whose lives she helped to save. Some veterans have found friends they have thought for years were dead. One of the veterans from the vigil saw a man walking up from the Wall at three in the morning whom he had put on a stretcher for dead in 1968. Two veterans searching for each other's names on the Wall touched hands and recognized each other.

At the Wall the men and women who returned from Vietnam alone and who have, in many senses, remained isolated ever since,

can finally "come home" and realize that they are not alone. Two men will meet at the vertex of the Wall, look at each other's unit patches and insignia, hug, and ask, "When were you there?" A veteran will walk up to a complete stranger standing weeping in front of a panel, put his arms around him, and say, "Welcome home, brother." Nurses and medics and constantly thanked by veterans who were wounded in country. And many times I have seen a tourist walk up to a veteran and say, "I just want to say thank you."

John Devitt went to Washington in 1982 for the National Salute to Vietnam Veterans and the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. He had been a vocal opponent of the design of the Memorial and expected to hate it, but instead he felt pride, and it was a healing emotion. He wanted other Vietnam veterans and their families to share this feeling and conceived the idea of a Moving Wall to travel around the country "so that those who might never have the opportunity to travel to our nation's capital could still experience for themselves the positive and healing benefits that contact with the Memorial evokes."

Last August I visited the Moving Wall in Cortland, New York. It was set up in a lovely little courthouse square, between a stone Catholic church and a white board Protestant church. Many downtown merchants displayed POW/MIA banners in their windows and the people who filed past the Moving Wall were extremely conscious of taking part in a historic event. For many of them, this was the first time that the Vietnam War had directly touched their lives. They looked for the name of a neighbor's child, a boy with whom they had attended high school. Grandmothers who could not make the long trip to Washington left flowers. And veterans told me, "Now that I have seen this, I think I can go to Washington--until now, I was afraid."

In making this healing experience available to all Americans, John Devitt has given us a great gift. A veteran friend from California recently wrote to me: "The Moving Wall is just like the Wall in Washington except for size. The mood, the emotions, the tears and the love are the same size." In Seattle a veteran left a note at the Moving Wall saying that he was the lone survivor of his unit. The next visitor saw him leave the note and reached out to him--they had both survived the fight. A vet who served as a guide in Anchorage approached a woman who stood crying in the rain at the center of the Wall. She told him that she had been a war protestor and that she had come "to make them understand that it wasn't them I was protesting." She had just wanted the killing to stop, she told him, but she couldn't touch the Wall. He took her hand, placed it on the panel, and said, "It's time to meet your people."

There is a quotation from the book of Jeremiah which is often read at prayer services for the MIA's. I think, however, that it is appropriate for everyone who makes the journey to the Wall.

The Moving Wall ---- 4

Thus saith the Lord: refrain thy voice from weeping and thine eyes from tears, for thy work shall be rewarded, saith the Lord, and they shall come again from the land of the enemy. And there is hope in thine end, saith the Lord, that thy children shall come again to their own border.

Jeremiah 31:16-17

To all of us, welcome home.