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American Again in My Lai

An Essay by Charles Waugh

Two Vietnamese girls, maybe 7 and 10, on a well-lit Hoi An sidewalk after dark, wearing tee shirts, shorts, and flip-flops, stood frozen, their hands dangling uselessly, their mouths open. In the middle of the street, one of the ubiquitous mid-sized Vietnamese dogs, muscular and square headed, was rapping the death snap on a skinny orange cat. Blood on the pavement, dark red and clotted with dust, had been sprayed as if the cat's plight began with a motorbike that didn't stop. Two women, possibly the girls' mothers, stepped into the street, giving the Vietnamese equivalent of "scat!" and waving their hands, forcing the dog to back off. The cat writhed left and right, wailing, its whole body shuddering, then suddenly sprang three or four feet into the air. Charged by the spastic motion, the dog darted in again, worrying the cat by its throat. Now the English version, very loud, coming out of my mouth –"SCAT!"– startling the Vietnamese and me too, catching myself doing something before thinking, risking a dog bite in a place I know I shouldn't, and then worse, stepping off the curb to scare him, preparing myself to kick him with all I had should he turn on me. The dog bolted into a hotel parking lot. When it disappeared behind a fence, I stopped following it and looked back. The cat now rocked from side to side, slowing down, taking its last breaths. A hotel security guard emerged from his booth with a dustpan to scoop it away from where his guests might see it. The girls hadn't moved. The women stood behind them.

I walked on, wondering what sort of sign this might be. I was on my way to a travel agent to hire a car to Son My the next day, better known to much of the world as My Lai, the site of the 1968 massacre. I had wanted to make the trip since returning to Vietnam five months before, and here on the way was not only death, but a chaotic, violent, and painful one, witnessed by mothers and children. I didn't have time to parse it out then; the office would close soon.

The agent, a weathered fifty- or sixty-year-old man with large rectangular glasses and coarse but still jet black hair, seemed amused by my ability to speak Vietnamese, and refused to speak to me in English, even though I'd

heard him speaking English on the bus a few days before. After telling him I taught at the National University in Hanoi and wanted to write about My Lai, he arranged the trip without taking a commission. Something in his eyes obviously approved.

The next morning, I woke early, showered, and dressed in long pants and a button-down shirt despite the heat. It's not polite to enter certain places in shorts, and though I didn't know for sure the memorial would be one of them, I wanted to do everything right. I roused Jen, my wife, and Owen, my two-year old son, and made them eat breakfast with me before meeting the driver at eight. It was the middle of our Christmas vacation, and none of us wanted to spend a day apart, but I couldn't take Owen to My Lai.

The driver, Hai, an earnest, good–looking man with full, wavy hair, sported one of the wide, thin catfish mustaches popular with many men in Vietnam. He took my Vietnamese with used-to-foreigners nonchalance. On the way out of town, we exchanged ages and the particulars of our immediate family situations–the usual introductory Vietnamese conversation. He had married just last year, at thirty, the same age when I married, and planned to have a child next year, at thirty-two, the same as when we had Owen. There was something about the way he grinned and said "*theo Anh*" –following you, big brother– when he spoke of having his first child at the same age that made it all feel real, like genuine human kinship. Vietnamese forms of address– all based on age and familial titles that force a speaker to change first–person pronouns depending on who's being spoken to–could feel a little alien, but now, with someone I barely knew compared to all my Vietnamese colleagues and friends in Hanoi, something felt right.

Along the flat and silty Vu Gia river, the tourist hotels gave way to wide, one story homes typical of the region, and Hai pointed out one set back from the road, painted blue long enough ago to now be as faded and nearly white as the hazy Vietnamese sky.

"That's my house," he said.

"Beautiful," I replied. "It must be nice living so close to the river."

He beamed. "Very nice. Lying in a hammock, watching the river go by. It's a good place."

We turned south onto Highway 1. A few dusty machine shops, fix-it joints, and dry-goods markets trailed from the intersection before giving way to the empty, mud-brown paddies, framed with narrow, red clay dikes. On a rise overlooking the fields and the road

spread a civilian cemetery full of raised tombs, all painted in bright swirling colors and adorned with flowers. Each incorporated a small censer, so the survivors could pray to their ancestors, sending them fragrant reminders of their love and respect. Not far down the road, a national cemetery cut a different shape and feel, with its hundreds of neat, white tombstones and a central monolithic monument proclaiming "*Ghi Cong To Quoc*" –in commemoration of the fatherland–as do the thousands of others just like it, all over the country. Another one, small, probably a single family's, occupied a corner of a rice field, protected from the paddy water by a concrete dike. Within a half mile, another, overrun by a flock of ducks. In metropolitan Hanoi, I could go for days without thinking about the war, but on this trip, obviously, there could be no avoiding its consequences; four million killed in a country smaller than the state of California meant 31 casualties per square mile, if spread throughout the whole country. But most of the fighting took place here in this very narrow part of Vietnam, so the real figure must be something like 190 casualties per square mile. In a place where people worship their ancestors, believing that they continue to have an influence on day to day life, I couldn't help imagining this trip as a pilgrimage into the land of the dead.

Hai asked me what I taught at the National University, whether I lectured in English or Vietnamese, and if my teaching related to our trip. I explained that I taught American Studies, and that for me the subject involved literature and the environment, history and culture. I told him in the United States I also teach the literature of the American war in Vietnam, and I have my students read about My Lai, so I wanted to visit so I would have some first–hand experience to share with them. I said I wanted to write about it so that more Americans would have an appreciation both for what happened there in 1968 and for what it means now. All these answers seemed to satisfy him. Hai told me what he knew of the massacre, which was a lot–more than I could understand in Vietnamese. One phrase I couldn't miss was one he repeated several times nonetheless: "*Nhieu nguoi chet do, nhieu con em be*"–Many people died there, many babies. I could only nod, and tell him it made me very sad.

After awhile, we talked about lighter things: the road, the car, differences between driving in Vietnam and the US. Soon enough, though, I ran out of Vietnamese, and we fell into an amicable silence, which I appreciated. I wanted to drift with my thoughts about the upcoming visit and the landscape around us.

Even though I had always been welcomed warmly and with exceptional generosity by my Vietnamese colleagues in Hanoi, I wondered whether people in Son My would hate me for being an American. Seeing so many tombs alongside the road, I already felt deserving of hatred: my country had caused many of them. I knew no matter what I would do or see, the experience would drain me emotionally. At least the land held some comfort. The suitably overcast sky, a melancholy slate, made the greens in the trees deeper, more serene.

When we occasionally topped a rise in the road, the Eastern Sea (or the South China Sea, depending on your point of view) appeared beyond the long tidal flats of shrimp and fish farms. The mountains loomed just twenty kilometers to the west, their steep faces rumpled with deep, jungle green. Between them lay the fertile plains, descending ever so slightly, paddy by paddy, to the shore. I could actually see all at once the geographic root of the Vietnamese myths in which the spirit of the mountain and the spirit of the sea battle one another, afflicting the people in the middle with the worst of the consequences.

The further south we went, the more alive the land became. The flat, empty paddies suddenly had men in them, plowing up the heavy mud with tractors or buffaloes, and then others were already full of rice seedlings. Further on, the seedlings had been pulled from their dry beds, and men and women waded through flooded paddies, bent over

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with baskets of the young green shoots on one arm, inserting them into the muddy bottom with the other. Within another thirty kilometers, some of the transplants had begun to glow golden green, nearing maturity.

The paddies ran right up to the several small towns we passed through, their dikes the foundation for three-story concrete walls. Long-handled rototillers, with big wheels and

blades to cope with the muck, and ancient lorries, broad and humped like dusty green elephants, parked on the sidewalks out in front, blurring the city boundaries with tracks of thick red clay that converged in wide arcs around the markets and caked into every curb and window ledge.

After more than two hours, we turned from Highway 1, just outside Quang Ngai. The narrow lane to Son My wound through groves of casuarina and eucalyptus, where their delicate, frond–like leaves broke the daylight into a warm ochre on the ground. Orchards of sapodilla and mangosteen separated the scattered small homes on either side of the road, and the Tra Khuc river rolled in and out of sight to the south. When the view opened to the north, I could see bright green paddies stretching into the distance, and hamlets floating in them here and there, marked by stands of tall trees.After about fifteen minutes, we rounded a bend and Hai slowed the car, pulled into a muddy lot and parked beneath a banyan tree. "This is it," he said.

Through the windshield, I could see only a refreshment stand, shielded from the sun and rain by a worn plastic tarp. A woman sat on a stool, chin in hands, elbows on knees, next to a small table lined with bottled water and a glass case full of plastic-wrapped snacks. As we got out, Hai politely declined my offer to join me, then carefully made his way around the mud to sit at one of the stools and smoke a cigarette.

Along the edge of the parking lot, workers lifted long sections of tall wrought iron fencing and attached them to brick columns. Just across the road, hidden by a tall hedge, children laughed and shouted in a schoolyard.

Coming around the banyan, finally I could see the memorial's central monument–a doleful stone woman standing with a raised fist, a dead child drooped over her other arm, another woman kneeling, cradling in her arms the head of an elderly man, his dead body sprawled across the base. But the workmen had torn up and staked off the sidewalks, leaving no clear path. I walked through the grass a ways and two small, cement block buildings appeared from behind the hedges to my left. Peering into the dark interior of the first and seeing a deserted reception lounge, I realized the time–just past noon. The museum staff would likely either be eating or having a rest. But not the construction crew. Men in blue coveralls continued trundling wheelbarrows back and forth, prying up stones and carting them away. Irregularly shaped concrete pads had been recently poured in various locations around the grounds and now lay empty.

Across a ditch and past a stand of trees that had previously blocked it from view, a large, sepulchral building in gray stone, with a gabled roof, black marble stairs and huge wooden doors rose up from mounds of construction rubble. Apparently a new museum, not yet open.

In contrast, the old museum, the second cinder block building, was very simple: one story tall, three rooms wide, poorly lit with just a few bare, fluorescent bulbs. The central room's gaping, doorless entrance let in the only natural light, as well as the relentlessly humid Vietnamese climate that had given the place a smell like musty old newspapers. Crowding the walls, yellowing maps, essays and photographs documented the development of the American war in Vietnam, leading to the March 16, 1968 Charlie Company mission in Son My that ended in the massacre. A picture of the first South Vietnamese President, Ngo Dinh Diem, meeting with President Eisenhower in the US in 1953 before South Vietnam had even been created, hung next to photo and newspaper displays of other landmark events, such as the Gulf of Tonkin episode being used as a pretext for the beginning of US bombing, the landing of US marines in Danang, and then the plans for the attack on Son My.

It wasn't the first time US troops had been there. In fact, the troops called the place My Lai because that's what the villagers always said when they showed up. But, what the villagers were saying was, "*Mỹ Lại*–The Americans, again." Charlie Company had been taking a lot of phantom casualties--booby traps on trees and along the paths between paddies, with no enemy in sight, literally no physical human body to blame or at whom to return fire–and the company's commanders became convinced that the men on the ground simply weren't being aggressive enough in tracking and pinning down the enemy. They gave their men ambiguous orders, ones that are still debated.

But whatever the truth of how high up the responsibility for the massacre went, the museum's second room chronicled the results. Pictures of the day's catastrophic events were taken by the Company photographer, Ron Haeberle. Many of these now infamous photos had been blown up to poster size and the display proceeded from the massacre's earliest moments to the gut-wrenching end. I'd seen most of the photos before, and yet they still retained the power to evoke tears. Maybe it was seeing them again after becoming a father, maybe it was seeing them after having lived in Vietnam for five months

and gotten to know a few of my Vietnamese colleagues' children, or maybe it was simply that, I, like any decent human being, could not look at pictures of infants who had been intentionally shot and killed, could not look at the desperation on a six-year-old's face as he tried to protect his two-year-old brother, knowing that within minutes of the picture being taken that American men shot them both to death, and not realize that my own humanity had just been diminished. And not because these soldiers were bad men, aberrational psychopaths or inherently evil, but because they were typical, common men, regular people like all of us, raised with the same values in the same churches and schools, and because the fact that they succumbed to the worst in themselves means that the same potential for barbarity lurks in each of us, needing only the chaos of war to be free.

Glass cases below the photos contained the everyday objects of many of the people who had been slain. A clothes iron, a tea set, a rice bowl, a rudimentary knife, a serving tray, several children's notebooks, a child's sandal, a toy crab. Beneath each of the pictures and near the relics, cards in Vietnamese and English documented the slaughter: "The hat of Mrs. Cu, murdered by the American GIs," or "The American GIs plan their murder of the villagers." Some of them seemed too propagandistic, but others, such as "The pile of women, children, and old men's bodies, murdered by the American GIs," could hardly be argued with. I was both aware of and uncomfortable with my own reaction of feeling like some of the signs were too much, knowing that many of these men did murder these people. Maybe it was the language more than anything else: American GIs is so inclusive, whereas if the curators had used individuals' names, or even Charlie Company, or Task Force Barker, or something more specific than a term that encompassed all the men who served and implied that every single American there participated in the massacre or had planned to do what he did. The signs' language just didn't allow for the complexity of the ethical dilemmas each of those young men faced. Of course, I felt uncomfortable thinking this way, probably because it seems an insignificant quibble compared to the plight of the Vietnamese. Five–hundred four Son My villagers simply did not have the opportunity to worry over ethical dilemmas as they were herded into ditches and indiscriminately gunned down.

The third room detailed the world 's reaction, the investigation, and the stories of the survivors. Framed newspaper stories from

dozens of countries, all over the world, offered sympathy to the victims and opprobrium for the killers. Pictures from 1968 showed survivors displaying their wounds or how they hid and escaped, and from the present, revealing their scars. In the position of honor, at the very end, hung large photographs of Hugh Thompson, the US helicopter pilot who witnessed the carnage from above, recognized the troops were firing but not taking hostile fire, and intervened by setting his chopper down between a fleeing Vietnamese family and a squad of US troops in pursuit. Despite the military's attempts to intimidate and belittle him at the time, Thompson served as a principal witness during the trials, and eventually, in the mid 1980s, the US Army itself awarded him one of its highest honors, the Soldier's Medal, and inducted him into the Army Aviation Hall of Fame for his bravery that day.

I walked outside. At the monument of the woman with the upraised fist, I slipped some money into the donation box, and picked up one of the packages of incense. No matches. I walked back to where the construction crew continued to dig up flagstones and asked one of the men for a lighter. Not knowing what to make of me, he could only grin and shake his head, he didn't have one. Handsome, he said to his friends finally, nodding at me. Not as handsome as you, older brother, I said, making them laugh.

A man wearing a suit and tie stood near us on one of the new concrete pads, looking at a blueprint with one of the older construction workers, and when he overheard us, approached, asking in faltering English if I needed anything. I showed him the incense and in Vietnamese said I needed a lighter. He smiled.

"Let me help you," he said.

In front of the monument, he unwrapped the whole package of twenty or so incense sticks and held them to the flame. When they caught, he held them aloft, then waved them out to smolder, and gave half of them to me. Pressing them between his palms and middle fingers, he raised them so the smoke would catch his unspoken words, then bowed three times and placed them in the censer at the monument's base.

If a standard Vietnamese prayer to ancestors exists, no one has ever taught it to me. In other places I'd visited and placed incense, I never tried to speak with the Vietnamese spirits anyway, always feeling like a kid at church, mimicking what my parents did without genuinely understanding the significance, feeling as if the palpable connection to those

spirits and that tradition simply could not exist for me; instead, I always just tried to be respectful, to show deference in a place not my own. But here beneath this heavy, stone monument at My Lai, beneath the weight of all those graves on the ride down, still struggling with the weight of that six-year-old's desperation, and carrying the weight of responsibility-by-association for so much suffering, I suddenly felt that I not only could, but was compelled to speak with these souls. As the anguish welled in my heart, grieving for the loss of so many human lives, aching with the memory of that small boy's face, and painfully imagining the utter sorrow, the terrible, jagged void in my life if I were to lose my own child, I asked the slain and their families for forgiveness, and wished them peace.

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After watching the smoke disappear into the gray sky past the sad, defiant stone faces of the monument, I placed the incense, and stepped back. Smelling the sweet, woody aroma, and seeing the smoke rise, I suddenly had the sensation that my grief too was being lifted from me, like the weight I'd been carrying had finally taken flight.

The man who'd helped me was still there, standing behind me. From his accent, I could tell he was a northerner, and when I asked, it turned out he was from Hanoi too, living in Son My temporarily to help direct the renovation of the memorial. The stately gray building would indeed be the new museum when finished, and the concrete pads would eventually display a recreation of the village as it was on the morning of the massacre, so that visitors could gain a better sense of what it had been like. He began pointing to various places around the grounds.

"Thirty people were killed just over there. One–hundred seventy people were killed in that ditch. One hundred two over there.

Fifteen. Eleven. Eight. Fifteen."

I could only nod.

When he finished, I thanked him for his assistance and explanations, and he went back to work. I decided to wander the grounds.

At the northern end, some construction workers had begun to create a riser in the middle of one of the empty pads, in red concrete. I watched as they mixed the dye into the cement in ten-gallon buckets. They looked like buckets of blood. But the dried concrete simply had the mellow red hue of the Vietnamese soil. Behind the pad, a chain–link fence separated the memorial from the surrounding paddies. The young rice spread a rich, vibrant green off into the distance to where it disappeared beneath the mist that had settled between the stands of trees. Birds chirped in the trees above me. Two flooded, empty paddies near the fence reflected the trees and the sky, and all was very peaceful. Even the workers, who had not stopped talking to one another, did so quietly.

I turned to watch them for a while, until the foreman said, "*Anh muốn làm việc với chúng tôi*?" You want to work with us?

"*Có việc làm rồi*," I said with a smile. I have a job already. This made them laugh.

"What work do you do?" he asked.

"I'm working right now, can't you tell?" More laughs. I told them I was researching the massacre so I could write something about it.

Appreciative nods all around.

All eyes on me, the foreman asked, "Anh là ngýời nýớc nào?"

I paused. I knew the question would come. In Vietnamese I answered, "I am an American."

Maybe a flicker of a raised eyebrow. But mostly smiles. It seemed my fears had been unnecessary. Most Vietnamese, maybe because of their traditional view of politics being only distantly related to their everyday lives, tend to see human beings instead of nationalities, actual, individual people, rather than governments. Having been raised to be a participating citizen in a representative democracy, I can't dismiss my culpability so easily.

Like it or not, a majority of us voted for the people who represented America to the world and who made the decisions that put those soldiers in this village, gave them the missions and orders that wore their humanity down. If those decision-makers represented us, then don't we all share a part of the responsibility?

Searching my feelings, I know the answer is yes. But I also know that one American, Hugh Thompson, acted on his conscience,

despite the obvious difficulties of putting himself into direct conflict with the soldiers on the ground, and intervened, ending the slaughter. Not just assuming the Army knew its business, not just allowing the momentum of events to compel his approval, he searched his own feelings and did what he knew to be right.

Being an American in My Lai, I found I had to accept responsibility, to apologize and to ask for forgiveness for the horrific thing my country had done.

This spirit of critical thinking, this willingness to allow personal ethics to override and discredit what everyone else approves of or says must be done, is perhaps our most important American characteristic: compassionate dissent. We find it in the voices of our most famous reformers: Thoreau, Douglass, Cady Stanton, Debs, Carson, and King. Because spiritual and social progress requires self-awareness, self-assessment, and self-criticism, following their examples of what it means to be an American has never been easy.

Being an American in My Lai, I found I had to accept responsibility, to apologize, and to ask for forgiveness for the horrific thing my country had done. I also found, in connecting to my citizenship in a newly profound way, that part of my responsibility included doing everything possible to prevent my representative government from allowing another My Lai to happen again. Of course, the workmen from Son My could not see all this. But at least they knew I was an American, and that I was interested enough in them to learn their language, and they could see my grief, my spirit of contrition, and even my sense of humor. I wish each of us could go there and show them just how generous and compassionate we all can be.

When the question came, thinking these things, I was glad to tell them where I was from, proud to be a part of America's conscience.

On the way back to the car, I stopped in at the first building, where now several women sat talking and drinking tea. I asked if any of the guides spoke English, and after a minute, a woman emerged from a hallway and introduced herself as Do Thi Kim Chung.

I asked Kim Chung about the survivors, whether they could move on and have relatively normal lives. She said many could,

and cited the example of Vo Thi Lien, the little girl who had been rescued by Thompson and who now had a little girl of her own. But others could not. Their sorrow still too great, they did not like talking about the massacre, did not like the foreigners who snooped through the district wanting to stir up the past. I had considered doing just that, driving through the hamlets to see what they looked like, to judge, I guess, what life held for these people now. But I decided that my curiosity was not justification enough for disturbing anyone. The memorial was there. It served as a repository of the past so that the rest of the community could get on with their lives, to live as fully as they could in the present, looking forward to their futures. I would not disrupt that.

Kim Chung said some 15,000 visitors come to the memorial each year, many of them US vets, but really from all over the world. She showed me the thirty-or-so volumes of guest books, where visitors had recorded their names and experiences. Here and in the brochure, the theme was repeated over and again, that the memorial exists to remind us all that war itself is what makes atrocities possible, and to testify to the hope that "This will never happen again in the world."

Returning to Hoi An, rain began to fall as we turned on to Highway 1, and continued steadily, washing the late afternoon into darkness. Hai and I talked about his education. He told me he had not qualified for college at eighteen, and now that he had a wife, a job, and wanted to have children, he doubted he would have the chance again. Besides, he said, the Vietnamese system didn't really work to allow just anyone, whenever they wanted, to go to school. Having met with many university presidents around the country and listened to their plans to reach more students, I countered that the system was being renovated, new colleges were opening all the time, distance learning was becoming a reality in Vietnam, and that, most importantly, it's never too late to learn. He was impressed that my own father had returned to finish his undergraduate degree at the age of fifty-six, something unheard of when he was a young man. After all, I insisted, some things can and do change.

Back at my hotel, I sank into Jen's embrace, and then hugged Owen more than he cared to let me. When he finally wriggled away, he went back to jumping on the bed, trampolining his stuffed rabbit into the air, excited to have me home, ready to play, oblivious to everything but the joy of life.