

The Meaning of Memories

*"Untraditional"
Vietnam memorial
inspires remembering
... and healing*

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November 13, 1992 marked the tenth anniversary of the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the most frequently visited war memorial in our nation. Now a site for pilgrimage by veterans of all wars, it is easy to forget that it only barely survived the initial opposition of those who were outraged at its design.

This opposition was both powerful and vociferous. Critics called it everything from a "wailing wall for anti-draft and anti-nuclear demonstrators" to a "black gash of shame and sorrow, hacked into the national visage that is the Mall."

These critics wanted a memorial that honored the dead in a traditional way. Traditional memorials speak of lessons learned, conflicts resolved, the nobility of sacrifice and reestablished national unity. They both legitimize and embody the adopted meaning, designating the way the experience is to be remembered.

Traditionally, messages of honor and dignity determined America's memory of past wars. The classic iconography (eagles for strength and courage; palm leaves for victory; women in long dresses for peace) reinvokes the cultural ideals embraced prior to Vietnam — identifying America as a nation blessed above all nations, fighting for noble causes and emerging victorious. Recalling personal memories in this setting connects the events with positive sentiments about America. Traditional memorials promote individual and collective healing by helping us substitute feelings of national pride and glory for the pain that accompanies the memories of lives lost.

For the Vietnam War, traditional symbol systems do not work. As a nation, we couldn't agree on an unambiguous positive message about Vietnam that was appropriate. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is open-ended, giving voice to a variety of responses. It does not embody a message intended to resolve the Vietnam



experience. Instead, visitors can interpret the wall — and the war — for themselves.

Over the last 10 years, the memorial has absolutely refuted its critics. Rather than being insensitive to Vietnam veterans, it has a unique power to initiate their healing. It has compelled a vital, often difficult process of remembering, raising the psychological effects of war into individual and national consciousness.

The memorial's power to clarify and redress the wounds of Vietnam is rooted in its ability to trigger memory. We remember experiences in association with the meaning that we ascribe to them. Memories constitute an ongoing story about our lives. Conflict arises when episodes in our lives contradict what we believe to be true about ourselves and the world, when our autobiographical narratives cannot accommodate an experience in our lives.

Vietnam created this kind of conflict both individually and nationally. The first Americans sent to Vietnam were equipped with a cultural narrative describing wars and warriors in terms of World War I and World War II, when soldiers fought to save the world from tyranny, and victorious veterans returned as heroes to homecoming parades.

Their experiences in Vietnam, however, belied these expectations. Vietnam was not a black-and-white morality play like World War II, and GIs' guilt about killing was intensified by the fact that they contributed to the death of civilians. Their experiences conflicted with their prior knowledge about war and America. Like the veterans of previous wars, they returned home needing a coherent, culturally legitimate way of remembering. What they found instead was hostility, alienation, and worst of all, neglect.

The Vietnam war was an episode in history that contradicted America's self-concept. We questioned the propriety of our involvement, and we did not emerge victorious. When the fighting stopped, we signaled, by our words and our popular culture, that Vietnam was to be forgotten.

This process of "forgetting" mirrors what happens to victims of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): After Vietnam we suffered from national PTSD, which involves splitting or dissociating traumatic experiences. These experiences are kept outside of normal conscious awareness and are detached from the identities that they threaten. But not completely. Threatening memories surface in recurrent nightmares and intrusive flashbacks. A combat veteran with chronic PTSD, for example, may not be able to recall a helicopter crash in which he witnessed the death of his best friend. Yet his avoidance of airports and recurring nightmares suggest that he has underlying memory of combat trauma. This distressing, often debilitating side of PTSD testifies to the need for healing.

Psychotherapy with victims of PTSD involves assembling and integrating experiences that have been split off in memory, helping the patient to relive the entire experience from beginning to end. When memories are reexperienced and expressed in this supportive context, a web of associations emerge. These associations are the basis for a life story that is coherent and inclusive. And once-fragmented memories stay in conscious awareness.

Paralleling the treatment of PTSD, the memorial triggers memories in a way that promotes healing. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial compels interpretation and memory by dissolving the boundaries between object, environment, and observers. Because of the reflective property of the granite, visitors see themselves amidst the names. "As we started walking toward this memorial," said one mother of a Vietnam veteran, "I saw myself being pulled toward the black wall, even though my feet didn't want to move. I was so scared . . . I don't know what it is. You have to touch it. There's something about touching it."

Interacting with the memorial enables visitors to identify aspects of the Vietnam experience that are significant. At the site of the wall, individuals rivet on particular details. Many visitors respond to the names. In a letter to the editor of the *Washington Post*, veteran Wayne Karlin wrote, "Standing amidst the names, I was overwhelmed by death. I felt myself remembering the first time I saw our dead en masse: a line of 50 marines lying in the red Quang Ngai mud outside B-med at Chu Lai. It was raining,

and all of their faces were covered with those useless ponchos we had, but their legs and feet were sticking out and they were all wearing my boots."

Elements at the memorial suggesting that America did not "win" the Vietnam war triggered the recollections of others. These include the memorial's blackness: the inverted "V" for victory; its position underground, which some people interpret as a scar or gaping wound; and the contrasting characteristics of white marble monuments nearby, which include the American flag and implements of battle. For some visitors, these features evoke deep-seated feelings of anger and betrayal over having fought for a country that not only demonstrated lack of support for the war, but also would not share the blame.

The memorial offers safety and support and structure. The wall's obtuse angle and its position, nestled in the earth, create a separate space: its configuration fends off traffic noises as it gathers up and protects its setting — light, nature, visitors, surrounding sights. Designer Maya Lin described it as being "like hands which open, inviting people in, protecting them from the sounds of the city." The memorial tenders support by pledging to remember, and by drawing people together to share their experiences.

The configuration creates a journey with a beginning, middle, and an end. Visitors often start at the directory, and then follow the path to the edge of the wall. Guided by the path, the visitor descends and the wall rises. Jan Scruggs, the veteran who initiated the memorial, described this as a "descent into death and reemergence into the world of light." The path takes visitors on a journey into memory, the memorial serving as a crossroad between conscious and subconscious worlds.

A journey into memory leaves one inalterably changed by the experience. The type of remembering that takes place creates meaning and continuity. Recollection aids the healing process because when one remembers interacting with the wall, one's own experiences are remembered in association with a long-awaited, culturally sanctioned connection to the past. This feeling of being connected becomes part of the re-remembered experience.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial has radically changed the way we think about remembrance of war. Over the last 10 years, cities nationwide — from Little Rock to Portland, from Sacramento to New York City — have created "untraditional" memorials to Vietnam veterans. Most include the names of those who died in Vietnam. Like the wall, these memorials symbolize a desire to heal, and represent a commitment to remember everyone's sacrifice, to give voice to a collective pain, and to help each other bind the wounds of war. ■

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