



CONFESSION HEALS A VET

The following inspiring article appeared in St. Anthony Messenger (Aug '09). St. Anthony Messenger has many inspiring articles each month.

"I'm not going to the wedding tomorrow. I'm, sorry," Brad said as his chin trembled and his eyes began to fill with tears.

"But you have to be there!" I said. "You're the best man in our son's wedding. Macy is counting on you."

"I just can't do it, sweetheart. I can't stand next to that gook. I can't go anywhere near him."

Brad's breath was short and his voice trembled, almost a whisper. I could hear his anxiety level rising. He was starting to have flashbacks to his days in Vietnam.

"No, my love, he isn't a gook. He's a man from South Vietnam. He's a good man and a caring priest."

Brad mumbled something I couldn't understand.

"Think of how Macy and Monica will feel if you don't show up, not to mention the rest of the family," I pleaded.

"I just don't think I can do it. It took all I had to stay put on the altar during the rehearsal tonight. I wanted to run and hide. He reminds me so much of what I want to forget," Brad said as he put his arms around me, laying his head on my shoulder.

"Then try to remember the people who were helped by you and all the other soldiers there," I said as I held him. "The people of South Vietnam are grateful to you and the U.S. military for what you did for them."

"Yeah, I know," he whispered.

"Father Vu is not the enemy. He is our priest. And he's going to marry our son tomorrow. You just have to be there!" I pleaded again.

"I don't know. I just don't think I can do it," he whispered halfheartedly.

"Brad, Macy is counting on you, and so am I. Don't let this thing beat you. You can do it, my love. I promise you can," I said, trying to convince myself as much as him.

"O.K., you're right. I really don't want to disappoint Macy. I haven't always been there for him growing up. I don't want to do that to him again, especially now."

"So, you'll do it?"

"I guess. But promise me you'll stay close to me all the time," he said as he dried his eyes with his sleeve and relaxed only a bit.

"Of course, I promise. I will be at your side every minute," I said, vowing to be there for my husband in yet another of his battles with memories that hounded him unmercifully.

We held each other for a while, hoping once again that the ghosts of Vietnam would remain at bay, at least until after our son's wedding. It was Friday, February 7, 1997, and though I felt apprehensive about what tomorrow might bring, I was at peace when we finally got to bed that night.

Stayed a Safe Distance Away

The next morning, as we finished last-minute preparations for the wedding, we didn't talk of the previous night's anxiety. I knew from past experiences that Brad would have to fight these demon memories on his own. But I was firmly committed to trying to help him in any way I could.

And if I had anything to say about it, I was not going to allow those memories to rob him—to rob us—of the happiness we should be feeling on the day of our son's wedding.

As it turned out, the wedding went off without a hitch. Brad did fine. I was the only one who noticed that he stayed a safe distance from Father Vu during the wedding ceremony.

A Sniper's Horrors

Our son Macy's wedding day was but one of many occasions in a 25-year period during which Brad battled with the ghosts of the Vietnam War. I became aware of the problem shortly after he returned home from the war in 1970. We were married for only a few years when the symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) started to emerge.

His avoidance of people and social situations caused conflict in our marriage. At first, I thought he just didn't like crowds or public places. We learned later in therapy that this avoidance behavior was a symptom of PTSD—which contributed to his development of full-blown agoraphobia (fear of open or public places).

I recall an instance when Brad was awakened by a nightmare. He was terrified. He could not speak about it aloud, so he whispered the story to me, even though we were the only ones at home.

He told me there was a belief among the Viet Cong that a human body must remain intact after death for the deceased to rest in peace. If any part of the body were missing, the deceased would never be at peace. So, to express their hatred for the Viet Cong, some soldiers in Brad's squad would decapitate their enemies with a shovel. Brad did not want to participate in this gruesome practice, but he was pressured to do so by members of his squad...

Though it was dark in our room, I knew Brad was crying as he expressed extreme remorse and guilt over

having taken part in this barbaric act. He prayed for forgiveness from God and from the men he and his comrades had mutilated.

Brad was a sniper in the war, and a very accurate one, from what he told me. He killed quite a number of the enemy—from a distance. He would shoot and they would drop. He never got close to the bodies to confirm the kill, but he knew they were dead from the way they went down.

I don't think he felt a lot of remorse about killing the enemy. After all, it was a war. But I do believe he lived with the nagging fear that he might have shot some innocent civilians. It was difficult to distinguish a Viet Cong combatant from a civilian because the Viet Cong didn't wear uniforms.

Brad explained to me that a sniper's targets aren't always clear, but when his superior ordered him to shoot, he shot. Just the possibility that some of the people he killed could have been civilians was one of the things that burdened Brad, that weighed heavily on his conscience.

Another thought that haunted him was the death of one of his buddies who was blown up in a mortar attack while standing guard one night. Brad could have been the one on guard duty at that location on the perimeter of his squad's camp. But his buddy had just taken over for him five minutes earlier, when the fatal attack occurred. Brad felt guilty that he was still alive and his buddy was dead.

Though it might not have been rational, Brad carried a lot of guilt for what he did in Vietnam. He felt unworthy, unlikable. He withdrew from society as much as possible.

Prelude to Reconciliation

About two and a half years after Brad had forced himself to stand near the Vietnamese priest for our son's wedding, I again found myself turning to this very same priest for his help on a family matter. This time, however, was not a happy occasion.

It was Saturday, October 23, 1999. As I dialed Father Vu's number, I was hoping he wouldn't remember the wedding and how Brad seemed to ignore him the whole time.

"Good morning, Father. This is Joan Broussard," I said.

"Yes, Joan, how are you? What can I do for you today?" he answered in his usual cheerful voice.

"Father, my husband, Brad, would like you to hear his Confession. He was diagnosed with a brain tumor yesterday and will undergo surgery next week. We've been told the tumor is most likely malignant and the surgery is very risky. Brad asked me to call you to see if he could come for Confession before going to surgery," I said.

"Why, of course. When would he like to come?" Father Vu replied.

"Actually, he is ready right now. If you are free this morning, we could come right over," I said, hoping he didn't have any other commitments.

"Yes, I am free all morning. You can come now. I'll be waiting."

God's Forgiveness Was Total

We drove to St. Anne's Catholic Church in Youngsville, which is less than a mile from our house. The church staff does not work on Saturdays, so it was quiet and peaceful when we arrived to find Father Vu waiting at the door. We exchanged greetings and I quickly excused myself to wait outside to allow Brad and Father Vu their privacy.

I walked every sidewalk in the church cemetery several times over. I circled the church grounds numerous times, all the while praying that Brad's confession would be satisfying and nourishing to his mind and his soul. I also prayed for myself that I would not fail him.

Nearly two hours after they went into the rectory, Brad and Father Vu came out. Brad was smiling from ear to ear. His confession was complete and God's forgiveness total. The look of exhilaration on his face was matched only by the spring in his step, knowing that he was forgiven for all the things he'd ever done that offended God and other people.

Brad's joyful mood was contagious. We said good-bye to Father Vu and were both smiling as we walked, hand in hand, to the car.

"Hey, sweetie, I think I made Father Vu's eyes pop out," Brad said, still smiling.

"Why is that?" I asked.

"Because of some of the stuff I confessed to him. I am finally able to start telling it. I am really glad I come today. I feel good inside. Father Vu is a really good man. I like him."

Brad held his head high as we walked. I sensed confidence in his step. I knew he was ready for surgery.

Putting the Ghosts to Rest

The battle Brad had fought against wartime ghosts for nearly 30 years seemed to be reaching closure. This psychological battle had been perhaps a tougher one for him than the physical battle that was about to begin. By the grace of God and the newfound friendship of a Vietnamese priest, Brad was now armed and ready to face whatever lay ahead.

Brad's brain surgery went as well as could be expected. The doctors were able to remove about 80 percent of the tumor. We tried radiation and chemotherapy in an effort to shrink the remaining cancerous tissue, but to no avail. Brad's days were numbered.

Facing death was the catalyst for Brad's reconciliation with God, with his past and with his family. Shortly after the surgery, he began to ask for family members to come to visit him, and he made peace with each one.

Brad also made progress in making peace with himself, finally accepting himself for the man he was: a soldier called to serve his country in a war he did not totally understand. He was a soldier following orders he didn't always agree with but obeyed out of a sense of duty. He was what one might call a reluctant warrior.

A few weeks after his surgery, Brad started complaining that he was “tired” and wanted “to go home.” I understood the latter expression to mean he was ready for death, ready to pass into the next life.

One day Brad was very restless after a night of bad dreams about Vietnam. He asked me to contact Father Vu and ask him to come for a visit. I made the call.

They spent a lot of time together, an hour or more, exchanging was stories and praying. It was during this visit that Brad learned of Father Vu’s escape from Saigon just prior to the time the city fell to the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong. He was a seminarian at the time and only 20 years old.

When their visit was over, Father Vu emerged from the living room, leaving Brad sound asleep. Father Vu then helped me to understand the real meaning of the words Brad repeated every day, “I’m tired.”

He explained Brad was tired of carrying the ghosts of the people for whose deaths he felt responsible. This burden had been draining the life out of him for a very long time, and he knew he needed to let it go completely. Father Vu advised him to put it in God’s hands.

The Gift of Peace

And, apparently, he did. When he awoke from his nap following Father Vu’s visit, Brad was like a new man. He seemed very much at peace with himself—really at peace—as though the weight of the world had been lifted from his shoulders.

Brad’s attitude toward Father Vu had come full circle. It had gone from distrust and avoidance to respect and true friendship. Brad had developed a sense of brotherly love for this gently man from Saigon.

Brad died on May 3, 2000. He lost his battle with cancer, but received the peace he had longed for all his adult life.

Have a blessed week,

