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History of the Vietnam War

Written Assignment #2

Strength of the Soul

In the majority of stories we hear as children, there is a clear line between the good and the evil. When it comes to reality, however, the line between the positive and negative can be much more difficult to define. Often this is because the dark and light aspects of existence combine to form what could be referred to as the grey area. The war in Vietnam, the individuals involved, and the families of these individuals, all fit into that grey region which spans the gap between the good and bad. In every terrible experience or occurrence in life there is a brighter side to be seen, and it is this theme that stood out to me while reading of the myriad horrors detailed in the Appy book. Even in circumstances that made me shudder to imagine, men and woman were able to see rays of optimism. Humanity possesses the power to find hope, beauty, and astounding strength of both body and mind, even in the midst of the most horrendous of situations.

The first example of resilience in the face of strife can be found in the story told by a Vietnamese woman by the name of Vi Thi Vinh. She, and other young people toiled to create and upkeep what we now refer to as the Ho Chi Minh trail. Vi detailed her struggle for survival as her group defused bombs, filled in craters, and sought out food that had escaped the destruction caused by American bomb raids. She speaks of scraping moss off of rocks, or of soaking twigs in water and drinking the juice. Even in the midst of her backbreaking struggle to live, even during nights filled with the sound of explosions and death, Vi Thi Vinh remained resilient. This resilience was summarized when she describes camp with other youth. They performed plays, and sang songs well into the night. I was so humbled when I read the words: "We use to joke that you couldn't hear the bombs over our singing." To be able to literally raise your voice in song to drown out the sounds of destruction is something truly miraculous.

Another instance which illustrates humanity's hardiness is told by a surgeon who helped in the war effort, named David Smith. Smith said he felt privileged to be in Vietnam, even though men were dying beneath his hands, because he could at least save a few. He tells story whose symbolic power clearly summarizes the theme of humanity overcoming hardship, or turning the darkness into

something that pierces through the negative. While walking through a Vietnamese village, Smith saw an old man working metal. Upon closer inspection he sees that the man is utilizing old shells from bullets; melting them down in order to craft beautiful and ornate vases. The man was literally taking part of a lethal weapon, a symbol of death and pain, and turning it into something that was capable of bringing joy and color into the world.

The last tale of overcoming scars, both physical and mental, comes from an artist out of Hanoi. Vu Hy Thieu was a Vietnamese man who chose to join the southern forces, marching along the Ho Chi Minh trail. He speaks of sandals made of old tires, of thirteen-year-old boys who had their intestines blown out onto the mud, and of hordes of mosquitoes and blood-sucking leeches. After all of these appalling experiences, however, at the very end of his testimony, Vu describes returning to his city. He went through hell and back, yet still he closes with a recollection of the sun, rising on the walls of his city. He is struck by the simple beauty, by the sight of something he once took for granted, but never will again. I am astounded by the fact that a soul can survive so much anguish, yet still retain the capacity to observe and appreciate beauty.

Reading all of the accounts contained by the Appy book, I was humbled, sickened, and moved. I feel privileged not to have experienced anything similar to the things detailed in the stories of the brave men and women in the text, yet I also am able to see how their mindset can be applied to many things in life, no matter how small. By looking for the positive, even if all seems lost or hopeless, a flame can be found. It is this flame that gives humans the ability to move through situations that seem to have no happy ending in sight.

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