

Naming the Dead - edited

I felt a welcoming warmth at the sound of Mair's voice on the phone. Though we don't talk often, we've been through a few chapters together in the nearly 20 years that we've known each other. I was eager to hear her latest call to action. Last year Mair had felt the need to walk from the Canadian border to Kittery for peace, which she did despite her 50+ years and creaky knees.

"Listen, I have this idea, and I was wondering if you could help me with it", she began. I knew I would say yes to whatever, since I trusted her sense of adventure, and recognized her to be a fellow truth seeker. Her plan was to read the names of the American soldiers killed in the Iraqi war once a week on the Camden Village Green. It was a two person job, with one reading and one offering a solemn drum beat after each name.

As I considered the reading it began to take on a much more personal meaning for me. As so many aspects of this current political climate have, this one brought me flashing back to the Vietnam years. I am 40 years older than I was when my family was torn asunder by that war, but the memories are still fresh.

When I was 12, my oldest brother Pancho really rocked the boat when he quit school shortly after his 18th birthday and joined the army. We were not a military family, per se, but my father had done the same thing at the same age during World War II, and perhaps Pancho was unconsciously honoring that rite of passage passed on from father to son. My parents were not opposed to the war, though they were worried for Pancho's safety. Dad was proud. His wartime experience had been profound and disturbing. It had felt so much Bigger than anything he had previously felt in his life, and he was still talking about it.

Unlike many of his fellow infantrymen, Pancho survived the combat zone and returned home. As he told my father in one long drunken night of sharing, he had worked very hard at staying alive. Pancho seemed to have a resilient soul. He had a great imagination, and was fond of writing stories as a kid that featured bizarre characters of his own making. He had names for himself in his different personas; one of my favorites was Kelpy Whamo. It seemed like a part of him was always looking on from outside the game, and from there he usually found life pretty humorous.

Pancho was passionate about his interests. He was a natural scientist, and at 6 possessed a collection of butterflies that was the envy of much older boys. After we moved to California from the midwest he switched to collecting snakes. There was one road trip to the midwest where we traveled through an area where dozens of snakes were sunning in the roads and getting run over. Pancho was 12 at the time, and beside himself with grief and helplessness. Soon we were stopping for him to remove every dead snake from the road amidst angry tears.

When he came home from Nam he was sick at heart, and lost in a country that seemed to blame he and his fellow soldiers for an unjust war. I arrived home from school one day and there he was; a tense, well muscled young man.

We had moved to the East coast from our old neighborhood in California while he

was in the army, and now he found himself surrounded by strangers, in a family that didn't know how to bring him back to wholeness. After casting about in Connecticut with us for a few months, he set off for California on his own, looking for a way to restart a life of possibility. Before long he had a girlfriend and had enrolled in college. If you didn't look too hard, you could assume he was doing OK, and considering everything on my family's plate, we weren't looking too hard.

My middle brother had recently been drafted, and was evading the draft by traveling back and forth across the country and waiting for Selective Service to catch up with him. It was becoming increasingly evident that this war was a mistake, and Danny was not interested in dying for it.

At the same time our family was caught in the economic reality of moving every couple of years following Dad's jobs. We were back in the suburbs of Washington, DC. when we got the news of Pancho's motorcycle accident and death. Danny was living with us again at that time.

My parents received the news while they were in New York exploring our next move. I had taken the call at home from the California State Police who told me nothing and asked for my parents contact info. My parents were located in the city, and told the painful news.

We had no family in the area, and no time tested friendships. Pancho had never visited us there. There was no one to share our loss with. My parents decided we could only afford to send one of us, my father, to California to see my brother's body and to spread his ashes off the Huntington Pier, where my brother had spent many youthful days fishing.

It was a painful, lonely time for all of us, and a time when none of us could hide from the ways that our family felt broken.

It was many years later that I heard the statistics on how many Vietnam vets died of either accidental death or suicide within a year of coming home. Pancho's motorcycle accident had been unexplainable, nobody's fault but his own as he breezed through a stop sign and slammed into a car. Like many other vets he had come home with a fondness for certain drugs, and I've always suspected that there were drugs involved in the incident.

Recognizing my oldest brother as a war casualty was a radicalizing moment. It shook me awake and I was filled with pain and loss. It was so painful that I forgot, and lived in that place of forgetting for many years, until our invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq shook me awake again.

How do we honor our war dead? I honor my brother by doing whatever I can to discourage more young people from losing their lives and souls in yet another U.S. instigated, unjust war.

It's interesting that those of us who openly oppose this current war are accused of being unpatriotic. I oppose this war as an American, committed to America being the just and democratic country that it claims to be.

Reading the names has brought me full circle. Recently we were approached by a concerned mom and her teenage son after a reading. She asked, "Is this a memorial, or are you protesters?" And I answered, "We are both."

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