

# The Vietnam War Defined My Hero's Journey into Adulthood

by Robert Riversong, Unity Maine

Until modern times, life's journey was always understood as a series of rites of passage through critical thresholds of transition: birth, puberty/sexuality, entrance into adulthood, marriage, elderhood, and death. Cultures which reflected on life in a philosophical manner recognized a "hero's journey" through realms of darkness, danger and despair, facing fearful enemies and encountering helpful allies, discovering one's gifts, and returning into the light with new perceptions, new strengths and a new identity.

Born at the University of Michigan hospital, when my father – on the GI Bill – was completing his PhD studies in the new field of Social Psychology, I had seven different addresses as a child.

Not only was I moved from one public school system to another, sometimes from the most progressive to the most regressive, but was also the first person of Jewish heritage to attend (as a tuition student) the tony Bronxville NY public school (Jews, blacks and Catholics were not allowed to live there). My first creative writing essay in third grade was titled "The Value of the Itinerant Lifestyle".

As a child of the 1960s, coming of age in that turbulent time, and as the son of two liberal academics (a high school teacher mother with a PhD in education and a father who was a professor of Research Methods in a graduate school of Social Work – both working in the inner city of Detroit), I easily slipped into the maelstrom of the anti-Vietnam War movement, even while still a junior in high school.

Attending high school in a Detroit suburb that was, at that time, the most highly-mortgaged city in America, I also came to detest the ostentatious, materialist, "keep up with the Jones" culture I found myself in.

I participated in the 1969 DC Moratorium to End the War, where I had to deal with clouds of tear gas. Later I inadvertently led an illegal Yippie march through Detroit in 1970 on my fluorescent pink Triumph motorcycle in protest of the Kent State shootings and the invasion of Cambodia.

Though I knew I would not cooperate with the military draft, I had no awareness of a resistance community, nor any idea of just how I would avoid induction (other than the knowledge that I had an uncle in Canada). I got hold of an application for Conscientious Objector status, but it required multiple references and evidentiary proof that I had a life-long opposition – religious or moral – to war-making in all its forms. I threw it in the trash when I realized that I could not prove my convictions and that my local draft board was known to be the most conservative in the nation in granting CO status.

At age 17, after nearly flunking out of high school following my National Merit finalist status and early admission to the University of Michigan Honors College, I left home to seek my way toward the elysian fields of California, and became a professional automotive mechanic (one of the first and youngest fully-certified master mechanics in the nation) in an act of rebellion against my academic background, but also to be able to make a modest living, after an immersion into the poverty and joys of the hallucinogenic Hippie lifestyle at 10,000 feet in the Colorado Rockies.

Though I was both proud of my status as a certified tradesman and cynical about a system which can grant "master" status to one who has yet to gain any professional experience, I soon became disenchanted with the auto repair industry – both because of its inherent corruption and because it was a greasy job that perpetuated the automobile culture (to which I had a love/hate relationship). But I may have been the first auto mechanic who taught the subject in both a top liberal arts college and at an alternative high school for poor rural students who were having trouble adapting to public school.

Beginning my journey, as I did, as a non-violent social change activist while still in high school, I have always associated myself with the radical "left". I've certainly always considered myself a radical, in the etymological sense: "of or going to the root". My politics was grass-roots, and I believed that any issue could be effectively engaged only by understanding its roots and aiming at the root of the problem, rather than at superficial reforms of the status quo. But I was less sure about just what the "left" really was, even though I was at times immersed in it (I suspect that, for much of my life, the "left" has also been unsure of its identity and struggling to maintain viability).

My geographic journey seemed to vacillate for a time between the Midwest and the West Coast after first discovering the unstable "left coast" as a summer student at Stanford in 1970, where the ROTC building was still smoldering after being burnt to the ground and there were weekly demonstrations against "the system" and Keystone Cop arrests. I was in sunny southern California during the Manson Family events, the war with the Symbionese Liberation Army, discovery of a cannibal cult, and when one of the oldest hippie communes (The Brotherhood of the Sun) was stockpiling brown rice, guns and ammunition for the upcoming Armageddon race wars.

In my travels and in between stints at such jobs as gas station attendant, warehouse stocker and cab driver, I managed to glean college credits at Stanford, Harvard, Michigan, Oakland U, and Wayne State. My most memorable class was Remedial Wisdom, in which we were asked to sit on pillows in a circle on the floor and share the experience of our first assignment, which was to get up early enough to watch a sunrise (with smoking a joint as an optional extra).

But I dropped out of more colleges than most people ever attend.

I was night manager at a suburban Detroit service station (back when we prided ourselves in servicing people's vehicles: checked the oil, washed the windshield, filled the tires...) during the 1973 Arab Oil Embargo, and had the "pleasure" of dealing with daily gasoline quotas, alternate odd and even license plate days, and barricading the entrances to prevent irate drivers from coming in to demand gasoline (in the urban centers, attendants were getting shot).

During my round-trip travels between the middle-north and the western edge of the country, I found that books often appeared as road signs to help guide my philosophical journey, if not my geographical one. One of the major landmarks was *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values* by Robert Pirsig, the year it was published – 1974. Ironically, as I traveled eastward and read the book, I found myself accidentally (are there really any accidents?) tracing his motorcycle road trip in reverse.

Other books seemed similarly to jump off the shelf into my hands at critical junctures along my way. Another was *Future Shock* by Alvin Toffler (1970). Toffler saw the disorientation and anomie of contemporary society as a result of "too much change in too short a period of time" and of "information overload". His book led me to reconsider a more deliberate, focused and concentrated educational experience, and I applied to several respected eastern colleges.

I was accepted only by one, as Amherst College was not only transitioning from a bastion of elite male education to a co-ed institution, but was at the same time seeking to diversify their rather homogenous student body, and was happy to consider an itinerant auto mechanic of 22 years of age.

After returning to academia at the tony "little Ivy" Amherst College to study philosophy and religion in order to ground myself in epistemology and ethics before engaging the world more fully, I wandered into the appropriate technology movement and side-stepped into the anti-nuclear power movement, rising quickly into leadership positions.

I declined to pursue a degree at that time, when I realized the inherent corruption of "higher" education and found myself called to activism. I later, however, earned an AA in Liberal Arts with honors from a community college and a certificate in Experiential Education and Outdoor Leadership. I worked at Outward Bound and NH Conservation Corps for a few seasons, and because I had the good fortune, during my Outdoor Leadership training, to be exposed to Vision Quest, I incorporated rites-of-passage elements into my Outward Bound canoe and dog-sled expeditions and then became a Vision Quest guide as well as facilitator of the nascent Mythopoetic Men's Movement.

As a No Nukes movement leader, I helped turn a problematic 6,000-person occupation of the Seabrook Nuclear Power Plant construction site into the world's largest alternative energy and lifestyle fair, attended by 12,000 people, and arranged to get Dr. Ben Spock (the then-70-year-old baby doctor) arrested and then interviewed by a half dozen media outlets (the young police officer who gently put the cuffs on Spock whispered in his ear, "my wife is never going to forgive me").

Following a 1979 arrest for blocking the celebration of the launching of the first Trident nuclear submarine – the world's most powerful killing machine – in Groton CT, and a six-day air fast, I determined that, since I had planned to refuse to give my body to the Vietnam war (I came close to being called up in the last

year of the military draft lottery when I was 1A), I would also decline to give the fruits of my body to war, and I have refused to pay war (federal income) taxes since then.

When President Carter reinstated draft registration in 1980, I helped organize three anti-draft groups in New Hampshire, including a group of Quaker draft counselors (with whom I produced a half-hour TV special on draft resistance), and burned my Vietnam-era draft card in front of national network news cameras on the steps of the Concord NH federal building, signing a pledge to "encourage, aid and abet" draft registration refusal (which was a federal crime).

But, in all that rapid immersion in the non-violent "left", I never allowed myself to become ideological or captured by a defined dogma, which I believe serves more to constrain thought and action than to liberate the mind and the will (they are, at best, training wheels for an evolving and open mind and can be as destructive as any fundamentalism if adhered to "religiously" so that it becomes a straight-jacket).

When I served in 1978-79 as the media coordinator for the Clamshell Alliance, the nation's first grass-roots anti-nuclear power coalition, and was part of the small group that organized the 1979 First National No Nukes Strategy Conference in Louisville Kentucky, which coalesced a worldwide movement against "nukes", I found myself drawn more to the religiously- or spiritually-oriented activists, or those who lived close to the land (like Wendell Berry, whom I met in Louisville) than to the ideologically-driven ones. The former, I found, were not only more at peace in the world, even in the face of terrible injustice and inequity, but had far more perseverance – doing the work because it needed to be done, not merely to achieve temporal "success" (which the often-angry ideologues typically defined narrowly and hence often failed to achieve).

In fact, when the Clamshell Alliance failed in its primary goal of stopping the construction of the Seabrook NH Nuclear Power Plant, I watched many activists (largely from the urban centers of Marxist and anarchist thought) become deflated with the loss. I, on the other hand, felt we had achieved at least two enormous victories: we had introduced tens of thousands of Americans to the practice of strategic and militant non-violence (including decentralized organization and consensus decision-making), and we had dramatically expanded awareness of alternative or "soft path" energy options as well as the entire constellation of "appropriate technologies" – from organic gardening to people-centered communities.

Following my stint as a grass-roots movement activist, organizer and spokesperson, I spent a year in rural Maine, joining with four nuns and an Oblate priest in an extraordinary experiment in living the Works of Mercy in the form of an alternative economy of, by and for the rural poor (this project, called HOME, is still going strong after 47 years).

As a balm after my frenzied work in "the movement", this opportunity offered me a chance to slow down, reflect, and immerse myself in an ascetic form of life dedicated to serving humankind, as well as in truly simple living – with no indoor plumbing, electricity or phones at our homestead, and draft horses for power and locomotion.

It allowed me to appreciate the Trappist monk Thomas Merton's admonition:

"The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence. More than that, it is cooperation with violence. The frenzy of the activist neutralizes his work for peace. It destroys her own inner capacity for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of his own work because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful."

After emerging from the Maine woods, I found myself involved with a newly-emergent Community Land Trust movement, joining the live-in volunteer staff at the Institute for Community Economics in Greenfield MA to promulgate and support both urban and rural land and housing trusts. My job was the initiation of a Community Construction Assistance Project, through which urban rehab and rural new home construction programs were begun, leaving local people with the expertise and confidence to continue independently.

For one of the projects, I spent four and a half months living and working in a remote mountain "holler" in northeastern Tennessee, sharing the house of another Catholic Nun who was a tireless rural development organizer. I trained three locals, including a former moonshiner who became a deacon of his

church and two feisty women (one of whom was one of the infamous Hatfields), and supervised the construction of the first two Woodland Community Land Trust homes (which later manifested as 17 affordable and efficient homes, small farms and small businesses, the Woodland Community Development Corporation, and the Clearfork Community Institute educational center).

I went on to focus my energies on low-cost, healthy, passive solar, super-insulated home design and construction – which became my vocation for 35 years (much of that in the not-for-profit sector), and during which I pioneered a unique method of superinsulated construction and then spent eight years teaching its underlying principles and practical methods to others. Now, I offer design and consulting assistance to clients all over North America, in order to sustain my subsistence lifestyle.

In 1980-81, when I was volunteering a year of my life at HOME in Orland Maine, I engaged a middle-aged political feminist woman in conversation as we walked to our homestead, called St. Francis Community, who admonished me never (as a man) to attempt to define women's oppression. I still remember the fierceness in her voice and the daggers in her eyes as she expressed that. There was no sense of invitation into her philosophical space, but rather a warning to "keep out – men not welcome".

Years later, in 1997, when I was working as a wilderness guide and experiential educator, a midwife for men and others in ritual initiation and personal/social transformation – leading Mythic Warrior training for men, Vision Quests and Boys-2-Men Quests, sweat lodges and medicine wheel teaching – I wrote an essay, which was published in *Everyman: A Men's Journal*, Canada, called "Ideology and Its Discontents: Transcending Feminism – ReHonoring Masculinity". It began:

I've struggled these fifteen years since to hear the pain behind that stern warning. But I have had difficulty at times in hearing the story of women's oppression, and witnessing the revision of our history, language, culture, and politics by a feminism which has grown ideological.

While many, if not most, of my brothers and sisters in the movement for non-violent social change freely adopted the perspectives and values of feminism, I could never call myself a feminist though I supported much of the struggle for women's rights. ...

I honor women's attempts to help society understand and acknowledge the pain and devaluation that they have felt as women. But I cannot accept, any more than that woman in Maine when the roles were reversed, the right of women to define and label men's reality. I part company when the rhetoric of feminism not only denies men's experience of devaluation and disempowerment but makes us into enemies of women.

Feminism as a movement which expresses women's hopes, desires, and demands for respect and equality of opportunity is courageous and progressive. Feminism as an ideology which defines not personal experience but TRUTH – for both men and women – is oppressive and regressive.

Later, a series of nationally-significant events moved me further from the "left" or "progressive" camps, including the controversy over the 2012 shooting of Trayvon Martin, and the uproar over Cliven Bundy, the 67-year-old Nevada rancher and organic melon farmer who became notorious in 2014 for the armed sage-brush rebellion that occurred near his land, and the disingenuous dismissal of him as a racist.

But the biggest break with the "left" in my 47 years of progressive social-change activism came with the increasing stridency of the radical feminist movement, which led me to publish "When Progressive Social Change Becomes Regressive Ideology" in June of 2014. My cognitive dissonance with radical feminism and the universally-supportive "left" only increased when the national furor erupted over the November 2014 Rolling Stone article, "A Rape on Campus: A Brutal Assault and Struggle for Justice at U-VA", and the nation's campuses, under intense pressure from student activists and the Obama administration, doubled down on protecting women at the expense of men, rationalized by the ideological fiction of a "rape culture", and tossing out due process protections for accused male students.

This dramatic shift to illiberalism and anti-male discrimination resulted in dozens of lawsuits by aggrieved young men against their college administrations, and the undeserved international celebrity status of a Columbia University art major who was allowed to torment her five-times-exonerated former male friend by dragging a mattress around campus – and even onto the graduation stage – as her approved senior thesis "performance art" project.

I ended up publishing 24 long-form essays on ideological feminism on my Turning The Tide: Shifting the Paradigm of Human Culture blog, as I continued to twist away from "left" dogma and praxis.

Also feeding my slide away from the non-violent "left" (and the second-guessing of my long-standing opposition to America's gun fetish) was a 2013 arrest at gunpoint, during which a deputy sheriff tackled me to the ground and repeatedly punched me in the head for refusing to allow him to deprive me of the basic right of subsistence over a minor administrative issue (a civil drivers license revocation) that in no way created a hazard for the people or the state. Subsequent to that experience, I found myself sympathizing with the right-wing perception of a need to defend oneself against a tyrannical and violent state.

These last two years, I've been wandering throughout Maine, volunteering as a WWOOFer at various organic farms and seeking a "last address" among like-minded, earth-honoring souls who are living simply on the land, after having moved nearly 50 times in one short lifetime.

For now, I'm helping to set up an American branch of a New Brunswick CAN business that bags organic soil products for wholesale distribution to retail outlets – in exchange for a place to park my camping trailer and participate in productive work. I also do volunteer trailwork for the Sebec Regional Land Trust and assist the volunteer track repair crew of the non-profit Belfast & Moosehead Lake Railroad.

At age 65, I continue my journey, trying to be of service to humanity and the planet, never knowing where a responsive and supportive universe might take me next.