HEALING MYSTERIES IN A VIETNAMESE VILLAGE

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This past October, 2006, I led my sixth annual journey of healing and reconciliation for American veterans and civilians to Viet Nam. Our two week immersion took us from the Mekong Delta to Ha Noi. Toward the end of our journey, our group of veterans and healers rolled through thickly populated northern countryside where tiny homes are surrounded by vast stretches of rice paddies glowing an iridescent green.

We arrived in Thon Hoi Quan hamlet, one hour north of Ha Noi. Gathering in the square we were greeted by Mr. Tuy, a village elder. Other curious villagers approached. One man, forehead covered with large tumors of the type caused by Agent Orange exposure, beckoned us to inspect the rice he was drying and bagging. The school was let out for lunch. Scores of children surrounded us, competing with smiles, funny faces and welcome hugs to have their pictures snapped.

We prepared for the honor of entering the village *dinh.* We were the first westerners to ever visit Thon Hai Quan and thus the first foreigners to enter its sacred social chamber.

THE VIETNAMESE DINH

The Vietnamese *dinh* is a unique social, cultural and religious institution for which we in the West have no exact equivalent or translation. The *dinh* in this northern village is a broad wooden building with an outside portico and several large inner rooms. Elsewhere, as are some I have visited in the Mekong Delta, *dinhs* may be groupings of several small buildings, each reserved for a particular purpose, surrounded by gardens and altars. Whatever the architecture, the *dinh* is simultaneously a temple for the worship of the village god, a meeting hall for village elders and women's groups, a children's after-school center, a repository for important artifacts, a community theater for religious and secular performances, and a court for deciding disputes peaceably and free of legalities.

The word *dinh* was originally imported from China where it designated "an open, independent pavilion serving cultural entertainment."[1] Its original purpose "was to worship *Thanh Hoang,* the most venerated, the highest spirit of the village."[2] In Viet Nam, this purpose broadened such that the *dinh* became an institution promoting and preserving "specific village culture" and architecture "became multifarious with its own style in each region" of the country.[3] Vietnamese villagers eventually worshipped their own local god, usually "historical figures who had started or helped to develop the economic, social and cultural welfare of their homeland."[4] By the 12th century royal edicts "stipulat[ed] that all over the country each village must have a *dinh* building of its own." Thus, the *dinh* has been "imbued for generations with the emotional spirit of the Vietnamese countryside and its peasant soul."[5]

Dinh construction uses the principles of sacred architecture and especially fung shui. There is always water in front – fountains, ponds, pools -- to attract yin forces.

Buildings are constructed of native material. The main entryway is used only on sacred occasions. Important village artifacts are stored within, some displayed, others taken out on specific holidays and for ritual purposes. Effigies of gods, spirits, and heroes decorate walls and pillars.

Dinhs have helped Viet Nam endure centuries of warfare. They provided spiritual inspiration and solace and helped keep villages in tact by serving as an institution that rallied and strengthened the community, its ancestors and peasant spirits. During the American War, for example, the policy of pacifying the countryside by emptying traditional villages and relocating peasants to "strategic hamlets" was never successful. Though literally thousands of *dinhs* and villages were bombed and strafed (I have viewed bullet and bomb damage in some), the Vietnamese people would never abandon their homes, paddies, the graves of their ancestors or their beloved *dinhs.* Thus, for at least a thousand years, the unique Vietnamese institution of the *dinh* has kept the rural peasant culture spiritually strong, healthy, united and determined to survive and thrive during times of both war and peace.

"I understand," Anne, an American herbalist said during our visit. "The *dinh* is the heart of the village."

HONORING OUR COMMON WOUNDS

We entered the dim light of the *dinh* through a side entrance. Suddenly we 13 Americans and Tran Dinh Song, our southern guide and translator, were in a wide dark room scented by decades of incense smoke. Ancient royal edicts and newer military certificates hung from the walls.

Dr. Dai, a sociologist from Ha Noi, accompanied us. We sat in a circle on the wooden floor as he lectured. Behind him, Mr. Tuy and half a dozen village men in their 50s, 60s and 70s sipped tea and whispered.

Joan, a trauma therapist, asked the elders their health secrets of their vibrant longevity.

They summarized their practices: early to bed, a cup of green tea every morning, exercise, a few small glasses of rice wine every evening, a diet with more fish and produce than meat, no smoking, sex every three days and, above all, "a good heart."

What did they mean?

"Make peace in your heart," the elders explained. "Don't hold grudges. Don't make judgments. Don't be angry."

"This is the most important ingredient," Song explained. "In Viet Nam we think with our hearts."

Lance, a helicopter gunship pilot during the war, respectfully addressed one elder whose right hand was missing and its stump draped by the end of his long sleeve. Was his a war wound?

The trim elder with thick gray hair smiled. Indeed, he had lost his hand when an American rocket hit the anti-aircraft battery he was serving. His six crewmates were all killed. He had begged his doctors to save a few of his fingers so he could work. It had not been possible. He gently pulled back his sleeve to reveal a smooth, thin stump on half a forearm.

Lance approached the elder and said, “Me too.” He had been wounded when his chopper was shot down in central rice paddies. He rolled up his left pant leg and down his supportive hose. He revealed a leg that had been shredded and his military doctors had wanted to amputate. He had insisted on keeping the leg. After seven operations and the loss of most muscle mass, it was saved. Now he stood before his Vietnamese counterpart, both wounds exposed.

The Vietnamese veteran and all the seated men smiled and murmured. The elders, Song explained, said that Lance’s wound was “very good, very nice.” They honored him as a brave warrior whose wound was beautiful because he had willingly taken it in service.

Lance slipped his hand through the wounded arm of the elder, who clasped the American with his stump. Both men beamed.

I invited all the veterans present, no matter their service or allegiance, to gather together. All our host elders, along with Mr. Tuy, Dr. Dai, Song, and our four American veterans, stood together in a semi-circle.

Each vet introduced himself and his dates and place of service. Among our veterans were Alan, an infantry grunt, John, a forward radio operator, and Daniel, a marine in air operations. Most of the Vietnamese were North Vietnamese Army (NVA) veterans. Twice during the war Tuy had escorted new young troops from the north by foot from Ha Noi down the Ho Chi Minh Trail to the Central Highlands where they would serve. Each walk took Tuy a full year. Dr. Dai was a combat infantryman. Several of the older men had served in both the French and American wars. When our elder with the stump explained his history, Song sighed, “Oh, this man is a real veteran. He fought the French and helped defeat them at Dien Bien Phu. Then he fought during the American War until he was wounded.” This elder had spent 25 years of his life at war. Song, an air force veteran, the only one in the group to have served the southern side, stood among the others with equal honor.

The men stood together, each holding the hand or encircling the shoulders of his neighbors. Blond-bearded Daniel, tallest in the room, stooped to embrace the Vietnamese vets on either side of him. Alan sat on the floor grasping Song’s hand.

“Two of you have shared your wounds,” I said. “Can we please go around our circle again? Would each of you show or tell us where you were wounded? We wish to honor your wounds and help you carry your stories.”

Alan and John both touched many places on their bodies. Dr. Dai, dressed in a beige shirt and neatly pressed slacks, rolled up both pant legs and showed one badly scarred leg, the other with smaller bullet hole scars. “Your M-16 bullets went in here,” he laughed and pointed, “and out there.” Some men touched their hearts to show that their biggest wounds were emotional. Only one of the eleven veterans present said, “I was not wounded.”

The rest of our group, nine civilians, rose in honorific silence. Mr. Tuy divided a thick bundle of incense sticks between everyone present. We were ushered into the central room of the *dinh,* a temple room devoted to the village god.

We faced the altar crowded with candles, incense holders, plates of fruit, pictures and decorative items. Our incense sticks were lit. One at a time, vets first, we approached the altar, prayed silently, bowed and gave our incense to the god.

The village god is Tam Quang, a villager who lived there 2,000 years ago. He joined the Trung sisters rebelling against the Chinese occupation during 43 – 46 BCE and was killed. Two millennia later warriors from different sides of another war prayed together before this warrior ancestor who now belonged to us all.

After devotions we returned to our council room. We sat in a circle on the floor while the trays of offering fruit were placed before us along with steaming pots of green tea. Fruit from offering plates is called "god fruit" in Viet Nam. Our hosts said, "One apple of the god is worth more than ten from the market."

Some veterans held hands or peeled fruit for their new brothers. Together we feasted together on god fruit. Later, when we rose to leave, there were few dry eyes among us.

SHAMANISM FOR MIAs

Strolling between the neat, small, tightly packed houses, we were invited into the home of Nguyen Thi Vien. Vien had been working at her old gas-engine powered loom weaving silk in traditional colors and patterns. She led us before the family altar. In all Vietnamese homes, altars are the most important furnishing, standing in the center of the main room and dedicated to the last four generations of a family's ancestors. In Viet Nam, families maintain cultural continuity and spiritual presence by praying, talking to, and giving offerings to their deceased for a full century after death. On this altar was a picture of Vien's brother Duc at age 17, clad in his North Vietnamese Army uniform.

Phan Viet Duc had been a devoted, promising young man from this village. He turned 17 in 1968 at the height of the American War and volunteered for duty. Duc served as a sapper. Sapper is a term that dates back to 1501. Sappers are troops who advance in secret and often at night. Using cunning and high explosives, they seek to breach enemy defenses in order to clear a path for infantry.6 Not until 1977, two years after the war ended, did Duc's family receive government notification that he had been missing in action since 1971 and presumed killed. They were unable to learn anything about his remains.

In Vietnamese Buddhist belief, if the body of a deceased person is not recovered and given proper burial and ritual, that person becomes a co hon, a wandering soul. A wandering soul is a disembodied spirit who cannot find peace, help his relations, or continue in the cycle of reincarnation until receiving proper burial and aid from the living.7 In 2005 Duc's two older brothers traveled to the northern village of Hai Xuan to council with a shaman who is able to contact the spirits of the dead. After all other attempts had failed, the Phans wanted the shaman's help locating their brother's remains.

Nguyen Van Lien, born in 1963, is a traditional Vietnamese shaman. His name means lotus flower in Chinese. In 2000, he received visions in which spirits told him that he would be able to speak with the souls of the dead for the next eight years. When the Phans contacted him, he had already located three other bodies of MIAs from their hamlet. Lien was a total stranger to the Phan family and knew nothing about them or Duc's military history.

When the Phan brothers arrived in Lien's village he meditated, prayed, and performed ceremonies in front of his altar. He finally reported that he could indeed

contact the dead soldier's spirit. The Phans were skeptical until Lien answered many questions he could not have known about this family.

During the ensuing two weeks, the Phan brothers lived with Lien. Finally Lien received detailed instructions from the spirit world. The brothers were to fly to Hi Chi Minh City, the old Saigon, and drive exactly 350 kilometers from Ton Son Nuit airport into Tay Ninh province. Such a flight and excursion would be very expensive for a Vietnamese peasant family, but they had faith in Lien and were determined to help their brother's soul find rest.

Tay Ninh is northeast of Ho Chi Minh City near the Cambodian border. The province was the scene of fighting so brutal that the locals evolved the adage, "In Tay Ninh we had more bombs than rice." The Phans were given a map Lien had drawn from visions. They were told to meet a Mr. Phong who could help them. At exactly 350 kilometers they stopped to ask a stranger if he knew Mr. Phong. It was him.

Phong escorted the brothers to a military cemetery, complete with its monument declaring, as do all new military cemeteries throughout Viet Nam, "The Motherland Honors Your Sacrifice." They had been told to find a pillar erected as a Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in the rear of the cemetery. They were to arrive at noon and walk four meters in front of the pillar inscribed with hundreds of names. There, Lien declared, they would hear from their brother.

At the moment prescribed, the elder brother walked to the spot instructed and distinctly heard Duc's voice, "Oh my brother! Thank you for looking for my body. I am right here under your feet."

The elder Phan trembled and called Lien. "Correct," Lien responded. "Where you stand is where your brother is buried. Dig two meters and you will find your brother's body along with the gifts you gave him when he left for war."

The brothers dug. Not only did they find decayed remains but personal items and gifts they had given Duc proving beyond a doubt that this was their lost brother's body.

The next day the Phans held an official burial ceremony. Then they shipped the remains home and reburied their brother's body in his mother's cemetery.

The Phan's hamlet of Hoi Quan has a population of 4,000, 180 of whom are veterans. This village lost 61 soldiers, whom they call martyrs, during the war. Phan Viet Duc was the fourth MIA located by Nguyen Van Lien. To date Lien has located a total of 20 MIA bodies from this hamlet alone. The spirits say two years remain of his power to speak with the dead.

BLESSINGS

Our final stop was the Tieu Son Pagoda, a Buddhist nuns' sanctuary. We walked up the steep stone stairway past memorial markers to deceased nuns and statues of storks and turtles. We were welcomed by a short elderly nun whose scalp was carpeted with gray bristles and whose laughter cascaded through smiling lips.

The nun explained that her sect of Buddhism practiced three forms of funerals – cremation, burial, or embalming. Embalming was only used in rare instances for venerated teachers. She escorted us into an inner chamber to stand before the centuries-old embalmed remains of a venerated elder of this pagoda. Again we were given incense and the old nun nodded as we prayed to the spirit of this teacher.

We gathered around small wooden tables and once again were served god fruit along with soy cheese and tea. The tea was clear, warm, smooth and relaxing. The nun explained that it was an herb called *la voi,* cultivated at this pagoda for serenity and insomnia. When some of us remarked that they needed such a medicine, the nun shuffled off to quickly return with large bags stuffed with *la voi* as gifts.

Restored, we climbed the hill behind the pagoda to arrive at a giant marble statue of the Buddha. We soaked in the view of the surrounding countryside with a pagoda to Quan Am, the Vietnamese version of Kwan Yin, goddess of mercy, on a lake below. American veterans and civilians alike felt like this goddess had become our goddess as well.

We had been welcomed to this village and educated in the ways of the *dinh*. We had exposed, honored and blessed hidden wounds of veterans of both nations. We had offered incense and prayer to the god and elders here. We had heard shamanic practices revealed and rejoiced with a family recovering from war losses. And we had been gifted god fruit for our own sustenance. We had originally planned a visit to a traditional Vietnamese village. The Vietnamese people and spirit offered us the full cycle of a healing ritual and initiation into mysteries.

As dusk approached, we stood on the hill before a tall stone pillar to contemplate a final prayer. Inscribed on that pillar in precise old Chinese characters was a 12th century poem by Thanh To Thien Tong:

> We pass through this world like bolts of lightening.
>
> We are, then we are not, then we are,
>
> Just as trees bloom in spring, fade in autumn, and return again.
>
> Therefore do not worry whether you have or have not.
>
> Wealth and poverty are drops of dew
>
> Dangling from the tip of a summer leaf.[8]

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[1] Le Thanh Duc. *The Village Dinh in Northern Vietnam*. Ha Noi: Fine Arts Publishing House, 2001, 14.
[2] *Ibid.,* 15.
[3] *Ibid.,* 12.
[4] *Ibid.,* 15.
[5] *Ibid.,* 11.
[6] Tran, Lance Cpl. K.T. "Sapper – Where Infantry Marines broaden their skill set." *Marine Corps News Service,* Dec. 5, 2003.
[7] Tick, Edward. *The Golden Tortoise: Journeys in Viet Nam.* Granada Hills, CA: Red Hen Press, 2005, p. 98.
[8] Translated by Tran Dinh Song and Edward Tick.