

# The Voice

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## Survivor Mission

*An address to the inaugural Remembrance Eve Dinner for the Creative Ministries Network's Veterans Faith and Wellbeing Support, by Rev. Dr. Jackson H. Day, Executive Director, International Conference of War Veteran Ministers*

It's a pleasure to be with you here tonight, to be with others who have encountered the challenges of war and those who love them, and to have an opportunity to honour the memory of all those who didn't come home.

Tomorrow on November 11<sup>th</sup>, Australia along with other Commonwealth nations, will observe Remembrance Day. The observation began, almost one hundred years ago now, as Armistice Day, celebrating the moment World War I ended, at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour of the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the 11<sup>th</sup> month.

Armistice Day began in hope. People hoped that the end of the Great War would in fact be the War to End all Wars. Every war we've fought had hopes. None of us can say with certainty that those hopes have been realized. Those who died have fought with enemies and given their lives, but the world they dreamed of still lies in the future. The unfinished tasks fall to us, and those who follow us.

Death in combat is capricious. Why was the person beside me killed while I survived? Why was the one who showed such talent, who expressed such courage, whose life had so much potential, taken, while I, of more marginal talent and more pronounced fears and more limited potential, survived? Such questions are imponderable. They can only be answered through the actions of us, the survivors of war. We who live owe something to those who died, and the payment of that debt is our survivor mission. The most important pledge we can make to the dead is not just to remember them, but to live on behalf of them.

Each of us who returned faced different challenges and each of our stories are unique. I didn't come back from Vietnam with a clear - or even vague -- understanding of what my survivor missions would be, and certainly not

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### CONTENTS

Survivor Mission	1	Has God stopped calling?	6
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Rev Jackson Day

with a clear and detailed action plan to accomplish them! Like most people I simply wanted to get on with my life. But war has a way of not letting us go, and the debt I owe to those who didn't return has kept calling for payment. Often, it's only looking back that we understand something as part of our survivor missions. So it struck me that it might be useful to share some of the survivor missions I've found myself undertaking.

## ***I. Witness***

One survivor mission is to witness to what we saw.

Forty-three years ago this past July I boarded a plane at Travis Air Force Base in California. A long flight later, I was in Vietnam. A week after that, I was in Dak To, as one of the Chaplains of the First Brigade, Fourth Infantry Division, United States Army. I spent a year in the Central Highlands, our Area of Operations. Place names like Pleiku, Dak To, Kontum, Plei Djereng, Ben Het, and An Khe, as well as locations that existed only for a season - Camp Enari, Firebase 6, Hill 1089, Firebase McNerney, all became familiar.

The whole year, I took photographs. Pictures of worship services and other photos of my

unit's soldiers at firebases, and a lot of beautiful scenery looking down from the helicopters we rode in.

My parents were United Methodist missionaries in Indonesia and I learned, growing up, that one of the things you do when you're overseas is, you take pictures. Then you come back home, and churches ask you to show your pictures and tell about what you did. That worked for Mom and Dad. So when I came back from Vietnam, I put all my slides in carousels and got ready for the invitations from churches.

Thirty years later those carousels were still there, on the shelf, waiting for their first invitation. Apparently what worked for missionary trips doesn't work for wars.

By 1995 you could send slides to Kodak to be digitized, so I picked out 75 good ones, and when Kodak sent back a CD, began to arrange the photos on a website I called Vietnam Chaplain. ([www.warveteranministers.org/chaplain/veterans.htm](http://www.warveteranministers.org/chaplain/veterans.htm)) For the most part it felt like a very healing experience. Only later did I realize that's the kind of thing a therapist might tell you to do to process a troublesome experience. It would probably be called "journaling."

The slides had the date they were processed, so I could put the pictures in order by month. There weren't many slides in March, 1969. I didn't have a clue what happened in March, 1969. Something told me, "This could be important."

So I used the internet to start making contact with other veterans who were there at the time. We started an e-mail discussion group. And I discovered - was it really for the first time, or had I just "forgotten" that in March 1969 our Brigade was involved in something called Operation Wayne Grey in the Plei Trap Valley west of Kontum?

The mission was to block the 44<sup>th</sup> North Vietnamese Regiment which was trying to protect the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which went through our area of operations. Our biggest casualties of the year took place then. One company was just about totally destroyed. These were people I had visited and conducted

worship services for any number of times. And I had very little memory of it.

I had one memory from that month - sitting in the Brigade aid station listening to the radio waiting for helicopters to come in with the wounded. Apart from that, nothing. Where was I? What was I doing?

A woman saw my web site and sent me an email. Her father had been killed in action in March 1969. Did I know if there had been any kind of memorial service for him, she wondered? I didn't know. I couldn't help her. Then a couple of weeks later she sent me another email. She'd been in her grandmother's attic and found a letter the platoon leader wrote telling about her father's death and the events following. She had scanned the letter and emailed it to me. There at the end of the middle paragraph was one sentence: "Memorial services were conducted by Chaplain Day."

So I was doing what I was supposed to be doing. I just don't remember it. Putting the site together and contacting other veterans began the healing of the memories, and enabled a woman in Texas I had never met to put one of her questions about her father's service to rest.

The site has a guestbook with over a hundred notes from veterans who have visited the site. They appreciated that someone had saved some photos of familiar terrain and had posted a chronology of the war in a way that helped others with their memories. Really, I had done it for myself - but I discovered it was a

survivor mission on behalf of the dead and of the living.

And just a few weeks ago I was asked to visit a college class of 18 and 19 year old college students. They were studying the Vietnam war, and the Vietnam Chaplain website had now become required reading for them. I asked the class if any of them had Vietnam veterans in their family and three raised their hands. They were grandchildren of Vietnam veterans.

## 2. Meaning

Another survivor mission is to help make some kind of meaning out of what we experienced. A frequent saying in those days was "don't mean 'nothin'", but I tried to make sense of things by writing poetry.

In 1987 a clipping torn from a magazine announced that a college in upper New York State wanted poetry from Vietnam veterans. I sent in some of my poetry and a couple of months later got a call from St. Lawrence University offering me an airplane ticket if I'd come up and read some poetry at their Festival of the Arts. But they said, this is all stuff from your Vietnam days. Have you written anything since? I told them I would.

Movies were starting to come out about Vietnam. People started having these mental pictures of what a veteran was, based on the movies, and a lot was neither truthful nor complimentary. So I wrote, "Don't Look For Me in the Picture Show. (Columbia, MD, Feb 22, 1987. ©1987 Jackson H. Day. All Rights Reserved. First published in "Reclaiming the Pieces: Changing Perspectives from the Vietnam Generation" St. Lawrence University, Canton, NY, 1989)

You, mother, did not know me then  
as the band played John Philip Sousa  
and we marched across the football field

The Manual for Drill and Ceremonies  
gave a picture of how we were to look, and  
we looked it;  
of how it was to be done: And we did it.  
"Pretty as a picture," someone said, that



CMN Board chairperson Michelle Ehlers  
speaking with Vietnamese veterans

sunny day in May  
 seeing a hundred cadets, neatly ranked and  
 filed  
 pass in review.  
 \*\*

You, stranger with long yellow hair,  
 You did not know me four years later  
 as the lights changed on 42nd Street and we  
 stepped off the curb.

You looked at me, dressed in green, and saw  
 a picture.  
 Murderer, you called to the picture.  
 Not meeting my eye, speaking to my clothing.  
 \*\*

You, in black hidden by bushes and night's  
 darkness,  
 You never knew me  
 You had your pictures perhaps, taught in your  
 school  
 Foreign devil, running dog, Yankee imperialist  
 For that you would kill me,  
 and for my pictures of gooks in black pyjamas  
 I would kill you.  
 \*\*

And you, with your history books,  
 Don't ask me how it was  
 And imagine you will get who I am

Don't look for me in steaming jungle flicks  
 about Apocalyptic platoons  
 sensational thrillers of  
 pictures of trained killers running wild

Don't look for me in the picture show  
 Don't look for me among the picture show  
 men  
 Men without fathers, men without names  
 Rambo, they called him, but he had a name  
 and all he ever wanted was a father to tell  
 him,  
 "You done good, John."  
 \*\*

And you, lover, don't look for me in your  
 picture show  
 Don't admire your pictures about me  
 Don't pity your pictures about me  
 Don't patronize your pictures about me  
 Don't use me for your pictures about me

See past the pictures, the stories, the silence  
 Look for me in the words so hard to speak

Look for me in the tears so hard to make  
 Look for me in the laughter that comes by  
 surprise  
 Look for me when our eyes meet  
 When our hands touch  
 Be with me.  
 \*\*

Don't look for me in the picture show.

### 3. Connection

Another important survivor mission is  
 connecting with other veterans.

A lot of the time since the war, I really had  
 been trying to leave the war behind, getting  
 wrapped up in all the challenges of making a  
 life. But you need people in your life who  
 have some clue where you've been and what  
 you've experienced.

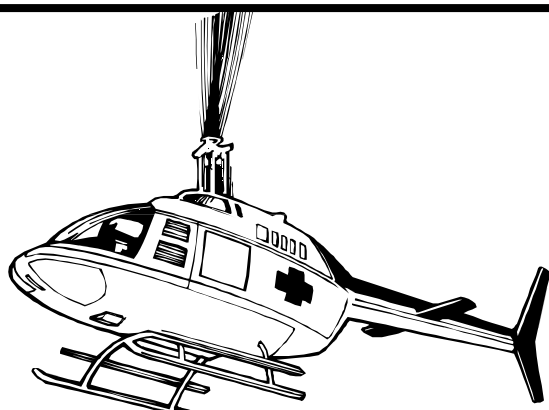
First there was a newspaper clipping about a  
 new chapter of Vietnam Veterans of America  
 that was forming in Baltimore. Soon I was a  
 founding member, secretary - and then  
 chaplain.

This was not a small thing. When I got out of  
 the Army I'd lasted one year in a civilian  
 parish and then I was just drained dry, so I left  
 pastoral ministry behind and I was working in  
 health care. Saying yes to these veterans who  
 wanted me for their chaplain meant realizing  
 that enough healing had taken place that I  
 could do this.

Then another connection appeared. I was  
 sitting at my desk one day at a consulting  
 company that did health care work under  
 government contracts, when a colleague  
 brought me a scrap of paper with a name and  
 phone number on it.

It was just after Veterans Day, and at the  
 Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington,  
 familiarly known as "the Wall," a Catholic  
 priest named Phil Salois had made an  
 announcement.

Salois had been in the infantry. Several years  
 after coming home he had entered the  
 priesthood and now had a ministry to  
 veterans. Father Phil wanted to make contact



with other veterans who were clergy. My colleague had remembered me as clergy, even though it had been almost 20 years since I had pastored a church.

I made the call and joined the new National Conference of Viet Nam Veteran Ministers. We have a couple of other members who were chaplains in Vietnam but most were grunts who went into the ministry afterward - everything from Roman Catholic to Assemblies of God. We include an Army nurse who is now an Episcopal priest, and a communications sergeant who is now a nun. She works with veterans who call her Sister Sarge. Sometimes when she introduces herself she'll say, "You've heard of the Singing Nun, and the Flying Nun - well, I'm the Swearing Nun."

Father Phil had his own survivor mission. Fr. Phil knew that he was still hurting from the war and he had a strong hunch that despite the many things we had done with our lives since, the rest of us were hurting as well. Fr. Phil had been awarded the Silver Star medal for bravery during a firefight in which his unit had walked into a U-shaped ambush. As a priest, his ministry has been ambushing people with healing.

At the first meeting of our group Father Phil led an ambush called a spiritual healing service that was designed to get some emotions released. He had poetry, he had prayers, he had music from the 60's, he had music with words about war and loss, and all the expectations about coming home that are never met. My first marriage had evaporated the year I was in Vietnam, and my homecoming will forever be associated with the loss of something I had once imagined would last a lifetime. For the first time in 21 years, I cried, and in profoundly deep ways those tears saved my life.

Out of the connections formed in this group I was put in contact with a group of psychologists who wanted to adapt a curriculum on trauma for use in faith communities. That became a book - *Risking Connection in Faith Communities* - which lays out the nature of psychological wounds sustained in combat, rape, domestic violence, child abuse, and the myriad other ways our souls get wounded - and shows the spiritual nature of such wounds, and how important community is in their healing. Of course, church congregations think of themselves as communities - and one of my dreams is that these communities can become healing communities

More than a decade and a half later our group has changed its name to the International Conference of War Veteran Ministers, You can guess why. We do spiritual healing retreats for veterans and their wives, and we have five full scholarships at every retreat for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans. We are honoured that the Creative Ministries Network here in Melbourne is in association with us.

## 4. Return

Of all the survivor missions one could think of on Remembrance Day, there is one that is especially important, and that is going back to what once was a battlefield. Seven years ago, I returned to Vietnam.

I'd wondered what it would be like to go back, and in 2004 it all came together. I could swing the time, I could swing the money, and there was a tour that included Dak To, where my unit had had a base camp and where I had first served when I went in country. So I went. A lot was about playing tourist - discovering emotionally what I surely knew intellectually: Vietnam is a country and a people, not just a war. Most of the people in Vietnam now are young, born years after we were there.

It's an odd capitalist communist country with everything full of energy and bustle and yet big red posters of Ho Chi Minh and hammers and sickles and calls to the young to become heroes like their fathers. What they call the

American War is long gone, but underneath the hustle and bustle there is still the unhealed pain between the two Vietnamese sides of what was also a civil war.

***“But the nature of survivor missions is that getting home alone isn’t good enough. We owe something to those who died and to the others who lived.”***

In the two weeks I was there we visited many sites, especially those important to one or another of the veterans on the trip. Where we knew there had been deaths, we lit incense in remembrance.

The most intense day for me was the day we flew to Pleiku, got on a bus, and drove north on route 14 to Kontum, then on to Dak To. In the towns there were memorials to the victors of 1975 and red banners urging citizens to celebrate their country and face its challenges with energy. Where the First Brigade had been we found the remains of the tarmac of the airstrip; I can’t describe the feeling of standing on that broken pavement with nothing around but tall grass and the tinkling of a cow bell - and the mountains. They were the one thing in Vietnam that hadn’t changed in all those years. You could look up to what we had called Rocket Ridge and see where Firebase 5 and Firebase 6 had been and imagine a helicopter about to land to take you up there. But now it was just silence -- and the spirits in the mountains.

Then the bus went on to Ben Het and we walked around where the Special Forces camp had been. Dusk was falling and we stood there at that border between day and night, light and darkness, and I could feel the spirits of what once had been. At the hotel that night I wrote *Ben Het at Dusk*. (Jackson H. Day, “Ben Het at Dusk”, June 4, 2005, Ben Het, Viet Nam.)

It is still, now.

A breeze brings coolness as we stand where soldiers once built sanctuaries of sandbags.  
Clouds shadow the place where steel flew and imagination tormented.

We look down at the expanse of green hiding old memories,

Covering the tortured earth, all except the airstrip's skeleton.

The red clay of the airstrip's ruins, long bare of its metal surface glows brighter as the light fades.

Across the road and beyond the stream, mountains rise, their tops hidden by clouds.

Those who walked among them are now memories, ghosts who wait to be invoked, recalled to life by us who once knew them.

They are gone now, all of them, both to death and to life; those in bunkers who faced the mountain, and their enemies moving quietly through the forest.

Gone the fear, gone the misery, gone the pain.

In their place, settlers have built houses by the road.

Peace has come, and peace's possibilities. As night falls, families share food in lighted rooms.

In nearby towns red posters celebrate victories and heroes.

The young hope they too may one day know such glory.

## 5. Warriors

Those of us in this room know that war is not about glory. In the end it’s a terrible thing with a high cost and if we’re here it’s because of an unfathomable grace that said, “You will live, but others will die.” Somehow the most religious of us and the least religious of us recognize that, and thus the hymn ‘Amazing Grace’ is a favourite of many veterans, perhaps because of the 4<sup>th</sup> verse, which I claim and I imagine some of you do as well:

*Through many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come;  
'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.*

But the nature of survivor missions is that getting home alone isn’t good enough. We

owe something to those who died and to the others who lived.

2500 years ago the Greek General Heraclitus is said to have written, I guess to his recruiters, "For every hundred men you send us, 10 should not even be here; 80 are nothing but targets. Nine of them are real fighters: we are lucky to have them, they the battle make. Ah, but the one, one of them is a warrior, and he will bring the others back."

The enduring mission of each of us survivors who has ever been a warrior is to bring the others back.

## 'Has God stopped calling?'

*This is the title of a paper presented by Kate Dempsey and John Bottomley at the June conference for the International Society for the Psychoanalytic Study of Organisations.*

*The paper investigates the response of the Uniting Church in Australia to the decline in ordination candidates for its Ministers of the Word, using both Church reports and the authors own recent research within the Church. The paper highlights how the modern discourse of the business world is employed almost exclusively to deal with an issue of organisational decline that may in fact be resistant to a business solution.*

*The paper suggests that beyond leaders' fear and anxiety about institutional decline, there is a deeper fear of organisational death due to a dimly perceived sense of God's abandonment of the present form of Church. The denial of grief in the face of this unspoken abandonment drives the search for business solutions to the perceived problem of the decline of ministerial candidates.*

*The authors use the insights of system psychodynamics to delve into these*

*existential issues faced by the Church and find a fruitful dialogue can occur between the theories presented in that field and the insights of a contemplative theological tradition. They suggest that the Church can regain its sense of the gift of contemplation by moving away from business-based solutions to its spiritual dilemmas.*

*Finally the paper provides several ideas for ways to promote this reflective direction in the Church and suggestions, based on our research, of ways to renew and regenerate the Church's ordained ministry. The paper is available in full from <http://library.ispsso.org/library/has-god-stopped-calling>.*

*Marisa Guerin attended the June ISPSO Conference. Marisa attended the workshop presentation of the above paper, and recently sent two emails reflecting on her work as a consultant with two women religious orders in the USA, and the responses to the Dempsey -Bottomley paper. Marisa wrote:*

*"I was particularly pleased when one of the leadership teams with whom I work recently concluded, after reading your paper and other resources, that they have been focusing on the wrong question in their vocation work. As a result of their discussion, they decided to broaden their approach to one of "inviting others to the charism".*

*Included in that invitation would be those who might feel called to the vowed life as a religious sister, but they are going to stop the "sales" approach and concentrate on a method that assumes that God's call is there, but broader and wider than the narrow gate on which they have been focused.*

*This change of approach is not just tactical; it involves their willingness to face the realities of shrinking and aging. Even if there is a steady but small core of vowed religious, the fact is that things will not be as they once were,*

and they are coming to terms with that as a spiritual experience, not just a sociological fact. Ironically, it is precisely this relaxing of a "death-grip" on the promotion of vocations to vowed life that will likely open their eyes to the fact that there are literally thousands of people who have been attracted to work in their schools, hospitals, and social service agencies in large part because they feel a strong resonance with their values.

I will be interested to see what they do with that. It is a pattern all over the US Catholic world, and congregations vary a lot in their creativity of response."

*The second email reported on a second order of sisters in the midst of their reflection on issues similar to those facing the UCA. Their approach is again instructive for our situation in the UCA.*

**"..we are invited to relinquish control and to enter into deep, non-defensive listening to the Spirit alive within us and present in the world around us."**

"As we look around our world, we see chaos and violence and the shifting of expectations and relationships. So much is breaking down - think of the Arab Spring, Italy's protest of Berlusconi's behaviour, our dysfunctional legislative process, and many more.

Our daily media reports the violence against persons, within institutions, and in our legislative and economic turmoil. Our church is experiencing fewer people in the pews, a shortage of ordained clergy, and a loss of moral authority in our culture. Religious communities are facing decreasing or no new entrants, aging members and the necessity of shifting responsibilities for ministries to lay colleagues. We sense that something is dying and it fills us with anxiety and doubt about God's presence to us. What does it mean?

To answer that question, we, as faith-filled people, realize that besides using business

strategies and approaches, we also need contemplation. We need to step back to ask "What is God calling us to?"

As we enter into that question from a contemplative place, we are invited to relinquish control and to enter into deep, non-defensive listening to the Spirit alive within us and present in the world around us. We are called to awareness of the presence of God in all things. We are called to trust that God will call forth a response from the 'uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts' rather than from human responses whose primary purpose is to silence anxiety and doubt.

Contemplation invites us to the awareness that Holy Mystery lies deep within the world and deep within all that God created. We are reminded that all that God created is good and that God is more powerful than all chaos.

Can we believe that the birthing of something new is already underway in the midst of our uncomfortable lived realities? Birthing brings wonder and mystery as well as pain and messiness. Can we stay in the mystery of this birthing time and space and trust that God is still calling, and to learn what it is we are being called to?

Contemplation is work - birthing is work - and we realize we cannot enter into contemplation passively. We must be willing to move through the mystery and wonder of pregnancy and birthing as well as through the pain and messiness to get to the something new to which God is calling us.

We ponder God's Word, alone and in community, and we are invited to go more deeply into the wisdom of God. As old models break down and new models slowly emerge, we are called to trust the Spirit's guidance into the truth."