2023

Less Than

Ron Bland

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It has taken many Vietnam veterans fifty years to get home. The trip has been filled with alienation and a profound sense of unfinished business as they faced hostility and unsympathetic rejection from our country. They returned to a nation that hated the war and despised them. They were warned not to wear their uniforms on flights home. Arriving in America, they received no welcome, no recognition, only rejection for answering the call of duty. This isolation defined them for decades. Most Vietnam veterans had little choice but to get on with their lives. Fifty years later, Vietnam veterans are fifty percent more likely to become homeless than other Americans, due to poverty, lack of support, dismal living conditions, or substandard housing.

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**Not everyone who lost his life in Vietnam died there.**

My wife and I are having an awesome long weekend in the West Village in Manhattan, with miles of walking, countless boutiques, a couple of guitar shops, and several bakeries and restaurants. For our final fling this morning, we go to a little boutique eatery that only serves oatmeal. Not that I don’t like oatmeal, but really? A restaurant that only serves oatmeal! Only in New York! Not expecting much. From the hotel lobby, I see it’s raining. I think, “Here’s my chance to redirect the decision from oatmeal to the bakery just two blocks away.” I can feel the croissant with almond filling warming my hand. But my wife’s umbrella snaps open. Oatmeal it is! Traversing several blocks and one brick-paved alley, we arrive at a wood-framed row house with a steep wooden stairway. In the corner, at the back of the stairs in the misty rain, a man sits cross-legged, asking me for change. In his space under steps, he has a cardboard sign asking for money for homeless veterans. Immediately, I think: “Get out of my face and get a better story!” But I check my words and consider: scam or not, this guy needs help. Asking his name, rank, and unit, he answers back sharply as if standing in a company formation. Surprised, I ask more
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questions about his service, hoping to resurrect some commonality in service. His name is Ray. Though not being able to make that link, his words assures me he’s a legit ’Nam veteran. I tell him to pack up his “kit” and come inside to have oatmeal with us. Shying at first, he shoved his “home” deeper under the stairway and stood. I tell my wife, “I cannot let this soldier be ‘less than’ today. It could have easily been me there.”

Climbing the stairs, I feel his apprehension about going in, with his hair matted under a Dallas Cowboys ballcap, olive drab fatigue pants that betray his lack of ability to keep himself clean, or his loss of pride. Face turned down, trying not to catch anybody’s eye, he takes a seat with us at the front corner, giving him a view of his spot, and keeping him guarded from other customers. I order Ray oatmeal with brown sugar and bananas. It’s easy to see his joy of warm food and pleasure to share a meal with caring people. After two bowls and a container ordered to go, Ray is not eager to see us go. But we walk away. Then I turn to him, stand at attention to salute Spec-4 Ray, adding a reminder to get to a VA hospital for help.

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86% of Vietnam veterans suffer from PTSD/depression.

I met Gerald in a grocery store in Clearwater, Florida, rolling along in his wheelchair, picking his groceries off the shelf with the hook end of his cane. I light up like a bulb.

“I can help.”

The 4th Infantry patch on his hat jumps out, and I get the sense of comradery and oneness. Without another word, I proposed that I push him through the store to collect his groceries.

“Hell no. I can push myself!”

“Look, I see you were in the 4th Infantry Division. I was, too!” This only got me a grumble; I’m not sure what he said, but it meant, Get the hell away from me.
Unable to resist, I asked, “How about if a veteran helps a brother home?”

“I’m not your brother and home is the park two blocks down!”

Now he’s really pissed. He made no bones about making sure I knew he lived on the street and he was okay! He still used his military training and experience to make it and I didn’t need help.

“Stop giving me that help bullshit. People only want to make themselves feel good. You want to help? Get my legs back. Give me back my dignity. Or get the hell out of my way! I have a good life. I don’t need you! My life is different than yours, but I’m okay!”

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25% of draftees in the U.S. Army went to Vietnam, but accounted for 30% of the deaths in the war.

Calvin Brownapple. What kind of name is that? It’s just a perfect day with sun shining in on his “spot” in front of an abandoned storefront, an old five-and-dime. He’s got a large tin cup, a little sign that reads: “Anything helps. Vietnam Veteran.” Between the perfect day and a heart full of nostalgia, I stop, put my back against the old store glass and slide down ‘til my butt hits the sidewalk beside Calvin Brownapple.

Already I’m calculating how much money to leave him. Without looking at each other we begin a conversation. First, it’s the questions everyone well-intentioned asks: Where do you shower, where do you sleep? Use the bathroom? How long you been here? How do you keep warm? In the winter? Calvin is confident and reassuring with his answers. The more he talks, the surer I become that his life is good enough, for him at least. Shower at the church, take out the trash at the diner, a provided breakfast, clean a few windows at the carwash that gets him a little cash. With just his charisma and warm voice, his cup always provides for his basic needs. We
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talk about music, art and artists there in Ashville. When I try to guide the conversation to his
military service, all I get is quiet and a faraway stare.

It's easy to like Calvin and hard to say so long. I promise to come back soon. I stand, and
stuff a wad of cash in his cup. He doesn’t speak again, only gives the Vietnam hundred-yard stare.

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Deaths after coming home from Vietnam have amounted to three walls behind “The
Wall.”

If you have nothing to give, give your smile. Give your eye contact and the gift of your
presence. Give love. Don’t walk right past him, pretending he doesn’t exist.

He does.