

John C. Rhead



Delayed Recovery In the Civilian Male of the Vietnam Era

I am a gadgeteer/philosopher (I like to tinker with toasters while contemplating the meaning of life). I have five step and adoptive children. I am the first one in my family tree to graduate from college and am proud of it. I work steadily at being a good enough husband and father. My experiences during and after Vietnam have probably made me a more sensitive therapist, as almost any humbling experience will do.

I was born in 1945, a citizen of the United States. As I marched through the traditional educational system I became a college freshman in 1963, a member of the graduating class of 1967, and took the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) along with thousands of other freshmen around the country. During college I was to learn that the members of my class seemed to represent some kind of watershed with regard to MMPI profiles, generating results so dramatically different from those of all preceding years as to cause psychologists from various colleges and universities around the country substantial consternation. The psychologist from my college who specialized in this area described the class of 1967 to me as having gone "to hell in a handbasket," saying he had not seen anything like it before or since. I enjoyed the uniqueness and felt somewhat defiantly proud of it, even though it seemed to be merely a result of the year I was born, rather than anything I had chosen or accomplished on my own.

Being born in the United States in 1945 also put me on a direct collision course with my country's foreign policy in Southeast Asia two decades later, and catapulted me into moral dilemmas that still trouble me.

During college, from 1963 to 1967, I was slightly active in the antiwar movement. I took a stand but took no significant risks. I organized a protest at my graduation consisting of nothing more than inviting my classmates to protest the war by wearing white arm bands during the ceremony. I tore up quite a few more sheets than was necessary to provide arm bands for the 10% or so of the class who joined me, and felt particularly proud to march in the ceremonies wearing my white arm band in combination with a red ribbon signifying the academic honor of Phi Beta Kappa. Externally the red ribbon seemed to confer credibility to the statement I was making with the white arm band, but internally I felt confused and scared. I felt proud of what I was doing, guilty that I was not doing enough, scared that maybe I was just acting out some crazy personal dynamics, and angry that life had to be so complicated already.

At a personal level I worried that I was just acting out another chapter in my struggle with my father. We had argued violently for a number of years over all kinds of things, each of us so hellbent on proving we were right that the arguments got very crazy very quickly. It seemed to me then (and still does) that we could have ended most of them very easily by my simply telling him that he was a good enough father and his simply telling me that I was a good enough son. However, that insight had little if any impact on the course of our arguments and, as I recall, even became grist for the mill a few times when I suggested such a possibility.

Vietnam seemed like the war that I was going to win with my father. The more I read and heard on the news, the more indefensible it seemed, and the more certain I became about my opposition to it. My father maintained that my political opposition to the war was merely a rationalization for my underlying cowardice and unwillingness to fight for what I knew in my heart was right. It reminded me of his very vague (but stern) admonition that I "would be sorry" if I engaged in premarital sex—I was 98% certain he was wrong but frightened by the possibility that he just might be right.

What had been somewhat theoretical got quite a bit more real when I graduated from college and entered graduate school in 1967. Up until then student deferments had been fairly automatic as long as I stayed in school and got passing grades. As the war heated up, so did the draft. By 1969 I had received my notice to report for a pre-induction physical, and the theoretical became very real. Was I ready *really* to take a stand and refuse to cooperate, knowing that expatriation or jail were likely to be the only remaining options if I did? On the other hand, would I not be more valuable in protesting the war if I were still in the country and not in jail? On the *other* hand, if I figured some clever way to dodge the draft, was I not betraying my own moral principles, since it left those who were less fortunate than I to be sucked up and murdered or mutilated by the war machine?

I finally opted to use all the cleverness I could muster to concoct an outrageous and complicated scheme which, to my amazement, worked! I took the physical, got a 4F, and was home free—having bamboozled a young psychiatrist at the draft board with what I had learned in a couple of years of psychology graduate school. I was enormously relieved to have made a decision to dodge the draft rather than directly refusing to comply, and elated that I pulled it off. It was also a great story, very much like Arlo Guthrie's version of "Alice's Restaurant," complete with a visit to the Moral Waivers Division.

Unfortunately, things did not stay simple. Nixon was carpet bombing Cambodia and I went to hear a stirring speech by Linus Pauling on the immorality of the war and the consequent need to oppose it by whatever means possible. I was moved to send my draft card back to my draft board, along with a letter explaining how I had schemed to get my 4F and stating that I would no longer comply with the system. I received by return mail my

draft card, enclosed with a form letter indicating that there must be some mistake, as I had sent them my draft card, which was something that I was supposed to keep in my wallet. I hated them for making me make that decision all over again, and considered briefly just tucking the card back in my wallet and forgetting the whole thing. However, Linus' words were still ringing in my ears (and conscience), so I sent the card back again with another letter, explaining more clearly that I was intending to challenge the authority of the draft board by refusing to comply with their requirements.

The reply to that one was swift and succinct—report for another physical. I think by this point a fantasy that Linus had stirred in me was dead—the fantasy that every guy in the country was sending in his draft card, creating an impossible overload on the prison system, so that the whole war would have to be called off and all the draft resisters would be granted at least amnesty, if not hero status. That fantasy was now replaced with fantasies of being raped and murdered in prison, and I again began to scheme about how to fail another physical. I knew that it would not be so easy this time, since my file would certainly have some sort of red (pinko?) flag on it. After considering various ideas I settled for something as simple as a drug to use to elevate my blood pressure, which I hoped to be able to take after giving the required urine specimen (so it would not be detected) and far enough in advance of the blood pressure screening that it would be effective. As it turned out the sequence was right (urine specimen first, then blood pressure) but the time interval was too short for the drug to take effect, so I didn't even bother to swallow the pill.

Resigned that they had me, I went through the remainder of the physical scared and dejected. The final stop was a room where about 50 of us were very cursorily inspected for abnormalities of our legs and feet. The examination was cursory enough that a guy with a club foot passed, and was only detected upon leaving the room, when one of the staff noticed he walked strangely. The only person in the group who was found upon examination to have a disqualifying defect (or any defect for that matter) was a guy with flat feet—ME! This time the 4F seemed like a gift from heaven, and I took it and ran.

After that I never put my life or health on the line by challenging the draft board. There was one episode that presented itself while I was protesting the war in which I was briefly so endangered. Once in it I toughed it out John Wayne style, but am sure I would have avoided it if I had seen it coming. As I contemplate it now the suicidal component of my "toughing it out" makes me aware of how morally painful and difficult those times were. To die a martyr's death while opposing the war certainly would have resolved a lot of things, including the nagging doubt that I had done enough to try to stop the war.

The aftermath of Vietnam is still painful and difficult for me. There is part of me that is still looking for the rite of passage that being a warrior, fighting for a noble cause, might have represented. I still question whether I did enough in protesting. I am embarrassed by the arrogance that I sometimes

feel when I meet someone who was mutilated by the war (physically, emotionally, or spiritually) and I find myself thinking that they got what they deserved for not being as clever as I was to avoid the draft (as if I had anything to do with it anyway). I am even more embarrassed by the arrogance reflected in the occasional fantasy that I could have gone to Vietnam and risen above the atrocities that were committed, thereby making me superior to those who were drawn into these tragedies. Part of me feels angry and cheated, just like the vets who served, that I am not accorded hero status for the actions I took during that time. I notice that I refer to myself in this paper as "dodging" the draft more than "resisting" it, reflecting my ongoing ambivalence about whether I am a coward or a brave warrior. At times I can be a bit compulsive about going to movies about Vietnam, as if exposing myself to the visual trauma of the war might atone for something or give me something that I missed. When my stepson turned 18 and registered for the draft, I found myself ruminating painfully about how we might handle the situation if some maniac in the White House were to want to put his tender young life in danger for the sake of some geopolitical chess match. At times I get a case of survivor's guilt, especially when I reflect on my second draft physical, and imagine that something extra is expected of me for having been spared.

In the end I guess it's all grist for the mill. We will all learn, grow and evolve as we try to grapple consciously with the Vietnam War and its aftermath. Like many of the really growth-producing situations that life presents, it is not one I would have chosen for myself or anyone else. But it is here, and invites us to explore more deeply not only our shadow sides, but the possibilities for reconciliation and forgiveness within and between us. Somewhere in my image of that reconciliation and forgiveness I feel my greatest hope for finding the collective wisdom/maturity that will help us avoid such insanity, with its attendant unnecessary suffering, in the future.

ADDENDUM: After drafting this paper I received a letter sent from my college to all the members of the classes of 1967 and 1968. It contained a summary of the findings of a study done by some psychology and psychiatry faculty members who examined some of the alumni of those classes who served in Vietnam, and was based primarily on those infamous MMPI scores. Among their conclusions, based on careful study of my Vietnam vet classmates 15 or 20 years after the war, were the following:

"Even in a group of well-functioning men, those with heavy combat exposure in Vietnam currently show increased psychological symptomatology relative to Vietnam veterans with less exposure . . . This effect is not attributable to precombat differences between groups . . ."

3460 Ellicott Ctr. Dr.
Suite 203
Ellicott City, Maryland
21043