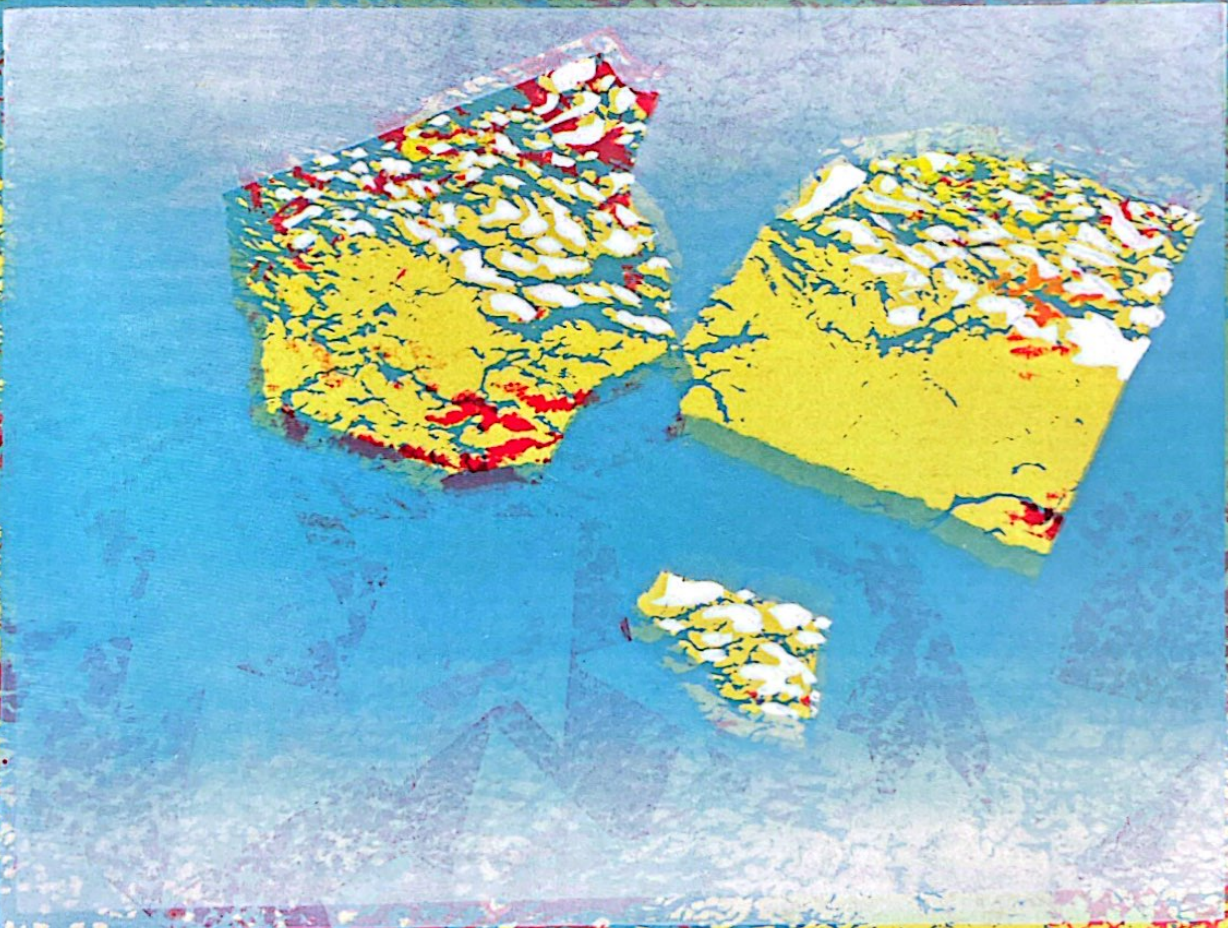


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THE CENTER MAGAZINE



Vietnam—Will There Be a Collective Healing?

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OR THE STUDY OF DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS
[with the University of California at Santa Barbara]

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THE CENTER MAGAZINE

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Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions

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On June 30th, Walter Capps stepped down as director of the Center to return to full-time teaching. Mr. Capps assumed the directorship at a pivotal time in the Center's history and almost at once faced some significant challenges. He needed to complete the final phase of the move of the Center's headquarters from its former home in Montecito to its new location on the Santa Barbara campus of the University of California. In the following months, he oversaw needed renovations in the Center's new quarters, including extensive landscaping and the renovation of a new, enlarged conference room. Also during this time he put into effect a number of economy moves calculated to insure that the Center would continue to operate in the black. In all this Mr. Capps had the backing of the administration of the University and the full support of the Center staff.

Mr. Capps' most noteworthy achievement is reflected in the academic program which he and the staff conducted during his tenure as director. In the last year and a half, the Center has sponsored over one hundred dialogue sessions, lectures, and conferences. A number of these have been reported in recent issues of the magazine. Subjects ranged from international concerns (the political and social implications of revolution in Iran and El Salvador, U.S. foreign policy and human rights) and energy matters (the pros and cons of nuclear energy and the social costs connected with long-range energy planning) to legal developments (the rights of criminal suspects, women's rights, and divorce law reforms) and the future of liberalism.

A highlight of Mr. Capps' administration came in October of 1980 when the Center sponsored a series of events marking the rededication of the Center in affiliation with the University of California. Joseph Duffey, Norman Cousins, and Michael Harrington were among the featured participants of those events.

Mr. Capps said of this affiliation that it puts the Center in reach of objectives far beyond its previous capacities. "We intend the finished product to be as radical and innovative as anything the Center inspired before, and substantial and compelling as befits the commitment of a gifted and challenged academic community."

We share this assessment and optimism. Walter Capps has played a key role in bringing the Center to this stage in its distinguished career. His administration reflected both continuity with the past and concern for adapting the Center's tradition to its future. We wish him well in his academic pursuits.

JAMES GRIER MILLER
President

JULY/AUGUST 1981

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VIETNAM—WILL THERE BE

In the latest of its series of dialogues and conferences on the meaning of Vietnam, the Center invited a number of people to reflect on the existence and/or possibility of a postwar healing process in America, six years after this country ended its military activity in Indochina. Earlier discussions dealt with the Vietnam

Task of Reconstruction Will Have to Be a Work of Ritual

WALTER H. CAPPS
*Professor of Religious Studies
University of California at Santa Barbara*

We have not yet come to terms with Vietnam. Vietnam remains an unfinished war, a problem for the American conscience. The most eloquent clue to the unfinished character of the Vietnam experience is the fact that the responses are formed primarily through personal testimony. Most of the writing about that war is being done by veterans who have personal stories to tell. We know that only certain human situations give rise to such autobiography or confession.

These personal documents of Americans in Vietnam do not simply tell what it means to be an American, and about the nature of patriotism and heroism; they also touch on a set of religious topics, themes such as blame, guilt, and the need for restoration. We are witnessing a collective process in which Vietnam-era veterans are leading the way.

Vietnam tends to symbolize what we find right and wrong about life itself. It tells us how our enthusiasms are formed, and what we are avowing.

The conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union has become, it seems to me, the modern world's primary expression of the mythological clash between superpowers. Psychically and religiously for many Americans, it is a battle between God and the devil, between our God-fearing way of life and, as it is described, godless Communism. Vietnam and El Salvador are simply the locations where this colossal battle takes place.

It is exceedingly difficult, however, to maintain allegiance to this myth when one has personally experienced Vietnam. It is then that the lines of collective interpretation come apart, when as Morris Dickstein has said, the myth about America gets shattered.

After that, there is a tendency, particularly among liberals, to try to put the pieces back together again, through either intellectual or programmatic means. But the task of reconstruction is not primarily an intellectual one. It involves a kind of intelligence which incorporates the capacities of collective wisdom. Reconstruction is larger and more complicated than simple conceptual work.

Coherence cannot be willed into being; it cannot be thought into being; it cannot be legislated into being. A pervasive injury has occurred. The breaking of the myth was not merely an intellectual event. Nor is it ideological warfare that we are most concerned about. This time, shame and guilt are involved.

If wholeness and well-being are to be re-established, it can only be as the result of a collective

A COLLECTIVE HEALING?

war and American values (*The Center Magazine*, July, 1978) and the impact of Vietnam (*The Center Magazine*, July, 1979, and September, 1979). The series was organized and directed by Walter H. Capps, former director of the Center. Here are the views of participants in the dialogue on healing.

healing process. The body politic needs to be healed, and for that it is not enough to find ways to make our philosophies relevant again, or our policies resonant.

The impact of Vietnam is being experienced through a continuing ritual, a process very much like that of confession, absolution, and restoration. The Vietnam veteran centers are the places where that ritual is being worked out. The counselors in these vet centers function as confessors, like secular priests. The vet centers themselves are like neighborhood religious communities, all of them involving persons living and working together in the ritual process. □

Veterans' Ills Are Rooted in Moral and Religious Malaise

WILLIAM P. MAHEDY
Vietnam veteran
Director
The Vet Center
San Diego, California

I am a Vietnam veteran, former Army chaplain, and ordained Catholic priest. After my marriage, I

needed a job, and went to work with the Veterans Administration, where I met Shad Meshad. The two of us had the privilege of collaborating for years, working with Vietnam veterans in the streets of Los Angeles. I am the team leader of the Vet Center in San Diego. I also function as an Episcopal priest in a parish in San Diego. So I am an ordained counselor in the Vet Center.

We are dealing in the vet centers with what in the diagnostic and statistical manual is called "post-traumatic stress disorder." A New York psychiatrist who had a great deal to do with changes in this manual has found six characteristic symptoms of the disorder in some Vietnam veterans. They are: guilt feelings and self-punishment; perception of oneself as a scapegoat; rage and other violent impulses directed against indiscriminate targets; brutalization resulting from combat and its attendant psychic numbing; alienation from one's own feelings and from other people; and doubt about one's continued ability to love and trust others.

Now this is all very true. I have dealt with hundreds of Vietnam veterans, and it is so true.

But I have found that at the root of what is bothering a lot of veterans is a moral and religious malaise. Even those who have slipped back into the American mainstream seem to experience a vague feeling of unease, suffering in varying degrees from a spiritual debilitation. We've all got a trace of it.

This spiritual malaise may not always be as troublesome to the individual as the clinical syndrome, but it still produces a feeling of uneasiness, or dis-