

Healing From the War

TRAUMA AND TRANSFORMATION AFTER VIETNAM by
Arthur Egendorf (Houghton Mifflin: \$15.95; 364 pp.)

Reaction to the national trauma called Vietnam has come in stages. First, 10 years ago, was the period of welcomed but uneasy quiet. The nation's long anguish had come to an end, or so it seemed. Scattered sniper chatter continued

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about how right and how wrong it had been for the United States to have become involved there, and there were assorted appraisals of military and diplomatic strategy. But the war had ended, and there was relief from its powerfully divisive social and political tensions.

The first indication that the uneasy quiet would not hold came in cinematic and episodic literary form. The next stage of interpretation occurred when clinical components were coupled to the narrative accounts. As had happened before, Robert Jay Lifton got there early, this time with his "Home From the War: Vietnam Veterans—Neither Victims nor Executioners" (1973). But the specifics were supplied by less public writers—Charles Figley, Art Blank, Steven Sonneberg, Jonn Wilson, John Smith—who were exploring the dynamics of post-traumatic stress disorders. Their findings helped establish the rehabilitational work of the vet centers, which agencies assisted Vietnam veterans, too, to attain effective collective postures.

The period following was one of expanded public awareness, each segment of which was catalyzed and nurtured by the veterans themselves. The vets organized their own national homecoming in November, 1982, capped by the

dedication of the memorial on the Washington Mall. On Memorial Day, 1984, the Unknown Soldier from the Vietnam War was given an official funeral, preceded by a hero's parade. Veterans Day, 1984, witnessed the dedication of the three sculptured figures, the concluding segment of the memorial. And events surrounding the 1985 10th anniversary of the fall of Saigon included a homecoming parade in the nation's largest city, together with salutes and ceremonies in cities and towns large and small throughout the country. The United States may have lost the war, but the nation still possesses the spiritual ability to transform a negative into a demonstrable positive.

The next stage—the one clearly on the horizon now—has been introduced with the publication of Arthur Egendorf's "Healing From the War." The book is necessary because the scars, wounds and guilt remain. Can a person be involved in acts of killing without being acutely aware of it, from that time forward? What does one think about when one is awakened from sleep by a flashback in which one sees the eyes of someone whose life one has taken? To what does one turn when encountering such "dark nights of the soul" or when forced, by circumstance and personal volition, as Peter Marin phrases it, "to live in moral pain?" These are questions Egendorf addresses, and his data, as well as his responses, are formed by years of involvement as a clinical psychologist and therapist with Vietnam veterans. His thesis is that real healing (even healing from a war)

can occur but that individuals must reach out for the assistance that is available to them in each of the critical opportunities for wholeness and transformation that life affords.

The strength of the book is threefold. First, the portrayal of the dynamics of post-traumatic stress disorders is among the best available. Clinical terms are translated into non-clinical language in a manner that is engaging and trustworthy. Second, the analysis of the interpenetration of the military and political dimensions of the war with the psychological experiences of participants is among the most lucid and illuminating on record. Particularly useful is the author's appraisal of the comparative utilities of the various schools and methods of psychoanalysis. And third, the design of the book, which places vignettes and commentaries together, is both a literary and pedagogical success.

One negative: At times, it seems, the book encourages healing to seek out transformation prematurely. What about the knowledge that the violation of the moral order carries a tenacious metaphysical status? And how do we accommodate the personal discovery that the Vietnam experience, no matter how paradoxical this may seem, has actually trained one to see the light? Healing, characteristically, tends to imply and invite cure. The deeper truth about Vietnam is that both self and society engage some essential powers of healing when post-traumatic sensibilities are simply acknowledged and revered. Egendorf invokes Odysseus repeatedly. Vietnam is also Plato's myth of "the cave."

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