

THERE WAS A PHRASE THAT CAME OUT OF THE WAR -----

PROMINENT.....

"It don't mean nothing"....

THE VIETNAM WAR IS NOT THE KIND OF EVENT WHOSE MEANING IS ALREADY  
FIXED.....

That's why, the only trouble I have in this course is with  
people who already know what the war means, and are  
disappointed with me because I don't give emphasis  
to that meaning.....

THE MEANING OF THE WAR IS STILL BEING WORKED OUT.....

THE MEANING OF THE WAR IS STILL BEING CULTIVATED.....

THE MEANING OF THE WAR IS STILL BEING LEARNED.....

Like the Veterans Memorial in Washington.....

One might think that we know the meaning of the war, and  
then we go there, and there we find that meaning of  
the war reflected in that symbol....

It's not that way at all..... Most of us who have gone there  
haven't really known the meaning of the war until we've  
encountered the symbol.....  
and it doesn't tell us in a flash what the meaning is....  
But we continue to learn from the symbol as we  
continue to come in contact with it....  
and as we let it do its work....

I don't know if I really knew the meaning of the war until I  
met Dan Gisel....  
and Wilson Hubbell.....  
and Mike Madrid... Denver Mills....  
John Murphy and Tom Lewis.....

Because, in very real ways, the life of Dan Gisel, Wilson  
Hubbell, John Murphy, Tom Lewis, reflects the meaning of  
the war....

And the same is true is Mrs Nga.....and the same is true of Hien Do....  
And the same is true of Bob Kerrey.....

ALL ARE REFLECTIONS OF THE MEANING OF THE WAR.....

ALL, FOR US, STAND LIKE TEXTS -- not all texts are  
books -- THEY STAND LIKE TEXTS THROUGH WHICH  
WE PERCEIVE SOMETHING OF THE MEANING OF THE WAR....

When Bob Kerrey was here, he cautioned us against drawing up a list of THE LESSONS OF THE WAR.....

And he added that the one lesson that seems to hold is that when we as a people go into an area, even wanting to help, if we don't know the situation well, we can do more harm than good....  
WE OFTEN MAKE THE SITUATION WORSE.....

I guess to this major lesson, I'd like to add two others:

THE FIRST is prompted by a comment Hien Do made in this class on TUESDAY.....

In his very gentle way, but with real persuasive force, he pleaded with us to recognize that the VIETNAMESE ARE HUMAN BEINGS.

the Vietnamese are Human Beings too....

Pretty basic.....

I'm indebted to a 19th century Danish philosopher, Nikolai Grundtvig, who said that the most important truth is that we're human first, and this is the divine order....

Human first, he said, and everything else secondary.....

Human first, then Vietnamese, or American....  
or Russian.....

Human first, then black, or white, or brown, or yellow...

Human first, then democratic or republican or libertarian...

Human first, then Buddhist, or Christian, or Jew or Presbyterian, or Methodist...

HUMAN FIRST.....

And one of the lessons of the VIETNAM WAR is that if we lead not with human first, but say, WITH IDEOLOGY first, then we get into all kinds of trouble....

AND THE SECOND OBSERVATION HAS TO DO WITH THE RATHER REMARKABLE  
WAY THIS CLASS FUNCTIONS.....

I have some friends in town...who do good things.....  
and when I'm at their house....  
I often come away...thinking,, "They bring out  
the best in all of us...."

And I've thought at times that this is the way this class  
functions....

You know, the VIETNAM WAR is full of paradoxes....

WHEN I STAND BEFORE THE VIETNAM WAR, I'M CAPTIVE  
TO THE WHOLE RANGE OF HUMAN EMOTIONS.....  
ANGER, DISGUST, SORROW, DEEP GRIEF, PATRIOTISM,  
all of it, all at the same time...

And yet I read in one of your term papers...that the  
EVENT THAT HAS MOST DIVIDED US is also SERVING AS THE  
EVENT THAT IS BRINGING US BACK TOGETHER AGAIN.....

One night, I am told, Jan Scruggs, deeply discouraged  
about the controversy surrounding the design of the  
Memorial....  
went by himself quietly to the Lincoln Memorial...  
And he stood there in the presence of that great figure...  
And he thought that this memorial was the symbol of the  
nation's greatest violence...  
BUT NOTHING IN THE MEMORIAL FAVORED EITHER THE NORTH OR THE  
SOUTH.....  
AND NOTHING WAS SAID ABOUT SLAVERY BEING MORALLY WRONG...  
OR EVEN THAT THE CIVIL WAR WAS A RIGHTEOUS CAUSE...

But people standing there could read the words of Lincoln's  
Gettysburg Address...or the words of the 2nd Inaugural  
Address...Then they would think about the words,  
stand quietly, and let their feelings flow.....  
And they would come away different than when they arrived....

SCRUGGS vowed that the same would be true of the Vietnam Memorial...  
the only words would be the names of those who had given  
their lives for the nation.....  
And the people would see the names, stand quietly, and let  
their feelings flow... And they would come away different  
than when they arrived.....

WHEN THE SCULPTURE PORTION OF THE MEMORIAL WAS DEDICATED IN  
1984, President Ronald Reagan (using words crafted by  
John Wheeler) said: