

The power of diaries

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Blog 11/16/06

Driving my car yesterday, I was listening to NPR and heard snippets of a Vietnam War diary written by Dr. Dang Thuy Tram, a North Vietnam doctor who was killed in a US attack in 1970.

A woman read Dr. Tram's words as they have been translated into English. She read softly, with a strong Asian accent. I was driving and suddenly I was crying.

Vietnam war protesters used to chant "Bring the war home!" as they closed down university buildings with their sit-ins and their bombs. They wanted Americans to understand the suffering of the Vietnamese people. I thought there must be a better way.

Dr. Tram's diary brought the war home like the protesters never could. I kept driving, kept listening, kept crying.

After the woman finished reading Dr. Tram's words on air, Fred Whitehurst was interviewed about the diary. Whitehurst was a US military intelligence officer in Vietnam at the time Dr. Tram was killed. He came upon the diary, smuggled it home (against orders), and tucked it into a file cabinet. There the writings stayed for 35 years as he worked as a CIA man. He wanted to get the diary back to the doctor's parents, but as a CIA worker, he couldn't converse with the "Comms" in Vietnam. Eventually, through some other veterans and a Quaker woman living in Vietnam, he found a way.

The program included a short interview with Dr. Tram's mother, now in her 80s. She said that all the time her daughter served as a military surgeon during the war, she wrote letters home. In those letters, Dr. Tram never told her mother the whole truth of her situation. She minimized the danger, her fears and her agony seeing others suffer. The mother said parts of the diary are so painful that she has not been able to read them.

Now, almost 40 years after the diary was written, it has been published in Vietnam. It is an unvarnished account of war. At times Dr. Tram is critical of Communism. She can't understand the hatred on both sides. She spares no words describing the horrors she sees. She writes about amputations and about medical workers sometimes having to carry patients to safety on their backs.

The diary has sold more than 300,000 copies in Vietnam, where most books enjoy a run of a few thousand at most. The book will come out in the US next year.

Whitehurst described himself as a non-pacifist, a CIA "company man." Yet he said he looks at the killing today in Iraq and wonders "Could there be a better way?"

It reminded me of a saying I heard years ago: "There is no way to peace. Peace is the way." The saying sounds simplistic, but it makes sense to me. If war is not an option, you must find another way. People would become very creative about solving problems if killing were ruled out.

Dr. Tram's last diary entry before she was killed speaks of being a strong adult able to cope with war, yet asks "why do I want so much a mother's hand to care for me...?"

Dr. Tram's diary has been compared to Anne Frank's writings during the time she and her Jewish family hid from Nazis during WWII. Anne's last diary entry is etched into my mind. She wrote about believing, in spite of everything, that people are good.

The NPR account of Dr. Tram's diary ended with a postscript about Anne Frank's horse chestnut tree in Amsterdam. Looking at that tree full of blossoms and leaves in spring gave Anne great comfort when she was confined in a dark attic.

But the tree is diseased and must be cut down. A sapling from the tree will be planted in its place.

People die, trees die, words live.

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