

The memorial will make no political statement regarding the war or its conduct. It will transcend those issues. The hope is that the creation of the memorial will begin a healing process.

- Bob Doubek¹

What are you going to do? Show a hippie hugging a soldier?

- Peter Braestrup

Most monuments and memorials have fierce supporters and just as fierce detractors. The story of the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial is no exception. Although beloved and recognized now as possessing a power unlike other public statuary, it was at first called a "shame" and a betrayal of the courage of those who served and died.

Maya Lin's design, the winning entry in 1981 was one of 1421 entries. She described her design as a place where the "earth should be cut open." It was as if she envisioned the conclusion of one commentator: Old wounds could only heal after they had been reopened.

There were two other keys to her design. The first, and foremost, was the names. The names of those killed or missing, nearly 60,000, would serve as the icon, the symbol, the image. And like the Washington Monument or the reflecting pools of 9-11, there are no symbols, no embellishment beyond names.

The second key was chronology. The names would be listed by the year they were killed or deemed missing. Detractors believed, rightly, that this would create confusion. You need to go looking, hunting. Unexpectedly, though, this aspect of the design proved cathartic. Family, friends, fellow veterans needed to find the ones they lost. It is almost as if the grieved searched the netherworld in the black marble to find the dead and speak their name, resurrect them in their heart.

It was as if they were drawn by the same ghostly bugle. (572)

Perhaps it was the demand for silence that made "the wall" such a powerful force. As a pastor I have found that most veterans who were in combat do not speak of it. I have been with many WWII veterans and veterans of the Korean war whose ability to repress memories is lost with Alzheimer's or dementia. So many spouses have said to me, "he never spoke of any of this."

Yet, it seemed with the Vietnam War it was not simply the horrors of war that were repressed, but the experience as a whole. It is as if naming your service would open you up to hatred, judgement, derision. Which I believe is why the three men who raised the funds for the

¹ All quotations are taken from the May, 1985 volume of *National Geographic*. The article can be found on line at https://avalonlibrary.net/National_Geographic/National%20Geographic%201985-05%20167-5%20May.pdf

monument wanted "no political statement." By political I take it to mean no glory, no verdict, no definition beyond loss.

This was the aspect of Maya Lin's design, the absence of symbol that served the purpose best, but it was also what nearly brought the whole project to a halt. It was as if the memorial needed some sort of monument. At the eleventh hour a compromise was reached: a statue depicting three soldiers would be added to the site as well as an American flag. The statue would not be heroic, but neither would it be penitent. The eventual design showed comradeship as well as suffering, courage as well as confusion. The memorial needed a monument.

While the statue soothed the detractors, in the end, the wall was what people came to see, it was more than enough. The honor was found in how people came in droves. They came and created their own memorial below the name of the one they loved. Mementos, flowers, teddy bears, dog tags continue to be placed at the wall more than forty years after its dedication.

One father struck match after match, and then said to his wife, in a hushed voice, "There's Billy."

In 1985 I was up late reading assignments for my first semester in college. The house was quiet. I do not remember why I picked up the latest National Geographic, but something drew me to it. On the cover was a man placing a flower on the wall. The May edition of National Geographic told the story of Jan Strugg, the man who envisioned the memorial as the names of those who were killed or missing.

Reading the article that night I was unprepared for the description of one family's search. Parents searching in the dark, knowing the year, but not being able to find their son, until the father said, "there' Billy."

I began to weep and kept weeping for an hour.

Two years prior, the man after whom I am named took his life. He killed himself. At the time of his death I was sixteen. Although inadequate I was thrust into the role of comforter and minister long before I would become one. It was as if I needed to help those I loved to navigate their grief. In helping others, I realized that night with the National Geographic article, I had kept grief at bay, buried it as deep as I could. "There's Billy" unearthed all that grief in a moment.

Maya Lin described her design intent as "poetic." I would agree as poetry is meant to create places where you can enter, a space where you are free to see and experience what is true and good and beautiful even if it is very, very painful. I have no name on the wall that is my family or friend. I am not a veteran. But on that night in 1985, I too found "Billy."

