



The RE-Integration Project

VSA *A Writing Workshop*
Texas *for Veterans*

FALL 2017/SPRING 2018

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VSA Texas is a nonprofit organization challenging perceptions of how people contribute by creating an arts-inspired, inclusive community of individuals with diverse abilities. VSA Texas started services specifically for veterans with disabilities/wounded warriors in 2009. VSA Texas hosts an annual Distinguished Artist Veterans exhibition featuring veterans' artwork and provides opportunities year-round for artists to get involved with our Artworks: Creative Industries professional development program. We also work with arts organizations statewide to forge partnerships with veterans' support organizations to provide art programs for veterans and military families. The Re-Integration Project includes our addition of writing classes to our program. After debuting our writing classes in Summer 2016 to much success, we have continued and expanded them with class offerings at the VSA Texas classroom, at the Austin VA Outpatient Clinic, and in Temple at the Cultural Activities Center.



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*“Learn to love the reflection you see in the
mirror; It’s priceless.”*

J. WESLEY PORTER, US ARMY,
1985–2007, KOSOVO, IRAQ

Introduction

THIS BOOK OF POEMS, STORIES, and screenwriting by Texas veterans came from a series of six classes held in central Texas from October 2017 through April 2018. This year our goal was to expand our classes beyond Austin. We started with two classes at our community space and two classes at the Austin VA. Those have been popular and well attended, so we kept that going. We started a new class with our partners at the Cultural Activities Center in Temple, TX farther up the IH-35 corridor.

We had some very talented teachers this year as well. Stephanie Whallon continued her work with us. The veterans in her class at the Austin VA Outpatient Clinic enjoy the warmth and encouragement she provides during her classes. She takes the time to read each new work and give feedback. Then we added a class by Benjamin Reed. Ben comes to us from Texas State University. His class was more of a college style workshop and the small group of men in that particular class made a great team who spent hours talking about writers, reading new works, and sharing feedback with each other. We also added Elizabeth Decker to our teaching roster. Elizabeth does a unique blend of visual art, writing prompts and meditation and listening to music in her classes. They are casual and fun and the participants in her class at VSA Texas as well as at the Austin VA really enjoyed the time spent with Elizabeth. The artwork on the cover is from one of the veterans in her class. Finally, we met Cynthia

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Linzy through the Cultural Activities Center in Temple and she has been teaching our classes at that new space. This was Cynthia's first time teaching veteran writers, and she loved it. The camaraderie formed in her classes was phenomenal. Most of the veterans who took her first class signed up for the second one immediately.

We are excited to continue working with the community of veteran writers that we have developed here in central Texas and look forward to our next round of writing classes, visual art exhibitions, dance programs, and more.

—April Sullivan, *Artworks Director*

It was my first experience working with Veterans, and I had no idea what to expect. Should I tiptoe around PTSD issues, avoid certain subjects, go easy on criticism of their work? One student, apparently reading my mind, said, "Cynthia, you can be hard on us. We are soldiers!" That was the beginning of one of the most rewarding teaching experiences of my life. Little did I know the love, constructive sharing, and high-quality writing that we were about to produce TOGETHER. It is hard to find words to describe their fine words and support of each other and of me. I am so grateful to know each one of them.

—Cynthia Linzy, *Temple class writing instructor*

Poetry



My Apology

By Clarence Ambrose, US Army, 2002–2003

As I sit down and contemplate the amount of time it takes me
to think and act
Would leave me with no time left to wait
The last few times I stumbled and couldn't react
What else is there left to do now
Do I pray, do I cry, do I reflect on all the reasons
That moment yeah it was great, but how could one try to make
destiny or an end
Should it just flow or is it just this hard
The thing you don't know
The time you don't know
Will it ever come to light even if I tried
To hide it from blowing up out of me more
Keep it to myself really to my God, to in him
There's only light
Tomorrow is almost here, I think! That'll make it better so
they say
But this worried mind who loves what is right
Is worried about doing what is right
The right way.

There is a day

By Clarence Ambrose, US Army, 2002–2003

There is a day I know for sure
I'll see my savior, he'll see me too
Oh, that day when I'll be free
I know that it's true

There is a day
Where we'll be, there is a place
There is a time, there is a day
Where we'll be
Oh day of joy soon to be here
We'll be singing and dancing
And shouting
Oh day of joy soon to be here
We'll see that day, we'll see that day
We'll see that day, oh what a day!

Oh that day when it finally comes
I know my savior will say well done
For then I'll know how much he loves
Me, have no fear here comes that
Day

Now I will try to keep the race
Cause of my savior I will do it too
There's no disgrace when I see
His face, I know that's what he'll say

Nine

*By Shawn Eveleth, US Army, 2009–2012,
Operation Enduring Freedom*

He walks out of his own, the shining of the lightning lighting
up the road.

He doesn't know where he will go, he's got to get away from
this place and face the unknown.

His hands are stained with dirt; the jury that he buried will
judge him one day.

His face is stained with hurt, as his tears full of fears will give
him away.

Another story nears the end, all that's left behind is a letter.

I understand how a man can fear a friend; the worst that could
happen is things get better.

If the cost of living outweighs the value of life, it's so much
harder to climb than it is to fall.

But you could have made it with me there by your side, I just
wish you would have called . . .

He was trained to be tough, to soldier on and be strong and not
have issues.

It must not have been enough; he sliced away his life with the
knife he was issued.

His feet are caked with mud; let the rain wash away his pain on
this cold night.

His hands are caked with blood, his heart stops beating while
he's bleeding as he whispers goodbye.

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Another story nears the end, all that's left behind is a letter.
I understand how a man can fear a friend; the worst that could
happen is things get better.
If the cost of living outweighs the value of life, it's so much
harder to climb than it is to fall.
But you could have made it with me there by your side, I just
wish you would have called . . .

The Blackness

*By Shawn Eveleth, US Army, 2009–2012,
Operation Enduring Freedom*

A dark place, a cold closet corner where she hides in the clothes
as soon as they start screaming.

Her fingers grip her doll named Daisy as she fearfully follows
the shadows dance on her feet.

She cries her eyes dry as she whispers goodbye and fades away
into the blackness that dampens the sadness.

She can't understand why they always have to fight.

She just wants something to break 'cause she hates this, can't
take this.

Later they apologize and she pretends to believe their lies.

She just wants something to break 'cause she hates this, can't
take this.

Years later, she's buffing out bruises with the bottom half of a
bottle before she goes to work

Her fingers grip the mirror as she glares at her reflection
wondering why she married such a jerk. She can't
understand why they always have to fight.

She just wants something to break 'cause she hates this, can't
take this.

Later he will apologize and she'll try to believe his lies.

She just wants something to break 'cause she hates this, can't
take this.

She thought she'd get away when she grew up but the skeletons
stayed.

Her worst fear is what she became.

A dark place, a cold closet corner where she hides in the clothes
as soon as he stops screaming.

Her fingers grip the blade bathed in blood as she traces the
veins until she can no longer see.

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The Wall

*By Barbara A. Malone-Verduin, US Army, 1986–2007,
Desert Storm/Shield/OIF*

Brick by brick I've built a wall
Brick by brick you've made them fall
Now, my wall is not so tall
Now, you know me best of all

A Protest

By jawwTEM, US Navy, 1959–1964

Hello? I speak to no one.
Hello darkness! Emptiness!
That which is not.
One might ask, why speak at all?
As if deaf ears may hear.

How does one talk to someone, not there?
Even to explain the quiet emptiness,
In hope that deaf ears may hear,
These still faint mutterings,
Of a lonely heart and soul.

How do you tell no one that is not there,
Of things that you feel, from within?
To even explain the way that you see,
Or perhaps the way you want to be seen.

Someday, I hope to meet,
Some one that's there,
With ears that hear
And eyes, that care to see.

Down a Rabbit Hole

By jawnTEM, US Navy, 1959–1964

Darkness, balanced with Light? Isn't that the way life is?
Do we die only to live again, or do we live only to die again?
My own life has been rather revealing in this way,
Like layers of an Onion, peeling away in ever growing rings,
That keep getting smaller with each layer, the deeper one goes.

Do we learn more every time we drop down a Rabbit Hole?
Or do we forget each journey?

I have so many questions? Will I ever learn the answers?
Or . . . , In the knowing and learning,
Would I even understand what it was that I knew,
And then forgot.

In Passing

By jawnTEM, US Navy, 1959–1964

Friend? Yes you! That, who is passing so quickly by.
Are you so fresh with your own thoughts,
You have no awareness of another soul,
Scant yards from your own?

I, a mere mortal, am aware.
Aware of your passing as a blind one,
With eyes that see.

Truly, I care not for your going.
What do you leave?
A lingering whiff of flowered aroma,
A glancing sliver from sunlit hair,
A romantic wrench, vibrant upon the air.

Friend? Are you not one of Gods greatest marvels?
You, who can walk, talk, think,
Who may, communicate,
Pass by all too quickly, and are gone.
Leaving a faint aroma,
A flashing glance from deep, dreamy, eyes,
And an emptiness, more profound than before.

If I could but arrest your movement,
A short while only,
Then my should shall know such joy,
As to shake my very foundation.

For you, who were about to pass,
Have tarried.

Nowhere

By jawnTEM, US Navy, 1959–1964

Where are we going?
Where have we been?
Better to ask, see you tomorrow,
Which never arrives.
Some things, like life,
Are forever out of our reach.

Double Entendre (I simply love them all)

By Cody Morris, US Army, 1988–1989

It is not often you can so easily find in a single word with
hidden splendor the likes such as a double entendre raised
to a power of near infinitesimal magnitude!

Yet there is such a word.

Speak if softly,
feel the reverence.

Speak it loudly,
embrace the power.

Shout it from the mountain,
let the thunder roll.

Think it to yourself,
its essence fuels the soul.

So what's this word of which I speak?
The pearl of wisdom for which you seek?

It names the actions of unsung heroes,
Loved ones,

Friends,

Strangers,

unbridled power of Demon or God alike.

It may seem to end in a game of possum,
be fooled not, your word is:

Awesome!

Started with but a lightning strike,

it eats,

it breaths,

and left to nature's own device,

forever it would grow.

Spotted now,
the call for help,
outward goes.
Swift and bold,
they join in.
This is no game,
but they hope to win.
Wild flames on windswept fuel,
yes,
this will be an awesome duel.
Smoke fills sky,
white hot sap and embers glow.
They ask not why,
the job is theirs,
this beast to slow.
Soon it's found,
the hottest spot.
Boots to ground,
giving all they got,
on the go.
Mission planned
objective clear.
Town to save,
people in fear.
Helmets on,
guts are tight,
look out fire,
they're here to fight.
Packed upon their backs,
a full array of gear.
Another sleepless night,
Dauntless,
in the face of fear.

In the belly of a boundless beast,
A flaming tornado swells engulfing its new foe.
Cut off now; No other place to go.
Fuel to plenty,
winds so swift.
They find each other,
wrapped,
in one last gift.
The cause was just,
they did it right.
Such need for air,
they lose this fight.
A moment of clarity,
there is no doubt.
One task left,
ends this bout.
Cellular signals,
they did gain.
Short goodbyes,
hardly ending pain.
Words of love,
comfort sought.
How brave they were,
how well they fought.
Lives were saved,
with time they bought.
Lives set asunder,
for their lives
they gave.
Wind,
she turned against them,
in the beasts maw,
all were caught.

Spoken softly,
a list,
a tribute,
for those who came.
Spoken softly,
not a roster
fore there was no game.
Spoken softly,
etched
in face of stone
eternity bound,
the name of each
to the last man,
found;
wrapped in blankets,
from heat to shield.
Bubbles from space,
flame and heat proof enclaves.
No scorcher earth beneath,
Not victims killed.
Fighters,
one and all,
fill these earthen graves.
Forgot them not,
nor why they came.
Speak it proud yet softly,
you near each plot.
Hero's honor which you pay,
more,
seek they not.
They'd thank you kindly,
just one word you say.
AWESOME

Falling

*By Bill O'Connell, US Navy, 1987–1992, Desert Storm, US Army,
2006–present, OIF/OND*

We started our way home
the sinking feeling within me,
sober with anguish
trying too hard
to fill in the blanks
reflecting on the road,
in the darkness
through Alabama,
Mississippi,
Louisiana
this fundamental,
painful journey
passive betrayal

An exercise in progress
wondering questions within myself
conversations in my head
moving onward
with crazy ideas
keeping myself grounded
in irrational thought
as it so often happens,
there was the void
sequence of the road
without the distraction of television,
or music
it will take a long time
to feel anything

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Veering between feelings
of moving on,
and sadness.

Accepting an idea about destiny
falling,
alone

Monday

*By Bill O'Connell, US Navy, 1987–1992, Desert Storm, US Army,
2006–present, OIF/OND*

My wife came by the house after being gone for a week
she talked to our sons
eventually, we had time for ourselves
an awkward conversation ended with her leaving

Everything I consider as success or failure
on a day-to-day basis
depends upon how I am with this woman who left me
I don't think it's healthy

As with all my emotions,
struggling
I think of my state of mind as a bad movie,
already seen
resign myself to keep watching
until it plays itself out

Unhappy

*By Bill O'Connell, US Navy, 1987–1992, Desert Storm, US Army,
2006–present, OIF/OND*

Please don't look at me
and my faded memories
they roll by the car window
I'm doing time in a glass prison

Ashamed of the places I went
every day I try to hide
it tears me up inside
I spin my wheels against the direction I should be going

The realization has just dawned upon me
I am in a dark mood,
feeling more distant from her than ever
part of me wants to keep it that way

My fortune telling
tells me
it's not going to work out,
leaving me slightly sad

Everything in my mind tells me
don't listen to my heart any more
it just gets me
into trouble

Have You Ever Lost a Pet?

By J. Wesley Porter, US Army, 1985–2007, Kosovo, Iraq

They say time heals all wounds big and small
The pain of losing a pet is still raw
My pet was great, beautiful and kind
He would look in your eyes and read your mind
In life, we only have so much time
Our pet made us happy as I enjoyed my wine
The one thing I do know as I remember our pet
He gave us a relationship we will never forget

Pain Is My Friend

By J. Wesley Porter, US Army, 1985–2007, Kosovo, Iraq

Each time I move from place to place
The pain in my body wants to find its face
Some things in life have a way to change
The pain of discipline and focus impacts my brain
I ask myself, why do I do the things I do?
The reason is, pain creates opportunities for growth too
I want people to know, I have a desire for success
Pain is my friend, I will endure to be the best

He Stole My Treasure

By Gloria A. Preston, US Navy, 1980–1997,

Desert Shield/Desert Storm

He stole my treasure under a full moon past midnight.
He stole my treasure, I didn't put up a fight.
He stole my treasure without sparing a dime.
He stole my treasure, I was an accomplice to the crime.
He stole my treasure more precious than silver and gold.
He stole my treasure, leaving me empty and cold.
He stole my treasure while he set the stage.
He stole my treasure while sipping tea and burning sage.
He stole my treasure as we walked on the beach.
He stole my treasure as he taught and as he preached.
He stole my treasure while admiring my beauty.
He stole my treasure, it was his ultimate duty.
He stole my treasure, looking handsome and smelling fine.
He stole my treasure with his melodic voice and rigid spine.
He stole my treasure, by kissing my hands and rubbing my feet.
He stole my treasure, this altitude is making me weak.
He stole my treasure, by blowing his warm breath upon
my neck.
He stole my treasure, by appealing to my intellect.
He stole my treasure, by touching parts that should not be
touched.
He stole my treasure and opened the door to the spirit of lust.
He stole my treasure when he placed his tongue in my mouth.
He stole my treasure, that act alone would bring cause for
arouse.
He stole my treasure when he came to my home.
He stole my treasure and threw dirt on the throne.

He stole my treasure, yearning for me in the morning.
He stole my treasure without even a warning.
He stole my treasure by tapping into my energy.
He stole my treasure, a surge that brings weakness to my knees.
He stole my treasure, I acquired from birth.
He stole my treasure, the world says have no worth.
He stole my treasure that restored my youth.
He stole my treasure, a flower will open when it's seduced.
He stole my treasure and placed my life in jeopardy.
He stole my treasure, creating a form of modern day leprosy.
He stole my treasure and ran away with my prize.
He stole my treasure and the scales fell off my eyes.
He stole my treasure, although I was a willing participant.
He stole my treasure and he did it in increments.
He stole my treasure, beat the drums and draw the sword.
He stole my treasure, a three-stranded is an unbreakable cord.
He stole my treasure, unyielding to risk of violation.
He stole my treasure, god will judge for condemnation.
He stole my treasure, blocking promotion to the next level.
He stole my treasure, the higher I go the bigger the devils.
He stole my treasure that had been purified.
He stole my treasure, a befitting gift of a bride.
He stole my treasure that made me holy.
He stole my treasure, with god by my side, I will never be
lonely.
He stole my treasure, separate the wheat from the tare.
He stole my treasure, identifying who is the true royal heir.
He stole my treasure, an offering that smells sweet to the
father.
He stole my treasure, an acceptable sacrifice of a daughter.
He stole my treasure, walk out the word and be ye transformed.
He stole my treasure, resist the urge to conform.

He stole my treasure, expose the truth behind the wizard of oz.

He stole my treasure, a spotlight now shines on the face of a
fraud.

He stole my treasure. The world values less than a copper
penny.

He stole my treasure that is thrown away by so many.

He stole my treasure that has been saved for years.

He stole my treasure that has cost nights of tears.

He stole my treasure that sets me apart.

He stole my treasure, removing a feather's weight from my
heart.

He stole my treasure, beware of the trickery of thieves.

He stole my treasure, he will rob you blind then bless your
sneeze.

He stole my treasure while god watched in anger.

He stole my treasure, now I walk in danger.

He stole my treasure, certified, approved, and branded as a
warrior.

He stole my treasure, submit your documents to the superior.

He stole my treasure that was god's possession.

He stole my treasure, I bow down to correction.

He stole my treasure then offered an apology.

He stole my treasure, I had declared and decreed.

He stole my treasure, for the yoke was unequal.

He stole my treasure, returning to vomit can be lethal.

He stole my treasure that was designed for marriage.

He stole my treasure, an institute with no disparage.

He stole my treasure, kill the flesh, lay down and repent.

He stole my treasure, god promised a king that is heaven sent.

He stole my treasure, arrest the behavior.

He stole my treasure that is scorned by the risen savior.

He stole my treasure, no appetizers will be served before the
main course.

He stole my treasure, walking in order defeats a divorce.
He stole my treasure by disregarding the value of my sacrifice.
He stole my treasure, undeserving of a virtuous wife.
He stole my treasure that makes me extra special.
He stole my treasure but I was a willing vessel.
He stole my treasure, I am not a hypocrite.
He stole my treasure, retake the test, flee from his grip.
He stole my treasure, elders teach your babes to be like eagles.
He stole my treasure, train them to fly, to soar, and to be regal.
He stole my treasure, behold the promises of god are ye
and amen.
He stole my treasure, the man I put to sleep for you will indeed
take your hand.

He Wears a Mask

*By Gloria A. Preston, US Navy, 1980–1997,
Desert Shield/Desert Storm*

He wears a mask and his time will surely expire
He wears a mask, that will be ripped off, melted in a raging
blaze of fire
He wears a mask to avoid his true self
He wears a mask, he's so ugly and will have no friends left
He wears a mask to control you with a 21-day spiritual
principle
He wears a mask of deception and its consequences may be
reciprocal
He wears a mask of a loving husband who honors his queen
He wears a mask while tormenting me night and day causing
me to scream
He wears a mask while posting on my Facebook account
He wears a mask, working double-time, assuring his "black
love" image is still intact
He wears a mask while peeping through my private medical
files
He wears a mask and he can defend himself before a jury trial
He wears a mask perpetrating as a caring step-father
He wears a mask, appealing to my estranged eldest daughter
He wears a mask believing water is thicker than blood
He wears a mask and now god is pulling the ultimate plug
He wears a mask and pretends to be the humanitarian advocate
He wears a mask, he crosses boundaries, snoops, and
investigates
He wears a mask of an expert, intellectual, and professional
He wears mask and everything he does is felonious and
unethical

He wears a mask because he is so deceiving and egregious

He wears a mask to feed his ego, gain status, and become
prestigious

He wears a mask to earn access to sacred spaces and reset
the bar

He wears a mask, once upon a time, he was spoiled and spared
the rod

He wears a mask to conceal a little boy who was abused and
also cheated

He wears a mask, the venom he brews can be spewed and
secreted

He wears a mask, this is a warning to everyone within his path

He wears a mask, heed it now, or feel his fury and his wrath

He wears a mask while he manufactures crocodile tears

He wears a mask to prick your heart and eradicate your fears

He wears a mask while disguised as an African king

He wears a mask of a fantasy husband and fairy tale dream

He wears a mask to attain your darkest secrets from behind
the veil

He wears a mask of a god and my trust in him sadly failed

He wears a mask that obscures the face of monster

He wears a mask and displays acting skills that could earn him
an Oscar

He wears a mask and his reign will end by a decision from the
court

He wears a mask that will fall off by an indictment or a divorce

He wears a mask to camouflage darkness that can not reign
with light

He wears a mask and I will blow his cover and “Mayweather”
this fight

He wears a mask and speaks in parables, scriptures, rhymes
and riddles

He wears a mask, the philosophy he preaches will leave you
psychologically crippled
He wears a mask to hear of past indiscretions when you were
not wiser
He wears a mask to re-victimize someone's misguided
daughter
He wears a mask to obtain access to your door and be your
lover
He wears a mask to rescue you as a woman who now has been
covered
He wears a mask and I was adorned with invisible shackles on
my ankles, wrists and neck
He wears a mask and I popped the chain and fled the premises
before he returned from work
He wears a mask unable to quiet his mind roaming back and
forth, to and fro
He wears a mask that is too heavy for a little boy to rise up
and grow

I Am a Bridge

*By Gloria A. Preston, US Navy, 1980–1997,
Desert Shield/Desert Storm*

I am a bridge designed by The Great Engineer with a beginning
and an end.

I am a bridge whose road leads from a prison mindset to a life
that is cleansed.

I am a bridge capable to withstand the wear, tear and shifting of
the earth.

I am a bridge who bears the test, trials, and temptations that
life disburse.

I am a bridge who will pay the toll when you have no money.

I am a bridge who will shift you to the land of milk and honey.

I am a bridge planted to transport the lives that are in jeopardy
of failure.

I am a bridge who will light up the pathway that leads to our
Savior.

I am a bridge over troubled waters the sharks circle and the
alligators snap.

I am a bridge who will guide you through every unforeseen
trap.

I am a bridge of winter, spring, summer and fall.

I am a bridge who shelters you from the pain of it all.

I am a bridge who provides ease in your amazing crossover.

I am a bridge, if you close your eyes, I will be your chauffeur.

I am a bridge be cautious of the ice, snow and the rain.

I am a bridge focus on Him and stay in your lane.

I am a bridge built beyond my weight capacity.

I am a bridge leading you through the tunnel of life's
catastrophes.

I am a bridge constructed to guide you up and over your
problem.

I am a bridge who will arrive you to a life for which you are not
accustomed.

I am a bridge inspected for cracks, breaks, trauma and abuse.

I am a bridge whose instructions were written the, Living Word
is the glue.

I am a bridge to watch the sunrise and sunset will leave you
breathless.

I am a bridge, you can stand on me and be a living witness.

I am a bridge traveled heavily by the broken-hearted.

I am a bridge, so emerge with a new character, He will
complete what He started.

I am a bridge designed for you to move forward, delete the
thoughts of the past.

I am a bridge, shifting to reverse will cause a terrible crash.

I am a bridge who leads to a missionary trail.

I am a bridge who brings comfort that you will prevail.

I am a bridge who will deliver your sickness and disease.

I am a bridge who will not leave you on the roadside to bleed.

I am a bridge who will gather the babes of society.

I am a bridge, in your future is where I place my priority.

I am a bridge who sees your destiny on the horizon.

I am a bridge enduring the pressure it takes to go from a piece
of coal to form a perfect diamond.

I am a bridge you must cross for your survival.

I am a bridge God has named A Place of Revival.

I am a bridge whose paint has been chipped and structure has
been worn.

I am a bridge rising majestically to the purpose for which I
was born.

The Cage Is Open

*By Gloria A. Preston, US Navy, 1980–1997,
Desert Shield/Desert Storm*

The cage is open, it's a holy calling to walk out god's purpose.

This grace was granted before the world surfaced.

The cage is open, for nine months he knitted you in the womb.

Designed not for you just to sit in a room.

The cage is open, move out of the confines of your home.

God wants you to move into the uncomfortable zone.

The cage is open, preach to the world, not just the church.

Cast your net, go in deep and search.

The cage is open, people are waiting on a willing vessel.

Don't look for affirmations to be successful.

The cage is open, confess and profess from your soul with fire.

It's a chance for you to dream a little higher.

The cage is open, you can't achieve by sitting in a box.

You are the access to healing and deliverance.

The cage is open, get out of bed, come out from the shadows.

We fight with him, we use his power.

The cage is open to travel the world and deliver his message.

To break strongholds and usher in his presence.

The cage is open, you can do all things through Christ.

One step at a time he will change your life.

The cage is open, he didn't create you to fail.

It pleases him for you to prevail.

The cage is open to break the power of religion.

Ignite it with fire, burn old tradition.

The cage is open, the harvest is plenty but the laborers are few.

You didn't chose him, but he chose you.

The cage is open, be like David, encourage yourself.

Stop window shopping or you'll get left.
The cage is open, peter took a step outside the boat.
Your trust in him will keep you afloat.
The cage is open, be not distracted by the faces of men.
Look up, he holds the blueprint, he holds the plan.
The cage is open, don't sit and watch life pass you by.
His desire for you is to soar and to fly.
The cage is open, did you not hear his still small voice?
Obedience requires you to make a choice.
The cage is open, has fear caused you not to achieve?
He conquered death, hell, and the grave. That you will believe.
The cage is open for you to make a U-turn in your car.
The cage is open for you to speak a word in a bar.
The cage is open for you to encourage the youth.
The cage is open for you to teach what the word says is the
truth.
The cage is open to reach that woman standing on the corner.
Tell her she is not of this world, she is just a foreigner.
The cage is open, did you see those people over there?
They need to know they are a joint heir.
The cage is open, faith is a fruit that has to be produced.
Hear the word, grow and be loosed.
The cage is open, why should you have to be told twice?
He died on the cross for your abundant life.
The call was sent forth, the word has been spoken when you
looked at the cage and saw it was open.

A Little Act of Kindness

By Charles W. Snyder, Sr, US Army, 1942–1945, WWII

This is a great country
How much better could we be
If we cared more about others
Instead of caring for only me.

With just a little act of kindness
As we go along life's way
We could lift someone's burden
That they struggle with each day

We don't have to be a hero
Or appointed to anything
Just a little act of kindness
To some weary soul we bring

If we can't say something good
That people can understand
Let's show a little act of kindness
To those who do the best they can.

If in your heart you know
You are doing your very best
Then just a little act of kindness
Means you have passed the test.

Our country is in trouble
How long we do not know
But a little act of kindness
Is something we can always show.

To the faint at heart we cannot listen
For to the strong go the prize
Just a little act of kindness
To our enemies will be a surprise

In God we put our trust and hope
Alone in him we depend
Just a little act of kindness
We will be victorious in the end.

Life's Ripple

*By Kris Tidwell, US Air Force, 1988–1992,
Desert Shield/Desert Storm*

The ripple of one action travels in every direction
Touching those with whom its author has no connection

Not realizing until too late, how much life our words imbue
Utter only those that you would have equally returned to you

Speak your words with the kindness of a whisper
Do not forget, eternity is the unintended listener

Our works and words matter, much more than you know
A ripple can multiply and with each connection grow

Our journey through life is measured and weighed
So even to the silent witness let kindness be displayed

Lest your legacy be one that others prefer to forget
Fill with your ripples with more love, than with sadness and
regret

The Assignment

*By Kris Tidwell, US Air Force, 1988–1992,
Desert Shield/Desert Storm*

I will live in a house of understanding
With the flavor of Mexico
And the rhythm of Manhattan

I will inspire, like Washington
That all would endeavor to cross the Pacific Ocean
And bring a bookcase made of compassion

I will take the random smile
And turn them all into the Mona Lisa
From Singapore to Prague

Blindly navigating the predetermined
To change its heart from the unmovable stone to the
swaying tree

I will sew with courage like Betsy Ross
A flag of people joined in unity

YOU WILL KNOW ME BY THE SCARS ON MY HEART

Loneliness . . .

*By Ronald Townsend, US Army, 1966–1969,
South Korea/Vietnam*

You will never believe me if I told you.
I have had tons of girlfriends in my life,
but never a wife.

It makes me sad, and often unhappy.
I smile in public, but I feel
forlorn and sappy . . .

Living alone isn't any fun.
A "date du jour" means a beverage,
and a hotdog on a bun . . .

Four walls, and door-locks in check.
Cable television remote device in hand;
I'll watch a baseball game; Oh, what the heck!

Window shades set at the right angle.
A heart frozen in time, ready to untangle.
All set for another evening alone,
Sports, or news shows; I won't wrangle.

When I add a pint of ice cream or two,
I forget about the isolation and loneliness,
and then I'm not so blue.

My heart melts though as I sit without a clue.
Maybe I'll add a few more raisins,
—surely that will do.

40 VSA Texas

Window shades set, door-locks in check.

Cable remote in hand, accessibly high-tech.

Yet, I yearn to say to her with a smile and a peck:

“Look Honey! He just hit one into the upper-deck.”

A Soldier's Journey

By Darrell Watts, US Army, Active Duty

A soldier journey is determined by his faith.

No one knows their path or even what is at stake.

Living a continuous dream with nightmares of being awake.

23rd of July 2007 was the date.

Challenge my will to survive and even had me to doubt my
faith.

A band of brothers was defeated by the loss of a friend.

That still image of an open door is where the nightmares starts
and end.

It was at that moment when I realized that the world was
controlled by sin.

And this war that we were fighting was impossible to win.

Then I learned how to close the door of my nightmares and live
in the moment.

That the world is full of choices and we have to make one and
own it.

My brother's story lives with me and by the memories I share.

And for the sound of each door that closes I now know he is
there.

Bystandard

By Darrell Watts, US Army, Active Duty

Words can't explain that a simple gesture could have change
the outcome of this game of life that we all share the blame.

Started with the fun making of my name, as the class sit around
and became entertain by the very thing that drove me
insane.

My spirit was broken, exposing those wounds that was not
quite visibly open.

Only wishing and hoping that someone could notice these
scars and rescue me with words that are felt and not just
spoken.

As I stand on this battle field known as a classroom and watch
my so called friends erupts in laughter as the bully strikes
fear like he was only joking.

I the victim cowards down in shame crying tears of pain
leaving my body wilted, emotionless and moping.

Trap in this war of words standing on the front lines my mind
search for any place that my body could go.

The look in my eyes was evidence that there was none while my
self-esteem had reaches an all time low.

Losing the struggle within those tears of feelings belittle and
worthless begin to forcefully flow.

I then lifts my head to look into the eyes of my used to be friends that I can't recognized and now realize that I no longer know.

The classroom feeds off the bully ignorance and stupidity after each gesture and comments the bully spoke.

Once the school bell rang nothing had change as the bully continues his tyrant while I steadily paces to my home.

The bully screams some of the most horrific things but the only thing I wanted was to be left alone.

Those words he spoke cause more damage than stone while the crowd points their fingers and grin like there is nothing wrong.

Only a few more blocks as I eagerly walks, praying that this bullying would just stop because all I really wanted was to be left alone.

But more of the crowd gather and erupted in more laughter and then I yelled (COULD YALL PLEASE JUST LEAVE ME ALONE!)

But no one would listen as they continued their mission ignoring my words and the high pitch of my tone.

I spot my home in the distance and then begin to dart off in a instance running into the threshold of my door.

Thrusting passed the kitchen since there was nobody home who would listen I finds sanctity on the bathroom floor.

The pain is unbearable I shattered the mirror trying to destroy
the image that my used to be friends found so laughable.

I'm a child mentally scarred at the young age of eleven
surrounded by angels of peace as I sits at this table writing
this poem from heaven.

You see, that day no one thought twice to just look into my
eyes cause they wouldn't be surprised that I had convinced
myself to take my own life.

I had found my way back in the kitchen searching for answers
that was missing to this pain and there I thought I found it
with a knife.

I placed it on my wrist and said goodbye to my family with a
kiss and waited until my body became as cold as ice.

My thoughts were that taking my own life would end all of my
pain and suffering.

I never thought that my death would cause my family even
more pain just because they loved me.

I watched my mom shed tears of affection over my casket and
my father looked on reminiscing.

I've previously witness the sharp pain for the lost of
grandfather but I was stubborn and didn't listen.

And now the family photos are now only memories since now
I'm the only one missing.

In his eyes

By Darrell Watts, US Army, Active Duty

In the eyes of a child, his father is the strongest man that ever
existed.

But how long can a father be strong when his health is no
longer what it used to be?

It's not like he chose to be, the frail image of an elderly old man.
That faces the difficulties of shortness of breath for just being
able to stand.

And yet he is still my father because the glimmer from his eyes
let's me know it.

Once was the fastest man in the house and so strong he could
toss a rock further than any one of my siblings could
throw it.

Those years faded so fast as if some of those years I missed it.
But in the eyes of a child, his father is the strongest man that
have ever existed.

And I get it, eventually every man discover his weakness.
But my father is so strong I just know in my heart he can
beat this.

I pull from his wisdom and gain energy from his strength.
And if these doctors say it's his life cycle then my dad will just
break that circle and add some more length.

They keep saying that he is older now and his body is no longer
the same.

But they are not looking into his eyes because for me, those
have yet to change.

My dad gave me a gift where I'm able to bench press my pain.
Together we run a strong race, making memories with every
inch that we gain.

Now I sit and look into my dad's eyes during this hospital visit.
And he is still the strongest person in my eyes that ever existed.

She don't know my name

By Darrell Watts, US Army, Active Duty

As simple as it may be, my name goes unsaid because she
doesn't know it.

More different than the hidden talents never to be discovered
by it's poet.

Not even a distance memory of our past could blast my name
to the forefront of her mind.

Little do she know is that I was the one sending love notes
when we were just nine.

And our freshman year in high school I was the one that always
offered to carry her books.

Also I was the one in sixth period walking by the door giving
her those goofy looks.

She used to laugh all the time so I knew she didn't think I was
insane.

It's just unbelievable now she don't know my name.

She choose to go to Hillman and naturally my decision
followed too.

I just had to be close to her so what else was I suppose to do?

We shared the same degree plan so our schedule was almost
the same.

She pledged AKA and I became and Alpha Phi Alpha man.

Shortly after graduation the war broke out and uncle Sam came
a calling.

I didn't want to leave so I searched for excuses, limitations and
other ways of stalling.

But all my efforts failed and I was forced to leave to go play
those war games.

But today I look into her eyes and I can see she don't know my
name.

Nothing seems to last as she is shielded from those memories
from our past.

I stand in the distance right next to this window pane.

Watching her sleep in this hospital bed and to never remember
my name.

After thirty-seven years of marriage I still love her the same.

If I was granted one wish, there is nothing in this world I would
change.

Because every day I get to meet my wife again and again even if
she doesn't know my name.



Short Stories



I wanted you to be the first to know

*By Skip Bellon, US Navy, 1975–1980,
Vietnam Era*

I WANTED YOU TO BE the first to know.”
Rowan tentatively confided in me.

He was walking toward the edge of a cliff as he spoke. Then he said to me, “I told her you were in love with her.”

Ignoring the fact that the rope I was hanging from was unraveling at a fast rate, I said, “No! How could you do that!”

Rowan continued talking as he returned to the truck. “I had to.” He responded, “She was staring at me.”

He grabbed the emergency rope that was lying under the camping gear. At the same time he did that, the rope keeping me from falling roughly two hundred feet, unraveled enough to bring me one half-inch closer to the bottom of the gorge. I strained my neck in an attempt to regain that slight margin, so that I could once again see Rowan, and said, “What does that mean?” I screamed at him from under the edge of the cliff, “She was talking to you not staring at you.”

Rowan fashioned one end of the rope into a loop and addressed my concerns, “Good point.” He said, “Maybe I was the one that was staring.”

He had made the other end of the rope into a lasso and as he continued speaking, he started twirling the lasso around, over his head, “Well, either way . . . I told her.”

He let fly with one end of the rope and lassoed a nearby tree stump.

With my questions becoming a bit eager, and with the palms of my hands getting sweaty and growing tired, I asked Rowan, “What exactly did you say to her?”

He let loose with the free end of the rope, the end with the loop in it, and the rope came sailing toward me. It looked like a long snake, swimming in invisible water, and nothing at all like the rattlesnake that was currently resting on the, too narrow ledge, just below my dangling feet.

“Just that.” He answered, “I just said, You know he loves you, don’t you?”

Watching the looped rope get closer to me, I noticed that we may have measured this part of the plan a little too close. So just at the right moment, I had to let go of the sweaty palm, rope. I aimed my right foot at a point on the eight-inch wide ledge, right next to the snake and jumped out to grab the loop.

“But I didn’t want you to tell her!” I shouted, as I used the rope for leverage while I ran along the side of the mountain in great twenty foot strides, all the way back to dangling bottom of the bridge that almost brought me completely across the fifty-foot gap between ledges. From there I climbed the dangling bridge-turned-rope-ladder.

“Is it too much to ask,?” (short, quick breath)

“That a man gets to tell.” (several quick breaths)

“The woman that he loves . . .” (one long breath)

“That he loves her.”

Rowan reached down and grabbed me by the hand I extended to him, with my question, and admitted, “No . . . of course not.”

With one great pull, I came quickly up the last few feet and landed proudly on the ground, in front of Rowan.

So I asked him, “How did she take the news?”

The Wages of Public Occupations

By Russell Clark Eskew, US Army, 1972–1975

LET US ADDRESS POVERTY. John Maynard Keynes (1883–1946) tells the impoverished to just wait for the economic system’s multiplier to hire you. However, there is an alternative to the Federal Reserve printing trickle-down money. I have a computer model where people share their wages with information management. As public servants we can work for each and every one of us, if each of us agrees to hire all of us. Common wisdom states that poverty is just the human condition. But Jesus knew of a higher reality, a mathematical way, claiming anointment “to preach the gospel to the poor.” His premise is Matthew 20:1–16. Each worker gives all of the other, say, 100 workers a one hour job for \$1 apiece, then collects back all of the money he paid, \$100 (that is, 100 points), with the wage he does working for everybody. So 100 people do 100 \$100 wage services in a daily cycle. I call the model www.sharingwages.com.

Though Jesus tells us to forsake everything “for my name’s sake, [you] shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life,” this is not asceticism. If you have ever lived in communal lifestyle, you could realize this scientific idealist zero-sum economy. The church of the Nazarene sect believes Jesus was raised communally. If Jesus hired workers to live out this economy, those people may be who accompanied him in Jerusalem that Palm Sunday. This is the motive for overturning

the money tables. His reputation has endured 2000 years. The recent advent of computers makes a zero-sum economy manageable. www.sharingwages.com is a technological civility for humanity.

Jesus told 100 panhandlers that he will hire them for what they were asking, an hour/day for \$1, as his example of everyone making an hundredfold \$100 in wages. His example is that each worker give \$1 to then take \$1 from each person. Everyone collects \$1 from everybody then gives it all back to the same people who do a \$100 wage service. The second example Jesus sets is as a worker businessman, that he will pay 100 workers \$1 apiece if everyone will give those \$100 workers \$1 apiece. You get all your money back. For a \$50 wage each of 100 workers gives \$0.50 to then takes \$0.50 from each \$50 person. In this case each worker businessman pays \$50 workers \$0.50 apiece. Let the computer do the accounting.

There are no limits of workers or simulating money in www.sharingwages.com. Wages are associated with services, or occupations. Confidential information like your name, address, telephone number, social security number or e-mail address are not used and you are only known in a Results Table by job number, worker identification number, occupation title, hourly wage, total people and ZIP code for everybody to see as payment. The ZIP code groups global people together by locality. You can find the occupational location yourself. You choose occupations that people would ask you to do for them.

Jesus' mercy to the panhandlers lends opportunity to claiming occupations. An aspiring but possibly wholly inexperienced worker is asked to go to www.onetcenter.org, then O*NET On-Line, then Skills Search to get the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) services that he can do. All participation is voluntary. You can quit your job for another job. People can go

to a SharingWages Mall of Franchises in their hometown ZIP code where they can organize. Read an Occupational Outlook Handbook about your latest chosen service occupation, practice it with other participants, plan a franchise, or search for services from the Results Table. The objective of a service search is the True Daily Double, a standard occupation with both a simulated service wage and an employer's actual wage. After Saving your ZIP code to Show all your sharingwages.com Selected ID, Choose, Evaluate, then Download the occupations results.

People are asked to make an average wage, simulating money. For the higher-than-average hourly wage, everybody carries the too-much surplus; for the lower-than-average wage, the more frequent the job choice. A one-hour training wage for all the chosen occupations is all that is expected. People might take all day to do all of the chosen occupations. Everybody chooses an average \$100/day for a one-hour/day combination of all the chosen occupations. It may take more than a day for everybody to work before working again. The 83rd in line upon choice will be the Total People $(100) - 83 = (17\text{th})$ in line completed after everybody works in return payment; "the last shall be first, and the first last," mitigating hoarding.

Karl Marx socialism doesn't use money to hire all of the workers as Jesus' monetary sociology does in www.sharingwages.com. Commodities are like occupations and prices are like wages; in Matthew 14:16–21 Jesus feeds 1 fish to and 1 fish from each of 5000 people. Matthew 11:28–30: "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Life in the Dark

*By D B Hogan, US Army, 1970–2004,
Vietnam, OEF*

WHEN YOU CLOSE YOUR EYES what do you see, hear, feel? I never thought about this until one week, I attended a class for the blind with my son who lost his sight due to a very toxic accident while diving in the Gulf of Mexico.

Everyone who attended this class no matter the degree of blindness had to wear a total darkening blindfold as well as use a white cane to feel their surroundings while walking. The cane has a metal piece on the end that was in contact with the ground. As the metal would slide across the ground it would transfer the feel of the surface up the cane to your hand so you could see in your mind's eye whether it was smooth, rough, grass, dirt or if there was an object in the way.

I learned real fast that what you see in your mind's eye is totally different than what is actually there. I had also noticed my hearing had changed, not that I could hear better but rather I became more aware of what I was hearing. I also noticed my sense of feeling had changed. Not feeling with my hands although it had changed somewhat, but the feeling of or shall I say the more aware you were of the sunshine, wind, coolness in the air, even a keener sense of smell.

There was one day I was thinking that these people had lost their mind because of what they wanted us to do next. They wanted us to make something out of wood using a table saw,

drill press and router while blindfolded. Can you imagine pushing a block of wood through a running table saw? Well, after we finished and I counted, I still have all my fingers. The project actually turned out pretty good.

Another day we were loaded into a van, driven to a residential area, while blindfolded with white cane in hand. Hearing trucks and cars speeding by, we had to walk a block, cross the street, walk another block all the while blindfolded. While on the walk I heard noises that were familiar, but never really paid attention to before. I heard a swimming pool motor turn on and the start of a sprinkler system. Even the birds seemed louder because I was listening for and not listening to sounds. I could feel the coolness of the shade as I walked under a tree, the smell of freshly cut grass, even the smell of a freshly watered lawn. We had instructors walking with us in case we needed assistance. Even though it was a little scary, we were in no real danger.

This experience had made me realize the things that we take for granted every day and the joys of God's creation that we miss. I still would not want to lose my sight. One thing I can take away from this experience is that a blind person can be in a room full of people that they had known all their life and still be totally alone and frightened.

The Disturbance

*By D B Hogan, US Army, 1970–2004,
Vietnam, OEF*

DO NOT DISTURB ME for I am disturbed because after we fried the eggplant on Saturday night I became sooo . . . full from the amount I had eaten. While resting in my favorite recliner the fullness subsided as I drifted in and out of peaceful slumber. I could hear the faint sound of rolling thunder in the distance. The storm must have been getting closer as the rumbling became louder and the sweet smell of fresh rain filled the air.

My wife was in the kitchen washing dishes from the supper meal all the while humming her favorite song. Our family pet “Lilly,” a loving dog with long black hair and white spots around her face was lying on the floor beside my recliner as she guarded her family and her home.

I could vaguely hear Lilly as she began a low growl sensing danger from an unknown presence or sound. Suddenly my wife stopped humming as she dropped a dish on the tile floor which shattered into what looked like a million pieces. Looking towards the window over the sink she let out a bone chilling scream.

Startled, I stumbled sleepily into a standing position as I hurried to the kitchen. On entering the kitchen I could see the horror on her face, her lips were quivering as she pointed shakily toward the window. Looking in the direction of the kitchen window I reached for the cabinet to retrieve the pistol that I

kept for family protection. Grabbing the gun from the cabinet, I turned, raising my hand while taking careful aim, fired, missing the mark. The bullet penetrated the wall hitting a water line ricocheting into an electrical wire causing sparks mimicking the ones you would see on the Fourth of July.

Being fully awake and disturbed by now realizing a gun was not the smartest choice for a weapon as the water sprayed and electricity sparked. Suddenly I dissolved into uncontrollable laughter as I saw my soaking wet wife dodging sparks, and observing the smirky grin on the face of the biggest, ugliest rat I have ever seen as it turned and disappeared through the open window.

Easter Reflections

*By Benjamin J. Ladd, US Marine Corps,
1997–2002, US Navy, 2008–2012,
Global War on Terrorism*

CIGARS ARE LIT in a room full of books.

The tobacco doesn't cause cancer.

The smoke fills his mouth as the nicotine pleurably passes into his bloodstream. A few draws and a few minutes pass and a few more draws and in time the cigar is extinguished, discarded with the usual ceremonies.

Another man enters the room and sits down. He opens a newspaper and begins reading. A glance is given to the main headline which reads: "THE MEMORIAL TO PEARL HARBOR IS FINISHED; IT'S DEDICATION MET WITH MOURNING."

The man reflects. His thoughts veer from Nagasaki and Hiroshima to Tokyo and sushi and finally settles on the day's observance of Good Friday. The matzo was purchased this morning along with a bottle of red wine for the communion to take place later. Maybe this will be the year that he rewatches "The Passion of the Christ." At the very least, he knows he will re-read John 18–20. He remembers the first Good Friday (now an ancient memory) he dipped his hand into the wine in order to apply the blood of the Son of God to the door-frames of his own house. Even without the elements, he recounts in remembrance the Lord's brutal sacrifice and the subsequent salvation offered to the household of faith.

After the familiar thoughts of gratitude and reverence subside and the proper amount of time has passed, the man reaches for his pipe and tobacco pouch. The leaves fill the bowl in three pinches as the tamper prepares them for their initial lighting. The pipe has been nearly broken in, and he knows the smoke will be a good one.

The tobacco doesn't cause cancer.

The Christmas of 1964

*By Barbara A. Malone-Verduin, US Army,
1986–2007, Desert Storm/Shield/OIF*

I WAS FOUR IN 1964, sitting upon Santa's lap in a vast warehouse, surrounded by Christmas trees, decorations, Christmas music and other children standing in lines waiting to see Santa. Each child received a box of ribbon candy and a random, small toy, such as, a doll, a train, a car, a paddle and a ball, jacks and a ball, playing cards, or a coloring book and crayons. We were all delighted to receive these gifts. I received a doll, but I decided to trade it with another child for more ribbon candy. I favored the ribbon candy over the doll, especially, because I was hungry and because the ribbon candy was delicious. If anybody didn't want their ribbon candy, I would take it. The ribbon candy always takes me back to Christmas of 1964, when I had my first memory of the shocking burst of cool, refreshing peppermint ribbon candy, sugar and sitting on Santa's lap telling him what I wanted for Christmas, which was probably a doll that walked, talked and laughed, something I recall telling my Mother I wanted for Christmas.

I also recall on Christmas Eve of 1964, I saw Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer's shiny red nose blinking through the sky leading Santa's sleigh. I still remember the thrill of seeing that image. Of course, I found out later in life that the red blink-

ing light I saw was an airplane's red light flashing and blinking. What a time it was, a backwards glance into the past, like a blink of an eye, my first memories of the smells and tastes of ribbon candy, meeting Santa Claus, the twinkle in his eyes, the twinkle in mine, and the twinkle of Rudolph's red shiny nose in the sky and the Christmas of 1964.

The Dress

*By Barbara A. Malone-Verduin, US Army,
1986–2007, Desert Storm/Shield/OIF*

I NEEDED A NEW DRESS for my baptism, and not just any dress. This dress had to be special. It had to be a white dress to represent innocence, purity and new beginnings. As I shopped for the dress, I found one that was not exactly white, but egg shell white. The top part of the dress was like a shawl made of a lacey, crocheted pattern draped around the shoulders and buttoned in the front. Up to the neckline. The bottom part of the dress was gauzy cotton. Midway at the torso was an elastic band gathering and connecting the top and bottom of the dress. The dress was perfect for the occasion and served its' purpose. It was a great dress for other occasions as well.

The following year, I was due to graduate from high school, and the dress was perfect for this occasion too. The following year, my sister Dottie borrowed it for her graduation. Then, in the following consecutive years, my other sisters, Susie, Theresa, and Trudy wore it for their graduation. It's a good thing we were all small in size and we all looked fabulous in it. The dress became the "traditional graduation dress." When I was due to graduate college, of course, I had planned on wearing the dress. I knew it would still fit me, since I weighed the same since when I graduated from high school. I attempted to get the dress from Trudy, who was the last person to wear it and graduate in the dress, but, we could not find the dress. Tears gorged from my

disappointed eyes. I was devastated and in a panic. I doubted I would ever find another dress like the “traditional graduation dress.” I suppose I could have had one made, but there wasn’t enough time. Nothing would or could ever replace the symbolic meaning of that particular dress and where it has been and its’ purpose. Eventually, we discovered that Dottie apparently had it last. She remembered wearing it for another occasion. But, could not find it. I was broken hearted. The chain had been broken. I was bitter about it, but I got over it. Dottie bought me a new dress. It was a white cotton dress with a pink flower at the right breast, and a thin, pink belt for the waist. It was pretty and comfortable enough, but it was not THE DRESS.

Many years later, the dress had been found at Theresa’s house after she borrowed it for yet another occasion. Eventually, the dress was returned to me. It was a little dingy and had a small tear at the waist band. This was nothing that couldn’t be fixed. I could sew the tear and whiten it a bit. I thought maybe I could wear it for my wedding, but by then, I had gained too much weight, unfortunately, unless I actually did lose the weight by then, which I highly doubted. None of my other sisters could fit in it anymore either. So, I didn’t feel as bad. But, still sad I couldn’t wear it.

I still have the dress. It is safeguarded under a plastic bag in a closet at my home. It is available for my great niece to wear for her graduation, if she desires to wear it. If my son ever had a girl, she could wear it for her graduation too, if she desired. The irony of the dress is that it amazingly survived two different house fires. The dress was meant to be.

Unfortunately, my sister Theresa passed away from brain cancer last year. I thought I could have Theresa wear it one last time and lay the dress to rest with her wearing it. We would see Theresa and the dress one last time. But, since she was cre-

mated, her husband and children decided not to use it. Otherwise, they loved the suggestion and the offer, but respectfully declined. I understood. No hard feelings.

I still have the dress and now my niece Brianna who is eight years young is ecstatic about wearing it for her graduation. I hope she wears it for her graduation to keep the tradition going and so on . . . and so on for as long as the dress can last. Thank you Dress. I love you.

The Mysterious Peacock Mask

*By Barbara A. Malone-Verduin, US Army,
1986–2007, Desert Storm/Shield/OIF*

REBECA WAS DRAWN to the peacock mask at the thrift shop. It exuded a mysterious, yet familiar vibe, that spoke to her, as if she personally knew the mask and it knew her—a soul mate from the past.

“Dance with me,” the mask sensuously summoned.

“Show me your magic,” Rebecca erotically whispered.

Rebecca touched the mask’s silky smooth feathers, appealing to her sensuality, sending positive vibrations throughout her body, mind, spirit and soul. She placed the mask on her face. Rejuvenating jolts connected her to the mask in a mystical, loving way. She began the dance of love, moving in dizzying circles of figure eights. She knew what she had to do. She danced to attract her soul mate. She felt him through the mask. She felt him in her arms as he led her in a trance dance. Suddenly, Rebecca stopped dancing. The mask felt hot, hotter with every passing second. It started to melt into her face. Rebecca screamed and clawed at her face, trying to tear the mask off. But, it would not budge. She felt a painful, diabolical strain in her eyes, as if some sort of entity was trying to get through her own eyes. The entity took over the mask and Rebecca’s entire body, sucking the essence out of her. Rebecca was no longer in control. The mask’s eyes began to glow a fiery red, orange and yellow. A loud fero-

cious growl roared out of Rebecca's mouth, stunning her in disbelief. Again, she was helpless to control it. When an electrical short abruptly shut the lights off in the thrift shop, the mask lost its power and Rebecca fell to the floor breathless and dazed.

"What happened?" Rebecca, inquired, shaking her head back and forth.

A crowd of thrift shoppers stood around her in awe, helpless as Rebecca.

One of the thrift shoppers asked, "Are you alright?"

"I feel like, someone hit me over the head with a hot iron frying pan," she mumbled weakly. Then she saw the mask lying on the floor. "Get that thing away from me! Get it away! Get it away! I never want to see that thing again!" she screamed.

The owner of the thrift shop put a lighted match to the mask. The mask sizzled and let out a moan, as it turned to ash.

"That's the last time I will ever touch anything that looks mysterious or speaks to me. I will never be that curious again." Rebecca vowed.

The Peacock Theme

*By Barbara A. Malone-Verduin, US Army,
1986–2007, Desert Storm/Shield/OIF*

PEACOCKS HAVE ALWAYS fascinated and inspired me with their brilliant patterns of flamboyant colored feathers of royal blue, shades of purple and emerald green, my favorite colors. They also have brown and black speckled sporadically throughout their feathers. I was amazed to find out that the male peacock has these colorful features for attracting the female peacock, which do not have the colors or the spread and array of feathers that the male possesses. The female is known as the “peahen, the babies are the peachicks, and a family is a party. Hens lay about five to eight eggs and incubate them for twenty eight days.” The more a peacock’s feathers stand out, the higher the chances he finds his soul mate. The “eyespot” on the feathers trigger and attract the peahen’s attention, while the peacock shakes and rattles his fan of feathers known as, “train-rattling” to “hypnotize” his mate with the eyespot. “The peacock’s feathers can weigh about sixty pounds or more and spread to 150 to 200 feathers, which grow to about five to seven feet long. Peacocks are the largest flying birds and have a life span of twenty years.

Peacocks belong to the pheasant family, also known as peafowl.” Other than its gorgeous colors, the peacock has another unique feature. It has “four toes that face front and one points directly backward. The parties spend the majority of their time walking around seeking food, such as, insects, plants and small

creatures. At night they “roost” high up in trees to avoid predators and to protect themselves.” Incidentally, “three species of peacocks exist, namely, the Indian peacock, which is a national bird of India, the African peacock and the green peacock. In India cultures the peacock is kept as a pet, and peacock feathers are used throughout the home for protection from negative energies. In Feng Siu, peacocks are recognized as good luck and protection. They also symbolize love and beauty.” For these reasons, I am inspired and in awe of peacocks. In fact, I idolize them so much, I have a Zen-like, meditation, yoga workout room dedicated to peacock paraphernalia, which includes, pictures, figurines, jewelry boxes, dish bowls, cups, notebooks, Christmas decorations, and various other objects with peacock shapes and colors. I adore the peacock, and I am especially attracted to its’ flattering, mesmerizing colors. I have been inspired to write about them, draw and paint them, make costume designs and wear them to dance “The Peacock Dance” to interpret and demonstrate the alluring act of attracting a soul mate, if I were a peacock, and mostly to show the elegance and beauty of the peacock. I danced rhythmically to music called “Les Lapins (which I believe means rabbits) and Panthers” taken from a CD I bought in Paris at the Lido, a dinner theatre, where I saw an extraordinary, sensational dinner dance show called “C’est Magique!” While performing this peacock dance, I wore a costume I created and entered it in the Creative Arts Competition for Veterans, along with other peacock themed entries of a drawing and an etching of a peacock, along with the writing of this peacock themed essay. I also entered this essay in the Call for Artists/Writers with VSA Texas. I found focusing on these projects to be the best therapy I or anyone could ever have to help overcome Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or to help with whatever pain anyone is going through or whatever

issues one needs to overcome. This is a positive distraction for getting my mind off any issues I have had in the Army, Iraq, and in my past. This therapy also helps me to be able to deal with any issues I might have in the future. I also enjoy participating in art and writing projects to express myself. I have been thinking about getting my Master of Arts Degree in Expressive Arts Therapy, concentrating in dance, movement, yoga/meditation, creative writing, and art, while using and listening to music to enhance these experiences. Consequently, I intend to focus on all positivity and avoid any negativity. I intend to focus on spiraling into the vortex of an onward and upward journey towards positivity. In conclusion, the peacock will symbolically help me to spread my wings and fly with the peacock parties, while I am protected by them and believe in them, and I believe in myself.

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Push

By Bill O'Connell, US Navy, 1987–1992, Desert Storm, US Army, 2006–present, OIF/OND

IN THE MIDDLE OF a summer night, we arrived in Baghdad. I saw the blinking lights of Apache helicopters off in the distance. Enemy tracer fire chased them in the darkness.

Later, I settled into the top rack of a bunk bed and looked at my watch. It was just past four o'clock in the morning of our first day in Iraq. They did not let us sleep. Our mission was explained a few hours later. The area of operations was populated mostly by Muslims of the Sunni sect, in a place called Ameriya. An uprising among Al-Qaeda forces against the Shi'a death squads that moved in had destabilized the region. Everybody was killing each other. The prospect of getting into bed with the Sunni, Al-Qaeda faction satisfied my curiosity as to how desperate our situation was.

As the following days passed, and we got our weapons and vehicles ready, our mission was turned upside down. My tank platoon was attached to an infantry company and relocated to the Mansour district, outside the area we had originally planned. While Ameriya was largely Sunni, our new area of operations was mostly Shi'a.

Once considered a partner, the Sunni, Al-Qaeda, was now our enemy again, along with Jaysh al-Mahdi, "The Army of Mahdi." Also known as JAM, it was not a designated terrorist organization, but an armed political faction vying for control of

Iraq within our sector. JAM was conducting criminal activities and was hostile toward coalition forces. We would be fighting against both sides of the conflict.

We ventured into our area of southwestern Baghdad, a platoon of sixteen tankers and a few infantrymen loaned out to us. Once a densely populated area, our sector looked like a ghost town. Sectarian cleansing by Jaysh al-Mahdi had pushed most of the Sunnis out. We found dead civilians almost daily, the bodies lying by the side of the road. Stray dogs would pick at the corpses as we marked locations on our GPS equipment and pushed the information up the chain of command. Sometimes, the Iraqi Army would strafe the bodies with machine-gun fire to see if they had been booby-trapped with explosives, which was a common technique of the insurgents.

The outgoing unit we replaced had a very light footprint in the area. Their tour was winding down as the surge was beginning. We turned up the heat and made our presence felt in areas with names such as The Field of Death, and The Gauntlet. Those were among the places the outgoing unit cautioned us to avoid.

The violence kicked off immediately. Improvised Explosive Devices and small-arms fire started to hit the infantry platoons. On my platoon's first time outside the wire, my platoon leader's Humvee was hit by an IED. The gunner was a teenager, hit with shrapnel in his head and neck. But he survived and was sent home.

That night, as we were sleeping in a building occupied by American soldiers and Iraqi police, I was awakened by the echo of an explosion. I drifted back to sleep. Then somebody woke me up and told me to get ready to go. I looked at my watch. It was just after eleven o'clock.

Another platoon had been hit by an IED. I got my gear on

as fast as I could. Soon, we were in our Humvees, and on the way. The radio was buzzing with traffic. We knew, as we hurried to our objective, that something terrible had happened. The assessment we heard from the scene was bad: A catastrophic kill, with four Soldiers Killed in Action (KIA). And now, an understrength platoon, with one Wounded in Action (WIA), trying to provide security until help arrived.

It just kept running through my head . . . four KIA . . .

I was driving the Humvee. We came around a corner intersection. I saw something my mind could not accept. There was a Humvee engulfed in fire and upside down, by the side of the road. After that, everything that happened is a blur of images I cannot forget and stuck in my head. We had to establish security on the far side of the blast site. I drove forward, not able to avoid the body parts of Soldiers, there were so many. The Humvee bumped and bounced as I did my best to get past the vehicle that had been hit.

We set up security and got out. It was a nightmare that lasted more than six hours. Two of the bodies could not be found for some time. Eventually, an Iraqi woman led members of our recovery team to her back yard, about seventy-five meters from the explosion. She had covered the remains of one of our Soldiers with a blanket. Body parts were collected from even farther away. Parts of the Humvee were brought out of homes. Some items, like rifles and other sensitive items, could not be found.

As dawn crept over the horizon, we left the area with what we had and made our way back to Camp Liberty. At that time, it was impossible to believe the Soldiers that had been taken from us.

In the aftermath, at Camp Liberty, I was told to put the body armor and uniforms of the dead into metal trash cans and burn

everything. Everything changed after that. It was like we were out for blood. We captured several insurgents. I fully participated. My platoon destroyed, burned, and killed. Sometimes, people just trying to get home, not our enemy but in the wrong place at the wrong time. In a lot of ways, we were out of control. We had seemed, at times, to be searching for payback. For me, I just wanted to hurt people. Make them feel what I felt that night in Baghdad.

When we got home, we went on leave. And for three months I lived in a room in the barracks. I was getting ready for a transfer from Georgia to Texas, where my wife and sons were waiting for me. I stayed up at night until dawn, every night, cutting and burning myself. I don't know why. Blood smells like the taste of iron in my mouth. I still hear the screams of the father of a boy we killed while on a daytime foot patrol. And I remember the lust for revenge went away at that moment, and feeling hollow inside.

Celebrating the Goodness

*By Orie, US Army, 2005–2006,
2009–2010, Afghanistan*

HELLO MY FOUR LEGGED FRIEND. We have both grown in so many ways in the three short years that we have known each other. You came into my life when you were just ten weeks old. We nourished you and gave you so much love. Little did I know that you were going to be the best healing therapy for my psychological and physical pains in the years to come. We have grown accustomed to each other that your gentle touch has wiped away my tears when I have been in a bad place. In return I have cleaned up your vomit and small accidents, but that's only a small price to pay for everything that you do for me day in and day out. We have learned each other's daily routines that you can sense when I'm having an anxiety attack. Your soft ivory curly fur feels so soothing against my skin that is so therapeutic when you let me pet you and hold you until I come out of the dark.

Simba, your brown eyes and multi-pooch size stature have seen my struggles and darkest days. I am grateful that you have stood by me for every challenge that I have had to face good and bad. You have given me hope when I have felt hopeless. You have given me strength when I have felt weak physically and mentally. You don't realize this, but you have become my ray of sunshine. Since you have come into my life, you have helped me

feel good about myself that I am slowly starting to have more confidence. I really don't know what I would do if I didn't have you in my life.

I thank you for helping me grow in every aspect of my life. Every day is a new day for both of us. You have helped me to go outside and breathe the fresh air again. All you ask of me is to take you on a walk so you can chase the birds and your pet friends hear you bark.

Every day I celebrate you and your furry friends for all the goodness and joy you bring not only to me, but other veterans. Your companionship has done wonders.

Praying for Rain

By Tom Orlando, US Air Force, 1972–1985

TLEZ-ATLI' OPENED the large chest and examined her ceremonial clothes. She knew she had to wear something sophisticated befitting the situation, and yet easy to remove. Putting aside her cape and other finery, she pulled out a tapas cloth that had been made by her great, great grandmother. The old cloth, made by pounding the stems of cacogi and puut plants, was soft and pliable. The sacred symbols painted on it in the blue ink of a chalotl snail were almost worn out, but this would be perfect.

She looked about the one-room, woven twig building that had been the home she shared with her husband. It wasn't much, but it was large enough to house their bedding, their dining and preparation area, and of course, the paraphernalia of the profession to which she had been called. For eight years now she had tended to the health, both physical and emotional, of her people. With potion and wisdom, and intercessory prayer, she had nurtured them and now she would do so again, for the very last time.

No rain had fallen in months. The river had dried to a small trickle, barely enough to water the ever smaller gardens the women had scratched out of the hard dirt. The once lush, green valley that had been their home was dying. Yesterday, her husband had come to her after a meeting with the tribal elders, and gruffly told her to be ready for today. It was the spring equinox, and they needed her to perform an ancient ritual to appease Lalo, the God of Rain.

She was nervous. No one in the village could remember the last time this magic had been used, but all had heard stories about it. She also knew that after being touched by Lalo, she would be considered taboo, too powerful to stay in her community.

She thought of the young women who were attending to the holy site, cleaning the large flat rock beside the ancient tree. Many of them had sat with her under that tree, learning the sacred ways of women. That tree was amazing. It was the only green thing as far as the eye could see. Its taproot must descend all the way down to the underworld, into the veins of the Earth Mother Goddess, Lazolte, herself.

The time was getting close. Carrying the sacred cloth and her ornaments, she walked slowly to the women's lodge. As she entered, she could hear singing and feel the heat of the steam bath that had been prepared for her. An ancient woman approached and started to untie her hair.

"You must be so proud, being chosen to be the gift to Lalo. You will be remembered for generations as being the one who saved your people from this drought." Two other crones removed her robes. They rubbed her down with mashed talattabaya leaves, and a pleasing aroma arose.

"It is a great honor," Tlez-Atli' was able to respond. Her mind reeled with thoughts about what was soon to occur. In her mind she could see the sanctified obsidian blade, a common tool used in these types of rituals. This time the knife would not take her life, but instead would initiate a ceremony that would leave her outcast from her husband, her friends, her entire community. Tlez-Atli' will assume the sins of her tribe and as such will become a pariah, forced to leave everything she had known her entire life, and wander the hills, welcome nowhere. She was ready to do this, as it was her duty as the Shaman of the tribe, to keep the gods pacified in the first place. Never the less, the thought of bolting, running to the hills, crossed her mind. Of

course, that would be a stupid thing to do; it would only make matters worse. Her tribe would hunt her down and kill her, her people would die of starvation, and for generations the magnitude of her sin would poison the ground a day's walk in all directions.

Tlez-Atli's attendants presented her with a steaming cup of honey-sweetened liquid she knew would relax her in preparation for the ceremony. She drank the draught whose suppressed but innate bitterness clawed at the back of her throat, and leaned back as her nails were expertly trimmed and painted blue. Next she was washed all over with warm water perfumed with flowers picked on the sacred mountain. Finally, her hair was anointed with the finest fragrant oils, and plaited in the style seen only in ancient murals on the walls of temples. A robe was placed on Tlez-Atli's shoulders and she was led from the steam room to another, where she reclined and her entire body was rubbed with scented grease. As the women worked on her, singing the sacred chants, she recognized the effect of the herbs that infused the grease. The gentle heat was followed by a delightful tingling sensation that made her skin pleasurable sensitive to each touch of her masseuse. Every square inch of her body was treated this way, with special attention given to her most sensitive pleasure points: her ears, neck, nipples, vulva, and anus.

Tlez-Atli' stood and the sacred tapas cloth was draped over her shoulders and folded across the front of her body. Her attendant sounded a drum four times in rapid succession, and four brawny young men of her tribe entered the chamber and lifted her onto their shoulders. They carried her, arms spread wide, past the hut she had occupied for the last five years with her husband, who now stood at the door with the three lovely teenage women he had been given in compensation. He fell in

behind them as, one by one; the other men of the tribe joined the procession.

By the time they reached the holy rock, the entire male population above the age whereupon they could grow dark hair in their genital regions was in attendance. Though she could not see them, Tlez-Atli' knew the women were there as well, forming an outer circle of observers to the sacrifice about to take place.

Tlez-Atli' was placed gently upon the holy stone, her limbs secured in a splayed posture to prevent her from injuring herself or anyone else in the throws of transcendental visions. The restraints were woven from the strong thread of the nupata spider, known for its man-sized webs that could snare small animals. The ropes made from these threads would hold her while not leaving marks or harming her in any way. A tear rolled from Tlez-Atli's eye at the thought of how much they loved her. One of the elders unwrapped her robe to expose her exquisite and private places and the sacred tattoos that covered her torso. Her nipples became erect as the cool mountain air blew past them, and the fine dark hairs on her arms and legs stood up. Her eyes closed and her mind wandered to the pleasurable sensations her body was experiencing as the elders droned the ancient prayer designed to enlist the favor of the Rain God in this ritual. The sacred knife was held high in presentation to the throng, whose howls of encouragement were deafening.

The blade was lowered, and, systematically, starting at her head and continuing to her feet, every hair was shaved. Then the role was called, and every male of age lined up at her feet; their naked erections too having been anointed with the same sacred unguent used on her body.

The elders' prayer changed and Tlez-Atli' opened her eyes. As she looked at the men, young and old, standing before her,

penises tumid, eagerly anticipating this event, the air around them shimmered. Her insides quivered with panic, but just as quickly the sensation passed. She was Shaman. She noticed a warming sensation as if a wall of heated air emanated from the men in front of her. It seemed to focus on her vagina. She looked at the first man that stepped up. He was shimmering in the sun, young and beautiful, and his eyes showed his nervousness at what may have been his first time. She smiled gently at him, and then suddenly . . . everything was gone.

She was looking up at a cloudless pale-blue, heat-filled sky—her skin felt parched—so parched it was cracking in places, and oh so sharply painful. She looked at her body and saw only the dry parched ground. Where her breasts should be were dry piles of sand like termite mounds . . . where her pubic hair should have been stood dry tufts of grass . . . she tried to lift her hands, but she had none—nor had she legs—she had become Lazolte. Her soul cried out as she felt something drive into her, and then pound into her again and again. It stopped, yet after a sweet moment of peace it started again, over and over again. It was a ceaseless pattern that wouldn't stop. Her very essence lamented at the intrusion.

Suddenly the air shifted around her, and she opened her eyes to see the heat in the sky coalescing into a bolt of lightning. She screamed as it fell towards her, and scorched the dry dirt skin of her body. The driving syncopation ceased for a moment and she could hear the wind murmuring as if it was speaking to her, but she couldn't understand the words. The percussive tempo, sometimes allegro, sometimes adagio, before long resumed. Again the air sheared and lightening fell, and the cadence paused, but soon restarted. And once more the air split, but this time she heard a scream of pain as the lightning bolt landed—and for a moment reality shifted.

She was back in her own body, lying on the stone altar. One of the younger village men was lying on her heavily, his body at a strange angle. His eyes were rolled back in his head and he jerked spasmodically. As the elders lifted him, her eyes widened seeing that his hair had gone totally white and there was a dark burn mark on his lower back at the point where his buttocks divided. She had felt the energy trail of the lightning that had passed through him into her body. With this awareness there was a tremendous searing pain, and she lost consciousness.

Her mind swam—geometric shapes of dazzling colors flowed across the insides of her closed eye lids. She could hear the celestial song. She recalled her parents singing to her as she played by the stream, the stream that gathered up the blessings of Lalo and presented them to her people.

She woke once again in that space of being the goddess. The energy that had caused her so much pain began to radiate throughout the dry soil that was her body, stimulating the seeds that had been dormant for so long. They were awakening. The sensation caused thrills of pleasure up and down her skin, from the inside out. She could feel the Life Force within her earthen body nurturing the seeds and calling them forth. She could feel the life force within the seeds calling to the rain, and she could feel the atmosphere around her answering that call.

More and more pleasure rolled though her being as she felt the energy of the Earth being stroked back to life by the god. Her breasts swelled and peaked, wanting to feed. The god suckled her breasts, and her womb opened and called the seeds. The feelings grew more intense once again as the energy of the god slid into her, impinging and extracting slowly and sensuously, building into a quickening, driving crescendo. She experienced the most intense orgasm she had ever felt, and knew that the sowing was done.

As Tlez-Atli' returned to herself, she felt the sweet rain on her naked body and opened her eyes to see her husband lying with her, she felt his rough farmer's hands fondling her breasts. She could feel him shrinking inside her, and knew that the magic was complete.

Lazolte had awakened. Her valley would live.

Daddies Can Be Good Mommies Too

By Tiberias, US Army, 1972–1974, Germany

MARISOL COULD REMEMBER the day her daddy came home from the hospital after his accident. Her mommy said, “You will need to be a big girl now and help me around the house because Daddy is hurt, and he will be home for a while. I have to work so you will have to help with the cooking, cleaning, laundry and taking care of your little sister.” Marisol was scared because she didn’t know how to do any of those things. Marisol was only ten years old.

Within the first week Daddy was already cooking breakfast for everyone. He taught Marisol how to make scrambled eggs and bacon. He had Kaitlyn in the high chair and was feeding her while Mommy came running into the kitchen, grabbing a slice of toast and a cup of coffee as she headed out the door. “Have a good day,” she said.

Daddy smiled at Marisol and said, “See, cooking is not that hard, just mix it with a little love and your meals will always turn out perfect.”

By the time Marisol got her books and went to the garage, her daddy already had Kaitlyn in her car seat. “You’re fast, Daddy,” Marisol said with a smile.

He dropped Marisol off in front of the school. He got out of the car and gave her a kiss and said, “Have a good day, sweet-

heart.” He waited as Marisol turned around at the door to wave goodbye as she entered the building.

When he got home, Daddy put a load of laundry to wash then sat down with Kaitlyn to watch her favorite video. It was about a princess that attended a great ball. Kaitlyn just loved it when her daddy would dance with her. She just laughed and giggled as he would pick her up and twirl her around and around. Each day after the video, Kaitlyn and her daddy would go for a long walk. This would always make Kaitlyn very excited because on their walks, Daddy would always let her pick a pretty flower. The neighbors just loved Kaitlyn because she was so tiny. They didn’t mind if she picked a flower as she took her daily stroll through the neighborhood. By the time they got home, Kaitlyn was hungry and ready for lunch. After lunch she would stretch and give a big yawn, letting Daddy know it was time for her nap. Daddy would give her a bottle of milk and rock her until she was fast asleep.

While Kaitlyn slept, Daddy was busy in the kitchen preparing dinner for the family. He listened very closely to the monitor just in case Kaitlyn woke up. She usually woke up in a happy mood and made noises to let Daddy know she was awake. Daddy would check her diaper to see if it needed to be changed. Daddy started to potty train her and sat patiently as Kaitlyn would talk to him about the flowers and how she wanted to go play in the flower beds or in the garden and pick tomatoes.

It was time to pick up Marisol from school. After school Marisol did her homework, then her chores. Daddy sat down by her to read the paper she had written for English. “Very good, sweetheart,” he said with a big smile. Daddy taught her how to fold the laundry and put it away in the dresser and what to hang in the closet. Sometimes they would clean the house or wash the car. Daddy taught Marisol how to work in the garden and

flower beds too. With Daddy helping her, it didn't seem like work, it was fun. Daddy would always ask how her day went at school. Marisol was all too happy to tell him all about it.

Some days Marisol and her daddy would be in the kitchen together and he would teach her how to cook different meals. Today it was roast, mashed potatoes and gravy, with green beans and a salad. While the roast and green beans cooked, Daddy made mashed potatoes. Marisol was busy shredding the lettuce. Then Daddy taught her how to slice tomatoes, cucumbers, and red cabbage to make the salad. Kaitlyn watched videos from her highchair while Marisol and Daddy were busy making dinner.

Mommy walked in the door as the table was being set. She smiled and said, "Hello, I'm home." Everyone greeted Mommy with a big hug. She said, "What a great job you have done setting this table Marisol."

Marisol gave her a big grin saying, "Thank you, Mommy." They all sat down at the table and said grace. Mommy talked about her day at work, Marisol talked about her day at school, and Daddy talked about the fun he had picking vegetables in the garden with Kaitlyn. It was noisy.

After dinner Marisol would wash the dishes. Mommy would work in the flower beds. Daddy would water the garden with Kaitlyn. When all their work was finished, they would all would watch television.

Soon it was time for Kaitlyn's bath. Mommy would prepare her clothes for work while Daddy bathed Kaitlyn and got her ready for bed. With bottle in hand, Daddy would sit in the rocker with Kaitlyn, and she would soon be fast asleep. Just before she went to bed Mommy would brush Marisol's hair. Once he put Kaitlyn in her crib, Daddy would come and say good-night to Marisol. "Goodnight, sweetheart. Don't forget your prayers," as he kissed her on her forehead.

“I won’t, Daddy,” Marisol said with a smile.

After a few weeks Daddy was back at work. Mommy was home again and things were back to normal. As Marisol lay in bed one night, she thought back on all the things she learned to do while Daddy was at home recovering from his surgery. She learned how to cook, clean house, wash dishes, wash the car, take care of Marisol, and work in the garden and the flower beds! She would be able to use this knowledge the rest of her life. As she thought about it, to Marisol, the most important lesson she learned was that daddies can be good mommies too.

The Eyes of Your Heart

By Tiberias, US Army, 1972–1974, Germany

JADEN WAS CONFUSED. He had been to many churches looking for God but had no luck finding Him. This Sunday he was with his dad at the Catholic Church. He didn't understand what it all meant, but he just copied what everyone else did. At times he would kneel. Sometimes he would stand and at other times sit, but why? When the priest spoke, he used a language Jaden did not understand. His dad said it was Latin. Sometimes the priest spoke in English, but still, he'd throw in some Latin too. Jaden prayed hard and looked around, but where was God?

Last Sunday he was in his mom's church. She was a Baptist. The service was all in English, and Jaden liked that. The people would sing songs, but only the pastor got to speak. He gave what they called the "sermon." It was usually a story of Jesus and things He did to teach us how to live holy. They never had to kneel, but there was lots of sitting and standing. The people were very quiet when the pastor spoke. Jaden prayed hard here too, but where was God?

He told his older cousin Adam about looking for God, and Adam assured Jaden that God was in his church and he invited Jaden to come with them the next Sunday and his mom said, "Yes." This church was called the Assembly of God. It was different. There people shouted, *Amen!*, or *Hallelujah*, or *Praise*

the Lord. They sang and played music, and people jumped up and down and clapped their hands. Jaden prayed here too, but where was God?

Finally after talking with his cousin Nathan, he decided to try his church. Nathan's church was a Charismatic church. There the pastor preached, the people shouted, jumped, and danced. They raised their hands in the air and sang. The people were very friendly and talked about how much they loved Jesus. They would call people to come up for prayer for healing or whatever needs they might have, and the people would rush to the front of the church to be prayed for. Jaden was very excited, but where was God?

Jaden's bedroom window faced his neighbor's bedroom window. One day he noticed Mr. Jones kneeling on the floor of his room, and it looked like he was praying. He had never noticed this before, and he became curious. Jaden decided to keep an eye on Mr. Jones, and every day around the middle of the day Mr. Jones was on his knees and it looked like he was talking with God! But Mr. Jones never went to church. At least not that Jaden knew about.

Jaden talked to his mom about Mr. Jones and his praying. She said, "You know, Mr. Jones is a very good man. He is always helping someone in need or feeding the homeless. He always has a smile on his face and seems to really know what it is to live in peace. He is a wise and generous man, and maybe he can help you find God." Jaden liked Mr. Jones and gave it some thought before he ran next door, but Mr. Jones was not home.

One day the garage door was up, and there was Mr. Jones, working on his car. Jaden thought this would be a good time to ask him some questions. "Hey, Mr. Jones," smiled Jaden as he strolled into the garage.

Mr. Jones immediately stopped what he was doing and

greeted Jaden with a big smile. “Well, Jaden, what brings you over?”

With no hesitation, Jaden blurted out, “Why don’t you go to church, Mr. Jones?” It took him by surprise, and before he could respond, Jaden presented his problem. “You see, I’ve been looking for God for the last few weeks, and I just can’t find Him. I’ve been to nearly half a dozen churches and prayed hard, and He wasn’t there!” Jaden thought half a dozen churches should impress Mr. Jones.

“You say a whole half a dozen, huh?” Mr. Jones tried to sound as if he were truly astonished. Without addressing the question of church, Mr. Jones asked Jaden a question. He said, “Jaden, have you ever tried to see Him with the eyes of your heart?”

Jaden was shocked. “What, the eyes of your heart? Now, Mr. Jones, everybody knows that your heart cannot see.”

Mr. Jones had that patient look that says *I know something you don’t* that adults give kids sometimes as he said, “Have you tried it?”

“Well, no,” Jaden said somewhat sheepishly.

“I’ll tell you what Jaden. When you go to bed tonight just say, ‘Lord Jesus, please open the eyes of my heart. I want to see You.’ And just believe that He will do it.”

Jaden thought about it, decided it would be easy, and said to Mr. Jones, “Okay, tonight I will do just that!”

That night after his Mom had tucked him in bed and Jaden had said his prayers, he waited for her to close his door. Jaden wasn’t too sure it would work, but the more he thought about it, Mr. Jones had never told him a lie. So, with a big hopeful breath he said, “Open the eyes of my heart, Lord. I want to see You.” Jaden waited for a few minutes, and his eyes became so heavy he could barely keep them open. Suddenly, his entire room was filled with a brilliant light! He had never seen anything so

bright. As he stared into that brightness, a figure stepped out, and Jaden just knew it was Jesus Himself. "It's You!" Jaden exclaimed, unable to contain his excitement. Jaden started asking questions immediately. "I looked for you in so many churches, but you weren't there. Where were you?" he asked.

Jesus smiled and answered, "Jaden, I was there, and I heard your prayers."

"Well, which church were you at?"

"All of them," replied Jesus. "Jaden, I have many people in the Catholic Church that seek Me with all their heart, and I love them. I have many people in the Baptist Church that seek Me with all their heart, and I love them. I have many people in the Assemblies of God that seek Me with all their heart, and I love them. I also have many people in Charismatic and Non-denominational Churches that seek Me with all their heart, and I love them," Jesus said.

"Well, what about Mr. Jones? He doesn't even go to church." Jaden inquired.

"Yes, I know Mr. Jones very well and speak with him every day. I love him too," He said. "All those on the Earth who seek Me with all their heart, I love dearly. I even love those that don't seek Me out, but I wish they would. I gave My life for all of you, and you all belong to Me. Jaden, I have something for you to do for Me," Jesus told him.

Jaden said, "Lord, I will do anything for You."

Jesus said, "Tell the people I am alive, that I am real, and I want from them the most precious thing they possess." Jesus said, "I want their time. Tell them that if they will speak to Me that I will not only hear them, but I will answer them." He continued, "I will speak to them and guide their path when they miss it."

Jesus spoke with Jaden until he was fast asleep. When he

woke up He couldn't see Him, but he knew Jesus was still there. He ran and told his Mom what happened that night. He was so excited and said he was going to tell Nathan and Adam all about it too. He ran next door and yelled, "I saw Him! I saw Him!" to Mr. Jones.

Mr. Jones smiled and said, "He told me He was going to pay you a visit, Jaden."

Jaden smiled real big and said, "Well, He did, and I will never forget it. I saw Him with the eyes of my heart!"



Screenwriting



Weeds in the Garden of Gold

By Skip Bellon, US Navy, 1975–1980,
Vietnam Era

ZOOM IN ON a typical suburban back yard. Surrounded by a six foot tall security fence on both sides. The very back of the yard butts up against the garage and a gravel alley. Next to the garage is a garden. While half of the garden is ripe with early summer vegetables and flowers, the half closet to the garage is about to be made ready for fall pumpkins. We see the gardener, mother, on her hands and knees near the garden and some garden implements. Two children are sorting seeds in the garage.

MOTHER, whistling and singing: Whistle while you work . . .
(whistles)

La da da da dee da da.

RENEE (*ten years old*): Ma! Derek is using the seeds to spell out bad words on the cement.

MOTHER: Renee, your little brother will always be spelling bad words on the cement, or saying them to his teacher. Why don't you sit out here and help me pull weeds?

RENEE: Aw, Mom. Do I have to?

MOTHER: No. You don't have to. But supper might be late if you don't help me. You know Derek's gonna slow me down, too. So it's either pull weeds, or keep an eye on Derek . . .

RENEE: OK. OK. I'll help pull weeds.

MOTHER: Here, you take this hand fork and trowel and break up the clumps and pull the weeds, while I use the hoe and break up the ground ahead of you. I'll be able to cover more area, faster, than you can with those tools, so when I finish I'll come over and help you.

RENEE: Sweet.

(Renee moves to a spot in the garden where her mother had already started and kneels down on the ground and starts weeding. Mother grabs the hoe and walks to the edge of the same area.)

MOTHER: DEREK! Quit spelling words in the garage and come out here and sit by your sister.

(Renee gives her mother a quizzical, pleading, look.)

RENEE: Mommm!

MOTHER: Hey . . . that's the way it has to be. You'll understand when you have children of your own.

(Mother, Renee and Derek all take their places in the garden and start weeding.)

RENEE: Now he's making bad words in the dirt, Mom.

MOTHER, whistling and humming: La da da da dee da da.

(Several minutes pass . . .)

MOTHER: Ouch! Dammit!

(Derek and Renee look at each other, quickly. Their mouths both open in disbelief.)

DEREK (*eight years old*) says to Renee: Mother said a bad word.

(Renee mouths the words: I know.

Derek looks at his mother. Renee looks at mom.

Mother decides to move on past her statement.)

MOTHER: I just hit a big ole rock with my hoe.

(Derek and Renee watch her go into the garage to get a shovel.

Derek watches while Renee picks up her two tools and walks

on her knees over to the spot where mother hit the rock. She starts scratching at it with her hand fork.

Mother is coming down from the loft in the garage. She finally found the spade after several minutes of searching. She sees Renee coming into the garage.)

RENEE: Mom, it's yellow.

MOTHER: What's Derek done now?

RENEE: No. Not Derek. The rock. It's yellow. Isn't gold, yellow?

(She held up the hand fork so that her mother could see the gold particles on the tip of it.)

They both exited the garage and walked past Derek on their way to the yellow, gold rock. They noticed that Derek had taken some of the longer weeds and formed them into the word-phrase, "Dammit". They finally reach the spot where mother had dropped the hoe.)

MOTHER: Well, I'll be.

RENEE: See . . . yellow. Just like I told you.

DEREK: I want to see, too.

(They all look at the top of a rock that was definitely not colored brown, or gray, or dirty white, or any of the dull earth tones. As Renee would say, "It's yellow!")

MOTHER: It sure looks gold.

RENEE *(to Derek)*: See, I told you gold was yellow.

(Derek grabs the two-foot long stick he had been using as his own garden implement. An amazing tool that combines the qualities of rake, pick, shovel, hand fork, and AK47 assault rifle.)

DEREK: SUPER HOOOOOO!

(Derek runs over to another weedy area and starts stabbing at a golf ball sized rock in the garden. Mother looks at Renee.)

MOTHER: What did he just say?

RENEE: Super Hoe. He thinks his stick is his hoe and he's looking for a rock to attack.

(Mother contemplates this for a second.)

MOTHER: Aww. Just like his mother.

(Then Derek takes the stick in both hands and starts hitting the rock like a lumber jack would use an axe.)

MOTHER *(to Renee)*: Well, maybe more like his father.

(Mother takes the shovel and puts the edge to the ground, just short of the rock. Pushing down on the blade with her foot, she dislodges the rock from its resting place.)

MOTHER: Holy cow, that's heavy.

(She gets down on her knees and uses the shovel, and Renee's trowel, to hoist the rock up a few inches. Then she takes a rag from out of her back pocket and places it under the rock. Reaching around the rock she grabs the end on the hanky she had just let go of, and pulls it all the way under the rock. She then pulls both ends of the hanky together, much as how a stork carries its bundle to awaiting parents. Then she pulls on the hanky, with not quite all her might. It comes to rest on the surface of the garden.)

MOTHER: Wow. It's even heavy when it's out of the hole.

DEREK: Akk—akk—akk—akk—akk.

(Derek was now shooting at his rock.)

RENEE: What is it, Mom?

MOTHER: I think it might be a big hunk of gold.

(Derek drops his stick and grabs his heart. He spins around on one foot and collapses on the ground.)

DEREK: I'm shot.

RENEE: Is it worth money?

MOTHER: Maybe.

RENEE: Is it worth a lot of money?

MOTHER: Maybe. It's as big as your father's fist.

(She was holding her own fist next to the rock, in comparison.)

RENEE: Will we get something new because of it?

MOTHER *(nods)*: Maybe two or three new somethings.

(Derek had snuck up behind Renee with his stick.)

DEREK: Akk—akk—akk—akk—akk.

RENEE: Aaaahhhhh!

(Mother puts her hand over her mouth to hide her smile.)

RENEE: DEREK . . . ! Mother!

MOTHER: Derek, quit tormenting your sister. Why don't you go in the garage and see if you can spell one of Daddy's words.

DEREK: Kung Fu ATTACK!

(With that he threw his stick all the way to the other side of the yard and ran into the garage. Mother took off her hat and placed it over the large piece of gold. Then she laid some of the tools on top of her hat.)

MOTHER: OK, Renee. Let's go inside and plan a big surprise for your father.

(Renee put her tools in the tool bucket and followed after her mom. She was putting the thousand questions she had, into their proper order.)

MOTHER: Won't your father be surprised.

RENEE: He sure will be.

MOTHER: I think Derek may learn to spell another word.

CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS

MOTHER: Handsome, slim, brunette. Obviously raised right herself, she now imparts her mother's wisdom to her own children. Loves them both . . . proud of her daughter, could go either way on the son. Always does things the right way . . . as she was taught. Fair in all her dealings, even when she has to be strict. Spiritual, not religious. Believes in the deeper meaning of things.

RENEE: Tall for her age. Looks like Mom. Unbridled curios-

ity, and a bridled enthusiasm towards anything Earthy and natural. Understands her lessons, both in school and life.

Strives to find her place in life, as she separates things into black or white. Never stops asking questions.

DEREK (*looks like his father*): Kung Fu ATTACK!

SECOND SCENE

Mother moves her slim body through the maze that is the entryway. She stops to take her gloves off and places them on the shelf above the row of coat hooks. Slipping out of her yard work shoes, she moves over a half-step and slips into her house slippers. She turns, and in the wall mirror before her is the reflection of her daughter.

Everyone has told the mother that her daughter is the spitting image of herself, and she agrees. Long brunette hair is a strong family feature and Renee's brunette hair is placed on top of a tall frame.

RENEE: How much do you think it's worth in money?

MOTHER: I really have no idea.

RENEE: A million dollars?

MOTHER: No. Nowhere near that much.

RENEE: A hundred dollars?

MOTHER: If it's really gold, then yes . . . I would think at least that much. Probably several hundred dollars . . . or even a thousand or two.

RENEE: That's still a lot . . . right?

MOTHER: Well, it's not going to change our lives. But it's a noticeable amount. It sure will be fun finding out.

RENEE: How can it not be gold?

MOTHER: Hmm?

RENEE: You said, "If it's really gold."

MOTHER: Oh, uh . . . well, there are things that look like gold, but are not really gold. And that wouldn't be worth anything much.

(Renee looks intently. She is processing every word her mother says. She was born curious, and loves it when her mother is detailed in her explanations. Which, comes in handy, because her mother is very detail oriented. Renee is specifically remembering an explanation her mother gave her earlier, when they were gardening. She was explaining the difference between the unwanted weeds, and the desired plants.)

RENEE: So it could just be another weed in our garden?

(Her mother had disappeared into the food pantry. While she picked out some dinner items she paused, as she too remembered the weed conversation, and admired her daughter's extrapolation, and she smiled from the pride she felt.)

MOTHER *(her smile became a chuckle)*: Yes, Honey. We could have just pulled a weed from our garden of life.

RENEE: But I hope not.

MOTHER: Me too, but I guess we'll find out.

(Derek comes in from the garage and walks into the kitchen. Mother stops him by putting her hands on his shoulders and leads him back to the entryway.)

MOTHER: Everything that's dirty comes off in here, mister.

(Derek holds up his dirty hands, in response.)

MOTHER: Then straight to the bathroom and wash up.

RENEE: Maybe we could plant a tree in the hole where the gold was. Maybe a cherry tree?

MOTHER: Maybe a money tree.

DEREK: Let's plant a apple tree! Apple tree . . . Apple tree . . .

(His voice trailed off as he ran upstairs to the bathroom.)

Mother moved back to the table and was looking at every food

item in the pantry that was yellow. After all, gold is yellow, and she wanted to leave clues for her husband when he came home. Now she was looking at the bananas, the corn, the macaroni and cheese, and the lemons, and was trying to figure out a way to make it all appetizing.)

MOTHER: Well at least I have a dessert figured out. Renee, go upstairs and get the new \$20 bills that Grandma gave you. Let's make a surprise for father. If all the yellow food doesn't get him asking questions, then a dessert plate with \$20 bills and Goldfish Crackers and Bon-Bons wrapped in gold paper, should raise an eyebrow.

THIRD SCENE

A tall man in his early thirties pulls his car into the alley by the garden and parks next to the garage. Leaving his tool belt and hard hat laying in the back seat, as he always does, he walks past the garden and the lawn tools that are laying out. Looking ahead, he sees Renee standing by the door, holding it open, and smiling broadly.



<http://www.vsatx.org/veteranServices.html>

Cover image by Carol Gonzales, US Air Force, 1982–1990