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## Community, Diversity and Reconciliation in Remote Vietnamese Villages

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# COMMUNITY, DIVERSITY AND RECONCILIATION IN REMOTE VIETNAMESE VILLAGES

Edward Tick, Ph.D.

With a population of over 90 million and growing, Viet Nam is the 14<sup>th</sup> most populous country on the planet. But its land mass is only the size of California and due to climate change is actually shrinking. Not only in its major cities but also throughout the countryside, population density is a significant factor and shapes the organization and structure of communities. Viet Nam is very crowded.

In these conditions, a village is often not what we in the West think of as a village. In remote regions with challenging terrain, such as the Central Highlands where some of the American War's fighting was fiercest and most difficult, there are vast stretches of sparsely populated, steep and rough-hewn green mountains with small scattered hamlets. In these remote regions, especially, live communities, villages or reservations of many of the 54 ethnic minority groups of Viet Nam.

More commonly in Viet Nam, a village is a thick conglomeration of small huts, tiny one -room houses or larger but modest multi-room or few-story dwellings for the more well-off. These are always narrow and situated side by side with perhaps a small plot of land in front or behind, ramshackle sheds for an outhouse or shelter for a pig or chickens if the family is lucky, or part of a communally owned pond for fish if the family is more affluent. Houses are

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Poet, author, psychotherapist and international activist and guide, Edward Tick, Ph.D., ([www.edwardtick.com](http://www.edwardtick.com)) is author of four nonfiction books, including *War and the Soul*, and two volumes of poetry. A specialist in war and trauma healing and the cultures of Viet Nam and Greece, Ed uses the humanities, literature, cross-cultural and ancient psycho-spiritual-cultural practices for healing.



Communal fishing pond

aligned in thick rows along mud and dirt lanes. Community cemeteries dot the landscapes. Garbage is strewn as abundantly as a cash crop in this thick population lacking basic social services. Livelihoods are made in the local markets where, usually while the husband of the family works the fields, the wife plies their modest wares of fruits and vegetables, eggs sold individually, cheap mass-produced market goods, home-made kitchen or garden items, or everyday items procured at a bargain price and resold for a few extra dong (\$1 US = 22,000 VN dong).

In Viet Nam, whether remote rural hamlet or congested commune village, the interdependency, interrelatedness, longevity, religious and cultural traditions and legacies all knit together to create sustaining and intimate communities made of patchworks of extended families.

I have traveled to Viet Nam every year since 2000. In my experience the Vietnamese sense of community in which everyone is family easily and joyously extends to visitors of even the most diverse and alien backgrounds. This is especially moving as in Viet Nam *we Americans* are the diverse members of a generally homogenous population.

Before exploring this experience of being *the other*, Americans whose country made war on theirs, a comment on diversity in Viet Nam. Viet Nam's population is comprised of about 87% ethnic Viet people, 2% Chinese, 1% Cambodian (Khmer) and the rest their 54 ethnic minority tribes, known collectively as the Montagnard or mountain people.

Clearly there is ethnic diversity in Viet Nam and there are political and psycho-historical issues that linger or continue between these populations. In brief, there has been an active and successful Chinese population in Viet Nam for centuries. The Vietnamese government has been particularly hard on the Montagnard. They would be akin in status, oppression, suppression of culture and remanding to restricted areas to our Native Americans. And many Cambodians arrived in Viet Nam as refugees from the Khmer Rouge genocidal regime of their country. Each group has different challenges and different experiences of diversity in Viet Nam.

Another dimension of generational diversity need be mentioned. As in the United States during the war, historical differences created diverse populations – enlistees, draftees, protestors, resisters, evaders, high-lottery escapees. Many have lingering psychohistorical issues. The American War in Viet Nam created significant divisions among their population. Factions include southern Army of the Republic of Viet Nam (ARVN) veterans, northern People's Republic or North Vietnamese Army (NVA) veterans, Viet Cong (VC) veterans who were essentially militia, non-combatant Pioneers – largely women, Agent Orange victims. All these are now treated as one people, one family. Some government prejudice and denial of benefits remains toward ARVN vets, but as we will see not among the common people.

We turn to our American experiences in the Viet Nam of today of otherness, differentness, moral responsibility for the war, the possibilities of reconciliation between former foes. How do the Vietnamese experience us? And

what is our experience of being the outsiders from our country that formerly invaded this land?

As specialists in the holistic healing of war and violent trauma, every year my wife Kate Dahlstedt and I conduct healing and reconciliation journeys to Viet Nam for U.S. veterans, war widows, peace activists and others suffering the aftermath of what the Vietnamese call the American War. We have engaged in this practice of healing through direct encounter and cultural immersion, reconciliation and atonement since 2000. In a sense we seek to overcome the diversity and division caused by war and enter into a shared identity and consciousness with former foes as mutual witnesses and survivors. By now I have led 18 such journeys, taking hundreds of American veterans, family members, peace activists, spiritual pilgrims, health practitioners and teachers of every kind to immerse not merely in war history but in sacred witness and healing of war wounds while encountering the country and people as they are.



In the remote southern Mekong Delta, American veteran Dan New unites with a Viet Cong veteran he once fought against.

Sometimes with our group and sometimes after our group leaves from Ha Noi, Kate and I remain to visit the northern village of Hung Yen, home of our

goddaughter Nguyen Thi Ngoc, and other remote villages. I first met Ngoc in 1995 when she interviewed me for her college newspaper after I lectured in Ha Noi. She rode for hours through difficult traffic on her aunt's old Ho Chi Minh Trail bicycle to meet me. She created a friendship association between young Vietnamese and American veterans. She says, "Please keep bringing your veterans here so I can heal them with my love." She calls me *Bo*, father.

With Ngoc we first visit the homes of her parents and in-laws. We are welcomed as long-lost family, hugged and kissed and stuffed with homemade foods prepared for days for our arrival. Poor as they are, they feed us enough to last many days. We talk and laugh and sing and tell stories and listen to family and folk tales. We are aware of our differences-- we need translation aptly provided by our long-time friend and guide, Tran Dinh Song, a southern air force veteran. We also must be instructed in customs and behaviors. Ngoc's family laughed as they stuffed home-made spring rolls, blood pudding and other home-grown goodies into our mouths with their own chopsticks. As I almost gagged, they explained, "This is how we express our love for each other in Vietnamese families." So amidst giggles and teasing, I stuffed back.

Very quickly all differences seem to fade away. We experience such acceptance, good will and inclusion that we do not experience a tolerant diversity of different types of peoples but rather a family reunion in an inclusive and embracing community. This may result, in significant degree, from Viet Nam being a communal culture for millenniums encountering our Western individualism that expects separation, alienation, competition, conflict, lack of understanding. And though we are in the north, inclusion extends to Song, a veteran of the southern armed forces. He is never treated as though he were a former foe but rather welcomed everywhere in the north as a brother.





Kate, Ngoc and twin daughters Ngai and Nan praying beside a family grave.

After family visits we explore the village. We pray at its cemetery where our Vietnamese family's ancestors are buried. We were greatly honored as beloved extended family when we were included in a 2 AM ceremony to dig up, cleanse, pray over and rebury the bones of our family's great grandmother.



Traditional rural cemetery

We visit the pagoda and meet neighbors. Some of them are destitute but all exude good will. "Did you ever meet Americans before?" we ask here and elsewhere. "Yes," they answer over and over again in these northern remote villages, "but the Americans here were only your planes flying overhead and your bombs falling on our homes. You are the first ones coming to meet us face to face and hear our stories." And they enthusiastically share their tales.



Praying and sharing stories together in the village pagoda.

One lucky year we were honored guests at the village pagoda when it ceremonially received new statues of Buddha. We paraded in the streets with the local people, prayed with them at the pagoda and were feasted as honored guests.





The author with village elders welcoming the new Buddha statues. Linh, far right, is Ngoc's father-in-law. He is my *em*, younger brother. I am his *anh*, elder brother. He addresses me as Em Ed so everyone knows our relationship.

We are always greeted with joyous smiles, warmth and gratitude, and with hot green tea served from old cracked teapots. As Americans the villagers welcome us into their community not as former foes but as missing parts of their history. They want to tell us theirs and they want to hear ours. It was as if these people had been waiting decades for this brief and long overdue meeting. The surprising gratitude we receive, often with strong embraces, because we want to hear their stories, is moving and compelling. Compassion and empathy transcend otherness and diversity.



Meeting with the non-combatant Pioneer Women and Men who worked the dangerous and heavily bombed Ho Chi Minh Trail during the war. Song is next to the author, Kate Dahlstedt standing behind.

Our last journey just months before the pandemic shut down travel was no different. Our group left Ha Noi for their homeward flights and we drove the two hours to Hung Yen. Our goddaughter Ngoc arranged two meetings with destitute people who have almost no income, receive no government aide, and need assistance. Most of all they needed their stories witnessed.

Over decades of healing work with veterans and others suffering the invisible wounds of war, I have grown the commitment to meet and aid forgotten and neglected warriors and survivors, not just from America but from anywhere.

We arrived at the tiny hut of a Vietnamese veteran of the 1979 Chinese border war. We have met many of these veterans around the country and they register the same complaint. They tell us that because the government walks a



tightrope in its relations with its huge and aggressive neighbor China, it neither recognizes nor provides aid to the disabled veterans of that defensive war, Viet Nam's last.

This vet's home is a one-room cement hut with a broken wooden door, no windows, sparse laundry on the line across the entry, and dried *long an* fruit husks stuffed into old bags as the only cooking fuel.



Chinese Border War veteran's home.

We arrived with our gift of a dozen chickens stuffed into a straw bag and a packing crate tied onto the back of Ngoc's moped with their legs gently bound for safe transport. This gift cost us \$150, an exorbitant amount of money for a family whose major source of income is scavenging in the garbage dump. 'We had no hope of ever raising this much money,' we were told. But with this gift the family can raise chicks for both food and eggs, sell eggs in the market at a few *dong* a piece, occasionally eat meat, and develop their own independent small

family business that might sustain them through the years. This small gift transforms a family's life and contributes to the well being of the entire village.

We had arranged this meeting in advance but when we arrived no one was home. Neighbors told us, "Our friend Nguyen had a health crisis. This often happens to our veterans. His wife rushed him to the hospital."

It was a weekday, early afternoon, school time. After searching and asking, the family's son, ten-year-old Hao came home, dragging his bamboo fishing line. His eyes were dark and bright, but his clothes were ragged, dirty pants and shirt. He was shy, looking askance or at the ground as we greeted him and showed him our gift.



Hao explained to us, "My friends are studying. But I must fish in the village pond for my family's dinner." But his pail was empty. I composed this haiku for him:



My friends sit in school  
while I trudge home from the pond  
with my empty pail

We explained who we were and turned the chickens over to him. He had never met Westerners or white people before and had never hoped for or received such aid. He bent over the chickens in a mixture of confusion, shyness, gratitude and wonder as we wished his family *phuc*, good fortune.

We left Hao to care for his family's new flock as we moved on to our next meeting with a destitute Pioneer woman, one of the many thousands who had sacrificed her youth and health to build, clear, or transport supplies on the heavily-bombed Ho Chi Minh Trail during the war. We met with and heard the sad story of this Pioneer woman's years of hard labor, disease, bombings as she worked to keep the trail clear. As we sat in her tiny hut, another twenty or so neighbors arrived. Each one had an almost identical story of long, difficult, life-threatening and health-destroying non-combatant service during the war. No individuality as we conceive it. They scolded us in a friendly manner that demonstrates differences between their collectivist and our individualist



Co-leader Kate Dahlstedt with pioneer women.

cultures. They said, "You cannot hear just one story. You have to hear all of us. Because each one's story is almost the same and each one's is everyone's."

We meet with the neediest every year. We give this kind of aid that transforms their fortunes in ways they could never achieve or imagine. We transform their imagery of Americans from a people of power who visit with bombs to people of love who help them restore and thrive. And we are always moved and surprised at this – they inevitably express love and respect for the United States in spite of our painful history together. The word for Americans in Vietnamese is *My*. It literally means "Beautiful." They call us "the beautiful people." I asked Minh Thai, who as a teenager survived the Christmas bombing of Ha Noi, "How can you call us that after the war?" She answered, "Because you are."

On this journey our travelers had gifted several destitute families, a kindergarten we built in the Mekong Delta, a cow to an impoverished family, financial aid for emergency medical care to a southern veteran, a walker to a crippled Viet Cong woman vet, \$500 to the Saigon Peace Commission for support of Agent Orange victims, and Hao's chickens. None of this would have been possible for these people on their own. With this help their lives are transformed. And perhaps Hao might be freed to stay in school.

Much of my work focuses on healing our veterans and on a higher order of research, seminars, and reconciliation meetings. But much is grass roots. These efforts are sometimes called "warm donations" or in Viet Nam "people to people diplomacy" because they are direct and personal aid that circumvents bureaucracy and immediately creates lasting relationships and changes lives for the better. And they immediately and directly address the moral injury of our veterans: "I now help restore what I once harmed," they say." Or as Isaiah preached, "You shall become the repairers of the breach..."



Iraq War veteran John Monihan delivering life-saving medical aid to elderly Vietnamese woman as a reconciliation gift from his family in memory of his deceased veteran father.

As I sit at home during this global shutdown, I not only extend compassion to all afflicted by the virus and its impact. I also remember all those who may not even have a chicken. Though it is easy to fall into despair at the world condition, I also affirm that every few hundred dollars we donate or raise transforms the well-being and destiny of a family and community and overcomes the differences in our ethnic identities and especially our histories as adversaries. We enter a shared identity.

Every year we begin our journeys with a visit and homestay at the remote Mekong Delta island home of Viet Cong veteran Tam Tien. Tam was a peace-loving elementary school teacher in the distant southern Delta. He only joined

the Viet Cong when American planes bombed and destroyed his school. "I did not want to fight, but when your children are being slain and schools bombed, you have no choice," he explained. Tam shares his story of brutal jungle fighting against American and southern troops deep in the Delta, his near-death wounding and long and difficult survival. Then he makes every American vet tell his story. He says as he laughs, "In case we ever met before under different circumstances."

Tam was Viet Cong and Song ARVN, enemies during the war. But neither one wanted to be and they are dear brothers now. Song sleeps in Tam's humble home. Together they sing Red and Blue Music to our group -- the old war songs of the north and south. Song wrote of everlasting brotherhood separated by war in a poem in 1966,

As bullets penetrate our lungs  
And life bleeds out of our bodies, please smile.  
Although we stand on opposite firing lines  
We still share the common streams of our native land.

Now he explains, "History and difficult karma forced us onto different sides of the river. But Viet Nam is our common home and beneath all differences we are brothers." This openness extends to the next generation. Song's son of an ARVN married the Hanoian daughter of an NVA. "We become one family," Song smiles, "and so recreate and celebrate the reunification of our country."

At Tam Tien's Mekong River compound, Americans, southern, northern and Viet Cong veterans all mourn the war together. We witness each other's wounds and struggles. We offer witness, empathy, honor, gratitude. We help each other rebuild honorable and good lives. Ethnic and military diversity melt away into shared experiences with common meaning. Tam Tien says to our group, "We are brothers and sisters who survived the same hell and from now on must tell the world the same story." We become a community in the shared story of war survival and mutual healing. These efforts teach that, as the Vietnamese say, "Americans are not people who visit with bombs but beautiful people with big hearts."





American, northern and southern Vietnamese veterans in reconciliation at Tam Tien's Mekong Delta compound. Tam Tien is far right behind the author and Song second row far left. Vietnamese and American women are also veterans.