Taming My Rage

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Two forces occupied me as I’ve grown:
Love and Rage.

Love is related to nature and service to others. I loved the woods where I would wander as a kid, exploring fossils, pine glades, and lady slippers. Gathering moss in the Catskills with my grandfather for my grandmother’s flower pots. And I loved the military—following my father’s veneration of those who served in World War II, traveling with him across the country during the war in the back seat of an old Chevy as he taught airmen the technology of aircraft engines, mimicking my neighbors’ older brothers in the Korean War by digging trenches and foxholes in the fields around my house, watching parades, graduating from a military high school and West Point, volunteering for service in Vietnam, always yearning to do my part in protecting my country. I felt a part of the whole.

Rage was first felt while in those pretend foxholes as an eleven-year-old when I destroyed our trenches in a fit of blind rage against some kids who had messed up my work. Shortly after that, I beat up the bully who had harassed me for four years, even though he was two years older than me. The rage bubbled up as a bunch of us shot up a
flying squirrel with our BB guns. But then I felt love, sadness, and shame as I viewed his limp body. I think the rage went undercover then, but it was till there bottled up.

Years later, I had a similar reaction of rage calling in a barrage of rockets from a helicopter gunship, then again that sadness and shame when seeing the body of a young Viet Cong, armed only with a bolt action rifle against the missiles I struck him down with.

There are so many intertwining memories of love and sadness and rage. Among them:

- Marching with the Troop 12 Fife and Drum Corp. in Kingston
- Marching with the Albany Academy Cadet Battalion in Albany
- Marching with the US Corps of Cadets in New York City and Kennedy’s Inauguration in D.C.

We were, I was, “Marching as to War,” as the old hymn expressed it. The rage grew as I witnessed and experienced the corruption and lies during the Vietnam War. My close friend and mentor after telling me “this war is not what they say it is” was killed by his counterpart because he had discovered his counterpart’s rampant corruption.

Then there’s the rage over our wars in the Middle East, spurred on by the lies of people we trusted. And it still goes on.

And then there’s the memory of Little Joe Kniffen, my great-grandfather, the last member of my immediate family to be in the military before me. He was fifteen when he joined the 25th NY Volunteer Cavalry and fought in the Second Shenandoah
Valley Campaign of the Civil War with General Sheridan (the General who later, I’m ashamed to say, led the slaughter of the Cheyenne and Lakota Sioux). Several stories of Little Joe were passed down: of his tears and shame laying waste to the farms in Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley, and his twinkling-eyed remarks about “those damn Johnnies.” He was the third member of his family to fight in the Civil War.

His oldest brother died in Andersonville Prison, and another brother died of wounds at home. Little Joe made a point of showing my mother his brother’s grave before he died (my mother did the same with me—it was a remote, overgrown graveyard near Middletown).

I also carry the memory of friends: Jim Ray, Bob Dickenson, Bill Whitehead, Bob Fuellhart, Mike Casp, Mike Crabtree, Turk Griffith, Ron Zinn, Frank Reasoner and fifteen other classmates who died in Vietnam, and Chuck Chandler, who was murdered in his driveway by an insurgent as he was leaving his home while on embassy duty in Brazil. And I carry the memories of my Vietnamese colleagues: Ba, Sang, Si, Hieu, Hen, Manh, Khoi, Ninh and Tien. And I’m remembering my classmates who still are alive and whose friendship kindle my life with profound love—I don’t know how else to describe it.

Somehow there is a place deep in my heart where these men or my feelings about these men have a special place. Some have called this place Fiddler’s Green or Benny Havens—it’s a special place, verdant, loving, connected, where there is no pretense, no posturing, no bullshit (well maybe a little), where I and everyone there are fully accepted despite political affiliation, race, position of power or status. We all are ourselves there and it’s beautiful.

Those people and that place give me courage and spur my acts every day. Reflecting on these memories help me tame my rage.