



*Veterans of War,
Veterans of Peace:*
A Must-Read

by Ravi Chandra, M.D. | photos by Publisher, Koa Books



Sometimes, as a psychiatrist, I fantasize about quintessential questions to ask my patients, to draw out their most poignant truths. “Tell me – what did the war do to you?” is a leading contender. Even for people who’ve never been in war per se, I imagine this question opening a window into all the conflicts and traumas a person might have experienced, all the “wars” they’ve been through, however they might define them. Another big-ticket question I never ask is “how do you deal with the fact that you’re going to die someday?” Instead, I ask people about their lives in other ways, their hopes and dreams, their purpose in life, where they find meaning.

Maxine Hong Kingston (the *Woman Warrior* herself) and the writers included in her anthology, (*Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace*) (Koa Books, 2006), dare to ask and answer these tough questions.

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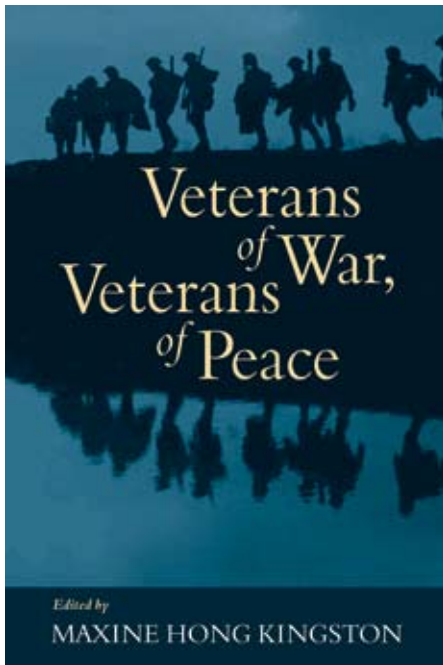
They have produced a work which should be required reading for every politician who has any say in starting or ending military conflicts, and indeed, for anyone who seeks to understand war and violence.

In the anthology, 80 remarkable individuals have grappled with the most elemental, powerful force that resides in

our individual and collective psyches. And faced with this fiery edge of human aggression, they have chosen the path of healing through words and actions.

Of course, your reaction to the volume will depend on your own life experiences. And that touches on possibly the only shortcoming of the collection, the paucity of non-Caucasian voices. Only 10 of the 80 writers included are Asian or Asian American. Five of these are Vietnamese. I wish there were more. However, this omission doesn’t detract from the power of this compelling work, because war unfortunately speaks a universal language.

The path these stories took to publication is as remarkable as the volume itself. Kingston began working with Vietnam War veterans in the early 1990’s, around the time of the first Gulf War. At the time, Venerable Master Thich Nhật Hạnh was leading meditation retreats for Vietnam veterans, and she added a writing medi-



tation component to these retreats. She then began holding monthly workshops which included periods of sitting, walking, and writing meditation.

At first, primarily Vietnam War veterans attended the gatherings. Gradually, veterans of other wars, peace activists, and survivors of other forms of violence joined the group. The group continues to meet four times a year. Many creative works emerged from this process, including over 10 books and three films. It's a real testament to the need for and the power of healing, that these wounded warriors could come together, form a community, nurture each other, find their voices, and blossom. If ever a phoenix rose from the ashes, it was in the center of their writing circle. I'm especially proud that an Asian American woman was a key figure in helping this healing take place. It's just another reminder that we, as individuals and as a community, are integral to the evolving story of America.

Three of the narratives are good illustrations of the breadth of this work. Jim Castellanos, a marine who tries for conscientious objector status in the current Iraq War, describes an encounter with a Marine chaplain who shouts questions at him and derides him for his change of heart. "So

if someone tried to kill you, you wouldn't kill them first? You're stupid! You don't know anything! I have lived through war before. I have lived through four wars! I know more than you do!" The chaplain is Vietnamese American.

Martin Higgins relates his gritty return stateside from Vietnam. He refuses to shower, shave, and change into a "Class A uniform with badges and ribbons and the works," in exchange for a free flight on military status. Instead, he buys a civilian ticket and travels in a dusty camouflage suit, with a loaded pistol strapped under his clothes. "Get yourself a good facefull, shithead," he thinks to himself as he meets the eyes of fellow passengers. "This is what is." He is unwilling and incapable of masking his otherness and is

universal dark side of human nature: "I know that within me lurks a mindless, violent, possibly even murderous impulse. My sad, confused, and violent family life was always a war zone. It was not necessary for me to go somewhere like Vietnam to know violence and its aftermath." Like the other accounts, he expresses healing through reflection, relationships, and new experiences. "I pray that I might fully comprehend the message and respond with loving kindness toward myself, my family, and my misguided culture."

Two prolific Vietnamese writers are represented, Lê Minh Khuê and Hồ Anh Thái. They were affiliated with the North during the war. Ho's tale is of feminine strength while Le writes of forbidden desire. Three Vietnamese Americans con-

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tributed to the anthology. Nguyễn Quí Đức, the noted journalist and author, has a half-dozen poems here, more heartfelt songs of the exile and loss. Hạnh Hoàng writes a surreal, post-modern, metaphorical tale of isolation and desperation in "Field of Heads," about children buried in the dirt, perhaps representing all the deforming conditions that people accept as


hell-bent on confronting others with what the war has done to him. When he gets home, the war literally comes home. He ultimately decides to return to the war, to try and be a force for good.

Doug Zachary writes of a childhood seared by violence, and alludes to his Vietnam experience. He is conditioned for violence in a way that speaks to the

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normal. Julie Thi Underhill showcases two short poems which evoke the senselessness and enormity of war-time deaths. All the selections are preceded by brief bios of the writers, which are often as interesting as their stories themselves.

It's fitting that I finished this review on September 11th, a day that raises questions about the use of force, as America marks the anniversary of the World Trade Center terrorist attack. On that day, General Petraeus controversially testified before Congress about the ongoing Iraq War. To be continued. I really hope this is not a never-ending story. To that end, to better understand violence and its consequences for the human soul, we have this outstanding volume and the deep truths of these individuals to guide us. 



Acclaimed writer Maxine Hong Kingston edited the collection.

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