

## Skeleton Keys

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WANDA'S VOICE CRACKED as she read the certificate acknowledging Burt's sacrifice and commitment to duty during the war in Vietnam. "He carried the pain from that war all his life," she whispered. "He grieved over what he saw and what they made him do. He grieved for the friends he lost during the war and the two who killed themselves after it was over." At Wanda's request I'd brought the certificate out in the wake of Burt's death. He was only on hospice services a few days and was in a coma by the time we asked her if she wanted to take advantage of our Veterans Recognition Program (which is designed to give to patients and families time to reflect on the meaning of life experiences while in the military). Now it was up to her to tell the stories, at least the ones he'd shared, as well as those she knew first hand about how he had struggled to put his life back together, his strong spirit, and the way the war embedded itself into his life and their relationship—the distrust, the nightmares, the guilt, and social isolation.

As I left that day I was thinking about my uncle, Eddie, who was caught up in that same war. Since I've become involved in helping the hospice where I work as a clinical social worker develop its veterans program, his memory has, to paraphrase Flannery O'Connor, been "in me like a stinger." Initially my interest in the program grew out of the many years I've counseled terminally ill combat veterans and seen the ways the psychic scars and buried grief of war can surface at life's end. This has informed my insistence that our program be flexible enough to provide room for veterans and their families to make choices and create meaningful ritual space, unencumbered by any agendas, judgments, or expectations on our part, and that it be presented in such a way that, for those veterans who are not interested, there is no pressure to participate.

Eddie's presence (or, perhaps, his absence) began pressing into my awareness after a visit with a patient who spent his life in the Marines and came back from Vietnam with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It has been pressing ever since. It's as though Eddie is being summoned by some inner voice stirred by these veterans of Vietnam, summoned from the deep layers of memory into which he descended after his death in 1986. I know very little about what he did during the war. We never talked about it. My first memory of him, though, was as a soldier. He'd brought me a pint-sized Army uniform with my name on the pocket and an M-1 rifle complete with a real stock and a fake barrel.

Over the years his anger at the politicians of that era as well as political leaders in general was apparent. Despite his silence on Vietnam, two things were clear: He believed he and

his generation got pushed into fighting a war that never should have happened and he had an unquestioned affection for those of his generation who fought the war, as well as those who fought against it.

It's not much to go on, but then again, I never thought about the war when I was growing up. Eddie was always my free-spirited uncle who'd gone off to California while the rest of us remained rooted in the Northeast. He was the guy with the crazy hair, intense eyes, and suspicious-looking friends marching to the beat of different drummers. Our connection was forged talking about the underground music scene and stories he'd share about the characters he met in the dives around San Francisco or while repairing equipment and instruments damaged when shows got out of hand, like the time a club owner brought him some amplifiers with the electronics blown out by a punk group that had urinated on them after learning the club planned to stiff them out of their money.

I didn't see him that often. California was a long way away and plane tickets were expensive, but I always felt a strong connection with him, stronger than the infrequent visits and generational disparity might suggest. The night he died I was 3000 miles away in Syracuse, New York, when I was awakened by the sharp pulse of an ambulance siren. My eyes snapped open and I heard someone say, "Bring it over here quick." I heard the metal of a stretcher clanking as it rolled across asphalt. I jumped out of bed and looked out at the parking lot. It was empty, still. I wandered into the kitchen, looked in the refrigerator, and opened a can of soda. I drank half, put it back and returned to bed, wondering what had just happened. The next morning I thought I might have been dreaming until I checked the fridge and found the half empty can of soda. Shortly thereafter I learned Eddie had been killed on his bike by a drunk driver at the same time I'd been woken up by the phantom sounds.

My life as a hospice social worker was in the distant future then. The notion of grief and bereavement as a process, and a potentially long one, was as unintelligible as a scroll written in ancient Phoenician would have been. I felt angry, I felt sad, and I wanted to get my hands around the throat of the guy who ran him over. It really was that simple, or so I thought. But soon the emotions and revenge fantasies abated and the events of that night were wrapped up, packaged into a personal narrative and filed in memory for reference chronologically or topically as the occasion demanded.

In the last 26 years I've thought about him now and then, but the thoughts have been transient and the emotional tone

has typically been neutral. So why now is he so suddenly and routinely on my mind? It is a truism among many bereavement counselors that grief can wait many seasons before being fully assimilated. That it can play itself out in unconscious patterns of thinking and behaving, it can flavor our inner lives with silent assumptions, predilections, stories about the world, relationships and so on. Is that what's really driving my interest in working with combat veterans?

Grief may also lie dormant, patiently waiting to reveal both its challenges and messages when the time is right or when events trigger its emergence. Is this the "unresolved grief" that people talk about? Has my work with the veterans of Vietnam who are beginning to trickle onto the hospice caseloads somehow triggered it?

Or could it be that as I am aging I find myself wanting to talk with him about things we never would have talked about when I was younger. What was it like to be in California in the '60s? Where did he find the courage to follow his dream of hitting it big as a musician, playing and writing music at night and on weekends, working days to scrape enough money to pay the bills, knowing all along the odds were long and many people thought he was a fool for even trying? What about all those hours out on his bike, riding up and down the coastal highway every chance he got? What was he looking for out there? What did he find? And what might things be like now, later in life, as he was getting older?

It can be valuable to revisit losses at different times and from different perspectives to take in and absorb their enormity. Is this what is happening? Many have pointed out that a death does not end a relationship for those who are left behind. It shakes the terms of that relationship to its ontological and existential roots leaving its meaning and expression to be renegotiated in a world where a loved one is no longer physically present. Sometimes during these renegotiations a relationship can strengthen and grow. I see it all the time as hospice patients explore their lives and, when looking back on relationships with people who have died, they gain insights which bring empathy, understanding, forgiveness, or even a new appreciation for that loved one.

This is what it feels like is happening with Eddie. That, in a sense, it's not just about saying goodbye and processing residual grief—it's about saying hello again, integrating a deeper sense of the meaning of the loss, and coming back into relationship with the uncle who I still love and miss, but for whom there is now space to appreciate and value in ways I did not have available as a younger man. It seems fitting that the harbingers of this reconnection have been the combat veterans of his generation. Although he distrusted the military, he loved his buddies and they appear to have shown up with a skeleton key with which I have unlocked old doors behind which familiar stories and memories can now be examined with new eyes.

Probably this is why the questions I would most like to ask him have to do with what happened in Vietnam. Recently I dug out a journal he kept in 1966 while overseas. Somehow it wound up in my possession after his death. I had packed it away without reading it. It's short and sweet. After basic training at Fort Dix and advanced training at Fort Sill he was assigned to an infantry battalion. Every page keeps a close tally of how many letters he was receiving as he ached for home. He rarely mentions the war. Mostly he talks about

Phyllis, his fiancé, his music, and his difficulty adjusting to the regimentation and lack of privacy of military life. It was his genius for music that probably saved his skin when the army put him in a small musical group and sent him around to play for the troops. It kept him out of combat but not out of the soul-shaking aftermath visible in the hospitals he visited.

While he was over there Phyllis was killed in a car crash. There are only two spare comments about this in the journal, both of which appear shortly after a long break in the entries during the time she died. A chill went down my spine when her name, which had been appearing in nearly every entry, simply disappeared. It's another thing I'd like to be able to ask him about. In a sense it's a question I *have* been asking him if only in my mind.

What does it mean this saying hello again after all these years? What should it be called? As with any time we say hello to an old friend after many years, it can be a time for taking stock. In this case the years have passed for me alone. Eddie's life stands untouched for the last twenty-plus years while mine has continued. Looking back, taking stock, I see and appreciate things I did not see before—like what it must have been like for a 19-year-old to be thrown into such a crazy situation and how these experiences forever changed him. Like many reunions, it brings sadness and causes me to realize on a more visceral level how much I have missed him, but it also brings joy and gratitude. Simply calling it grief misses the mark. Though it is sewn from the same material, it feels like a different garment.

Centuries ago alchemists searched for the mythical philosophers' stone, a talisman with which they hoped to transform the rough material of life, the *prima materia*, into something precious. If there is a philosophers' stone for transforming the rough material of grief into something precious—wisdom, perhaps, or empathy or enhanced understanding—one of the places we may look for it is here in these moments of reconnection, when a relationship deepens even after death and the stories we tell of a loved one's life become more human and more inseparable with our own.

For 20 years I've worked with combat veterans from World War Two and Korea as they lived the last chapters of their lives. In the next ten years these veterans will be gone and Eddie's buddies will begin showing up in larger and larger numbers. Maybe some observers would see my motivation to help these warriors orient toward healing in their last weeks and days as being driven by the unconscious or displaced energies of unresolved grief. Maybe this is partially true. But more poignantly, I think, these veterans have awakened a renewed sense of relationship. Maybe that's splitting hairs when grief casts such a wide net. We can analyze things from this perspective or that, come to this conclusion or that, but, however exact and compelling our language and reasoning may sound, there is always an inscrutable substrate of mystery when it comes to things like this. Truth is, I don't really know why Eddie has shown up again after all these years. But I know one thing: I'm glad he has.

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