

## News Release

# Poetry and the Vietnam War: The Power of Words to Heal

By David Beard on Monday, March 23, 2009

The performance of Basil Clark's Starkle, Starkle, Little Twink has the real possibility of showing our community the power of poetry. By looking at poems by Vietnamese soldiers and by the American verteran Basil Clark, we can see the role of poetry in healing. Poetry can be an important tool to heal communities and to heal the soldiers who come home.

### Healing Communities

After the war, poetry continued to have a place in the lives of the Vietnamese. It helped the survivors come to grips with their "victory." That victory had an empty feeling, as Van Le explains:

Everywhere we dug there were white bones.

...What kind of foundation would they make for our house?

My friends were perplexed. Were they our bones or their bones?

... The Americans left years ago and took their bones with them.

These skeletons, scattered all over our land,

Belong only to Vietnamese,

--"Quang Tri" in Mountain River: Vietnamese Poetry from the Wars 1948-1993.

There is no easy rebuilding after war. Literally or metaphorically, the survivors of the war are building upon the skeletons of the soldiers who fell while fighting for them. Is it any less traumatic to know that your foundation is built upon the sacrifices of your brothers and sisters, sons and daughters?

In the United States, civilians had an equally hard time understanding what had happened in the war. Basil Clark makes the lack of understanding he faced clear in his poetry.

Walking in my uniform

When I heard him say,

"Hey there, Babykiller."

Kind of marred my day.

I didn't stop to answer.

I didn't want to bother.

I didn't kill no babies,

Though several lost their father.

--"Babykiller II" in Poetic Healing

Poetry can serve a community function. It can help a community understand what has happened to its children and find consolation after its losses.

### Healing Survivors

Veterans have an even more profound need for poetry. The Vietnamese veterans experienced the same sense of dislocation that American veterans felt. Ngyuen Duy tells us:

Medals stuffed into drawers

Celebrations – for what...

days of hunger, time chancing death,

the deep dug sorrow – all that done for.

--"Experience... From a Distant Road.

Basil Clark, in Poetic Healing, echoes this dislocation, as well. Clark strikes a chord by speaking with the voice of the unearthed bones of those who have sacrificed, even though he made it back alive.

The dog dug deep to bury his bone.

He thought he smelled some more.

The years had shifted sands, so soon

He scratched the coffin door.

The wood was rotten, he fell on through

With little choice but to linger.

Rover soon found himself quite content

Gnawing on my ex-finger.

--"The Dog Dug Deep" in Poetic Healing

It is only through the power of poetic healing as Clark experiences it (and as UM Crookston scholar Mark Huglen articulates it) that Clark can come to terms with his experience. Through that healing, he comes to reintegrate with the society that sent him to war.

Conclusion: Experience Starkle, Starkle, Little Twink at UM-Crookston on Friday, March 27, 2009, at 7 p.m. in Kiehle Auditorium.

Those among us able to attend the performance of Starkle, Starkle, Little Twink will feel, in our bones, the ways that Clark can use literature's power to heal. As we must encounter our sons and daughters, brothers and sisters who come home from service in the Middle East, we might some extra value in exploring Clark and Huglen's processes of poetic healing.

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