

The Journey Back: A Personal Story

by The Rev. Roger Ezell

as told to The Rev. Bebe Baldwin

Christmas trees stacked on a flatbed truck, a scene in which he was running away from battle -- these were the recurring dreams that haunted Roger after his service as a medic in Vietnam. For years he lived with undiagnosed PTSD and a series of outbursts he called “career-altering moments.” Finally, an intervention by trusted friends led to the beginning of his long journey back.

Roger’s dreams took him back to the Mekong Delta where he woke in the middle of the night to recognize the sound of incoming mortars and small arms fire. Forty-three U.S. soldiers were being attacked by fifteen hundred Vietcong. He remembers looking at the bodies the morning after the firefight and thinking, “Americans and Vietcong – how equal they are.”

Many years passed before Roger understood his dreams. The Christmas trees were body bags loaded on a Huey. Explaining the other dream he said, “I had always asked myself, ‘Why was I running away?’ I finally realized that I was running toward the guns because we had been ordered to the perimeter to bring back the wounded.”

Shortly after the battle Roger experienced the first of what he called his “career altering moments.” He lost his temper with a superior. The consequences of his action were averted only because his commanding officer already had orders for Roger to go to Europe to sing with the army chorus.

After his discharge Roger studied music at the University of Iowa. “One of the first things I learned was not to talk about Vietnam. Nobody wanted to hear. I didn’t know how to react to the student demonstrations.”

After graduation Roger taught public school music. He had another “career-altering moment” when he lost his temper, used inappropriate language, and threw a music stand. That ended his teaching career.

A call to Ministry of Word and Sacrament led to another career. Roger said he had always loved the church. He had been an active lay person and had worked with army chaplains. He had even memorized the entire Gospel According to Mark. “I love to tell the story,” he said.

After his ordination he served churches in Missouri and Minnesota. He remembers times when he was “on the verge of career-altering moments.”

In 2003, perhaps because of the Iraq war, he “felt pressure growing on me.” Roger had shared his story with an elderly couple who were church members and trusted friends. He often went to their home for coffee, rolls, and conversation. One day they began a conversation with the words, “We have observed ...” They described his startle response and his reaction to their dogs. Roger recalls, “There was a new dog that was jumping all over and I was jumping.” His friends were able to link his behavior and anxiety to his war experience. Roger said that his friends were not “professionals;” they were not psychologists or social workers. But, they were sensitive people who were able to describe what they had observed. They suggested a resource, a counselor with the Vietnam Veterans of America.

Roger accepted their suggestion and saw the counselor. “I had a life-changing breakdown right there in her office ... a life-changing moment under the supervision of a professional. I asked her, ‘Am I going crazy?’ She reached for a brochure, ‘PTSD does not mean you’re going crazy.’” For Roger, that was “the beginning of the journey back from depression and anxiety, not just for me, but for my wife, my family, my friends.”

Roger described his counselor as “my first listener ... It wasn’t because my wife and family and friends didn’t want to listen. They didn’t know what to listen for.” The

counselor became not only Roger's listener but also his advocate, helping him to navigate the Veterans Administration (VA) system which he described as a "maze."

Roger's health has been further complicated by lymphoma which is now in remission. He blames his cancer on his exposure to Agent Orange. About this he says, "The VA takes some responsibility."

With his healing journey has come "payback time" for Roger. He feels called to help others who are living with the wounds of war to begin their own hard journeys. He is an active member and speaker for the Disability Concerns Task Force of the Presbytery of the Twin Cities Area. He is using his gifts of music in the psychiatric units of the local VA hospital.

Roger shared his concerns for those serving in the current wars. He said that he and others in Vietnam did only one tour of duty. "How about those who are on their second or third tour? We don't have any idea what the cost is. I hope the church is ready. We must be ready!"

How can the church be ready? Roger listed awareness, listening, and advocacy. We must be aware of the facts about the issues faced by military personnel and their families. We must be willing to listen without passing judgment. We must be willing to advocate for adequate resources and, as we have opportunity, to advocate for veterans and their families. "Where would I be?" he asked, "without awareness, listening, and advocacy?"