

Last Night I Dreamed of Peace: The Diary of Dang Thuy Tram
War, Writing, Reconciliation

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Abstract

Last Night I Dreamed of Peace: The Diary of Dang Thuy Tram is a diary written by a North Vietnamese field physician serving in South Vietnam during the war we fought there who treated Vietnamese communists and nationalists whom American GIs had wounded. The diary was captured by an American GI, Fred Whitehurst, kept against military regulations, and held for thirty-five years because of the deep affection Whitehurst had developed for the diarist and his desire to return it to her family. After the family was finally found, the diary was published, first in Vietnam and subsequently in our country and eventually in many others. The stories of its finding, its long life in Whitehurst's possession, its return, and publication globally are significant stories of reconciliations across tense, conflictual boundaries.

Keywords: Vietnam, reconciliation, diary, Whitehurst

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I have a quiet story to tell. I call this a story about a book—which can sound lifeless in comparison to some of the other speakers’ stories at this conference. I hope it isn’t to you. It isn’t to me and to the many people whose lives have intersected with the book, as important for this presentation as the book itself.

Last Night I Dreamed of Peace: The Diary of Dang Thuy Tram is a book perhaps some of you have heard of or even read. It is a diary written by a North Vietnamese field physician serving in South Vietnam during the war we fought there. She treated men and women whom American GIs had wounded. She served the Vietnamese communists and nationalists who fought against our soldiers. The diary was captured by an American GI, held for thirty-five years, then published first in Vietnam and subsequently in our country and eventually translated into many different languages, thus reaching wide audiences. It is a book I teach in literacy and culture classes at my university in Missouri.

I speak about it today as someone whose connections with the military, with veterans, and with veterans in society is so sketchy I’m surprised I was invited to this conference. For example, since I teach few *undergraduate* classes now and since almost no *graduate* students in English, rhetoric, and composition at our school are veterans, I have little campus contact with veterans of recent military service. I am no authority on veterans’ issues other than what my lived experience has taught me as someone who came of age during the Vietnam War and whose inheritance included many movies and mass media publications about World War II. What I know better than veterans, however, are *students* since I’ve taught them for decades. Let me tell you about this book first through them.

Books, it’s no surprise to hear, often invoke significant emotional, intellectual, and aesthetic experiences in readers. This book often evokes all three. The reasons are many—

and varied. Some students respond to the beauty and lyricism of the diary's language. Students who have Vietnam veterans in their families sometimes have difficulty reading strongly emotive descriptions of GIs as killers. Most of the students who read this book in my classes have virtually no knowledge of the Vietnam War, and so their reactions to it are admissions of ignorance, a fact they regret but are happy to have experienced some degree of a corrective to via Dang's book.

Here is one student speaking, Laura Hastings, who introduces us to the diary's power through her reading experience. I use her and the next student's words with permission.

There are many reasons to read a diary. A reader can be searching for historical knowledge, biographical context on a specific person, or a better understanding of a particular event. . . . [W]hen I began reading the diary of Dr. Dang Thuy Tram . . . , I suspected I would be most interested in Thuy's experiences because they are so different from my own. I thought I would be pulled in by her accounts of surgeries with insufficient supplies or brisk retreats through the mountains of South Vietnam. However, as I read, I realized that I was actually far more interested in what Thuy and I had in common rather than what set us apart. I was reading for shared emotions rather than contrasting experiences. In many ways, Thuy's diary is full of concerns common to all people: love, friendship, loneliness, sadness, fear, and uncertainty. While she occasionally mentions medical treatments or battles, she writes more about her relationships to other people and her personal concerns about her own beliefs, competence, and abilities. . . . [She shows] compassion for other people and deep reverence for human relationships. . . . She worries if a loved one is in danger or is making poor decisions, and she rejoices when she connects with someone after a long separation.¹

Laura alludes to an ineffable quality of the writing that we might say springs from the author's humanity and her grace with language (and the talent of and assiduous care given by the translators who shaped the book into its English version). She lets us glimpse why Fred Whitehurst did not burn the diary when military protocol dictated that it should have been burned.

Here is another student, Kelly Sutton, who gives a different view of the book:

The Diary of Dang Thuy Tram stands as a singular testament to a North Vietnamese perspective of the Vietnam War. Its impressive success in Vietnam and realistic portrayal of the war secures both its prominence and literary value. . . . The [diary] form . . . elevates the authenticity of Dang Thuy Tram's reactions and involvement in the horror surrounding her.

While the publication of Thuy's diary in Vietnam was met with acclaim and praise, its publication in English held the potential for an icy reception in America. The Americans are clearly the villains of Thuy's world. The Vietnam or American War caused unfathomable pain for [both men and women], and . . . [the] families involved. . . . Though Thuy's diary reopens some of these scabbed wounds, the diary's power is in its ability to provide an opportunity for understanding and discussion,²

outcomes that my students attest to, even the ones whose families' Vietnam War experiences make the reading sometimes difficult.

My students' reactions—ones of passion and learning, cross-national, cross-historical, and cross-political interactions—are valuable to know, but for us at this conference, stories about how this book has been kept alive since the diary was written are even more pertinent. The diary ends in 1970, shortly before the writer, Dang Thuy Tram, was killed by American soldiers and the diary found and examined, as were all confiscated items, for their value to military intelligence. Because it was deemed to have none, it should have been burned, as Elliott Blackburn explains: "Documents with military value were sent to Saigon . . . , [but] there was no place to store the captured poetry, letters from home and personal documents written by North Vietnamese soldiers or sympathizers."³ Those who examined it, Fred Whitehurst and his interpreter, a South Vietnamese soldier, kept it from the fire.

Why wasn't this diary burned? I am not alone in thinking it was because these two men, like my students, felt its power. Their keeping it is a notable act for many reasons, but especially because of the risk involved. As Whitehurst tells it, his interpreter's recommendation that this artifact should not be burned "because it has fire in it [already] could [have been] viewed as treason" and thus the interpreter's advice to keep it was a

“very brave thing” because of the risk. The act also showed “respect for an enemy” and so was driven by somewhat complex motives, many of which we probably do not know.⁴ Whitehurst honored the significance of his interpreter’s move by following the instructive, and he did so even before he had “heard any of the words,”⁵ an act that shows how much he relied on and trusted his interpreter’s judgment. But Whitehurst’s personal response deepened as the diary emerged in rough translation in the field and he himself read it. As Whitehurst typed his interpreter’s translation, he says he came to love Dang Thuy Tram, with what he calls a brotherly love. “Even the early rough translation of the books was captivating and poignant,” he said. “It struck me that [she] . . . was a very beautiful person, and that this diary should go back to the family, should go back to the country.’ . . . ‘Her family deserved to have the diaries.’”⁶ At this point, it seems Whitehurst’s motives grew out of his respect for the text’s power and the writer’s ethos, and out of his sense that these treasures would hold even greater significance for the family than they did for him.

Significant to know about Whitehurst at the time he found the diary is that he had dropped out of school and volunteered to serve in the army.⁷ He was not one who went to Vietnam against his will via the draft, nor was he predisposed by his training, as many young Americans at that time were, to believe North Vietnamese fighters and their support staff anything but savage and inhuman.⁸ And yet Whitehurst “mailed the diaries and a series of photographs he recovered to a friend in California to ensure they weren’t confiscated as war trophies. [It is important to point out that in doing so], [h]is actions violated the Uniform Military Code.”⁹ The fact of Whitehurst’s saving the diary from fire, valuing it once he read it, and keeping it afterwards all mark points at which it would have been easy to succumb to established practice for handling such materials. Whitehurst continued to resist what it would have been easy to do.

Whitehurst’s next act, keeping the diary then for thirty-five years and making what efforts he could to find Dang Thuy Tram’s family, is perhaps even more significant because as time passes, one can easily discard the remnants of one’s past. Whitehurst didn’t, and

the fact that his search was constrained by many forces, intensifies the significance of his acts. In 1972 when he came home, he says it “would have been treason”¹⁰ to make contact with North Vietnamese citizens. A decade later in 1982, he became an FBI agent, furthering the restraints on his search: “FBI agents ‘do not speak to foreign nationals and do not speak to people from socialist countries,’”¹¹ he explains. He could have been immediately fired or put in jail. He was also prohibited from making inquiries at the Vietnamese consulate because he could have been detained there. Yet he treasured the diaries and what he felt was his duty to return them to the family.

Whitehurst left the FBI 1998 and thus some constraints against uniting the diary and its writer’s family were lifted. He “held on to the diary for more than 30 years, hoping to return the book to Thuy’s family. ‘It was one of those unfinished things; it was like a sore that continued to bother and bother him,’ Robert Whitehurst said. ‘We talked about it on and on for 30 years.’”¹² Thus Fred Whitehurst’s brother, Robert, was always involved in Fred’s search, shared his desires, and eventually took the lead. His doing so actually enabled the search to proceed more deeply because of Fred’s and Robert’s differing experiences of the war. Robert, though in Vietnam during the war, had not been in combat. As Fred explains, “His memories don’t overwhelm him,”¹³ and so he could more easily delve deeply and persistently in the search than Fred himself could. “Memories of the war,” Fred says, “still cause me a problem”; they can “crowd my mind,” disabling him in the search and presumably in his daily life; Robert can get “closer” to the work.¹⁴ Thus, Robert played a significant role in bringing the diary to public notice and ultimately returning it to the family. With his knowledge of the Vietnamese language, he created another somewhat less rough translation. As importantly, he pursued leads and constructed lines of inquiry that Fred wasn’t able to allow himself to do. But ultimately, his efforts of reunification seemed shut off.

“After [reaching] many dead ends [in their search for the writer’s family], the brothers sought an alternate life for the diary and began to consider how the books could

be preserved perhaps in an archive, if not sent back to the family.”¹⁵ But because of Fred’s love for the diary and the diarist, any future home would have to be one in which both would be respected as he had respected them. “Robert discovered the Texas Tech Vietnam Center through an Internet search in late 2004, and began talking with archivists. . . . He convinced his brother that Lubbock was a good place” for them, a decision not made lightly.¹⁶ Fred, who obviously didn’t regret “taking the documents [and] keeping them[,] . . . was glad that they now were in the care of Texas Tech archivists who could preserve them authentically forever.”¹⁷ Once the decision was made, both brothers attended a conference at the Center in Lubbock and in “an emotional presentation,”¹⁸ Fred gave the diaries to the Center. We can imagine Fred Whitehurst’s feelings parting with the diary he had kept for so long, the love he held for the writer, his then-fruitless search to reunite it with Thuy Tram’s family, and all the connections it represented for him. Turning over the diary must have represented at the time a goal unreached and abandoned.

Obviously, the story doesn’t end when the Whitehursts give up ownership of the diary. In fact, what are to me the most interesting stories of reconciliation occur afterwards.

The story continues because the Whitehursts had copied the diary onto “compact disc[s] that contained digitally scanned images of the pages of the diary to interested members of [the] small audience [at the Texas Tech presentation].”¹⁹ In doing so, they unknowingly ensured the reunification they had hoped for over those long years. Their purposes for making and distributing the discs are not articulated, but I can imagine several: To share the diary’s beauty and power with those who might be interested in reading it, to distribute it widely enough that it might have a wider audience than just conference-goers, and to find a link, in a dispersed and wider audience of readers, to someone who might have insights about locating the family.

Such a link was sitting in the audience that day. Ted Engelmann, a photojournalist, social science teacher, and Vietnam veteran, took one of the discs and, as fate would have it, left for Vietnam a few days later on a previously scheduled trip. His reason for going

was to complete a thirty-seven year-long book project for which he needed to do the final photo shoot. Englemann's career as a photographer had taken him to many places around the world and to Vietnam often. Thus, he "had developed contacts"²⁰ there who were able quickly to fan out into a network of resources to continue the Whiterhursts' search. The brothers note a shared perception in Lubbock that maybe, indeed, Englemann would follow through on the search plan he promised and find some success—a forecast that hindsight shows us was accurate.

One of Englemann's contacts was especially valuable because of her long history in Vietnam and the particular nature of her contacts. Lady Borten had served there during the war as Assistant Director of the American Friends Service Committee's Vietnam Program, a peace organization with no connection to the military, and as such "help[ed] war-wounded on all sides"²¹ which went some distance toward helping her to establish useful contacts. Evidence of her contact network, for example, is that because of her deep embeddedness in Vietnamese society, she had been able to help lead American military investigators to the My Lai massacre site during the war. Borton describes her role in the Friends' program, which allows us to understand part of the ways she had established her usefulness:

[I]n truth, I was merely a glorified errand-runner. While my western medical colleagues fit war-wounded Vietnamese with artificial limbs, I made runs to the American base to pick up mail, fetched supplies, and transported patients, stopping along dusty village paths to chat, listen, and watch. In this way, I saw crucial details that American military leaders, G.I.s, and journalists failed to grasp. I [also] became aware of hidden roles Vietnamese women played in the war.²²

Borton's books (*After Sorrow* and *Sensing the Enemy*), which recount her time among the Vietnamese refugees ("boat people") and her frequent residence in and/or visits to Vietnam after the war, help complete the picture of her complex network of connections with the Vietnamese people and their trust of her.²³ Using clues from the diaries—clues such as hospital and street names in Hanoi—Borton and her assistants perhaps

miraculously located the family within a few days, and Englemann soon met them. Once in the family's home,

He turned on his laptop, loaded the CD, and showed the family the two folders of images of the diaries. "After that, I moved out of the way," Englemann said. "Tears welled in the eyes of Thuy's mother, a gentle but strong 81-year-old matriarch," he said. He learned that earlier that year, in three major Vietnamese newspapers, the family had participated in news articles asking if anyone had any information about their fallen daughter. For months there had been no response. Now an American veteran, an enemy soldier, had appeared unannounced to hand them their daughter's most intimate thoughts and memories on a disk.²⁴

Englemann's visit with the family presaged what a public sensation the diaries would become in Vietnam. The tiny room he entered to meet Thuy Tram's mother and sisters, no bigger than the living room in a typical house in the States, was crammed with media people as well as family, as many as fifteen or twenty total.²⁵ In addition, a "vase of white flowers—Thuy's favorite, . . . stood next to one couch. Beyond was a small kitchen with a large table set for a great meal. . . . where "the place of honor" was reserved for him.²⁶ The flowers and place of honor for Englemann indicate the family's personal gratitude; the crowd indicate what would become the public's response. The diary was soon a "publishing sensation,"²⁷ selling 200,000 copies in its first summer when a "normal press run for books in Vietnam is 1,000—maybe 5,000 for very popular novels."²⁸

The book's reception in Vietnam is perhaps more easily understandable than what happened in the United States. As Kelly Sutton's words earlier said, the book's reception in America could have been "icy." Yet even before the book was published in English, the Vietnamese reception of the Americans associated with it was far from hostile, as we see from Englemann's reception and further, from the Whitehursts'. Further, Fred Whitehurst said he had "worried for years that the family would simply accept the diaries and then close the door" on his link to "the author who had haunted him." Instead, he quickly "traveled with his brother to Vietnam" where they were received into the family as adopted brothers and sons. "They really adopted us,' Fred said. 'How crazy is that?'"²⁹

Here begins what I think is the most powerful part of a reconciliation story. It is not, of course, unheard of for former enemies to become friends. But each time I learn of such reconciliation, I am moved. In this instance, perhaps more than usual because of my lived experience of the antipathy between Americans and Vietnamese during the war. These “diaries . . . joined two families [that had been] separated by war.”³⁰

After the Vietnam meeting, Thuy Tram’s family traveled to this country, first to The Vietnam Center and Archives and then to visit the Whitehursts’ extended family in North Carolina. Accounts of the visits are online; the video and still images are very moving and easily available at the Archives and through easy searches with the terms “Whitehurst, diary, Dang Thuy Tram,” and so forth. Among my favorite images are the ones of Dang Thuy Tram’s mother holding the diaries for the first time and of the whole family on horseback in Texas wearing cowboy hats. Interviews with Whitehurst are also available, in which he speaks powerfully about the reconciliations engendered by the diaries and their history. The reconciliation fostered by the diary is not only familial; it is global because of the public availability of the diary and the stories surrounding them. Let me end with glimpses of just a few other of the effects of these diaries on lives they’ve touched.

Says Robert Whitehurst, “I understand a lot more about the whole thing I was involved in as a young man” because of working with the diaries and engaging with Vietnam differently. “I don’t think I’ll ever completely let go of it.”³¹ Another powerful reconciliation occurred between the man who translated the published English version and his father who helped him, both of whom were refugees from Vietnam. Their relationship had been strained in the period before they collaborated on the translation: A book the son, Andrew X. Pham, had published earlier “brought my parents considerable pain and created a silence between us that lasted four years.”³² Pham’s description of the laborious process shows us the complexity of the translation process and its involvement of Kim Tram, Thuy’s younger sister. For the job, Pham says he

recruited my father's help. Tram was from my father's era. In fact, her family home in Hanoi was located a few city blocks from his. He understood her frame of reference and her usage of colloquial northern Viet. . . . For each diary entry, I made my own translation. My father made two translations: a verbatim version and an improved version, which was cleaner and more readable. I reviewed all three, mine and two of his. From this, I composed a poetic entry in the spirit of the author's prose, taking liberal literary license where appropriate. That is, I gave her the prose which she would have written had she had the time and a little more training. After all, I felt that it was the least we could do for an unauthorized diary destined for posthumous publication. In fact, I felt absolutely that it was the decent and honorable thing to do. My father read my composite version and gave feedback. I re-wrote the translation and resent it to him for another reading. Both of us were perfectionists so sometimes we went through several iterations for each diary entry. . . . During the project, we had the assistance of Kim Tram, the author's younger sister. She reviewed every sentence and scrutinized every word choice we made, on each draft. We were very grateful for her help. Certainly, with her explicit approval on every entry we translated and on the book as a whole, we felt we had fulfilled our task to the best of our abilities.³³

The story of the father and son collaboration is powerful one of love and intricate interrelationships between the two of them and, further, among them, the text, and Kim Tram. This collaboration, then, was cross-generational and cross-national. It also was cross-authorial, if such a word may be coined. Surely every translation is a collaboration between author and translator, some more intimate than others. This one seems deeply so.

A 2013 television interview in Hanoi shows the continuing impact of this book among people and across nations. In it, the young Vietnamese interviewer speaks also across generations and nations. She says "On behalf of our [current] generation, we can say thank you for this gift."³⁴ I will end with that remark and suggest that these glimpses I've provided into the diaries' stories touch only the surface of its impact.

About the Author

Suelynn Duffey is an associate professor at the University of Missouri-St. Louis where she directs the first- and junior-year writing programs. She has had a long career in rhetoric and composition, has taught at a number of different institutions, and has published on administrative, pedagogical, and ethical issues in writing programs. Her recent scholarship concerns place and literacies, the geographical locations ranging from the Old South to the Midwest and the socio-cultural ones ranging from English departments to her family. This is her first step into veterans' affairs.

Endnotes

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