

From **Traumatized Vet** to Peacemaker Activist

Ed Ellis and Ralph Metzner, Ph.D.

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Ed Ellis: When my tour in Vietnam ended in 1970, I returned to my home town in northern Oregon. This was a difficult period of suffering, introspection, and hedonism. I was bothered by guilt from serving in Vietnam, and an incomplete feeling from several bad acid trips, as well as repeated panic attacks. My new enemy was an unease that subtracted from social interactions, and I continued to use various medicines daily.

In March of 1973, I moved to Los Angeles and attended some sessions of primal therapy, which helped me come to an understanding of my history. The tears evoked during the therapy humanized me and I opened more to my wife, children, and my work as a gardener. The years passed, as did my parents, and during this time I would often remember the profound acid trips I had in Vietnam, and those experiences that opened up new levels in my consciousness. These states would stay with me for several weeks and I'd feel as if I had crossed the threshold of Heaven.

Ralph Metzner: When Ed contacted me, in the mid-1980s, he had been out of Vietnam for several years. He told me he had experimented with LSD before going to 'Nam and had several very profound experiences while there, but also several bummers. He said, "I had these incredible euphoric trips where I felt I loved everyone and was at complete peace with myself." When he went on a bummer, he couldn't get talked out of it, and felt abandoned by his friend. He suffered a nervous breakdown and was "fucked up," as he put it.

He wrote, in a letter, "what I can't get out of my head is: I'm still off from my last LSD experience. I still feel somewhat unclear and slightly depressed. I miss the feeling of complete well being and connection to everyone and everything I had during my LSD trips – when my mind went out to the ends of the universe and I felt so connected to everything. I could feel a bird flying by me. The most profound feeling I ever had." After the bummers, he said he felt like a sailor without a ship. He believed he couldn't get clear without taking acid again,



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but was afraid to take it again.

When I asked him to describe his general experience in Vietnam, he said that he was not physically wounded, but their base was often attacked, day or night, so there was a constant high level of anxiety. When I asked him why he took LSD there at all, in the worst possible setting I could imagine, he and his buddies knew they could be killed at any time, so why not experience these profound and ecstatic states? He described being high on acid at night, standing in the rain with arms upstretched. If there was a sudden attack, they would have to get ready.

Ed had gone to Vietnam an idealistic patriot, expecting to help his country defeat communism. Within a short time of being there, he and his buddies realized the whole mission there was a sham, and they were invading and occupying another country. "I had been carrying a lot of fear and blame. Blame towards my government for bringing horror to the people of Vietnam and blame towards myself for participating in it."

As I started working with him, we both realized that probing the meaning of his bad acid trips wasn't getting us anywhere. We decided to use MDMA, which was at that time still legal, because of its well-known effect in mitigating anxiety. During the session, I asked him to describe his mental and emotional state while there. It was constant terror and uncertainty about being attacked, day and night. He started to weep. He had felt unjustified, almost not entitled, to express or even have the fear, because nothing physically traumatic happened to him, and the whole toughness ethos of the Army. For the first time since returning, he could acknowledge the terror of just being there, in a place and time of war.

EE (from a letter written after the MDMA session): That session with you was a turning point for me. I have been aware of a deep sadness ever since and have been having a lot of emotional release. These tears have been such a friend to me. I have periods of such deep sadness, and it frees me up, and I stand in the middle of my life and look around with such thankfulness to be here – to be alive and to sense the process of my life. I had been afraid to see any films about the war, and afraid to talk to anyone, even my wife, about the fear and sadness

around it. I saw the movie *Platoon* and was so shocked by it – it was days before I could feel anything. Then the tears flowed and it's been about ten days since I saw the movie and I'm still affected by it. That feels fine to me – I can keep talking, like there is a process going on, a process of feeling the fear and pain and also of achieving more awareness of what happened to me – and to this country. I don't think this country is over what it did in Vietnam at all.

RM: My distinct impression was that

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the real trauma he experienced was not the bad acid trip he had, but just the fact of being in Vietnam. The PTSD had been covered over in his mind, because he thought he didn't have a right to the feelings of terror and grief. In my view the MDMA was much better suited to healing the painful terror-trauma and associated denial than probing with LSD would have been.

EE: The process of opening to these feelings was accelerated by the Gulf War of 1991 which broke open what I had been carrying around, and directed me toward more therapy and rap sessions with other vets. It also motivated me to join the group Veterans for Peace in Los Angeles and become a peace maker. In 1994 I became president and organized a veterans speakers group with twelve other vets. We visited high school classrooms throughout Los Angeles and shared our war stories and encouraged the students to think of non-violent solutions to conflict. We talked of the war propaganda in the media and the brainwashing going on of our own American history that whitewashes many dark events. We knew this wasn't about war stories but

the telling of honest painful experiences with accompanying tears of pain and grief. The students were receptive as were the teachers, because the truth we spoke relaxed our guts and we finally felt that things made sense. We encouraged each other to speak what had not been said publicly, to friends or family.

We were asked back year after year and our talks were particularly powerful at the schools of east Los Angeles, like Garfield and Manuel Arts, where college recruiters are not seen and military recruiters are seen constantly. In some schools we saw recruiters teaching gym class and being a permanent fixture in the lunch room. We realized what a scam the recruiters were pulling, promising a college education if the student would risk their lives. We debated recruiters, and in one session the recruiter was so ill-informed that she brought critical responses from the students, and later broke down in tears with us saying she didn't want to be doing this.

These speaking events in schools went on until the beginning of the Iraq war in 2003. We then included younger Gulf War vets in our talks to the students, and from a Veterans Day parade on November 11, 2003, we began organizing the Arlington West Memorial with white crosses, pictures and names, on a beach in Santa Monica, California. I don't remember ever in my life having such passion for a project.

I would be called on to speak, and I was hardly nervous. I was interviewed by many different media and would joke with the reporters and look into their faces and tell the truth. It has been rewarding to speak with the power of a peace maker – guided by the ancients. I was given a gift and the gift keeps rewarding me, every day of my life. I notice that my life goes into an imbalance unless I am working towards the vision of peace. I continue in the path of a peace advocate and although I am no longer president of Veterans for Peace Los Angeles, I am still active and sought out by members to stay involved, and I believe they feel more calmness when I am around. I continue to try and provide a perspective of peace, good will, humor and avoid that old family habit of talking ill of others. •