



Author of Perfume Dreams: Writer Andrew Lam's Speech at the 14th Anniversary of Peace Trees



Nhi Tran (center), a volunteer at the PeaceTrees reception for Andrew Lam held on Nov. 9 at the Greater Seattle Chamber of Commerce and Quang Le, the Country Director for PeaceTrees Vietnam. (photo: Phong Dang).

Quang Tri has a special place in my heart because when I think about the Vietnam War, memories of that place resurface. I was privileged as a child because I saw it first hand after the carpet bombing of that province. My father was a general who oversaw Quang Tri and Hue near the end of the war and he took me and my siblings there. I saw a ruined city, empty streets, and B-52 bomb craters that were filled up with water after the monsoon and children were swimming in them. That image of children laughing and playing amidst destructions stays deep in my heart.

I struggle to figure out what exactly to say today about Vietnam. My relationship with it remains complicated, with so many contradictions and without any final resolution. But I think of that contradictory image, laughter amidst horror and my relationship with Vietnam is a little like that: complicated, and it keeps on changing with time.

I left Vietnam at 11 at the end of the war. We lost everything when we came to America. We started over as poor exiles. There was a period in which we lived as impoverished refugees, first in the camps, then sharing an apartment at the end of Mission Street in San Francisco with two other Vietnamese families. We struggled for some time to make it to the middle class.

Vietnam as some of you who are old enough to remember was never an easy to quantify topic, a hard to frame story. The issue of Vietnam keeps changing but as a writer and as someone who came from that country I wonder if, looking at current writing that involves Vietnam, that we really are talking about the same country even after all these years.

Often times when we mention the word Vietnam in the US, we don't mean Vietnam as a country. Vietnam is not Thailand or Malaysia. Its relation to the US is special: it has become a vault filled with tragic metaphors – it stands for American lost of innocence, of tragedy, legacy of defeat, and failure. For the time in our history, Americans were caught in the past, haunted by unanswerable questions, confronted with a tragic ending.

So much so that my uncle, who fought in the war as a pilot for the South Vietnamese army, once observed that, "When Americans talk about Vietnam they really are talking about America. "Americans don't take defeat and bad memories very well. They try to escape them," he said in his funny but bitter way of his, "They make a habit of blaming small countries for things that happens to the united

states. AIDS from Haiti, Flu from Hong Kong or Mexico, Drugs from Columbia, Hurricanes from the Caribbean."

Then there's my father who only talk about the Vietnam of wartime. His memories go back to the time when he was a big shot, a warrior, when he fought battles and won. But he couldn't talk about the aftermath, about losing and the end and ensuing humiliation and the horrible losses. Of his comrades sent to reeducation camps. He can only go further backward to a time before the war was lost. He holds so much anger still on what had happened. He, like so man of his generation, hadn't been able to go past vehemence, hadn't been able to make peace with the past.

My own story is that, through the years, I made my own peace with it.

James Baldwin once asked piercing essay, "Which of us has overcome his past?" and promptly answered in another: "People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them." But with due respect, one can chase Baldwin's grim discernment with M. Scott Momaday's astute council: "Anything is bearable as long as you can make a story out of it."

The more mature respond to one's tragedy is not hatred nor resentment but the spiritual resilience with which one can, again and again, struggle to transcend one's own biographical limitations. History is trapped in me, indeed, but history is also mine to work out, to disseminate, to discern and appropriate, and to finally transform into aesthetic

self-expression.

And it is in stories about Vietnam, in looking at its current needs and its current problems, and trying to offer some insights, that I find my way home.

And I am not alone.

A young Vietnamese American friend of mine from Los Angeles whose sister was killed by Thai pirates while escaping Vietnam recently returned to Saigon where she is now a thriving entrepreneur. Another, the son of a colonel who spent 14 years in re-education, spent his honeymoon in Vietnam, despite his dislike of the Hanoi regime. Yet another friend, whose father was governor of Hue and was in solitary confinement came back, wrote a book and now has a bar in Hanoi.

My cousin whose family's was robbed of everything has returned from France, married a woman, raised a family, and works in Hanoi. He's prospering where his father once suffered. That was, he told me, his best revenge.

Another friend went a step further: she was forced to escape as a boat person with her family in the late 70s, has returned with money raised in Silicon Valley to help create a program to help impoverished families in Mekong Delta from selling their children to traffickers. She's changing the destinies of many others like her for the better.

Having lost the war, these people have emerged as the victors of the peace.

They've managed to remake themselves and go on with their lives, and more important, by re-

LTS.- Ngày 10 tháng 11-2009 là lần thứ 14 tổ chức Peace Trees tổ chức buổi ăn trưa hàng năm tại Seattle.

Một trong những công tác chính Peace Trees, do một số người HK đặt trụ sở tại Seattle là công tác vận động tài chính đóng góp vào việc tháo gỡ mìn bẫy trong những vùng chiến tranh xa xưa, là một nội dung vẫn còn gây nhiều

tranh luận, ủng hộ và bất đồng. Dù vậy tổ chức này phần lớn nhắm vào chính quyền Liên Bang, các doanh gia lớn, tên tuổi trong Tiểu Bang...và một số nhỏ trong cộng đồng gốc Á.

Buổi gây quỹ trong buổi ăn trưa năm thứ 14 thu được trên 200,000 đôla, trong đó có 75,000 đôla từ chính phủ Liên bang Hoa Kỳ ủng hộ. giúp đồng bào thiếu số trong tỉnh Quảng Trị. Diễn giả chính là nhà văn Andrew Lam (con trai của Trung Tướng Lâm Quang Thi), là một nhà bình bút diễn giả và viết văn, một trong những sáng lập viên của New America Media.

fusing to let rage and need for vengeance dominate their hearts, some have become active agents in changing Vietnam itself.

So in the end – Defeat or victory, National Loss or liberation, metaphor of tragedy or progress – none of that really matter.

Only lives lived every day matter, only in trying to influence the future for the better matters, and only by addressing present day needs and sufferings that the ghost of the past can be appeased.

And only when one looks at Vietnam through the view of human kindness, and not historical vehemence, that does the country open itself up.

Who was it that said "there's no East or West when you look up to the blue sky?" There is no North or South either when you look at each other with an open mind and an open heart.

If we want see Vietnam beyond its geo-politics, its troubling history with the US, then we need to open our heart. More important, if we want to see human liberty then we best try to uphold human dignity. And if we want to find peace, we must first find a way to forgive.

And lastly, I just want to leave you with a wise council from the Dalai Lama:

"If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion."

It is easier said than done. But it's certainly what I strive for. And in the face of enormous human suffering, I hope that's what we all strive for.



Ảnh chụp cô Nguyễn Cúc (ngồi xe lăn) tham gia trong buổi kỷ niệm này, cô từng bị cụt mất hai chân vì mìn còn sót lại ở Việt Nam. Ngoài ra còn có LS Lam Nguyen-Bull đương kim chủ tịch hội Vietnamese American Bar Association -Seattle. Nhà văn Andrew Lam có mặt với tư cách là diễn giả.