

THE THIRTIETH BACKHOUSE LECTURE

1994

As the Mirror Burns

Making a Film about Vietnam

Di Bretherton

The James Backhouse Lectures

This is one of a series of lectures instituted by Australia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends on the occasion of the establishment of that Yearly Meeting in 1964.

This lecture was delivered in Hobart on 12 January 1994 during the Yearly Meeting.

James Backhouse was an English Friend who visited Australia from 1832 to 1838. He and his companion, George Washington Walker, travelled widely but spent most of their time in Tasmania. It was through their visit that Quaker Meetings were first established in Australia.

The two men had access to individual people with authority in the young colonies, and with influence in the British Parliament and social reform movement. In painstaking reports and personal letters to such people, they made practical suggestions and urged legislative action on penal reform, on land rights and the treatment of Aborigines, and on the rum trade. James Backhouse was a botanist and naturalist. He made careful observations and published full accounts of what he saw, in addition to encouraging Friends and following the deep concern for the convicts and the Aborigines that had brought him to Australia.

Australian Friends hope that this series of lectures will bring fresh insights into truth, often with reference to the needs and aspirations of Australian Quakerism.

David Purnell
Presiding Clerk
Australia Yearly Meeting

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About the author

Di Bretherton is Director of the International Conflict Resolution Centre in the School of Behavioural Science at the University of Melbourne. She has practised as a psychologist in a variety of roles and taught psychology to tertiary students for many years. The Centre has a specific focus on research on ethnic conflict, from the personal, through neighbourhood, out to the international arena, but concentrates on the Asia Pacific region. One objective is to explore ways in which we can make conflict resolution more culturally sensitive. In addition she is Convener of the Task Force on Violence Against Women of the Victorian Community Council Against Violence. She has published widely and been an active campaigner against violence and for education for peace.

Di Bretherton is a Quaker by conviction and a member of the Victoria Regional Meeting. After making the film *As the Mirror Burns* she worked with Quaker Service, applying the knowledge gained through researching the conflict in Vietnam, to work towards reconciliation in the civil war in Sri Lanka. This project involves training Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim non-violence trainers. Commitment to the Quaker peace testimony underlines every aspect of her life; her teaching, research, activism, relationships and leisure. She recently married Roger Wales and between them they have four children and one grandchild.

About the lecture

Di Bretherton researched, scripted, and co-directed *As the Mirror Burns*, a 60 minute documentary on the Vietnam War. This has been shown in film festivals and on television, in Australia and internationally. *As the Mirror Burns* was a finalist for Australian Film Institute and Australian Teachers of Media awards. It has been shown on Vietnamese television and in Canada, the United States of America, and Asia. It was funded by the Australian Film Commission and is distributed by the Australian Film Institute.

This lecture describes the process of making the film as an example of action motivated by spirit. One of the attributes of Quakerism which attracted me to making the film was the synthesis of thinking, feeling and acting that it allows. If, in the Quaker community, we allow a split to occur between those who are

seen as spiritual and those who are seen as activists then we risk losing the core of our faith. The idea that there is that of God in everyone is fundamental. If those who are activists are seen as 'not really spiritual' then we fail to live out this idea. This is not to argue that we must all be activists, for silent worship is also at the core of our faith. Rather it is to state the obvious. In matters of the spirit equality rules and the spirituality of each and every member is to be affirmed. The centre is the deep and common experience of that which is God. The periphery is how we individually give expression to that experience and respond to the promptings of the spirit.

The making of *As the Mirror Burns* is an example of giving expression to the promptings of the spirit. Initially Di Bretherton did not have film-making experience, but the need to speak truth to power empowered her call upon the skills of others and acquire herself those which were needed to get the job done. The film is an inner as well as an outer journey, and the lecture reflects on the enemy within as well as the enemy without. The cycle of action and reflection is a model of personal growth and enrichment which takes us out into the world and then deeply into our own being in the world, and then out into the world again. It expands our horizons and then deepens our understanding of those horizons. To separate action and reflection is like trying to breathe out without breathing in, or to breathe in without breathing out. Spirit without action may be frozen and impotent. Action without spirit may be rote and mechanical. The spirit in action is what we aim for. *As the Mirror Burns* calls on the Vietnamese spirit of *tinh*, the spirit of harmony in everyday things as the sign for reconciliation.

Introduction

*Travelling in the land of the enemy is like looking in a mirror, the image I see of myself and my own culture are not always comfortable.*¹

For me writing and making the film *As the Mirror Burns* involved speaking truth to power. In telling you the story of the film I hope to convey the spirit in which it was made, to show how the action of making the film was, for me, a way of living the Quaker message.

The film does not tell the audience what to think and believe. Rather it presents different perspectives which challenge the audience to review their own construction, not only of the Vietnam War, but also of war in general and concepts such as liberation, the role of women in war and peace, and the way in which history is represented. It is an invitation to reflect.

The title of the film is a quotation from a novel² and refers to the idea that to move forward we must be able to look honestly at our own image. Sometimes the image in the mirror is not easy to look at and burns. But it is only through an honest appraisal that we learn and can move on. In the film the traveller begins by observing Vietnam, but she finds that the Vietnamese are also looking at her. The reflection of herself in their eyes is confronting. She finds herself rethinking the concept of war. War is not just an event that happens; it is a relationship that continues.

During the Vietnam War 1965-1972

*The sun runs red across the sky, the vegetation dies,
In the arms of a soldier, a child, a dead child lies.*³

During the Vietnam War I was studying in England. The news of the war came from newspapers and television. The press coverage was confusing, for I had little background knowledge of the region, but the pictures were vivid. While

the media talked about the politics of factions and the movement of troops the pictures told a different story. The pictures documented the suffering of people; women and children; old people, as well as men of military age; the human cost.

My response to the war was an isolated one. Unlike many of my friends who remember the time as one of group action, and have fond memories of involvement in a successful peace action, I remember the long, cold, dark English nights reading the news from the war. My colleagues at the University were very principled and committed but Vietnam was not their war.

After a while I began to receive literature from an organisation of Australian expatriates against the war. There was no address given with the literature. I had heard that the organisation was illegal and that membership would lead to arrest if one set foot in Australia again, so the organisation was secret. I was never to learn who put me on the mailing list, or even if the rumours were true. I worried about what would happen to my children if I got into trouble with the authorities or lost my job. The faceless group sent me protest posters. I put the posters up on University notice boards. Unknown hands took them down again the next day.

I returned to Australia in 1970 and met others who shared my opposition to the war. Hundreds of thousands of people protested in the moratorium marches which stretched as far as the eye could see. The march was so long that there was a time delay between the strains of the chant coming from different parts of the march and the echoes from the building, as if the protest would reverberate through the whole of space. The sun shone and the stranger who walked beside me helped carry my children as they tired. In 1972 the Australian troops withdrew and it seemed to me that the war was over.

In the International Year Of Peace 1986

I had thought of Vietnam as the place where the war was. The place where the news came from, somewhere else. Something in the past, as if when Australia withdrew the war was finished, gone ...I came to see that our stories of Vietnam are written by the men who were here during the war. In their telling of the story they paint the land as a backdrop in the theatre of war... a menacing jungle. Women, when they appear in our stories, are cast as innocent bystanders ... who occasionally wander onto the stage of the conflict.

*But the women who live here are not bystanders. For them Vietnam is not a stage, but is home. For them the war is not yet over.*⁴

1986 was the International Year of Peace and I decided to visit 'the place where the war had been'. Towards the end of the year I was to spend some time in Thailand. I had been working on a project studying young people's images of war and peace.⁵ Realising that my own images had been shaped by the Vietnam war, and that I would be close to that country, I decided to use my Christmas holiday period to take a trip to Vietnam. I saw this as a retrospective, as a reflection on the past.

Although Vietnam was officially open to tourists at this time it was not easy to get a visa, and it was only through the help of the peace movement in Thailand that I did actually get in. Owing to a party congress in the North, which tied up hotel facilities, I was only able to go to the South. This meant that I was not locked into a sight-seeing mode and was able to meet and talk with people in Vietnam, such as members of the Women's Association of Ho Chi Minh City.⁶ I did do a little travelling, to Vung Tau, An Phu and Cu Chi.

I was deeply shocked by this trip. It seemed that while the war had, in my mind, long since finished, for the Vietnamese people it was far from over. Indeed women I spoke to in Vietnam referred to it in the present tense as 'this war'. A curfew was in effect. The awnings above the outdoor cafes were recycled parachutes. Bridges were blocked off, roads were 'deconstructed', a matter of little inconvenience to local people who rode their bicycles over obstacles we would regard as impassable.

There were few animals⁷ and children struggled with defects such as cleft palates, possibly caused by exposure to chemicals. These could have been surgically corrected had there been resources available. Amerasian children, the mixed race offspring of Americans, both black and white, clustered in the streets of Ho Chi Minh City. They would call me Colonel and ask me to give them gum and 555 cigarettes, or to find their fathers. The cigarettes were not necessarily to smoke. Inflation was very high and 555s held their value with greater certainty than money.

The people in Vietnam were very poor. The streets of Ho Chi Minh City were thronged with homeless children, 'children of the dust'. The resources were carefully stretched. For example, children took turns to use the swimming pool for, say, 15 minute shifts. They were obliged to shower first, so children begged

on the streets for soap. The swimming pool became a stage in a continuum, with one group of children undressing and showering, the next swimming and the last dressing. After a time a man with a large bamboo pole would sweep it over the pool like a large windscreen wiper and the children agile and as light as little birds would scramble out in front of it.

There were few tourists from the Western bloc. We were told there was only our party of six (made up of two German men, a Scot, two women from Britain, one an Australian on her way home, and myself) in the country at that time. The women had been at the Greenham Common peace protest. We soon found we had a lot to share with each other and with our interpreter, who was a feminist and a member of the Vietnam Women's Association. The Germans had travelled widely and treated Vietnam as they treated the rest of the globe; a challenge to the athletic orienteer. They would set off for brisk walks while we talked. Then we would all feel guilty about our sixth member, the Scot, and try hard to do something which might interest him, something more in line with the expectations of a tourist. The interpreter was reading *The Diary of Adrian Mole* and from time to time would ask how typical this or that behaviour was in the West. It is interesting to wonder what picture of our culture she constructed from this limited source.

The hotels were monuments to decaying colonial grandeur, with ample suites and gracious corridors, empty of guests. The rooms appeared well equipped with appliances such as television sets, but these had no plugs.⁸ I did feel sometimes in Vietnam that I had somehow wandered into a Fellini film. The wires that just petered out seemed to increase the sense of being on a film set.

We shared the Doc Lap Hotel with performers from a Russian circus. The cast included twin acrobats complete with theatrical twirled moustaches. The circus performers seemed very sombre and I didn't see them smile. The dining rooms separated Vietnamese from foreign diners, a vestige of colonial racism,⁹ and I was uncomfortable with the realization that while I slept in spacious quarters the streets outside were bed to throngs of people.

While free enterprise was theoretically not the norm, the streets were full of tiny stalls, often just wares spread out on a cloth at the roadside. Almost anything, except dairy products, could be had for a price. Often the goods for sale appeared to be the families' personal effects. Children would try to supplement the family diet by sifting through the mud for shrimps. The level of inflation was so high that even the very poor children could play with notes as if they were monopoly

money. One of my favourite photographs from the trip is of a person withdrawing money from the bank and having to stand on tip toe to reach the top of the bales of notes that had been taken out.

The most disturbing material came from the Women's Hospital in Ho Chi Minh City and the war museums. I am quite squeamish about mutilation and tend to avert my eyes from material such as Amnesty posters which document torture. The confinement to Ho Chi Minh City and its environs meant we spent extra time in museums, and in Vietnam that meant War Museums.

I was immersed in the evidence of torture over Vietnam's history. In the context of two thousand years of conflict, given the Vietnamese custom of displaying graphically material which we would censor, my concept of what war is was deeply challenged. Wave after wave of oppression and destruction.

The Chinese... the French... after a while it didn't seem to matter who the invaders were. The thing that stood out was the sordidness, the use of war as an excuse for sadism, and the sexual politics. For example, it seemed as if, while men were abused for some practical reason, such as being locked up to prevent them taking up arms, women were tortured for motives that seemed more to do with sexuality.¹⁰

My view of what it means to be human was challenged. The challenge was not only in terms of facing the evidence of depravity, but also in terms of finding examples of extraordinary courage. The Vietnamese talk about 'an ordinary heroine'. While they use this to refer to specifically military examples I think the idea of the ordinary hero and heroine expresses the courage and endurance of the ordinary people and cannot be fully understood without taking into account what it is that they have been through.

The Women's Museum documented the history of the women soldiers, the 'troop of the long hair'. There were collections of memorabilia from the war. The domestic nature of the fighting was highlighted by the simplicity of the exhibits. The pompom on the baby clothes held a message; the light signalled the 'all clear'. Wood was carved in the shape of rifles so the women could trick others into thinking they were armed.

And water pots. Hot water in the pot meant come in. Cold water indicated it was not safe to do so. Two huge mortar guns sat in the Women's Museum. The 'troop of the long hair' brought these in to Ho Chi Minh City bit by bit on their

bikes. Examples of the clothing they wore were on display, the utilitarian garb described by the Western press as 'black pyjamas'. In Europe women had to fight to be allowed to wear trousers. It is an irony that it was a patriarchal Chinese emperor that decreed the women here in Vietnam would wear trousers. The practice of foot binding was never introduced. Perhaps it was considered too aristocratic and the women would not be able to work as well with bound feet. The freedom from constraint in dress is apparent in the strong and graceful walk of the women now.

We visited the tunnels at Cu Chi, the underground headquarters of the South Vietnamese Revolutionary Forces. The tunnels are small in width, so any Westerner who happened to locate them could not fit through, though sections have now been widened for tourists. The tunnel system was elaborate, with facilities for meeting, cooking, and providing medical treatment underground. The system, which is estimated to be over 200 kilometres long, has different levels. Trapdoors to lower levels could be booby trapped, and corridors provided escape to neighbouring villages. The dirt was carried secretly to the fields during the day time. By rolling it up in her trousers a woman could then roll the cuffs down a little at a time, as she went out to work in the fields each day, to avoid detection.

At this time travelling through Vietnam was like travelling through a series of separate kingdoms. Permission to come into a province was needed and one would stop and go through a leisurely ritual of meeting representatives from the local People's Committee, have tea and conversation, before being permitted to pass. It was as if the traveller was the personal guest of each locality. While the poverty was deeply distressing, the experience of being in a society with few cars, and no plastic or beer can litter was very attractive.

I was, however, shocked by the extent and long term effects of the chemicals. It is one thing to read about the effects of dioxin, another to see the effects up close. It is painful to converse with an innocent child who struggles to close his lips around a syllable because his face has a crater down the middle of it. It is one thing to accept such a burden as an accident of nature, another to fear that it is an end result of American, and by extension Australian, foreign policy.

I had seen pictures of the defoliation on the television, a field, the side of a road, with wilting vegetation. I had not seen the bare rocky mountains, the dusty plains, where once great rain forests grew. The effects of the defoliation are quite apparent to the practised eye, creating a typical micro environment. Light dusty

soil, like central Australia, stretches of American grass¹¹, sparsely spaced skeletons of great rain forest trees, silence where once birds sang.

I had also thought that effects of Agent Orange would be limited to those who were exposed at the time, not giving sufficient thought to the fact that in Vietnam the chemicals have entered the food chain. The local people do not receive an occasional exposure to sprayed chemicals but rather live all the time in the sprayed environment, eat food grown in the sprayed soil, drink water that has run off the sprayed land, eat fish that have been reared in the run-off water. Indeed the fate of many of the chemical drums, in a make-do post war culture, was to be recycled as household water tanks.

It was difficult for the Vietnamese to research the effects of the chemicals. In 1986 they didn't have aspirins or paper and pencils much less the equipment for highly technical medical research. However, the rate of birth defects and cancers that are consistent with the effects of dioxin is very high indeed. We visited the Women's Hospital and were shown examples of foetuses, and met young women who were suffering from a form of cancer which at first seems to be pregnancy but is fatal if not treated. The fear of not knowing if a missed period signals the possibility of a new life or one's own death seemed dreadful.

It was not all negative though. The way the Women's Association of Ho Chi Minh City worked interested me. The women I met seemed to be lacking in bitterness, trying to pull together against the most enormous odds; to establish orphanages; to provide evening classes for the children of the dust; to treat drug addiction in women, to heal and repair. The women themselves seemed to combine toughness with grace.

My image of the Viet Cong had not encompassed the possibility of her being a tiny woman who arranges flowers, peels the fruit in carved designs, and talks with the utmost courtesy as she offers more tea. The picture I had in my head of the Viet Cong became different from that of 'the damned Cong in their holes'. My image became more one of quiet gracious women, physically strong and lithe, and unselfconsciously beautiful.

When I first met with the Women's Association in Ho Chi Minh City I asked them about working together. Women who were soldiers fighting the Americans work alongside those who lived with Americans. I was told that to hold grudges would be 'not realistic'. I would have found this attitude to forgiveness less believable if I hadn't been so well treated myself. I did not

experience any ill will towards me as an enemy. The Vietnamese seem rather to value in a very positive way the fact that Australia chose to withdraw from the war.

The poignancy of the situation of Vietnam's forgotten people really hit me in the final moments while waiting for the aeroplane to leave. The other five of my group were in the first class seats and I was seated alone further back. There was a long delay before the next set of passengers, who were Vietnamese emigrating under the United Nations orderly departure program embarked. They came on to the plane with notices pinned to them in Vietnamese. They sat, sometimes more than one to a seat, and were bemused by the seat belts. It seemed to me that they were about to step off the edge of the known world with only their notices, which I couldn't read, to guide them.

My friends sent me down a glass of champagne. I didn't like to refuse it when they and the hostess have been so kind as to send it. I didn't like to drink it when those around me had not been offered a drink. So, you can picture my response as I leave Vietnam, sitting immobile, holding, just holding, the glass of champagne surrounded by refugees, quietly starting to cry.

1987- Talking about Vietnam 1989

*What you see depends on where you are looking from. We call it the Vietnam war. They call it the US war. We say the fall of Saigon. They say the liberation of Saigon.*¹²

On my return to Australia I was asked to talk to a number of different groups, including Friends, about my experiences. I found it difficult to speak about my trip. First, I was myself so moved that I was incoherent.¹³ Second, the other two women (the Australian woman had returned home, bringing her English friend to visit) did not want to be named in public, fearing they would be in danger of right wing reprisal.

But these were less difficult obstacles to overcome than the fact that most of the people to whom I was speaking had no experience of Vietnam upon which to draw, only images and ideas constructed second-hand. This lack of information did not stop them having fixed ideas about the politics.¹⁴ Even members of the peace movement would brush aside my attempts to describe the poverty of the 'children of the dust' with the assertion that the Vietnamese had no business to be

in Cambodia.¹⁵ Yet from the perspective of the children, cut off from the outside world, Hanoi might have been on another planet. People I spoke to immediately blamed the Vietnamese for their own condition. The ideology of the communist government, its inept management, the traditional dry rice practice of the indigenous people, were blamed. Having attributed blame to the Vietnamese, the people I spoke to then used this as a reason to distance themselves from the situation.

I found that visual material, the photographs we had taken, were more convincing than words. I could show a picture of the rich green of An Phu on the Mekong Delta, an area not targeted for defoliation because it supplied the allies with food, and contrast this with a scene of the Tay Ninh district near the Cambodian border where great rain forests have been denuded and only the skeleton trees remain. The audience can see why the defoliation was deemed necessary, for the jungle hides its occupants even in peace time, and at the same time feels how wrong it is to attack the vegetation.

The idea of the film grew out of the photographs and began modestly as a plan to make a videotape. I spoke to an interviewer on community radio about how the visual material seemed to communicate at a more basic level. She said 'you should make a videotape'. 'But' I protested, 'I don't know anything about videotape.' 'Never mind, she said 'I'll teach you.'

A collective was formed of the two women who had been in Vietnam, the interviewer, others who were interested specifically in the project, and others who wanted to do something to help. To avoid getting locked into the discourse of the political strategist we decided to focus on making a video by and for women. The ideology of the group was feminist and the idea was to become able to handle all the roles. We spent so much time talking to film makers, who were very generous with their time and then sent us off to talk to yet more film makers, that I began to joke about making a comedy about the process of enthusiastic amateurs being sent off to talk to someone else.¹⁶ It was quite exhausting because we were trying to learn how to do what needed to be done, then recruit others and teach them what we had just learnt.

Within the group there was a tension between doing something to help women in Vietnam, such as collecting medical supplies, and making the videotape, which sometimes seemed more frivolous and self indulgent. I did not waver, however, from the sense that what I personally must do was to tell the story as clearly and well as I could. Contributing medical supplies, while

worthwhile, had welfare as its aim and the more basic need, as I saw it, was for justice.

The feminist orientation did not in the end by-pass the problems of ideology. There were disputes about which bank was correct enough for us to use; whether it was possible to have a convener as required by the bank to operate an account; whether it was permissible to give second-hand goods to the Vietnamese women; and so on. While these were important issues I felt a strong sense of urgency and commitment to the women in Vietnam. I also found the collective structure difficult because everyone had an equal say, but not everyone was equally informed, or prepared to be equally responsible. The women who had been in Vietnam with me had by now moved on and I was the only person in the working group that had actually been there.

As I read more about colonial relationships with Vietnam I became convinced that the Vietnamese women had been on the receiving end of much that was shoddy. I resolved to make the videotape the best that could possibly be done, given our inexperience and limited resources. This commitment to excellence began to conflict with the philosophy of role rotation and making sure that everyone felt included. In the meantime I and some of the other women in the group began to take courses in various aspects of film making to improve our skills.

As part of my commitment to making the videotape I began learning the Vietnamese language. On Saturday mornings I would set off to Vietnamese school with hundreds of Vietnamese children and several other adults. While my aim was initially the modest one of learning enough to be able to name people and places accurately, I soon became aware of how much more insight into a culture one has through knowing a little of the language.¹⁷ The Vietnamese language is tonal, so the same word accented differently means something entirely different. The differences are hard for us to hear and even harder to reproduce, but the language is as lovely as water rippling over smooth rocks.

Of the other adults studying Vietnamese with me, some were studying to work with migrants or to relate to a Vietnamese partner, but others were themselves Vietnamese. Vietnamese has a large number of words that express varying degrees of social relationship between the speaker and the person spoken to. It is rude to use the wrong one, just as in French "tu" might be too familiar or "vous" too distant depending on the circumstance. In Vietnamese to use the word for a younger woman when the woman is older is disrespectful. A number of my

classmates were Vietnamese immigrants studying up the complex system of pronouns so as to be able to greet newly arrived relatives respectfully. These relationship words have connotations of family roles that go with them.

Imagine the challenge faced by the revolutionaries who wanted to create a more equal social framework when the idea of fixed hierarchical roles is so firmly structured into the language!

Ho Chi Minh, whose political strength was his ability to communicate complex philosophical ideas as village metaphors, chose his name because it means paternal uncle of the people, neatly side tracking the dictatorial overtones of father. The paternal uncle can have authority but also gives the children piggy backs and is someone to confide in.

I talked to a woman whose father was a commanding officer in the South Vietnamese Army. I asked her why her family had chosen to come to Australia. She told me her father had been a teacher, an occupation which in Vietnam carries a status even higher than medicine. During the rise of communism one of his pupils, presumably motivated by the same drive that led to calling each other comrade, did not use the proper term for a 'teacher', 'thay', but the term 'anh' or 'sir'. Shocked to the core he immediately resigned and joined the army. I really enjoyed hearing this story and related it to the heat which accompanies debates about racist and feminist language. While it is easy to dismiss debates about language as 'just semantic' and his behaviour may sound like an over-reaction to us, from his own perspective his appraisal was correct. A climate in which a pupil could address a teacher in anything less than the highest form was indeed one in which significant change had occurred.

I also began reading about the history and culture of Vietnam. I had bought English language books in Vietnam and found the folktales particularly helpful.¹⁸ It seems that throughout Vietnamese history there has been an oral folk culture which makes fun of power. Stories of pompous local dignitaries and silly mandarins balance the reality of oppression. Also these books tell stories of heroines like the Truong sisters, who led the first national uprising in 40 AD, and Kieu, a popular fictional character who is thought be some commentators to embody the soul of Vietnam.¹⁹

Another useful source of information was provided by the biographies of earlier Western travellers. They describe a Vietnam with wildlife so tame and

abundant that the flocks of birds covering a lake would not make way for the small boat, in areas where now it is rare to hear a bird sing.²⁰

Of course I also grappled with the politics of Agent Orange²¹, for at that time it was thought that science came down on the side of Agent Orange not having an effect on people. I could not accept this, having seen the rate of deformity in Ho Chi Minh City, but was urged not to discredit the film through making false claims. Eventually I decided I would just have to say 'The women in Ho Chi Minh City believe this to be the effect of the chemicals' which was strictly factual.²²

The idea for the project at this stage was for members of the group to pay our own way, and about ten women wanted to come.²³ We planned to make a videotape of the visit. I bought a video pro camera equipped for tropical conditions. But as the time to go approached I became worried about the level of our skill and we decided to apply for funds to take a professional camera-person with us. We had learnt that well-shot footage could be edited with help afterwards, but that if the basic footage was not right then nothing much could be done with it.

However, when I applied to Film Victoria the response was to say we could have the amount of money requested but not for a camera person. Rather we should use the money to develop a script that could be the basis for a professional film.

So we cast about, for someone to write the script. However, once we hired her, the script writer she said that she couldn't write the script, because it was in my head. So we decided to use the funds for her to consult and teach me how to write for film.

The quality of the film is important especially when showing verdant landscapes, otherwise these may turn chocolate box green and bleed ²⁴ on videotape. And I wanted to show the beauty of the landscape. For if films tend to show Vietnam only as a back drop to a war movie, not as the exquisite country that it is, then the full import of defoliation is hidden.

Survey of locations in Vietnam 1989

I shall go visiting

When my land has peace I shall go visiting and never stop.

I shall go in celebration and hope that I will forget

The story of this war.

When my land has peace I shall go visiting, I shall go visiting.

I shall go visiting

Villages turned into prairies. Go visiting.

Forests destroyed by fire:

When my people are no longer killing each other,

Everyone will go out into the street

To cry out with smiles.²⁵

Instead of taking the whole group in 1989, I returned to Vietnam with two members Wendie Llewellyn and Gretchen Thornburn. We talked to authorities in Hanoi about the film, surveyed locations in the south as well as the north, and lined up people to interview. We took the video camera I had bought. Wendie shot some excellent footage²⁶, and Gretchen who is a sound recordist with the Australian Film Television and Radio School, taught us to log our tapes properly²⁷ and tried to give us a bit of professional polish.

We were assigned a different interpreter than the one we had on the first visit, which saddened me because our first interpreter was philosophically more in tune with the project. Our organiser seemed very efficient and helpful but we had to speak to her through the interpreter. It would have been much better to take an interpreter of our own but the politics of the situation precluded this.

We visited Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Tay Ninh, and the surrounding countryside. Economic change was apparent. People were no longer dressed in rags but were smartly clad. There were many more motor cycles in the streets of Ho Chi Minh City. The greater level of affluence was in part cosmetic, for relatives abroad send back money and clothes. Many well dressed pedestrians went home to crowded quarters without running water or sufficient food to eat. A trip to homes, or hospitals, or the provinces showed a level of poverty that few Australians could comprehend.

For example, we videotaped a child being born. The birthing kit consisted of two pairs of forceps and one pair of scissors. The director of the hospital explained that a basic problem was that the scissors don't cut properly because the

screws joining the blades were worn. The nurse cut the umbilical cord with effort, because her scissor blades didn't quite meet. Some of the nurses attending the women in the labour ward wore only one glove because there were not sufficient for a pair each. All of the surgical gloves were washed for re-using in water that appeared to be none too clean. This was the most affluent women's hospital in the country, the central training institution.

I mention cleft palate again for its occurrence is consistent with the effect of dioxin and was quite prevalent. On one morning's drive along the road from Ho Chi Minh City to Tay Ninh we noted five instances. The indicator of changing times was the fact that they had all been surgically repaired. The surgical corrections could be quite extensive. We met Viet and Due, conjoint twins who have been separated. The incidence of conjoint twins in south Vietnam is very high. This is also thought to be due to the effect of dioxin.

The signs of war were still apparent with the road in from the airport to Hanoi running through fields of bomb craters and the area outside Tay Ninh on the Cambodian border being stripped of vegetation. Dusty plains were broken by termite nests and boulders, or sweeping expanses of 'American grass'. With a little experience it was possible to tell from the environment where the war had touched the landscape. Sometimes I would ask the interpreter about the terrain, ask what happened here in the war. She would say nothing. So I would ask her to stop and ask the villagers who would then take us to the base. This is the way we located the Australian base, using the defoliation as a guide.²⁸ The Vietnamese themselves living with the view from day to day forget that once tropical orchids grew here and adventurers came to hunt tigers. I myself needed to go back to accounts from Western travellers to make sure I have the right place on the map. The past has been integrated into the present, with the use of all resources eked out to the full. The coloured electrical wires left by the Americans woven into tea pot holders, tyres into soles for sandals, bomb casings into well shafts, GI helmets into water basins, parachute silk into awnings and baby harnesses. The American airstrip illustrates the Vietnamese genius for recycling; it has become part of the highway, a small stretch of sealed road is the clue to the past.

Our visit was during Tet or New Year. Part of celebrating Tet is letting off firecrackers, which frightens away the bad spirits of the old year and leaves a clean start for the new. The firecrackers are not the small bangers that I associate with Guy Fawkes day but can be large enough to create a deep thudding explosion. The reverberation of one was sufficient to topple a guitar balanced on a piano top and cause it to fall.²⁹ Our videotape had an uncanny resemblance to war

movies with images of palms waving in the wind and the deep thud of distant explosions.

During this visit there were also signs of a more contemporary military action, the return of Vietnamese soldiers from Cambodia. A number of returned soldiers were selling cumquat trees and blossoms in the flower market in Hanoi. I found this a touching symbol of peace. It is not uncommon in Vietnam to see boys arm in arm admiring flowers or other beautiful things, though they also like to display their macho qualities by holding large crackers in their hands while they explode and thrusting their burnt hands in front of the camera to record their courage.

Shooting the film in Vietnam 1990

The Vietnamese idea of spirituality is expressed by the word linh, meaning cosmic power; it is associated with lightning and rainfall. Corresponding is tinh, the human aspect; its sign is rice. In the depths of the Vietnamese consciousness, this word evokes the feeling of harmonization of the earth, the heavens and the ancestors. Offerings of the first fruits of the peasant world, the rice is burnt sacrificially on the altar, or the drinking of distilled rice - expresses the earth that produced it. The rice is permeated - as the earth is - with the soul of the ancestors who are buried near the fields where it was produced. Here in Vietnam is a religion of rice.³⁰

The stage of trying to get everything together to shoot the film marked a change of mood for us. Up until now I had felt, in relation to this project, like someone who is slightly out of their depth. Every time I learnt some new strokes the size and depth of the pool would enlarge to keep me swimming.

Now the situation was rather more precarious. To move ahead we needed a great deal of money, the diverse personnel, and the right season for filming - all available simultaneously. My work place was not geared to grant leave when the light is at its best, remained unimpressed with the vacillations in arrangements that had occurred, and was determined that leave should be taken according to the academic calendar not the weather.

The Australian Film Commission agreed to fund the film, and things looked ready to proceed, except that we lacked a professional producer.³¹ Understandably the Australian Film Commission wanted a professional at the

helm of a large budget. When we chose Cristina Pozzan to take this role she wanted some changes made in the team. Wendie Llewellyn resigned and decided to make her own film instead. By the time Cristina and I actually left for Vietnam to set things up for the film in February 1990, we both just sat down in the aeroplane and fell asleep exhausted.

The structure of the group as a funded endeavour differed from that of the earlier collective. We now had defined roles and responsibilities. I found that I enjoyed the professional structure. Rather than an 'equal and the same' assumption as in the collective there was an 'equal but different' model. Each role was needed and each person must be carefully listened to if the project was to succeed. There must be a great deal of trust between team members, respecting the skills and crafts of each other.

Gretchen Thornburn as the sound recordist and Mandy Walker as the camera woman joined us two weeks later. As the first all-women film crew to visit Vietnam, we were a novelty, and perhaps not taken all that seriously. This allowed us more freedom than other film crews we encountered had enjoyed. We carried enormous amounts of luggage - 34 pieces. There are some lovely stills of tired crew members waiting in airports, surrounded by a sea of cases and packages. Some people teased us about our vanity, assuming the odd shaped boxes contained hats.

We were able to interview a range of women for the film. A few of the highly educated women speak English which of course allows for a more direct relationship with viewers than do the translated interviews. Though I never reached a high level of proficiency in speaking Vietnamese, I had reached a point where I could match what the person said with the interpreter's rendering and from time to time pick up if there was a discrepancy. This was a great help as I didn't feel completely in the dark about the proceedings in Vietnamese.

Mrs Dinh is a member of the central governing body, the President of the Women's Union and is known as the Third Sister of the revolutionary forces. This means she is probably the most powerful woman in Vietnam today, and certainly one of the most celebrated. Her picture appears often in the museums. Despite her position as a commander in the forces she is gracious and beautiful to look at, not at all our stereotype of the Viet Cong. When she decided to become a revolutionary to resist the French at the age of 12, her mother was concerned that this might lead her to neglect her family duties.

On the film she says that the strength of the Vietnamese women comes from their hatred of the enemy. I was tempted to cut this as it didn't fit the spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation which I wanted to portray, but truthfulness demanded I leave it in. Despite her gentle appearance³² Mrs Dinh is a warrior.

At Cu Chi we interviewed Mrs Nho who was head of the female guerrilla unit. She is a very practical person. When we asked to interview her she said, 'I'll just need to feed my pig first' and we filmed this too.

She hoped that after the revolution her life would be easier but finds she still has to work very hard to make ends meet. During the war she hid in the tunnels and she still lives above them now. Like her neighbours' she has recycled military odds and ends. The axle of the well fitting in her garden is a bomb case, the water tank a chemical drum (it looks like an orange band on the container. Many of the Agent Orange drums were used as water tanks) and the pot plant is a tank wheel from a vehicle that her 'girls' shot down. She was introduced to us as 'just an ordinary heroine'. She has lived in Cu Chi all her life and views her life in a very matter of fact way with little understanding of how the war is seen from the perspective of world affairs.

The Director of the Women's Hospital, Dr Phuong, is softly spoken and it is clear that she is overworked. Our interview was interrupted by a need for her to prescribe for a dying woman. Her quiet and patient manner contrasts dramatically with the horror story that is written between the lines of what she has to say. Her tendency to understate and give the evidence in a careful scientific manner, makes what she has to say highly credible.

As we walked through the hospital and saw the room full of young women with watchful dark-rimmed eyes, women who have had to have hysterectomies for cancer, women who make no sound of complaint but wait and watch, her gentle tone became chilling. As she stood by the jars of grossly deformed fetuses her soft and tentative tones evoked in us anger on her behalf that she herself doesn't feel. She had the option of going to France with her husband but chose instead to stay where she feels she is needed.

Kim Phuc is the little girl who appeared in the famous photograph running naked down the road after being covered in napalm.³³ The family has been deeply affected by the war. Her mother and her aunt, who are interviewed in the film, still suffer from effects of the chemical themselves. Kim Phuc and her brother

were permanently disfigured in the incident. Their two cousins, the aunt's sons, died.

This raises a number of issues about how we represent the victims of the war. Kim Phuc was one of many but is singled out in the Western media as if she were one of a few tragic casualties of war. In contrast to Mrs Dinh, Kim Phuc's mother is almost too sweet in her spirit of forgiveness, all too ready to take up the role of the innocent victim. The film tries to show that there are a range of attitudes and positions.

Dr Hoa is the French-educated daughter of a wealthy family who has opted to remain in Vietnam. A former Minister for Health, she is now Director of the Children's Hospital. She is the most progressive feminist we met. She criticized the Women's Union on the grounds that it has not addressed issues such as the allocation of home duties between men and women. Her observation that the present power structure is based on war, not peace, is a telling one. She is particularly interesting because she does have a more global perspective. Most of the women in Vietnam have been quite cut off from the rest of the world and don't define themselves as part of an international pattern.

While making the film we revisited all the destinations of the two earlier trips and added Halong Bay, Danang, and Hue. The policy of *Doi Moi* or 'renovation' was literal as well as figurative. The bomb craters outside Hanoi were levelled, the roads re-built, and the parachute awnings replaced by other materials. Numerous street stalls crowded the Hanoi streets, but the authorities in Ho Chi Minh City were moving the open markets off the city streets. Hotels were re-painted and booked out. The floating hotel, which had been unprofitable on the Australian Barrier Reef was towed to Vietnam and now provides a late night disco on the Saigon river for a chic clientele.

While there was still a US trade boycott, the category of 'medical supplies' was reputed to be stretched to include tractors and motorcycles. The dry fields outside Tay Ninh supported tiny green rubber-plant seedlings and the workhouse orphanage had been replaced by an internationally funded children's village which could serve as a model for cottage care anywhere in the world.

Great emphasis on friendliness to the US was noticeable. A gentleman we dubbed 'Mr Bones' visited Vietnam every few months and conducted an expensive search on behalf of the US government for the bones of Americans

missing in action or MIAs. We were told that the American War Crimes Museum is to close because 'the US doesn't like it'.

Relations with the USSR were still close. The television sets, now working, showed culturally inappropriate Russian programmes. I remember sitting waiting in a hotel lobby. My surroundings were the image of the tropics; dark polished wood panels and impressively carved furniture, potted palms, but no fan. Vietnamese patrons sat watching the screen, calm and contained, despite the sweltering heat. The television showed a white heroine wrapped in furs rushing emotionally into the snow and calling out in Russian, which none of us understood. There were no subtitles.

Perhaps the biggest difference now was the contact with the Western world, particularly by post. Vietnam has been in the past so cut off as to be almost on another planet. Since the signing of a postal agreement, it is now possible to write or call Australia.³⁴ People used to send letters by traveller.

Much closer and more regular contact with relatives abroad brings Vietnam out of its isolation, makes it part of the international scene again, with both losses and gains. Business interests, in particular from Japan and Hong Kong were ignoring the trade boycott and investing. Vietnam was now the world's third largest exporter of rice. Pollution; (for lorries and cars as well as motor cycles were pushing the humble bicycle off the road) noise; the emergence of a class of beggars and prostitutes; the logging of the few trees that remain; more plastic sandals and war toys; and the decline in the position of women in society which Dr Hoa discusses in the film are some of the losses. The gain was a sorely needed rise in the standard of living.

Letting the film tell the story

I have thought long and hard about Vietnam over the last 20 years, for something like this does not lightly leave you, and I have decided that the true innocents are not those - as Washington would have it - who are afraid to use force and do not understand the real world, but those who still think in this day and age we can impose our values and our will upon peasants by force.³⁵

One of the big moments of my life was that when we finally got to see the footage. Usually as one makes a film there is the chance to view the rushes (that is the quickly developed film) in order to get feedback and learn. This process was

not possible for us as there were no resources to develop the film, or even to send it back to Australia for safe keeping. We kept all the film with us and didn't see it until after we had finished. The strains built up. All those years of work. Fears for what could have gone wrong. A fault in the camera. Heat damage to the stock. The fears mounted. However, the footage was beautiful.

To some extent my job seemed to be finished at this point. The documentation had been obtained, the women's stories were available to others who wished to see and hear them. However, to make material accessible to an audience a lot more work needs to be done.

The first step is make a rough cut or assembly. That is, things which definitely won't be used are excluded. The assembly is shown to others for feedback and then refined. This was quite a learning experience for me. A close friend, with whom I had shared many of the ups and downs, and often consulted, after seeing two hours and twenty minutes of footage of women in Vietnam, said in conversation 'What women? Were they women?' I had assumed that the camera provides evidence and that if you put the evidence up on the screen then people will be able to see it. My friend saw figures in black pyjamas in conical hats working on the road and assumed they were men.

We re-cut the film so that at the beginning as we see a close up of a woman's face under a conical hat, I stress the word women in the voice-over, and the viewer's eye is shown that the people in conical hats are women. We also put in a lot more detail about the history and culture of Vietnam. I felt this made the film a lot less artistic, but the feedback from others suggested that we needed it.

Of course my job was not finished. The process of editing takes much time and patience. Recording the voice-over also tested our patience, due to my inexperience. One of the advantages of the professional specialised structure, rather than the earlier collective one, is that other people can move beyond their own limits. For example, the camera woman and the musicians really understood what I was trying to say and were able to use their talents to express it in ways that transcended my abilities, particularly in terms of how they convey the spiritual elements through pictures and music.

The launch of the film at the Australian Film Institute Theatre in Sydney, was a special occasion, particularly as our Friend, Senator Jo Vallentine, spoke. The film has been shown in Australia and abroad, at film festivals and on television, and is distributed as a videotape by the Australian Film Institute. The

History Teachers Association wrote a study guide to the film which makes it more attractive to teachers.

This might be a good moment to pause and acknowledge the help given by Friends: Margaret Bywater and Topsy Evans gave advice and support from Quaker Service Australia; Diana Pittock and Patricia Officer listened and urging persistence, David Buller spoke to my condition and gave advice on organisation; Chris Warner took me seriously as a film maker; and Dorothy Benyei gave support with research, and made cups of tea.

Being a member of the Society of Friends created the conditions in which I could persevere with the project, and I would like to express my gratitude to you all.

While *As the Mirror Burns* was being made, there was a spate of Vietnam movies such as *Platoon*. The time has come, the papers seemed to be saying, to reveal the truth about Vietnam, to tell 'the real story'. Indeed one of the problems in attracting funds was the idea that we have 'done Vietnam'. But the Hollywood genre representations of the war perpetuate the image of the Viet Cong as uniformed men running through the jungle in formation. The woman soldier exists as the exception rather than the rule. Rambo's guide to the MIAs turns out to be a woman as does a sniper in *Platoon*. In contrast the women's museum in Vietnam estimated that 80% of the guerillas were women and Vietnamese-made films show a much higher participation by women.

The stereotype of the Vietnam War, the idea of the *Rambo* script, is postulated on an image of the enemy which is adult and male. The stereotype is undermined by the fact that the enemy included young women. David Donavan,³⁶ one of the veterans who realized that the women were soldiers, said I had never really thought about really having to fight a woman myself... The knowledge that a woman had been trying to kill me made me very ill at ease. Threatened male ego there, I suppose, but psychology aside, the plain fact is I just didn't want to kill any women. I know that might sound silly. I didn't hesitate at killing men did I, so what's the difference?'

As the Mirror Burns contains references to the war movies: the opening scene with its throbbing music, stealthy ominous movement and characteristic palms alludes to *Apocalypse Now*, as does the scene on Vung Tau beach. The traveller walks through a jungle and the noises are ambiguous, strange threatening. When the scene resolves it is strictly domestic: pigs, chooks and a

well-kept cottage greet her. The woman in the jungle offers her tea and asks her to come in. The stereotypic threat is resolved in a peaceful way.

It is difficult to know what proportion of the guerrilla fighters were women. Guerilla warfare is by its nature secret. What is clear is that the Vietnamese estimate is much more substantial than the Western estimate and the main weapon of the troop of the long hair was their invisibility. That is, the sexism which makes women's work invisible in peace time became a major asset in war time. We can go back and look at our pictures of 'rounding up the Viet Cong suspects'³⁸ and see that the men are captured and the women working in the fields are left alone, unsuspected. If the women's own estimation of their role is correct it means that the threat of nuclear war, more firepower than was used in both world wars, and tons of chemicals had less power to win the war than did our own prejudices.³⁹

The Enemy Within

*My love for you was thin ice, walking the wire
At top speed we skated out of control.
I'm with you, we screamed, not daring to look down
There was always, always the void, always the void.*

*Now I am an observer, I can see that I'm dead
There's no movement, not even breath
In this deep dark silence this terrible chasm
Always, always the void, always the void.*

*Sometimes I have the feeling that if anyone should scratch me
Underneath they 'd find no one there.
I always gave myself away for love
Then there's always, always the void, always the void.⁴⁰*

The idea that by looking at the reflection in the mirror, transformation and growth can occur, is an element of psychoanalytic psychology. In *As the Mirror Burns* the journey through the land of the enemy, the outward travel, has an inner dimension and draws on the work of Carl Jung. The film itself is shaped like a snake, which is the symbol for personal transformation, looping first this way and then that. It approaches the uncomfortable material, then, just as the images are too painful it slides away again, veering from side to side and yet gliding forward.

Central to the film is the Jungian notion that the enemy is within. The path to enlightenment involves knowing and making friends with the parts of ourselves that we would rather suppress. The 'real liberation' that Dr Hoa talks about is to be gained by understanding, not armed struggle. But this understanding is not to be reached by withdrawing from the affairs of the world, but rather by becoming an active and reflective agent in the affairs of the world.

Jung's basic position is very similar to that of Quakers, hence the affinity that many Friends find with his work. He was a mystic, believing that every symbol is ultimately a mystery and sees life as a journey through an inner landscape. The journey is enhanced by taking the time to meditate and reflect. The value of that reflection is not based on knowing the meaning of the unconscious symbolism, but more on the faith that attending to that which is spiritual within us will help it flourish and grow.

While *As the Mirror Burns* is itself a political statement, the act of making the film was a response to listening to the inner voice. While there is that of God within us all it may be more, or less buried, more or less obscured by different voices within. By embarking on a conscious attempt to explore our own personalities and unconscious processes we can become clearer, better able to listen to that which is God within. Listening to the inner voice involves being able to welcome silence. But not everyone welcomes silence, because it does allow the darkness, as well as the light, to come into greater awareness. To welcome the silence one must make friends with the darkness. People may become used to a lot of distractions such as television and radio, as well as work and business to ward off being with themselves.

The void is represented in the film as the moment when the traveller arrives at the border and is scrutinised by the airport official. The moment represents the fear of stepping off into nothingness. Actually, there is no physical void on earth. Even our skin is permeated by the air, that which is other. A fingernail contains a universe of micro-organisms. The void is rather a frightening psychological state. It is about the fear of annihilation of our humanity and dignity, our inner self, and perhaps about our fear of death. But sometimes the fear of loss of inner self seems greater than a fear of death. Death can have a sense of dignity and fullness, whereas the theft of another's sense of dignity can be more fearful.

Jung sees facing the void as an inevitable stage of human growth. It will involve meeting the enemy within. He⁴¹ believed that to move to a state of wholeness it is necessary to greet and become friends with parts of ourselves

which are not available to normal consciousness. For example, if we are male we hide from ourselves and others the characteristics which we deem to be female. We claim to ourselves the good, the heroic and project on to others, the enemy, that which is bad. However, literature recognises that the evil figure is the shadow of the hero. Lucifer is a fallen angel. Sherlock Holmes struggles with Moriarty, his evil twin. The Gollum was once a Hobbit. When the Wizard of Earthsea⁴² names the dark figure which follows him, the name is his own. Rambo needs the 'damned Cong' to support his crusading role, and needs them to be male to maintain his sense of machismo. It is only when we recognise the evil in ourselves and our affinity with our enemies that we can become truly whole.

In case I am seen as subscribing to New Age philosophy please let me be clear that there are some important differences. By New Age philosophies I mean those contemporary creeds of positive thinking that promise healing and well being. People who believe in healing through crystals, aromas, reading Tarot cards, adherence to a course of miracles, and so on may be drawn to Quakers by the shared practice of meditation and commitment to living a simpler and more spiritual lifestyle. While there is nothing which says that an individual Quaker can't have such beliefs, these philosophies are essentially more dogmatic, often prescribing positive thinking as a basic tenet of faith. The aim of the Quaker silence is different from that of meditation. While it confers relaxation and contributes to well being to individuals its aim is to wait for God's word. That is, the Quaker silence is transpersonal. I think also that Quakerism is about struggling with the pains and evils of this world, rather than denying them, and so is fundamentally at odds with the New Age philosophy of overcoming negative thinking.

As Quakers our main task is to be able to hear the inner voice. To do this we need to have hearts and minds that are prepared. There are challenges to this preparedness. Turning inward, the loud voice of unconscious personal need may be confused with the will of God. The promise of New Age therapies can seduce Friends into thinking that there is the security of an answer. A belief in having found the answer terminates the sense of seeking and forecloses on development.

The essence of Jung's work is the seeking of inner wisdom. This is not to be found in too uncritical an adherence to his words. Jung lived within certain cultural restraints and to take his ideas on board uncritically is neither right nor, I think, what he would have wanted. I think Jung and the other psychoanalysts seriously underestimated the abuse their patients had encountered. It could be that what Jung sees as 'normal' in terms of crossing the abyss and owning one's own

shadow is a cultural description of what people who have been abused as children need to go through to begin to heal themselves.

Many women will find little guidance in Jung. The heroic roles go to men and the female figures are difficult to identify with. Jung drew much of his inspiration from other sources. His wisdom was openness to revisiting medieval psychology and to allow the psychological wisdom that existed in contemporary indigenous cultures, in symbol and myth, fairy and folk tale, in literature and art to enter the healing relationship. It is this experiential base which is particularly valuable.

A concept which I find very useful in Jung, and particularly relevant to a Religious Society, is that personal growth needs to be in the direction of down, not up. The metaphor of a tree is helpful here. The tree needs to put down a strong root system, working its way through the soil, reaching down into the dark, transforming manure into nutrients. Once an effective root system is established then the tree is resistant to pressures, to strong winds which might blow over a less grounded tree. Once an effective root system is established, the upper branches shoot and blossom of their own accord. A religious person, having a heavenly ideal, may be particularly tempted to try to reach up with the uppermost branches first. This may lead to denial of the reality and a large gap between the ideal and the real, a rhetoric of, rather than a lived experience of, growth.

The issue of the self and selfishness looms large in the personal growth movement. One way of looking at the concept of self is to distinguish the small, egotistical, individualistic self and to distinguish it from the larger self that is defined more collectively in relation to others and feels closer to God. The latter self is less egocentric but is also more assertive. A number of popular psychology books, inspired by Buddhist ideals, urge the death of the ego. Personally, I find the idea that one must kill the ego, violent and similar to practices which call for the mortification of the self. The Buddha himself grew beyond such practice. Love is to be found in positive cultivation and nurturing of both oneself and others. The wish to kill off parts of ourselves, such as the ego, is a form of violence, even if it is done in the name of religion. The aim is not to avoid the conflicting inner voices but to get to know them, make friends with them, to give voice to their better qualities and so transform our relationship with them. Jesus said love your enemies, and I'm suggesting that this includes the ones within.

In the silence we may meet our own shadows and projections. The way forward is not to deny them but to journey through them. If we work to develop

ourselves and resolve our internal conflicts, we can be empty and clear, and can walk cheerfully over the earth recognising that of God in others. To become less defensive, more open and able to listen to those who are different, to be able to see others as potential teachers rather than enemies, an inner change is needed.

Reflections

*Sleep my little one, sleep
Your mother must use rifle
And plough
Night and day
Blood and sweat
For the life of our village
For our sea
For our sky.*⁴³

Looking back from the present time I can see that the story of the making of the film has a shape: a beginning, a middle and perhaps even an end. While making the film it did not seem like that. Things that seemed to be going nowhere at the time, later appear like seeds intentionally sown; what seemed to be endings became beginnings. The need to keep going even when the end is not in sight, even when the path itself must be found by groping in the dark demands faith. It is important for me to share this because I want you to remember that I am an ordinary person who gained the skills I needed as I went along. What I can do, you can do too, should the need arise.

I began by wanting to share with others the knowledge I had gained from visiting Vietnam in 1986. This was knowledge about war; that it doesn't just end but goes on affecting people's lives for generations; that it isn't somewhere else in an arena of war but happens in people's homes; that it impacts on the lives of everyone not just those called soldiers; that women and children as well as men are victims in war; that women and children as well as men play an active role in war; that war doesn't just damage their environment, it damages our environment; that war is costly and ineffective and those who make military decisions are not called upon to account for how resources have been spent, whether the stated aims were reached or not.⁴⁴

This was also knowledge about Vietnam: that it is a beautiful place, not just a muddy battlefield or hostile jungle; that the culture is rich and interesting; that

the role that women have played in Vietnamese history is significant; that the representation of the Vietnamese as 'the enemy' is punishing them in real terms; that there is much we can learn from the Vietnamese about endurance, survival and forgiveness.

When I began speaking about Vietnam I was talking against the tide.⁴⁵ When early Quakers talked of speaking truth to power they located power in figures of authority such as kings. The source of the power I needed to address was much more diffuse. It included official power such as government departments, but also community groups, and ordinary people. What I was trying to address was really the public perception of Vietnam and hence the shared construction of its history, and of the role we played in that history. I felt that the 'real story' film genre was reinforcing those old ideas about war which my experience was forcing me to discard. I felt that the exclusion of any real data about the Vietnamese in the films was re-iterating the limited vision that helped create the war in the first place, that we were repeating past mistakes rather than learning from experience. The film tries to unlock the rigid constructs that we Westerners have about Vietnam, as a basis for a more understanding relationship with the Vietnamese people. It is rather sorry to note that while Australians and Americans were prepared to send their young men off to die for the freedom of the Vietnamese they have made little attempt to find out who the Vietnamese are. Making war, and not knowing are closely related. At the time of the war Chomsky⁴⁶ pointed out that we can only kill people if we rob them of their human status. While murdering people remained wrong, it was the right thing to get rid of 'gooks'. This is similar to the frame of mind that has it that Australia was 'empty' before white settlement.

I seemed to be wanting to say just what a large number of people didn't want to hear. When I stood up to speak I felt that men might reject the feminist perspective, and veterans my alliance with the peace movement. The local Vietnamese community strongly opposed any contact with Vietnam at all. Many ordinary people felt that Vietnam is remote and nothing to do with them. A number of scientists, including members of my own family, argued that the chemicals did not have an effect and I was misguided to listen to the Vietnamese. Medical practitioners I spoke to argued that the Vietnamese should do better studies with data from more sophisticated tests to support their case. A number of women that I spoke to argued that it was not right to talk about 'deformity' in foetuses, and that this was insensitive to the disabled. Politically-oriented members of the peace movement felt that I was too focussed on the personal,

experiential level and that in any case Vietnam had put itself beyond the pale of sympathy by occupying Cambodia.

The relevance of talking about women in Vietnam was not immediately apparent in my work place. I myself feared my own ignorance and felt that I would get something wrong and that this would be used to dismiss everything that I said. So the power that I spoke to was not that of kings but of social pressures to go along with the prevailing system of belief.

There was within me a voice that argued that we in the West were deluding ourselves, and in our films of Vietnam were not clearing the air but rather giving expression to and reinforcing our own myths. This voice did not seem to be my own, though I spoke from my personal experience. It was as if the voice was there and my task was to find the way of conveying its words to an audience that didn't actually want to hear it. The voice did not give direction and say 'Go and build an Ark' though my actions seemed as odd. It did not say 'This is the real story, the truth about Vietnam'. What it did say is that the 'real' story is unreal, that what was needed was to begin to peel away layers of illusion, to question the myths, to look at things from different perspectives.

Of course, during the time of making the film much has changed, and the film has been an active agent in that change process. Men who see the film are usually quite interested in its feminist perspective, because it allows novel information to emerge, and these days gender is a fashionable concern. Veterans have expressed sympathy with the portrayal of a Vietnam which is like the one they knew and the film's stand against the use of chemicals. The local Vietnamese community protested at the showing of the film but has requested that I make a film about their experience, to provide their perspective too. The film has been shown on television.

Many ordinary people now feel that Vietnam is a place one might visit and articles about it appear in the travel and business pages. The scientific studies which were thought to dismiss the case against the chemicals have been found to be flawed and compensation is being paid to veterans in the US. A number of medical practitioners and business men are travelling to Vietnam to work and invest there. Now that there are pictures of the malformation of foetuses there has been no suggestion that 'disability' would be a suitable description. The Vietnamese have withdrawn from Cambodia so Vietnam is no longer seen as beyond the pale of sympathy. Whatever criticisms have been levelled at the film factual error is not one of them.

With the wisdom of hindsight things look different. This brings me on to thinking about what we mean by truth. The film is, after all, about the idea that what is seen depends on where you are looking from; that truth is not singular and unitary. The voice-over of the film is subjective, the voice of the traveller rather than an abstracted voice of authority. Nor is it unitary: the women tell different stories, not one story, and difference as well as agreement can be heard in their tales.

So speaking truth to power is not having the one right answer. Rather it is about holding on to and articulating what we deeply believe in the face of pressure to be silent and resisting the comfortable temptation to collude with that which is clearly false.

In the Society of Friends we tend to think of speaking truth to power as words, written or spoken, and not as using the arts. I would not have thought of making a film 'to speak truth' because the skill and knowledge were so far from my experience. Indeed I still feel strangely removed from the film, *As the Mirror Burns*, as if it has its own life and makes its own statement.

My attitude to making the videotape, and later the film, was very much like one of holding a baby. I did not see it as my own baby, or even think that I was the real parent. Rather I was like a midwife who helped the film give birth to itself. I kept holding it, looking after it, while trying to find more qualified people to take it on. Only in hindsight do I see how the periods of holding the baby added up to quite a large proportion of the parenting.

The arts can speak symbolically, and so have been called the language of the unconscious, the vehicle for metaphors, dreams and visions. In Meeting we recognise this implicitly through using everyday stories in ministry. However, the more explicit use of the arts tends to be more marginalised⁴⁷ and seen as part of the social or fellowship agenda rather than an expression of ministry. Given our history, it is not surprising if we Quakers neglect the arts.⁴⁸ However, one of the strengths of using the arts is that they may cross cultural barriers and find common ground, even when an understanding of each others' language is limited.

Looking back I can see the gendered quality of my own response to the war as a young person. A graffiti message on a wall in my area reads, 'What did you do in the Vietnam War daddy?' Its intent is to question the morality of our military involvement. Interestingly it does not ask the mothers what they were doing, as if being female absolves us from responsibility. My answer to the

question is that I mourned for those who were dying but did not act effectively. One of the crucial differences in my ability to respond in 1986 was that I had in the interim become a Quaker.

Being a Quaker meant that I had support in 'dreaming the impossible dream' and translating it into a practical, achievable project. Being a Quaker meant that I listened to the inner voice and acted on it even though it seemed at the time to be impractical and difficult to justify my own behaviour.

Sometimes I would ask myself why I couldn't be like other film-makers and begin with a short student film as my first endeavour. The answer was obvious. It was not that I wanted to make films *per se* but rather that I needed to make sure this film was made and that if no one else would do it then I would have to. I didn't possess the skill and knowledge that others had, but others were not making the film, so I would have to do it.

I felt myself to be following, and serving, something beyond myself and expressed that spirit in action. In expanding myself to meet the tasks I gained a lot personally. There are obvious practical gains such as film-making skills, other opportunities which are open to me through making the film, and a different vision of what it means to be a woman. In retrospect I feel that the greatest gain is in courage and in the experience of being encouraged. Speaking truth to power means not just challenging the power in others; it also means confronting the power of fear in oneself. To speak well of the enemy is to be seen as a traitor; to risk rejection, to stand alone. But my fears were ghosts, spectres, to be confronted not by weapons but by faith. By following as truthfully as I could in the footsteps of my leading, to keep putting one foot in front of the other, though the destination was not clear, seeing that which is of God in those who we represent as the enemy, so I learned to walk where it is lighter and there are fewer ghosts. What was uppermost in my relationship to the Vietnamese women was not so much the importance of loving the enemy, but of not being afraid to learn from them. For war can only be based on ignorance, on not knowing the other as a human being, on not greeting that which is of God within.

The spirit of *tin*

To look at the image of the enemy is to begin to change it. As the mirror burns the reflection shifts and fades.

*... The stories of the women are not written, but have not been erased. They say the scars left by the thunder and lightening of *linh* are not somewhere else in a theatre of war but here, now. In our sea... our sky... our home, the earth.*

*They invite us to travel beyond our image of the enemy, go further than revenge... to meet again in the spirit of *tin*.*

Peace, or lack of peace is within as well as outside ourselves. One of the greatest sources of disillusionment and despair in my life has been living through the destructiveness of peace groups that break down, usually in a very public way, in factional fighting and petty dispute. This of course undermines the message of peace. Already accused of being idealistic and unrealistic the peace movement sometimes seems to be bent on proving the critics right.

On the other hand the greatest source of hope that I have is Quakerism. While Quakers are a religious rather than a peace group we do strive to live as a peaceful community. When I describe how we do things to others our agenda seems very much more radical than that of a local peace group. 'Yes', I say 'We worship in silence. We have no hierarchy, no priests, no binding doctrine. Anyone may speak, but of course should only do so in a sparing manner. When we have a disagreement we use silence and meditation to resolve it. We wait. We are pacifists. Voting down a minority is a form of coercion. We wait until we all agree'. It doesn't sound very practical and yet it is. We have operated in this way for over three hundred years. The secret of the Society's longevity is, I think, its ability to understand that practical action is spiritual expression, to reconcile the inner and the outer aspects of human experience. In the Society of Friends we sometimes draw a false dichotomy between those who are practical and action-orientated and those who are spiritual. I hope in telling you about the film, to show an example of 'spirited action'.

As the Mirror Burns ends on a spiritual note evoking again the spirit of *tin*, that of God which is expressed in harmony and simple things, as the means for reconciliation and healing.

Notes & References

- [1] This quotation is from the voice-over of the film *As the Mirror Burns*.
- [2] The title is taken from Wilson, Elisabeth (1986) Prisons of glass London; Methuen.
- [3] This is from my journal. The picture which inspired this couplet was of a girl lying dead on a cart. A soldier was trying to get her brother to accept that she was dead, to let go of her hand, so the body could be taken away.
- [4] From the voice-over of the film.
- [5] This project is a good example of working through the negative images rather than denying them. In the International Year of Peace many people held art exhibitions and wanted young people to paint images of peace. They were disappointed with the barren responses, often a stereotypic peace sign or a bomb with a cross on it to signify no war. At the Melbourne College of Education we began an approach based on the principles of art therapy. We asked the children to first develop their image of war, a particularly fruitful approach in Australia where so many people have come from war-torn societies. Using the image of war we then worked to develop complex images of peace, using the exercise to help young people to develop strategies of peace-making through their art. This project was to become a solid foundation for exploring images of war and peace in the film.
- [6] This congress is now seen as the occasion of the turning point in Vietnamese policy of *Doi Moi* or openness but of course at this point we had not yet heard of perestroika in Russia and the changes that would lead to the end of the Cold War.
- [7] It had not occurred to me that the animals would be affected by birth defects too but of course they are.
- [8] At the time I concluded that they didn't work, but later I found that people just poke the wires into the sockets, a practice which I could not bring myself to adopt.
- [9] When I asked the interpreter to dine with us she refused the invitation.
- [10] Having seen the coverage of the conflict in Bosnia, the so called policy of 'ethnic cleansing', the rape of women, the decline in relationships between neighbours, the lack of clarity about who is fighting who for what purpose, you might understand what I mean. I have recently been reading Sheila Jeffreys' work on sadomasochism and finding that her idea of 'eroticising dominance' gives a helpful insight into this phenomenon. Jeffreys, S. (1993) The Lesbian Heresy Australia; Spinifex

- [11] The Vietnamese report that because the vegetation was initially too wet to burn the Americans dropped grass seeds from the air. When these had grown the grass could be napalmed. The grass grows up to the height of a person and as it not edible by cattle takes over the defoliated areas.
- [12] From the voice-over of the film.
- [13] As I left Vietnam I felt I was leaving the violence behind me, however, I found that the exposure to the effects of violence had sensitized me to the cruelty in everyday conversations, as if the voice that had devastated Vietnam spoke here too.
- [14] I see this as a role reversal on the Vietnamese judging us on the basis of *The Diary of Adrian Mole*.
- [15] Now Vietnam has withdrawn from Cambodia and Australia has peace keeping troops there a more sympathetic appraisal of the Vietnamese role is apparent.
- [16] Later I was to realise that little is as likely to strike dread into film makers as a bunch of enthusiastic amateurs who want to make a film. It was the merit of the idea which endowed them with patience.
- [17] One of the things that struck me as I was making the film was that we knew so little about Vietnam during the war. Young men were sent there to die, but we didn't really know who the Vietnamese were, what language they spoke. Even now when the film is shown some people comment with surprise that there are beaches.
- [18] For example, Eisen Bergman, Arlene (1975) Women of Vietnam USA; Peoples Press, Hu'u Ngoc and F. Correze (1984) Anthology of Vietnamese Popular Verse Hanoi; Red River Foreign Languages Publishing House, Language and Culture in Vietnam, (undated) Sydney; NSW Adult Migrant Education Centre, Women in Vietnam (undated) Hanoi; Red River Foreign Language Press
- [19] Nguyen Du (1983) The Tale of Kieu: A Biligual Edition of Truyen Kieu. Translated and Annotated by Huynh Sanh Thong, with an historical essay by Alexander B. Woodside, New Haven, Conn.
- [20] In the film the only birdsong captured by the soundtrack is from the caged songbirds on the hotel roof
- [21] For example, see McCulloch, J. (1984) The Politics of Agent Orange London; Heinemann

- [22] Since then it has become clear that the scientific studies were flawed. As most of the members of the population studied have been exposed to chemicals the control groups are contaminated.
- [23] People from aid agencies advised us that a party of this size would be a heavy strain on scarce resources.
- [24] The colour appears to jump out of its proper location and run on to other shapes, similar to the way that water colour pigment may suddenly run from where the artist has placed it into other wet areas.
- [25] A popular song heard at Quang Ngai cafe during the war quoted by Arlene Eisen Bergman.
- [26] Some of this was used in her documentary *Code Name 7 Roses* a videotape distributed by Ronin Films.
- [27] As there are many hours of tape it is necessary to have a system for organising the material. A log is created which keeps track of what is on each tape, where and when it was shot and so on. Later when editing the tape the desired segments can be located without having to sit down and replay 20 hours of footage.
- [28] Children came from the forest to watch us film. One of them pointed to his nose to show it was Australian too, the more pronounced shape and higher bridge suggesting European as well as Asian origin. Vietnamese people see us as having "high noses". Children of Australian and American service men asked us to find their fathers, a request I found sad, as often the father's name was given as Smith or Jones. One child said she had been granted permission to leave and had been waiting for for six years for her father to pick her up.
- [29] In 1989 night life for the visitor in Hanoi was either a trip by trishaw to the piano bar restaurant or attending a gathering at the Australian embassy.
- [30] McAlister, John T. & Mus, Paul (1970) The Vietnamese and Their Revolution New York, Harper & Row p79
- [31] The producer we had lined up took a job with the funding body and could not continue with us.
- [32] People working on processing the film before the translation was available to them said they were puzzled by the appearance of somebody's "nice little grandmother".
- [33] The family said Kim Phuc has been studying in Cuba. Rumour in the West has it that she migrated to the United States. If the rumour is true than this is

embarrassing to the Vietnamese government as she is something of a national symbol.

- [34] I received a few telephone calls at the Doc Lap, or as it is now becoming known by its former and more famous name, the Caravelle. Some were intended for the East German visitors but referred to me because I look the same, a nice reversal of the racist view that all Asians look alike.
- [35] David Halberstam, letter reprinted in Pratt, John Clarke (1984) Vietnam Voices New York; Penguin Books p665
- [36] Donovan D. (1985) Once a Warrior King UK; Corgi Books
- [37] Perhaps one of the reasons that Vietnam Veterans have suffered so much is society's denial of what actually happened. More Australian veterans have died by suicide since the war than were killed during it.
- [38] For example, the Victorian State Library has a most interesting collection of press pictures taken in the sixties.
- [39] Not that I would claim anyone won, but I do see the Americans as having failed to achieve the objectives they set out to achieve with all that hardware. Before I began doing the research for this film I believed that war was wrong, but I had not realized that it is ineffective.
- [40] Linda Collins has been conducting conflict resolution programs in a women's prison. I am indebted to her for bringing to my attention the 'Somebody's Daughter Theatre' and their performance 'Tell Her That I Love Her'. This is a group of former prisoners. Many of the women were in prison for drug abuse. When they leave prison there is pressure from old friends to resume their former lifestyle. There is also pressure from within. Many of the women take drugs to escape the pain they feel. "Tell Her That I Love Her" is a compilation of the stories of women who have managed to resist and are making it on the outside. The poem 'The Void' comes from this performance.
- [41] Jung, Carl G. (1963) Memories. Dreams. Reflections Recorded and edited by Aniela Jafte. Translated by Richard and Clara Winston NY; Pantheon.
- [42] For a discussion of archetypes in literature see Schechter, Harold and Jonna Gormely Semeiks (1990) Patterns in Popular Culture : A Sourcebook for Writers USA; Harper and Row
- [43] This lullaby for the revolution is read in the film. I was very interested in the image of the breast feeding soldier which occurs in Vietnamese folk literature. In our

culture the male is assigned the fighting and the female the nurturing role, and this division may be used to exclude women from participation in military decision making processes. In the film Mrs Dinh says 'Vietnamese women are very strong, they do all the fighting and all the housework'.

- [44] For example we do not ask 'Is Kuwait liberated?' or call the military to account for the fact that it is not.
- [45] The other two women actually feared for their lives.
- [46] Chomsky, N. (1969) American Power and the New Mandarins USA; Pantheon
- [47] Except in particular Meetings such as a New York Meeting which has a performing arts group. On the occasion I attended, music was used as part of the unprogrammed ministry.
- [48] By this I mean that our Puritan heritage, and the period in our history in which Quakers were known by their adherence to the 'peculiarities', have left a shadow over the arts.