

A Korean War Veteran's Dream

Mary C. Rorro

Summary

This brief vignette illustrates the power of collaborate conversation for the same of healing moral injury.

The little girl walks up to me on the beach. At first, I'm happy to see her. As she comes closer, I see she's been crying and ask her, "What's wrong, sweetheart, don't cry." Then she always says the same thing: "Why you shoot me, GI?" I start to cry and she disappears. I never meant to hurt her. She was just looking for food in the dark and she died because she was starving. I have never hurt a fly and now killed a child. I'll never forget her face when I pulled her from the rice paddy—she was like a little angel. She could have grown up and had babies and been happy in her village. Instead, she only lives on in my dream as a six-year-old girl. They say it wasn't your fault—you were doing your job—but how can God forgive me? I can't forgive myself. Now my own daughter has died and I think it's a punishment from God. I don't know if I'll see the girls in Heaven.

A THERAPIST'S RESPONSE

This is the recurring dream of a Korean war veteran who has been haunted since the war for accidentally killing a young Korean girl and two other children in a rice paddy at night while on guard duty. He had thought that the enemy was primed for attack, but in the darkness shot these starving children who were looking to take the soldiers' food. This patient's poignant story was so moving that it compelled me to write his story. The emotional

Mary C. Rorro, DO, New Jersey Veterans Healthcare System, James J. Howard Outpatient Clinic , 970 Rt. 70, Brick, NJ 08724 (Email: mary.rorro@va.gov).

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content of his regret and guilt weighed on me. I felt such compassion for this gentle man who lived with grief every day of his life. There was no absolution I could provide and no forgiveness he would accept. His dream embodied a wish fulfillment that he never killed her and that she was still alive on the beach, walking to him unafraid. It was as if it had never happened—until this scene was shattered every night with her crying, “Why you shoot me, GI?” As I heard his dream time and time again, I realized she had not only lost her life, along with the two other children, but my patient’s spirit was lost as well—he was the fourth victim. For this veteran’s enduring pain and my own for him, I wrote this poem:

KOREAN GIRL POEM

*Little girl, straight black hair
smallest of the three
you made too much noise
I had no choice
can you forgive me*

*You’ve been eternally young
since nineteen fifty one
haunting my dreams
until my day is done.*

*I’m happy to see you
In my dream alive
until you say, with
searching tears in your eyes,
“Why you shoot me, GI?”*

*Pulling the trigger
sealed my tortured lot.*

*My pain would have ended there
if I instead were shot.
Maybe I’ll see her in God’s House
though maybe I will not;*

*Her face stays with me
to my grave
four childrens’ spirits
lost.*

KOREAN VETERAN'S RESPONSE

I did not know how he would react when I gave him this poem on the next visit. I did not want it to make him feel even more dysphoric, but thought it should be shared. After reading it he said, "You have been so good to me, Doc." He shook my hand and asked to take it home. Near the holidays, he brought me a green wooden framed copy of my poem which he made. He was so proud, saying "Here, Doc, I want you to keep this in your office for other people to see, and put it near the door. I also have a copy hanging in my house; it makes me feel that I am honoring the girl's memory."

The Korean veteran still dreams of this little girl and feels this will never end. My listening and reframing of his story into the poem seems to have benefitted him and to have created an empathic connection between us as doctor and patient. On the next visit, he said that his own daughter had died. "Now they are both together in Heaven, the Korean girl and my daughter. Now maybe my daughter can tell her that I never meant to kill her and that it was a mistake. I don't know if I'll see them in Heaven." His grief had been transformed into a healing remembrance of both children and a validation of his pain.