

Ted

We first met at Manchester College
in Peterseim Chapel.
Home between tours,
I was there to speak
about Vietnam.
Ted was on his way over:
he had come to listen –
and to learn what he was getting into.

Someone had told me
that he would be there,
But I didn't know which one he was
until time for questions.

Ted asked many questions.

They were all the very serious,
searching,
practical questions
of a fellow who wanted to know,
essentially,
whether it was really possible
to work constructively
in such chaos.

Also, Ted wanted to know about
Identification.
Was it really possible to be accepted
as an individual,
a friend,
a brother:
Or were you always
just
another
American?

I saw Ted many times in Vietnam,
But I remember him best
at Di Linh.

Once when we visited,
we waded in mud up to our ankles
carrying bread up to a hill
to a little school.

Ted stopped here and there
to chat with friends
along the way.

It was good to be there with Ted –
to listen to him
switch easily
from English
to Vietnamese
to Koho,
to watch him,
just as easily,
laugh with his neighbors,
and tease the girls,
and play with the kids.

It was good to be there with Ted,
because you knew
that he belonged.

Ted and I talked about his questions
from months before at Manchester.

He had found his answers.

No absolute answers,
to be sure,
but answers you could
live with.

Then,
suddenly,
like the sudden splendor
of a tropical sunrise,
it was Ted and Ven Pak.

The two were one
after two years of
hop-scotched courtship
meeting in Tuy Hoa,
or Nha Trang
or Di Linh
or Saigon
and filling the spaces
with letters
and dreams.

Their joy in living
was not the kind you envy,
but the kind you share.

And then,
the day so suddenly begun
was as suddenly ended.

It was the classic intersection
of the eternal opposites
as the terrorist's bullets
smashed into his chest
and he reeled back
into the closet
where he had once raised
baby chicks.

Death is neither new
Nor ever very far away.
Sometimes it seems as though
all we ever get out of life
is Death.

There is,
of course,
the knowledge that
Ted was very much a man
and nothing more –
Doomed from the day of his birth
to die somewhere,
sometime.

And there is,
of course,
the resurrection miracle working
even now,
to secure for Ted
his place
among the very much alive
(who of us who knew him
can ever be the same?)

He would not wish us
to do the ultimate injustice
and remember him
as a sinless saint.

No, Ted fought temptation
and sometimes lost –
like all of us –
and we dare not think lightly
of his struggle.

And yet there is,
deep in each of us,
an emptiness
which grows
when those we love
are no longer
where we need them.

An emptiness
which expands
in proportion
to the pointlessness
of the losing.

When good men fall –
Casualties of their own virtue –
Rage has no place.

But what, then?

We are left wondering –
like Ted's hand
fingering the frets
of his guitar
searching for just the right chord
to begin
an unfamiliar Peace.

Soon the strings vibrate
A little,
And there is harmony
As we begin to deal with Ted
In his mystical transposition.

The song takes form
so we realize
that we must
pick it up,
join in,
carry on.

Only that gentle harmony
to which Ted
attuned his life
can help to fill
the silent void which,
with his going,
now remains.

Death is neither new
nor ever very far away.
And now we begin to know
that what we get out of Death
is Life.

Bill Herod
1971