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## VIETNAM: MEMORIES AND MEANING

# Bearing Witness to the Inhuman at Mỹ Lai: Museum, Ritual, Pilgrimage

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This article explores how the Sơn Mỹ Memorial and Museum and its associated community activities and programs commemorate and memorialize the 1968 Mỹ Lai Massacre and its aftermath. The museum provides space for reflection and bearing witness to the profound suffering in the Massacre. *Bearing witness* means reliving or remembering and coming to know an experience, especially a traumatic one like Mỹ Lai. Witness bearers are both those reporting first-hand experiences and memories, and those listening to and learning about the experiences. When locals and visitors alike participate in the activities and rituals at Sơn Mỹ, in pilgrimages to Mỹ Lai, or in touring the memorial and museum, an opportunity is available to recognize the “existential legitimacy” of the events, experiences, and memories. Bearing witness can open pathways to individual and societal healing as well as identity redefinition.

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**Keywords:** Sơn Mỹ Memorial; Mỹ Lai Massacre; Vietnam War; bearing witness; pilgrimage

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## Introduction

The philosopher Giorgio Agamben's (2002) statement, "Human beings are human insofar as they bear witness to the inhuman" (212), is haunting and paradoxical when considering the Mỹ Lai Massacre of March 16, 1968. On this day, U.S. Army soldiers assaulted, tortured, mutilated, and killed over 500 villagers in the commune of Sơn Mỹ in central Vietnam. This was the largest, most well-known, and most shocking massacre of civilians in the American-Vietnam War (1956–1975).<sup>1</sup> Today, the Sơn Mỹ Memorial and Museum,<sup>2</sup> established in 1976, just one year after the end of the War, stands as a resolute witness, memorializing the Massacre.<sup>3</sup>

In this article I will explore how the Sơn Mỹ Memorial and Museum provides space for bearing witness to the extraordinary experiences and memories in the Massacre, and reflecting on their meaning. To "bear witness to the inhuman" at the site of Mỹ Lai Massacre provides opportunity for transformative learning, for individual and societal healing, and for identity redefinition. Locals and visitors alike engage in the witness-bearing process when they take part in the special events and rituals, in pilgrimages to Mỹ Lai, or in touring the Sơn Mỹ Memorial and Museum. The soul-searching and meaning-making involved when bearing witness to the inhuman can lead to knowing what it means to be human, per Agamben's statement.

## Mỹ Lai Massacre: Historical Context

The Mỹ Lai Massacre was one of multiple massacres committed by the U.S. military in the American-Vietnam War. On the morning of March 16, 1968, the American unit known as Charlie Company, of the 11th Infantry Brigade, 23rd Infantry Division, arrived by helicopters in the hamlets of Mỹ Lai, Tư Cung, and Co Luy, in the commune of Sơn Mỹ, which had about 700 inhabitants. Sơn Mỹ, also called Tịnh Khê, is located in Sơn Tịnh District, in Quảng Ngãi Province in Central Vietnam (Oliver 2006, 192). Lieutenant

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<sup>1</sup> Known in Vietnam as the "American War" (*Chiến tranh Mỹ, Kháng chiến chống Mỹ*) (Asian-Nation.org n.d.).

<sup>2</sup> In Vietnamese, the Sơn Mỹ Memorial and Museum is *Bảo tàng và Di tích Sơn Mỹ*, translated Sơn Mỹ Vestige and Museum.

<sup>3</sup> In Vietnam, the event is known as the Sơn Mỹ Massacre, while in the U.S. it is known as the Mỹ Lai Massacre.

William L. Calley led a “search and destroy” mission to invade the village his company called “Pinkville,” incorrectly believing that the village was harboring troops of the 48th Viet Cong Battalion. Calley ordered his men to shoot anyone they encountered at point-blank range, even though they met no resistance and found no males of fighting age. When some American soldiers refused to shoot, Calley executed the villagers himself (Digital Histories 2016). Within several hours “every living thing in Mỹ Lai that the troops could find—men, women, children and livestock—was dead” (Anderson 1998, 3). The names of the 504 Vietnamese civilians killed during this four-hour episode are conspicuously listed on a giant plaque at the entrance to the Son Mỹ Museum.

Most of the photos of the Massacre in the museum exhibition were taken by Sgt. Ron Haeberle, a U.S. military photographer. Haeberle’s photos reveal the harrowing story: villagers in terror; corpses with skulls split open, intestines spilling out; charred bodies in the rubble and ashes; as well as an ironic image of a circle of soldiers enjoying cigarettes, beer, and laughter. Some of the most gruesome images of mutilated, clubbed, and stabbed civilians are not included in the exhibits. Likewise, the accompanying narratives are not sensationalized or graphically described, leaving the museum visitor to imagine the details and make their own interpretations, judgments, and meanings.

Haeberle’s photos in the museum also depict the dramatic account of U.S. Army helicopter pilot Hugh Thompson, who was on a reconnaissance mission. Thompson landed his aircraft between the advancing U.S. troops and the retreating villagers, and evacuated surviving villagers to where they could receive medical care. The massacre ended only after Thompson made repeated radio calls to his superiors to report that a massacre was occurring, and threatened to open fire if the U.S. troops continued their attacks. A photo-exhibit in the museum shows the U.S. Army presenting Thompson and two members of his crew with the Soldier’s Medal, the Army’s highest award for bravery not involved in direct conflict with an enemy, in March 1998, thirty years after the events at Mỹ Lai (History.com 2009).

Haeberle took black-and-white photos on an army-issued camera but used color film in his own camera. U.S. officers in command of Charlie Company and the 11th Brigade had immediately made efforts to cover up the massacre and downplay the bloodshed, and so

Haeberle did not tell his superiors about the color photos, instead taking them back to the U.S. in secret. Over a year later, investigative reporter Seymour Hersh broke the story of the massacre in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (Hersh 1969, A1). Following widespread interest in the story, Haeberle sold his photographs, initially to the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* (Eszterhas 1969). The publication of Haeberle's photos in *Life* and *Time* magazines in November 1969 brought the Massacre to national and international attention.

Following the uproar about the Mỹ Lai Massacre and its cover-up, the U.S. Army ordered a special investigation. The report from the inquiry was released in March 1970, and recommended that twenty-eight officers be charged for their involvement in the Massacre and its cover-up. The Army would eventually charge only fourteen of the twenty-eight, including Calley, with crimes related to the events at Mỹ Lai. All except Calley were acquitted. Calley was found guilty of premeditated murder for ordering the shootings, despite his claim that he was following orders from his commanding officer, Captain Medina. In March 1971, Calley was given a life sentence for his role in directing the killings at Mỹ Lai. His sentence was reduced upon appeal to twenty years and later to ten. He ended up serving three years under house arrest and was paroled in 1974 (Anderson 1998).

In August 2009, Calley made a public apology while speaking to a Kiwanis Club in Columbus, Georgia, near the military base where he was court-martialed in 1971 (Associated Press, 2009). In his words, "There is not a day that goes by that I do not feel remorse for what happened that day in Mỹ Lai... I feel remorse for the Vietnamese who were killed, for their families, for the American soldiers involved and their families. I am very sorry" (Associated Press 2009).

Observers note that this was Calley's first public expression of remorse, and that it came more than 40 years after the massacre. At the Son Mỹ Museum, there is one small panel exhibit that reports on Calley's 2009 apology.

### **The Significance of *Bearing Witness***

*Bearing witness* means reliving or remembering and coming to know an experience, especially a traumatic one, through oral sharing or other communications, such as writing, media, music, art, or a museum exhibit. In a historical or psychosocial sense,

witness-bearers include both those describing first hand-experiences and memories and those listening to and learning about the experiences. For the M̃y Lai Massacre, witness-bearers include all those who were involved—villagers and American soldiers alike—who could describe their experiences. The visitor to the Son M̃y Memorial is also a witness-bearer, as he or she “listens” to the memories told through artifacts and exhibits.

From a phenomenological viewpoint, there are no true witness-bearers to testify or report on the experience of being killed in the Massacre. Those who survived are considered imperfect proxies to those who fully experienced the torture, mutilation, and killing (Agamben 2002, 33–35). Hence the proxy witnesses—the survivors and their descendants, observers, reporters, and scholars—carry the impossible responsibility of providing testimony about an experience which they did not experience firsthand.

Recognizing the imperfection of the testimony underscores the insanity, inhumanity, and incomprehensibility of the Massacre. But actively listening to and acknowledging the memories of the experience have the effect of bestowing an “existential legitimacy” and honor to the experiencers themselves and to those telling about the experiences on their behalf. “There are times ... when the highest honor, the greatest love is paid to another by simply bearing witness to his or her experience” (Johnson 2011). The Son M̃y Memorial serves to authoritatively document and validate the unimaginable, unbelievable, and unbearable truths about the historical event and about human nature. What is revealed may be morally unconscionable, cognitively unbelievable, and psychically unbearable as witness bearers come to know and accept the “is-ness” of experience and memory, even as the narrative violates expectations and ethical imperatives of “what should be.” Authenticating and “owning these truths” affirm and honor suffering as a valid, albeit difficult, human experience.

Psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton explains that “bearing witness to history liberates us emotionally and mentally” (1998, 20). Bearing witness contributes to the process of *social healing*, enabling individuals, communities and nations to at least

partially relieve past and present wounds. This healing involves cultivating health by seeking historical truths, reconciliation, restorative justice, and dignity, while simultaneously addressing and attending to physical, emotional, spiritual, and interpersonal wounds.

*Social healing* is a paradigm that seeks to transcend dysfunctional polarities that hold repetitive wounding in place. It views human transgressions not as a battle between the dualities of right and wrong or good and bad, but as an issue of wounding and healing.... (Thompson and O'Dea 2012)

In witness bearing, the affirmation and acknowledgement of an experience—including those of suffering—relieves irreparable wounds, softens transgenerational trauma, restores the dignity that was shattered, and returns wholeness to individuals. Listening is a means of holding space, which makes pain and trauma gradually bearable and faceable. When such feelings are felt, expressed, and then heard and acknowledged, the experience can be intense, even explosive and re-traumatizing. But as witness bearing continues, the stresses and traumas subside, and healing commences for both teller and listener. The emotional burden may be lightened and the dissolving of wounds may progress (Pikiewicz 2013). Witness-bearing is a sacred process that can bestow existential legitimacy to a traumatic experience and support social healing in a community. Bearing witness can deepen and fortify the soul and affirm one's humanity (Kumar 2014).

### **Bearing Witness at the Sơn Mỹ Memorial**

The memorial at Sơn Mỹ is set in a particularly beautiful countryside location. In the garden, trees stand tall and firm as though holding on to the memory of the Massacre. Their trunks are scarred with bullet holes. The grounds reveal the outlines of foundation marks where homes, shelters, and sheds once stood. The Museum building itself contains numerous artifacts; an extensive photo gallery; and documents including excerpts from military investigations, court-martial transcripts, and news and magazine articles based on interviews with the soldiers who perpetrated the crime and the villagers who survived it.

For visitors to the Memorial and Museum, bearing witness involves experiencing these environs—the place, the grounds, the land—where unfathomable brutality, violence, and atrocities occurred. One can almost hear the cries of those who were tortured, assaulted, and killed. The soil, stones, trees and remaining wildlife seem to hold memories of the death and destruction that took place here. Exhibits in the museum give the viewers opportunity to imagine the chaos, and to reflect on what it might mean that human beings were capable of such cruelty and unthinkable violence. Writes one visitor:

I was only seven years old when the Mỹ Lai massacre occurred, but I still remember seeing disturbing photos of it in *Life* magazine. Now I was standing at the irrigation ditch where over one hundred of the bodies were found. Mỹ Lai is an emotionally tough place for anyone to visit.... Standing there I tried to contemplate the madness that occurred on this peaceful spot. Roosters crowed in the distance and the pungent smell of burning brush wafted over the village. It was an ordinary day, just like the one when the massacre occurred. Then I looked down and noticed hundreds of bare footprints along the path, many of them the tiny footprints of young children. They were interspersed randomly with imprints of army boots. (Michael 2012)

Some of the tour guides at the Sơn Mỹ Memorial are relatives of victims and survivors of the massacre. For them, witness bearing involves both retracing the events of March 16, 1968, and conveying the memory and meaning to the visitors on tour. For example, Kiều, the guide who led my tour, walked us along the irrigation ditch. She pointed out how villagers were corralled there to be executed. Then she stopped and lowered her head in a silent tribute. Later, she explained that her own mother witnessed and survived the massacre of several hundred villagers at the ditch. Her mother was then 17, and taken for dead in the pile of bodies. For Kiều, her prayer-tribute was a witness-bearing ritual that has a healing effect, not only for herself, but also for the tourists and students on her tours. For the visitors, the



opportunity to stand alongside Kiều in her tribute is to connect and bear witness to her mother's memory of the events occurring right here on that day.

### **Witness Bearing in Ritual: Commemorations and Memorial Services**

An annual service held on the grounds of the Sơn Mỹ Memorial on March 16 every year is an important witness bearing ritual. Typically, several hundred are in attendance, including representatives from the U.S. The event includes an incense offering, several group prayers, and tributes by local and international speakers. In 2012, U.S. veteran Billy Kelly presented 504 roses at the anniversary service in commemoration of the 504 documented victims. Mike Boehm, an American veteran representing the Madison Quakers, which has financially supported various Mỹ Lai memorial projects, has frequently returned for the anniversary memorial services to pay tribute, award scholarships, and play music on his violin (Voice of Vietnam 2012). Former U.S. Army officer Lawrence Colburn, one of the three-man helicopter crew that intervened to stop the killing, participated in the 40th anniversary commemoration. There, Colburn was reunited with Do Ba, a survivor he rescued (Stocking 2008). The memories for both Colburn and Do Ba were vivid. When Colburn landed his helicopter, he found “eight-year-old Do Ba clinging to his mother’s corpse in a ditch full of blood and the bodies of more than 100 people who had been mowed down” (Stocking 2008). In his testimony at the 40th anniversary commemoration, Colburn said: “Today I see Do Ba with a wife and a baby... He’s transformed himself from being a broken, lonely man. Now he’s complete. He’s a perfect example of the human spirit, of the will to survive” (Stocking 2008). Kelly, Boehm, and Colburn’s narratives represent witness bearing to the village’s transformation through the decades after the Massacre. They are a testimony to realizing the restoration of dignity and wholeness following profound trauma.

The annual memorial service at the Sơn Mỹ Memorial is a witness bearing ritual. For those who participate, it is an opportunity to recall and retell memories, to offer incense in tribute to those who perished, and to recognize the struggles of survivors

and their descendants. In turn, it is an opportunity to reflect, take stock, and reassess the meaning of the Mỹ Lai Massacre, both for oneself and for the collective society. This reflection and meaning-making process has multiple dimensions, especially in terms of authenticating experiences that have previously been too difficult and overwhelming to acknowledge, think, or talk about.

For visitors to the Son Mỹ Memorial and Museum, bearing witness involves listening to the horrific, poignant, and unthinkable narratives, feeling the ongoing grief, sorrow and trauma, as well as seeing the potential for healing and wholeness in various stages. As visitors reflect on the madness that occurred, the yearning to find paths toward healing, reconciliation, and solidarity with the victims is almost unavoidable. When one senses the sanctity of the place, there is a corresponding glimpse into the possibility of reconciliation and redemption. In this way, the action and practice of bearing witness drives the personal and collective healing process.

### **The Call to Pilgrimage as Bearing Witness**

At the time of the Mỹ Lai Massacre, I was a draft-age American citizen registered with the U.S. Selective Service System<sup>4</sup> as a conscientious objector. In 2013, more than 45 years after the Massacre, I came as a visitor<sup>5</sup> to the Son Mỹ Memorial and Museum, not only as one who had “virtually” witnessed the Mỹ Lai Massacre and its aftermath through the media, but also as one whose classmates and family members were drafted into combat in the larger Vietnam War. The grief and sorrow I experienced upon learning of one after another classmate, relative, friend, or acquaintance killed in combat was distressing every time. My search to comprehend the madness in the War, particularly visible at Mỹ Lai, became a preoccupation.

With this background, I visited the Son Mỹ Memorial and Museum holding memories of sorrow, grief, and outrage, as well as curiosity about what meaning

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<sup>4</sup> Commonly known as the draft board, the Selective Service System was a U.S. military conscription program.

<sup>5</sup> My travel to Vietnam in Summer 2013 was supported by the ASIANetwork Faculty Enhancement Program, funded by the Andrew Mellon Foundation.

the local Vietnamese have found in the Massacre 45 years later. This visit to the Son Mỹ Memorial was reminiscent of my trip to the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park and Museum at age 16, in 1965. At Hiroshima, I had a meltdown that became a transformative learning experience, catalyzing my identity as a conscientious objector and peace pilgrim-ambassador. Visiting the Son Mỹ Memorial and Museum was similarly impactful: I glimpsed the psychosocial dynamics associated with historical events and places involving profound mass traumas. I realized afterwards that the visit to the Son Mỹ Memorial was a *peace pilgrimage*.

Two years later, in 2015, which was the 50th anniversary of my first pilgrimage to Hiroshima, I received a new *call to pilgrimage*.<sup>6</sup> The clairaudient transmission, which was similar to the call documented in various pilgrimage accounts (Cousineau 2012; Clift and Clift 2004; Peace Pilgrim 1994), invited me to embark on a “Coming-Full-Circle Peace Pilgrimage” that would take me back to Vietnam, Hiroshima, and other sites of mass suffering and the memorial museums associated with those sites. Answering the call during my faculty sabbatical year, I traveled to eleven countries in Asia, North America, and Europe.

While the initial call did not clearly specify destinations or objectives for the pilgrimage, I came to realize that my *assignment in pilgrimage* was to highlight the rise of *planetary peace consciousness* in the global age. The concept of planetary consciousness as well as “bearing witness,” “transgenerational trauma,” and “social healing” became clarified as I researched and engaged in dialogue with witnesses and observers at sites involving mass violence, atrocities, and unimaginable cruelty and inhumanity.

Although I experienced the *call to pilgrimage* as a solitary invitation, the Son Mỹ Memorial receives frequent requests from organized tour groups bringing Vietnam War veterans<sup>7</sup> themselves “coming-full-circle” to revisit and remember their combat experiences. The Vietnam veterans groups who visit the Son Mỹ Memorial have not

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<sup>6</sup> I questioned whether my *call to pilgrimage* was merely imagination, a hallucination, or other cognitive malfunction. The characteristics of others' *calls to pilgrimage*, which have been documented in Cousineau (2012), Clift and Clift (2004), and Peace Pilgrim (1994) were comparable to my own experience of the call.

<sup>7</sup> Vietnam veterans refers to foreigners, mainly Americans, who served in the armed forces in the American-Vietnam War (1956–1975).

been those who were in Charlie Company, the unit that perpetrated the massacre. The visiting veterans also do not typically refer to their visit as a *pilgrimage* beforehand, but the impact of the visit carries the meaning of pilgrimage: A pilgrimage may be either metaphorical or may involve actual travel to a sacred or historical site (Cousineau 2012, xxv–xxvi). Pilgrimages usually involve a journey as well as a spiritual or existential quest for self-understanding, wholeness, or wisdom (Morinis 1992, 336). This is especially pertinent for Americans who still carry unresolved dissonance about the meaning of the Vietnam War in their history and national identity.

Visitors attribute the word *pilgrimage* to their visit to Mỹ Lai when they realize the emotional and visceral impact of their experience. Professor Carol Becker (2003) described how undergraduate and graduate students responded to a visit they made together:

Of all the sites we visited over our three-week journey, no other had the psychological and emotional impact of Mỹ Lai. We absorbed the nightmare that had occurred there, and left transformed. Without thinking too much about the weightiness of the term, some of us began to call the visit to Mỹ Lai a “pilgrimage,” probably choosing this word because of our awareness that we wanted to know the place not just through the mind, but more deeply, in the body. This is the type of secular experience many of us associated with pilgrimage.... (56)

Pilgrimages are travel narratives involving encounters with the sacred. These narratives are part of the quest genre, wherein the protagonist journeys to discover that which is sacred (Goodnow and Bloom 2017). Some visitors to the Son Mỹ Memorial report their visit as an encounter with the sacred. For example, this history professor wrote in a blog:

One thing that struck me...was my emotional response, particularly at Mỹ Lai ... one cannot help but to feel the spirit of the place—*hallowed ground*... We can still hear the voices of the dead begging us to hear their suffering and remember so that war can be avoided in the future. There is so much

suffering in war, and particularly in this war on all sides—one cannot help but be affected and affected to say “never again.” (thunderfromtheleft, 2013)

### **Bearing Witness and the Agonic Struggle to Healing**

The process of bearing witness to first-hand experiences of the Mĩ Lai Massacre, or answering a call to pilgrimage, does not guarantee relief from continuing nightmares or reliving trauma and stress (viz., PTSD). The magnitude of the atrocities and brutality which occurred in the Mĩ Lai Massacre were so profound that usual ways of thinking about and discussing such experiences are severely limited and inadequate. The losses are unrecoverable. The grief and sorrow are limitless. The trauma, stress, and horrifying memories are deep, persistent, and intractable. The pain reverberates socially and becomes a collective trauma. When societal healing does not occur, pain persists over generations, i.e. is transgenerational (Yamamoto, et al. 2012, 51).

Witness bearing becomes difficult or impossible when the events, experiences, and memories remain so unbelievable, unthinkable, unspeakable, and unbearable. Lederach and Lederach (2011) explain that these kinds of collective traumas are “violations that so destroy the essence of innocence, decency and life itself that the very experience penetrates beyond comprehension and words” (1–2). Pham Thanh Cong, director of Son Mĩ Memorial, illustrates how difficult the journey to healing and reconciliation can be, even with the witness bearing process in place. In 2008, at the 6th International Conference of Museums for Peace held in Kyoto (Japan), Cong gave a moving description of the Son Mĩ Memorial Park and Museum. His voice cracking, he told about the recently upgraded museum and the newly added sculptures there. Cong was understandably emotional while giving this presentation: He was eleven years old when the American helicopters landed in his village. The soldiers threw a hand grenade and fired their M-16s into the thatch-roofed home where Cong was huddled with his mother and four siblings. He passed out after he was wounded. Later in the afternoon, a few surviving villagers found Cong amidst the corpses of his mother, three sisters, and six year old brother. Over the decades, Cong has publicly recounted his experiences, i.e. borne witness to his memory, several times. In this presentation, as well as in subsequent talks and

interviews since, Cong emphasized the persistence of his traumas, repeating, “I will never forget the pain.”

A video shown at the Son Mĩ Memorial documents a historic meeting between Cong and U.S. veteran Kenneth Schiel, who participated in the massacre (Aljazeera.com 2008). Schiel, a member of Charlie Company, was charged in the 1970 Mĩ Lai courts-martial with killing nine villagers, although the charges were later dismissed. In the video, which documented Schiel’s solo pilgrimage to revisit the site of the Massacre, Schiel says, “Did I shoot? I’ll say that I shot until I realized what was wrong. I’m not going to say whether I shot villagers or not” (Al Jazeera English 2008). With torment in his voice, he explains that he came to apologize to the people of Mĩ Lai. When Cong asks him why he and the others did this terrible thing, Schiel can only say, “I ask myself all the time why did this happen. I don’t know” (Al Jazeera English 2008).

But Cong does not accept Schiel’s statement that he felt a sense of overwhelming horror when he realized he was in the midst of this slaughter. He continues to press Schiel, demanding an explanation. Schiel replies, “The only thing I can do now is just apologise for it.... I’m here to tell you what was done here was wrong. I can’t justify what happened. I can’t fix your heart. I can’t bring your people back to life. And I’m sorry.” At this, Cong comes to an angry conclusion: “So maybe *you* came to my house and killed my relatives.”

During his presentation at the 6th International Conference of Museums for Peace in Kyoto, Cong explained to the audience that the video documentary did not show the rest of his conversation with Schiel. When Schiel asked if he could participate in the local ceremony to commemorate the anniversary of the Massacre, Cong told the audience, he refused to grant permission, explaining that “the local people will be very angry if they realize that you were the person who took part in the massacre” (Hersh 2015, 52). Cong’s efforts to bear witness to and find a meaningful connection with Schiel’s story were not possible because the emotional encounter with Schiel was a new trauma that compounded Cong’s unanswered questions and intensified his unbearable feelings and horrifying memories.

Cong's loss of both parents and all four of his siblings continues to overwhelm him, and remains unresolved nearly 50 years later. Cong's response to Calley's public apology in 2009 was equivocal. He explains:

It's a question of the past and we accept his apologies, although they come too late.... However, I prefer that he send his apologies to me in writing or by email.... I want him to come back... and see things here.... Maybe he has now repented for his crimes and his mistakes committed more than 40 years ago. (Aljazeera.com 2009)

Like his response to Schiel, Cong's equivocation about Calley's apology illustrates the difficult journey toward healing and reconciliation.

### **Witness Bearing as Identity Redefinition**

Even though Cong could not fully accept the oral apologies from Schiel and Calley, the Son Mỹ Memorial, which Cong directs, is unequivocal in its promotion of restorative ideals. The Memorial emphasizes remembrance of the massacre, and encourages reflection about the universality of sorrow, irrecoverable loss, and tragedy. This aspiration is a genuinely "new and different set of memories as a basis for a collective identity" (Sherman 1995, 50–51). Instead of instilling adoration of a leader, heroism of warriors, or fueling moral outrage for the mass killings, the site embodies hope for worldwide human solidarity, a value that transcends nationalistic interests.

The guidebook at the Son Mỹ Memorial describes the revised identity of the Vietnamese people as vigilant peace-seekers:

Vietnamese people, traditionally magnanimous and merciful, consider Son Mỹ a thing of the past although it has still been painful...looking back upon Son Mỹ, a piercing event of the past, is not to wake up the hatred but to understand an unforgettable historical occurrence, and more importantly, to keep vigilance, to pray and struggle for peace, so that the world will never witness such things as Son Mỹ. (Hoang 2009, 3)

In this way, the creators of the memorial recognize that Son Mỹ is not only a site of profound suffering, but also a deeply sacred space, as it is a ground upon which this identity redefinition can and has occurred. This awareness is comparable to the meaning-making in Hiroshima following the dropping of the atomic bomb in 1945. It was 1947, two years after the bomb, when Hiroshima's then-Mayor Shinzo Hamai announced the first Hiroshima Declaration of Peace, in which a revolution of thought for a culture of peace arose as the city's new identity (Hiroshima city n.d.). The Declaration stated: "... on August 6 1945 ... Hiroshima turned into a city of death and darkness ... But now, Mankind shall remember August 6 as the day that brought the chance for World Peace... We... commemorate that day [with] a Festival of Peace, despite the limitless sorrow." By choosing to view itself as a city of peace and a sacred site where affirmation, compassion, and gratitude would grace everyone, whether resident or visitor, Hiroshima City's "revolution in thinking" and reinvented identity opened the pathway to reconciliation and restoration of dignity, even alongside "limitless sorrow" and continuing suffering. The Son Mỹ Memorial ushers in the same kind of redefined identity and affirmation for a culture of peace.

In the revised identity, the identification as victim is deemphasized. In Hiroshima and Son Mỹ alike, there is a notable absence of movements to seek formal apologies or reparations from the U.S. government, even when so much post-conflict societal rebuilding and social healing are necessary. Diplomatic relations between Vietnam and the U.S. became normalized in 1995. International support for societal healing and reconciliation are cited in Son Mỹ Memorial guidebooks:

In addition to seeing relics of a massacre, visitors to Son Mỹ now also come to witness how Son Mỹ is revitalized. After the war, with assistance from various levels of authorities, from other organizations and individuals, domestic and international, Son Mỹ people began to thrive from the ashes and ruins, indicating the immortal vitality after the agony of wartime... [caption] Schools in Son Mỹ have been improved on, sufficient space to welcome thousands of children every year. [caption] Mỹ Lai Peace Park, funded by



Madison Quakers, Inc... [caption] My Lai Health Center, sponsored by Mrs. Cherie Clark (US Hope Organization). (Hoang, 2008, 23–25)

The increasing number of visitors to Sơn Mỹ, including former U.S. soldiers in the American-Vietnam War, is considered evidence that “Sơn Mỹ is always in the heart of the Vietnamese but also humankind” (Hoang, 2008, 17).

## Reflections

Bearing witness to an extraordinary event like the Mỹ Lai Massacre is an existential pilgrimage into fundamental questions of the nature of humanity and what it means to know the human capacity for unimaginable violence, atrocities, and cruelties upon fellow humans. First-line witness-bearers are not only those villagers who survived the Massacre and the American soldiers who participated in the slaughter. The artifacts, exhibits, videos, and documents at the Sơn Mỹ Memorial and Museum also serve as witness-bearing testimonies. They too are imperfect representations of the experiences and memories of those who perished—those who did not have the opportunity to convey their oral histories and testimonials of what happened.

Whether visitors come to the Sơn Mỹ Memorial and Museum as tourists, students, seekers answering a call to pilgrimage, or as participants in a memorial event, they have an opportunity to engage in the witness-bearing process. This experience becomes a chance to fulfil Agamben’s call to “bear witness to the inhuman” as a means of claiming one’s humanity. To learn about and then acknowledge the truth of unbearable, unthinkable, and unspeakable events and experiences is a transformative learning experience. Bearing witness to the Mỹ Lai Massacre and its aftermath opens a pathway to individual and societal healing and to identity redefinition. Bearing witness raises the sense of connectedness to the legacy of humanity and history (a.k.a. “witness consciousness”) and taking ownership of one’s responsibilities as a “global citizen.” To glimpse the deeper meaning of the profound suffering is to first question and then affirm faith in life itself, despite limitless sorrow, unrecoverable losses, and unending suffering. It is about the quest to restore justice, and to rebuild one’s shattered connection to humanity, and to divinity. One recognizes that

wholeness, honor, and atonement—the healing we seek—can be nurtured even as darkness, inhumanity, and suffering remain.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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