

# Loyal Soldier Work and the Healing of Veterans

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**By Belden C. Lane, Illuman Wisdom Elder**

They carried all they could bear, and then some, including a silent awe for the terrible power of the things they carried.

—Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*

It could have been one of the tributaries of the Mekong River in South Vietnam: Muddy water flowing under overhanging vines and trees; the winter of 1970. But it was forty-five years later, along a stream in southern Missouri. Men of Illuman had gathered for a ritual of release, honoring one of their brothers—a Vietnam Vet who had carried emotional baggage from that war for a long time. The rest of us were there to discharge our loyal soldiers, having worked through Bill Plotkin's material. Our brother was the living symbol of our own struggle and release.

He had been drafted at the age of twenty, going to Vietnam at the peak of the US involvement there. Over 500,000 military personnel were "in country" at the time. During his tour, a major offensive by the Vietcong swept through the south, Nixon authorized the secret bombing (and later invasion) of Cambodia, the My Lai massacre came to light (with Lt. William Calley put on trial), and four students were killed at an anti-war rally at Kent State University.

His personal story echoes that of many at the time: A late night on patrol in the jungle. Enemy soldiers approaching. The firing device for a string of claymore mines. A subsequent anguish that had no relief.

Dressed in his old green uniform and escorted by other veterans in our group, he approached our circle of men by the river. The ritual was simple. Looking with compassion at the man he saw in a full-length mirror, he acknowledged that the war was over...the one he'd fought on the ground and the one he'd carried inside. He saluted that soldier, saying, "It is finished." Then he took off his uniform, was smudged with sage, and told his story (reading and burning short memories he had written on slips of paper). We declared him a forgiven man, free from the guilt of the past, and invited him to share symbols of his true manhood. As the river flowed nearby we wept, laying hands on this beautiful man, sharing in a healing that spread far beyond our small circle.

Loyal Soldier work is powerful, especially when joined with the blessing and healing of actual soldiers. We need our veterans even more than they need us. They open us to the real and mythic wounds we all bear from the horrendous wars we've fought. They call us to a common work of grief, shared love, and freedom from the terrible power of the things they carried.