

"Forget the War, Remember the Warrior"

A Veteran's Healing Pilgrimage

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Every year, in mid-May, a large group of motorcycle riders gathers in Ontario, California, to begin a ten day cross-country journey to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington DC. The group is composed of Vietnam veterans, relatives and friends of veterans, those supportive of the riders' cause and, recently, veterans of current US conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. This pilgrimage (as its participants term it) is called the Run for the Wall (or simply "the Run"). Riders from California, and others who have joined along the way, arrive the Friday of Memorial Day weekend. On Sunday of that weekend, the Run joins several hundred thousand other bikers in Rolling Thunder, a motorcycle parade in support of veterans that roars through the streets of the nation's capital. This ritual began in 1989, and although its itinerary and composition have changed over the years, the goals of the journey remain the same: to honor all veterans (living and dead), to demand an accounting of prisoners of war and soldiers missing in action, and to provide healing to veterans through communal support and the ritual of the Run itself.

felt when he laboriously carried a wounded comrade to a waiting medevac helicopter only to find that the man he carried had already died. Survivor guilt adds to these still-painful psychic wounds.



"Welcome home, brother." Photo courtesy Jill Dubisch

Like many pilgrimages, the Run for the Wall is a transformative journey that can have powerful and long-lasting effects. In the company of other participants, veterans experience an environment in which they are honored and may safely speak of the wounds of war. It is

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veterans, the Wall is where the spirits of the dead reside. Touching the names of the dead calls back their souls, one veteran explained. At the same time, the Wall is a difficult destination for many, and going there with others who both understand the fear and grief associated with such a visit and can provide support is what makes it possible for many to undertake this pilgrimage. The larger, publicly stated purpose of the journey—to ride for the POW/MIA cause and in support of all veterans—removes the journey from the medicalized and individualized approach implied by other therapies that seek to help veterans recover from war trauma.

A Search for Identity

Important in the healing process is the construction of a collective narrative within which individual experiences can be placed and identity claimed. Such a narrative is particularly important for veterans of the Vietnam War, given the controversy over the war and the rejection many veterans feel they endured upon their return. "Forget the war, remember the warrior"—a slogan displayed on t-shirts worn by Run participants—sums up an underlying theme of this journey and of the rituals that accompany it. It suggests that we should leave the controversial politics of the Vietnam War behind and focus instead on the suffering and sacrifice of those who participated.

The narrative constructed during the ten-day ride seeks to represent the riders as heroes who sacrificed for their country and are now continuing to serve by riding on behalf of their fellow veterans, in contrast to negative labels that many experienced after their return from Vietnam. In addition, the

pilgrimage is in many ways a ritual re-creation of the war. It includes uniforms (motorcycle jackets with patches that recount personal deeds and experiences); riding in formation (with a space left for the "missing man," representing all those who did not return); camaraderie engendered by the hazards and hardships of ten days on the road; and joining with Rolling Thunder (whose name recalls the carpet bombing of North Vietnam) for a triumphant ride through the streets of Washington DC, thereby finally receiving the homecoming denied upon the veterans' return from Vietnam—"the parade they never had." "Welcome home, brother," is the greeting commonly offered to a veteran who joins the Run for the first time.

For many participants, the Run has been a declaration of their identity as veterans, an identity that they were previously hesitant to claim. Those returning from the Run have often joined veterans' groups that they had previously shunned. Some participate once or twice in the Run for the Wall, but for others it becomes a defining annual event in their lives. The Run demonstrates the power of ritual to effect healing in its broadest sense and to create a positive sense of identity for those who have experienced rejection or marginalization as veterans. But it also raises a troubling question: can we honor warriors and address the very real psychic wounds of war, and at the same time not forget or obscure the political forces that led to the wars in which these veterans fought, which created the need for such rituals in the first place? Given that in recent years the Run for the Wall has expanded to embrace veterans of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, and given the already troubling consequences that these wars have had and will continue to have over time, this question promises to become even more critical in the future.

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COMMENTARY

The Run as Healing Ritual

For eight years, beginning in 1995, my partner and I rode with the Run for the Wall on its annual journey, completing the trip to Washington DC three times. We have helped with some of the Run's organization, participated in events between trips, and experienced activities that occur along the way, organized by local communities that host the Run at various stages. During these experiences, we have spoken with veterans to learn about the traumas of war and difficult processes of healing. More than 35 years after the Vietnam War, the pain, anger and grief that many Vietnam veterans experienced are as fresh for them as if they had been incurred just recently. One veteran wept as he recounted to me the grief he

not uncommon for a veteran who joins the Run thinking he was "just going for a ride" to find himself revisiting his war experiences and addressing wounds he did not even know he still harbored. In addition, family members of veterans, including veterans who died in combat or are missing in action, can find sympathy and understanding from other participants.

The Run also serves as a ritual of mourning for the dead, both at the Wall itself and at various memorials along the way. For many veterans, this is the only opportunity they have had to honor fallen comrades, as collective rites of mourning were not allowed in the context of war and there is no single place of burial at which such mourning can now take place. For many Vietnam