

LEARNING TO SHOOT

Ed Murphy

Through photography I was opened. I learned what creativity means. Taking pictures was an opportunity for me to see deeper and share, strengthening both my confidence and activism.

I learned to shoot in Vietnam with a Canon 35mm camera. In basic training, I was trained to kill. We fixed bayonets and charged. Our drill sergeant shouted, “What’s the spirit of the bayonet?” “To kill!” “And what does that make you?” “Killers!” we shouted. It was hard to hear myself saying those words.

We learned to use hand grenades. I fantasized throwing a baseball from center field to home plate; got familiar with the M16, and when I arrived in Vietnam, I learned to use a 45-caliber pistol and an M79 grenade launcher. I never fired in anger, did not kill or wound, and seldom carried these weapons. As an intelligence agent, I often traveled alone, wearing civilian clothes, with a snub-nosed .38 on my belt. Common sense, Vietnamese language skills, intelligence training, and my wits were my primary weapons.

I bought a camera and taught myself to focus and to shoot what I saw. I learned to capture rather than to kill. I wanted to understand Vietnam. Looking through a lens, I could see detail, gain perspective, and compile artifacts. Photography helped me remain calm, transforming fear and communicating my experiences when I came home. Photos remind me that Vietnam is a country, not a war. Photography

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opened my eyes to more. I found life where the focus was on death.

I'd had enough dying before I went to war. My mother's death when I was six surrounded me. As a teenager I lost two friends. The first died in a go-cart and the second in a car accident. As a young seminarian, I walked through death row at Maryland's state penitentiary. JFK, my president and hero, was killed when I was eighteen. He was followed by Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and many civil rights workers. Young men from all over America came home in coffins. I was safe in the seminary but changed my mind. I decided not to become a priest. War waited for me.

Bill and Augie, friends from Little League days, were surprised to find me on Dragon Mountain, our 4th Infantry Division base camp. They thought I was becoming a priest and was protected from the draft. I was shocked as well, wondering how I got to Vietnam, but it wasn't that confusing. I had left the Paulist Fathers and enlisted. I didn't wait for the army to collect me. We were together for two days before Bill and Augie went home. They gave me hope that I too would survive.

Once I bought my camera, I looked closer at life. First I took tourist snapshots: scenery, our military base, those in my unit. Then I saw more: water buffalo, kids, Montagnards, Vietnamese families, monks, clothes, sandbags, tents, and the effects of weather. I saw faces, emotions, hands, feet, and hair. I saw individuals rather than people. I made friends, and started listening. It was my job to pay attention, but the camera took me past searching for combat intelligence, threats, facts, and contingencies. I valued the people of Vietnam and they valued my curiosity. They invited me into their homes for meals and to play with their children. They spoke of their lives and asked about mine. They wanted to know why I was there and how I imagined life when I went home. I saw their hopes and fears, shared mine, and found we had much in common. I never forgot the war, but the camera and these conversations offered more. We discussed their religions and mine, education, work and play, marriage and death, French colonialism, literature, culture, Ho Chi Minh, nationalism,

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Saigon, their dragon and fairy founding myth, and American history. We talked the way people do who want to know one another.

I became creative before I understood what creativity meant. I was trying to survive, having fun when I could, and documenting my life. I was looking for material to consider. I may have remembered Camus's writing in *L'etranger* that a man could turn one day's experience into reflections for a lifetime. For almost fifty years I've looked at my photos and remembered.

I wonder how I came to pick up a camera. It changed my life. Cameras were available on the army base and cheap. Most of my colleagues had one. The Post Exchange (PX) imported excellent equipment and sold everything at a discount. A camera and tape deck is what I chose. At first the camera gave me something to do. I distracted myself from the war with beer, music on my tape deck, and the camera. Then I began to study my photographs; taking a second look at what I'd seen, gaining a deeper understanding of what I experienced, I found details I missed with the naked eye.

Being Irish, I collected stories to tell. I can't sing, an embarrassment in an Irish family. Singers were always in demand at parties. Both my father and godfather had good voices. My eighth-grade music teacher asked me to mouth the words when we sang at graduation. Art class taught me to forget about drawing. My hand was not steady and my penmanship was horrible. It got me into trouble. I yearned for music, and even bought a trumpet at a pawn shop but we could not afford lessons. Like most kids, I was drafted into school plays. I played Tiny Tim in *A Christmas Carol* and felt the part. In high school I had a walk-on as a soldier in *Aida*. I joined the Forensic Club and was taught public speaking, my first success, and developed a skill that continues to serve me to this day. I like standing in front of crowds. I am not afraid of microphones. In seminary, I expected to be taught to preach but didn't stay long enough, so I learned through political activism.

My first college paper was a bust, as much to do with my handwriting as the subject and my lack of training and discipline. My

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priest professor humiliated me in front of the class. I lost confidence in my ability to write. It was a wound I nurtured for decades, even though I published dozens of articles and then a book. Fortunately, my grammar school principal had planted hope, and I found ways to nurture it. Eighth-graders did log books. They included one-page essays and a related sketch. One could not graduate from Public School 11 until Mrs. Ceretta reviewed your collection of essays and illustrations. I made errors and corrected them, and she encouraged me. I felt that if I could meet her standards, there must be some hope.

Then there was the flower show. Students from all over New York City went to The Coliseum to arrange flowers in a competition. It seemed an odd form of creative expression for a working-class boy, but I had grown up surrounded by woods; saw the beauty of wild flowers, trees blossoming, and autumn colors. Our ancestors were farmers. My grandfather planted fruit trees and grew his own food. Our father was a great vegetable gardener and, today, my siblings have beautiful flower gardens. I plant oak trees and flowering bushes. The flower show was a new aesthetic experience. It was playful and pretty. I enjoyed myself, was not embarrassed by my awkward voice or inability to draw well. I found a familiar artistic form and recognized the creativity in my working-class backyard. I realized that creativity was not dependent on traditional forms or expensive lessons, and gained more respect for the Murphy family. It gave me more confidence to seek my own form.

Gaudeamus Igitur (so let us rejoice). My seminary, like some older universities, had a Gaudeamus tradition of putting on plays poking fun at professors and college life. A few of our classmates had strong talent. I got supporting roles and had fun. We lived in a world with Gregorian chants. I enjoyed listening, sang quietly, was never shamed but did not look forward to singing a High Mass. I doubt that my parishioners would have enjoyed it. My exit from seminary spared us all.

The military strengthened my analytical and mechanical skills. I learned to type in intelligence school and found confidence in words.

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My penmanship did not get in the way of what I had to say, so writing became more rewarding. I was trained to report facts; focused on words and concepts. Report writing is a discipline akin to journalism, requiring the integration of observations, ideas, and clear statements. In a war zone, the military wanted basic information, to know who and where their enemy was. The camera and typewriter became tools that supported my creativity and enabled me to transcend physical limitations. They removed the barriers to my words and insights. I stopped being embarrassed, and became playful and experimental.

Back on Staten Island I gave my first slide show to our Peace Coalition, joined by Dr. David McLanahan. David had volunteered in Vietnam and had a sensitivity to the Vietnamese that exceeded most Americans. We spoke about the people of Vietnam, a country not just a war. Most of the audience had come for a different story. They wanted to hear about the violence and for us to validate their politics. We spoke out against the war and invited them to share our deeper appreciation of who the Vietnamese and Montagnards are. Cold War and simplistic politics was how our country went to war. Most Americans wanted to discuss politics rather than culture. The best part of our presentation was gaining a new friend. We are still in touch today. David is now a retired surgeon and a frequent visitor to Indonesia. He has kept his values, and now promotes indigenous crafts.

After Vietnam, my camera helped me understand my life. Four months out of the military, I took my camera to England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland on my way to our ancestral home near Blarney Castle in Cork with my father, my brother Tom, and our friend John Soldini. My camera took me deeper than landscapes into my own history and soul. I saw England's power over Wales and Scotland, and their yearning for independence. I photographed the people who explained these values so I could remember them later. I photographed my father at St. Andrews, a professional golfer's pilgrimage to his sport's sacred site, reminding myself not everything is political. In Northern Ireland, I saw Protestants and Catholics caught in a historic political, cultural, and economic contest, rather than a

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religious conflict. Coming south into The Republic, I was inspired by a land of poets and writers, bards and singers. I came home from America and war in more ways than I anticipated. I felt Celtic more than Catholic and Irish as much as American. In Vietnam, I'd felt a connection and responsibility to my ancestors. In Ireland, I came to understand what it meant to be colonized and to be a colonizer. I'd gone to war thinking it was an American mistake but right for me, my responsibility. In Vietnam, I saw the error; saw myself as a colonial soldier and compared myself to the British troops occupying Ireland. In Belfast, we'd heard British soldiers singing "All we are saying is give peace a chance." When I placed photos of Vietnam and Northern Ireland side by side, they were similar. It was hard for me to hate the British soldiers. A year earlier, I'd been in their situation. In Cork, we met my father's family; sat by the same fireplace where my grandfather was raised and sipped Irish whiskey. I walked the land, listened to its stories, and used my camera to stay focused. Vietnam opened my soul. Ireland gave me roots, identity, and voice.

I found myself through my camera.

Back in New York I became more of a subject in news photographs, on the radio, and television; an activist more than an observer. I took fewer pictures and used my voice instead against the Vietnam War, racism, and mistreatment of our developmentally disabled neighbors. My creativity was expressed through action, writing, speaking, and elections, through nonviolence. I had used photography as a tool, to research, capture, and share what I saw that others didn't. At home there were more and better photographers, so I stood in front of the camera. My strength was in using my caste privilege as a combat veteran, leadership, courage, and organizing ability. I challenged traditional ideas, assumptions, rules, patterns, and relationships. I was arrested twice for what I believed; at the White House protesting the Vietnam War and on Staten Island for Irish independence from England.

During this period I was moved by music, especially messages of hope. Music inspired many of us to action. At home I used the

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reel-to-reel tape deck I had bought in Vietnam; learned to mix my own sequences and became my own personal disc jockey. Exhausted from school, politics, and organizing, I would spend hours feeding my soul listening in guided musical meditation. Not a good singer, I am a good listener.

Four years later, Lin and I moved to San Diego so she could attend graduate school. I was hired as director of a nonprofit community agency serving youth, the poor, and the homeless. When the business community tried to shut us down, I used all the leadership skills and organizational creativity I had to fight for our clients and agency, to strengthen public support. This was my apprenticeship in executive management and organizational psychology. I articulated a clear vision for the agency and wrote an editorial that helped turn the tide of resistance and build community support. I redesigned the agency to address community concerns.

In 1976, Lin completed her graduate work and we moved back east to Saratoga Springs, a small city just north of Albany. I found work in state government and started graduate studies in public administration. I wanted to move beyond advocacy to implement my values. At the same time, I was hired as regional program coordinator for the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, in Saratoga Spa State Park. Ten years earlier, the Saratoga Performing Arts Center (SPAC) had been established within the Spa Park. SPAC became the summer home of the New York City Ballet and Philadelphia Orchestra, and hosted a variety of large popular concerts. My opportunity for a creative life was enhanced. Saratoga has a vibrant arts community. Many of our friends were artists and performers. We frequented Caffè Lena, the oldest-running coffeehouse in the country. Dancers and musicians rented apartments for the summer. We swam in the pools with them, ate in the same restaurants, and drank in the same bars. We bought season lawn tickets for music and sat inside for the ballet. Yaddo, the famous artists' retreat, was our neighbor. We got to know the director, were invited to dinner, and met resident artists. My arts consciousness was raised far beyond my own work-

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ing-class roots.

The state park system added more. My portfolio included funding the arts performances in regional parks and at historic sites. We gave many young performers a start and a paycheck. I earned a certificate in Arts Management through North Carolina State University.

In the '70s federal, funds were allocated through the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) to hire the unemployed. Governments used these funds mostly to hire maintenance staff. I obtained five slots and hired an arts management crew. I taught them four key concepts, goals, objectives, activities, and timelines, so they could develop and manage programs, and expand their work skills. I set them free to interview park workers, visitors, and community members, and charged them with coming up with an arts plan to supplement SPAC's role. They brought back a variety of good ideas and more enthusiasm than they would have had I directed them. One idea provoked controversy. Spa Park had a 500-seat theater that was used by SPAC for one month each summer. We proposed opening it to the community during the off-season. SPAC's president gave me a lecture on quality. He pointed out that their long-term lease gave him a veto over cultural activities within the park. I spoke with my boss and the concessions manager, and then read their lease. The theater was owned by State Parks, not SPAC. They had a right to use the theater if they specified each year by March 1st. I waited till mid-March, found out when it would be free, and invited community participation. One year we recruited local musicians through their union, hired a conductor, and produced a free Irish cabaret with singers, musicians, dancers, actors, and storytellers. We let dancers and theater teachers use the rehearsal rooms. I left State Parks in 1981, but by then we had demonstrated to SPAC and State Parks management that this asset should be available to the community. In 1986, Home Made Theater moved from their 55-seat Caffè Lena venue to their new home in the park, and remains there today.

Later, I helped found the Vietnam Veterans of America. Lin, our friend Van, and I founded Pathfinders Institute, and developed some

of the earliest PTSD programs. I became the lead program consultant on developing New York's Vietnam Memorial, research center, and fine arts gallery, where my first photo exhibit, *Vietnam Lives in My Soul*, was shown, laying out the forces and events that shaped my life before war, during, and after. I returned to Vietnam many times and developed two additional shows. I led a humanitarian mission into northwest Vietnam and created a show, *On the Road to Dien Bien Phu*. Some years later, I brought our daughter, Zoëann, to Vietnam and Laos on a project to help the City University of New York establish English language programs and academic exchanges. Zoë was being trained as a photographer in college. We shot and produced a third show, *Vietnam: A Country Not a War*. This exhibit was turned into a book, *Vietnam: Our Father Daughter Journey*.

In 1999, our friend Denis Hughes was elected president of the NYS AFL-CIO and invited me to become part of his team. We developed the Workforce Development Institute (WDI); building education and training programs for unions; and expanded into a variety of additional initiatives: economic development, manufacturing, childcare, energy, the environment, and cultural services. Esther Cohen was directing Bread and Roses, the cultural arm of 1199SEIU. I learned of their *unseenamerica* project, where they lent cameras to workers and taught them to document their lives. We expanded their program statewide. When Esther left Bread and Roses, she started consulting for WDI, and we worked more closely together developing arts initiatives. Esther pushed me to believe in my own writing voice, develop my skills, and to publish a memoir, "to teach us how you did your work." I am doing that now.

An award opened a new door for creativity. My graduate school, Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and Policy, University at Albany (SUNY), gave me their distinguished Continuing Professional Education Leadership Award. I was described as a reflective practitioner. A year later, I recruited eighteen others and asked them to write essays about their work and how they chose their careers, based on the idea of reflecting on your work. I edited these essays

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and produced *Working Stories*, essays by reflective practitioners. In 2017, I am editing *Creative Lives*. In addition, I edited an anthology, *Becoming a Leader*, which contains thirty-five essays and op-eds I wrote and published over the years.

My professional life started in military intelligence and evolved through war, antiwar, politics, public administration, organizational development, leadership, and organized labor. My creativity has been expressed through a variety of forms. The most obvious have been writing and photography. Some of my best work has been done as an innovative leader, an organizational chiropractor, helping agencies align their internal energies and strengthen their systems.

To become creative, I had to be less obedient and compliant within many institutions: the Catholic Church, military, politics, and government. I needed to be clear about my values, stand up rather than go along with the crowd, take risks with my personal identity and our family's economic security. Lin took risks herself and inspired me to do the same. She led me into deep inner work, therapy, feminism, exploration of broader spiritual concerns and relationships. Returning from war, I became an activist; developed an identity as a political and organizational leader. To be effective, I needed to understand myself, and the internal and external forces shaping the organizations I was involved in. I became an innovative and effective change agent. That is my service in the world. Meanwhile, I keep learning, playing with ideas, photos, and words.

Because photography and writing didn't bring me money, I often valued them less. My organizational skills and creative leadership are what fed the family and gave our children the resources they needed to launch their careers. In my elder years, I am putting more effort into traditional creative activities; mostly writing and helping others do the same.

I found my creative voice. Esther got me to admit that I am a writer. I am on a roll. I am returning to my memoir project with a deeper focus on ethics and the spiritual values that have guided me. I am building my own Web portal and blog. I read somewhere that

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there is no free press unless you own it. There is a part of me that wants to stand on a street corner and tell the world what I think.

I am curious where all this takes me next.