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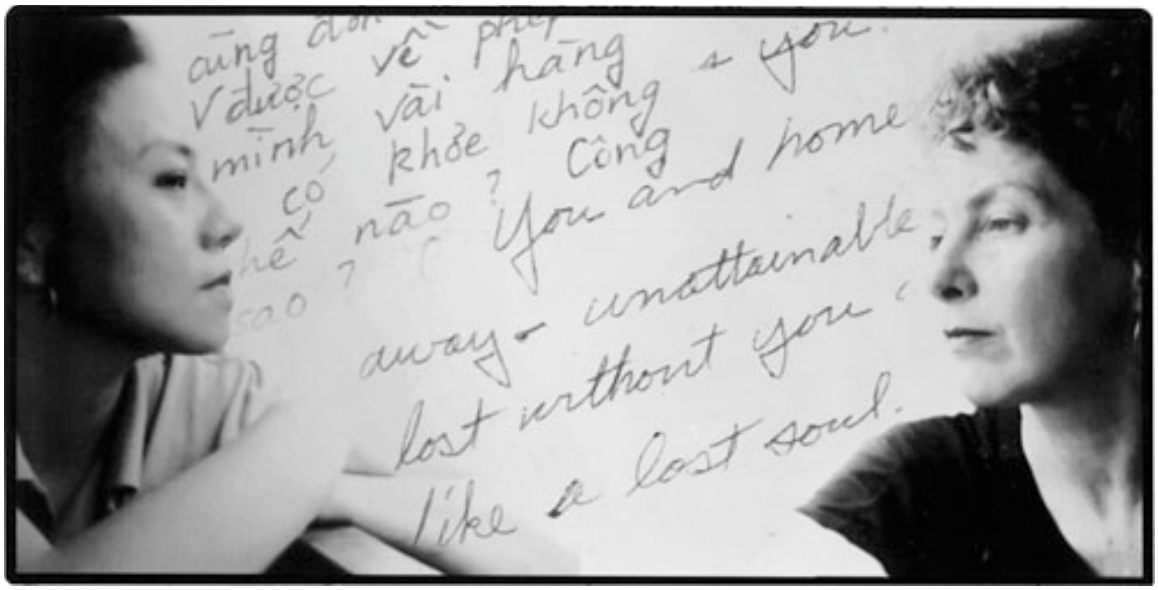
Weaving a Web of Support for Widows Worldwide



Xuan Ngoc Nguyen and Barbara Sonneborn

Letters from Barbara to Jeff

by Barbara Sonneborn

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For twenty years I tried to push all thoughts of your death out of my mind. I did not read about Vietnam, neither articles nor books. I could not see the famous Vietnam films or the television specials. It's not that I didn't think of you. For a long time I could think of nothing else, feel nothing but the pain of your loss. We shared so much from the time I was 14 until my 24th birthday, when I heard you were missing. But thinking of how you died - that was beyond me. It made me crazy with rage. Now, finally 20 years later, I want you to know what it was like for me, your widow, in those long days and months of 1968. And in the years since, how your death destroyed me, how I rose up from the rubble that had been my life, our life together, transformed, ultimately stronger, and with a better understanding of the value of life, because of the pain that I had to endure. I am ready to tell you what it was like for me to lose you so suddenly, so needlessly…

I remember the night before you left for Vietnam. When we were at the Hilton Hotel, in San Francisco, eating at L'Orangerie, walking around, trying to be very jolly. You were so alive, so filled with life - how could you be any other way? How could you not come back? I just couldn't imagine how it could be any other way. You had to come back. I remember getting the news that you were

missing, and saying, if there is a God, I'm praying for him to save you. I'll do anything. I'll believe for the rest of my life. I know I'm not the first one who's ever presented this deal to God, so it may have fallen on deaf or indifferent ears. But that you were dead was proof to me of all the existential reading, thinking, and talking into the night that we had done in the years during college. Remember those last four lines that we read again and again of that e.e. cummings poem?

Then laugh,_Leaning back in my arms_For life's not a paragraph_And death, I think, is no parenthesis._This was, for all eternity, the one drop of life that you and I would ever share.

You crawled out of a foxhole during a mortar attack, risking your life to save a wounded young man. You won a bronze star and lost your life. What does that mean, a bronze star in exchange for your life? You were that kind of a person, a most unique human being. I hated you for doing that for quite a long time, for losing your life to save other people. I didn't care how brave or wonderful that was. I just wanted you back in my arms, alive and well.

When I was alone, the blackness of the universe would swallow me up. I started taking sleeping pills almost immediately. I would swallow my pill, sit down at the kitchen table with my father or mother for company, and wait to feel drugged. Then I would take a magazine to bed until I just passed out. I couldn't read anything but a mindless magazine for a long time. If I was alone, even for a few minutes, I would grab a magazine, just to have words going into my head so that I didn't have to have my thoughts for company. Then the hardest part was waking up - the denial and disbelief, the anguish and the rage. You know, Jeff, the feeling, the sudden desperate wish that this is just a bad dream; it can't really be happening. And then, the reality that it is happening.__Do people ever stop to think that somebody has to prepare these bodies to be shipped back to their families? Perhaps for the undertaker it's rather cold and impersonal. But what merciless human being took your wedding ring off and didn't wash it before it was put into some envelope to be sent to me? When it arrived, it was encrusted with mud and blood, along with your dog tags, all of which were bloody and filthy. I couldn't believe "they" sent that stuff back to me without washing it. I remember sitting on the floor and opening up that package, the personal effects of Jeffrey Gurvitz - rings, watch, wallet, my letters to you.... But the stuff that was personally on your body, covered in blood, that's what drove me crazy. Your last lifeblood soaked into the ground in Vietnam. That land, with your blood in it, belongs a little bit to you.__That you could do something as

intimate as to die and not share that moment with me? I remember crossing the United States with my father a few months later and feeling so angry at you. That you didn't call me up and say, "Hey, next Thursday I'm going to get killed. You're not going to hear about it until your birthday. And I hate to deliver that kind of thing to you for your birthday, but I want to prepare you for this." You and I had been such a part of each other's fiber from childhood, that it was just beyond my reckoning that you would go and die like that... by yourself... without me.

The day of your funeral, picture Chicago in March. It was a Tuesday, sort of a white sky, sunny day, winter sunshine, not a bitterly cold day. It was, in fact, an innocuous day, which was just what I wanted. I didn't want it to be a beautiful day, so that every beautiful day would remind me of you. I didn't want your funeral to be on a Monday because I couldn't deal with Mondays, I thought, ever again. I couldn't stand for spring to come that year. I couldn't bear it that the trees would bud, the leaves would unfurl, the flowers would blossom. It seemed like such a vulgar display of life when you were so dead.

The darkness of your death formed and colored my days. I can mark my transformation, my freedom, to the time I began swimming in a friend's pool, about eight years later. Although I certainly had had some very good periods of time by then, I was still haunted. One night I had a dream that I was swimming under water in a place filled with light, and that I was accompanied by streams of red cloth. The dream had such power that as soon as the stores opened the next morning I went to the local fabric shop, and discovered a large piece of bright red cotton in the remnant pile. I took my cloth and my underwater camera to the pool and started photographing the shapes created underwater, by the cloth. They were organic, embryonic shapes. The red was no longer the blood of death, but the blood of birth and life. Through this work I began focusing on the light rather than the darkness. Swimming and seeing the light, the beautiful refractions as the light split apart on the bottom and sides of the pool, provided a transforming experience for me. Finally I was able to get out of my place of darkness and explode into that light, experiencing energy buried for many years.

I remember the dream that I had repeatedly. I would be in a house, an unfamiliar house, a place where the wallboards were torn away and a bloody body, like meat, an unrecognizably bloodied, skin-torn-away body would be sort of stuffed into the wall. I would start to scream and scream, and awaken with that terrible choking scream of a nightmare. It took about eight long years before that dream

stopped returningDuring that period I experienced, for the first time in my life, periods of extreme claustrophobia, particularly in dark places like movie theaters, or awakening at night in a darkened room. The dreams would sometimes haunt me in the day. My heart would pound and I would have trouble breathing. Sometimes, I thought I was losing my mind, that I would never be free of this torment. I would see the mortar exploding into your body again and again and again. I felt obsessed for years, even after I remarried, with the awful imagery of your death. But gradually the images dissipated and I was free to live my life feeling whole again, feeling light and optimism and excitement about being alive, as I had felt before you were killed, and in some ways even more so, because now I was much wiser. I had learned some painful lessons. I knew the sweet and ephemeral preciousness of life, and the true meaning of living not in the past or future, but only in the present.

I am sitting on an airplane waiting to take off for Vietnam. Very unreal. I can't believe I am doing this, until I look down at the middle finger of my left hand and see your wedding ring: a simple thick gold band. I remember the day I gave it to you. And then I remember the day it was returned to me in an envelope. I decided I would bring it with me, to have something that was yours, that was close to you, to keep it close to me on this journey. Now, my heart beats wildly. I can't believe I'm actually going to land in Hanoi. Standing in the doorway of the plane, my heart is pounding. I am smelling the air in the land where you died.

A fitful night's sleep, not very surprising, thinking about today, when I am actually going to be at the spot where you were killed. I am remembering 24 years ago when thinking about you dying in Vietnam was like thinking about you dying on another planet. In the darkness of the days and nights after you were killed, the awful and awesome and inconceivable reality of your death, grief like an explosion tearing into me, like the explosion that killed you, my heart was ripped open, as though I would bleed to death with you. Now those scars which have taken all these years to heal - picture my heart, just picture it with long and jagged scars, scars that most days I do not feel after all these years - but today, on the way to where you took your last breath to where your heart stopped beating, I am painfully aware of those scars.

We passed hundreds of little ponds - all bomb craters. What would it be like to have war in my own home town, to have bombs dropping day and night, killing my family, napalm burning up my house, Agent Orange destroying the redwood and oak forests, poisoning the food that I eat, the water that I drink, soldiers

battling each other nearby, as I desperately try to hide my family and myself? Rounding a bend, a desolate landscape. A long dead forest, dead for many years, not burned, but nothing is growing here. Agent Orange was sprayed here several times. We are all looking around, horrified by the devastation, many years later. Even in a burned forest, the next year, green sprouts up. Not here.

We enter the village of Khe Sanh. At least ten people are waiting to greet us, ushering us from the blazing heat into a large, cool, blue room with windows on three sides. I am now accustomed to these welcoming ceremonies, but I am struck by the sincerity of the welcome in each place, by how surprised they are that an American Vietnam war widow wants to actually film their story, by how desperate they are to tell their story. We sip our tea. I tell them what an honor it is to come to this village, to be welcomed by them. Two stunningly beautiful women enter. They are village officials, but the woman in blue, Nguyen Thi, was head of the local Viet Cong - the National Liberation Front - during the war. Folding and unfolding her hands in front of her, grim-faced, she looks into my eyes. _ _One of the men tells me that I am the first American she has spoken to since the war. She takes a deep breath and begins. "The war did terrible, terrible damage to this area. 106 out of 107 villages in this district were burned to the ground by the Americans, some several times. Women were raped and murdered, children were torn to pieces, old men were stuffed down wells." Her voice is shaking. She pauses, her elbows on the table, her head in her hands for a moment. Recomposing herself, she continues, "This area was a free fire zone. That meant that anything that moved could be shot and often was. Quite frankly, many people here still hate the Americans." Unlike people in the north who never saw an American soldier, these people had daily contact with American troops. Again, a long pause, "But I am glad you have come. We welcome you. We want the American people to know what suffering took place here. Films like yours can tell the true story. We know you come as a friend." Her voice softens, her eyes seeking mine, "I am sorry that your husband had to die here."_ _Pressing her lips together, she raises her eyes and Nguyen speaks. "Everything we had was destroyed. Sometimes there was no food for weeks. We ate leaves and grasses. The water was poisoned by chemicals, but we drank it anyway. We had to, to survive." Sighing deeply, her voice becomes vehement, "It is so hard to talk about this. I never talk about it, but the Americans must know what happened here. I am glad you are here even though this causes me great pain."_I get up to pour her some tea. I do not know what to say. Anything I could say seems so paltry. She looks at my face, sees my grief, squeezes my arm. The room is absolutely silent. There is not even a breeze through the open windows.

An older woman, who is a widow is ushered in. As she begins to speak, she bursts into tears, "My husband was bombed. We couldn't even bury him because there were so many bombs. We tried to collect the pieces of his body but we had to run and hide." Sobbing, she continues, "Sometimes the Americans would just come into a village and shoot everybody - women, old people...children." Her voice rises with anger as she tells me, "If you could stay for 10 days and nights it would not be enough time for me to tell you all the terrible things I saw the Americans do during the war. Now I am exhausted. I am an old lady. These memories cause me such terrible pain. I must stop. I must rest."_ _Dung tells me that they want to escort us into the mountains now, to show me the place where you were killed. Feeling emotionally devastated, overwrought by this day, I would like to sit and weep with these women, while the director part of me would like to interview them more fully - hear every terrible detail of what happened here. We bump through an incredible terrain, steep drop-offs, ruts like canyons, and the disquieting feeling that this region looks so like California, so much like the coastal mountains of Central California in the dry season. I find myself imagining that millions and millions of years ago, California and Vietnam were one land that split and got separated through the eons by the Pacific Ocean._ _Remembering that these brown rocky hillsides and cliffs were covered with dense jungle when you were here, I am increasingly aware of the scrubby plants that we pass, none higher than my chest, and a light metallic smell. A doctor in Hanoi told me that there is still a scent of Agent Orange where it was heavily sprayed. Dung and our local guides have explained to me that the spot where the mortar attack took place was less than 4 kilometers from here up the mountainside across rough terrain. I was asked if I wanted to chance finding the actual spot. "This would be quite dangerous," Dung explained, "because the area was heavily mined, and local people are not infrequently killed or maimed by old mines which were laid by both sides."_ _We walk out, into the heat. My clothes stick to my perspiration-soaked body. My head pounds. The sun is like a hot iron pressing down on me, taking any energy I might have left. I cannot imagine the young soldiers here in full battle gear, carrying 80-pound packs. Nguyen Thi points up the mountainside. "See, there, that rocky cliff. To the right of that and up, that is where I believe it happened. The fighting was very intense at the end of February, 1968." I feel my heart flip over._I am at the place where you were killed. My guide is the former Viet Cong leader of this district. For all I know, she led the attack that killed you. Now we stand here, no longer enemies, only both of us against war. Nguyen continues, "I was walking on this road once and the planes came over;

drenching me with Agent Orange. Lots of us were sprayed several times. We have many health problems. I have terrible arthritis and strange skin problems. Many people here have died young of cancer - sick suddenly, then dead. Lots of deformed babies. Lots." Similar to the diseases that American soldiers are dying of, only so many more Vietnamese are dying._ _In a small, grass-covered shrine, we light incense to honor the Vietnamese and Americans who lost their lives nearby. I look over my shoulder to see up the mountain. Abruptly my mind fills with explosions, fire, bodies from both sides, lying broken and dead. I am reminded of the violent imagery of your death that flooded my consciousness for years. I feel overwhelmed. My knees feel rubbery. I am sickened. I just want to fall to the ground and weep for the tragedy, the awful waste of lives that took place here._ _I turn and look back, perhaps for the last time, at the place where you lost your life. A moment of solitude. But no, three women are alongside me on bicycles. They smile as I look at them, and I smile back and indicate that I am stopping to look at the view. They stop for a minute, and finally continue. I walk on, finally alone.I can't help being annoyed at this kindly man who I see walking just a bit behind me, obviously guarding me. So much for solitude. His job is to make sure that I'm okay. I notice that this man is picking flowers along the way. As we see the jeep approaching in the distance he catches up with me, and presents me with a bouquet of flaming orange flowers. Smiling, closing his eyes for a moment, he nods. I am so touched by his gesture of understanding. We walk together, my friend and I, until the jeep arrives.

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Barbara Sonneborn, Producer/Director/Writer, has worked as a photographer, mixed media artist, and set designer for 26 years. She designed and directed all visual aspects of Jean-Claude Van Itallie's play Bag Lady, which was produced in New York at the Theater for the New City. She photographed and directed the use of projections in The White Buffalo, produced at Princeton University. Her artwork has been exhibited in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and can be seen in New Directions in Photography, a book edited by then New York Metropolitan Museum of Art curator of photography Weston Naef. Her photographs are also included in many private and museum collections.

Her awards include a 1998 Rockefeller Film/Video/Multi-Media Fellowship, the International Documentary Association Award for Distinguished Achievement/ABC News VideoSource Award and two National Endowment for the Arts grants. Regret to Inform is Sonneborn's first film.

Her future plans include writing a book about the widows of the Vietnam war, and further films that explore the psychological and societal impact of war.

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