Fifty Years Later, the Class of '68 Remembers

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Their year is especially notable—1968, a year that conjures images for almost all of them, not all of them happy or sweet. Vietnam dominated. Death tolls there were staggering: 16,592 American soldiers died that year, 200,000 North Vietnamese and Viet Cong. The impact on many new graduates was profound and helped shape the rest of their lives. The following are some of their reflections, in their own words.

This summer, the class of 1968 reminisced with lots of laughs. They spent time traveling through remembered stories, some embellished a bit, retelling yarns in dozens of colorful conversations.

But serious moments occurred too, public and private, old friends chatting not simply about their college years but about the divergent paths they took the day after they flicked mortar board tassels aside.
SYLVAN GEERITSMA

Sylvan Geeritsma was one of those who returned to Dordt’s campus this summer to share and listen with others who gathered for this year’s 50th anniversary reunion. The student body president in 1968, Sylvan found himself in a military uniform not long after graduation, an experience he has written about in a moving and thoughtful essay that you can read in its entirety in the September Pro Rege at http://bit.ly/MoralFogofWar.

This excerpt from Sylvan’s essay illustrates part of what he came to learn.

After basic advanced infantry training, I completed officer candidate school and was commissioned as a second lieutenant in military intelligence. Deployed to Vietnam with the 101st Airborne Division, I was in charge of an electronic surveillance unit for half of my tour.

During my first week overseas, at a training class on rules of engagement, we were reviewing the Geneva Conventions and combat rules—you fight soldiers; you don’t harm women, children, civilians and friendlies, etc.

A man stood up, hardly old enough to have finished high school. He was in Vietnam before, he said, and served with highly-trained guys sent into enemy territory. “Do you really mean that now if we are discovered in the jungle by a woman and a couple of kids,” he said, “we can’t kill them anymore?”

The instructor repeated what he mouthed earlier: “The rules say...” He didn’t even have to wink. The answer was clear. Nobody could say he didn’t teach the rules; everybody knew he didn’t.

We were in Vietnam to “win the hearts and minds of the people,” which makes counter-insurgency seems almost evangelical, doesn’t it? But if you knew of mothers and children who died, would their deaths “win the hearts and minds of the community”?

Fifty years ago, it seemed to me that war is about purposeful killing on a large scale. Did you ever think about how hard it is to kill? I mean real close-up killing in which you see fear in a man’s eyes, you see the messy blood, you bludgeon, you plunge in the knife or bayonet, you hear him beg for his life for the sake of his children.

Revalution overwhelms most of us because God did not create us to kill. Genesis 9 says that when we kill, we are destroying the image of God. It is as if we are trying to destroy the closest thing we see to God—burning him in effigy. That doesn’t come naturally. We are not created to do that.

Armies dehumanize “the enemy.” It’s easier to kill a “gook” in black pajamas than a person—even an evil person. Demonization and dehumanization are forms of hate. Sixty years after his war, my father still talked with bitter hatred about the “Japs” as a devious species. When I took bayonet training, we were told to imagine we were stabbing the enemy at home in bed with our wives or girlfriends, because it’s easier to kill what you hate.

Military language is confessional, religious language: ethos, creed, mission, spirit, immersion (as in baptism), commitment. The change required is eerily parallel to Christian conversion. Recall Paul’s language in Ephesians 4 and Colossians 3 of taking off the old self (civilian) and putting on the new self (warrior). Or consider Paul saying in II Corinthians 5:17 that if anyone is in Christ, she is a new creation. Parallel that with the idea that if anyone is in the army, he is a new creation; the old (cook or postal clerk) is put away; the new (warrior) is put on. Some say the army breaks you down and rebuilds you into the kind of creature they need.

Soldiers, too, are partly dehumanized. The extent of change and damage varies from one person to the next—drugs, suicide, long-term PTSD. Soldiering is arguably the most self-sacrificial of callings, not just because of the risk of physical death or injury, but because it sacrifices the self with a more recently recognized disorder than PTSD, something called “moral injury.”

Yet that is not the last word, because the last word is always grace.

We all know a familiar poem that
challenges us to begin exchanging guns for garden tools and atomic bombs for medical isotopes. God almighty will finish the job, but he calls us already now to begin, by his grace, to make into reality the prophecy of this poem:

They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war any more. Everyone will sit under their own vine and under their own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid. for the Lord almighty has spoken.

JOHN SCHUURMAN

John Schuurman worked as a professional actor before becoming a pastor. He retired from the pulpit at Wheaton Christian Reformed Church. He and his wife Janet Damon ('72) live in Wheaton, Illinois.

While home from Dordt for the summer of 1967, I hung out with a University of Denver student who rented a room in my parent's basement. He was a history major and due to graduate the next year, too. Mark was brilliant, articulate, and passionate in his derision of "Johnson's War." It took him about three nights over beers at the Rathskeller to transform this fairly naïve jokester who went to a tiny Iowa college into an activist ready to take up a sign and join in the beautiful people's demands for a better world.

Thus prepared, I came back to Dordt for my senior year. I loved 1967-68 Dordt. I soon discovered the professors who would welcome a pointed question, the ones who such things only bewildered, and the ones who were out to see that the national nonsense was not going to happen in their yard. Some of it went gloriously fine in talks over food—despite the cuisine—and in smoky dorm room debates over cards and coffee. I should add that a small band of brothers—about three I think—restrained ourselves from trying to occupy President Haan's office.

All of us on campus, whether politicized or not, were young and brave and just beginning to understand our nascent power as baby boomers. Time and a degree of turbulence would tell what we'd make of it.

BETTY (VINK) WIELAND

After 25-plus years of working for Christian Reformed Home Missions, Betty (Vink) Wieland retired to enjoy the gift of a second marriage. Her husband, Dave, died of multiple myeloma in May of this year after sixteen years together. At home in Grandville, Michigan, she still does some freelance speaking and writing but mostly simply enjoys her retirement.

For me, 1968 benchmarked God's molding of the woman I have become. After graduating from Dordt in May, I was eager to leave my Iowa roots and explore. Our country was in chaos, but my Reformed foundation was solid. Or so I thought.

In August I moved to the Chicago suburbs to teach. Flower children students and three feisty housemates invaded my cozy world. I tasted the bitterness of war through a roommate's fiancé, who was fighting in Vietnam. Answers weren't simple anymore.

Marriage, kids, and leading an outreach Bible study called Coffee Break followed. I learned to love the unlovely, accept differences, and forgive. Then my world fell apart. Divorce. All my little black-and-white boxes came tumbling down. I wore a big "D" on my forehead. But when I needed grace the most, God provided it. Over and over.

Looking back, I see that what I caught from my Reformed education was not what I was taught. I was taught guilt-grace-gratitude, TULIP and a Reformed worldview. All neatly packaged and tied with a bow. What I caught was that there were "rules" for belief and behavior, and I was to keep my mouth shut and tough it out if life got hard.

BERT VAN NIEJENHUIS


I remember reading an article about cultural imperialism in the Edmonton Journal’s Weekend magazine in the 1960s, something titled “One Day the Slaves Will Rise.”

By the spring of 1968 the Vietnam War effort was visibly going awry. The increasing brutality of the American military seemed to strengthen the enemy’s resolve.

Four of us visited Chicago on spring break that year, staying at the home of a Roseland grocer, whose neighborhood was already changing color. While enjoying the psychedelic posters and strobe lights in an Old Town shop after dark, suddenly, ominously, we heard a clerk warn us, “The King’s been shot—you should get outta here!” So we did.

Next morning in a restaurant on the Loop, heavily-armed national guardsmen raced by in Jeeps. From the Prudential Building’s 40th floor we saw the mayhem in the streets: burning buildings and speeding fire trucks. Police were under orders to shoot and kill looters. That afternoon in Cicero we witnessed squad cars full of officers, rifles attached to the dash.

In August I eagerly ordered a class set of TIME magazines. Teaching social studies became exhilarating—especially on “Current Events Friday.” Every month featured a new revolution. The Chicago riots were a microcosm of the rest of 1968. They prepared me for my most effective teaching day ever—9/11.

The slaves were rising and still are. Maybe U.S.-style democracy is not the best solution for every nation.

GERRY STIEMSMA

Like Geeritsma, Gerry Stiemsma found himself in Vietnam soon after graduation. When he returned stateside, he started a career in the classroom, stayed there for 42 years, retiring at 70 from Waukegan (Illinois) Public Schools. He and his wife Karen Ulferts (70), live in Silver Lake, Wisconsin.

On April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr. was murdered. I remember my brother, Glen, pounding his fist against the wall and saying, “What’s wrong with this country?”

After graduation that year I did farm work during the day and worked a factory job at night. While driving home I remember hearing, live, the assassination of Robert Kennedy.

The draft notice came August 15, but my introduction into military life was a God thing. He blessed me with a fantastic Christian bunkmate—from Augustana. We figured out we’d played baseball against each other in college.

Things changed. In the deep South, the small huts made me feel as if we were still in sharecropper days. During my bus ride from basic training, I sat staring at a world I’d not seen before while sitting next to a guy who was part African American and part Native American. When we stopped in Memphis at the bus depot, we were given instructions not to leave the building. Angry rioters and demonstrators controlled the streets.

My blooming relationship with Karen, my future wife, was great comfort. Her love, concern, and the constant flow of letters uplifted and blessed me.

In college, I remembered hearing about the Tet Offensive and not thinking much about it. Less than a year later, I was in it.

JERRY BUTEYN

After teaching German (and some English grammar) at Christian schools in Michigan, Jerry Buteyn found his way back home to the family farm in 1976 and took a Michigan bride.

Riots are another strong memory from 1968. Following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., they broke out in more than 100 major U.S. cities including Chicago, where 11 lives were lost and entire neighborhoods were decimated.
along with him. They have a grandson, a sophomore, at Dordt College.

That year, two of us student-taught at Edgerton, Minnesota, staying with a family who made us breakfast every morning. I remember the news being on, updates on the war in Vietnam. In February the highest weekly totals of death and injury for the Vietnam War week were tallied: 540 and 2,547. Yet I had to block that out and go across the street to teach German and English. It was scary.

I didn’t get drafted. The high school where I taught that fall was full of rich kids. One of them even asked me why I taught school—there wasn’t any money in it. The two most difficult high schools in town, teachers said, were South High (heart of the inner city) and East Christian (very affluent). At South, you were thankful to go home with your physical health, at East with your mental health.

Such was my first year of teaching, 1968. I learned more about dealing with students (even rich ones) than they learned German from me, but still, 1968 was a really a great time in life.

BARBARA MEYER

As a claims advocate in an insurance brokerage, Barbara Meyer helps clients through whatever “sticking points” might occur in a claim. Her husband, Larry (also ’68) is retired from positions as a pastor and a high school Bible teacher. They live in Kenmore, Washington.

“There is a crack in everything— that’s how the light gets in.” That’s Leonard Cohen.

Our life in 1968 brought a twist on those words. War, racial tension, and riots were everywhere, but we were insulated in our last year in college—an exciting but anxious year filled with our new marriage, practice teaching, finishing up courses, and moving.

The first crack came when Larry was called to report to the draft board for a war we were barely conscious of, yet knew we didn’t believe in. He got a divinity deferral, but we knew many young men didn’t and maybe would die. A little light on the actual dark plight of the world.

The second crack came when we moved to Michigan for seminary years. We had heard about riots in the area from a cousin who said she would never go out at night. But in our naiveté, we thought we were protected from all that. We were riding downtown one Saturday, when a group of rioting young men came to our car and rocked it. The look on their faces stayed with us. Another little light on the plight of those caught in racial problems.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that.”

Did our years at Dordt help us understand a bit more when we finally saw more? Rock-solid teachings made for a resounding “yes.”

JIM VANDEN BOSCH

Jim Vanden Bosch is a filmmaker and the founder of Terra Nova Films, a Chicago-based non-profit that produces and distributes films on aging-related issues like elder abuse and geriatric healthcare. He lives in Lamont, Illinois.

When memories give us an entryway to revisit meaningful pieces of our existence, they also give us a way to assess who we were compared to who we have become. As I reflect on the memories of my years at Dordt, it is clear to me that those years were a nutritive starting place for who I would later become. It was the Reformational perspective that was just beginning to take hold there during those years that propelled me into a way of thinking which, over the remaining years of my life, enabled me (often in fits and starts) to accept rather than deny growthful change. How amazing that a cloistered kid could grow from a participant in a march (led by a Dordt prof) to the Sioux Center park in support of the Vietnam War into someone who now abhors abusive domination of any kind. How amazing that the seeds of a new perspective could help me through the crucible of painful life events, including a divorce, and allow those events to help crack open new vistas of grace and growth. How amazing that the very religion that birthed Dordt, and that still tries to define and understand God, finally enabled me to see that any attempt to define God is impossible, and is, instead, often an expression of a humanly hubristic attempt to make a god in our own image. Amazing grace!

JAMES CALVIN SCHAAP (’70)