

SHARED WEIGHT

The Fall of Saigon, 30 Years Later

Woody Curry's Journal

Billboard

Hello, I'm Marc Steiner, and welcome to the Center for Emerging Media's series, Shared Weight, a documentary series about the impact of the Vietnam War, thirty years after its end. One member of our group was Woody Curry, a veteran returning to Vietnam to revive his love for the Vietnamese people.

WOODY CURRY: Now how many young, black kids off the streets of South Baltimore you know who run 'round in the jungle speaking some Oriental language and flying around in helicopters and stuff like that? Who is it? It's me.

MARC: From combat to drugs and the street and institutionalization to running recovery centers, we follow Woody on his journey to come full circle, to find himself again, thirty years later. First, the news from National Public Radio.

Segment 1

MARC: Hello, I'm Marc Steiner, and welcome to Shared Weight, a radio documentary series thirty years after the Vietnam War. This hour, we take Woody's journey. We look at the life of Wynwood Curry, better known as Woody.

MARC: I often say if you married Deepak Chopra and Richard Pryor, you'd have Woody Curry. Woody joined our group of eight on our journey to Vietnam. Included in the trip were three Vietnam veterans, Woody, poet George Evans from San Francisco, and writer Wayne Karlin. For Woody and George, it was their first time back since serving. Wayne had been back several times and written extensively about his war experiences as well as editing anthologies of both American and Vietnamese writers. A Baltimore native and Vietnam veteran with Masters degrees in psychology, Woody runs one of the most successful drug recovery programs in the country, something he knows from the inside out, having been addicted to alcohol and drugs for many years after his return from Nam. He knew what it was like to recover and relapse, recover and relapse again. Woody's been clean and sober now for more than 15 years, having been through the program he now runs.

WOODY: [Actuality] Your constant drug use and the other pleasure-seeking behaviors that you engaged in, your brain is formatted to seek pleasurable, favorable solutions on a feeling level 'cause that's what drugs do. They make you feel better. Okay? So when the drug use stops, you still gravitate to those things that to a lesser degree made you feel okay: Sex, money, property, prestige, all of those things that you use to make you feel good. You avoid painful situations, you avoid disappointment, you avoid frustration, you avoid all of those things, and you use other things to override what you perceive to be an unpleasant situation.

Let me tell you what I see that happens in here. I haven't told y'all this, I watch. I learn more by looking and listening, rather than talking. That's why I do one group a day. Rest of the time I'm watching what's going on. Let me tell you what I see. The first two things that these guys get once they get nice and detoxed, not sober and clean because that takes a while, once they get detoxed, the first two things they get is a goddamn cell phone and some Viagra. A cell phone and Viagra. I know what you're trying to do, reach out and touch someone. Then you want a job, so you wherewithal to pay your phone bill and use your Viagra.

MARC: You've just heard Woody Curry as he is now, speaking at his Monday night recovery lectures at the South Baltimore Station, and Woody was born and raised in South Baltimore, in the inner city. He was a sensitive kid, an intelligent kid, who never graduated high school. He had two older sisters, and uncles who had fought in World War II and Korea, so there was a tradition of military service in his family.

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WOODY: I talk about it. I'm clear on it. I mean, you know, I see it, hindsight's always 20/20. You know, one day acceptance and approval and everything else, I volunteered for that mess, ashamed of my sensitivity and all that kind of crap, so I wanted to prove something to them, and they were all talking about their exploits, the Marines and how tough they was and everything, so I said, well, I'm going to a whole goddamned step better. You know, I'm going straight at it. You know, I'll show 'em.

MARC: A couple of days after he arrived in Vietnam, Woody and I spoke together in his hotel room.

MARC: Your time in Vietnam was when?

WOODY: From September of '64 until December of '64, then I came back to Hawaii, and I stayed in Hawaii until December of '65, and then the whole brigade came to Vietnam.

MARC: And then you stayed there for how long after that?

WOODY: After that 'til mmmm...December, January, February, March...July '66.

MARC: After basic training, Woody was tested by the military. He scored high on his aptitude tests, and when the brigade returned to Hawaii, he was sent into the army's language school to learn Vietnamese.

WOODY: The teachers in the first phase, the first ninety days, were Vietnamese women. These women taught—oh man, the army's slick. These women taught us all of the social niceties. 'Good morning, how are you?' 'How far is it?' 'What time does the post office open?' You know, regular everyday conversation. So, after you learned all of that stuff, later on the women disappeared, and South Vietnamese army officers and American advisors and a sprinkling of civilians took over. So, the conversation changed from 'What time does the post office open?' to 'How many blocks of C-4 do I need to blow this bridge up?'

MARC: And all this was taking place way before there was a consciousness at all about the Vietnam War?

WOODY: Naw.

MARC: This was taking place before most people even understood why the war was—

WOODY: Yeah, yeah, because most people back in the United States didn't even know it was a war going on 'cause at that time, it wasn't anything but advisors in Vietnam, but now this is in retrospect, alright? 'Cause of course I didn't know it at the time, but it was being set up anyway because in Hawaii, the 25th Division was a jungle training division, and the area of deployment was to be southeast Asia. And they had been running this thing called Shotgun since 1961, where troops from the 25th Division were manning machine guns, so they were given the assignment of 'riding shotgun'—this comes from the old stagecoach days—on these helicopter aviation companies. The army had aviation companies in Vietnam. Their main function then was transporting UTTs, they called them.

MARC: What's a UTT?

WOODY: Utility Tactical Transport. So, the job of these aviation companies was basically training and taking ARVN—Army Republic of Vietnam, we called them ARVIN—taking the ARVN troops out in the field to fight against this insurgency. It was an insurgency then.

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WOODY: In language school, when we learned Vietnamese, it was a bunch of people in language school that—the military had a problem with us. Right? Because I don't think that they foresaw that the people who made these high scores on the army language aptitude test were more open-minded than the average soldier. You know what I mean? A lot of these guys had college degrees, and they were Mexican and Puerto Rican and black and, you know, white, but it was a group of people who had more of a awareness of world events than the average soldier was, right? So, they separated us and put us all the way up on the other end of the post, and in the evenings after school, right, the discussions that went on in the barracks where we were were about imperialism, civil rights. We even talked about the French Revolution and the writings during that time and talked about them being written to reflect the times that they were in, so the conversations up there were a lot different from the kind that you had in the barracks, the regular barracks. But then there was this other thing too, where being in this macho military thing, that was there too. I guess it was somewhat of an anachronism, you know? On one hand, I speak Vietnamese, I like poetry, I like music, then on the other side, I was real gung ho as far as the military was concerned. The two of them went together, as strange as it might seem.

MARC: Something happened there that began to change Woody Curry 'cause you said—what's that quote you always used when you came back to America, that you spoke a different language?

WOODY: Yeah. Something happened in the military while I was here. When you can communicate with people, they aren't the enemy. They're the enemy, but they're not—am I making sense? The GI's called me VC, which was the name the Americans gave to the enemy, the Viet Cong. And that was a nickname they gave me, okay? It was playful, but at the same time it was kind of sarcastic because I had some Vietnamese friends, alright, that weren't the enemy, but to the United States military, everybody that was Vietnamese was the enemy. So, you had two things going on here.

MARC: When we came back to Baltimore, I talked more to Woody about his time in the army as a translator and in the Shotgun program.

MARC: What did the army have you do with the Vietnamese language when you were there? Did you interrogate prisoners? Did you interpret for the troops? What did you do with the language?

WOODY: Everything that they needed me to do, whatever need they had for an interpreter, that's what I did. For a while, I was an RTO, that's a Radio Telephone Operator. And I was in the infantry some. We were sometimes trying to get information or what documents meant or whatever the CO wanted. Whatever the CO wanted me to do, that's what I had to do.

MARC: Why were they wasting a good interpreter on being a gunner?

WOODY: Well, that was the only way back in the day that you could get the language school graduates into Vietnam was through the Shotgun program because of the rank, and you couldn't—if you wanted to be an advisor, you had to be an E5 or above, and they were mostly career professional military men, and that was a permanent assignment, okay, but the Shotgun was TDY, temporary duty, so they had to incorporate the third phase of language school into the Shotgun program in order to get us in country.

MARC: Wh-

WOODY: Shotgun was top secret mission that the 25th had been given while authorized to shoot at the enemy, you know, when we weren't supposed to be doing it.

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MARC: Woody Curry served with honor in Vietnam. He was medevac'ed out, wounded in body and spirit. When we come back, he reflects on his life after the war and his journey back 40 years later that rekindled the pain and the passion he had for the Vietnamese people and Vietnam.

Segment 2

MARC: Hello, I'm Marc Steiner, and welcome back to Woody's Journey. Woody Curry, the poet, the writer, the sensitive street kid, was also a soldier from a family who went to war when called. He went to Vietnam with the 25th Infantry Division as a helicopter gunner and a Vietnamese translator in 1964. He had to shut himself off from the world to survive.

WOODY: Somebody told me, one of them old, old, old veterans, told me the best way to get through a war is to die before you get in it then you ain't got nothing to lose. And dead people don't have no feelings, you know. Just consider yourself as already being dead and accept the fact that you're dead, and then the fear of it goes away.

WOODY: [Actuality] The psychiatrist at Walter Reed told me that the whole time you were in that situation, you were in a psychotic episode. I said, 'What do you mean?' He said, 'Because normal human response in that type of situation is to get away from it as fast as you can, but when everybody's psychotic, then nobody's psychotic.'

MARC: We got a small taste of what Woody might have felt during our visit to Cu Chi. Cu Chi was the site of one of the most important series of battles during the Vietnam-American War. The Cu Chi tunnels ran for over 250 miles, carved out of rock by hand over 30 years. The Viet Cong lived in those tunnels, set up hospitals that were laced just beneath where the American troops were camped. The Viet Cong popped out of those tunnels to attack and then go back and hide. Soldiers called 'tunnel rats' went in after them. It was part of Woody's war in Vietnam. He speaks with producer Valerie Williams.

VALERIE: [Actuality] You've got to pay a dollar to shoot it.

WOODY: I wouldn't pay ten cents to shoot it. Shoot at what?

VALERIE: I don't know. Wayne just said you can pay a dollar and shoot an AK-47.

WOODY: It might be a good photo op. You could grab an AK and put yourself a bush hat on and send your pictures back to the world of about how big a Che Guevara revolutionary your ass is. And nobody ain't shooting back at you. You see what an AK-47 does to some goddamn body, you really wouldn't want to be in no damn big hurry to shoot the son of a b----

VALERIE: Right.

WOODY: . . . for no reason whatsoever. Because it's not designed for f---ing recreation.

MARC: Along the way, Woody met another veteran, a Vietnamese who looked at Woody and said to him, 'You were here.'

VIETNAMESE VETERAN: [ACTUALITY] 1965.

WOODY: 1966. Came December '65

VIETNAMESE VETERAN: American base?

WOODY: 25th Infantry.

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VIETNAMESE VETERAN: Ah, that's right.

WOODY: We're old friends.

VIETNAMESE VETERAN: He my brother still. You're an American born. Let's forget.

WOODY: Yeah.

VIETNAMESE VETERAN: And too, you see this bullet. From here to up there. Let's forget it. Just forget it. All of it.

MARC: After we left the veteran at the sandal shop, we came to the entrance of the tunnel exhibit for the tourists. Woody had said several times he wasn't going down there, but after our cameraman went in, the next thing I knew, Woody had ducked into the hole as well, and I followed. Maybe it was the old soldier telling him to 'forget it' that prompted him to face an old fear and put it to rest. He called it 'The Thing in the Tunnel.'

WOODY: [Reading] I must know this thing intimately. It knows me, it owns me, I must move with it, I must taste it, I must smell it. I can never express this. It is beyond expression because it does not exist objectively. Can't be quantified, weighed, negotiated with, it is who, what, where I am, the alpha, and the omega. Whatever my mind attempts to label it, it consumes it. That's what drew me back in the tunnel. I don't know where else to find it. That's the only place in the universe where I can meet it. There's only one place where I know longer exist. It's both the grave and the birth canal, trip through the unknown to the unknown. I emerge not me. Someone emerges. I need to become again. I didn't exist moments ago. My whole world ceased to exist moments, hours, days when they all became eternity.

WOODY: There are parts of me, that like most people, I tend to avoid. And that's what makes them so frightening.

MARC: Which is why you had to take that leap into the hole.

WOODY: Hmm. To make myself, consciously—I did it consciously before, but I didn't allow myself to feel it because if I allowed myself to feel it afterwards, I would never do it a-damn-gain. That's why I had to make it my ally rather than something that immobilizes me. That's why I have to accept it and get friendly with it, so I can use it rather than be destroyed by it. And the thing about fear is that most people do whatever they can to avoid it, but it's a survival thing. That's what it's for, so it doesn't necessarily feel good, but it saved me. You know? It saves every soldier in combat.

MARC: On our second day in Vietnam, we went to Son Sac, a school north of Hanoi to meet with some students. At the school, Woody had what he thought would be a casual conversation with a young student named Lin. What came out of that conversation was something that Woody least expected.

MARC: And the little girl asked you, "Do you remember how to say 'I love you' in Vietnamese?" Wasn't that the question she asked you?

WOODY: Yeah. And I got tongue-tied.

MARC: I remember. I was watching you from the doorway.

WOODY: You didn't hear the rest of it, did you?

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MARC: No. Said, 'Did you love her?' I said, 'I think so.' 'Did you?' I said, 'I think so.' Ca lei, which means "maybe", then she looked right back at me again and said, 'Did she love you?' and I wanted to run somewhere and get away from this crap 'cause I didn't want to, you know, I didn't want to—I hadn't thought about it, hadn't thought about it. You don't allow yourself to do that. It's too dangerous.

MARC: Back home in the states, we probed more deeply into the secrets of his world in Vietnam.

WOODY: I never talked about anything but the war. I never talked about my relationships. Forty years, I never dealt with that. I wasn't nothing to deal with. It was one of those things that happen to you in your life and you submerge it somewhere, you put it in some compartment in the recesses of your mind and you just leave it alone.

MARC: How did you meet her?

WOODY: I saw her on a bus. So I went up and sat in the seat and spoke to her. You know. 'Chow-ang, chow-ko,' and that kind of surprised her, and she looked at me and asked me, 'Ang-tien Vietnam cong?' 'You speak Vietnamese?' I said, 'Vong, toi noi tien Vietnam.' And went on from there, just became two people, rather than American and Vietnamese, I guess.

MARC: Woody might have suppressed the memory of Ko An Hai, but his mother remembered.

SARITA CURRY: He was going with this girl, some girl, and he got so involved with her, he wanted to bring her back to the states, and I said no. And when, you know, I got the letter, and I wrote back, I told him, I said, 'Now, you can bring her to United States, but you won't bring her to my house. I had enough trouble out of you, and I don't need no more.'

WOODY: Relationship with her was like an escape, and I guess I became kind of attached to looking for when I could see her to get away from the smells of the oil, and the cordite, and the heat. And it was a real intimate, personal kind of thing. It wasn't a public thing because the Vietnamese wouldn't have went for it, and I know doggone well the GI's I was around wouldn't have went for it because the only women that they knew were the bar girls and the street girls and stuff like that.

[1]

MARC: We asked Woody's mother, Sarita, about what she remembered about that time.

SARITA: I had this premonition, and all of a sudden I saw him in trouble. And he was in this helicopter, and there was a lady standing down below there with a baby in her arms wrapped up in a black blanket, and he had his gun pointed down on the woman like this, and I said, 'Oh my God, please don't show me nothing else.' It just vanished after that, and when he came home, I was sitting in the living room one night, and he and his father and one of his father's friends was out in the kitchen, and they were talking, and the very thing he was telling them about he being up on this mountain in this helicopter and this gun pointed down at this woman—it was a woman, but she had a machine gun, pointing it at them, but he got the woman first, and this is what threw his nerves off. But that wasn't a baby. It was a machine gun that she had wrapped up in a black cloth or something.

WOODY: You don't think and do it. You do it, you know, you do it. You don't see gender. You're in a life or death situation, and you do what you do, and you don't think about doing it. You think about staying alive. You don't think about staying alive. You stay alive. That's what most people don't understand. Most people deal with this stuff intellectually where they can see pros and cons, and con is being dead, so it ain't no con in it. You do what you got to do, and then later on you think about it, and that's where your upbringing, and your beliefs, and your traditions, and your values conflict with what was necessary, and that's where the problem starts.

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MARC: Woody Curry was medivac'd out of the battlefield, brought home to the Walter Reed army hospital in Washington D.C., wounded in both body and spirit.

SARITA: They kept him there for, I think it was, two weeks.

WOODY: I was in there for almost three, four months.

SARITA: Was it? Oh.

WOODY: Six months.

SARITA: They had to calm him down, whatever. So when he came home, I will never will forget it, that Saturday morning, and he came right down the middle of Smallwood Street, threw up both hands, and he said, 'Gung ho! All the way!' I said, 'You're right about that.' I already had my bag packed, and all I had to do was open the door, pick it up, and move out, and that's just what I did, so he said, 'Hi!' I think he spoke, and I said, 'Okay, I'm going down to Aunt Dickie's. I'll be back shortly.' I said to myself, 'Unless you come down there or try to find me, I won't be back until you go back to Walter Reed. I can't handle it.' And they tell me it was terrible.

WOODY: Tell you what happened one time. I gets drunk one day. I used to stay drunk quite a bit. And I had read in the newspaper about a helicopter being shot down in Vietnam, and the person that was the gunner on helicopter was a buddy of mine from Ohio, and so I'm reading this, and it had an effect on me, and my father's thing was, 'What are you so upset about? You ain't there now.' So, he and I got into a fight, and he told me to leave his house and don't come back.

MARC: Could you start off by talking a little bit about your definition of what was not diagnosed back then, which was post-traumatic stress disorder.

WOODY: This is in retrospect too because I'm a therapist. It's an adjustment disorder, adjusting to trauma. If you don't believe in something anymore, then you don't feel it. So, my lack of feeling is a protective kind of device. And so then you come back to the United States to a drab experience, your old neighborhood, your old family, your old girlfriend, people doing ordinary stuff. You just came from a situation where it wasn't a damn thing ordinary, so then to tell you, well, get ordinary. What? I don't know how to be ordinary. It goes deeper than that. Only way I can be ordinary is to be phony. See, I didn't have no more connections with them guys on the corner. I was a whole lot older than they was. I couldn't get into none of that, the bars, and the clubs, and all that kind of crap. When I drank, I drank by myself, you know, I didn't socialize. I wasn't a social person. Plus, it helped me sleep. Plus, it made being alone livable. See, I was a loner. You know from 1966 'til 1973, I didn't even have a girlfriend. I had nothing to talk to any woman about. I didn't know what to say. What was I going to talk about? I opened my mouth, and everybody thought I was crazy.

MARC: When Woody came home, he spent a lot of time between being addicted and being clean, between a life on the streets and a life being institutionalized.

WOODY: Admissions and re-admissions along with the alcohol into Perry Point VA hospital. I spent most of my time there.

MARC: The story you tell about what they diagnosed you as?

WOODY: Sociopath.

MARC: Because?

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WOODY: You know, if a person's thinking any differently from the so-called normal mindsets, okay, getting you back to thinking and behaving normally is treatment. Right? But the things that they considered normal, I really didn't give a damn about, you know. You couldn't approach me from some Christian belief system, not after what I had seen. The people that were supposed to be therapists—and I'm like, man, you ain't got a clue. What is it you want me? Wha'chu want me to do? Say, 'I'm okay with everything that everyone's talking about. I'm okay. I love my mother and the country and apple pie and baseball.' Is that what you want me to do?

MARC: Despite his drinking and stays in mental hospitals, Woody was full of life, a well-liked character of the streets and quite functional and involved in the social and political struggles of his day. While waiting in the Dulles airport for our flight to Hanoi, we talked about our lives as activists in the 60's.

WOODY: I participated real actively once I got here because I was in Resurrection City in '68, alright? And I stayed over there, and not only the war, but the whole direction the country was going in, so Vietnam, civil rights, assassinations, the whole country was like—my energy went into change.

MARC: I also was at Resurrection City, but I didn't know Woody then. We were among the thousands in the Poor People's Campaign who camped out on the mall between the capitol and the Washington Monument. It was the last great campaign of Martin Luther King's life before he was assassinated. The interaction of the war, the Vietnamese people, and the streets of Baltimore transformed Woody Curry. We come back with him from his journey, 40 years after the war in Vietnam. We'll be back with Woody's Journey in just a minute.

Segment 3

MARC: Welcome back to Woody's Journey. We come home with Woody from the war in 1966 and from his journey back in 2005. Woody's coming home from the Vietnam War, wrestling with his addiction and the life he brought home with him from that war 40 years ago altered his understanding of addiction, why we are addicted and has helped him lead the Station, two firehouses where addicts now live, into one of the most successful and unique drug recovery programs in our country.

WOODY: In the process of recovering from the addiction—I call it 'the addiction' because everybody participates in it. I was just a player, you know, I'm surrounded by addicts. You know, I've got food junkies, money junkies, and power junkies, and drug junkies. I'm surrounded by junkies. Everywhere I look, somebody's attached to some kind crap, you know what I mean. So I call it 'the addiction.' My personal one is just part of the grand scheme, but the basic principles you have to practice to get alright with yourself are more Eastern. They just put a different spin on it, same stuff, same principles apply everywhere, I mean, honestly, willingness, open-mindedness, forgiveness, patience. They work just about anywhere you go. They got a saying in the 12-step program. It's a program of progress, not perfection, you know what I'm saying? So, you know, I get better with it, you know what I mean. I ain't trying to be no saint by Thursday. You know, I got my stuff. You know, you can't just be in America. You got to be some-damn-body. We're never taught how to be. We're taught how to be something or somebody, and it's always something that we're not, so we're always chasing something or force something that—that's what I tell them guys, you know, that 60 days I say in the program, when I say, 'Look, just sit down.' You know, it's like the Zen guy taking—and they say I'm harsh, but that's Zen practice. But the Zen master used to get the pupil's attention by banging him upside the head or slapping the hell out of him, right? But I do it verbally, and people don't realize what I'm doing. It's a technique. I do it verbally. My harsh words, my screaming, my jumping on 'em is a verbal slap. It wakes them out of that stupor that they're in, that automatic response that they're conditioned to behave and pretend to be a certain way. So, when I jump down their throat and holler or something like that, it's not therapeutic to take a board like the Zen master and bust somebody upside the head, so I'll do it [snap] Certain words have that kind of impact, you know, and I'll tell them, 'I don't want to hear that s—t.' 'What do you mean, you don't want to hear it? This is who I am.' 'That's bullcrap.' It's a game you're running.' So, now I've created a problem for them. What I'm saying is, 'It ain't real, you ain't real, and I don't want to hear it.' So it ain't no difference from where I'm looking at it from. I'm not looking at what they're doing; I'm looking at who they are, you understand? So, I'm seeing something totally different from what kind of box they're working out of. I'm seeing 'em for who they are, how they feel, that's what people miss. They got to put somebody in a box, put them in a

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category, and frame 'em, and that's the same thing I teach the guys. I am not interested in what kind of box you're working out of. I'm interested in who you are and how you're handling being.

MARC: The theme of the box and putting people in boxes becomes part of Woody's way of teaching.

WOODY: Did it ever dawn on you that what you're resisting is being put in a box? Because they say it's a spiritual illness, right? You cannot box spirituality. It's infinite. Boxed spirituality we call religion. You know there's the box called Christianity, Islam, Judaism, you know. There's all these different boxes. That's religion. That's not spirituality. That's spirituality somebody done put in a box, and when you go into it, right, you find out that it's made up of absolutes that you can't do, but you want to do bad as s—t, so now you got an internal conflict. I feel like I want to do this, but what I believe tells me I shouldn't be feeling this way, right? I shouldn't think like this, but you do. So, what do you do? You go along with the program for acceptance and approval rather than finding a different way of looking at things.

WOODY: The world was in you before you even saw it. The description of the world was in you before you even came across it, so you have a map of the world that's in here. Right? And you were told these things a long time ago, that you need a woman, right? And you saw everybody around your pair off, and they put all of this stuff of love and all that kind of stuff in it, right? When were you ever told that the first love you have to have is for yourself? Whoever was raised up thinking that? You were told that you got to be a certain way, look a certain way, act a certain way, and have certain things in order to get the love that you're looking for, right? Nobody ever told you that it was already in you? Did they? So, what you're looking for—you remember that other song, Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places? Some—I think it was an Eastern mystic said, you want hide a person from himself, put it inside of him because the last place he's going to look.

MARC: During the entire trip over to Hanoi, Woody was silent. He sat by himself. He hardly spoke to anybody during the entire 18-hour flight. Before we left, he was full of trepidation. The only places Woody had ever been was the war in Vietnam and east coast of the United States. When Woody landed back in Vietnam in Hanoi, a part of the country he had never seen, we hear from a conversation that he had with Valerie Williams that it wasn't what he expected.

VALERIE: So, Woody, it's your first day in country. How're you feeling?

WOODY: Pretty good. I'm just trying to identify my feelings right now. I'm not feeling threatened or anxious as I thought I would be, which takes me back to then. I had a lot of Vietnamese friends, and I guess that's part of the problem I had when I was in the military.

VALERIE: Well, you told me earlier that you're feeling actually very calm as if you've sort of gotten into the Vietnamese mind space. Is that—you think that's what's going on?

WOODY: It's surprising me, but I understand it. I always did feel pretty calm around Vietnamese, for some reason. My nickname in the military was VC. It was. That's what they used to call me, the GI's. They said it sarcastically because, you know, I could relate. I don't know why. Don't ask me. Maybe I'll find the answer to that while I'm here, but I don't know why. I just don't feel—I don't feel like—you'd be surprised. I mean, I'm alright.

VALERIE: You look very much at home to me.

WOODY: Yeah, I am. That's what I'm saying. I mean, it's—it's amazing to me. It's like I never left here. I don't know how I'll feel when I get up around Pleiku. I don't know, but now I don't have a conflict. I feel okay.

MARC: On their way down to Saigon River to the Delta, another place he served, he tells Valerie about Pleiku and the Montagnards.

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WOODY: In the central highlands, those ethnic tribes up there, see the reason why I don't say a hell of a whole lot is because they're talking about oppression, right, but they oppress the ethnic tribes themselves.

VALERIE: Yeah.

WOODY: You see? Ain't nobody saying nothing about that. Ain't nobody saying a damn thing about when the NVA went in and destroyed and burned down a whole Montagnard village full of women and children. They did that, right? They don't talk about those strategic hamlets where they used to come in in the middle of the night and drag the chief and his wife and children out in front of everybody and blow their damn brains out, you see. It's a whole 'nother side to this thing that ain't nobody saying nothing about. Everybody's talking about the poor Vietnamese. I'm saying, s--t, they did their s--t too, and ain't nobody mentioned that, none of that. If they're so freedom-loving and nationalistic, right, how come they're oppressing those people? How come they cut that other society altogether? See, the Montagnards are the niggers of Vietnam.

VALERIE: Right.

MARC: Pleiku, which Woody thought was such a paramount part of his journey back to Vietnam, turned into a personal liberation of another sort, even though he never set foot back there.

MARC: You know, as this whole thing unfolds for you, it's almost like something began to click for you when you got back here.

WOODY: It started when I decided I wasn't going back to Pleiku.

MARC: Uh huh.

WOODY: Because the damn war's over. What I need to go back there for? For what? For some selfish-ass reason, to re-write history in my head, you know. Uhhnnn-uh. It's over. Life goes on. You know what I mean? Now, when I let it go, I'm confronted with who I am and what I am in the here and now, and I'm alright with that.

MARC: While the rest of us on the trip were meeting with the great poets, writers, filmmakers, and intellectuals of Vietnam, Woody was in the streets and in the Buddhist temples, spending his time with the street kids, the everyday workers, the shopkeepers, and the hustlers. He spent his nights out in the dark streets of Hanoi and the bright lights of Saigon, where most foreigners didn't go.

WOODY: It's the same way I draw the parallels between the kids hustling in the street and the kids hustling in the street in Baltimore and the people panhandling or begging in the street and the people panhandling or begging on the street in Baltimore because the language, what is different, what the behavior and the mindset, and the reason why they're doing it is basically the same thing. See, so it's not very hard for me to converse with them, so I can go and hang out with Chung, and he's a kid, but it's like hanging out with either Chris or Man, my two sons. The one's 25 and one's 21. And I can know what he's doing and find a way to communicate with him in his language. You know, we can be on the same page. I don't have to pick up every little nuance and every little sentence structure or correct grammar in order to be able to communicate with him, and when I was talking to them guys down the street in one of my pictures, when I was sitting down on the pavement talking to them, and they were just sitting down in a circle, kicking it, making small talk about the girls, about joking, about my rings, about my butchering other languages, stuff like that. And we were communicating pretty effectively because we were all on the same page as far as whatever the theme or topic of conversation was at. We find a way to make each other understand what each other's saying. I guess I feel more at home with them than I do with the politicians and stuff. See, I don't feel at home with the politicians in the United States. You know, a politician is a politician. I don't care what damn country you're in. The crap they're talking about has very little to do with what the devil is going on. You know what I'm

SHARED WEIGHT

The Fall of Saigon, 30 Years Later

saying? He's trying to paint some pie in the sky picture of some stuff, and the people on a day to day basis is just trying to put food on the table and feed their families and stuff like that, so I've been more at ease with them and me not being too different from them, only culturally different, but basically the same same, like you know that's what we do all the time, that's what comes out, same same. You know, and we communicate pretty good. I can go different places by myself.

MARC: It wasn't until almost a year later, after we returned from our journey to Vietnam, that Woody began to really fully understand the profound effect that Vietnam has had on his life.

WOODY: I didn't know enough about the way the Vietnamese thought, even though I could speak the language. It was more of an intellectual feat, but I didn't realize being around them as long as I was and being able to speak the language, how much of them became part of me. You know, the inner person, I guess, how much alike we were, even though I was American, they were Vietnamese, in conversing about a lot of different stuff, I connected with them, not from a confrontational perspective, even though that was the one that we were in as far as the war was concerned, but on a personal level how I started seeing them as people, just like me, and I brought all that stuff back here with me, but I didn't know it.

MARC: Woody Curry's intimate relationship with Vietnam and the Vietnamese people brought him full circle 40 years later. The forgiveness in their hearts changed his. His war is over. Thank you for joining us for Woody's Journey, full circle, from war to acceptance. For more information about Woody Curry, his life, and his unique program, go to www.centerforemergingmedia.com. I'm Marc Steiner, and thank you for listening. This has been a program from the Center for Emerging Media. Major funding from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the Osprey Foundation. Executive Producer, Marc Steiner. Producers, Steve Elliot and Marc Steiner. Editor and engineer, Andrew Eppig. Field recording, Neelon Crawford. Vietnam coordinator, Danh Ngoc Truc. Studio recording and mixing facilities provided by Clean Cuts Music and Sound Design. For a complete listing of funders and participants in this program, go to www.centerforemergingmedia.com.

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