

Connections
A Rumanian Adventure
by
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It is never easy moving from one chapter of our lives into the next, but I think it is particularly difficult for soldiers returning from combat. The intensity of fighting and the loss of friends warps the lens through which we see the world. When I returned from Vietnam, ordinary people living everyday lives seemed pretty strange to me.

I could not connect with them or their lives.

Of course, I probably seemed a little strange to them too. The first time a door slammed, I hit the floor. And the second time too. As I sheepishly got back to my feet, Mom would ask, "Is there anything I can do?" There wasn't.

You know how it is when we go through a traumatic experience: your emotions get bound up and your dreams get locked down.

Fortunately, a couple of weeks after being discharged from the army I got together with a couple of friends from the Danube trip (A 1964 canoe trip down the Danube River that derived some of its' inspiration from the CRMS Spring Trips. The adventure had appeared as a 46 page cover story in National Geographic Magazine). We had created another idea for the Geographic, this time to hike the Carpathian Mountains of Rumania from the Russian border to the Danube River. The time was right for the idea at the Geographic, and they went for it. I couldn't wait to show Bob Gilka and the editors at the Geographic what I could do now as a photographer after the two years of seasoning in the army.

But, it turned out, the time was not quite right for me. We weren't more than a day or two into the trip when I realized that the warp in my lens that made it so difficult for me to relate to members of my family was making it impossible to relate to the people I was trying to photograph in Rumania. It was like a wall had grown up between us. There was no emotional connection. There was too much fog in my mind. I knew I needed to do something. I just didn't know what.



About a week into the trip we crested a hill and there below us was this magnificent Moldavian cloister called Sucevita. It was so beautiful we set up camp right there. As Dan was getting a fire going, Bill looked up from his guitar and said: "Hey Dan, isn't that a nun down there waving a white flag at us?" Dan looks: "Yeah, I think it is." Well we all went down to check it out. ... It wasn't a nun, it was the Mother Superior, and she wanted to know what we were doing on her hill. We explained to her that we were journalists doing a story on Rumania and described for her the arduous 25 kilometers

we'd hike from Arbore that day. She said, "Oh, you must be so hungry. Won't you come in and have something to eat."

She ushered us into her cozy little kitchen and introduced us to her cook. "Natalia, these boys are from America. What can you do for them?" In moments Natalia had a fire crackling in the stove, and as the room filled with the aroma of an omelet rising, the Mother Superior reached out to each of us, asking us to tell her about our families and describe growing up in America. I was so taken with how completely she had connected with us that I blurted out that I had just returned from Vietnam....

Silence. Long silence.

"Oh, that must have been so hard."

Looking right at me, she said: "We are going to have a service tomorrow morning at 7. You are welcome to join us."



Entering the chapel was like stepping back into the 16th century. Surrounded by shafts of light, the murmuring of prayers, and scent of candles burning, we were mesmerized. I felt like I was floating in a sea of compassion.

Before long, the emotional tension that had held me prisoner since leaving Vietnam began to ease, and memories of friends lost in Vietnam floated up in my mind. I remembered Dave Hackett, captain of the soccer team, high fiving teammate after they score a goal. I recalled Bruce Nickerson, fraternity brother and head of student government at Dartmouth, striding across the campus, sharing his dream of entering the seminary when he got back from his tour of duty in Vietnam.

Both were exceptional guys: Dave was awarded the bronze and silver stars as a Marine lieutenant and Bruce two Distinguished Flying Crosses as a naval pilot. Both were gone. But, we all suffer losses. And we each have to find some place safe enough to make peace with those memories so that they

don't continue to distort our dreams.

The next morning, as we strode from the monastery waving good-by to the last of the nuns, I felt the release we all feel when we let go of painful memories. I felt like a deep-sea diver must feel when he comes up from the depths of the ocean, lifts that heavy metal helmet off, and sets it down on the dock. I felt light on my feet. I could see clearly. I could connect to the people around me. I felt great!

You know how it is when you feel good. It seems like everyone around you feels good.



The next day, after a really steep climb, we came face to face with this Rumanian shepherd. I was still feeling good. I looked at him, just trying to say hello with my eyes. He looked back at me. Something happened. A connection. A visceral bond took hold. And in that moment, I realized what the Mother Superior had been showing us. If we reach out to the people we encounter, we invite them to reach back in return.

In that connection we discover the understanding of other people that sparks ideas and inspires the hard work it takes to transform our ideas from dreams into realities.