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Norman's Triumph: The Transcendent Language of Self-Immolation

Nicholas Patler*

On a chilly November day in 1965, a thirty-one year old Quaker pacifist named Norman Morrison, a father of three, left his home in Baltimore with his infant daughter Emily and drove forty miles to Washington, DC. Once there, as dusk settled over the capitol city, he drove to the Pentagon where he drenched himself in kerosene and struck a match on his shoe. It is not clear if he had handed Emily to someone standing nearby or had sat her down out of harm's way. As Norman burned alive, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, looking out of his office window only yards away, was horrified. He watched as Pentagon attachés rushed to try to put out the flames, scorching themselves in the process.¹

Sometime earlier that afternoon, Norman had mailed a letter from the Washington area to his wife Anne in Baltimore: "Dearest Anne, Please don't condemn me . . . For weeks, even months, I have been praying only that I be shown what I must do. This morning with no warning, I was shown . . . Know that I love thee but must act for the children in the Priest's village." This latter reference was in regards to an article that Norman had read that morning in which a Catholic priest described graphically "women and children blown to bits" from U.S. bombing and napalm raids on Vietnamese villages.²

"What can we do that we haven't done?" Norman asked Anne that morning as the two discussed the disturbing article in the quiet of their suburban kitchen. They had done everything they could think of: prayed, lobbied officials in Congress, withheld their taxes, wrote articles and letters to newspapers and people in power, and worked locally on the grass-roots level. But the war was escalating quickly and Norman predicted that it was going to get far more destructive, with America possibly becoming desperate enough to use nuclear weapons against North Vietnam (which McNamara later confirmed was a serious option). That past July, President Johnson had announced that he was increasing U.S. military presence in Vietnam to 125,000 men, followed by the doubling of monthly draft calls. One month later, CBS aired the destruction of Viet-

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namese villages by U.S. Marines. For close to six months leading up to that November day, Norman kept up with news coverage of American bombers raining down Agent Orange, napalm and bombs on the north daily. And only three days before his self-immolation, he had attended a Quaker conference where a speaker asserted that more civilians than soldiers were killed in North Vietnam by a ratio of three to one.³

Norman was “agonized by the killing of Vietnamese civilians” and believed that unless the war was stopped it “would take a heavy toll on the soul of America.” He listened for divine guidance, the Inward Light of revelation that a Quaker waits for in quiet and stillness. Finally, all at once, he felt he had received his answer.⁴ With the “napalmed bodies and wailing children” crying out, Norman must have remembered the Vietnamese Buddhist monk whose burning image had made it all over the world. In 1963, Thich Quang Duc sat in a lotus position at a busy intersection of Saigon, drenched in gasoline, and burned himself to death to awaken the world to the suffering of the war and persecution of Buddhists. It was a sacrifice that had deeply moved and awed both Norman and Anne.⁵

Norman's answer must have also led him to think about Alice Herz, an eighty-two year old Quaker-Unitarian peace activist who only eight months earlier had sat in front of a federal facility on a street corner in Detroit and burned herself alive to protest the war in Vietnam and the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Before her self-immolation, Herz wrote a letter to her daughter where she explained, “I do this not out of despair, but out of hope,” echoing Buddhist monks, such as Thich Quang Duc.⁶

With his path clear, Norman waited for Anne to leave to pick up their two older children from school, sometime after which he stuffed Emily's diaper bag with extra pacifiers, bottles of milk, and diapers, got in his car, and drove toward his destiny.

The self-immolation of Norman Morrison communicated meaning to the diverse persons interpreting it, from power elites to peace activists, from Americans to Vietnamese. Moreover, this meaning impacted people in different ways. With that in mind, I have attempted to narrow down the ways people were meaningfully⁷ impacted through the different experiences of three people/collectives. Some were genuinely inspired by Norman's self-immolation to take action, through activism and writing, against the American war in Vietnam and work for peace. Here we will consider some of their responses through Anne's own efforts and eyes, as well the way she and others interpreted Norman's act for the country and

the world. Next, we will consider how Norman's public burning led Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara on an introspective journey that he was not fully aware until years later, but which possibly influenced his decisions and actions in the immediate weeks and months following Morrison's death and his eventual advocacy of nuclear disarmament and alternatives to war. Finally, we will consider some of the ways Norman's self-immolation profoundly touched the hearts of the North Vietnamese, as well as how his public burning in the U.S. served as war-rallying propaganda for the Vietcong.

While any one of these could be a study in and of itself, my purpose in this essay is to give a summary of each in hopes of offering a glimpse of how Morrison's self-immolation communicated to people in diverse ways, leading them to respond in some form. In short, the conclusion of this paper is that, with the exception of those who rejected his self-immolation as morally or psychologically indefensible and closed their hearts to any deeper meaning, Morrison's shocking public death by burning had a surprisingly meaningful influence on everyday people, activists and war-making elites, often in ways that may not always be obvious or appreciated.

Opposing the war, working for peace: "I could feel Norman's spirit . . . urging me to keep up the struggle. . . ."

Anne describes the devastating impact Norman's death had on her and the children in her powerful narrative, *Held in the Light*. She writes that "it was as if a heavy curtain fell upon us" and "our family remained in a state of frozen grief for years." Whatever meaning Norman's death would have for others, it would leave the Morrison family in a state of inexpressible grief and brokenness. It would leave the three children without a father, and a mother who for years would be emotionally distant. It must be deeply acknowledged here that Norman's self-immolation not only ended a life, but also left a family deeply wounded.

Within that space of frozen grief, however, Anne still found strength to not only continue on, but to also work to protest the American war in Vietnam. In the weeks and months after Norman's death, with her grief bottled-up, Anne "threw" herself "into work to end the war" to honor her husband and his sacrifice. "I could feel Norman's spirit just out ahead," she wrote, "urging me to keep up the struggle for peace."⁸ A little over a week after his death, Anne wrote about his opposition to

war and his willingness to sacrifice his life in the Stony Run (Quaker Meeting) newsletter:

“Norman Morrison was convinced that the control and ultimate elimination of war is an imperative of this century. He considered war itself—and the hatred and passion it inspires—as the real enemy of the peoples of Vietnam and the United States. He gave his life as a witness to this belief.”⁹

In addition to writing, Anne also worked doggedly for Quaker humanitarian assistance in Vietnam. She became actively involved with the American Friends Service Committee, eventually serving as one of its board of directors. Anne also became a sort of lightning rod for Quaker and non-Quaker peace activists who transferred Norman's sacrifice for peace on to her. She worked with many of them directly, and often was in dialogue with many others, sometimes late into the night on phone calls with “people in the forefront of peacemaking.”¹⁰

Norman's public burning appears to have sped up the tempo of anti-war activism, a feeling that both Anne and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara shared. “The episode created tension at home that only deepened as dissent and criticism of the war continued to grow,” wrote McNamara.¹¹ Anne writes that she received numerous letters from peace organizations and individuals, saying that they were increasing their anti-war activism on all levels.¹² Tom Wells, in his book, *War Within*, believes that “the antiwar movement took a stunning turn” after Norman's self-immolation. It also inspired American seminarians and divinity students to participate in a symbolic self-immolation by burning their draft cards. Michael S. Foley writes: “Since most American war resisters did not express their protest by setting themselves on fire, destroying one's draft card in this way demonstrated ‘symbolic understanding and support’ with those who did.”¹³ While antiwar rallies had occurred in forty cities around the country in October, the largest rally to date occurred three and a half weeks after Norman's death when 35,000 protesters, including Coretta Scott King, marched on the White House for “Peace in Vietnam.”¹⁴

In addition to Anne's own increasingly intense engagement and leadership in activism, Norman's death was reported and discussed in the media in the days, weeks and months following his death, which probably inspired activism. Some commentators were negative. But interestingly enough, as Anne tried to read everything she could on her hus-

band's death, she discovered that they were the exception. Most others tried to understand Norman's self-immolation within the context of the message that he was trying to communicate. In an article in *The Christian Century*, which was reflective of much of the sentiment, the poet Anthony Towne declared that Norman and other self-immolators "were profoundly appalled by the war in Vietnam and the United States' involvement in it and were persuaded that only this desperate witness would prevail against it."¹⁵ Even a critical essay in *Life* magazine, which called his death "a deranged act," believed that it would nevertheless awaken the "American conscience in regard to Vietnam."¹⁶ As a professor at Wooster College, where Norman had graduated, explained: "He made it a moral question: you couldn't intellectualize it after that."¹⁷

The language of self-immolation, it seemed, was being understood in a way that Norman had intended.

Norman's incomprehensible sacrifice also fired the imaginations and hearts of poets. Anne had shared with an interviewer that she felt "poets can understand this act better than other people."¹⁸ If self-immolation for a higher cause is a transcendent language pregnant with mystery and meaning, poets seem the most likely interpreters among us. Many of them shared their poems with Anne, with several poems finding their way into publications, such as *Poetry*, and newsletters, which included Quaker and peace newsletters. Several of the most famous were written in Vietnam, becoming a language that was swept into the larger public domain, which we will get to shortly. Many others were written in the U.S. by poets such as Hugh Ogden, who wrote, "Oblivious and wild for peace you breathed/close to murder/and then put her aside/to change our history."¹⁹

Anne could also describe the self-immolation of her husband in a sort of mystical language from which poetry could emerge, with strong biblical overtones, or in a way that one could easily imagine inspiring poets, which she began doing immediately following the event, and continued to do so over the years and decades that followed:

"He was entering eternity. He had a call. If you believe in angels, as I do, then I think they were there. I mean, I saw his coat—it wasn't even burned that much. . . . My own sense is that he held her (Emily) for the moment—and then the angel of God intervened."²⁰

Taking control of the narrative

Considering the impact of Norman's death, inspiring word and action, why was there so much focus, particularly early-on, with his self-immolation compared to Alice Herz, whose public burning eight months earlier in Detroit for the same causes had barely generated a whisper? This question is an important one because the answer reveals how the language of self-immolation can be crafted to communicate a meaning. For one, Alice's choice of a street corner in Detroit to protest the war and nuclear weapons was a marginal location compared to Washington, DC. It had little symbolic meaning. But more significantly, nobody stepped up to tell her story or interpret her act in the immediate aftermath of her self-immolation. Her daughter, Helga, was also a peace activist, but it appears she withdrew, understandably, over the pain of her mother's death (though Helga and others, including a Japanese writer, would later tell Alice's story).

In contrast, Anne, followed by others, quickly took control of the narrative and framed it in a way that validated Norman's self-immolation. Even before leaving the Fort Myer infirmary after identifying Norman's body, Anne, with Emily in her arms, dictated a statement to a friend to be released to the press:

“Norman Morrison has given his life today to express his concern over the great loss of life and human suffering caused by the war in Vietnam. He felt that all citizens must speak their true convictions about our country's actions.”²¹

This was followed by a press conference held the next day by members of the Stony Run Quaker Meeting where they issued a joint statement which made it clear that underlying Norman's self-immolation was an “essential message.” This message was that Norman saw “our country's policies in Vietnam ...as evil.” He felt that all traditional protests “seemed to fall on deaf ears,” and thus his choice of public burning was “a desperate search to find the way to be heard by the American people and by their leaders.” The following day Baltimore Quakers held a memorial service outside of the Pentagon during which they publicly expressed their concern over self-immolation, but nevertheless praised Norman as “a great man” who sacrificed himself to give life to others.²²

There may have been another reason Norman captured attention and imaginations: his utter normalcy in the sense that he seemed like the av-

erage American man, some details of which had been seeping into the public domain in the days and weeks after his death from people that knew him. He seemed an unlikely candidate for a brutal self-sacrifice by public burning. Norman was a young devoted family man; a college and seminary graduate; a minister; the executive of his Baltimore Quaker Meeting. He was a reserved man, quiet, thoughtful, a bit awkward, but who loved to work with his hands. He was a man of the earth, and a lover of creation. Even early-on, while a senior in high school, Norman wrote in an essay, "I am, on a small scale an apple grower, a bee raiser, and flower bulb encourager."²³ If his sacrifice seemed incomprehensible, his life revealed itself like a familiar book, which people could understand, but which paradoxically deepened the mystery even more.

The mergence of self-immolation and Quakerism?

Anne also desired to craft Norman's sacrifice within a Quaker framework, determined to make it fit within its contours, giving it a deeper foundation in one of the oldest and most revered traditions. In *Held in the Light*, she mentions the trickle of Quaker concern over Norman's self-immolation "as not in accord with pacifism and peaceful witness," and the opposition to "Emily's presence and the potential of violence done to an innocent child." In regards to the latter, she admits that she would have not been able to forgive Norman if anything had happened to Emily. But she believed that Norman took Emily to remind him of the Vietnamese children who were being maimed and killed in war. She found peace in her conclusion that he never intended to harm her in any way, and that Emily emerged without so much as a scratch (see this footnote for one credible account of Emily in the immediate aftermath of that day).²⁴

In her booklet, *Fire From the Heart: Norman Morrison's Legacy in Vietnam and at Home*, which was published three years before her more in-depth *Held in the Light*, Anne implies on the first page that Norman's self-immolation, though profoundly non-conventional, was in line with the "Quaker injunction to 'Let your life speak.'"²⁵ In *Held in the Light*, Anne wrote that of "utmost importance to Norman was obedience to one's internal authority, as informed by God through the Inward Light or Inward Christ."²⁶ While moving Norman's public burning toward a Quaker framework, she also understated the deep concern that Quakers had over her husband's self-immolation. She mentions opposition only

to dismiss it with bountiful examples of messages of support from Quakers all over. Yet it appears that in the wake of Norman's death, many Quakers grappled with whether there was a "difference between death at one's own hand and death at the hands of others." As we saw above, they struggled over how taking one's own life, particularly in such a violent way, could fit within the peaceful witness of Quakerism, and its emphasis on protecting and nurturing life. As one Quaker leader explained, "we don't believe in the taking of human life—including one's own. So we are all agreed that we wish Norman had not done this and that he had committed an act against the things we hold very dear."²⁷

Perhaps such responses motivated Anne to make Norman's act consistent with the things Quakers held dear. It is completely understandable why she would do so, and she shows that Norman's self-immolation can be interpreted as being consistent with aspects of Quakerism. Even in the above critique, Quakers who were against self-immolation still recognized and admired his courage to sacrifice himself for others. Anne quotes Quaker historian David H. Fischer that "the Christian had a sacred duty to stand against evil in government, and that individual conscience was the arbiter of God's truth." She further shares that Norman often talked about and preached on taking risks in accordance with God's leading, following "the promptings of the Inner Light," and being willing to sacrifice oneself on behalf of others. She believed that Norman's "decision . . . was one of holy and compelling obedience to an inner directive." Several other Quakers believed that "Norman acted in accord with the best Quaker traditions" and stressed that it "is the Quaker tradition to follow the Inner Light ...even in the face of public misunderstanding."²⁸ Thus, even though Quakers did not support taking one's life, they had a long tradition of responding to inner leading and risking one's life on behalf of others. Norman's self-immolation followed roughly along these lines, though pushing the boundaries of how far one may be led in following this inner directive.

And this may have been where the suicidal act of self-immolation and the peaceful tradition of Quakerism merge: Anne and many other Quakers believed that Norman was following the Inner Light to sacrifice himself to awaken others to the horrors of the Vietnam War and as a witness to peace. They believed he did it to stop killing and to awaken the human conscience, which Quakers have felt called to do throughout their history. "In this sense," writes Christian-Buddhist scholar, Sallie King, "Norman Morrison was being a good Quaker, indeed a model Quaker, in

obeying God's order, as he understood it, to sacrifice himself."²⁹

Interestingly, the message that Norman hoped his shocking death would communicate to the world reached deep inside one man, perhaps even more, at the echelon of American power.

The Haunting (Healing) of McNamara

The language of self-immolation had not only meaning for peace activists and peaceful folks, but it also had meaning for war makers, particularly one of the most powerful in the world. When Norman stepped on top of a small stone wall with a jug of kerosene not far from the Pentagon building, it is believed he had no idea that he was in full view of the office window of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. It is remarkable that he ended up there, since the Pentagon is a sprawling complex taking up thirty-four acres. It is also unlikely he could have known that the busy Secretary, often traveling afar, was even in his office that day.³⁰

When McNamara looked out his window, an aide tried to explain that a man with a baby had set himself on fire, the Secretary seemed unable to grasp the horrific event. As he watched Pentagon attachés putting out the flames and the wailing ambulances arriving, he could only mutter out in a barely audible voice, "What? He did what?" McNamara quickly retreated from this event, suppressing it deep within, and moved about as if things were normal in the abnormal world of war-making in Vietnam. He later wrote: "I reacted to the horror of his action by bottling up my emotions and avoided talking about them with anyone—even my family."³¹ But the self-immolation of Norman Morrison had seared its burning image deep within the conscience of McNamara, and the event would not let him go, haunting him like a ghost for years.

Morrison-McNamara presents an irresistible temptation to romanticize how an obscure but courageous hero, representing the best of the average person, sacrifices his life and in the process awakens the conscience of a frightful giant that has been trampling the land and wreaking havoc. As a result, the giant is grieved by his actions and he sets out to help others and do good. While this sounds like a fairy-tale, it is in some sense a caricature of what happened, except that the reality may have been even stranger.

Daniel Ellsberg is famously known for his role in releasing the Pentagon Papers in 1971, which exposed the covert actions of Washington elites in waging war in Vietnam. He was another man who sacrificed his career and even well-being to expose the destructive lies of power. Back

in 1965, however, Ellsberg was a speechwriter for McNamara, and had followed closely his boss's efforts in taking the U.S. disturbingly deeper into the war. Indeed, McNamara had been one of the most instrumental people in Washington "pressing for the necessity of a bombing campaign against the North (Vietnam)" in the first place.³² By the summer of 1965, McNamara was requesting 100,000 more U.S. troops in Vietnam, with perhaps another 100,000 in 1966. He also recommended that summer that President Johnson "call-up approximately 235,000 reserves and National Guard and that the regular forces be enlarged to 375,000 men, by increasing ...the draft and extending tours of duty."³³

McNamara went further than increasing troops, however. He recommended an aggressive change in strategy that would result in unleashing the worst in humanity and the horrific suffering for Vietnamese (and soon for Cambodians) on a scale not yet seen—a mission to "search and destroy." Troops were to "take and hold the initiative . . . keeping the enemy at a disadvantage, maintaining a tempo in such a way as to deny them time to recuperate or regain their balance, and pressing the fight against VC/DRV (North Vietnam)." They were to "run them into the ground and destroy them." Translation: an unmitigated bombing campaign that would rain down destruction, supported by swarms of ground troops that would not give what was left time to rest or—retreat. Shortly after McNamara's recommendations, President Johnson announced that the troop levels would be increased to 125,000 (25,000 over McNamara's numbers), and bombing of North Vietnam intensified.³⁴

Norman was surely watching the president's announcement that July, and we can only imagine that he was disheartened and angered. With no end in sight of the war, and the destructive war promising to become ever more destructive, a sense of desperation began to take hold of him. But Norman did not have hard feelings toward Johnson, McNamara or any particular leader, according to Anne. She shared with an interviewer that "it was the impersonal, mechanistic thinking and the acceptance of violence toward the innocent in Vietnam that he was witnessing against, and the Pentagon was its representative."³⁵

Norman's public burning deeply impacted McNamara. The former defense secretary admits that it not only impacted him; it reached into his home life where his family was also "deeply affected by it." In his book, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, where McNamara admits with candor and humility that U.S. policy had been "terribly wrong," a few of the things he shares in regards to Norman's self-im-

molation seem pregnant with meaning. One is when he writes, “Marg and our three children shared many of Morrison’s feelings about the war.” This potentially reveals that there was opposition to McNamara’s role in the war before Norman’s death from the most intimate place possible and from the people he loved the most: his own family, under his own roof. How this manifested in his personal world is not clear. However, it must have seeped in at some level, impacting his conscience, possibly leading him to question himself. One thing McNamara reveals with anguish in his book is how people would come up to him in public, often when he was with his family, and scream “Murderer!” and “Baby burner!” He writes how it deeply upset him and his family, and how his wife and son developed ulcers from the stress.³⁶

McNamara says something else that seems pregnant with meaning: “And I believed I understood and shared some of his (Norman’s) thoughts.”³⁷ Thus, the man who worked persuasively to escalate the war shared some of the thoughts of an anti-war activist. Was this because of his family’s influence? Had he been suppressing it until it became unbearable? He admits his “grave weakness” of “bottling up” his “emotions” and turning “inward,” refusing to talk about things that bothered him.³⁸ Perhaps there were always two McNamaras, divided and in conflict, with the one who shared the thoughts of a peace activist awakened by the bolt of lightning that struck him on that November day.

I mention all of this because it is possible that McNamara’s conscience and even guilt over his role in Vietnam was just below the surface or already brewing when Norman burned himself to death at the Pentagon. Or perhaps it lay deep within, stirring at times, but dormant at others, and was ignited by Norman’s fire. Whatever the case, within a month after Norman’s death observers noticed “a discernable change in mood” in McNamara. It was so striking since it seemed the Secretary had almost overnight gone from “overflowing confidence to grave doubts” about the American war in Vietnam.³⁹

More significantly, behind the scenes, McNamara, who had been one of the busiest escalators of the war, was now trying to de-escalate it. According to Paul Hendrickson, declassified documents show that shortly after Norman’s death, McNamara was “urging the president in memos and in White House meetings and in private conversations to consider a bombing pause.” In declassified papers, transcripts and notes from November-December 1965, “McNamara would be pushing harder for bombing pauses and other kinds of options and cessations than

he'd ever pushed."⁴⁰

Certainly his reassessment of military realities was an influence.⁴¹ But Norman's self-immolation in front of his window was one of the "darkest moments" of McNamara's life, and may have been "the emotional catalyst" for his striking reversal. In a 1992 article in *Newsweek*, McNamara mentioned "a young Quaker" as one of the most significant people that had an impact on his doubts about the war. While McNamara would waver slightly in regards to the American war in Vietnam, often stopping on the cease-bombing side, it would be the last of a series of secret memos to President Johnson on November 1, 1967 calling for "an end to the bombing and negotiations with Hanoi" that would finally spell the end of his career as Secretary of Defense. Four months later, President Johnson would "promote" the war-retreating McNamara to president of the World Bank, replacing him with the war hawk Clark Gifford who, with McNamara's conscience out of the way, would immediately embark upon an unprecedented bombing campaign.⁴²

Anne and McNamara: "a kind of communion"

Shortly after the above *Newsweek* article came out in 1992, Anne decided to reach out to McNamara, writing him a letter to help him get to know that "young Quaker" a little more. While it appears that McNamara had learned some about Norman, the man who would haunt him for years, on his own, Anne wrote:

"He was a gentle person; a Quaker pacifist and committed Christian; a graduate of divinity school . . . a passionate man, he cared deeply about peace and the ideas of this country. The horror of what American was doing in Vietnam ... drove him to his desperate act. That, plus a kind of ultimate calling ... As horrible as witnessing his self-immolation must have been, perhaps destiny intended that you should have been that close."⁴³

Anne ended by assuring McNamara how "Norman would be grateful" for his "perspectives on the war now" and his "work for world betterment." If Norman had moved toward McNamara, courageously confronting the war makers, McNamara now seemed to be moving toward Norman, courageously confronting the warrior demons of the past, which Norman had stirred, and scattering them by his honesty and regret. Sometime after the publication of *In Retrospect*, Anne and officials at Stony Run Meeting issued a statement, which they forwarded to McNamara, calling for "healing the wounds of that war" and the need to

“forgive ourselves and each other.” They also thanked McNamara for his courage in publicly admitting that the war in Vietnam had been a tragic mistake, which Anne wrote in her book “was extremely rare among public officials.”⁴⁴

For McNamara, his life path was once again on a trajectory that seemed to move him inexorably toward an encounter with another Morrison. A few days later, McNamara would call Anne, expressing how moved he was by the “depth and breadth” of her forgiveness. He told her that he “should have known a Quaker would be that way.” Anne described her conversation with McNamara as “surprisingly relaxed and candid. . . . It was almost as if we knew each other. Norman’s death is a wound we’ve both carried. In an odd way, we came into a kind of communion with each other.” Indeed, it appears that one Morrison awakened the conscience of McNamara, bringing him face-to-face with his sins, and the other Morrison forgave him, helping to heal him and set him free.⁴⁵

As much as it may have been McNamara’s redemption, it was also Anne’s. Like McNamara, she had suppressed her painful feelings for a long time. But during her conversation, they both, together, “spoke” of their “emotions, then and now.” There was no more hiding, no more suppressing, no more bottling-up. It was a release for both of them, talking emotionally about the past, finding a shared communion in Norman’s life and sacrifice, and sharing their hopes for the future.⁴⁶

Getting back to the fairy-tale of the frightful giant whose conscience is awakened by the unlikely hero, McNamara, the once war-like giant, began to walk gently in the world as he went on to advocate for nuclear disarmament and alternatives to war.⁴⁷ In doing so, he became the hero. But perhaps the giant was transformed most into the hero by his profound humility and honesty, where he takes the light from the unlikely hero who perished and illuminates the tragic mistakes and inhumanity of the war he helped create. In that regard, he has left a powerful witness and testimony of personal transformation, and something with which to awaken posterity to the futility and blindness of war, and a map from which they can chart a different path. In this sense, the former defense secretary’s book is as much Norman’s story as it is his own.

Perhaps *In Retrospect* is, in retrospect, Norman’s triumph.

Norman in Vietnam: “the ultimate sacrifice”

The language of the American self-immolation was perhaps interpret-

ed most easily and profoundly by the Vietnamese, who needed no translation whatsoever. It was a language that to them was familiar, and one that transcended all barriers to understanding. There was no shock and confusion, or search for meaning and understanding as there was in the U.S. It was as familiar to them as the Lotus Sutra, which justifies self-immolation. Indeed, there is a well-established tradition in Buddhism of self-sacrifice in the form of burning oneself for reasons such as to protest the oppression of the Dharma. One of the first accounts of the self-immolation of a Buddhist monk in the area of Vietnam dates back as early as the fifth century C.E.⁴⁸

The Buddhist, Thich Quang Duc, who publicly burned himself to death at a busy intersection in Saigon in 1963, was the first to do so in a long time, however. But his sacrifice by self-immolation inspired many others in Vietnam during the war who followed in his wake. As Thich Naht Hanh explains: "Love and sacrifice always set up a chain reaction of love and sacrifice." This included the student Nhat Chi Mai, a lay disciple of Hanh's, who burned herself to death "to waken love among men/to give peace to Vietnam." Hanh writes that Mai "moved the hearts of millions of her countrymen, evoking the force of love."⁴⁹

Most North Vietnamese knew nothing of Americans except through "bombers and bombs and helicopters and soldiers." But then came November 2, 1965. When Norman burned himself in front of the building full of the men whose minds and hearts were conceiving the bombers and bombings that were being unleashed upon the north, the Vietnamese were moved and inspired. A professor in Hanoi and former Vietcong soldier shared with Anne how the news of Norman's sacrifice impacted him when he first heard it: "I was in my bunker in the jungle that night when the news of Morrison's death came over Liberation Radio. I just sat there and cried. That someone in America cared enough about us that he would give up his life."⁵⁰

The North Vietnamese government immediately seized upon the news to craft their own narrative of Norman's self-immolation. They officially hailed him as a great hero across the airwaves, and used his image and sacrifice as war-rallying propaganda. It enlivened an embattled Vietcong hunkered down in jungles and bunkers, and touched the hearts of civilians throughout the country. Within three weeks of his death, the government had designed an impressive commemorative stamp bearing Norman's face on a background of flames, with a group of peace marchers directly below his image. The words on the stamp read: "Norman

Morrison, the ultimate sacrifice as duty and purpose demand.” They created posters and pictures of his face, which were displayed all over, sometime next to a picture of Ho Chi Minh, including in factories and the windows of Vietcong transport and military vehicles, as well as on the fenders of bicycles and in the windows of private automobiles. They named at least one street after him in Hanoi; mass public rallies were held in his honor; and troops traveling down the trails dubbed the “Ho Chi Minh Trail” by the Americans were said to have the likeness of Norman sewed on their backpacks.⁵¹

Within a month, Anne received condolences from Ho Chi Minh, and an invitation from him to visit North Vietnam, which she respectfully declined for the time being. While it is possible that Ho Chi Minh and the Vietcong leadership would have used the widow of Norman Morrison to further their cause, it would be a mistake to believe that the North Vietnamese claim to Norman was only or even primarily strategic, perhaps even for Ho Chi Minh. They felt as if someone had stood up for them from afar in the land of their enemy, and they were profoundly touched that he had performed the Buddhist heroic act of self-immolation on their behalf. Minh would continue to send Anne gifts and notes expressing his gratitude with nothing to gain. A eulogy in an Hanoi newspaper read in part: “Sleep in peace, NORMAN MORRISON, the flame of your sacrifice will never die down in our hearts.” Soon the Hanoi Revolutionary Museum would display two huge photographs of Norman, along with one of Alice Herz, with interpreters telling of their heroic sacrifices.⁵²

Norman became a folk hero throughout the war and would have a place of honor in the collective memory of Vietnam. As Anne writes in *Held in the Light*, “For the Vietnamese people, Norman had metaphorically put on the Saffron robe of the Buddhist monk and spoken their language. They saw his sacrifice for peace as a great love for them.”⁵³

The pervasive impact of Norman’s act in Vietnam can be grasped when we consider that self-immolation was not only a cultural value understood by Buddhists; it was also seen as the ultimate expression of unconditional love and courage that one could make, but which very few had the courage to do. Hanh explains the famous self-immolation of Thich Quang Duc, like that of Nhat Chi Mai, as an act of “courage to challenge violence and inspire love.” He goes on to explain:

“Like the crucifixion of Jesus, Thich Quang Duc’s act expressed uncondi-

tional willingness to suffer for the awakening of others. Accepting the most extreme kind of pain, he lit a fire in the hearts of people around the world."⁵⁴

For the Vietnamese Buddhists, self-immolation was a powerful language that only a few had the courage to speak. And as Anne says so poignantly in the above quote, Norman, the American, spoke that language, and communicated meaning to the masses in a land far away. Through his self-immolation in Washington, he stepped into their world in Vietnam, and became one of them and one with them.

The Vietnamese monks and nuns also used poetry and song as a way to honor Norman's sacrifice, which was powerfully swept into the streets, jungles and classrooms. They had been using this "language of the soul" for years to challenge oppression and to awaken others to the deep suffering of the country and the need for peace. They immediately recognized that Norman's self-immolation, which fired their hearts and imaginations, was poetry in motion, and thus the language of poets. The most famous poem was "Emily, My Child," written by To Huu, North Vietnam's revolutionary poet laureate, only five days after Norman's death. After opening the poem with Norman's spirit taking Emily to "the Riverbank, the Potomac" so when "grown up" she will know the way and not be lost," Huu transitions into an indictment of Johnson and McNamara whose "crimes are piling high." He tells them that because of their crimes, they can never be like the hero Norman: "You cannot borrow the mantle/ Of Christ, nor the saffron robe of Buddha!" He speaks further to McNamara in a way that perhaps reveals why Norman took Emily with him that day:

Look this way!
For this moment, look at me!
Here you see just a man with a child
In his arms.
I am of Today,
And this, my child, my Emily, is the life of all
Our futures.⁵⁵

Huu ends his powerful poem with Norman's self-immolation: "I burn my body/So the flames may blaze/The truth. "Emily, My Child" was memorized by North Vietnamese school children, and so touched the hearts of Vietnamese, it has become part of the country's literary tradition, known by many even today. Anne explains why Emily captured the

heart and imaginations of the Vietnamese: "Because Emily had been in her father's arms ...and had lived, she became a symbol of hope and survival for the Vietnamese during the war, at a time when their own children were being wounded and killed. . . ." ⁵⁶

During the latter 1960s, American visitors to North Vietnam were struck by how deeply impacted their hosts were by Norman's sacrifice, and how he had become a national hero. They often shared poems and songs with the Americans. A delegation led by Tom Hayden, for example, listened as their chief interpreter sang a song remembering and praising Norman's life and sacrifice. Others were met by questions from Vietnamese that only wanted to talk about the young Quaker.⁵⁷ When Anne visited Vietnam in the 1990s, she was moved and awed by how the Vietnamese from all over still revered Norman, as well as she and her children. The former prime minister, Pham Van Dong, wasted no time in letting her know that her family "was esteemed in the highest magnitude." He continued: "That anyone at a moment can do something so beautiful and noble, well, it's unimaginable . . . I think Norman Morrison with his sacrifice has become immortal." Another Vietnamese man told her about how his headmaster in school called them all together to share what Norman had done: "Of course, we all cried. I could not believe someone in another country would die for us."⁵⁸ While Anne drank in how her husband had touched the "heart and soul of the Vietnamese," she still had to admit that his death was also used to inspire determination in the war. Norman had given his life to end war, killing and violence. When she shared this concern with a Vietnamese leader, he gently explained: "Ms. Anne, we were fighting for our country and our land. We did not want to be dominated by outsiders anymore. Morrison and the peace movement, I am convinced, helped to shorten the way and save lives."⁵⁹

This is a possibility. If we consider that Norman's self-immolation released a powerful anti-war protest, and that had also helped inspire a reversal in one of the most powerful war-makers, perhaps there is much truth to this. True, the war continued to grind on destructively for almost ten years after Norman's death. Yet, if we imaginatively remove these variables that challenged the war machine from our history, it is possible that the war would have gone on far longer, or that it would have been shortened by the horrendous possibility of a nuclear war (nuclear weapons were an option).⁶⁰ Perhaps that was the purpose of Norman's divinely inspired mission.

We do not have to attach any grand or divine significance to Norman's sacrifice to find its significance for the Vietnamese. The significance for them was that someone far away had expressed a love and concern for their suffering by taking on suffering. This unknown Quaker was for them the American Thich Quang Duc who like the Buddhist monk had transformed himself into a bright torch to illuminate the darkness.

Conclusion

In late 1967, as Secretary of Defense McNamara was trying to convince the president and others to stop bombing and seek negotiations, he invited an unlikely guest to his office to talk about the war. I wonder if Hanh was not in some sense an extension of Norman for McNamara. It seems unlikely that it would have ever crossed the Secretary's mind to invite a Buddhist anti-war activist to his office before witnessing the Quaker's self-immolation. But now Hanh, a Vietnamese peace activist, was sitting face-to-face with the man who was responsible as much as anyone for unleashing horror upon his homeland. The journey had been long and full of suffering: from the Buddhist monks that were protesting the war by self-immolation from afar; to Norman knocking loudly on the conscience of power at the Pentagon; and finally Hanh's gentle entrance into the Pentagon as McNamara opened the door of his awakened conscience. McNamara listened intently as Hanh talked about the war and "the truth of our suffering." The busyness of Washington and war could wait, as McNamara kept his visitor with him for a long time that day. Three months later, as President Johnson quietly pushed him toward the door, McNamara resigned his office.⁶¹

This has been a story of violence, suffering, loss, and grief; a story of grace, forgiveness, transformation and healing. It has been a story of opening doors, letting others in and others, including ourselves, out. The self-immolation of Norman Morrison had been a violent act of love that brought diverse people together in strange and unexpected ways. It connected them through a bond of unimaginable sacrifice that reached from Washington to Vietnam, from the heart of peace to the heart of war. Moreover, there must have been many more, including in Washington, whose consciences were awakened by Norman's self-immolation, even in the Pentagon.⁶² Since we know that a leader like McNamara, deep in the fog of war, can be led to a clear path of peace and transformation, then we have to assume that there were many others who were awoken that day that we may never know about.

On a personal note, while spending a week in meditation at one of Hanh's monasteries in New York, I remember something that a Buddhist monk told me after describing how he fled his war-weary country as a stowaway on a small ship the day after the fall of Saigon. When I brought up the topic of Hanh's talk with McNamara, he responded, "Yes, McNamara. His daughter often visits here for meditation retreats." I am not sure which daughter it was. I didn't ask. But now that I am at the end of this journey, which this essay has been for me, it seems a poignant ending to a powerful story. Norman's legacy, it seems, continues to live on in very unexpected ways, as McNamara's daughter crossed over into that world of peace and reflection that had begun to call out to her own father on that November day, a world away.

Notes

- ¹ Anne Morrison Welsh, *Held in the Light: Norman Morrison's Sacrifice for Peace and His Family's Journey of Healing* (Mary Knoll New York: Orbis Books, 2008), 6-7; John Paul Flintoff, "I told them to be brave," *The Guardian*, October 15, 2012.
- ² Sallie B. King, "They Who Burned Themselves for Peace: Quaker and Buddhist Self-Immolators During the Vietnam War," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 20 (2000), 2; Welsh, *Held in the Light*, 36-37.
- ³ King, "They Who Burned Themselves," 37; *The History Place: The Vietnam War* (<http://www.historyplace.com/unitedstates/vietnam/index-1965.html>); Anne Morrison Welsh, *Fire From the Heart: Norman Morrison's Legacy in Vietnam and at Home: Pamphlet 381* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 2005), 9; Norman at the conference, taken from *New York Times* reporter, John Corry, who put together a timeline of Norman's last several days, described in Paul Hendrickson, *The Living and the Dead: Robert McNamara and Five Lives of a Lost War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 213.
- ⁴ Welsh, *Held in the Light*, 36, 41, 42, 45,
- ⁵ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action: Writings on Nonviolent Social Change* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1993), 43-45; Welsh, *Fire From the Heart*, 3.
- ⁶ Bob Fink, *Vietnam: A View From the Walls: History of anti-Vietnam War Protest in its Posters, Flyers, News Clips and Narrative of a Participant* (Detroit)

(Greenwich & Allegro's News Gallery, 1981), 55-57. While this source appears to be self-published, it reproduces several original newspaper articles reporting the self-immolation of Alice Herz.

- ⁷ I chose "meaningfully" rather than positively or constructively because although Morrison's self-immolation inspired actions, some of those actions could not necessarily be considered constructive, such as using his death to rally people for war in North Vietnam. Norman sacrificed himself in hopes of ending the war, and his Quaker tradition did not accommodate war as an option in any context.
- ⁸ Welsh, *Held in the Light*, 40, 47.
- ⁹ Welsh, *Held in the Light*, 47.
- ¹⁰ Welsh, *Held in the Light*, 61.
- ¹¹ McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Times Books, 1995). 217.
- ¹² Tom Wells, *War Within: America's Battle Over Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 58; Welsh, *Held in the Light*, 51.
- ¹³ Michael Foley, *Confronting the War Machine: Draft Resistance During the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2003), 120.
- ¹⁴ McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 217. A future expansion of this essay might explore the speeches and perhaps writings of rally participants to see if there is any mention of the self-immolation of Norman Morrison, explicitly and implicitly.
- ¹⁵ Anthony Towne, "Immolations and Consensus: The Justification of Innocence," *The Christian Century* (January 19, 1966).
- ¹⁶ Welsh, *Held in the Light*, 45.
- ¹⁷ Hendrickson, *The Living and the Dead*, 210.
- ¹⁸ Hendrickson, *The Living and the Dead*, 194.
- ¹⁹ Hendrickson, *The Living and the Dead*, 197.
- ²⁰ Hendrickson, *The Living and the Dead*, 200, 201.
- ²¹ Welsh, *Held in the Light*, 6.
- ²² Welsh, *Held in the Light*, 40, 44.
- ²³ Hendrickson, *The Living and the Dead*, 209.
- ²⁴ Welsh, *Held in the Light*, 38. While there is much mystery surrounding Emily that day, one of the most credible accounts was told by an army major in an interview, which Paul Hendrickson describes in his book. Major Richard Lundquist told an interviewer that he ran to where he saw Norman burning. In the midst of the chaos, with people running, he discovered "a child on the

ground . . . in blue coveralls.” He says that he quickly picked her up and carried her some distance away where he handed her to someone. See *The Living and the Dead*, 215.

- ²⁵ Welsh, *Fire From the Heart*, 3, 9.
- ²⁶ Welsh, *Held in the Light*, 42.
- ²⁷ King, “They Who Burned Themselves,” 3, 14.
- ²⁸ Welsh, *Held in the Light*, 42-44; King, “They Who Burned Themselves,” 6.
- ²⁹ King, “They Who Burned Themselves,” 9.
- ³⁰ Hendrickson, *The Living and the Dead*, 194; “Pentagon Tours: Department of Defense” (<https://pentagontours.osd.mil/facts-area.jsp>).
- ³¹ McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 216.
- ³² Daniel Ellsberg, *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 52.
- ³³ Ellsberg, *Secrets*, 88-90.
- ³⁴ Ellsberg, *Secrets*, 90, 95.
- ³⁵ Hendrickson, *The Living and the Dead*, 194.
- ³⁶ McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 258.
- ³⁷ McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 216.
- ³⁸ McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 216-17.
- ³⁹ McNamara’s change in mood from Chester L. Cooper, *The Lost Crusade*, quoted in Welsh, *Held in the Light*, 97.
- ⁴⁰ Hendrickson, *The Living and the Dead*, 198; Welsh, *Held in the Light*, 97;
- ⁴¹ McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 369.
- ⁴² Hendrickson, 198; Welsh, *Held in the Light*, 96, 97; Ellsberg, 199-200, 216; McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 369, 371.
- ⁴³ Welsh, *Held in the Light*, 98.
- ⁴⁴ Welsh, *Held in the Light*, 97-99.
- ⁴⁵ Welsh, *Held in the Light*, 100.
- ⁴⁶ Welsh, *Held in the Light*, 100.
- ⁴⁷ McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 346.
- ⁴⁸ Jan Yun-hua, “Buddhist Self-Immolation in Medieval China,” *History of Religions* 4 (1964-65), 243-268.; King, 3.
- ⁴⁹ Nhat Chi Mai, “A Letter to the U.S. Government,” *My Country is the Whole World: An Anthology of Women’s Work on Peace and War* (London: Pandora Press), 178; Hanh, *Love in Action*, 43, 44.

- ⁵⁰ Welsh, *Held in the Light*, 122.
- ⁵¹ Hendrickson, *The Living and the Dead*, 204; Welsh, *Held in the Light*, 108-109; S. Brian Willson, "Why Do We Kill, Maim, and Colonize? Case of Norman Morrison," (<http://www.brianwillson.com/why-do-we-kill-maim-and-colonize-case-of-norman-morrison/>).
- ⁵² Welsh, *Held in the Light*, 108-109.
- ⁵³ Welsh, *Held in the Light*, 108-109.
- ⁵⁴ Hanh, *Love in Action*, 43.
- ⁵⁵ Welsh, *Held in the Light*, 102-105.
- ⁵⁶ Welsh, *Held in the Light*, 105, 117.
- ⁵⁷ Wells, *The War Within*, 65.
- ⁵⁸ Welsh, *Held in the Light*, 129, 131,
- ⁵⁹ Welsh, *Held in the Light*, 134.
- ⁶⁰ For the opposite opinion, see Adam Garfinkle, who argues that the antiwar movement prolonged the war: *The Origins and Impact of the Vietnam Antiwar Movement* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995).
- ⁶¹ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Calming The Fearful Mind: A Zen Response to Terrorism* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2005), 12.
- ⁶² A high ranking official in the Pentagon named James Carroll had written that Norman's death had been a catalyst for his own opposition to the war. See James Carroll, *An American Requiem: God, My Father, and the War that Came Between Us*, quote in Welsh, *Held in the Light*, 101.