The Angel of Pleiku and Our Hidden Wounds

"And this, is this from a bump, too?" She touches his lip with her finger, but he doesn't answer—he raises his hand to hers and gently traps it against his cheek. He leans into her palm, his mouth quivering—trying not to cry. "Life is tricky, isn't it, George?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

The above scene, from my novel, *The Angel of Pleiku*, takes place in the coat closet of a 1968 classroom in Wabash, Indiana—but it could be from any year or any school in America. George, a sophomore, has just returned the coat his teacher—my protagonist Arlene Stephens—had recently given him. His father, a farmhand, rejected her gesture as an insult. The motherless boy has a severe crush on her, and they both know what happened, yet it's left unsaid, unresolved, because that's how it often was—and still can be today.

The negative effects of violence and abuse are a main theme of my story, and indeed in my last blog I alluded to a tragic episode from Arlene's childhood as being the core dramatic issue of the novel:

She tries to recall the last time she hugged her father. Was it at the carousel, in the yard playing with her puppy, or in bed while half asleep? Was that a dream—his scent, his whispered words? Her face tenses, her chin drops to her chest. "Why did you leave?" she asks, but the room remains mute, her question met with silence.

Abandonment is a form of abuse, and this befell Arlene when she was seven-years-old. But in this scene, she's thirty-five—why has she not "gotten over it," as they say? There's a condition known as post traumatic stress syndrome, or PTSD. It refers to the potential negative effects of traumatic events—such as violence and abuse—that occur, unfortunately, to most of us on our path through life. I say potential because they affect people differently, depending on a myriad of circumstance and the complex nature and diversity of our mind and bodies. PTSD affects adults as well, as I dramatize in those characters who are combat vets—Bill, Mark, Stan, and Gordy. All of them have experienced extreme danger, violence and death in Vietnam.

But traumatic events are especially troublesome for children. It is thought there are a few main reasons for this, all related to age. First, children do not yet have the experience to place these events in perspective, or possess the ability to balance them with more positive measures. Also, given their stature, they can't exercise the adults' basic self-defense tactics—flight or fight. Powerless, they

may freeze, but this grants them no favors in most cases. Which leads to what may be the most destructive aspect of this trauma—it can cause lasting damage to the child's developing brain. It can actually re-wire otherwise healthy growth—perhaps as a last ditch defense against the threatening nature of the situation. The list of symptoms and conditions found in PTSD is long, but a few are depression, anxiety, insomnia, violence, anger, and addiction. One noteworthy psychological phenomenon that can occur is disassociation. When a person experiences an event, or series of events, which involve pain, fear, loss, and/or confusion, they may react by shutting down emotionally—a kind of separation from the horrible reality of the situation. They may actually forget the event, or bury it away—hoping to move on, hoping to "get over it." And they often do—for a time.

Even if buried in the unconscious mind, this trauma leaves one in jeopardy, for its demons will surface, demanding attention. They may take control of one's life in some cases, contributing to addiction, mental illness, and suicide. One interesting fact I learned from a therapist after a symposium on Vietnam vets and PTSD: She said of the vets she treats for this, most revealed they also had some form of childhood trauma. Not to lessen the horrific nature of war itself—perhaps they were less resilient to the stresses of war because of this? A story about a combat vet I found in *Spoils of War*, a book by Charles Levy, may illustrate this. Shortly after

returning to the family farm, the vet, Byron, shot and killed his step dad—and they had been very close. His sister reported that Byron had been acting nervous, wasn't sleeping, had nightmares, and was concerned with all the death he saw in Vietnam—especially in the case of a friend who stepped on a mine. They never found his head. Byron had also relayed an incident from his childhood. When he was five, his biological dad killed his pet calf by slamming a hammer into its head—right in front of the boy. He then butchered the animal. Perhaps—in Byron's mind—his step dad became his father, and the shooting was a reaction to this abuse, exasperated by the additional trauma he suffered in Vietnam.

I realize stories such as these are not pleasant to hear, but my point is that violence and abuse begets violence and abuse, or at least a host of negative consequences. I am dismayed by the horrible things routinely done to children such as Byron—some with good intentions. But my hope is the more these realities are exposed and discussed, the better understanding people will have that the way they treat others can foster lasting effects—both negative and positive—and can carry on from one generation to the next.

"Hurt? Yeah, I got hurt. Life is tricky—people get hurt." —Arlene Stephens, responding to a question about her own swollen lip.