

# Truth And Lies

A Storytelling Performance Script – By Stone Riley © 2014

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## **Important Note:**

*This is a true story from the author's youth, recounted by the author long years later in a storytelling performance. If the reader disbelieves a certain major fact that is mentioned here, the reader ought to do research for which a Closing Note below courteously offers some useful suggestions, or if such reader fails to do research such reader ought to shut his mouth.*

## **The Larger Picture:**

*The author performed this script at an extraordinary artistic event five days ago: The opening of an extraordinary show at ArtRage Gallery in Syracuse, New York, U.S.A. This show displays two dozen works of excellent leftist political fine art by current artists from across the U.S.A. It is the only such art show known in these times here in this homeland of a cruel and crumbling empire. The author's contribution to the show was his painted canvas "Drone Strike In North Waziristan".*

## **The Performance Setting:**

*It was September 6, 2014 at half past two o'clock, a clear and warm but humid afternoon in Syracuse. The author did this performance in 15 minutes, capping off a little show of talks by some of the participating artists, in the gallery's main room surrounded by the artwork pieces, this being a runup to the opening reception of the show a few hours later. This Artist Talk drew a surprising number around 50 people that afternoon, which would then swell to a very gratifying 120 at the evening reception. Our Artist Talk audience sat in rows of firm comfortable movable chairs facing a small space of floor allotted as the stage, the wall behind which bore a large fine fabric piece of dense greens and silvers depicting part of our beleaguered Earth.*

## *The storyteller spoke:*

My first really hard artistic performance I had – a stage performance – was very hard. I did a month in jail from it. But on the other hand, I got some poetry and pictures from that month. But the performance: It was the first time I really felt the magic – the psychic communion with the audience and performer – the first time I felt it profoundly and was moved by it, by the audience through that medium.

The stage was a U.S. Army auditorium on a U.S. Army base in Germany and I was a U.S. Army soldier. I was a young ordinary low-rank common soldier: a “specialist four medical corpsman”, a senior private field medical aide in other words. And the auditorium was in my battalion, the U.S. Infantry battalion there in Germany where I lived and worked, doing small medical services. We treated sprains and gave inoculations. I always drove an ambulance on all our practice field maneuvers and now and then we had some serious work.

It was 1969.

Now, that was half way round the world away from Viet Nam. In 1969 in Viet Nam it was completely different.

But half way around the world in Germany the mission was: Be prepared to die and see your companions die, and kill other people, to hold a piece of land. There's a geographic feature called the Fulda Gap, a wide round plain in the middle of Germany, and the idea was – the story was – the propaganda was – that huge Communist armies might invade from the Soviet Union to the east at any moment. So we practiced and trained and fixed our equipment and practiced and trained ... without end. We were in the Cold War.

Meanwhile, half way around the world from there in Viet Nam, by 1969 the Viet Nam War was so frantically insane, and monstrous, and desperate, and hopeless, that our colleague U.S. common low-rank soldiers there, in many of the infantry battalions there, were declaring truce. They were, in many infantry battalions, raising flags of truce over their field positions in the Communist enemy's view, refusing all orders to attack, committing violence only in defensive situations, and killing their own U.S. Army officers who interfered with their non-aggression policy. In Viet Nam, by 1969, some of my U.S. Army colleagues were killing their own officers by dozens on a claim of self-defense.

And furthermore, that big military mutiny threw a paralyzing fear into our ruling class: The rulers of America did not dare to start another big war until Bloody Slaughter Bush and his gang made us invade Iraq 34 years later. Those mutinous soldiers in Viet Nam saved the world from the worst crimes of an empire for a third of a century.

Meanwhile, half way round the world away in Germany, I had gone insane with grief. One of my companions in our medical squad had been transferred from there to Viet Nam and promptly killed, by enemy action presumably.

A man who was not a friend to me really but only some way me, only someone my own age from my own land, a field medical aide co-worker with whom I with others sometimes went out to the local pubs and sometimes caught a movie show and played a hand of cards, a neighbor nearby in my barracks (a shot of bourbon on winter nights from the bottle in my locker) and waving hello from one field ambulance to another as we drove back and forth about the muddy summer fields of the Fulda Gap.

He dead in the hot war elsewhere. He dead now because our second letter to him from our squad came back undelivered stamped “deceased”, his first letter back to us prior to that having been full of the foreboding deadly horrors that were loose in Viet Nam.

So, in love's despairing grief, I began to talk and talk and couldn't stop about the pointlessness of it. I talked and talked and couldn't stop, in barracks or even standing in the morning roll call ranks, very lacking discipline, deranged perhaps, about the unending futility of all of it, talking talking of the unendable pointless war, ever since a man I knew, one of my colleagues in the medical squad, had been transferred from there to Viet Nam and promptly killed.

Ordered up onto a stage, a theater stage, in a theater, and the audience sitting out there were all of my infantry battalion's officers, all of them both high and low – corporals, sergeants, up to the colonel – and this a time when U.S. infantry elsewhere were freely, under claims of self-defense, executing their own officers by dozens – and me surprised, was ordered to appear there, sent in at the auditorium's stage door, sent up to the stage, far from Viet Nam, and emerging there between the open curtains, stopping there you may be sure, invited by a senior ranking member of the audience to defend myself or something like it vaguely asked.

Yes. Astonishing. Mind blowing. As anciently a trial by joust, a trial by art. Me suddenly standing there ranked nothing but a field infantry medical aide senior private. Me perhaps a threat to them? Was that it? And would that be so astonishing really? Or did they want to understand really?

Please understand: I was political already. I was from the racist Jim Crow segregated South and was of the low White working class of an industrial city there. And I was one of the many many White American youth who turned against the American Permanent Race War, with its propagandist lies and lies and lies and lies and lies and lies and lies, in our generation.

And furthermore, that was 1969, a few short years since Dr. King was killed. And when there had come to my ears the announcement that Dr. King, the Minister Of Peace, was also killed, I had rushed to a nearby store that carried paperbacks, counted out some money from my empty pockets, stepped in past the book's cover, and began devouring the Autobiography Of Malcolm X, which I guessed to be a trusty source of background information in larger quantity than I'd seen. And of course my heart there opened to the human story that it told.

So, standing on that stage – that auditorium, that trial by art – a few years later, there came to mind for me the simple strategy that Malcolm X, a self-taught great orator, recommended for speaking to a lost and grieving people. Through his book he told me to do this: You add 2 plus 2 and you say “4”.

I walked to sit informally on the front edge of the stage, a dance-like movement learned in high school class, and I began to talk about the duties of a soldier.

I told them I believe a soldier does not owe any duty at all to his country's government. In the vault of curiosity that left, I said I think a soldier owes all loyalty to his country's people. I explained this – slowly, enunciating clearly for they came from many ethnic groups and spoke with many accents – saying when there is a war I have to ask myself, is this war doing good for the people whom I visualize at home, the family and friends I know, all of their family and friends, and all of theirs? (A pause to let this expansive view come real enough to me and them, for me to see, by means of our magic field, that they were seeing it.) And then I spoke what they had decided, the obvious, that in the current war that question must be answered “no”.

And what moved me was their doubt and their confusion. And the danger, all too real, that in confusion they would resort to fear, and through fear to obedience, and through obedience remain enslaved to the enormous cruelties we all knew too well.

*[ Stage direction: The storyteller used the **next three words** as lightweight Shakespearean comedy relief: He spoke them with declamatory finger raised, then (finger still up) peeked here and there among the audience to spy if anyone had any notion of that third word and none did. None laughed, praise Gd, but mood was lightened and the balance of the script heard. ]*

In summation: Tagore

– Rabindranath Tagore the great Hindu art philosopher –  
he pointed out that a beginning artist, to start serious work, must discover this: Your ideal of art.

It's not that you need to find yourself first, that's ridiculous. It's ignorant. Who thought that up? Know yourself first to start your true artistic work? Well, we know who said it best: Shakespeare in Hamlet: “This above all things, to thine own self be true,” and he put that on the lips of a lying thief! Polonius in Hamlet, a villainous self-deceiving self-serving lying thief, in a play that is a tragic carnival of thieves, that's where Shakespeare put that. Find yourself so you can start your work? I'm now sixty-eight and I am now struggling with a poem, a long poem, struggling to discover what or who I am. If I'd waited for that, I'd never have begun.

Nor is it the just as stupid advice “Find your own voice” and yet beginners hear that everywhere. Find your own voice? What would we say of an actor who insisted on speaking their own voice? Or a singer who did that? Or, actually, in any art?

So here's what we must do when we are striving to start doing good art work: Discover what is most horrible, then from that, what is most beautiful. And you find those things in this world, where we are, by the reactions of your soul and heart in this world here. So then you ask: What can art work possibly do to aid the beautiful? And so you have begun.

And so it was for me: In the magical communion wrought by art, I felt the tragic fear and confusion of my fellow human beings, the tragic fear and confusion which leads us to obedience in evil. They brought that murky substance to me purified by their sincere attendance on my words and my example so I could see it clear at last. And by seeing what was horrible – their fear and dire confusion which led them to acceptance and obedience in enormous evils – the essential factor of all the greatest horrors that I knew there in that world – by seeing that so clear, I saw a shining hope for antidote which might perhaps perhaps perhaps resolve and clear that murky twilight of the human heart. In seeing them, in their tragedy, as they let me see them, I saw a hope too. I saw the thing of greatest beauty.

So now, ever since,  
in every kind of art work that I've taken in my hands,  
I have tried to serve that beauty.

I have tried to state that hope and prove that it is true,  
that fact, if it is true,  
which lifts our dire confusion when we  
fearfully obey in evil.

And that lovely fact, if it is true,  
or if we make it true, is this:  
That actually, we are free.

***Closing Note:***

**> Major Fact:** *The behavior of U.S. ordinary soldiers in Viet Nam vis a vis U.S. officers as herein described did happen as described. Research suggestion 1: Watch a 1970 report by TV journalist John Pilger, "Vietnam: The Quiet Mutiny". Research suggestion 2: Google the word "Fragging". Research suggestion 3: Google the phrase "Mutiny in Vietnam".*

**> Also:** *The "magic" psychic communion between an audience and performer is definitely real. I will not here venture any guess as to the physics or metaphysics of this fact but if you think it false here's my research suggestion: Find any artist in any art who performs before audiences a lot and ask them their opinion.*