

Two photographs

I will always remember the day I saw the two photographs. Wednesday 13 November 1996. In one of those simple, yet graced, encounters that an ordinary day can bring, I was flicking through the Sydney Morning Herald when two pictures on page 12 absorbed my attention. One was all too familiar. A nine year old Vietnamese girl running naked along a war torn road, screaming as napalm seared her body. It is one of those war-time images that perpetually haunt the public arena. Vietnam 1972. No explanation required.

For me, this image has always touched a nerve. The first time I laid eyes on it was in 1972 when I, too, was a nine year old girl. I remember as a child looking at the photo for a long time, identifying with the other child's age and gender, and being profoundly affected by the contrast in our lives. Here was I, living in the USA in the age of American Pie, and there was she in Vietnam enduring a nightmare of horrific proportions.

Time moved on, and I had always assumed the child in the photo had died in the war; one of countless casualties, forgotten except for the click of a journalist's camera. What a joyous revelation on that day in 1996 to discover a second newspaper photograph of a smiling 33 year old Vietnamese woman that told a different story. According to the accompanying

article, the Vietnamese girl, Kim Phuc, survived the war and now, after years of surgery and emotional healing, lives in Canada with her husband and son. The article told how, in a dramatic public gesture of forgiveness and reconciliation, Kim had traveled to Washington DC to lay a wreath at the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial. In her address to a crowd of several thousand people she spoke words of forgiveness, peace and her faith in God who 'saved my life and gave me faith and hope.'

'Even if I could talk face to face with the pilot who dropped the bombs, I would tell him: We cannot change history, but we should try to do good things for the present and the future to promote peace,' Kim Phuc was reported as saying.

I recall, on that day in 1996, looking at the two photos for a long time: the terrified nine year old girl and the smiling 33 year old woman. One an image of anguish, the other of peace. The two images stay with me as a testimony to Christian hope. That the violence inflicted on an innocent child-victim can be transformed into a beacon of peace for the international community is a sure sign of that mysterious process by which our world is gradually being 'enfolded' into God.

The two photos came to mind again this week as I was reading a report on the plight of displaced persons in Dafur. Jane Williamson of Jesuit Refugee Service Australia writes: 'It's a

terribly dark situation and I have to keep reminding myself that there have been other countries, other situations elsewhere, like Cambodia, that have seemed this black at some point in history and have recovered.' (Link 3:2 Autumn 2007)

Yes, when the night is darkest, it is tempting to forget. Which is why individuals like Kim Phuc are light to us, reminding us that God's loving presence abides with us always, even through the most grievous chapters of human history. •

