

**From <http://www.regrettoinform.org/pages/aboutthedirector.shtml>**

**Barbara Sonneborn  
Producer/Director/Writer**

Barbara Sonneborn has worked as a photographer, sculptor, and set designer for 26 years. She designed and directed all visual aspects of Jean-Claude Van Itallie's play Bag Lady, which was produced in New York at the Theater for the New City. She photographed and directed the use of projections in The White Buffalo, produced at Princeton University. Her artwork has been exhibited in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and can be seen in New Directions in Photography, a book edited by then New York Metropolitan Museum of Art curator of photography Weston Naef. Her photographs are also included in many private and museum collections. Her awards include a 1998 Rockefeller Film/Video/Multi-Media Fellowship, the International Documentary Association Award for Distinguished Achievement/ABC News VideoSource Award and two National Endowment for the Arts grants. Regret to Inform is Sonneborn's first film. Her future plans include writing a book about the widows of the Vietnam war, and further films that explore the psychological and societal impact of war.

## ***Regret to Inform***

### ***A History of the Film***

In 1968, on her 24th birthday, Barbara Sonneborn received word that her husband, Jeff, had been killed in Vietnam while trying to rescue his wounded radio operator. "We regret to inform," the telegram began. Twenty years later, Sonneborn, a photographer and visual artist, embarked on a journey in search of the truth about war and its legacy, eloquently chronicled in her debut documentary, *Regret To Inform*. Framed as an odyssey through Vietnam to Que Son, where Jeff was killed, Sonneborn weaves together the stories of widows from both sides of the American-Vietnam war. The result is a profoundly moving examination of the impact of war over time.

P.O.V., PBS's award-winning showcase of independent non-fiction films, presents the national broadcast premiere of *Regret To Inform* on Monday, January 24, 2000 at 10:00 PM ET (check local listings), co-presented by the National Asian American Telecommunications Association (NAATA). The film received an Academy Award Nomination for Best Documentary Feature and won the Best Director and Best Cinematography awards at the 1999 Sundance Film Festival for documentary.

In 1988, at the time Sonneborn began this project, she had met only one other American war widow. Despite the growing number of support groups that existed for Vietnam veterans, she was unaware of any support network for the wives left behind. Propelled by her desire to find other women who had experienced the same loss on both sides of the war, and to understand what could be learned through their stories, Sonneborn put together a production team in 1990 and sent out several thousand letters searching for widows in the U.S. With the help of many Vietnam war veterans, the press, and other survivors as she found them, Sonneborn talked with more than 200 American widows during pre-production for the film.

In 1992, Sonneborn traveled to Vietnam, accompanied by Xuan Ngoc Nguyen, a South Vietnamese woman whose first husband was killed in the war fighting for South Vietnam. Xuan later married an American soldier and moved to the U.S. in the early 70's. She agreed to serve as Sonneborn's translator on the trip and to share her own story in the film. On their journey through Vietnam — where more than 3 million people were killed during the war — they found women everywhere they went who wanted to be interviewed. "They were quite surprised and very moved that an American widow wanted to hear their stories," Sonneborn recalls.

In *Regret To Inform*, women from all sides speak out, putting a human face on the all-too-often overlooked casualties of armed conflict: the survivors. Intercut with beautiful scenes of the serene Vietnamese countryside and shocking archival footage from the war years, the women's voices form an eloquent international chorus calling for peace. *Regret To Inform* is a powerful meditation on loss and the devastation of all war on a personal level. It is a love story, and a deeply moving exploration of the healing power of compassion.

*Thanks to P.O.V.*

## *Stories from the Widows of War Living Memorial*

www.warwidows.org

### **Wahida, Afghanistan**

When she was still a young girl, Wahida's homeland Afghanistan was invaded by Russia. Her village was bombed and destroyed, and her family was forced to immigrate to Iran.

In Iran she joined the Afghan resistance, and met her husband who was also in the resistance. "Living with him, I thought I had said farewell to pain and sorrow," Wahida explains. "Still, he was away most of the time fighting in the fronts. I would ask him, for how long do you plan to keep going to the fronts? He would answer, for as long as my country and my people are not free."

Wahida had just given birth to her third child when she learned of her husband's death. She could barely survive, and was kept alive only with the memory of his resilient spirit.

"I could hardly read or write before my marriage, but afterwards, my husband always encouraged me," Wahida says. "This was his dream for me. He said that the liberation of women is in their own hands, and there is no other way than their own struggle to gain rights. After his death I felt lonely, but his words were in my head, and I continued learning to read and write with even more determination."

Now living on a refugee camp in Pakistan, Wahida has joined the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA). Her struggle to help the Afghan women who continue to suffer under the oppressive Taliban regime helps her through her own grief. In addition to attending RAWA events, she is raising her three children and teaching other refugee women in the camp to read and write.

But Wahida's love and longing for her husband is always with her. "I am one of hundreds of thousands of suffering Afghan women who wait until the end of their lives to see their husbands again," she says. "It seems I have merely heard that he has been killed — I can't accept that I have lost him."

### **Erna McKinney, Sierra Leone and Oakland, CA**

After suffering through the destruction of two wars, Erna McKinney believes she has been silent long enough. Erna left her homeland, Sierra Leone, in 1964 to attend college in Ohio. "The last thing I thought was that I'd marry an American," she laughs. "I intended to go back home."

But she fell in love with Clemmie McKinney after they met at a college mixer, and they married in 1967. Three years later, Clemmie had to leave Erna and their two young daughters behind to serve in Vietnam.

One April day in 1972, Erna, who was eight months pregnant with her third daughter at the time, was cooking dinner in the kitchen when five military officers approached her house. "I saw them and immediately knew. I had a knife in my hand because I was cooking, and one immediately came over and took the knife out of my hand," she says. "Before they could even tell me what had happened, I had passed out." She did not receive her husband's remains until 1983.

After her daughters had grown, Erna returned to Sierra Leone in the hopes of rebuilding her country which had been ravaged by civil war. Instead she found herself in the middle of the conflict.

Shortly after moving back to Sierra Leone, Erna and her sister heard over the radio that rebels were entering their city. As Erna picked up the phone to check on her relatives, a bullet shot through her living room. Rebels broke down the front door and threatened to kill them. They began to raid her home and take anything they could. “My sister could not stop crying, but I knew I had to be calm,” Erna says. “So I kept talking to them and getting them bags to carry my belongings.”

Erna could hardly bear it when one of the men spotted her husband’s military jacket and flight suit, which she had always kept with her. “I watched him take the suit with all my husband’s decorations. That was my husband’s life, and I watched them take it away,” she says. “It’s hard to even explain how I felt.” Just after Erna and her sister escaped, their home was bombed.

Erna, 62, has since returned to the U.S. and lives with her daughters in Oakland, CA. She was eager to add her own story about the impact of war when she learned of the Living Memorial. “I am so passionate about this, and I never had an outlet before,” she says. “Once a person is dead, that’s it. The way that people in this day and age are using wars to take care of conflict, it doesn’t make any sense.”

### **Grace Umutesi, Rwanda and Atlanta, CA**

It is painful for Grace to even speak about the Rwandan civil war which tore her life apart. “Please don’t ask me, which part did you take. That kills my heart, it kills me somewhere,” she says. “We’re Rwandan, isn’t that enough? I was born in my country. My father never talked about the Hutus or the Tutsis.”

Rwanda’s civil war claimed the lives of Grace’s husband, Martin Nkurunziza, and her eldest daughter in 1994. She does not even know how or when her husband was killed; she just knows that he is gone.

Grace fled with her other four children to the U.S. after her husband was killed, and she has now settled in Atlanta, GA. But the pain of leaving her country has added to her grief: “You go outside your country. You are homeless. You start your life again. I am forty years old. I have to learn a new language and survive.”

Her only option now, she feels, is to speak out against the horror of war. “Let me tell you this, to lose your husband — I am not the first, not the last,” she says. “But to lose your husband in the condition of war, that is painful.... My message is: be strong, teach your children to grow in peace, forgive.”

### **Mai Vang, Laos and Minneapolis, MN**

Mai married Lia Lor when she was 15 years old. Only three months later, he left to fight in the war. “He had to go — he was ordered by someone,” Mai explains. “He would go for three months and then come back.” Mai and Lia had five children when he was killed in 1972, after 12 years of fighting.

It is particularly painful for Mai to think about how her husband died. He was shot in the leg and unable to walk, and no one would help him to a hospital. By the time troops came back to rescue him, the area had been taken over and they gave him up for dead. "I was so worried about him and very sad," she says. "I was sick for a month and then I waited and waited but he never showed up. Nobody went and rescued him."

Mai fled with her children to the U.S., where she is now living in Minneapolis, MN, and she found the courage to raise her children in a strange new country: "I have twenty grandkids. Even though I was a single mom I was able to raise five sons to be independent. One is a doctor and one is a police officer. I am a very strong woman."

But her strength does not ease her grief, which persists to this day. "When I see the news or hear from other people about wars, my heart drops down," Mai says. "I feel so sad for the people in that country that probably have to suffer the same."

### **Nancy Le, South Vietnam and San Jose, CA**

As the devastating war was finally coming to an end in Vietnam, Nancy married Ngai Vinx Le. The first few years of their married life were very happy, until they ran into trouble with the new Communist government.

Ngai, who had studied computers, was sent to a work camp in 1975. "The camps were far away in the forests, in the jungle," Nancy explains. "The people had to get up early and work hard in groups. They got soup of water and flour. They were killed if they went against the authorities." Two years later, Nancy was able to collect enough money to get her husband freed from the camp.

But they continued to be followed by the police and their company was taken over by the government, so Nancy and Ngai decided to leave Vietnam in fear for their lives. Her husband and her two oldest sons left first, as there was not enough room on the small boats for them to all go. Six months later Nancy and her two younger sons followed.

"I was very scared. Our boat looked like a small egg in the water. We only saw water and sky around us," she says. "It rained and the waves got very big. We ran out of food... After nine days, we landed on a beach in Malaysia."

Although she tried desperately to find them, Nancy never heard anything about her husband and two oldest children ever again. She and her younger sons moved to the U.S. years later, where Nancy now lives in San Jose, CA.

"When I think back, I feel very lonely," Nancy says. "I lost my country, as well as my husband and two sons. I miss everything."

## *Widows of the Vietnamese-American War*

### *Season of Remembrance*

#### **Barbara Sonneborn, Berkeley, California**

On the morning of my 24<sup>th</sup> birthday I woke up to a knock on my door. “It’s the United States Army,” said the voice outside. I instantly knew what had happened. I didn’t want to open the door. For a moment, I thought if I somehow slipped out the back none of it would be true.

When I was told that my husband Jeff was missing in action in Vietnam, I just collapsed, screaming, and started pounding my fists on the wall. Late the next afternoon, the man in the army uniform returned to tell us that Jeff had been killed.

Jeff and I were childhood sweethearts since we were 14. We grew up together, shaped each other, and were inseparable. He was an all-American kind of kid, well-liked, the leader type with lots of friends. We married right out of college.

Jeff had signed up for advanced ROTC in college knowing that the military would help him with his education. He wanted to go to law school. For a kid from a family without a lot of money, it seemed like a great deal. In 1963, most Americans had barely heard of Vietnam.

Once he was committed, Jeff felt that he had to go to Vietnam if he was called to do so. He felt if he didn’t go, someone else would have to go in his place, and that he had made a commitment that he had to fulfill. His father had been in World War II, and he grew up in the generation of John Wayne. Jeff believed you did what your country asked of you — “my country right or wrong.” He left for Vietnam on January 1, 1968.

Jeff’s letters from Vietnam were full of mundane details, love and longing — “I can’t imagine living a whole year without you” — sharp fear and then making light of that fear. He would tell me how they would go into villages and search for ammunition and rice. I’ll never know what that involved. In the last letter I received from him, he sounded very disgusted with the world. His letters were filled with loneliness, but he really felt that he was going to get through it. Waiting at home was like having my finger in an electrical outlet, but I was at that age where you think nothing can happen to you.

I don’t have a lot of memory of that time after I learned that he was killed. I just remember a lot of darkness and not being able to eat or sleep. I couldn’t understand how the world could go on. At 24, it’s very unnatural to be a widow.

For years I worked through my anger towards the war and my sadness at losing Jeff. Twenty years later, I felt that I was at a good stage in my life. I was remarried to a wonderful man who is incredibly supportive. I became a visual artist and photographer. But on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Jeff’s departure for Vietnam, January 1, 1988, I woke up and started to write him a letter about how his death and the war had affected me. The letter became the narrative for *Regret to Inform*, my first film.

The film follows my journey through Vietnam to Que Son, where Jeff was killed, weaving together stories of widows from all sides of the American-Vietnam war; but it's about my larger odyssey to learn the truth about war and its legacy. It is a film about all war — everywhere.

I had only met one other widow from the war before I began this project; and I realized that most of what we know about war is from the point of view of men. When I went to Vietnam I already knew that war itself was the enemy, not the Vietnamese people. I knew that when Jeff was killed. Meeting other widows in Vietnam, seeing the suffering where the war had actually happened, had a profound effect on me. I saw that widows, veterans and civilians were all victims of war. I felt the anger I had stored for years against my government and the war melting away as I realized that by continuing to be angry, I was continuing the war.

We are all victims of war. In war, whether you are the person lying face down in your own blood or whether you are the one standing above that body with a gun, you are both victims of war.

*Regret to Inform* is about much more than Vietnam; it's a metaphor for all wars. It's about the healing we experience by recognizing our common suffering, our common humanity. I want my film and my work to teach others about the terrible legacy of war. By sharing stories of compassion and understanding, I believe we can transcend the bitter anger left by war. Above all, I hope, in some way, to prevent war in the future.

### **Nguyen Thi My Hien, Hanoi, Vietnam**

My husband was a teacher, not a soldier. He volunteered to teach students in a district in Central Vietnam that was in the area of fiercest fighting. When he left in October of 1972, our son was only four months old. I was so worried because no one can predict what can happen in war. He told me that Vietnamese women don't cry when their husbands go away, but I didn't obey him and just rolled on the ground to cry. I was filled with the premonition that I wouldn't see him again. And thus the truth came.

I had first met my husband, Tran Dai Buu, while I was in high school. He helped me study to enter the Hanoi Medical School. He was tall, handsome, very active and very clever. Our life together, though, was too short. We were together only six months out of our two years of marriage, but we were very happy indeed.

I was listening to the radio when I heard that his district had been bombed. I later learned that a bomb had hit the shelter he was in, trapped him inside. When the planes left, people could hear my husband scream. But the debris was so heavy it took hours to reach him and he was already dead. And to think that as a doctor I have saved so many lives, but I could not save his.

I was very sad and lonely after his death. I had to complete my lectures in the university as well as take care of our eight month-old son. Since then, I try to hold my sadness in and not cry in front of others. Only I know my pain.

Now, 25 years after the war with America ended, I am 52 years old and the director of Thanh Xuan Peace Village, the only such village for handicapped children in northern Vietnam. In our village we take care of handicapped children, many who had been affected by Agent Orange. Every day I see the destruction of the war through the children we care for in the village.

My son has grown up and graduated from university. Though we are successful in our lives we miss my husband very much, especially when Tet and other holidays come and all the other families come together, but there are only the two of us.

War is going on all over the world, even if Americans are removed from it. Now that we are in this Season of Remembrance, my message to widows of war in Vietnam and across the world is to let the world have peace.

**Xuan Ngoc Nguyen, Portland, Oregon**

I was only 14 years old when my South Vietnamese village was burned to the ground. It was 1968, and my five year-old cousin was killed by a soldier in front of me. You can't comprehend the loss, you just try to go on.

I was forced to start working at a bar to support my family. Sometimes men would pay me to dance with them and sometimes I sleep with them for money. It was my only option. I had no education and selling goods at the market wasn't enough. It was something I had to do for my family, as many girls before me had to do.

At the bar I met my husband, Huynh Van Toan, because his friend was a drummer in the band. When I didn't have to leave with a man at the end of the night, I would go with him for coffee. He was a very shy and gentle person. I liked him but he was out of my reach because of who I was and what I did. I finally was brave enough to tell him how I felt, and we decided to be together but had to keep it a secret from our families.

I was so worried when he left to fight in the war. He was a peaceful man who studied Buddhism and didn't want to fight, but he had no choice. For him to be forced to take a gun and shoot someone was not his nature, but that's the nature of war. I was pregnant when I learned he had died. I felt numb inside and wanted to cry, but tears could not come out. I could feel my baby kicking inside me, so I could not think of my own loss and sadness. I had to bury it and go on. I'm not the only one who lost the one I loved: the whole country was suffering.

When his family had ceremony for his death, I carried my son back and forth in front of his home but knew I couldn't enter because they disapproved of me. I had to work the streets to support my child and that's where I met my second husband, an American soldier. He was nice and kind enough to take care of me and my child, which many American men promised South Vietnamese women but did not do. I had my second son with him.

When it clear the North going to win the war, my family urged me to leave Vietnam because they feared I would be punished for having an American child. I moved to the United States to be with my second husband at a military base in Illinois, but was forced to leave my oldest son in Vietnam because of visa restrictions. He only two years old, and I did not see him again until he eleven and was allowed to come live with me. The pain of leaving him was unbearable.

Being in the United States was very lonely. In Vietnam, my neighbors' doors were always open. But in my new home, I barely spoke enough English to have a conversation. It was only me and my

second child, who became my best friend and my companion. He and the thought of my first son back in Vietnam were all that kept me alive.

My second husband suffered from the war as well. He couldn't believe that the Americans had lost and talked about how they should have bombed Vietnam more. That was his view, because he from the military, but I the one who had watched the bombs fall on my home. I knew we didn't agree and I would try to just nod my head when he talked to me, but we grew apart and divorced years later.

I am 46 years old now, and I have three grown sons. When I was asked to return to Vietnam as a translator for the film, I was very scared of how the widows from North Vietnam would receive me because I from the South and had married an American. But in talking to the widows, I saw that we are the same. We both lost a loved one and our country was destroyed. We are not enemies; war is our enemy. The best gift was to be able to talk to the widows in the North, woman to woman. We suffered the same suffering.

### **Lula Bia, Window Rock, Arizona**

I fell in love with my husband Michael as we rode the school bus together each day. I was in 10<sup>th</sup> grade and he was in 12<sup>th</sup>, and we soon became high school sweethearts. He was a bull rider in the rodeo, and I would follow him around to the different rodeos. I was so proud of him.

Michael was drafted just after he graduated from high school. He was a member of the Navajo nation, as I am, and he was eager to serve his country. I was 19 years old when we decided to marry. He was home on leave, and we only had three weeks together after our marriage before he had to return to service.

Michael called me the night before he left for Vietnam, and we talked for five hours. He kept trying to convince me that it would be okay, and that he would be fine. But he didn't know how bad it was over there, and neither did I. We were so young and we thought we were going to have the rest of our lives together.

He had been in Vietnam for less than three months when I received word that he had been killed. I was six months pregnant at the time.

Michael's remains were so unrecognizable that they were sent home in a plastic bag, and he was identified only by his dental records. Because I didn't get to see him for a last time, I didn't believe it was really him. I couldn't believe that he was really gone and I went on hoping that they had made a mistake. Sometimes I still have that hope.

My son was born in September of 1968. Mike had been so excited to be a father, and I named my son after him. My son was the only thing that got me through Mike's death, because I still had a part of him.

I went back to school and became a teacher. I teach the first grade and have been a teacher for over 20 years. I'm 50 years old now, but I've never remarried because I know no one could take care of me and my son the way Michael would have.

I never understood why my husband had to be sent to a land he had never seen, and why he didn't come back. I had so much anger and pain. But when I first talked to other widows from the war, it was such a relief to know I wasn't the only one in pain. It's hard for me to talk about losing my husband, but I want others to be aware of how many lives war destroys. I want people to understand how we, as widows and survivors, felt about being left without our loved ones. I want the children I teach to have respect for all people, of all nationalities, so we won't suffer like this again.

**Norma Banks, Vallejo, California**

Over 20 years after the war had ended, I became another of its many widows. I had first met my husband Michael in 1969, when he had just returned from Vietnam after serving there in the war. I never knew him before the war, but I knew that it had made him a different person.

I learned from him that you can't just go over there, fight the war, and come home to return to normal. The real battle starts once the war is over. I wanted to know what had happened to him over there. He would tell me that there is no glamour in war. He was not proud of it.

Michael kept trying to find a way to consciously live with what had happened in Vietnam. In order to survive there, he had to keep killing. He didn't do it for love of his country, because he didn't feel that there was a threat to our safety. But he had to keep killing just to survive. We did a lot of crying together about it. War creates so many scars, and it's not just the soldiers who are affected. Our life together with our two daughters was filled with joy, but the war was a constant source of pain for him.

I never imagined that his battle wasn't over, but Michael always felt that something wasn't right with him. In 1980, he started to get skin rashes and constantly felt sick, but no doctors could diagnose him. I watched his pain worsen for several years until ultimately his body itched everywhere 24 hours a day. It was slow and progressive. I didn't realize at the time that I was watching him die every day.

Eventually, the doctors determined that Michael had skin cancer, cancer of the lymph nodes and an enlarged heart as a result of his exposure to chemicals. Back then they didn't even say Agent Orange. Michael knew far before we did that he was going to die. My daughters and I always had hope even after all we had experienced. But in 1989, the day after his 44<sup>th</sup> birthday, Michael died of cardiac arrest due to his exposure to Agent Orange.

Every day is a struggle for me, and sometimes I still can't believe it. But I think about how much we laughed together and what a wonderful father and husband he was. He was an artist and went back to school to finish college, I was so proud of him and I just didn't want him to be in pain anymore.

As much as I want to bury my own grief, I think the truth needs to be told. The effects of this war will be going on for generations. Our men fought the war, and they were the soldiers. But the widows, we are the warriors. No one understands what we have to go through long after the war is over.

New York Times, June 25, 1999 Film Review:  
(from <http://www.nytimes.com/library/film/062599regret-film-review.html>)

## **'Regret to Inform': Odyssey of Loss and War in a Land of Languid Beauty**

**By STEPHEN HOLDEN**

On 1968, on her 24th birthday, Barbara Sonneborn, the director, writer and producer of the unforgettable documentary film "Regret to Inform," learned that her husband and high-school sweetheart, Jeff Gurvitz, had been killed in Vietnam. "We regret to inform" began the telegram. Eight weeks earlier, her husband had left the United States to fight in Southeast Asia. He died during a mortar attack at Khe Sanh while attempting to rescue his radio operator.

Although Ms. Sonneborn remarried happily and developed a successful career as a photographer and visual artist, she remained haunted by strong residual feelings about the war. And on the 20th anniversary of her husband's death, she resolved to travel to the place where he had died. Her trip, begun in 1992, forms the spine of "Regret to Inform," an eloquent, subdued howl of grief that is so exquisitely filmed, edited and scored it is the documentary equivalent of a tragic epic poem. Every word and image quivers with an anguished resonance.

The film, which opens today at the Art Greenwich Theater, is only 72 minutes long, but its blend of heartbreaking interviews, devastating archival combat film, hushed music (by Todd Boekelheide) that hovers evocatively between Asian and Western modes, and cinematography that brings out the brilliant electric greens of the misty Vietnamese landscape, achieves an extraordinary synergy.

A journey that begins as a personal quest widens into an inquiry in which American and Vietnamese war widows, many of them fighting back tears, dredge up their most excruciating memories of war and loss. One of those is Xuan Ngoc Evans, Ms. Sonneborn's translator, who recalls the bombing of her village in South Vietnam when she was 14 and seeing her 5-year-old cousin shot to death by an American soldier when the child ducked out of their hiding place to search for water.

Abandoning wounded friends and relatives, Xuan fled her village and survived for a time by prostituting herself to American soldiers. At one point she contemplated suicide. As she spews out these bitter memories, her mouth twists down, and her voice begins to break. Even now, she says, she has bad days when she can barely bring herself to speak. "But in my heart, I know I'm a good person," she adds. "I wouldn't have done what I did if I had had another choice."

Every documentary film has an agenda, and the interviews that make up the bulk of "Regret to Inform" add up to a damning indictment of war in general and in particular the Vietnam War, which it portrays (without actually coming out and saying it) as a disastrous miscalculation. As much as the wives of American soldiers suffered, the movie suggests, the Vietnamese soldiers' wives whose communities and homes were destroyed along with their husbands suffered far worse.

The film goes out of its way to remind us that American casualties didn't end with a cease-fire. One woman stoically describes in detail her husband's seven-year decline and eventual death from chemical poisoning (probably Agent Orange), after returning from combat. Her remembrance is accompanied by vintage news clips of the loading and spraying of chemical defoliants from the air.

More than one American war widow recalls the eerie experience of receiving a letter from her husband after he was killed. It wasn't until 20 years after her husband recorded it that Ms. Sonneborn could bring herself to play a tape that arrived in the mail shortly after the news of his death. In one chilling excerpt, he reflects, "I feel as if I were a bystander at my own life, calmly watching myself do things I never expected or desired to do." What exactly those things are remains unsaid.

When Ms. Sonneborn reaches Vietnam, her guide around Khe Sanh is a former Vietcong leader who describes how she and other wives of North Vietnamese soldiers disguised themselves as maids to spy and gather information on American troop movements. The woman and her family were eventually arrested and tortured by the South Vietnamese. Near the end of the film, she and Ms. Sonneborn perform a healing ritual and ceremonial offering to the war dead.

Visiting the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, Ms. Sonneborn encounters a woman in tears because her husband's name is not listed. After returning home safely, the woman explained, he went into the garage one day and shot himself. The note he left read, "I love you, sweetheart, but I just can't take the flashbacks anymore." There is much more like this, most of it recalled in the hushed voices of those deeply acquainted with grief.

"Regret to Inform" is in the odd position of having been released almost simultaneously with another three-word, five-syllable Vietnam documentary, "Return With Honor." The two films might be described as the yin and yang of Vietnam War sentiment.

Where "Return With Honor" is an overtly patriotic film celebrating the heroic endurance of American pilots captured and imprisoned by the North Vietnamese, Ms. Sonneborn's film takes a longer and deeper view. While recognizing that war has its heroic aspect -- witness the fortitude and resilience of the widows -- her film also implies that the terrible price of that nobility is one that nobody should have to pay.

Philadelphia Inquirer, July 22-29, 1999 Film Review  
(from <http://www.citypaper.net/articles/072299/ae.mov.vietnam.shtml>)

## War Is the Enemy

*A Vietnam documentary unlike any other tells the stories of the women left behind.*  
by *Sam Adams*

February 29, 1968 is not a date familiar to historians of the Vietnam War, but it is one Barbara Sonneborn will never forget. On that day, over 30 years ago, her husband, Jeff Gurvitz, died in an army hospital after being wounded by a Viet Cong mortar at Khe Sanh. Speaking about it now, so long after the fact, her voice is calm but hard, the anger and sorrow of three decades compressed into a tone that accepts but does not forgive the circumstances of his death. In the course of an hour-long conversation, she refers to Jeff's death several times and the language is always the same; without euphemism or retreat, she says simply: "That's the day my husband was killed."

Now 56, Sonneborn (who has since remarried) was 24 when she watched her husband go off to war, and when she learned that he would not be coming back. For years, she dealt with her pain and outrage through artwork, photographic installations, metalwork sculptures and the like, settling in the Bay Area where she lives today. But as she tells the story now, she woke one morning in 1988 "knowing I had to do something about Jeff's death, something that would reach the widest possible audience."

That something turned out to be *Regret to Inform*, Sonneborn's elegiac look at the carnage inflicted by war on those who are not soldiers, but combatants nonetheless. In the 20 years since Jeff's death, Sonneborn says she had met only one Vietnamese war widow, but she began to seek them out to find if other women's experiences matched her own. And she determined that she would go to Vietnam, to the place where Jeff was killed, and interview women there, some of whom had lost whole families to the war.

Sonneborn says the decision to interview Vietnamese women was made at the very beginning, and she presents it matter-of-factly, as if there were no other way to tell the story. But it's worth pointing out that for all the American movies made about the Vietnam War, none has so unapologetically and unflinchingly dared to present the Vietnamese as casualties and not just aggressors.

"We're a very ethnocentric and Eurocentric country," Sonneborn explains. "We live safely within our own borders and have not seen war on our own land in anybody's lifetime. I wanted to look at how war affected human beings, to go outside the arena of politics, and not say this side, that side, the other side. Let's look at war: War is the enemy."

In one of the film's most gripping images, Sonneborn shows the crude drawing she received explaining her husband's injuries. An outline of a man's body with cross-hatching to represent the torn flesh and shattered bone, the figure chillingly suggests both the extent of his wounds and their commonplace nature. In essence, the movie audience receives the information the way Sonneborn did so many years ago, forcing them to ask, "What does it look like when someone you love is killed by a mortar? Are you willing to send your child to war, are you willing to send your husband?"

Or would you stand in his way with your own body if you *really* knew what it was like?"

That last question is particularly poignant, since it contains the seeds of so many war widows' regrets. One subject interviewed in the film relates how she had planned to smash her husband's hand with a hammer, thus preventing him from actively serving. Similarly, says Sonneborn, "I suffered for many years after Jeff was killed with [the thought] 'Why didn't I stop him?' Just before he left, we were driving in our little Volkswagen, and I thought, just for a second, of turning the wheel and hitting a parked car. I didn't want to get killed, but I wanted to stop him from going. But I was 24 years old, and he was adamant, and I didn't know then what I know now."

In addition to those who lost family on both sides during the war, Sonneborn includes interviews with a woman whose husband killed himself because of postwar flashbacks, and one whose husband died of cancers probably related to Agent Orange. In including their stories with the others, *Regret to Inform* echoes a crucial sentiment voiced by one widow. The war isn't over when the fighting stops, she says. "It starts when it ends."

In moments like that, it is clear that Sonneborn intends *Regret to Inform* as an elegy for all war dead, and a warning to those who would enter such conflicts in the future. "The film," she explains, "is about anywhere that people are tearing at each other's throats. The notion that there have always been wars and will always be wars is a mythology that we subscribe to. Our killing power is so enormous now that if we don't change our mythology we may well destroy ourselves. We haven't grown in sophistication in relation to our technology."

In the end, *Regret to Inform* is about the cost of war, not just in human life, but on the soul, and the soul of a nation. In the film, Sonneborn admits, "What haunts me most is not just that Jeff died here [in Vietnam], but that he had to be a part of this at all." In an audio tape recording she received after Jeff's death — one she couldn't listen to for decades — Sonneborn's husband confesses, "I feel as if I were a bystander at my own life, calmly watching myself do things I never expected or desired to do." One widow puts it even more succinctly: "Is my husband a hero, or is he a murderer?"

"Both sides were brutal," Sonneborn concludes. "War is a monster. The young men who were blamed for what they did in Vietnam — they were sent over to do a job, and the job was to kill as many people as they could. Vietnam vets have said to me that the question that makes them the angriest is when people ask them, did they kill anybody. What do we think they were there to do? They didn't go to go swimming at China Beach."

The controlled anger swelling in her voice, Sonneborn reflects, "Jeff was killed in a war that our leaders have since told us was a terrible mistake. People come up to me at every screening and say, 'This war tore our country apart and we have never recovered.' I think that is profoundly true."

**Regret to Inform**, an Artistic License Films release, opens Friday, July 23, at Ritz Bourse.

From <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/examiner/archive/2000/01/12/STYLE9479.dtl>

## **Widows of war**

By Edvins Beitiks - Wednesday, January 12, 2000

She sat in the restaurant, surrounded by people talking in muddled tones about the stock market or the new millennium flu, and touched her left side, briefly. That's where the shrapnel went in, she said.

"I was OK. It went between two ribs, and I just picked it out," said Xun Ngoc Nguyn, who was in San Francisco as part of a five-city tour in support of widows of the Vietnam War. "But my friend was wounded bad. I knew she was going to die."

The attack on the marketplace in Saigon's Chu Lon district came in the summer of 1968, when Xun was 14. Before the grenades were thrown and gunfire broke out, Xun and her friend had gathered enough food for both of them, but as her friend lay dying, Xun hoarded both shares.

"I have to eat," she said. "But I feel guilty, to this day. . . . I never told my mother, because she had taught me about Buddha, about sharing, about compassion. I knew it was wrong to let a friend die on an empty stomach. I knew it was wrong to do, but I did it."

That same year, Xun slipped into prostitution, wanting to help her mother support a family of seven. "I was 14 1/2 then, wearing makeup, wearing a wig," she said, staring down at her bowl of soup. "I was wearing a push-up bra - the GIs think I've got big boobs. But when I get undressed they say, 'You're just a baby! I want my money back!'"

Everyone seemed so young in Vietnam then, said Xun. "I was a birthday gift for one soldier," she said, with an awkward smile. "I knew it was his birthday, and I should bring something, so I buy a little gold cross for him. I spend the night and . . . a few weeks later his friends come to me and say, 'Suzie' - they called me Suzie - 'hold out your hand.' And they put the cross I give him in my hand.

"He had been killed, you see. I was probably the last woman he made love to. . . . I don't even know if you can call it 'making love' . . . and I am holding this cross, and the first thing that comes to my mind is, 'I paid money for this. I can get my money back.'"

Xun held a hand to her face and said, "I have gone to the memorial in Washington, D.C., and looked for his name. But I cannot remember it. I cannot remember."

The purpose of the widows' tour is to make sure names are not forgotten, that faces are remembered, that the killing stops. "The Season of Remembrance Tour" will find U.S. and Vietnamese widows traveling to San Francisco, Los Angeles, Washington, Seattle and New York, topped by a New York ceremony in April marking the start of the online International Widows of War Memorial.

Berkeley director and co-producer Barbara Sonneborn, who was led to film the documentary "Regret to Inform" because of the death of her husband in Vietnam, is an organizer of the tour. "That's a war that really didn't need to have happened," Sonneborn said. "We live by myths, and the myth is that there have always been wars and there will always be wars. But there can be a new

mythology, a mandate for peace."

The widows tour is the first stage in spreading the word, said Sonneborn, who has launched an online memorial at [www.regrettoinform.org](http://www.regrettoinform.org), coupling it with a toll-free number (1-877-END-WARS). "Regret to Inform," nominated for an Academy Award last year, will show on PBS's "Point of View" series Jan. 24, and Sonneborn hopes classrooms nationwide pick up the message.

"I'm not alone here," she said Monday in a phone conversation. "It just seems that way because the world isn't used to listening to women. Listening to women is fairly new in this century, and listening to women on war is brand new. "

There have been other attempts to draw attention to the wrongs of the Vietnam War, to the cancer-causing legacy of Agent Orange and to the two dozen wars still raging around the planet, but Sonneborn is hoping people finally are ready to listen.

"Women can become a force for peace," she said. "How does something like the land-mines treaty happen, except that a bunch of people stand up and say, 'We won't have it!' What would happen if Lysistrata came true, if women refused sexual favors for their men going off to war? What would happen if women brought all their nonviolent arsenal to bear?"

Xun, who appears in "Regret to Inform," is one of the widows caught up in the aftermath of Vietnam. She lost her first husband, a Vietnamese marine, in the fighting, then married a U.S. Air Force advisor, coming to the United States in 1974 to start over - trying to pick up the pieces of a life shattered by memories of sleeping with men for money, taking food from a dying friend and watching as a 5-year-old cousin was cut down by bullets.

That also happened in 1968, said Xun, 46, a dress designer who lives in Portland. She had taken refuge in a bunker with her cousin when the boy complained of being thirsty and asked her to get some water - "I told him it was too dangerous and he said, 'I'll do it.' I followed behind him, and when he gets to the surface he falls down, trips on something, something crazy like that, and they start to shoot. This American who kills my cousin, he has the same look in his eye that I have. I feel guilty, you know, letting my cousin go outside, and he feels guilty, too . . . I know he doesn't mean it."

Xun twisted her fingers around a napkin. "I want to hug the soldier, to make him understand," she said. "Who is hurt? Is it my cousin? Is it me? Is it the soldier who pulls the trigger? All of us are victims."

Xun said, "I believe, for a long time, that I am a bad person . . . but now I realize war creates monsters. People do things they do not really want to do."

Her fingers still curled around the napkin, Xun remembered her first husband, Huynh Van Ton, killed when he was barely 18, two months before his son was born. "He was a very sweet man - the only man who loved me for who I am," she said. "A Vietnamese man is not supposed to love a prostitute because we go with foreigners, but he loved me.

"We have a private ceremony. We promise ourselves to each other, forever. I stopped dating

American GIs, but I feel bad that he is not my first, that I cannot give him that . . ."

Xun looked away and was silent a moment. She talked about going back to Vietnam and finding her former husband's grave defaced. "His picture on the tombstone was smashed in, his face smashed in," she said. "I don't understand why they do that. He is already dead. Do you want to kill him again?"

After a quarter of a century in the United States, Xun still feels drawn to her home country, but she shakes her head over the desecration of her husband's grave and other South Vietnamese cemeteries. "What will they say when their children ask about this?" Xun said of the Vietnamese. "Will they say nobody from the south was killed in the war? How are they going to answer that?"

Xun has had to answer uncomfortable questions about the war from her sons, 27, 26 and 22 - especially from the 22-year-old, who was born in this country and recently joined the Marines.

When he was sent to Beirut, Xun mailed him a copy of "Regret to Inform," and "he showed it to the men on board his ship. He tells them, 'This is my mother.' He loved it."

She doesn't know why her son joined the Marines after she had spoken so strongly against war, said Xun. Part of it was being young, part of it was wanting to travel, part of it was not wanting to be a burden to his single mom. "But in the back of his mind, he is thinking, 'This is where I came from,' " said Xun. "So I know it makes a difference, what I am doing. It does make a difference."

Even with all that's happened, Xun feels blessed. "There was a time, you know, when I never thought I would make it to 24. Drinking every day, smoking every day - I had to, so I can deal with what I am doing.

"When I come to the United States, I feel so lonely. Everyone has a photo of their families, their grandma, their grandpa. I don't. It's all gone, from the war. I try to commit suicide, twice. . . . I never, ever thought I would make it to 24.

"But here I am," said Xun, looking around the restaurant. "It is a gift, the best gift of all. Life."

She can't get used to things, even after all these years, said Xun, like going to the pharmacy to buy Tylenol and "five kinds of Band-Aids, all styles. Or driving around by myself in a minivan, just myself and my dog. I feel so selfish, so self-centered."

That's part of the reason she's going on the tour, Xun said. "It is my way of saying, 'I am here. Thank you.'

"I think sometimes about the GIs I was with, the Jimmy or Tom or Chuck or Charles, and I wonder, 'Did he make it? Did he die? Is he homeless, on the streets?' I wonder if they survived.

"And I want them to know I survived, too, that I have three beautiful sons and a good life.

"They called me Suzie," Xun said. "And I want them to know, 'Suzie made it.' "

From <http://www.warwidows.org/html/programs.html>

## **Distribution and Promotion of Regret to Inform**

**Regret to Inform** continues to screen at film festivals, community screenings, and schools and universities around the world. **Regret to Inform** is also available for home viewing through direct purchase and home video rental. The proceeds from the sales and distribution of **Regret to Inform** benefit the work of the organization.

Distribution and promotion of **Regret to Inform** remains a key priority for the organization because it is an extremely powerful tool for viewers. There are currently no other documentary films about the Vietnam War that use the perspective of women, particularly widows, as a vantage point from which to explore the harsh legacy of the war.

In addition to distributing **Regret to Inform**, **WIPA** also coordinates special screenings where widows from **Regret to Inform** and other armed conflict speak about their experiences. By hearing personally from the women in the film, the impact of **Regret to Inform** is even more profound for the audience. In coordinating screenings, we target a broad constituency that includes universities, veterans organizations, community groups and peace organizations. Our aim is to challenge each audience to think critically about the lasting effects of war, especially its impact on women.

## **Widows of War Living Memorial**

The **Widows of War Living Memorial** is an on-line memorial where widows of war from all over the world share their stories. The memorial aims to increase international attention to the plight of widows of war and provide widows with the opportunity to tell a story that is seldom told. The memorial also forges connections between women from all over the world, and currently features stories from places as diverse as Sierra Leone, Afghanistan, Cambodia, Armenia, Israel and Palestine, Afghanistan, Kosovo, Bolivia and Rwanda. We encourage you to visit the Memorial and read widows' stories.

## **Regret to Inform Teaching Guide and Education Program**

The **Regret to Inform Teaching Guide and Education Program** were created to address the need for a curriculum that could teach students about the Vietnam War, and all wars, from multiple perspectives, especially those traditionally left out: the viewpoints of women and the people of North and South Vietnam. In June 2000, an advisory board convened to begin the planning of an educational curriculum that would help teachers to use **Regret to Inform** as a teaching tool to explore war and armed conflict in the classroom. The advisory board's members represent a range of organizations including the National Council of Teachers of English, Rethinking Schools, Facing History and Ourselves, the United States Institute of Peace, the American Friends Service Committee and Lesley College.

Our current activities include distribution of the **Teaching Guide** and promotion of **Regret to Inform** to educators and students across the country. Through grassroots outreach, appearances at educational conferences and an on-line **website**, we engage teachers in dialogues on ways to maximize the impact of **Regret to Inform** on students.

In the aftermath of September 11, we are also collaborating with educators to use **Regret to Inform** as a starting point to address the tragedies of September 11.

### **Social Change Through Advocacy and Bridge-Building**

One of the most powerful aspects of the **Widows of War Living Memorial** and **Regret to Inform** is the impact that reading stories from all sides has on an audience. In this same tradition, **WIPA** has begun to bring together women from opposing sides of armed conflicts, and to encourage widows of all wars to use their experiences as a means to engage others in their communities about the human costs of war.

As we enter a war of unknown dimension, **WIPA** is reaching out to women of Muslim and Arab descent, including women from Iraq, Palestine and Afghanistan. We are building partnerships with Afghani refugee communities in countries such as the United States and Pakistan. We are making every attempt to connect widows from these parts of the world to widows of war from other armed conflicts. Only by breaking through existing religious and racial boundaries can we work towards a shared vision of a peaceful world.

From <http://www.warwidows.org/Memorial/wipa-overview.html>

WarWidows International Peace Alliance (WIPA) amplifies the voices of women profoundly affected by war to help prevent and end armed conflict, foster reconciliation and promote peace around the world. WIPA works across international, cultural and religious boundaries through the innovative use of the arts, media and educational initiatives.

Our organizational goals are to:

- Use authentic storytelling from all sides of conflicts as a force for peace.
  - Contribute to the development of the public's view—particularly young people—in moving toward a more compassionate, sophisticated understanding of resolving conflict.
  - Develop programs that advance conflict resolution and reconciliation and are applied to conflicts around the world.
  - Build on the work inspired by with the documentary film **Regret to Inform** into a strong and effective, highly international organization (NGO) with adequate funding, competent staff, a diverse, engaged board and strong partnerships.
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- **Regret to Inform**– Distribute and promote the documentary film **Regret to Inform** to film festivals, schools and universities, and community organizations on an on-going basis
  - **Widows of War Living Memorial** ([www.warwidows.org](http://www.warwidows.org))– Develop and produce an on-line memorial featuring stories from widows of armed conflicts around the world
  - **WarWidows Speak Out**– Create forums for widows of armed conflict to tell their stories to wider audiences; includes speaking engagements, media tours, and missions of friendship and reconciliation
  - Develop educational materials that encourage an understanding of war and armed conflict from multiple perspectives; current work includes a curriculum on the Vietnam War to be released in the Spring of 2001

WIPA's work is rooted in **Regret to Inform** (RTI), the Academy Award-nominated documentary film by director Barbara Sonneborn. RTI explores the Vietnam-American War through the stories of American and Vietnamese widows, interwoven with Sonneborn 's personal journey to Vietnam and the site where her husband was killed.

In conjunction with the distribution of RTI, the **Widows of War Living Memorial** was created as an online tool to continue to tell the story of armed conflict from the perspective of widows all over the world. The Memorial currently features stories from Afghanistan, Israel, Palestine, Colombia, Angola and many other countries.

In the Spring of 2000, several American and Vietnamese widows from RTI toured the United States to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War. The powerful reaction they encountered while speaking to high school students spawned the development of an educational curriculum that would teach about the Vietnam War from multiple perspectives— a curriculum that does not currently exist.

The public's encouraging response to RTI also led to the idea that an organization rooted in the essence of the film— using personal stories of victims of war from both sides to convey the deepest truth about war and its legacy— might have something truly unique and significant to offer to people

of all backgrounds and ages interested in human rights and international peace. A wide range of RTI friends and colleagues agreed, and in October 2000, the WarWidows International Peace Alliance was founded.

From <http://www.warwidows.org/Memorial/BCSresponse911.html>

## **From Ground Zero: Reflections on September 11, 2001**

**By Barbara Sonneborn**  
**Founding President**  
**WarWidows International Peace Alliance**

I think of the American flag lying folded on a shelf in my house. It is large. Large enough to cover my first husband's coffin when his young and broken body came home from Vietnam in 1968. I have tasted war. I know that it's terrible legacy goes on for generations, if not centuries.

Flags are springing up amidst the rubble. It is September 15th in New York. Four days after the terrorist attack.

A food stand rests at an odd angle on the sidewalk, its windows piled high with cut bagels and kaiser rolls sprinkled with poppy seeds, waiting for a coffee break that would never happen. My eyes move to the blown out window of a news and magazine store, now looking like a site for archeologists to dig through, searching for the lost meaning of a civilization.

Down this street—gray smoke and steam, a jagged, entirely and completely gray mound of rubble, barely 4 stories high. Twisted steel, crumbled like honeycomb. A line of firemen and rescue workers, gray with grime, gray with exhaustion, gray with grief, forming a line on top of this mass of steel, concrete, desks, chairs, computers, and broken human beings, all now dust.

I look up at the blue sky grayed by smoke, here, where the words, ground zero, have new meaning for Americans.

My mind fills with celebrations at Windows on the World, meetings, just going to the World Trade Center on a clear day to watch the sun set, to see the lights of New York turn on, to feel on top of the world.

I cough. My eyes sting. The acrid smell of burning plastic. And something else... My husband and I clutch hands, yet again in tears.

A small village in Afghanistan, Kosovo, Panama, Vietnam... All bombed.

Now we see with new eyes. We see the pain that much of the rest of the world has had to endure, and we must see, truly see, through our own hearts the pain that we, as a nation, have caused as we enter this new era.

In my heart, a forked road, the path to war, and the path to peace. How can I become a lantern on the right path? What do we value most deeply in times like this? What is justice, and how is justice served? How do we find a way to halt terrorism and bring to justice those who perpetrate it without being terrorists ourselves? How do we halt terrorism without doing exactly what the terrorists want us to do, which is to polarize the Muslim world, and bring a great holy war down on the West?

I am inspired by the humanity of so many human beings in the aftermath of this despicable crime, by the clamoring of voices not to take the lives of the innocent as we seek the perpetrators of terrorism.

I do know that we, as a nation, must proceed with great wisdom and restraint, with utter moral maturity, with ideas of retribution banished from our hearts and minds. We must counsel our leaders to build a world community that will work together against all terrorism. It is a time to listen more deeply than we ever imagined we could. We must seek to understand our world, the roots of this terrible act, all of its implications for our future. A clarifying quote on NPR: "To plan for the future without understanding the past is as effective as planting cut flowers."

Between 1988 and 1998 I made a film, *Regret to Inform*, to try to transform my husband's death in the war in Vietnam, into as powerful a statement against war as I could make. The film tells the stories of widows of the war in Vietnam from both sides of the war, but beyond that, *Regret to Inform* is about all war, everywhere, showing the suffering on all sides at the same time, humanizing the people that we have seen as enemies, drawing a portrait of our shared humanity against our common enemies—violence and war.

At the United Nations, on March 8, 2000, International Women's Day, *Regret to Inform* was shown in a special session of women from around the world, a beautiful rainbow of humanity. Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations, opened the session speaking these words: "Men know how to build walls and women know how to build bridges. Peace in the 21st century will be in the hands of women." The standing ovation shook the walls. It is the time for women, for all human beings, to become bridge builders.

In this spirit, an organization of war widows has grown out of *Regret to Inform*. War Widows International Peace Alliance calls on war widows, on women everywhere to join together across all borders, to break through all racial, religious, and national boundaries to celebrate our common humanity and work together to build a peaceful world.

War Widows International Peace Alliance is reaching out now to build bridges between women in Muslim and non-Muslim communities, to build understanding, to avoid creating an enemy, "The Other," in order to justify going to war.

We are deeply committed to peace education. We are introducing a curriculum using the film, *Regret to Inform*, in high schools around the country. Simultaneously we are bringing the film to colleges and universities to create dialogue about the meaning of war and peace in our lives. The film is being used internationally as a tool to foster discussions about peace and compassion across borders.

We recognize the power of story-telling to effect how people see their world. We urge you to share your personal stories—stories of war and armed conflict, stories of compassion and humanity--on our web-site, *Widows of War Living Memorial*. We who have personally known war must speak out as witnesses.

Where are women's voices in this dialogue, in the decision-making process as we build our world?

Using media and 21st century tools of communications, we seek to bring the voices of women to the forefront of public consciousness as we shape the future.

Over the years, I have reflected on a statement of Ghandi's, "Be the change you want to see." In suffering, in crisis, there is also opportunity for awakening. This is a critical time in each of our lives.