

DISPATCHES

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Awaken Your Whispers

By Kim Kluxen Meredith

(author of *Listen for the Whispers: Coping with Grief and Learning to Live Again 2013*
MSWA Silver Medalist in spiritual/religious book category)

I crouched under my second-grade desk as the school-wide alarm bell screamed in my ears. A faint whisper slipped out of my chapped lips as I folded my skinny arms over my blonde curls. I forced my eyes shut.

Oh, God, please don't let the Russians come to my town.

America was deep in the Cold War. As a seven-year old, I routinely participated in our elementary school's air-raid drills. I obediently assumed the duck and cover position, but I did not understand the purpose. What was a Russian? What did they look like? How would they get to my tiny village in upstate New York? Would my meager wooden desk save me from a bomb?

When the safety exercise was over, I crawled out from under my desk and sat back in my chair. I smoothed the wrinkles in my starched dress and crinoline petticoat. Dick and Jane and Spot and Puff innocently stared at me from my reader as my teacher directed us to resume our lesson. I stowed my nagging, unanswered questions in a secret place in my head where they marinated until I released them again during the next frightening drill.

Decades later, on a chilly March afternoon in our nation's capital, I let the fur-trimmed hood of my black wool coat fall forward and shroud my head as I leaned on my stomach on the grassy hill behind the top of the

Vietnam Veterans Memorial to make a rubbing. My two young children watched from the base below.

A few minutes before, I had discovered my high school friend's name in the directory and located his position on the wall.

John J. Stegland III—Panel W1, Line 4.

I needed to take home a tangible reminder of his family's sacrifice. But I did not expect the etched letters in the black gabbro wall to release such a flow of residual tears.

When my father phoned to tell me about my high school friend's death, I was three states away and a sophomore in college. The reality of the Vietnam War was even further away. I saw the disturbing clips on the nightly news. Occasionally I joined my friends in protest. But I was on the sidelines. The sad news of his death briefly paused my carefree college life. After hanging up the receiver on the pay phone, I cried. I tried to process the loss, but my geographical distance and limited understanding prevented me from fully feeling its impact. My mother sent me a clipping from the local newspaper. I put it in my jewelry box. The editor used John's high school graduation picture in his obituary. John's face would never age past 21.



As an adult, I heard about the new memorial in Washington and I decided that I needed closure. After all, it is never too late to whisper goodbye.

“Excuse me ma’am, you are not supposed to be up on the grounds behind the Memorial. You can use a ladder to reach this spot instead,” the uniformed guard respectfully informed me.

My throat tightened. The damp sod muffled my whisper. John was my friend. I needed to touch his name. I quickly finished rubbing my number 2 pencil across a creased white piece of paper.

Goodbye John. I miss you.

Many years passed and my whispers intensified.

I was riding home alone in my car from the commuter train station when a distinct voice filled my head. It was so real that I thought perhaps it came from my car radio. When I checked the dial, the radio was turned off.

This is the man you are going to marry.

After a nine-month courtship, this man, David Stewart Kluxen Jr., and I were married.

Fifteen years later, a one-car accident left my 44-year-old husband a quadriplegic. His voice was silenced. A machine forced air through David’s limp body. But his mind was as sharp as the bone fragments that severed his spinal cord.

After two weeks in intensive care, David deliberately formed the words.

Help me die.

We both knew our time on earth together was coming to an end and he needed my assistance to die with dignity.

One whisper boldly echoed in my head and brought me to my husband.

The other whisper was silent and took him away from me.

My whispers have called to me for a long time. They come from a gentle, warm place deep down in my core. Sometimes they are just an odd feeling. Sometimes my own timid voice speaks. Other times there is an object or a sound that captivates my attention. In their most sophisticated form, my inner voice echoes in my head. My soul speaks through my whispers. They are my moral compass. They demand to be heard.

We all have whispers. But we need to learn how to listen to them. They are gifts from God, but so often they go unopened. We need to learn to trust their messages. It is important to allow them to give us the courage to stand up tall and live an authentic, mindful life.

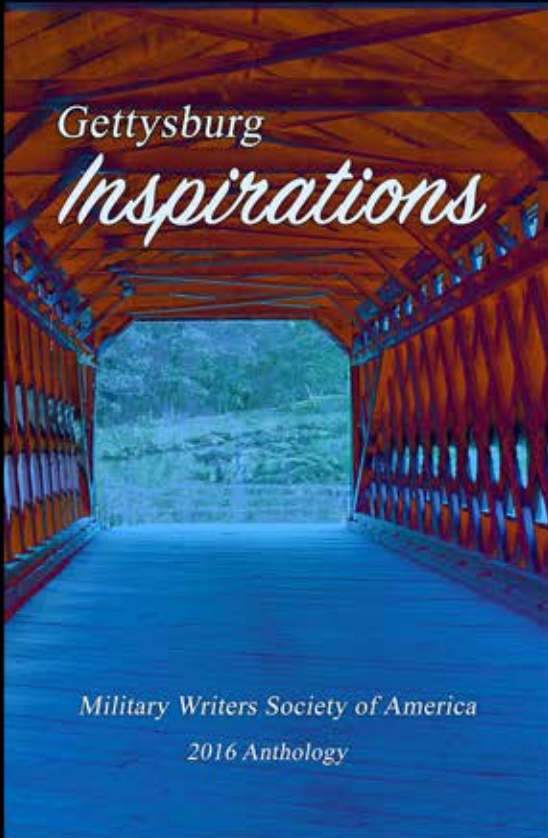
Perhaps now in a time of moral divide, all of us need to pay better attention to our own whispers. Perhaps we need to step back from the cacophony of the day. From the chatter of the media. From the tempting eddies that can suck us down to a place that is dark and confusing.

By checking our moral compasses, we can honor those who fought for our country. We can acknowledge our freedom and liberties that are unmatched in the world. Let’s step up and be brave and listen to our whispers and let our feet and voices take us to places where we can be seen and heard.

Let’s awaken our whispers.



Palo Duro Canyon State Park



Check out the new Military Writers Society of America 2016 Anthology, *Gettysburg Inspirations* inside.



Fort Fisher, NC

