My Little Soldier

John died at 19, two years younger than his father when I was drafted into the Army.

I will never be able to sit at the table and have a beer with my son on Veteran’s or Memorial Day and share my experiences in Viet Nam (distorted as they may have become over time) and he will never go off to a war someplace no one ever heard of until bombs and bullets gave it the dubious distinction of being recognized.

Even so, John, though he wore no uniform; though he was not in the military, was a soldier, an urban soldier, fighting against the injustice that permeates our society. His weapon was the microphone and his ammunition were his words, spit out faster than the rounds of a Thompson sub-machine gun, hitting the target dead center.

His banner was Love and he practiced it; not the carnal or the meaningless façade of caring when you don’t. No, John was there, in the middle of the night to answer a phone call from a distraught teen, like himself, who had doubts and anxieties and needed someone to speak encouraging words. He was there to leave his bed and drive over to the house of someone who needed comfort because they were rejected or bullied. And, he would travel a hundred miles or more, at his expense, to deliver his message to anyone who asked, usually without any honorarium. He left his mark in this world, from Atlanta, California, Manchester, Minnesota (to name a few), in the hearts of those he touched, while others, even much older, left only a scar in their wake of ignorance and hate.

For John, no one had to earn respect from him. They HAD his respect…everybody.

He was a warrior fighting injustice, oppression, inequality, racism and, most important, reaching out to his fellow “hapas” who were of mixed descent, to inform them that they had a voice, were not inferior; that they had opportunity and that they could make a difference if they worked within the present culture while remembering and honoring their heritage, never forgetting where they came from and how they got here.

He spoke for and to the ones whose parents arrived as refugees, just barely able to speak English and who worked 10 to 12 hours a day in minimum wage (or less) labor so they might raise their children with opportunities they could not get in their homeland – the ability to break out of the cycle of poverty and oppression through education and personal commitment and recognizing and seizing opportunities. He gave awareness and hope.

John was a warrior and a healer. He had water to give (as he said), water that refreshed and rejuvenated his peers. And it was water that ultimately, tragically, took his life.

So this Memorial day will be different for me as I pay my respects to a different type of soldier, but a soldier none the less, who fought in his own way for his country. This young man who was an instrument of peace in a war-torn urban setting; a young man who shared his canteen of water freely and attempted to bind the wounds of the injured. A young man, regardless of his being my son, is worthy of my deepest respect.
So, to my son, John: I salute you for a job well done. My brave little soldier who, in his brief time with us, fought the good fight, passing the torch to those he inspired, and died a hero in the eyes of those who loved him. Peace.