
Let's Communicate: It's Not About War

"How to Tell a True War Story," in Tim O'Brien's novel *The Things They Carried*, has almost nothing to do with war. Rather, it has to do with the difficulties of a speaker to communicate their feelings—which are conveyed through stories—as well as the listeners' failure to understand them. "How to Tell a True War Story" includes several accounts of events that occurred in the main characters' lives during Vietnam. One of which concerns the character Bob Kiley, or Rat as most people call him. A week after his friend dies, Rat decides to write a letter to his friend's sister telling her about the good times they had, how great of a guy he was, and how much he loved him. Although Rat mails the letter, even after two months, the sister never replies back. In response, Rat complains, "I write this beautiful fuckin' letter, I slave over it, and what happens? The dumb cooze never writes back" (69). The letter, which is both the recollections of his experiences with and his true and honest feelings for his best friend, is Rat Kiley's story. And it is a story that the listener, in this case the sister, does not understand—she could not get that the letter "wasn't a war story" but that "It was a love story" (85). The use of the word "dumb cooze" then illustrates the frustration Rat Kiley suffers, for he is unable to successfully describe the love he has for his best friend.

Similarly, "Field Trip" is also about the listener's inability to comprehend the emotions behind and the point of the speaker's story; but more importantly, "Field Trip" is about the speaker's incapability to voice his own stories. In "Field Trip," the narrator, Tim, goes back to Vietnam and takes along his ten-year-old daughter Kathleen. A major reason Tim brings his daughter is to show her the world, and to offer her "a small piece of her father's history" (182). In a sense, because he cannot verbally say it, this is Tim's way of showing his story and having Kathleen attempt to walk in his shoes. The issues in understanding are presented when Kathleen asks, "how come you were even here in the first place?" and Tim replies, "I don't know...because I had to be" (183). Even though Kathleen repeats her question, "But why?" all Tim can do is try "to find something to tell her," eventually shrug and say that "It's a mystery, I guess. I don't know" (183). This demonstrates both the daughter's failure to grasp the significance and meaning behind this whole trip, as well as the father's inability to convey it.

In addition, even when Tim goes swimming in a marshland to carry out his attempt to wash away his own guilt, and to honor the memory of the dead soldier Kiowa (which are his main reasons for going back), his daughter, who watches him, is nervous and nearly grossed-out. She says what Tim is doing "is stupid," and what he is about to swim in is "not even water, it's like mush or something" (186). Kathleen's attitude towards the events of this trip to Vietnam reveals her lack of understanding of Tim's past experiences, and thus current actions. However, Kathleen's lack of understanding is due mostly, in a larger sense, to Tim's failure to communicate. If Tim could have told Kathleen why he even went to Vietnam in the first place, then maybe his daughter would have had a better idea of why he did, what he did.

Evidently, both of these short stories lean towards a more fundamental, underlying issue: the speakers' failure to communicate. So why, then, is it so hard for speakers to do such a seemingly uncomplicated task? In Rat Kiley's case, he became frustrated because he could not properly convey his affections towards his best friend, and even his anger towards the sister (another reason he called her a "dumb cooze"). Additionally, later on in "How to Tell a True

War Story,” there is a sad and disturbing scene of Rat Kiley repeatedly shooting at a helpless, innocent baby buffalo. Rat’s actions reveal how he is unable to put into words his worries, sadness, rage, and other emotions, and therefore takes it all out on the baby buffalo. He even “tried to say something, but then cradled his rifle and went off by himself”(79). Consequently, Kiley’s decision to go off by himself shows that he could not, or was still trying to, figure everything out (his feelings, for instance). Likewise, in “Field Trip,” Tim himself does not truly know why he went to Vietnam (in the first place). This is exemplified by when he goes swimming in the marshland. As it becomes obvious, this marshland is not clear and pure like water; in fact this “water” is dirty and full of bugs and tiny bubbles and probably all kinds of other jumbled up matter, or, as Kathleen puts it, this water is “like mush” (186). Conceivably, this was Tim also trying to figure things out for himself, which explains when he “tried to think of something decent to say, something meaningful and right,” in the end, “nothing came” to mind (186).

This uncertainty is also similar to “How to Tell a True War Story” when the narrator starts talking about what the war feels like for the common soldiers. What is important is not the war itself, but the fact that “[t]here is no clarity” (82)—exactly like the “water” Tim was swimming in. So perhaps the reason why Rat Kiley, Tim, the common soldier, and maybe even the common person, has difficulty conveying their feelings is because they have yet to figure and work out their own emotions and their own stories. For these people, it is as if they are swimming back and forth and thinking, “what’s the point”—as if they are trying to “get at the real truth,” trying to figure out and get at their true feelings (82, 85). There is, however, one conviction that stands true for both the listener and the speaker, and that is their “overwhelming ambiguity” (82).