

New Nonfiction from Tom Keating: “The Lobby”



I am careful with the coffee tray. It holds four coffees and one tea for my guys in the VA hospital lobby.

Everyone who comes to the VA hospital spends time sitting in the lobby, waiting for a meeting with a doctor, or a blood draw, whatever they need. All of us are in the lobby because our bodies paid the price for our service.

It is a large lobby, with many comfortable upholstered chairs

placed in the center of the lobby floor. VA clerks sit behind the long counter on the left, and the Eye and Ear clinic is on the right. Flags for all the services; Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard, and the new Space Force hang from the high ceiling. A large US flag hangs opposite the service flags. The doctor's offices and labs are behind the elevator cluster near the information desk. Occasionally a nurse in blue scrubs would appear from the doctor's offices and shout out the name of a patient for their appointment.

Everybody wears baseball caps proclaiming their branch of service or places where they served: Desert Storm, Iraq, Afghanistan, Vietnam. Vietnam Vets are the oldest guys now.

My group calls itself the Orange Brigade. You can tell by our baseball caps that we are all Vietnam War vets. We suffer from exposure to Agent Orange, the defoliant, hence the name of our group. We meet on Mondays as we wait for our appointments. The group started after we all met in the lobby one Monday for our appointments. We pulled together some chairs into a corner of the lobby and shared our Vietnam stories. We would wait for our name to be called and talk about the Red Sox, or the Bruins, and the state of the country. We started with ten in our group, but there are five of us now.

The brigade includes Gerry, a former Marine with Parkinsons, Jim, a six-foot five ex-paratrooper with cancer, Charlie, an Air Force vet with raging diabetes, and Shirley, a former Army nurse who has severe migraines. I'm an Army vet, too, the youngest in the group at sixty-seven with an ischemic heart. I make the coffee run to the café just off the lobby.

I bring the tray over to the group. Gerry's hand trembles when he reaches for his coffee, which is half-filled, so he doesn't spill.

"Thanks, Tim," he says. Gerry had to cut his law practice down to almost nothing when he became ill.

I give Jim his large black coffee and a chocolate-dipped donut.

"Mama's milk," he jokes. "Thanks, brother." Jim played pro football before the Army drafted him, now he is thin and frail. When he came home, it was difficult for him to adjust. His career in law enforcement was cut short by his difficulties, including lots of brawls and drinking. Two marriages went bust as well.

Charlie grabs his large mocha coffee, and a honey glazed. He uses a wheelchair because his legs can't support his obese body. Shirley nurses her tea and shakes her head at Charlie's gorging.

"You want to go into a diabetic coma?" says Shirley.

Charlie shrugs at Shirley's comment. "Hell, I'm dead already. The Air Force killed me. I flew in the planes that sprayed Agent Orange." He took a bite of the donut. "When the VA diagnosed me, I was shocked. I had to take insulin shots. I couldn't eat what I wanted, or drink what I wanted. That's no way to live. Fuck it, I'm doing what I want."

I sip my decaf and Splenda and say nothing. Everyone makes their own choices. When I returned from the war, I had it made. My fiancée had her Dad get me work at his advertising agency, and we married, raised two children, and were happy till my first heart attack at fifty.

Shirley nurses her tea and shakes her head. When she first joined the group, she spoke of her time in the war. "So many boys, so much hurt," She left nursing after the war. She had a lengthy career in retail, and the success helped ease her pain.

A nurse comes out of the clinic office and shouts, "Wentworth, Gerald!" Gerry shouts "here!" and grabs his walker to stand up.

“Carry on, folks! See you guys next week.” Gerry straightens up, turns smartly with his walker and shaky legs over to the nurse.

Jim shakes his head and says, “Man, Jerry will be lucky to be here with us next week. He’s getting worse.” Charlie laughs, Shirley just sips her tea. It worried me that Gerry was worse, and in spite of his bravado, he knows it too.

Another nurse appears and shouts, “Brackett, Charles!”

Charlie nods to us, says, “See you guys’ next week,” and wheels off. He is slowly eating and drinking himself to death. Jim says aloud what we all were thinking,

“I bet Charlie aint gonna make to next week.” Shirley nods in agreement. We are quiet for a minute or two, then I ask Jim how he is doing, and he says,

“Middlin, boy, middlin. My belly hurts all the time, and they wanna cut out my intestines and put me on a bag. I don’t wanna do that, but I guess I have to.”

Shirley says, “do it, Jim. You can live longer with the bag.”

Before he could reply, the nurse comes out again, “Kearney, Timothy!” Raising my hand for the nurse, then offering it to Jim, I tell him.

“I WILL see you two next week!” I smile.

“For sure, brother, take care,” he says. We shake hands. I bump fists with Shirley who smiles up at me.

Walking toward the nurse I look back at our corner of the lobby. Jim, wincing at the pain in his stomach, is slumped in his chair. Shirley tries to comfort him. I stare at the two empty chairs, Charlie, and Jerry. The Orange Brigade body count is rising. I take a deep breath and follow the nurse.

Interview with Tom Keating, Author of 'Yesterday's Soldier'

Andria Williams for The Wrath-Bearing Tree:

I was honored to read Tom Keating's memoir, '[Yesterday's Soldier](#),' an excellently written and sensitive account of his time as a non-combatant servicemember during the Vietnam War. Tom had been a novice in the Roman Catholic priesthood, but when the priests at his seminary deemed him a not-ideal candidate for that calling, he enlisted in the army, which caused him a massive change in his state of mind. His responses to some of my questions are below, and the link to the full interview is embedded. Please come watch – Tom is a great speaker, and his thoughts on how various cultures of religion and obedience play into military service are interesting.

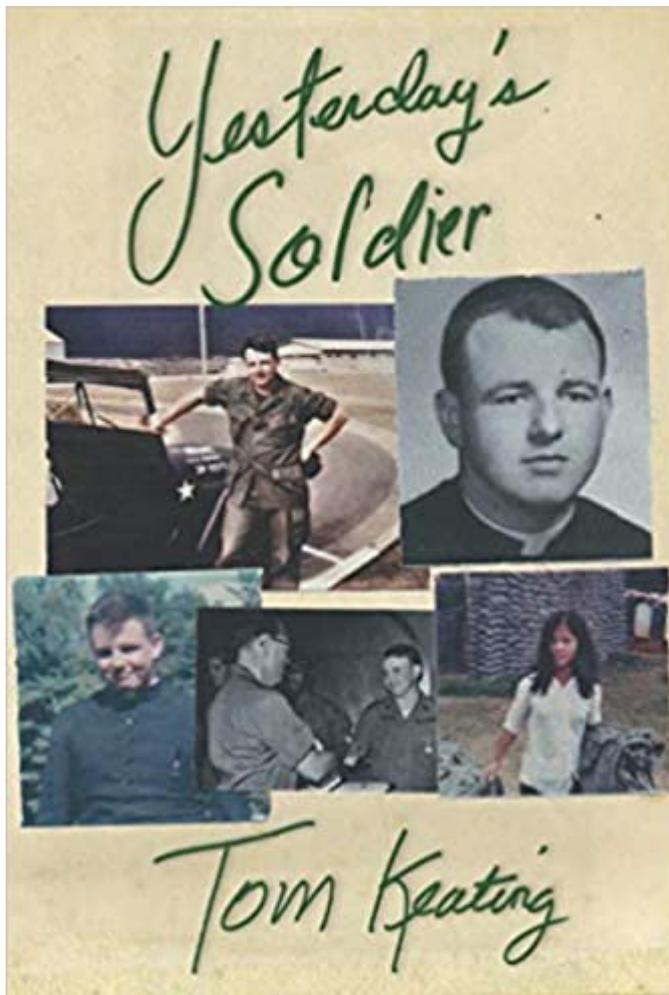
Good news: Tom is now happily married and lives in Massachusetts.

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WBT: Can you explain your path from seminary school into the military?

Tom Keating: I am the first son of my family of Irish Roman Catholics. Back then, to be a priest was admirable. I attended an all boys' catholic high school taught by priests, the Congregation of Holy Cross. They were young priests, and they

were great role models. The idea of being like them grew as I went through the four years. In my senior year, I sought their advice and declared my intention to be one of them. The next five and one half of my life I was one of them.



My admission of my CO struggle at Bridgewater State college during the class on educational philosophy. The assignment was, we all had to share a moment of radical action we performed. The class was full of veterans. It was tough to share my story with them. Their positive reaction to my story gave me the idea to write a book, but it took years to complete.

WBT: You mention that there were 27 novitiates in your first-year group, but only 5 remaining when you left. What do you think made them leave?

Tom Keating: I was a young seminarian full of the aggiornamento of the church, full of the idea to be Christ's apostle for the flock, so to speak. That flock included the young men who wanted to avoid the draft. I saw my role as ministering to them. Hell, I even co-signed a loan for my friend, a coed who needed money. Of course I had none myself. That action and my activities did in fact affect my future as a priest. The men who were in charge of the seminary were afraid of the liberal trend in the church that I embraced. I originally wrote in the EPILOGUE of the book "And Father's world? The world he lived in, one of order, Latin masses, strict obedience to a hierarchy, Gregorian Chants, celibacy, black cassocks and clerical collars, a world he treasured and tried to protect? He was right to be afraid. That world had been turned into-dogshit." A reference to the dog poop on the previously spotless corridors of the seminary ([Cat, my editor,](#) thought I should change that, so I did make it milder.)

My Dad and I watched the demonstrations in Chicago during the convention. I was home then from the seminary. We shared our shock and disgust at the police in the riot. He was from the World War 2 generation, respect for authority, etc. It cemented our relationship.

There were violent incidents where I *didn't* have that aversion, mostly in-country. A monument to Army training/brainwashing. In the book, I described a vehicle accident that happened when I was on my way to the elephant factory. That violence was accepted by me and the jeep driver. The dead bodies on the wire after a sapper attack elicited no aversion, just acknowledgement of our firepower. I was bothered by that but could not show it.

Seminary life in 1963-64 was harsh. Monastic rule meant sparse meals, rule of silence except when in class, early morning prayers before breakfast, work on the property after class. No social life, parental visits once a month, poverty chastity and obedience. The social dynamic of 27 mostly teenage boys in

that pressure cooker of conformity and strict rules was tough. The novitiate year, where we spent working and praying on a farm in Vermont was very strenuous. It was a pressure cooker, like military basic training, only it lasted one whole year. Our farm was located outside the town of Bennington VT, and we could hear the music playing on car radios that drove by. The world was driving by us, and we were anchored in a centuries-old system. Desertion from the novitiate was swift. We finished the year there with 10 newly sworn in religious.

War and peace today? Of course right now the Ukrainians are being assaulted by Russia. Peace is harder to find. I don't have any great thoughts on war and peace except to say countries are fighting for lithium and rare earths now, and resources like water and iron and salt and sugar. It is insane. I try to have peace around me, so I work with my church and the local veterans' community to help them. I can't do much for nations and their wars, but I can give peace to my friends and social circle.

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Watch the full interview with Tom Keating here: