

# Living For Higher Purpose

Story of a City Boy Who Survived the Viet Nam War  
by Living for Jesus and Others

Reverend Peter G. Vu

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First published by Dog Ear Publishing  
4011 Vincennes Rd  
Indianapolis, IN 46268  
[www.dogearpublishing.net](http://www.dogearpublishing.net)



ISBN: 978-1-4575-5816-0

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Printed in the United States of America

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I dedicate this book to the following people:

- My loving and faithful God and God's son Jesus, who has always been by my side to protect, support, comfort, and show me the way.
- My family and ancestors: Great-grandparents, grandparents, parents, uncles, and aunts, who have never wavered in their support for me and have continued to protect and cheer for me beyond this life.
- My friends and benefactors: These kind and generous people are like my guardian angels, who God has sent to me throughout my life to give me a helping hand in times of need.

I'm forever grateful to my God and indebted to all of you. May our loving and faithful God repay you abundantly and continue to bless you and your loved ones.



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## Introduction

The Viet Nam War, like other wars in human history, has entered the American consciousness and remained a bewilderment for the present and future generations to discern and wonder. This war divided America, Viet Nam, the public at large, and many families. It brought tears, bloodshed, suffering, hatred, anger, chaos, loss, and destruction to all involved. Many books have been written and movies have been made to reflect various viewpoints and opinions. But, few books have been written from the perspective of a witness and survivor of this war. Viet—the main character of this memoir—witnessed the end of the War and lived through the horrible days under a Communist regime.

During this war, people lined up on both sides to support it and protest it. After the war ended, no one seemed to care about its victims or wanted to speak up for them and come to their aid. Viet wants the world to know what happened to its victims and what was left behind after everyone left the country. He survived the aftermath and escaped by boat to search for freedom and a new life beyond his broken homeland. He spent about a week at sea fighting for his life against hunger, thirst, heat, seasickness, waves, violent storms, sharks, Communists and their allies, pirates, the idea of cannibalism, and death. Thankfully, by God's grace and with the help of some good people from a South Korean ship, Viet was rescued along with his boat mates and dropped off at a refugee camp in Singapore. After several months at this camp, his father sponsored him to come to America.

Viet struggled to learn English and adapt to the new culture in America. He battled loneliness, hopelessness, discrimination, lack of resources, and other issues that a refugee endures in a new land. He also tried to discern the priesthood vocation and decided to follow his Lord's footsteps and serve His Church. With this, he left behind numerous great opportunities of the Promised Land and entered the seminary. He conquered many challenges of seminary life and acquired new skills and disciplines to help him become an effective priest for God's people. After ten years of seminary training, Viet was ordained a priest for the Diocese of Grand Rapids, Michigan. He has been a faithful and loving priest for 20 years and is looking forward to serving Christ's church for many more years.

Viet has shared a little bit of his life story in his Sunday homilies and other workshops in the last 20 years. His friends and parishioners have urged him to write this book so that they will have a full picture of his amazing life. This book is partly a history book and partly a personal diary. As the two parts of this story weave together, one will see the divine presence and the secrets of life that have helped Viet survive throughout his life. He relied on the protection of his ancestors and the help of Guardian Angels—kind and generous people—that God sent him along the way. Most important, he has looked up to his loving God and a higher purpose to stay alive and move forward each day.

Hence, Viet's memoir has taken the title *Living for a Higher Purpose*. This book will guide readers through many stories of Viet's life and eventually help them determine what that higher purpose is. It also discusses many popular, current issues such as war and its victims, refugees and their life's challenges, life under a Communist regime, core curriculum, how the world views America, the relationship between Catholicism (Christianity) and Buddhism, and much more.

After reflecting on various issues and discerning life from different viewpoints, Viet will help readers come to the same conclusion about the secret of a fulfilling and joyful life. That is, a person should use his or her life to serve Jesus and other people. By sticking to this way of living, a person will find meaning and unending joy even in the dark night of his or her soul. This person will always trust in God's love on the Cross of Jesus to guide, protect, strengthen, and encourage him or her throughout his or her life. My hope is that you will find comfort, joy, hope, and answers for your life issues by journeying through this memoir with Viet. May God's love always be before you, beside you, and behind you all the days of your life.

Fr. Peter G. Vu



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# Chapter 1:

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## Searching for Life and Salvation on the Days of Apocalypse

“One, two, three,” a boy facing a wall with his eyes closed keeps counting. His friends scatter looking for a place to hide in the neighborhood where they grew up together and knew everyone so well. There are occasional giggles and whisperings as this group of kids tries to keep themselves well hidden from the counting boy, who seems oblivious to all the fun his friends are enjoying. His voice seems to pick up with a faster pace as he says, “...seventeen, eighteen, nineteen.” A few slackers speed up with their search for the best hiding places, but change their minds at the last minute and decide to go home to hide instead. That is probably the best hiding place of all. Even the most seasoned detective cannot find them there.

After several minutes of counting that seem to go on forever and commotion from kids looking for the best hiding places, the whole neighborhood is reduced to silence. The boy who counted a moment ago stops abruptly at thirty and calls out at the top of his lungs, “Ready or not, here I come!” When he closed his eyes a moment ago, he could sense all the familiar sounds and smells of the neighborhood. He could tell where all the yelling and screaming was coming from. A couple of his neighbors often talk with their household members at the top of their lungs, as if they were deaf. Street vendors also frequent the neighborhood and call out their selling slogans, letting everyone know what is best about their products. His whole neighborhood is always full of sounds that intertwine with one another to create a magical concert for its residents and visitors. The intoxicating smells of the tropical flowers and fruits make the whole neighborhood feel like the Garden of Eden, where everyone can feel safe and have anything they want.

The counting boy slowly opens his eyes to an eerie silence of a neighborhood that he once thought he knew it quite well. All his

friends had gone into hiding, and he now must look for them. He wonders where he can begin his search. Maybe he can find a couple of kids behind the gate of the neighborhood coffee shop. Or perhaps some of them are hiding in the courtyard of the huge palace at the end of the main street leading to the neighborhood. As he walks down the street searching for his friends, he calls out their names and makes all kinds of weird noises, such as shaking the front gates of each house and dragging a stick along the fence to rattle up the fainthearted. He had to get them to come out of their hiding holes! He learned this tactic from watching some Western movies in which the cowboys would herd their cattle by whistling and hollering.

His tactic works as he finds his first victim giggling behind a big coconut tree. After several minutes, he finds and gathers half of his group of friends who play the game with him. He also learns from those he's found that some of the hiders went home. It would certainly be difficult for him to find those friends! He calls them the "MIA or Missing in Action" buds, who often do not complete the game because their parents call them home or they must go take care of something else. After chatting with one another for a little while, the group decides to call it a day. What everyone does not realize is that a couple of kids are still hiding in a secret place within their beloved neighborhood. And yet everyone goes home that day full of contentment, as if they had just completed an amazing project. They are totally oblivious to the couple of their buddies left behind in some hiding hole.

That is the neighborhood where a young boy named Viet grew up. It is a place where everyone knows each other well and the kids play on the streets without a care in the world. Viet used to play soccer, badminton, volleyball, hopscotch, rope jumping, marbles, and other fun games with his neighborhood friends. They all go to Catholic Church and Buddhist Temple together without any concern or question. One of the common activities they enjoy doing together annually is going to Midnight Christmas Mass together and hanging out late afterward. Unlike Christmas in many Western countries, Christmas in Viet Nam is not a national holiday, and all children went to school the next day. In fact, students had to attend school all day the day before and the day of Christmas. The only holidays that students were excused from school were the couple of days for Lunar

New Year. They also had to go to school six days a week and were allowed only Sunday off. Although Viet and his friends must work hard in school, they seem to enjoy the normal life of a kid.

What they do not know is that a horrible war is going on not too far from their seemingly safe neighborhood. That war has been raging for a couple of decades, but most children in Saigon City have not been told much about it. Among the thousands of lives that have been lost, many of them are children. Hundreds of children have been recruited to fight for the northern Communists, while many have been displaced or lost their families and homes.

The safe bubble that Viet and his neighborhood friends have played under for years comes crashing down during several historical days in April. Their whole neighborhood was shelled mercilessly and turned into a war zone. That is the day their beloved city of Saigon falls into the hands of the Communists.

Viet and his friends grew up in a middleclass neighborhood near Saigon city that is about a ten-minute bicycle ride to the main airport in South Viet Nam called Tan Son Nhut. They all live such a sheltered life that they are caught by surprise when Saigon falls and the horrible bombing and shooting takes place around their neighborhood. They have never seen any news about the Viet Nam War. All they do is go to school, play on their neighborhood streets, stop by a church or temple for some prayers, and come home to eat and sleep. They do not watch much television except some traditional shows and occasional Western movies. In fact, most of them do not have their own televisions and usually huddle together in a living room of a wealthy family in their neighborhood to watch their favorite shows. The collapse of Saigon and the invasion of the northern Communists come as a total surprise for Viet and his friends. They thought it was the end of the world.

Viet, who was raised in a Catholic family and listened to the Sunday readings in church from the Book of Revelation cannot believe that he would experience the same vision right there in person. As an avid Bible reader and a regular churchgoer, Viet recalls one of the big topics in that Sacred Book was the last day of the world or the Apocalypse. That is the day that God will bring judgment on our sinful world, wipe it all out, and create a new world. The scene of that historical day is quite chaotic and scary. Wars and famine will break

out. Natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, volcanoes, drought, and so on will occur worldwide. The sun will darken, and the moon and the stars will fall out of the sky. The Sacred Book describes pain and a dark, bleak, and horrifying picture of the last day. In addition, hunger, bloodshed, killing, fighting, and death come in abundance on the last day.

Viet wonders if all the prophecies in the Book of Revelation have finally come true and the last day is finally here. As he looks up to the sky, he sees it filled with military jets and helicopters taking off from the nearby airport. He has never seen that many airplanes on the sky before. Suddenly, some of them are shot down or fly into each other. The accident leaves a trail of black smoke and a buzzing sound of a descending object that meets the horizon with a loud crash.

After watching this scene play out in the sky for several hours, Viet is utterly speechless, but decides to check out one of the main roads leading to downtown Saigon. He wants to see what has happened. The scene is not any better than near his home. He sees tanks, military vehicles, and soldiers running every which way on the road. Some of the soldiers wear complete uniforms and helmets, while others throw away their uniforms and run around only in their undershirts and shorts. None of them carried a gun or weapon. Viet later learned that the soldiers stripped away their uniforms because they did not want to get shot. In many cases, they simply walked around with a white flag or their hands up to show the Communists that they surrendered. That busy road to downtown Saigon was also littered with dead corpses, fresh blood, and all sorts of abandoned weapons. He had never seen anything like that on the road before.

Full of horror and complete sadness, Viet turns his eyes to the safe neighborhood where he and his friends played just a couple of days ago. But the neighborhood playground—his cocoon—is now completely deserted. He finds no familiar person wandering around his beloved neighborhood. Like the game of hide and seek that they played recently, most of his neighbors and friends have gone into hiding, trying to keep themselves safe in the most secure places of their homes. Viet begins to wonder why he is still standing out in the open and risking being hit by a stray bullet or bomb. Suddenly, he hears buzzing sounds above his head and some loud explosions near his home. He realizes it is not safe to be in the open, and now it is time for him to seek shelter with his family. His home has no basement or

bomb shelter. His family must create a makeshift bunker of large, thick planks of oak wood. Sadly, they later reused those planks to make caskets for Viet's grandparents and great-grandparents.

The bunker is dark, hot, uncomfortable, and ill-ventilated. They must squat and sit knee-to-knee next to each other in the bunker. They also take a break every few hours and go out to stretch and breathe some fresh air. Their electricity and water has been cut off and the entire neighborhood is in darkness. All the local food stores and outdoor markets are closed. Viet's family must ration their stored-up foods and dash to a local well to bring back water. They try to cook some meals over coal, woods, sticks, straws, papers, books, and even paper currency.

Viet remembers these difficult days quite well as he tries to help his family in every way he can. He goes out to his family garden in the back of the house a couple of times a day to pick some vegetables such as squash, pea, herbs, and several Oriental plants for food. He also gives his parents a hand in butchering chicken, ducks, and rabbits that they raise in the back yard to survive through the last days of the Viet Nam War. Unfortunately, the shelling of the nearby airport and the martial law that restricts all movements in the city of Saigon continued for more than a week. Viet can see their food ration beginning to dwindle. Their little garden is picked out to almost nothing. Their poultry is butchered right down to just a couple of chickens. Their bags of rice have mostly been used up, with only one small bag left. He does not know where they will get their food in the coming weeks. However, Viet has always had a strong faith in God and recalls how God came to the rescue of God's people in their difficult moments of the Old Testament. He remembers how God performed a miracle for the widow of Zarephath and her son and never let her bag of flour and jar of oil go empty. Viet's faith is gradually strengthened and renewed as he spends time in prayer with his family during this challenging period. They help him learn to put on the armor of faith when time get tough and teach him valuable life lessons about survival. In the beginning, he thought he would never be able to make it through the aftermath of a long war like the Viet Nam War. The whole social structure was turned upside down, and there was a lot of destruction. The survivors have very little to live on, but they will have to press on despite the challenges and uncertainty of the time.

During this Apocalypse-like period in Saigon, two incidents stood out distinctly for Viet. They impacted his life and left an indelible mark on his memory about this difficult time. The first incident happened when his family's food ration was about to run dry. They had butchered all their poultry, picked their whole garden, and had nothing left except their family pets. Viet remembers his family had a few dogs and cats, and he knew them quite well. He helped raise and take care of them, such as feeding them, bathing them, and playing with them. He had grown close to one of the family dogs and played with it almost every day. Suddenly, on this particular day, his family had no food left. His family told him to help butcher his beloved dog.

"Viet," his grandpa calls. "Would you please give me a hand? Take the dog, Spotty, to the backyard and wait for me there." This dog was called Spotty because he had dark spots all over his white fur coat.

"What are we going to do with Spotty, grandpa?" asks Viet. "Are we going to give him a nice shampoo bath?"

"No, we're not going to give it any shampoo bath. He looks just fine. But, we'll have to butcher it!" answers his grandpa.

"We're going to do what?" startles Viet. "We can't do that, grandpa." He pauses to process the shocking news. He then pleads, "Can't we butcher something else, grandpa? Spotty has been our family pet for a long time. We can't hurt him like that!" Tears start rolling down his cheeks, and he sobs.

"I know, grandson." His grandpa tries to calm him, but he explains, "It is very tough for me to do that to Spotty too. But, we have no other choice. If we don't butcher him, we'll have nothing to eat and we'll all die of starvation. Do you understand that?"

He then gently pulled Viet close to him and gave him a kiss on his head. Viet reluctantly nodded his head as his eyes welled up with tears. Still, his heart was torn between his loyalty to his family and his love for Spotty. He did not know what to do, and he certainly did not want to disobey his grandpa.

Although he refused to kill his pet, his family insisted that he had to carry it out and help save his family. He had never seen his family or heard of anyone ever eating a dog before. But, he had no choice. He had to butcher his beloved pet to save his family. He led his favorite dog to the backyard of his home where his grandpa was



waiting for them. He saw the dog's tail wag feverishly as if it thought something great was about to happen. Perhaps Spotty remembered the times they had taken him back here to feed him or when Viet played catch with him on this same ground. It did not know what was about to happen.

Viet couldn't help but recall the classic bible story about Abraham dragging his beloved son to a mountain to sacrifice him and show his loyalty to God. Fortunately, God could see Abraham's faithfulness and decided to spare his son by giving him a ram for sacrifice instead. But, this time there was no ram or anything else to take Spotty's place.

Viet held down tight on Spotty's four legs while his grandpa butchered it. His hands were trembling and tears rolled down like a flowing river on his cheeks. He prayed and hoped that this nightmare would end soon, but he did not know when that would be. He did not like what happened to his favorite pet and yet he thanked God for the opportunity to be around his grandpa and get to know him a little better.

Viet came to respect his grandpa for the wisdom and guidance and his family in the darkest and most difficult time of their lives. He appreciated the life lessons that his grandpa taught him that day about life survival and tough choices. In real life, we will be presented with many tough choices and difficult decisions. These choices and decisions will make a person cry and tear out his or her heart. But, a wise and decent person will always pick his or her family and its survival before anything else, even if one must sacrifice his or her favorite pet. A person will surely put the interests of the whole, such as his or her family, before his or her own. Since that unforgettable day, Viet looked up to his grandpa and came to him whenever he needed guidance or wanted to know what he had to do in his daily life. Indeed, he found a wonderful source of guidance and survival in his grandpa.

Although the experience in the backyard was sad and terrifying for Viet, he learned many valuable lessons about life survival and sacrifices. In life, sometimes Viet has had to make personal sacrifices, like killing his favorite pet, to achieve something great, such as helping his family survive. Along with that personal sacrifice, Viet learned about the importance of obedience and taking orders. If he did not listen to his grandpa and do what he was asked to do, things in his home would

have never gotten done, and his family might have died from starvation. Worse yet, there would have been a big fight and chaos in his family. The greatest life lesson Viet learned is the importance of putting his family or the common good before himself and his interests. After all, without his family, his life would not be worth living. Perhaps that is why our Lord Jesus came down to earth and sacrificed His life on the Cross to keep His family together and bring them life and salvation.

Another incident that stayed with Viet until the day he died took place when he helped cook for his family during the difficult days after the Viet Nam War ended. Apparently, they did not have any fuel for cooking and had to use any material available to make a fire, including burning paper currency. Viet remembers his family handed him a stack of paper currency and told him to go cook dinner with it. He knew that the entire city of Saigon was under a strict curfew when the northern Communists took over, and everything was completely shut down. That meant he could not do anything with all that money in his hands. He knew his family would not want him to keep that stack of money for his college fund or future use. They wanted him to use that money as fuel to cook dinner for them. Perhaps that was the first time he learned that someone could use paper currency literally as fuel material. But, he did not want to waste all that money! Perhaps they might need it in the future. He reluctantly took it to the cooking site.

“Would you please help me get the fire going, Viet?” asked his grandma.

“Sure, grandma,” answered Viet. “I’ll help you.”

“Good. Thank you,” said grandma.

“What are we cooking, grandma?” inquired Viet.

“Just the usual. Some rice and some vegetable soup,” replied grandma.

“Oh, that sounds delicious. I love that, grandma!” complimented Viet. Then, he made a quick glance of the backyard and found no more wood or anything else to start the fire for cooking.

“Grandma, we have nothing here for fuel,” questioned Viet with a voice of concern. “How are we going to start the fire? What are we going to cook with?”

“Grandson, not too worried,” grandma reassured him. “I already had that figured out.”

“You do, grandma?” inquired Viet. “What is it?”

“We’re going to get our fire going with the money you’re holding in your hand,” replied grandma.

“Are you sure, grandma?” asked Viet in surprise. “But, what are we going to do in the upcoming weeks if we burn all this money?”

“You worry too much, grandson,” calmly reassured grandma. “God will take care of us tomorrow and beyond. For the Bible says, ‘Let tomorrow take care of itself. For today has troubles of its own.’ Namely, let’s just worry about today for now.” Then, she handed Viet a small stack of money bills in all sorts of denominations.

“Start the fire with all of that money,” said grandma. “I hope that’ll be enough to cook our rice and soup for today.”

“I’ll make that work, grandma,” replied Viet.

He tried to start the fire with several low-denomination bills as his hands were trembling holding the burning bills. This was the first time he had burned money. He threw in several more bills to get the fire going. He did not know how smoky it was to cook something with money bills or papers. His eyes filled with tears. But, he was not sure if that was because of the smoke or because of the stack of money he had to burn for cooking. He found it difficult to burn the high-denomination bills. Still, he had to burn all the money to cook the whole pot of rice.

On that day, grandma taught Viet many wonderful lessons about life and its survival. He learned to trust God more and not let the challenges of today make him worry too much about tomorrow. For God, our source of life and salvation, will always be here to help us. Burning that money to cook a meal also helped Viet learn to detach himself from money and worldly possessions and put the survival of his family above everything else. He began to look at life as a bigger picture and realized that he should not focus and live for money and worldly things. Rather, he should live and work for a higher purpose, namely, his family. Doing so would add more flavor to his life and make it worth living.

As Viet has matured in his life, he often looked back on this cooking experience and would be grateful for many valuable life lessons it left with him. He learned that money and worldly possessions should not be the purpose of his life. For their values would run out at some point, just like that stack of money in his hands that day.

All it was good for was to be used for cooking. Furthermore, money comes and goes. He might have thought it was the end of the world when he saw his family burn all their valuable assets to survive. But, the truth is that provided his family was safe and could survive through these Apocalypse-like days, they would be able to work hard and rebuild that fortune with the help of God. Sometimes, people become too attached to money and worldly possessions, and hence they become selfish and greedy with God's blessings for them. They hold on tightly to those things, and do not want to share those blessings with people around them, especially the poor and the misfortunate. They let worldly things shackle them, take over their lives, and put a value on all their relationships.

What they do not realize is that God gives them all those worldly things to serve God and one another. Instead, they become slaves to worldly things and treat all relationships around them like trash. In the end, all they get is a stack of money without anyone to share it with.

What Viet learned from that cooking experience is totally opposite of what the world often tells us. He learned that what matters the most at the end of the day is the relationships that he could save and maintain. He was proud and honored that he could help save his family's lives and preserve its peace amidst chaos and destruction. That cooking experience forever changed his view of money and worldly possessions and began to shape his life mission.

Throughout human history, there have been all kinds of conflicts and wars. In addition, there have been an endless number of natural and manmade disasters. All these events have created a sense of Apocalypse or the Last Day, pain, suffering, tears, sadness, hunger, death, chaos, uncertainty, hopelessness, and other headaches. Many lives have been displaced, whereas others have lost their lives or faced seemingly unbearable challenges. We wonder where these poor victims could possibly find strength and help move forward from their piles of rubble. Surprisingly, even in those dark and depressing moments, we can still find God's presence and saving power. For wherever there is love, one will be able to find God's saving power.

Surely there was plenty of love in Viet's family. That was enough to warrant God's saving power for them amid the death and destruction of the Viet Nam War. Viet and his family were saved

because of their love for each other. That love, along with God's love for them, helped shelter them from the flying bullets and hopeless situation at the end of the Viet Nam War. Through that ordeal, Viet also learned to put his family and love for Jesus above his own life. That gave him the courage and willingness to make many personal sacrifices for his family. He was happy to do anything for his Lord Jesus and family, including laying down his life for them. He simply imitated what his Savior taught him: "There is no greater love than this, one lays down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). Love is what saved the day, even the Apocalypse day.

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## Chapter 2

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### Searching for Reasons to Live in the Land of the Dead

The love of God and their love for each other were what saved Viet and his family during the days of the Apocalypse. But, that was just the beginning of his long and amazing adventure through life. Viet and his family survived those horrible days at the end of the Viet Nam War. The days of martial law and curfews thankfully came to an end and life was supposedly back to normal. However, it was not quite normal at all. Viet and his countrymen now had to live under the rules and control of the Communists. After defeating the United States-backed regime of South Viet Nam, the Communists of North Viet Nam united the entire country and established a new government in Viet Nam.

The first order of business for the new government was to round up all the personnel of the South Viet Nam regime. Although the Communists harbored anger and revenge against their countrymen in the South who collaborated with the United States, they hid that dark emotion and their wicked intentions in rounding up their former enemies. They established hundreds of reeducation camps around the country, even in Siberia, with Russia carrying out their roundups and detaining men and women of the former regime. They told the public and the world that these men and women had betrayed their country and followed a foreign government like the United States and its corrupted way of life. Now they must repay their debts and sins that they committed against their country by attending the camps for “just a week” and learning about all the wonderful things that Uncle Ho—the Communist leader—would give them. The new government claimed they had misunderstood Communism and Socialism. They needed to be reeducated and enlightened about the new way of life. After they got to know Communism and Socialism better, they would gladly embrace it and see the many wonderful things it would bring to society, families, and individuals. They claimed everyone would have a better life, and their society would be the envy of the world. But, the