**The Things They Carried 🡪 Inference activity and Journal Guidelines**

**Tim O’Brien**

We all carry things with us in our purses, wallets, pockets, backpacks, etc. For most of us, we have at least one or two items that we consider **must-haves,** things we cannot live without, things if forgotten, we feel incomplete.

**Procedure:**

1. In your journals, divide a fresh page into three columns.
   1. Label the first column: **NAME**
   2. Label the second column: **ITEM**
   3. Label the third column: **INFERENCES**
2. Think for a moment or two about one item that you carry with you always. In the space below, write down the significance of this object.
   1. Be prepared to share this with the class.
3. Each student will go around the room and share what his/her item is and explain its significance to him/her.
   1. Audience members are asked to write down each classmate’s name and item discussed.
4. After each student has shared, let’s take 5-10 minutes to write down INFERENCES for each person and item. In other words, based on what each student carries with him/her—what can we infer about this person?
   1. **Inference**: a conclusion reached on the basis of evidence (what you are told/what you see) and reasoning (what you already know).
   2. **Example**: If a student carries an inhaler because he/she has asthma, we can infer that health and life is really important to him/her. If it weren’t, then he/she wouldn’t bother to make it a priority to carry around something that could potentially be a lifesaver.
5. Share Out: We will share some inferences made—we won’t have time to discuss all.
   1. Things to consider-
      1. Can inferences be wrong?
      2. How can they be wrong?
      3. Can inferences be right?
      4. How can they be right?
6. Connection: In the novel The Things They Carried by Tim O’Brien, each character carries something either physically, mentally, emotionally, or sometimes—all of the above. Each item will hold some sort of significance and it will become a major focal point as we read this novel.
7. TASK: As you read the assigned sections of this novel, I am going to ask you not only to answer reading comprehension questions but also I will require you to keep a journal. The guidelines for your journal entries are on the backside of this assignment sheet.

**JOURNAL GUIDELINES**

You will not be required to write a journal entry for each chapter—in fact some chapters are clumped together. Make sure you do not lose this piece of paper because it has all of your journal prompts for this novel.

**Directions**: Each journal entry must be labeled (Journal 1 + Date). Though there is no word minimum or maximum, it is important that you flush your ideas out completely. Each journal will be graded based on three things: whether or not you answered the prompt(s), how much effort you put into it—did you just shoot for the bare minimum? Did your response seem rushed?, and whether or not the entry was turned in on time.

**Journal 1:**

***The Things We Carry***: This journal will reflect on the different things we carry with us on a daily basis…both the tangible and intangible things. There are questions below to get you thinking and writing, but let the questions inspire commentary and questioning about the things we carry and the things that weigh most heavily on us.

What intangible things do you ‘carry’ with you (for example parental pressures, responsibility, etc.)? What weighs more heavily on you: the tangible or intangible things?

**Journal 2:**

“Love” and “Spin”

Re-read the last paragraph of “Spin” that begins, “Forty three years old and the war occurred…” In this paragraph, O’Brien reflects on the function of “the story” and memories. He says, “And sometimes remembering will lead to a story, which makes it forever. That’s what stories are for. Stories are for joining the past to the future.”

Your assignment is to recall a memory or an event that you would like to make forever (you will make it forever by writing it into history). Is there an event in your life or an experience that was so vivid, powerful or memorable that you would like to write it down so you never forget it? It could be a childhood memory or a recent one…but your goal is to write a vignette (short story) to give it life. Be as specific as possible and recall with detail and specificity.

**Journal 3:**

“On the Rainy River”

***Complete Parts 1 and 2 of this task:***

**Part 1: Reflecting on O’Brien…**

O’Brien calls himself a coward for going to war. *Why* does he consider himself a coward? Do *you* think he was cowardice or brave in deciding to go to war? Explain. What do you think you would have done?

**Part 2: Connecting it to now…**

The war in Iraq has often been referred to as the “new Vietnam,” so much so, it had been suggested that a draft might have been implemented. In addition, the refusal of the government to release military personal (after their service time is up) from duty has been called a “reverse draft.” What are your feelings on these issues? Do you think we could ever find ourselves in another Vietnam? If put in O’Brien’s shoes (if a draft were implemented in the US now), what would you do and why?

**Journal 4:**

“How to Tell a True War Story”

Directions: Answer the following questions.

1. Return to the short story, “How to Tell a True War Story.” Find and list as many elements of a true war story as possible. Look for the following phrases for prompts:

* “A true war story…..”
* “You can tell a true war story by… ”
* “True war stories do/do not…”

1. Now re-read and think about the list of elements of a true war story. How do these elements affect and influence your responses, as a reader, to the stories in this chapter and in this book?
2. According to O’Brien, why are stories important?
3. What is more disturbing to you, the death of Curt Lemon or the killing of the baby water buffalo? Explain your reasons.
4. On the last page of the story, O’Brien says this story was “not a war story. It was a love story.” What does he mean by this? In what sense was “How to Tell a True War Story” a love story?

**Journal 5:**

“Metaphors for War”

In the style of O’Brien, create at least 5 metaphors (or similes) for war. These metaphors can be about actual combat, about being on the home front, watching it on the news, hearing the stories, seeing the pictures, etc. Like O’Brien, your metaphors must also explain themselves. Be creative, not simplistic or predictable. Use creativity, figurative language and imagery.

# **Journal 6:**

“The Sweetheart of Song Tra Bong”

# **Psychology – the study of mind and behavior**

**DID MARY ANNE GO MAD?????????????????????**

Mary Anne Bell underwent drastic changes in behavior and personality while visiting her boyfriend in Vietnam. Perhaps Mary Anne “went crazy” …or… perhaps the behaviors and characteristics Mary exhibited in Vietnam were there all along, waiting to be ignited. What do you think?

Write a **psychological analysis** of Mary Anne Bell. Consider and explain what the reader knows of Mary Anne before she came to Vietnam, her gradual changes in personality and behavior, and her concluding actions and state of mind. Make connections between what is possibly going on in her mind and how it is revealing itself through action. Ultimately, answer the question: **Has Mary Anne gone insane or has she found her true self?**

*Become a psychologist! Get into the mind of Mary Anne; analyze and try to explain her behavior. Be conclusive…although we are not certified psychologists, we can come to conclusions and have fun with this. Your analysis should be at least one page in length.*

**Journal 7:**

“Stockings” “Church” “The Man I Killed”

For this journal, you will choose 1 of the above stories as the inspiration for your writing. Before completing this journal, you should reread the story in its entirety:

* If you choose “Stockings,” your entry should be about some aspect of superstitions (superstitions in general, why people have them, your superstitions, or some other related topic).
* If you choose “Church,” you should choose 1 quote from the story as the springboard for your entry. There are lots of good quotes and questions about religion, God, why bad things happen to good people, etc. Please state the quote first.
* If you choose “The Man I Killed,” your journal should be about a life-changing moment or event. How did this moment or event change you, your outlooks, beliefs, how you see yourself and/or the world around you? Try and be as specific as possible when describing this person or incident, like O’Brien is describing the man he killed.

**Journal 8:**

“Speaking of Courage” and “Notes”

Metafiction – writing that refers to the process of writing. Often it explores the relationship between fiction and reality, memory and consciousness. Metafiction is self-reflexive and introspective in nature.

*Task: Write a* ***metafictive*** *journal entry. Explore your own writing processes. How do you approach different types of writing (creative, poetry, essay, journal, etc.)? What do you like or dislike about writing and WHY? Can you remember your first writing experiences…how your writing has developed?*

**Journal 9:**

Creative Writing - Happening Truth v. Story Truth

For this journal you will tell 2 versions of the same story: the “happening truth” and the “story truth.” The first thing you should do is come up with the bare bones of the story (the basic facts). Your story can be a war story but need not be. It can be about most anything. Then you should write your 2 versions based on the bare bones.

Your “happening truth” should be about one paragraph and will **have little to none of the following**:

* elaboration
* use of metaphors or figurative language
* reflection
* lies or stretched truths

Your “story truth” should sound like and imitate the stories O’Brien tells (or stories his characters tell). Your “story truth” should be at least one page in length and include:

* deviations from facts or ‘truths’ in “happening truth”
* plentiful use of figurative language (metaphors, imagery, personification, etc.)
* dialogue
* reflections or commentary on meanings or morals

**Journal 10:**

**Choose one journal below as your final entry.**

1. In “Ghost Soldiers,” Tim struggles with feelings of **revenge and remorse**, a powerful duo. Write a journal entry in which you explore these feelings, experiences you’ve had with them and/or the power they can have over a person, or the power they’ve had over you.

2. In “Field Trip” and “The Lives of the Dead,” the innocence of children is juxtaposed with the disillusionment of adulthood, death and reality. Choose one of the statements below, taken from the stories, and write your final journal based on it.

***“Death Sucks.” “I’m trying to save \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_’s life with a story.”***

3. *The Power of Pictures…*

In many of the stories within *The Things They Carried*, photographs serve important functions. Do you have a photograph that serves important emotional, spiritual or superstitious purposes? Write about that picture. Explain the power it has, its importance to you, where, how or when you carry it with you. Maybe even include it in your portfolio!