

The Vietnam Memorial: A parable for leadership

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The other day [I heard Maya Lin](#) talk about her design for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington DC. I've visited the wall many times, and it's always crowded with people, many of them deeply moved by the v-shaped black granite gash in the earth.

The memorial seems brilliant, even inevitable now, as if the memorial couldn't have possibly looked any other way. But at the time, it was controversial, scandalous. Many Vietnam veterans fought it. They wanted something more traditional. A few concessions were made—a flag, a statue of a soldier—but through it all, Lin remained convicted and steadfast to her vision and her design.

The night before the memorial was dedicated, Lin was touring the space when a Vietnam veteran walked up to her. He was a big guy, an imposing guy, and he was livid at what he saw. He lit into her, practically pinning her to the wall with his rage, asking, How dare she do this?

As I listened to this story, I imagined what it would have been like to be Maya Lin, and to be the focus of such ire. Then I realized that of course, it has happened to me, though on a more modest scale. One time in the church I used to serve, we made a decision to change the way we served communion. It was the right decision, and we communicated our purposes the best we could. But a man left that day and made a beeline for me: *How could you do this? How dare you do this?* I received his rancor as non-anxiously as I could, but inside my heart sank and I was flooded with doubt.

I was expecting Lin to admit to similar feelings, but she responded differently. As she listened to the veteran, and heard all of that pain tumbling out, she thought to herself, ***It's working. The wall is doing exactly what I'd hoped it would do.***

Pastors, leaders, and any of us in the transformation business: take heed. When you touch people emotionally, people may lash out. But that's not necessarily a sign to stop. It can be a sign to stand firm, or if you dare, to go deeper.

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