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Bill Schlotter

UCSB's Capps Center to Celebrate 25th Anniversary of Founding of Healing Class on Religion and the Impact of the Vietnam War

Jonathan Shay, a specialist in combat psychiatric trauma, will give the keynote talk at a celebration honoring the 25th anniversary of the founding of Walter Capps's groundbreaking UC Santa Barbara class on the legacy of the Vietnam War, Sunday, March 7 at 3 p.m. in Campbell Hall on the UCSB campus.

The event is free and open to the public.

Examining the legacy of the just-concluded war in Vietnam in the late 1970s, Capps, then a professor of religious studies at UCSB, looked around and saw an American social fabric in tatters after years of bitter argument over the war's morality and prosecution.

Seeing his nation damaged, he wanted to extend a healing hand of reconciliation.

Capps offered that hand to his students in 1978 in the form of "Religion and the Impact of Vietnam," believed to be the first college class in the nation to examine the effects of the war on American religion and culture.

The class routinely attracted 850 students per session. It also attracted the attention of "60 Minutes," the CBS television news magazine.

Capps is gone now, victim of a heart attack in 1997 soon after leaving academic life for a seat in Congress.

But his vision lives on, embodied in UCSB's Walter H. Capps Center for the Study of Religion and Public Life. Also speaking Sunday will be Congresswoman Lois Capps, Walter Capps' widow and his successor in Congress; and Vietnam veterans and students who participated in the classes.

With America again divided by war and with young American service people returning home scarred by their experiences in Iraq, the Capps class is perhaps as pertinent as ever. It continues to be offered at UCSB and is now taught by Richard Hecht, a professor of religious studies.

Sunday's speaker Jonathan Shay brings an array of experience working with traumatized veterans. A staff psychiatrist in the Department of Veteran Affairs Outpatient Clinic in Boston, Shay has written two important books on the mental health of combat troops, "Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character," (1995) and "Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming" (2003).

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