Michael Barnhouse wrote his essay “I Went Downtown 1968” for Dr. Heaphy’s Recent U.S.: 1929 to the Present class.

I went downtown to experience the “Politics of Joy,” Hubert Humphrey’s theme as he runs for president of these oh-so United States. I went downtown to watch people, to see how they move, how they interact—to innocently stalk the innocent. I went downtown to swim in the circus outside of the Democratic National Convention and to suck up all the life. I needed the energy from the protesters like Popeye needs spinach. I went downtown to look through the window of life and remember who I once was, before Vietnam.

I went to Vietnam because it was the right thing to do, just ask my dad. I had always done what was right. I had nice friends, got good grades, played football, dated nice girls, graduated from high school and dad got me a job at the steel mill. I had aced the early program for American life: baseball, apple pie and Mom. Then the US government decided I was needed to serve in their army. It was my “once in a lifetime” opportunity to serve my country with honor—honor, duty, country. I could care less about Southeast Asia, and I thought about running away. Accepting to go to Vietnam felt like getting behind the wheel of a car that you knew had no brakes; however, there never really was an option. How could I let down Dad’s buddies at the VFW, or Mom’s friends at church, or the old man next door, or my baseball coach? I was the star pupil, remember? It was black and white ... baseball, apple pie, Mom, honor, duty, country.

Vietnam introduced me to a world of grays. It seems pretty clear cut on the surface, in that you go into the war not wanting to die, or kill. When you start dropping buddies though, the ambiguities pop up like mushrooms all around you. The fact is that war is hideous and beautiful.1 Men are capable of shooting women and children; nevertheless they are able to selflessly care for a stray puppy. The fact is that war teaches value: you are never more alive than when you are almost dead.²

You dread the hump, yet you crave the adrenaline and camaraderie. Death is the game, but in Vietnam, most of the time your opponent was invisible or disguised as a youngster asking for candy. This increases the stress which runs like acid down inside of you, and you see the dead alive again.³ This increases the mania, yet the stories you retell about the dead somehow make sense and calm you. Vietnam is filled with ghosts, because the dead will live in stories.

The ghosts of Vietnam will haunt me forever, and I view life differently. The war itself was a struggle to hang onto goodness and hope. A fight for the naiveté you had before the war, when things were still black and white. You battle for that person inside you, the pure person you were as a kid, by using stories to tie together your life and remember who you are.⁴ The cultural themes which control our society mean absolutely nothing in the bush. It was surreal chaos.

So, I went downtown to witness what sort of chaos the sardonic Yippies, and other protesters could whip up. I was glad to see the Yippie candidate for president was there, a fat young pig who went squealing through the crowds.⁵ It was mostly just kids marching and joining in the profanity laced chanting of slogans: “Hell no, we won’t go,” “F**k the pigs.”⁶ On the last day of the convention, even after several days of beating and gassing from 12,000 police, the protesters put the word out to meet at Grant Park then march to the convention hall. I was there, moving amongst the crowd said to number about 10,000. They were broken up by billy club toting police and National Guard shortly after the US flag was removed from its pole by protesters and replaced with a red T-shirt.

Considering my recent military experience, I was not concerned for my safety. I moved through the crowd like a ghost, never letting the cops out-flank me. As I walked down Michigan Ave. with several thousand marchers, I reveled in their passion and innocent support for their cause. The mood was intoxicating. All were chanting “Peace Now! Peace Now!” as they moved toward the police line set up in front of the Hilton downtown.⁷ As the kids began taunting the police, I could see a change in the posture of the cops; this was to be the end of it. I have seen what men are capable of when they have reached their wits end, and I flashed back to a hamlet in Vietnam as
the police poured into the crowd. They beat anything that moved - demonstrators, politicians, journalists, doctors attending to the injured." We entered the village and shot anything that moved, and then burned it to the ground. The sound of a crying Vietnamese baby mixes with screaming demonstrators, "Sieg heil! Sieg heil!"; "The whole world is watching!" The police beat them all the way to the patty wagons, blood and tear gas was everywhere. I moved away into the mist.

I went downtown in search of hope, only to be reminded of the sickness man carries in his heart. The kind of sickness that is responsible for the bloodbath in Vietnam. However, I am encouraged by the purity of purpose of most of the protesters, and their strength of conviction. I envy them, because I doubt if I can believe in anything ever again.

2 Ibid, O'Brien, 80.
3 Ibid, O'Brien, 34.
7 Ibid, Anderson, 122.
8 Ibid, Anderson, 123.