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Monk, Vietnam veteran helps others find healing

BOOKS



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WORCESTER — There will always be war, unless we first find peace within ourselves.

That is the message Claude Anshin Thomas, a Zen Buddhist monk and Vietnam War veteran, delivers in his travels throughout the world by being a living example of peace rather than arguing, demonstrating or marching for it.

His itinerary led him to Assumption College in Worcester May 6. He had been invited to speak by Project New Hope, a local program that provides free services to combat veterans and their families.

Mr. Thomas, author of "At Hell's Gate, a Soldier's Journey from War to Peace," is very familiar with the concerns those veterans face. He, too, struggled with post-traumatic stress disorder after his Vietnam service from 1966 to 1967. He was only 17 when he volunteered for active duty, but soon became an assault-helicopter crew chief. By the time he was 18 he had been shot down five times and had killed hundreds of people. He was honorably discharged from the U.S. Army in August 1968.

When he returned home, Mr. Thomas, like many veterans, found it impossible to re-enter society and pick up where he had left off. Addiction, isolation, homelessness and despair became his daily reality. Eventually, after performing several years with his rock band and earning a master's degree in business management from Lesley College, he began a serious study of martial arts. He became accomplished in the Shaolin Kung Fu and Hap Ki Do traditions.

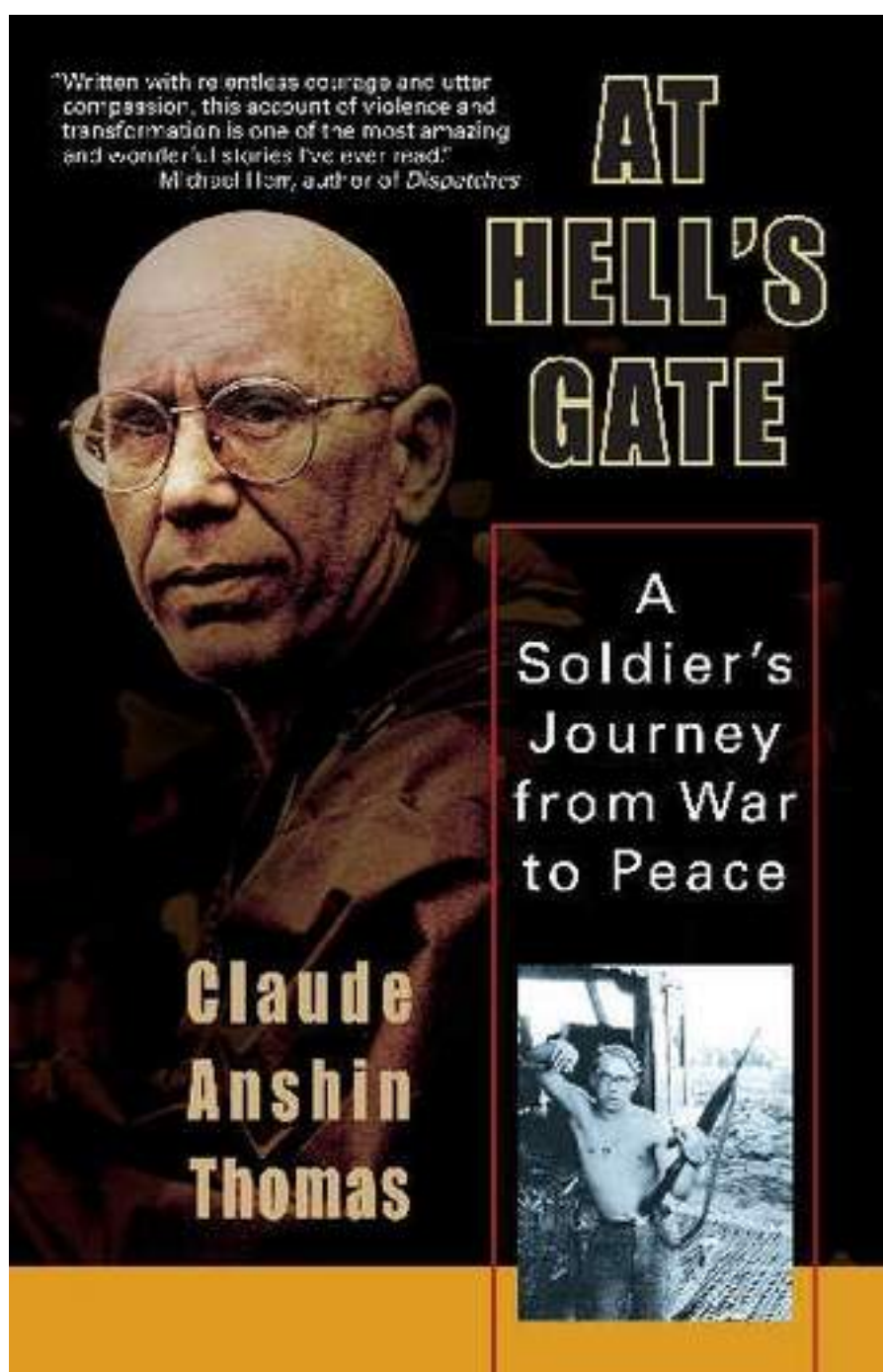
In the early 1990s, he became a member of the Vietnamese monastery and retreat center, Plum Village, in southern France, where he was guided by the venerable Thich Nhat Hanh, who founded the monastery while exiled in France. It was there, he said, he was awakened to the devastating and lasting effects of war, and how to find healing. He was ordained a Zen Buddhist monk in 1995, and made it his life's work to help others find healing.

"It's critical for us to wake up to the roots of war within us," Mr. Thomas said, shortly before taking the podium at Assumption May 6. True to his Zen calling, Mr. Thomas exudes an air of gentleness and calm.

"The roots of suffering are not external. They're personal," he said. "Even if apparently the causes are external, it's still personal because there's nothing I can do to change what is external, but what I can do is work differently with myself."

As a mendicant, Mr. Thomas cannot live in a permanent home more than three months out of the year. When that time comes, home is the Zaltho Foundation in the Florida panhandle, a spiritually-based foundation committed to ending violence. The rest of the time he travels where he is invited, and it's usually not some nice peaceful church group he's visiting. Just before arriving at Assumption, he was at Gardner state prison, speaking with inmates.

"I work a lot with cultures of violence, because of my own background having been a combat soldier in Vietnam and having had the support to navigate the very complicated terrain of healing and transformation, which is not the absence of suffering. It's learning to live in a different relationship with it," he said.



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