

The Things They Carried: “Speaking of Courage” and “Notes”:

Name: _____

1. To begin with, why is this story called “Speaking of Courage”? Assume the title does NOT hold any irony. In what sense does this story speak of courage?
2. Why does Norman Bowker still feel inadequate with seven medals? And why is Norman’s father such a presence in his mental life? Would it really change Norman’s life if he had eight medals, the Silver Star, etc.?
3. What happened to Kiowa? Where did this happen?
4. What is the more difficult problem for Norman – the lack of the Silver Star or the death of Kiowa? Which does he consider more and why?
5. Like other male characters in this novel (for example Tim O’Brien and Lt. Jimmy Cross), Norman Bowker develops an active fantasy life. Why do these men develop these fantasy roles? What do they get from telling these fantasy stories to themselves?
6. Why is Norman unable to relate to anyone at home? More importantly, why doesn’t he even try?

7. In "Notes," Tim O'Brien receives a letter from Norman Bowker, the main character in "Speaking of Courage." Why does O'Brien choose to include excerpts from this seventeen page letter in this book? What does it accomplish?
8. What happened to Norman Bowker? Why?
9. What did Bowker want Tim to tell a story about? What was his reaction to the first version of the story? How and why did Tim change the original story?
10. What does the narrator say about his transition from Vietnam to civilian life? Do you think this is true? Give evidence to support your answer.
11. Who else felt responsible for Kiowa's death?
12. Consider for a moment that the letter might be made-up, a work of fiction. Why include it then?
13. In "Notes," Tim O'Brien says, "You start sometimes with an incident that truly happened, like the night in the shit field, and you carry it forward by inventing incidents that did not in fact occur but that nonetheless help to clarify and explain it." What does this tell you about O'Brien's understanding of the way fiction relates to real life?