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Odysseus' "Wounded Healer": New Insights on the Therapeutic Value of Veteran Responses to Homer's Odyssey

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Abstract

Existing research identifies the value in exposing military veterans to Homer's *Odyssey* for the timeless human questions that the epic presents regarding the veteran's reintegration into civilian society. This paper presents new insights regarding the therapeutic value for military veterans in incorporating journal writing into an undergraduate humanities course—in particular, a course that examines epic classics in literature such as Homer's *Odyssey*. Central to the learning outcomes presented here, veterans in this course were encouraged to examine the *Odyssey*, not as a mirror of their own lives and not necessarily for instructions on how to transition from military to civilian life. Rather than approach the epic as veterans reading about another veteran, they were asked to assume the role of literary scholars examining a literary artifact that is rich in timeless human stories. This scholarly "control" on their interpretive lens liberated veterans to make deeply human connections with the epic's human questions—rather than singularly military connections. As this paper discusses, one of the most striking features in the journal reflections that veterans produced in this course was a tendency to advise the epic hero, rather than attach to him. Carl Jung identifies this perspective as that of the "wounded healer": In counseling Odysseus how to face his reentry challenges, the veteran counsels himself; in healing the wounded one, the wounded healer heals himself.

Keywords: veterans, pedagogy, Homer's *Odyssey*, Carl Jung

Introduction

I had been teaching Homer's *Odyssey* to college students for many years before a student veteran challenged me to truly teach it—to truly hear the life instructions given to us in a song sung nearly 3,000 years ago. A Marine who had served two tours in Iraq and one in Afghanistan, Cody (we will call him), was older than the majority of students in my humanities class. Were it not for his excellent scores on tests, I might have guessed that he had simply checked a box when he enrolled in my course. Notably reliable, Cody routinely submitted his assignments on time, never missed a class, and was always alert. And yet, despite the fact that our class format relied heavily on discussion, Cody did not utter a single word in our first two months together.

Halfway into our semester we were examining a scene in Homer's *Odyssey* where Odysseus visits the underworld, the land of the dead. Among epic heroes around the world— Gilgamesh, Osiris, and Aeneas, to name a few—the hero candidate's visit with the dead is his final and most difficult stop in his journey home. It is where he reunites with those who have died next to him in battle; it is where he is buoyed by consultation with his dead parents; and it is where he takes stock of his previous mistakes and measures his mettle to go on. The ancient Greeks call this descent into the underworld a *katabasis—a going down* which, if the hero is to emerge victorious, must be followed by a *going up*. Symbolically speaking, if resurrection (*anastasis*) does not follow this descent (*katabasis)*, then mere death will occur (Nagy). As renowned mythologist Joseph Campbell notes, the underworld is the place where the hero candidate must either embrace spiritual healing—or surrender to a future marked by loss and confusion. It is where the hero chooses to say *yes* to living—or *yes* to taking himself out of this life (*Collected Works*, 75).

This caught Cody's attention.

"I've been to the underworld," he offered in a quiet tone.

And then, "Does he make it?... Does Odysseus make it out and get home?"

It was clear to me that we were not just talking about Odysseus here.

"Yes, Cody," I responded, "Yes, he makes it out… and yes, he makes it home ... alive."

"Good," Cody answered, "looking forward to it."

For most of us, Homer's *Odyssey* celebrates a soldier whose champion wit saves him in a series of epic scrapes with sea gods, cyclopes, and seductresses in a ten-year contest at sea. Yet, for veterans like Cody, Homer's *Odyssey* tells a different story. Odysseus is our first hero in western literature whose glory will not be earned in combat against enemies in foreign lands. Rather, his glory will be earned in the battle at home*:* in the struggle to transition from combat to civilian life; from military commander to fellow citizen; and in his attempt to resume his role as a husband, a father, and a son. As Classics scholar Charlotte Higgins states in her article, "The Odyssey: A Soldier's Road Home":

> *The Odyssey* invites us to ask: Can soldiers ever, truly return home? Will they "recognize" their family and vice versa? Can they survive not just the war itself, but the war's aftermath? Will they, in some dread way, bring the war home with them? *The Odyssey* says: you thought it was tough getting through the war. Now, see if you can get through the nostos, the homecoming.

Because it is in the field of the *nostos*, the homecoming, that as college and university professors we greet the enrolled veteran, we have no choice but to accept Higgins' questions to the returning veteran as our challenge as well. To this purpose, I created a course in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* at my university exclusively for veterans. Of the 6,500 students enrolled at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Daytona Beach, approximately 10% are military veterans—a majority of whom are combat veterans. While I was not entirely clear what my learning objectives were, I saw a need to provide a space for self-examination for these veterans. *Who better,* I thought, *to help educators understand our student veterans' transition from combat to civilian life if not the veterans themselves?* Their reflections on this subject as it relates to their own lives and as it is inflected in Homer's *Odyssey* were produced over the course of four years in journal entries and in formal essays—a selection of which I will be sharing here with their consent and anonymously.

In brief, the journal reflections that these veterans produced ultimately revealed unanticipated, but remarkably fruitful insights regarding how Homer's *Odyssey*—and certainly many classical works in literature—can be used as a therapeutic tool for reentering veterans.

In reading Homer's *Odyssey* with veterans, I had expected the possibility that by engaging with the traumas of combat and reentry endured by Homer's Odysseus, veterans might engage with their own traumas—and frankly, I was vaguely alarmed by this possibility. As a professor of Classics and a poet, not a therapist and not a veteran, I wondered if I was in over my head. What I discovered instead was a result that I had not counted on: Again and again in their journals, these veterans not only *connected* with Odysseus in his efforts to return home from battle, but they also assumed the role of *counselor* to Odysseus. Frequently assuming the perspective of an *advisor* to Odysseus, their journal reflections present an empathy toward Odysseus that reads like an affirmation of a human being that only a combat veteran could offer to another combat veteran. In their journals, they are forgiving of Odysseus's bravado; they nod understandably when Odysseus gets detained on his journey home by an extra-marital affair with a goddess named Circe; and finally, when Odysseus—upon his arrival home to Ithaca—cannot bring himself to tell his wife what he has done and seen in combat, these veterans in their journal reflections *talk for Odysseus*.

In his study of archetypes, Carl Jung identifies the perspective that these veterans assumed in their journal reflections as that of the "wounded healer" (Jung, 115). The term derives from the ancient Greek legend of Asclepius, a Greek doctor who, in recognition of his own wounds, established a sanctuary at Epidaurus where others could be healed of their "wounds." In explaining

the concept of the *wounded healer*, Jung states that it is the physician's own wound that gives him the power to heal another's wound.

It is his own hurt that gives [the healer] a measure of his power to heal (Jung, 116).

And, as Jung points out, it is in healing the wounded one that the healer himself becomes well. As their journal entries will demonstrate, it is precisely this position of the *wounded healer* that these veterans assume, again and again, in their engagement with Homer's wounded Odysseus.

This Jungian identification with the epic hero becomes most amplified with Odysseus's actual reentry. When Odysseus finally arrives home in Ithaca, after ten years in combat and ten years at sea, he arrives in disguise—ostensibly to carry out in secret the kind of reconnaissance that Odysseus is known for. For the past several years, Odysseus' wife has been harassed by young Ithacan men that assume Odysseus is dead. His wife is at her wits end and his 20-year-old son is spiritually lost. Upon his return to Ithaca, the only person who seems to "recognize" Odysseus is a nurse who washes his feet when he enters his home. The complex metaphor of the returning warrior who comes home in "disguise" is not lost on the combat veteran: As one veteran writes in his journal:

> When Odysseus returns home, he carries on as if he's disguised himself to determine whether he can trust the people that he's encountering….But, actually, what I think he really wants to know is if anyone recognizes him anymore. I think he actually really wants people to identify him under his "disguise" as a beggar. He wants them to tell him that he has not changed and that he is the same man that they knew before—even though he knows he isn't. This makes sense – and Odysseus should feel no guilt about his tactic of disguising himself. It's called survival.

The complex analysis and empathy with which this veteran *absolves* Odysseus of guilt and even *advises* the epic hero —as in the comment, "Odysseus should feel no guilt about his tactic of disguising himself"—would seem to spring from a closeness to Odysseus's suffering that the veteran himself knows. In offering an analysis of Odysseus's reentry experiences, he relies upon his own reentry experiences. In probing the wounds that Odysseus has disguised, he safely shares the wounds that he himself has disguised. Furthermore, this veteran is not simply *connecting* with Odysseus; he is also *counseling* him—and in turn, according to Jung, he is counseling himself. "It's called survival," the veteran writes. According to Jung, in performing the role of the *wounded healer*—the one who empathizes with the wounded Odysseus and who faces his demons *for him*—the wounded veteran heals himself. Given the confidence and clarity with which this veteran presents his *diagnosis* of Odysseus, it would appear that Jung has it right.

Also worth noting: the veteran writer in the passage quoted above *applauds* Odysseus for disguising himself—not so that he can stay alive in a *foreign country* among *enemy fighters*, *but so that he can survive in his own country among friends and family.* For this veteran, as for Odysseus, survival skills honed in battle become survival skills employed upon reentry. In the words of another veteran:

> I served in Afghanistan in the Marines for five years as an infantryman. I know, like Odysseus knows, what it is like to go to combat with another human being who is bent on destroying you and your comrades. You learn not to trust people if you want to stay alive. After a while everything looks like a trojan horse. Odysseus gets this.

The challenges for the returning Odysseus, according to these veteran journal reflections, are their challenges as well: *to clarify who in our homeland is an ally; who can be trusted; who will love us after we have been changed by the horrors of war?*

But, as explained by another veteran, it is also apparent that these veterans see the work that they themselves must do: the self-healing that they themselves must undertake in reentering after combat:

> Odysseus had to be guided by the gods to find his way home. It is not unheard of for returning Sailors, Soldiers, and Marines to NOT have a very strong recollection of "home". When we are away for so long, we become entranced by the mission. Upon our return we feel lost in our home town. The god's guidance for Odysseus in reaching home looks to me like "muscle memory." I've called on those gods.

The authority and personal empathy with which these veterans usher Odysseus home in their journal reflections would seem to speak to a desire to usher themselves home. And yet, as one veteran identifies, the new roles and new responsibilities that accompany reentry are not easily absorbed by even the best of warriors:

> Soldiers are trained to kill. Men are trained to contribute to society. Odysseus knows that he is good in combat. However, he is unsure if he will be a good father or if he'll still have a wife. Odysseus has never met his son. Although he [Odysseus] wants to be home, the thought of possibly being a bad father might be holding him back, unbeknownst to him.

It is notable that what is *unbeknownst* to Odysseus in this veteran's journal reflection is—at least for the moment—as clear as day to the veteran who is analyzing the epic hero. If we accept Jung's theory of the *wounded healer*, this veteran's journal reflection makes sense: Where Odysseus cannot explain his own fear of failed fatherhood, the veteran—who shares Odysseus's fear—*can* explain it. Where Odysseus believes he has disguised himself simply to do reconnaissance in his own town, the veteran can explain the layers of fear attached to this disguise. And when, upon his return to Ithaca, Odysseus does not go directly to his home to reunite with his wife and son, but instead wanders in disguise among favorite places in his town, this is not—as we might imagine—so that Odysseus can acquire needed information regarding his homeland. Instead, as one veteran explains it, this is *every* reentering veteran trying to remember what *home* looks like:

> In the first few days of coming home from a long deployment, I would often climb in my car and simply drive. I wouldn't have a destination. I would just go. Every time I would end up at a place of significance to me, making it there without actually thinking of it as my destination. This is exactly what Odysseus is doing when he wanders from place to place in his first few days home. He is trying to remember what home looks like.

In his widely-hailed book, *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming*, psychiatrist Jonathan Shay examines the experiences of combat veterans through the lens of Homer's *Odyssey*. It is here that Shay characterizes Homer's Odysseus as "a sleazy ass-kisser," haunted by "grim and despicable failures of leadership" (78). Shay continues that "everywhere I turn I stub my toe on the defects of his [Odysseus's] character." Ultimately, Shay concludes, "Odysseus shows us how *not* to return from combat" (231).

One explanation for Shay's negative assessment of Homer's Odysseus could be, as Christopher McDonough points out, "Though [Shay] begins to read *The Odyssey* 'as an allegory for real problems for combat veterans returning to civilian society' … he soon starts to analyze the hero as though he were a real person (n.p.)."

Unlike Shay—in fact, diametrically opposed to Shay—I encouraged the veterans with whom I worked to regard Homer's Odysseus as a *fictional* character—as a fictional character that embodied the phantoms of war. For these veterans in my courses, Odysseus became what T.S. Eliot in his famous literary study, *The Sacred Wood*, calls the "objective correlative." To adapt Eliot's concept means that Odysseus becomes for the veterans in my course "an embodiment of a situation and a chain of events; he becomes a formula for a set of emotions that the poet hopes to evoke in the reader" (Eliot, 92). As a consequence, their journal reflections invited them to engage with Homer's epic as human beings engage with *art* – and to therefore reflect more objectively upon *Odysseus's* struggles—rather than on their own struggles. To start with Odysseus, rather than the veterans

themselves, is to defuse what might otherwise become a combustible learning experience. From a teaching perspective, to start with Odysseus is to start without presumptions about the combat experiences of these veterans. As T.S. Eliot knew, with his theory of the objective correlative, in probing the depths of art, we probe the depths of ourselves—and we do so without preconceptions about what we will find through this exploration.

Look, for example, at the seamlessness with which these veterans construct their own lessons from combat as *Odysseus's* lessons. With regard to the question of why it takes Odysseus 10 years to get home, to travel from modern-day Turkey to his home in Greece, we are told that the epic hero's challenge is not in *reentering* civilian life; rather, it is in in *giving up the war*:

> Odysseus isn't struggling with his return to Ithaca. He is struggling with his longing for the war. For me, one of the biggest things that I learned from being in Afghanistan is the brotherhood. The love that each of us had for each other is unmatched in today's society which is why I feel so many veterans have a hard time adjusting back to this culture of just me. Even writing this right now has me wanting to return to that. That's what Odysseus wants. He wants his troops. He wants his tribe.

In summary, as is the case with so many of these veterans' reflections, it is difficult, at times, to gauge who we are talking about: *Odysseus* or the *veteran writing about Odysseus*? In the early stages of my work with veterans reading the *Odyssey*, I began with two questions: *Could instructions for reentry from combat to civilian life be found in Homer's Odyssey? Could the gods that guided home a soul-dead Odysseus in Homer's epic also shepherd home our soldiers today?* What I discovered is that I had to invert these questions. It would not be Homer's *Odyssey* that supplied the instructions for reentry; it would be the Marines and sailors and soldiers in my course who would meditate on and craft these instructions. It would not be Homer's Odysseus shepherding home our veterans, but *our veterans shepherding home Odysseus* – and, in turn, according to Jung, *finding their own way home*. When Homer's reader becomes the *wounded healer,* he looks a lot like the veteran who has been trained to face down the enemy—and to survive doing it. In the case of Homer's *Odyssey*, the "enemy" is the returning warrior who doubts his capacity to reenter whole.

What these journal reflections revealed to me is a determination among these veterans to do just this: to enter not only whole, but ready to heal. In articulating the wounds of Odysseus, these veterans most definitely appeared to be articulating their own wounds—and quite likely, the wounds of many returning soldiers. More importantly, by assuming the safe distance of regarding Odysseus as a fiction—an ancient artifact—they took on the task of understanding Odysseus with an objective sureness and optimism that permitted parallels to their own lives and that invited healing through reflection and writing. If Jung's theory of the *wounded healer* holds up, it would appear that in their determination to explain the issues obstructing Odysseus's reentry, these veterans began to charter their own return home.

I would encourage colleagues reading classical works such as Homer's *Odyssey* with veterans to take these inverted questions into their own classrooms: To start with the epic hero, and not with the veteran before us; to dwell on the distance from Troy to Ithaca, and not from Afghanistan to the US; to invite the veteran to counsel the epic hero homeward, toward reunion with *his* family and *his* culture—and in turn, to design his or her own healthy reentry.

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