

Odyssey Home:

A Veteran Performance

Performed in *Creating Peace from Conflict*
as part of the series, "America in Times of Conflict"

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and excerpts from Homer's *The Odyssey*

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Movement 1: *the return*

Mike:

When I teach the *Odyssey*, I teach it in its ancient context. Greek epic has a number of different scene-types, which it uses over and over. One of these is the "hospitality scene," which represents an ideal way that one receives an unknown guest into the home according to ancient Greek tradition. The stranger is instantly recognized as a worthy person; he is fed and entertained. Only then does the host ask his name, and establish a more permanent relationship in which they can reciprocally host one another and look out for one another forever. The *Odyssey* is composed of repeated variations on this scene-type, in which every time it goes wrong somehow.

Steve:

Odysseus and his party left the town behind, and before long had reached the rich and well-run farmlands of Laertes, which he had reclaimed from their natural state by his own exertions long ago. Here was his cottage, surrounded by outbuildings where the serfs that laboured for him had their meals and sat and slept.

When they reached the place, Odysseus said to his son and his servants: 'Go into the main building now and straight away kill the best pig you can find for our midday meal. Meanwhile I shall test my father, to find out whether he will know me when he sees me, or fail to recognize me after so long an absence.'

Chris:

As a Marine coming home it seems to go one of three ways. It's either full of butterflies, because you're about to see the faces of people who just might be more excited to see you than you are to see them. It could be dreadful because you did something the last time you saw them and amends have yet to be made. Or you could have no feeling at all, which almost always leads to loneliness. I'm not sure which one of ladder two is worse.

Steve:

When the patient good Odysseus saw how old and worn his father looked and realized the depth of his misery, he halted under a, tall pear-tree and the tears came into his eyes. He deliberated in his heart and mind whether to hug and kiss his father, and tell him the whole story of his own return home to his native land, or first to question him and thoroughly test him. Upon reflection he thought it better to start by testing him with words that would rouse him.

Chris:

Coming home from deployment and coming home from the military are nothing alike, but each have a make or break moment. The moment when I consciously decided I was going to have a positive mental attitude... Just kidding, I ate a bunch of painkillers to feel better.

That last part never really materialized in my head as a thought, I just gravitated toward washing down 4 Percocet at a time with each moment I wasn't happy with me in some way, shape or form. And the meltdown always happened after all the work was done and I got home alone by myself.

Stephanie:

He told her of his stay with Aeolus, who gave him a friendly welcome and saw him on his way; and how the gale, since it was not his destiny to reach his home so soon, had caught him once more and driven him, sick at heart, over the teeming seas, Next he told how he came to Telepylus, where the Laestrygonians destroyed his fleet and all his fighting men, the black ship that carried him being the only one to get away.

Cheryl:

Despite our late arrival, the situation dictates maintaining my military bearing and not showing my exhaustion. I cannot wallow in pity my family could not be here to celebrate this milestone with me. Gathering my possessions from the gear truck, my Master Sergeant and I hastily reunite with members of our unit at our shop. My work family replaces my biological family's role in

homecoming and the welcome back is sincere. A speech is given and shots are doled out to everyone of legal drinking age that now includes me. I turned 21 today.

My desire to be reclusive and sleep after I return to the barracks is interrupted by the voices of my peers, all men. They will not let my 21st birthday go unnoticed and I'm invited to celebrate further. My new room, including a bed with no sheets, is abandoned in favor of joining my work companions. The night is filled with cheap beer and cranberry vodka shots and I enjoy the camaraderie immensely for the new few hours until my body, unaccustomed to drinking, rejects everything. Under the careful watch of my peers, I end the night with my hair pulled into a ponytail with a boot band and the toilet as my best friend.

Steve:

Meanwhile the lion-hearted Odysseus, in his own home again, was bathed and rubbed with oil by the housekeeper Eurynome, and clothed by her in a beautiful cloak and tunic. Then Athene enhanced his comeliness from head to foot. She made him look taller and sturdier, and she caused the bushy locks to hang from his head thick as the petals 'of a hyacinth in bloom. Just as a craftsman trained by Hephaestus and herself in the secrets of his art takes pains to put a graceful finish to his work by overlaying silver-ware with gold, she endowed his head and shoulders with an added beauty. He came out from the bath looking like one of the everlasting gods.

Cheryl:

Excerpt from Handwritten Journal Entry (March 4, 2005, 1753)
Evening colors finished sounding a few minutes ago. Being back home isn't as wonderful as I thought it would be. In fact, I am quite lonely. There isn't anyone that I particularly hang out with and I feel out of place.

Chris:

The one feeling of joy that a lot of us could agree with was the feeling of, "I'm so glad to be home." This is because in other countries you don't have the choices that we have here. You

can't simply just go, "Hey I want taco bell, or pizza," and just go do that.

But even home never feels like *home*.

Cheryl:

The night I came home was rather nice but everything has kind of fizzled since then. Today I was lucky to receive my ATM card from dad so at least I'm not broke anymore. It is weird having the whole day off [work]. I don't know what to do with my time. I should have cleaned my rifle in these last couple of days but I didn't. Now it's going to have to wait until I get off leave (whatever).

I know almost everything I am dealing with is out of my control right now and it really bugs me. To add to my other problems, I have been having mild chest pains on the left side of my chest the last couple of days. I used to get pains sometimes in Iraq, too, but I attributed it to having to wear my flak jacket with the sapi plates and fully loaded magazines.

Steve:

And in his turn Odysseus, favourite of Zeus, told of all the discomfiture he had inflicted on others and all the miseries which he himself had undergone. He began with his victory over the Cicones and his visit to the fertile land where the Lotus-eaters live. He spoke of what the Cyclops did, and the price he had made him pay for the fine men he ruthlessly devoured.

Chris:

Then comes time to get out of the military. Dreams seem to be the best way to describe the motivation. "I can afford to go to school now," I would say to myself. So we packed up the Jeep... my girlfriend that I plucked from back home, our dog, and myself drove from California back to Michigan excited to see what the future would bring us.

Mike:

When I got out of the Navy, I thought I knew what it was. It was just a job, I told myself. I wasn't very good at it, either, and, like you do when you're bad at your job, I quit to go back to school. I exited the same way I entered – needing money for school—and I elided the whole thing as some kind of mad four-year hiccup.

Chris:

It's important to note that when you get out of the military as a sergeant you go from making about 60 grand a year to nothing. Your final paychecks are sometimes held, and it takes two months before unemployment kicks in and three months before you see educational benefits.

Mike:

Sometimes this didn't work. I'd end up on some list of people to be "thanked for their service" and I'd instantly be uneasy around everyone. The people thanking me didn't seem to know what they meant by it, and most of the other people being recognized along with me had had stronger commitments, and had made real sacrifices – most of them had served in a time of war, whereas I didn't even have a combat specialization.

Chris:

Even if you've never seen combat, the stress level of combat operations teaches you to bottle up every stressful situations, and it's when you get home that all those feelings start to dissipate. For me the only way I could be alone with myself was if I was altered. I wasn't comfortable just being alone.

Mike:

This was very difficult to explain, not only because no-one wants to hear a detailed justification for your discomfort around them, but because, due to my specialization, I literally couldn't talk about my work. Of course, "I'm not allowed to talk about it" is the *worst* thing you can say: people reflexively think of you as a cross between James Bond and Batman. *That* suit certainly didn't fit.

Boyd:

To which the thoughtful Laertes replied: 'By Father Zeus, Athene and Apollo, if only I could have been the man I was when as King of the Cephallenians I took the stronghold of Nericus on the mainland cape, and like that have stood by you yesterday in our palace, with armour on my shoulders, and beaten off those Suitors! I'd have laid many of them low in the halls and delighted your heart!'

Mike:

But most of the time, I was *home*. In graduate school, I felt like I belonged. And when I took my first faculty position, teaching ancient Greek language and literature, it fit me like a bean bag chair: you sink into it, and you immediately feel like you never need to get up again.

Boyd:

So they talked together, and the others finished their task of preparing the meal. They took their places on seats and chairs, and were helping themselves to food, when the old man Dolius came in with his sons, weary after their work. They had been called in by their mother, the old Sicilian woman, who looked after them and lovingly cared for their old father now that his years sat heavily upon him.

Mike:

To use a more classical example, I was like all the people whose names are never mentioned in the *Iliad*: they didn't accomplish enough to get noticed, but they also didn't get killed, and they sailed home to no particular fanfare. And that was it: Troy was far away, and that's where it should stay.

Steve:

Odysseus told of how he had listened to the sweet song of the Sirens; how he had sailed by the Wandering Rocks, by dread Charybdis, and by Scylla, whom no sailors pass unscathed; how his men had killed the cattle of the Sun; how Zeus the Thunderer had struck his fast ship with a flaming bolt, and all his fine

company had been killed at one fell swoop, though he himself escaped their dreadful fate.

Chris:

Deployments were rough. I know it's hard for veterans to just come out and say it, with the entire ego thing, "it's a volunteer force, it's what you signed up for." But 12 on 12 off for seven days a week just the start. Sometimes you don't see a port on Aircraft Carriers for 8-10 weeks at a time, and by week two everyone starts to get a special kind of bitchy. Not to mention that if your what some would consider a "Shit Bag," you get first dibs on all the horrible jobs and have to hear about your turtleneck being wiped on someone else's genitalia while you are wearing it.

On deployments when you come home it's all the married folks that have people waiting on the docks or the flight line for you to come home. One of my parents didn't even show up to my graduation from high school, you think they were going to fly in from Michigan just because I was returning state side?

Stephanie:

He described his arrival at the Isle of Ogygia and his reception by the Nymph Calypso, who had longed to marry him and kept him in her vaulted cavern, a pampered guest, offering immortality and ageless youth, but never won him round. Finally how he arrived, after a disastrous voyage, at Scherie, where the Phaeacians honoured him in their hearts like a god and sent him home by ship with generous gifts of bronze and gold and clothes.

Cheryl:

The gifts sit unused. Lovingly bought, eagerly purchased, but entirely useless. Isn't that exactly what souvenirs are, utterly useless? The traveller picks up a token, imbuing it with more value than it alone possesses, and tries to carry that emotional attachment onto a loved one who should equally value said gift.

My barracks room is full of these tokens. They haunt me about what was planned only weeks ago and what didn't happen. Money wasted. Time wasted. Dreams unrealized in the wake of the reality of coming home under unplanned circumstances. My family suffered the loss of two family members during my seven months away and my command, in tending to my wellbeing, sent me home ahead of everyone else to be with them after I informed my supervisor of my grandmother's failing health. Now my room is littered with unfulfilled expectations in the form of souvenirs gathering dust and I've only been home a brief while.

Chris:

I remember vividly walking down the stairs and seeing all the families hugging and reuniting and feeling happy for a fleeting moment. It was an awesome situation to see your friends and bosses so happy to see their families. But as I sorted through the crowd and bumped into tens of dozens of people I realized that not a single person was here to see me. As I scanned the crowd I notice two or three other friends with the same empty look on their face too. I'd give a head nod, and they'd say something to the effect of, "can't wait to go get fucked up," with a forced smile. I'd nod in approval as I headed toward the long-term parking lot.

Cheryl:

Coming home was chaotic. The buses delivered us on the parade deck at Camp Margarita on Camp Pendleton, located in southern California; our long journey from Iraq was now complete. Families could be heard screaming, inarticulately, the names of their loved ones, hoping their cries would be heard more distinctly and the minutes and seconds separating them from their family member would pass quickly. My family is not on this parade desk; this truth I know. They live across the United States and they did not know I made it stateside until I called them earlier in the day from Bangor, Maine where well wishers provided us access to free cell phones to call our families.

Movement 2: *the distance*

Boyd:

'What a strange woman you are!' he exclaimed. 'The gods of Olympus gave you a harder heart than any other woman. No other wife could have steeled herself to keep so long out of the arms of a husband who had just returned to her in his native land after twenty wearisome years. Well, nurse, make a bed for me to sleep in alone. For my wife's heart is as hard as iron.'

Stephanie:

'What a strange man you are,' said the cautious Penelope. 'I am not being haughty or contemptuous of you, though I'm not surprised that you think I am. But I have too clear a picture of you in my mind as you were when you sailed from Ithaca in your long-oared ship... Your bed shall be ready the moment you wish, now that the gods have brought you back to your own country and your lovely home. But since you have mentioned it -since a god put it in your heart -tell me all about this new ordeal; I suppose I shall hear about it sooner or later, so I might as well learn about it at once.'

Cheryl:

Handwritten Journal Entry (February 8, 2007)

I am writing this journal entry to you as you sleep (hopefully peacefully) in our room at the Holiday Inn in Sheridan. I know these last couple of days have been very trying on you, which I am sorry for, but I am very thankful that I can be here for you. It was very wonderful to step off that Beech9000d (if I remember the name of that small plane right :)) and walk into Sheridan's small airport to see you as the first person as I walked through the door.

I am finding it very hard (I know I overuse the word 'very') to explain just how I have been feeling over the last couple of days. It saddens me to see you and Lura, and your mom dealing with your dad's death. It is a pain that strikes me dearly as I remember the grief I felt at my mother's passing as well. Each day you get slightly better about moving on but in the back of

your mind you always think to yourself-how would my life be if they were still around and each milestone-birthdays, holidays, and our marriage-help to remind me of all the things I had hoped to share with them.

Right now you seem to be holding up amazingly well and I don't know how to feel for you.

Sincerely,

Cheryl

Steve:

'What a strange woman you are!' said the quick-witted Odysseus. 'Why press me so insistently? However, I will tell you all, holding nothing back. Not that you will find it to your liking, any more than I do.

Chris:

My girlfriends sister made it very clear that I was ruining her sisters life. We stayed a grand total of 6 days in her house, all our stuff was delivered there, and she kept a months worth of rent. So after her and her sister got into it about me for the last time, we busted open the milk jug full of change that we were saving for a vacation to get into an apartment.

Three months after separation I got caught by my girlfriends other sister stealing prescription pills out of her bathroom cabinet. What did I do? I ran. I told everyone that I had a problem, and sought help to appease my girlfriend. Went to meetings for less than a month, and then I left school after a semester and hopped back in the service. Making zero amends to friends and family.

Boyd:

When Laertes heard this, a black cloud of misery enveloped him. Groaning heavily, he picked the black dust up in both his hands and poured it over his grey head. Odysseus' heart was touched, and suddenly, as he watched his dear father, a sharp spasm of pain shot through him. He rushed forward, flung his arms round his neck, and kissed him. 'Father,' he cried, 'here I am, the

very man you asked about, home in my own land after twenty years. But no more tears and lamentation, for I have news to tell you, and there is need for haste. I have killed that gang of Suitors in our palace. I have taken revenge for their bitter insults and all their crimes.'

Laertes answered him: 'If you who have come here really are my son Odysseus, home again, give me some definite proof to convince me.'

Movement 3: *the question*

Al:

The Man beyond the shella:
 No protection
 No protector
 Beyond him
 He sees her
 From her no trees or meadow of green
 No sea
 The stars never fade yet their flicker blinds him
 Beyond the hurt is loves intangible curse.

Home
 Honor ones mother enthusiastically

You surround yourself with comfort
 you surround yourself with pain
 The mess of being human can not escape your vein
 You train and train and train
 Only to be vain

Settlement:
 Never!
 Bereavement at what cost?
 Are you lost
 I must be...
 Coming home
 Sigh, cry, laugh and love
 This gentlemen is a gift from above.

"Al, you have always been a pal, my niece once yet always loyal.
 A person could confined in you, where did YOU do? The land of
 sand and guns I don't know, talk to me?"
 "Sister I always loved you I just never knew this side or your
 point of view. You know you have a nephew? He knows all about
 you say hello. Here's your niece she's curious to meet you."

family! Attention! I want to scream. I'm done I have been done. your daughter, niece, sister is gone. I flourish in the sun. I am your son. The moon of Al has borne a place so untouched it thrives; the beauty of life's scorned riches, the hearts forgiven scars.

Stephanie:

For seventeen days and seventeen nights we mourned for you, immortal gods and mortal men alike; and on the eighteenth day we committed you to the flames, with a rich sacrifice of fatted sheep and crooked-horned cattle round you. You were burnt in the clothing of the gods, with lavish unguents and sweet honey; and Achaean heroes in full armour, infantry and charioteers, moved in procession round the pyre where your body was burning and filled the air with sound.

Chris:

In Florida, it took all of a week for me to fall into full blown addiction. I networked with a barber by saying that, "I hurt my back and it takes awhile for insurance to kick in with the military, do you know anyone?"

Steve:

He had just finished this last tale when sleep came suddenly upon him, relaxing all his limbs and banishing his cares.

Chris:

\$25 thousand in cash advances later I was a shell of myself. Being reduced to nothing but self-loathing, self-pity and hopelessness truly turns a human being into nothing but defense mechanisms and justifications. Somehow I asked for help before physically dyeing.

It was then that I truly, finally, started to come back home. I spent two weeks in a VA hospital because it was found that I suffered from a mental illness, and then I spent the next 30 days in inpatient treatment for the dual diagnoses of drug addiction and mental illness.

Boyd:

Odysseus fixed his splendid armour round his shoulders, woke up Telemachus, the cowman and the swineheard, and told them all to pick up their arms. They carried out his orders and told them all to pick up their arms. They carried out his orders and put on their bronze armour. Then they opened the doors and went out with Odysseus leading.

Cheryl:

February 3rd, 2007, Kuwait, Myspace journal entry.

"I thought that all my Marine friends might get a good laugh to know that I had to break down and buy Army PT swishy pants because it was either that or men's khaki trousers for the commercial flight [home]. I felt so awful buying these things at the counter...feeling like lur[k]ing somewhere in the corner was a Marine who would be saying something to me about it...I just hate the idea of traveling in PT gear, especially when it's not even my Service's!"

His father's sudden death prompted an earlier return from Iraq. I returned stateside to Wyoming disheveled, a few days unclean, wearing Army swishy pants. A United States Marine in Army clothing. Months earlier he sent over my favorite pillow, my particular brand of toilet paper—Charmin Ultra Strong, Sobe Adrenaline energy drinks, and a set of civilian attire so I had it for appropriate parts of the deployment. Before receiving the news my father-in-law passed away I had already begun preparing for my departure from Iraq and I did the responsible thing by mailing back all items not deemed essential for the return journey. I expected to return home with my unit. I expected to travel home to California. I expected to travel in my desert camouflage uniform with my rifle, two sea bags, and a MOLLE pack. Instead, I landed in the small Sheridan, Wyoming airport, sans rifle, with the rest of my stuff, wearing these ridiculous pants, waiting to see my husband who I last saw in July, not even a month into our marriage.

Mike:

But in my case, slowly, gradually, Troy came sailing back to me. I took on some administrative responsibilities, and I realized that most of what I knew about leadership I had learned in uniform. I worked alongside colleagues and students from many different backgrounds, and I realized that I had learned to do that from my chief petty officers. I taught ancient literature, most of which is at most one step away from combat stories, and I felt—deeply—the need for my students to understand that aspect of them: about authority structures under extreme stress, about the inherent unintelligibility of battle in the moment, about how Achilles can at once have acute feelings both of honor and petty pointlessness. Apparently my Navy service wasn't just a job; it wasn't a hiccup; it wasn't even a prolonged yawn. It had become part of my breathing. It had come home to me.

Boyd:

But tell me about yourself - I'm curious. Who are you, sir, and where do you come from? What is your native town and who are your parents? And where is she moored, the good ship that brought you here with your gallant crew? Or were you travelling as a passenger on someone else's ship, which landed you and sailed away?

I will tell you all you wish to know, said the subtle Odysseus.

Cheryl:

Scared I might miss my husband in the *crowd* of others waiting for their respective family members, my heart is filled with disappointment he's seeing me for the first time in months dressed this way. My petite frame is hidden under the poufy fabric and I cannot tell how much I might smell from the lengthy flight. So much for a beautiful homecoming. This is not the reunion you see photographed all the time nowadays.

XXX

Mike:

To my surprise, I formed connections with my veteran students. It didn't bother them that I wasn't much of a Navy officer. It didn't bother them that I quit, or that I never made any real

sacrifices, as long as I was up front about all those things. They felt that I understood their language. They liked to work through their stories in dialogue with the ancient stories I taught. And, a few years ago, I felt a thrill when one of my veteran students, who knew my own lackluster military record, introduced me as a fellow veteran. I was surprised to learn that it was important to *him* to call me that – and to find that I agreed.

Stephanie:

Then Odysseus and his illustrious son attacked the front rank of the enemy and struck them with their swords and double-pointed spears. They would have destroyed them all and seen that none went home alive, if Athene, Daughter of aegis-bearing Zeus, had not raised a great cry and checked the whole throng: 'Ithacans, stop this disastrous fight and separate at once before blood is shed.'

Chris:

It took almost year for the court martial charges to drop, and I left service honorably. I married that girlfriend, and we have a child together now. I had a 65k job, and left it to follow my dreams in sports journalism. We have the 3-car garage with a pool, and we're happy.

In order to come home completely I had to build a home in my own head. I had to realize that nothing is ever as bad as it was, and that everyday is a blessing. Most importantly, I had to learn how to unconditionally love myself, to embrace my inadequacies and my gifts, and always give thanks to a power greater than myself by paying it forward. For me, I have to do this everyday.

Cheryl:

I am ill equipped for this homecoming. The temperature is a low double digit, probably 12 degrees, and I lack winter clothes. Sheridan has a JC Penney's and in an amusing old-fashioned way the store's sign reads JC Penney Company in black letters on a yellow background. A green awning provides a touch of shade. I

have never been in a JC Penney's like this one and I cannot find my way around. The layout is unfamiliar and this shopping experience is not a time to refresh my wardrobe; I shop for appropriate clothing to wear to my father-in-law's funeral and a few other items to get me through the next couple of days.

Chris:

Home is truthfully where you make it, not always where you were born.

Steve:

At Athene's cry the colour drained from their cheeks. In terror at the sound of her voice they let their weapons drop from their hands on to the ground.

Cheryl:

Thomas, my husband, follows me unexpectedly around my unfamiliar settings. Every moment is spent making up for the time apart. I wander around touching different shirts and pants, looking for suitable replacements for my current attire. After securing a few pieces to start, I enter the fitting room. He joins me inside. He sits on the simple bench as I hang the clothes up on the wall hanger. Giddy as a child, he revels in seeing me undress and dress my body again. My body is not new to him but there is a different joy now as he delights in seeing me, his wife, since our July separation. Not one to take excess pride in my body, I blush at his gaze. His presence in the fitting room breaks an unspoken and unwritten rule, but no one interrupts this quiet moment together.

Stephanie:

The much-enduring good Odysseus raised a terrifying war-cry, gathered himself together and pounced on them like a swooping eagle. But at this moment Zeus flung a flaming thunderbolt which fell in front of the bright-eyed Daughter of that formidable Sire. Athene called out to Odysseus: 'Odysseus, favourite of Zeus, resourceful son of Laertes, hold your hand! Stop fighting your countrymen, in case you incur the wrath of Zeus the Thunderer.'

Mike:

When I teach the *Odyssey*, I teach it in its ancient context. Greek epic has a number of different scene-types, which it uses over and over. One of these is the "hospitality scene," which represents an ideal way that one receives an unknown guest into the home according to ancient Greek tradition. The stranger is instantly recognized as a worthy person; he is fed and entertained. Only then does the host ask his name, and establish a more permanent relationship in which they can reciprocally host one another and look out for one another forever. The *Odyssey* is composed of repeated variations on this scene-type, in which every time it goes wrong somehow.

Circe receives her guests with a meal, but then changes them into animals and refuses to let them go; Odysseus's men invade the home of the Cyclops Polyphemus and feed themselves without waiting for his welcome, and then find that their host is going to make a meal of them. Even the kindly Phaeacians are at times rude and always arrogant, eager to be rid of their guest who, by delaying telling them his name, milks their politeness for all it's worth. In fact, the overarching story of the *Odyssey* is itself an extended version of this scene, in which Odysseus yearns to be welcomed as a stranger into his own home. In his absence, he has changed, and his home has changed too, so "stranger" is, by that point, the proper name for him. The happy ending of the *Odyssey* is that this strangeness is bridged. It is not erased, but it is accommodated.

Steve:

Odysseus obeyed her, and his heart rejoiced.

Stephanie:

Then Pallas Athene, Daughter of aegis-bearing Zeus,

Boyd:

still using Mentor's form and voice for her disguise,

Cheryl, Mike, Chris, Al:

established peace between the two sides.