





ODYSSEY

WARRIORS COME HOME

Brendan Bannon

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ODYSSEY

WARRIORS COME HOME

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A wound is a physical and/or emotional manifestation of human suffering. Art can alchemize the unseen wounds of the emotional world into light. When this transformation happens, it allows us to see the pain and suffering of humanity.

The psychological pain inflicted and perpetuated by trauma is a hidden and sometimes secret wound. When we can bring those wounds to light, we allow them to be seen for what they are. Once we can see our wounds, we can begin the task of healing them.

Wounds can be a gift; they can offer us a new and precious chance for growth. Our pain can teach us things we may never have been able to learn without it. Our wounds are often mistaken as weakness, as if tenderness and heartbreak don't carry with them immense strength. This struggle with traumatic wounds not only reveals the site of injury, it affords us the opportunity to learn and grow and expand ourselves in ways we previously didn't have the opportunity to.

**“Art is a wound
turned into light.”**
— Georges Braque

This growth and healing is the light that Braque speaks of. It is the beacon calling us home to ourselves. Art can serve as an enlightenment that transitions us out of our ruptured states and brings us together into a stronger, wiser and more whole version of ourselves. Art is a passageway, it is a bridge between suffering and beauty.

From the process of creating art to its final physical form, we move fluidly between the horror and the sublime. By shedding light on our pain and suffering we can reveal and allow the beauty that can come from it. This is a process that transcends speech, cognition, and the written word. It is growth and expansion beyond the expectations of both the creators and the viewers.

Brendan Bannon, Founder and Teacher

“We all go in for our reasons, but in combat we fight for each other. In those circumstances our primary concern is for those around us. This is an almost unrecognizable intimacy that we’ve never experienced before. When I come home I might not realize it, but I am fighting for this missing intimacy, this most powerful regard for another individual. The changes we face when we come home make life unrecognizable. Our ongoing journey home is a search for this connection.”

—Dan Mitchell, 91-B – Combat Medic 10th Mountain Division

The *Odyssey Workshops* began with a simple premise: With photography we can activate new connections for combat veterans, find purpose together, create meaning and discover beauty in the world at large. There is a boot camp for every soldier who joins the military, but there is no boot camp to prepare people for coming home. They are disconnected from their unit, removed from the rituals that structured their reality, and deprived of the battle-forged intimacy that connected them to each other. When soldiers become veterans, they are left to find the map home on their own.

Some 2800 years ago in Greece, Homer sang the *Odyssey*, an epic poem about a soldier’s journey home from war. There is a direct line from Odysseus’ journey home from the Trojan War to our project. That line will continue into the future, as long as soldiers come home.

Set against the chaos endured by Odysseus’ family, Homer described the tests and challenges he faced on his way back: The attack of the Cyclops Polyphemus, resisting the Sirens’ song, and the hazard of sailing between the six-headed monster Scylla and the whirlpool Charybdis. Odysseus battled mythical monsters.

Our veterans coming home today expect a clean break from war and a quick return to the lives they left. Instead, they meet mounting challenges as they face isolation. There’s little to prepare them for the changes they experience. The tests and challenges they face include survivor’s guilt, addiction, and the impact of trauma and post-traumatic stress. In America, 22 veterans a day commit suicide, in part because of the challenges they face coming home.



The 37 combat veterans of the *Odyssey Workshops* explored the impact of war on their lives. They photographed each other, loved ones, and meaningful places. They used the camera to illuminate the past and engage in the future by making new stories together. They forged connections with each other and activated a sense of belonging through photography. In doing so, their battles have been seen and witnessed and recognized.

People think of photography as a solitary practice, but the quest for meaning through photography, as they practiced it, was intimate and rooted in a community of peers. By using a camera to engage each other and the world around them, veterans shared the battles that continue long after the war has ended. They also reflected on their victories over circumstances.

I made a map for this project from a conversation I had with World War II veteran/artist Joe Orfeo. Joe enlisted at 17. He piloted a Harris boat in the South Pacific. When he returned home, he dove into painting influenced by his war experiences. That was how he described the unspeakable and transformed his turmoil. His paintings are filled with life and a haunting beauty.

In my 20s, struggling with depression and despair, exhaustion, and isolation, I reached out to Joe. I asked him how he found his way back from depression. Because he had been to war and come home, he had extraordinary wisdom to share. Joe told me trauma changes you. You will be different, but you can come back to yourself. He showed me that creativity and engagement were a way out of the darkness. He let me know that asking the essential questions and finding beauty can move you forward.

At the time I was taking care of my mother who had Multiple Sclerosis. I began using photography as a way of reconnecting with myself and reengaging the world around me. My curiosities came back, a sense of possibility took root. Eventually I began



Joe Orfeo, *Totem*, 1978 36x36 Acrylic on Canvas

traveling the world bringing pictures back to my mom in her nursing home room. In photography, I found a way to explore the world and connect with others. It was a passport into the lives of people around the world. In the aftermath of conflict at refugee camps and medical clinics, I saw people grow to meet the circumstances that seemed bigger than them.

To help children tell their own stories, I began teaching them photography. *The Most Important Picture*, began with HIV+ children in Romania and continued in Africa, where I taught photography in refugee camps and saw children transformed and empowered by telling stories with pictures.

When I came home from Africa in 2010, I wanted to continue teaching photography. The idea for the *Odyssey Workshops* was born at that time as a way of paying my veteran friend Joe Orfeo forward for the map of creative engagement he'd given to me.

Creative, reflective observation extends us deeper into the world outside while connecting us to the worlds within. Joe's experience foretold the journey that the pictures in this book illuminate.

The *Odyssey Workshops* put Canon cameras in the hands of combat veterans and taught them to use photography as a means to capture, confront, interpret, and share their experiences. Over nine months in 2019, I led four such courses, co-taught with veteran-artist Julian Chinana. These culminated in the exhibition *Odyssey / Warriors Come Home* at CEPA Gallery in Buffalo, NY and in the book you're holding now.

We began each course with a two-day mini photo boot camp. The first assignment was to pick and interview a partner. Then each person made a portrait of their partner based on the interview. At the end of the exercise, they introduced their partner using the portraits they made. From the start, the project was about using photographs to connect with another person. This portrait assignment established that we would be carrying each other through the next 12 weeks of the project. Successful pictures would be based on connection and engagement.

The pace of the retreats was slow. Books of photographs sat on every table; we watched movies about photographers. Stories were told, jokes were made, conversations grew. Common bonds emerged during

War







