At the end of Book 5 of Homer’s *Odyssey*, Odysseus washes up—completely destitute after 10 years of fighting and 10 of wandering—on the shore of Phaeacia, home of the isolated, but very civilized Phaeacians. They take him in, clothe, bathe, and feed him, devote their full attention to him, provide gifts, entertainment, and athletic recreation, watch him break down in tears when he is reminded of his past, listen intently to his personal story, even asking for more details, and send him off with a store of wealth to use when he arrives back home. What might we call such a place? A rehab facility? A half-way house?

Scholars have recently become much more aware of how ancient Greek literature, especially epic and tragedy, depicts psychological reality in general and the pathology of traumatic experiences in particular. Jonathan Shay’s work more than any has alerted us to how the trauma of warfare and its effects on the returning veteran are treated in Greece’s earliest literature, Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. By tracing the rehabilitation of Odysseus on the island of Phaeacia in the *Odyssey*, we can discern several stages of therapy that enable him to deal with his past and prepare himself to return home to face further trials.

At the beginning of Book 8, after his first good night’s sleep, Odysseus arises to join the Phaeacians in their festivities. He has avoided telling them his name or anything about his past, especially his role in the Trojan war and its aftermath. When, at the end of the noon meal, the local bard Demodocus happens to sing about an episode of the Trojan War in which Odysseus had been involved, Odysseus breaks down and cries, hiding the embarrassing display by covering his face with his cloak. Only his host King Alcinous notices his tears and hears him groaning deeply, but does not give him away. Instead, he calls an end to the feast and proposes that they all go outside for
athletic games. When Alcinous’ son invites Odysseus to participate in the contests, saying, “Come, scatter the woes from your heart” (Od. 8.149), he refuses with the reply, “Woes are much more on my mind than games” (Od. 8.154). Thereupon another young noble taunts him, suggesting that he looks more like a merchant than an athlete. This so angers Odysseus that he picks up a huge stone discus and hurls it far past any of the others. He is so fired up that he then challenges the Phaeacians to any contest except running (he is too worn down) and lets slip that he was a prime athlete when at Troy. This provocation (whether intended or not) has brought Odysseus out of his shell and given him self-confidence. This physical “therapy” indicates one stage toward recovery. He has yet to face the psychological scars that were indicated by his tears and groans at hearing the bard sing of the Trojan War.

That evening at the banquet, after a warm bath and fresh clothing, Odysseus offers Demodocus the bard the best cut of the meat he had been given, compliments him on the accuracy of his earlier depiction of war (“as if you had been there yourself or heard from another who was,” Od. 8.491), and surprisingly requests that his after-dinner song be about the ruse of the Trojan horse and the sack of Troy: he is, unbeknownst to the others, requesting a song about himself. We suspect from his reaction to the previous song that Odysseus is here taking a great risk. When the bard concludes with an account of Odysseus in the thick of the fiercest battle, Odysseus suffers a literal “meltdown” (Od. 8.522-531):

> He melted, and poured tears from under his eyelids onto his cheeks. And as a woman cries who has fallen around her dear husband who has fallen in front of his city and its people trying to ward off the pitiless day from the town and his children, and seeing him dying and gasping for breath, she throws herself around him and wails loudly, while others from behind beat on her back and shoulders with their spears and lead her off as a slave to endure toil and pain, and her cheeks are wasted with the most pitiful grief, so did Odysseus shed pitiful tears beneath his brow.
In this startling simile, Odysseus cries like the distressed female victim of his own sack of Troy. Far from exulting in his victories, he melts and sobs. Whether he expected this breakdown to happen (after all, he requested that particular song), or, in Jonathan Shay’s terms, he is “ambushed by his own emotional reaction” (Odysseus in America, p. 15), we are not told. Many veterans, however, have experienced such overwhelming feelings of sorrow and grief at revisiting intense combat situations, even when they were the victors—or survivors. A few years ago, a student in my class told how his grandfather frequently talked about his World War II experiences in Europe with great pride. One day when he was young, the student asked him to tell what it was like at Normandy. He began as usual, but then suddenly burst into tears and wept uncontrollably; needless to say, the boy was shocked. It is one way that humans deal with grief and trauma; it may represent a step toward recovery.

Odysseus re-experiences, in effect, his wartime battles not as joyous victories, but as sorrowful events as pitiful as the tears of a weeping widow. At this point, Alcinous stops the bard and declares that it is time for his guest to tell them his name and explain why he broke down when he heard about Troy. With this invitation to tell his story to an attentive and sympathetic audience, Odysseus begins the famous four-book narrative of his wanderings that resulted in the loss of all the men under his command—a battalion of some 500 soldiers!

In modern times, with tens of thousands of veterans returning from our ten-year wars involving multiple deployments, we have reason to pay particular attention to the way in which Odysseus recuperates from his harrowing experiences in war and wandering. He does this through tears and tales: tears that are prompted by emotionally reliving those harrowing experiences, and tales that put them into a narrative shared with sympathetic listeners. By telling them to others, he is relieved of their burden.

At a significant point in Book 11, in the middle of Odysseus’ narrative of the people he saw in the underworld (another aspect of facing his past), he wishes to stop and go to bed. Alcinous,
However, begs him to continue, significantly asking if he saw any of his old companions from Troy. Indeed, among those was Ajax, who had committed suicide and was still angry at him for winning the arms of Achilles. Some ghosts can never be appeased.

That evening Odysseus finishes the entire account of his “woes,” including all the blunders that cost the lives of his crew members. The following morning, the Phaeacian ship carries him magically back to Ithaca, at last prepared to face the dangers that await him at home. Homer describes his sleep on the boat (Od. 13.90-92):

...be who had suffered so many
pains in his heart,
as he passed through wars with
men and over grievous seas,
then at last slept calmly, having
forgotten all he had suffered.

Granted that soldiers who have suffered a 10-year deployment and a 10-year detainment cannot in a mere three days be healed (such is fictional compression), but we can discern the steps that facilitate recovery from combat trauma in one of the first works of western literature.

And, near the end of the epic, when he is finally in bed with his wife Penelope, and Athena has prolonged the night to give them time to catch up, Homer is careful to inform us that Odysseus told her “everything” and even provides a synopsis of all the episodes he had related to the Phaeacians. The final homecoming is only complete when all the traumatic experiences are put into a narrative and shared with a sympathetic listener.
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