

CLAUDIA HONEYWELL

Street Life

The homeless do not share our temporal world. For those who set out from and return to home, the day acquires a cyclical rhythm that is lost to the homeless. Without such place-bound rituals of departure and return, the day loses its circadian boundaries and becomes a one-way passage whose destination no homeless man or woman would attempt to predict. The homeless do not talk of the future. They have slipped out of the temporal orbit that holds the rest of us circling around the central force of home.

A strong sense of home gives the past and future an architectural stability, in which the future has a causal link to the past. Military service disrupts this temporal stability. Basic training and deployment challenge the temporal rhythms of home, replacing home's cycles with generic, conventional rhythms that identify the 24-hour duty day. Reveille and Taps, piped over loudspeakers, mark the cycles. The human animal adapts to its environment, and the innate time-sense yields to a strictly synchronized, artificial rhythm. For homeless veterans, this disruption may be the first stage in a lifelong struggle with displacement.

Jeffrey and Dean sit side by side on the benches of the plastic picnic table that fills the kitchen of Crawford House, a shelter for homeless veterans in Colorado Springs. They have the same lean, tense bodies. They wear similarly faded jeans and shirts, all slightly baggy. Jeffrey and Dean have very different stories. Jeffrey's flashbacks trap him in an unwelcome cycle of recurrence. The past plays repeatedly in his head. Dean wishes for something to recur in his life. He wonders if his recent reunion with a woman he knew 30 years ago will turn into the foundation of a new life.

As a helicopter mechanic stationed in the Orient during the late 1980s, Jeffrey traveled on combat missions in order to make repairs as they were needed. When his helicopter took fire, the Rules of Engagement required that they couldn't fire back until they had radioed it in and gotten permission from Headquarters. 22 seconds, Jeffrey said such a call usually lasted. His specificity was striking.

During one such 22-second interval, a Korean fighter came so close that Jeffrey's Army buddy reached out and grabbed him by his gun, shoving him facedown onto the chopper floor. While his buddy turned quickly back to man the door, Jeffrey pulled the Korean's head back by the hair and slit his throat. Before the Korean died, he and Jeffrey made eye contact. "Eye contact changes things," Jeffrey commented. Distance, says the philosopher J. Glenn Gray in *The Warriors*, enables us to maintain an idea of 'the enemy', an abstract sentience whose evil intent somehow manages to threaten all mankind. If it were 'our enemy', our hatred might persist even through eye contact. Jeffrey's did not.

Adventure. That's what the Army recruitment posters tell our youth they will find in a military career. Many young people dream of adventure, dream of breaking the fetters that hold them to their routines. Once these cyclic bonds are broken, who can predict what will be the result? There is a fine line between the one who wanders and the one who is lost, and military service draws many who will slip across this line. Add a high probability of traumatic war experience to this mix, and the newly molded soldier may find himself far from home indeed.

Jeffrey has physiological problems that he attributes to friendly fire exposure from a live nerve gas test. As Jeffrey tells it, the test was uneventful. The order came to put on gas masks and the men complied. Wilfred Owen wouldn't have written a poem about it. There was no guttering, no choking, no gargling from froth-corrupted lungs. 6 years later, Jeffrey was newly discharged, too young and too unused to his own autonomy to seek out the resources of the VA. The first sign of a neurological problem was a shaking in his hands when he would write, or lift a glass to his lips. The confusion came later, along with an unusual difficulty calculating the passage of time.

Repetitive activity seemed to help. Jeffrey started to walk, shambling along freeways, highways, and back roads. He has walked from Pennsylvania to Virginia, from Colorado to Texas. Although walking brings him relief, it has also brought him into trouble with the law. After his release from one of Colorado's privately-managed prisons, Jeffrey had trouble staying within the borders specified by his probation board. He walked, and when his walking carried him outside his probation zone, he was re-arrested. This happened four times. The probation zone

grew smaller each time. No one intervened, Jeffrey was offered no treatment. The private correctional management industry profited from Jeffrey's 5 stays in prison.

William Stuntz, a professor at Harvard Law School, who died of colon cancer months before his seminal work, *The Collapse of American Criminal Justice*, was published last fall, discusses the criminal justice system's prioritizing of procedure over principle, which has resulted in the implacable bureaucracy that sent Jeffrey to prison 5 times despite his lack of criminal intent. Stuntz points back to the Bill of Rights, especially the due process and equal protection clauses of the 4th, 5th, and 14th amendments, to show how we have framed our constitutional rights in the language of procedural bureaucracy rather than the language of human principles.

Stuntz's work has implications for the legalities of federal assistance programs like the VA. Homeless veterans like Jeffrey cannot navigate the intricacies of the VA's institutional and legal bureaucracy without assistance. Along with the temporal disruption that military service entails, young enlistees often forego life experience in managing the basic responsibilities of securing and maintaining housing and work. For many homeless veterans, the assistance they will need to learn these skills is kept out of reach by the prerequisite that they address their addictions. Others, who can go clean, are excluded for not having a secure address at which to receive benefit checks. In his work, Stuntz documents a cycle in which technical ineligibility will doom many who may have a functional potential for success.

Dean, a blond, blue-eyed man with craggy features, grew up in a Germanic family in Minnesota. The tradition of service was in his family: his family's service to America dates back to the Civil War, and he had great uncles who had served in the Kaiser's army and in the Spanish-American War. When he got a low draft number in '74, he enlisted, "to get it started," he says. After his discharge in '80, he tried to go back to the family farm, but couldn't stay put. He joined the Merchant Marine, which offered the possibility of more adventure, with no fear of being tied to anyone.

While many begin to roam for the sake of adventure, the roaming life easily becomes a habit. Fight or flight became Dean's mantra. Give it your all and if it doesn't work, move on. Dean kept moving on. His return to civilian life coincided with the tech boom of the 80's, and he was left behind by his lack of training in information technology. With every job rejection, Dean's fight or flight mechanism became stronger habit.

While in basic training at Ft. Carson, Dean met a high school girl. They hung out, slept together a few times, but didn't stay in touch when Dean left for Vietnam. Each went on to marry and eventually divorce. A few months ago, Dean got an

email. “Are you the Dean I fell in love with 30 years ago?” the writer wanted to know. She lived in Colorado now. Dean hitchhiked down from Minnesota, but had nowhere to live, couldn’t find a job, and quickly found himself homeless. “Why don’t you live with her?” I asked. “We’re in no rush,” he said, staring down at the coffee he was swirling in its white institutional mug. “We’ve been hurt too much to jump into anything. We’ll take our time.”

Homeless veterans display the stoic manners of the deployed, meeting their current mission to nowhere with as much military discipline as they can muster. For many, homelessness has the inevitability of the next assignment. Despite the conglomerate military community in Colorado Springs (one Army base, two Air Force bases, two VA clinics, and a variety of defense installations), the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans calculates that more than 500 homeless veterans live on Colorado Springs’ streets, and an average of 2 have died on the streets there each year since 2003. Homelessness awaits many service members with as much probability as that taps will play over the loudspeakers every evening on their military bases. Although artificial, the temporal rhythm of deployment exerts a powerful pull; once it is left behind, many veterans struggle to restore the rhythms of home. Not all will succeed.

Time can speed up and slow down, but to those with jobs, homes, and families, a day is the unit. Since Jeffrey and Dean were benefiting from housing assistance and career coaching at the Crawford House, I asked if they had hopes for the future. They didn’t. “Why set goals,” Dean asked, “when we can’t take care of today?”

I asked my same question of Donnie, who was drinking whisky out of a brown-paper wrapped bottle in a downtown park on one of the coldest days of winter. Donnie has been homeless since he left the Army in ’86. He won’t enter a treatment program because he doesn’t want to stop drinking. “The good Lord takes care of me,” he says with a bright smile. Later in the conversation, it came out that the good Lord had some help from the VA. When Donnie developed cataracts, he went to the VA and they did surgery. When his rotting teeth became so painful he couldn’t eat, he went to the VA and they restored them. Although his clothes and hair were as scruffy as the rest of the homeless guys sitting in the park, Donnie stood out with his bright grey eyes and white smile. “Donnie Osmond,” his buddy teased.

Our relationship to time is experiential, we have no idea what it really is. As St. Augustine said, “I know what it is if I don’t have to explain it. If I have to explain it I don’t know what it is.” There’s a scene in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* where a bunch of men in white lab coats give Ken Kesey a strange new drug, called LSD, and ask him to tell them when he thinks a minute has elapsed. Kesey realizes

he has no idea, but it occurs to him to reach surreptitiously for his pulse, whose rhythms he knows. The scientists file out, amazed at his accuracy.

Jeffrey and Dean are like this. Although a day for them is an interval too mysterious to predict, they know what a day is supposed to have in it. Their days are punctuated by appointments: to fill out paperwork at DHS, see someone at the VA, make a court appearance. Since they don't have cars, volunteers at Crawford House drive them everywhere they need to go.

A few weeks later, I went to visit one of these volunteers. Bunny lives in a spacious red Victorian next to a Church of Christ, not far from the Colorado Springs VA Clinic. Although it was late January, there was a group of Scandinavian Christmas dolls on her porch, alongside a thriving poinsetta. Inside, lace doilies and knickknacks cluttered the side tables in her cozy living room. Bunny is in her 60s, with elegant blond hair and pink-and-cream Scandinavian features. She wore a silky white sweater and her miniature white terrier jumped up against my legs.

After graduating from Texas A & M, Bunny went through OTC and joined the Navy. She stayed in for over 20 years, retiring as an O-5. Two of her three sons followed her into service, one in the Navy, the other in the Marines. She came to Colorado Springs with her husband, and when they divorced, she didn't want to leave and make her sons commute between Mom and Dad.

While in the Navy, Bunny managed boot camp education and remedial reading programs. I asked her about these. In her day, if you enlisted but couldn't read, they would teach you in boot camp. In 2009, at a Homeless Veteran Stand Down at the City Auditorium in Colorado Springs, Bunny saw the call for volunteers for Crawford House. She called the number, but no one answered her message. She tried repeatedly for several weeks before anyone called her back.

Bunny started delivering church food once a week to homeless vets in transitional housing. Then she bought tickets and took a group of men to the rodeo. Now she does whatever is needed, mostly driving men to appointments, helping them with paperwork, and helping them get started at their apartments. Her detached garage was full of furniture, she told me. I asked her what gave her the greatest satisfaction. The question stumped her, and she stopped to think. "It all does," she finally said. "The men are so appreciative."

Now that her sons are grown, Bunny would like to return to Texas, where her family still lives. But she owns three properties in Colorado Springs, and doesn't want to sell them at a loss. When the housing market improves, she will sell and move back within the orbit of her own home, where her parents and siblings still reside.

Why are so many veterans of America's armed services ending up on the streets?

How do so many service men and women, who have vowed to uphold our constitution in explicit ways that civilians have not, come to forfeit their promised right to the pursuit of happiness? This outcome is, for many, the final stage in a long process, and the vets themselves view it this way. They do not speak of the one thing they did wrong, or the one thing they need to fix. The process is cumulative and exponential. Each stage implies the next. Without transportation and advocacy, bureaucratic hurdles are insurmountable. Without a regular address to receive checks, VA benefits are out of reach. The constitutional guarantee of equal protection comes with elaborate procedural requirements that veterans' complex circumstances make impossible to meet. As one of my colleagues in the Air Force Academy's economics department likes to point out, equal protection means a rich man has as much right as a poor man to sleep under a bridge.

The U.S. government bureaucracy's tendency to reduce principle to procedure is well pronounced in the service branches, with their elaborately codified tactical systems. Stuntz argues that this obsession with bureaucratic ritual is uniquely American; certainly it dates back to the earliest puritan settlements, as Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* makes clear in its gentle satire of the primacy of protocol over morality in the American founding. "The founders of a new colony," Hawthorne's opening passage reads, "whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison." The presumption that incarceration and death are the two inevitabilities of the human condition has come to grim fruition on America's streets. Incarceration and death remain two of the only experiences that distinguish the story of one of America's homeless veterans from another.

In May 2011, Bunny organized a memorial service for the 19 homeless veterans who have died on Colorado Springs' streets since 2003. She laid 19 red carnations in front of the Veterans Memorial in Memorial Park as each name was called aloud. "I suspect several of these guys hadn't had any kind of service," she told a Gazette reporter. "Now they've had a military service."

The homeless veterans I have met all display the affect of endurance that defines Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter*. Thanks to a sixth sense that enables her to sense others' hypocrisy, Hester knows she is set apart not by her sin, but by its visibility. Homeless veterans, like Hester, have little inclination to fight their condition; their energy goes to enduring their burden and keeping some part of their spirit

unbroken. Like Hester, their hopes for a normal life have faded, yet a part of them is still resistant and longs to escape.

Dean and Jeffrey did not mean to wander past the point of no return, but they know themselves well enough to know that they are wanderers by nature. Homeless veterans are marked by many life experiences, but for those I spoke to, their former military service had a central role. The nomadic lifestyle of the military appealed to them, and they allowed their military service to reconfigure their temporal and spatial sense. If Jeffrey and Dean are to break out of their homelessness, they will have to rework habits that were formed during their basic training long ago. They need to learn not just skills, not just a whole new set of expectations about how things get done, but also how to reset their body clocks to the autonomous rhythms of home. The legend of the Trojan War helps us understand the human process of homecoming. Getting home from war is not just a logistical matter, as Agamemnon's deadly reception from his wife Clytemnestra makes clear. Odysseus, by contrast, shows that a wily warrior, with the help of a kind goddess, can reshape himself to the patterns of home, but it might take him 10 years, and he might have to contend, among other things, with monsters, magic, and the worst inclinations of his own nomadic nature.

CLAUDIA HONEYWELL earned a B.A. from the University of Chicago and a Ph.D. in classics from the University of Minnesota. Tenured at St. John's College in Santa Fe, New Mexico, Honeywell recently served as Scholars Program Distinguished Visiting Professor at the United States Air Force Academy.