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Abstract

This phenomenological research study, conducted from 2017 to 2018, rigorously and methodologically investigated Iraq and Afghanistan (OIF/OEF) veterans' first-person accounts of their experiences of profound change after war. This study explored the existential themes of homecoming, betrayal, grief, guilt, meaning, and truth-telling through the lens of OIF/OEF veterans. This existential investigation built on the methods of Husserl's phenomenology, which explored human consciousness, and Heidegger and others, who deepened the phenomenological exploration to address the question of human existence. Key to the investigation of human phenomena is allowing the core encounter to emerge through rich, authentic description. In this study, OIF/OEF veterans described an experience in which they recognized that they had been profoundly changed by war. In-person interviews were recorded and transcribed. Data was analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step approach. The findings highlighted how profound change after war was a matrix of psychological and spiritual expansion for both the individuals and their communities. The fundamental structure of this phenomenon had three essential facets. First, experience, awareness, and impact collectively constituted one another in a circle of influence. Second, a before-deployment self stood in stark contrast to an expanded after-deployment self. Finally, profound change was enduring and had wide-sweeping implications throughout many levels of each veteran's life. Psychological-spiritual growth may result in symptomatic behaviors that are easily attributed to psychological disorders. These results also illuminate the need for social support at the community level as well as the need for veterans to cultivate self-awareness as part of the transition process.

The Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts of the 21st century have ushered in a new generation of war veterans. For many, these encounters will bring about psychic changes so profound that the war itself will pale in comparison to what lies ahead. There is no guarantee whether a transformative maturity or a regressive disintegration will emerge. What happens in the short span of the homecoming years, often when veterans are at their most vulnerable, can have lasting effects on their health and efforts at reintegration. Experiences of combat and related phenomena may resist easy quantification and are subject to ongoing debates about their place in the human psyche as well as their proper role in society at large. The political, economic, social, and personal implications of combat experience may complicate matters even further. More robust approaches to transition are needed that can address the multifaceted and multilayered realities of veterans' wartime experiences. It can be a disservice to both veterans and society when only piecemeal or partial understandings of veterans' combat encounters are recognized and integrated into both the personal and the collective narrative. A transition that is arrested or inadequate can leave veterans ill-prepared to face the war-related phenomena that may emerge in their lives 2, 5, 10, or 20 years down the road.

Descriptive phenomenology is a comprehensive approach to qualitative research that accounts for the complexity of consciousness, and it is therefore a particularly vital tool in veteran-related research. This research sought to uncover the essential structure of profound change after war as encountered by Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF)/ Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) veterans. The *essential structure* is the scaffolding that makes the phenomenon at hand what it is. It describes the features and contours of a cohesive mental process that are shared between those experiencing it. The phenomenologically informed conceptual model of profound change after war offers a clear structure of awareness, expansion, and impact that shapes and defines the nature of homecoming for returning veterans.

Brief History

In 2008, the number of U.S. servicemembers deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan peaked at over two million combined troops (Belasco, 2009). Operation Enduring Freedom began in late 2001 when U.S. military personnel arrived in Afghanistan in response to the attacks of September 11, 2001. Troop numbers hit their peak a decade later in 2011 at over 30,000, and the operation officially ended in 2014 with a shift to Operation Freedom's Sentinel (OFS), an ongoing training and advisory mission of 5,000–10,000 personnel (Torreon, 2016). Operation Iraqi Freedom began in 2003, hit its peak in 2008, and then officially transitioned to an advisory and support mission with Operation New Dawn (OND; Torreon, 2016). Taking into account OEF/OIF/OFS/OND and the more recent Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR), which began in 2014, the U.S. military has steadily deployed an all-volunteer force to the Middle East for nearly 20 consecutive years. As those troops separate or retire, the transfer of personnel from military to civilian status has real-world implications for both the returning individuals and the community at large.

Homecoming

Homecoming is a critical juncture and generally refers to major transitions from deployment to home, from active duty to reserve/guard status, or from military service to civilian status. Even though each of these transitions has psychological, emotional, social, and spiritual implications, the physical tends to be emphasized. There are departure ceremonies when a unit deploys; battlefield rituals for valor, heroism, and death; as well as redeployment celebrations upon return. Rites of passage that highlight psychological or psychic transformations tend to be limited (Demers, 2011). Servicemembers engaged with the existential tasks of homecoming, such as moral reflection, consciousness raising, or spiritual reckoning, are likely to find fewer resources to guide them through these transitions than they can find for their physical transition home. This can result in alienation from critical social support and perpetuate a cycle of distress (Ahern et al., 2015).

The challenge of alienation has been articulated in a number of different ways over the past half century. Merleau-Ponty (1968) emphasized the ways that people perceive *entire worlds* rather than simply *discrete things*. In his work, he implored the wider community to recognize the importance of the whole and not just the parts. In this vein, how things appear in front of us matters because phenomena can cast multidirectional shadows and shape life in a multitude of ways. A previous battlefield experience can influence and color a veteran's world by shaping how they see their future on the horizon. Similarly, Relph (1976) advanced that the physical aspects of space do not stand alone but instead coexist alongside the perceptual qualities of how we imagine and remember space. Individuals are more than timelines of events, and people embody physical space carrying with them a whole host of accompanying worlds rather than as a blank slate. For the veteran, physical presence at home carries with it the previous world of combat. Schuetz (1945) recognized early that communities and veterans underwent significant changes in their time apart and that a successful homecoming required deep cooperation from both parties. For example, civilians steeped in the war propaganda issued by the U.S. State Department to raise money for World War II war bonds would need to adjust their expectations so that they could welcome home their veterans, whose military service often was nothing like what had been depicted in radio and film (Schuetz, 1945). Homecoming as a discrete, physical act, rather than as a mythic journey, remains the normative approach for OIF/OEF veterans. Tick (2005) warned against understanding war in terms of isolated facts and figures as opposed to an entire world to be grasped and faced by the entire community. Beshai and Tushup (2006) argued for the recognition of combat as a complex world where questions of life's sanctity and societal responsibility were treated as foremost concerns rather than secondary afterthoughts.

In the autobiographical milieux of memoir, journals, and poetry, veterans themselves articulate similar critiques of homecoming: that there is not enough emphasis on existential concerns or societal responsibility (Harris, 2014; Holmstedt, 2007; Jones, 2013). There have also been calls for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) to be applied to the wider society and not just the individual (Tick, 2005). The dominant framework currently assumes that the reintegration of veterans into a static society, one that does not change itself, is psychologically healthy and personally desirable, when it may in fact be neither (Marlantes, 2011). Too often, the wider culture forgoes the possibility that the veteran might have something to offer that the civil sector may need, like the hero's boon or gift earned along the journey (Campbell, 2012).

Design Background

Design Background

First-person OIF/OEF accounts often tackle phenomena such as ineffable experiences, the presence of the soul, and the human community as chief postwar concerns (Tick, 2014; Williams & Staub, 2005). Existential-phenomenological themes touching on meaning, identity, belonging, death, guilt, and shame have been endorsed by veterans across geography, gender, rank, and age (Castner, 2012; Gordon, 2014; Luttrell, 2007). These first-person voices, however, often fall outside of academic and medical research, which drive veteran-related policies and programs. Overreliance on the empirical scientific method as performed by these institutions confines the field and restricts its knowledge base. As a result, the limits of reality have frequently been assumed to be synonymous with the limits of method (Giorgi, 1970). More bridges are needed to connect veterans' self-identified concerns with the programs that are designed for them. Since the self-observer has greater access to the intricacies of their experience than does the external, third-person observer whose lens is more restricted, first-person accounts are an essential and irreducible perspective (Von Eckartsberg, 1989). Descriptive phenomenology and its focus on first-person experiences does not "wish for third person, ostensibly objective accounts of our lifeworld to wear the mask of truth to dominate the field of lived-experiences" (Steinbock, 2012, p. 594).

This study sought to excavate the lived experiences of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans through the lens of descriptive phenomenology in order to strengthen the conceptual foundation of homecoming. By prioritizing subjectivity, descriptive phenomenology shifts the veteran from the object of research to the subject (Colaizzi, 1978) and in this way allows veterans to reclaim the primary voice in postwar reflection.

Methodology

Descriptive phenomenology is the methodological framework for this study. Phenomenology is the exploration of the lived experience and a study of how events show themselves to the human person amid the complex layers and intricacies of life. As a methodological approach, phenomenology emerged in the Western philosophical tradition as scholars wrestled with questions of authentic knowledge about humanity and the surrounding world. The study of phenomena can be understood as "a philosophically consuming fascination with the question of origin, sources, and meaning of meaning and meaningfulness" (van Manen, 2014, p. 74). In the early 20th century, Husserl (1913/1983) advocated for the importance of the relationship between the mind and objects rather than solely the objects themselves and called for human consciousness to be explored with all the rigor and gravitas that had been afforded to the scientific pursuit of the natural world. He understood phenomenology to be "the science of the essence of consciousness" (p. 33), or the systematic study of subjectivity, and he argued that it was necessary because the natural sciences had become untethered from their philosophical roots and were therefore incapable of adequately addressing human concerns (Husserl, 1936/1970). The rise of phenomenology, in which human experience was foundational and prioritized, challenged the "sensation-bound positivism" that had infused modernism and shaped how and what was studied (Spiegelberg, 1972, p. xxviii).

In this study, veterans were asked to describe an experience of profound change after war—one in which they came to understand their postcombat lives in a new way. The concept of "profound change" allowed for a wide range of experiences to emerge beyond the traditional categories of trauma or psychological injury. In this way, the method aligned with the goal of uncovering veterans' existential interests, concerns which tend to be highly interconnected and not always discretely categorized. Clinical settings, particularly the Department of Veterans Affairs, which is traditionally called the VA, capture only a small fraction of both veterans themselves and the challenges, distress, and reintegration hurdles that they face (Demers, 2011). By investigating at the deeper level of profound change—rather than through the lens of a specific diagnosis like PTSD, spiritual distress, or moral injury—this research was equipped to capture the ways in which the sum of veteran experience is greater than its parts.

In addition to the overarching directive to "describe an experience of profound change after war," veterans were also asked a set of phenomenological interview questions (Barrell et al., 1987), including:

1. Briefly describe the setting of your experience. Where were you? What were you doing?
2. Attempt to get back to a short interval of time when you experienced the phenomenon. As you relive this brief interval, share your first-person, present tense experience.
3. Report both what you were experiencing and how you were experiencing it.

This pilot study aimed to uncover the shared structure of profound change among six OIF/OEF veterans. Priority was given to saturation and alignment of the data over the number of participants. This research was designed to allow veterans' concerns to emerge in their own language and to guide the outcome. Participants who could describe in detail an experience with profound change after war were selected, and participation was limited to Iraq or Afghanistan servicemembers who were able to engage in a 45–60 minute interview in a public setting. Prospective participants who were not able to describe or who did not report having had an experience of profound change were not eligible for the study. Participants were recruited until a full accounting, or saturation, of the phenomenon was reached. Variety was sought in terms of participants' age, gender, veteran status, and time in service. Specific medical or mental diagnoses were neither inclusive nor exclusive and were not asked about. Physical ability, substance use, and/or employment status likewise were not limiting factors. A service-connected disability or a particular military occupation specialty (MOS) was not required, although at least one post-9/11 combat deployment to Afghanistan or Iraq was a necessary qualification. The Saybrook University institutional review board approved and oversaw this study. The interviews were professionally transcribed for analysis. Table 1 presents biographical data for all participants (P).

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) seven procedural steps for phenomenological analysis of a qualitative inquiry. Step 1 was the first, full read through the transcripts to get a sense of the collective body of data. Step 2 focused on extracting significant statements that were in the data that were pertinent to the phenomenon at hand. The extracted significant statements were then compiled into a complete list. In Step 3, the meanings of the significant statements were drawn out and highlighted. The analysis moved from what the participants said to what they meant and thus illuminated meanings that might have otherwise remained hidden. In Step 4, the formulated meanings were gathered into clusters of themes. Validation took place in this step, as the themes were referred back to the original descriptions to ensure that the findings remained rooted in and closely tied to the raw data and that they did not contain anything foreign to the original descriptions. Likewise, the themes were allowed to stand in whatever contradictions or ambiguity that arose, and any discrepancies were noted. In Step 5, an exhaustive description pulled together all of the findings into an integrative account of the phenomenon. In Step 6, an exhaustive description of the phenomenon offered "as unequivocal a statement of identification of its fundamental structure as possible" (Colaizzi, 1978, p. 61). In Step 7, the final phase, the researcher returned to the participants and inquired about the findings, asking, "How do the descriptive results compare with your experiences?" (Colaizzi, 1978, p. 62). New data that emerged in this step was integrated into the analysis and the final outcome. In descriptive phenomenology, the goal of analysis is to create an essential structure of the phenomenon that outlines its mental contours and psychological features.

Summary of Findings

The phenomenon of being profoundly changed after war incorporated an important circle of experience, recognition, and impact. The experience of the change occurred first. Then came the ability to recognize it, followed finally by the ongoing impact of the event. In the findings, this

Table 1. Participant Demographics

P	Branch	Overseas	Age	MOS	Family	Employment	Gender
1	Army	Iraq	30–40	Chaplain	Married/Children	Employed	M
2	Army	Iraq	30–40	Infantry	Married/Children	Unemployed	M
3	Army	Iraq	20–30	Signal	Single	Unemployed	M
4	Navy	Iraq	40–50	Chaplain	Married/Children	Employed	M
5	Army	Afghanistan	20–30	Armor	Single	Employed	M
6	Marines	Afghanistan	20–30	Infantry	Single	Unemployed	M

cycle repeated itself rather than being finite, and it was not limited to just one sphere of life as veterans felt the cycle and its impacts in multiple places, such as family, work, and school. Veterans came to fresh recognitions about their experience of change and saw the impacts of this change evolve, and they uncovered new aspects of their identity both at the level of the self and at the communal level. This created a marked contrast between the before-profound-change self and the after-profound-change self. The interviewees' endorsement of "who I was before" versus "who I am after" illuminated the rupturing quality of profound change. This schism resulted from experiences that included but surpassed conventional definitions of trauma and were marked by the quality of expansion. The after-change self was not merely different or changed but was an expanded self with a greater capacity for sensory input, perspective, knowledge, or relationships. This bigger and fuller self, however, was not always accompanied by corresponding coping skills or ego strength. Personal transformation that moved more rapidly than either the individual's mental structures or social support could keep up with usually resulted in distress. In sum, the essential structure of profound change after war was (a) an unpredictable and erupting awareness of the profound change; (b) a rapidly expanded self, regardless of corresponding ego strength or social support; and (c) widespread implications in nearly all spheres of life.

Awareness

The awareness that profound change had even occurred was a key piece of the phenomenon's essential structure. The awareness itself emerged unpredictably and was often disruptive when it arose. For some, awareness developed at the moment of a key experience, while for others awareness took on more of a cumulative, unveiling effect. P1 had spent 4 out of 5 years on deployments with significant losses and an increasing feeling of the "heaviness of what we experienced." The snowballing effect of loss and the long exposure rate eventually culminated in a profound transformation. P5 endorsed a similar experience of key events "over time" rather than at "a specific time." P2 and P4 both had discrete transcendental encounters that were immediately recognizable, but it was not until a later time that they more fully understood the impacts of these encounters. P2 experienced an "unexpected slowing of time" amid "absolute confusion" as a first foray into

nonordinary time, an encounter which drastically reformed P2's understanding of the nature of reality. P3 and P4 had similar transcendental moments, with the former able to "see sounds" and the latter "seeing pain and suffering" in an energetic, third eye kind of way. P6 only began to recognize the depth of what had changed after his discharge from military service. After a childhood marked by "masculine betrayal and abuse," P6's newfound trust in male peers as a result of service in the Marine Corps was a source of deep healing.

Before-Deployment Self and Expanded, After-Deployment Self

The findings highlighted that veterans experienced themselves as having a before-deployment self and an after-deployment self. The profound changes that they encountered were often so extensive that they felt as if a new person had been born. The data supported the new self as being marked by an expansion and/or enlargement of sensory capabilities (i.e., heightened hearing, smell, and perceptions), empathy and spiritual sensing, or moral sensibilities. For some, this expansion was a positive change marked by growth, maturity, and perspective. For others, this expansion ushered in a breakdown of their coping skills and ego structure. On some occasions, growth and disintegration took place simultaneously. Interviewees described the emergence of a new self in a number of ways. For P1 it was "a major change," and for P2 it was "something that's going to stick with me and it's going to be a big deal." P1 described a "shaken faith" and said that "in the course of those experiences, the details of my life just lost all worth." P3, knowing that he had experienced changes in perception and cognition, still "doesn't know how to explain it to [my health care providers]," continuing "I still can't get help because they say I don't have it." P4's transcendental "seeing" of the suffering and pain of war while in the basement of a building immediately allowed him to start seeing that same suffering and pain in the "impact on civilians," something which he could then not unsee. P5's after-deployment self struggled with the "flow of civilian life," and after experiencing the grit and determination of his military peers, he found it difficult to interact with civilians who lacked such traits. P6's expansion of self came in the form of new trust, an ability "to actually have faith that I can trust another man in my life. And [that he] isn't like there to like crush you."

Widespread Implications

The third piece of the essential structure was the profound change's widespread, continually expanding implications. The effects of the change implicated not only the veterans but also their personal networks and their wider communities. Whether or not veterans were accepted and supported by their immediate friends and family often made a big difference in the nature of their homecoming. Describing the return home, P1 said, "like before, life was a bunker, and now it is just a lot of crushed stone.…I have absolutely no shelter, no sense of protection or security." In addition, P1 realized what "a gaping hole I was in this fabric" of a familiar community. P2 had internalized the ethical questions of combat and found little outlet for them upon his return home, resulting in a pressure cooker–like internal life that deteriorated beyond recognition. P3 had managed to integrate a newfound sensitivity to sound by balancing an avoidance of "shopping at Walmart, football games, and musical concerts" with more time spent building a foundation "for reimagining custody of my children." P4 entered homecoming with a "greater level of sensitivity to what was here" and reaffirmed the wisdom of moving through life in an intuitive kind of way rather than with strategic or intentional plans. P5 asked himself, "What rhythm am I supposed to march to now? Well, which ever one you want," which reflected the deep identity formation that was taking place. In the military, P6 had experienced trust in personal relationships, a departure from his preservice relationships characterized by a lack of or broken trust. This contrast had a number of disorienting impacts; P6 noted that homecoming was a time where "things you don't remember come up for you," in reference to abuse that had occurred in his past.

Discussion and Implications

With the data analyzed for its essential structure, it becomes possible to look at the phenomenon of profound change after war apart from medical diagnosis, psychological categorization, or political influence. In this level of analysis, often called lived experience, the participating subject is as close as can be to the phenomenon and is able to provide a sweeping view of the encounter. Lived experience, when described soon after the phenomenon itself, is freer of explanations or justifications. This kind of proximity allows the subject to craft a cohesive and internally organized accounting, in this case, of the profound change. The interviewees' narratives seamlessly wove together combat exposure, trauma, grief, trust, betrayal, family, community, intimacy, spiritual encounters, transpersonal experiences, heightened sensory perception, expanded perspectives, families of origin, religious communities, theology, psychological development, traumatic brain injury, mental illness, and physical injury, just to name a few. Rather than disjointed collections of separate themes, the accounts were coherent and connected. The findings at this subjective level of encounter produced a high-level accounting of the phenomenon that is closer to a conceptual model or a cohesive system than to a diagnosis or set of symptoms. Profound change after war could not be reduced to experiences, symptoms, emotions, or coping skills, although it embraced all of these. It also was not simplified to trauma, mental illness, grief, or moral injury, even though it incorporated these as well.

This understanding of the phenomenon of profound change after war may thus contribute to a more nuanced and informed understanding of homecoming by equipping veterans ahead of time with realistic expectations and appropriate resources. The essential structure of profound change, which includes continual awareness, an expanded self, and ongoing implications, suggests that an informed homecoming, rather than a laissez faire one, is crucial. For the veterans who have encountered profoundly transformational experiences, understanding a map of the terrain to come might be a central step toward an effective homecoming. The landscape might not only include traditional mental health services but also models of psychospiritual development that have the potential to align with servicemembers' systems of making meaning (Harris et al., 2015).

The ways in which veterans can be deeply and profoundly changed also shed light on practical concerns, such as diagnosis and treatment as defined by the VA. The work of preparing servicemembers for the cycle of awareness, integration, and impact extends far beyond the health care traditionally offered by the VA. A specific challenge in receiving adequate care is the task of demonstrating eligibility and the ways in which a servicemember must show that they are psychologically injured in connection with their military service. Such parsing may not be consistent with the integrated nature of the phenomenon at hand. The findings from this study show that veterans experiencing profound change

after war are engaged in critical psychological, spiritual, and social tasks on many levels and in many areas at the same time. This raises questions about the degree to which the practical services of the VA reflect the reality that veterans who have been profoundly changed may experience.

The findings also can provide insight for practitioners who encounter Iraq and Afghanistan veterans throughout the course of their work. Such practitioners may include university professors, clergy, counselors, medical personnel, veteran service officers, social workers, mental health professionals, and even family members, to name a few. Profound change after war takes place on an iterative continuum whereby experience, recognition, and impact mutually inform one another, and a before-change self stands in contrast to an expanded, after-change self, with ongoing implications. Profound change after war involves the complex work of awareness and integration in the midst of an expanded being; the phenomenon could be described as one of development and expansion. Psychological, moral, and spiritual developmental theories might be considered essential tools when engaging with a veteran who has experience with this phenomenon. The movement of the psyche has been addressed by a number of scholars, including Erikson's (1982/1997) psychosocial stages, Kohlberg's (1984) moral development, Fowler's (1981) stages of faith, Steinbock's (2009) structures of mysticism, and Loder's (1989) transformative growth. These models have the advantage of serving as a map and a guide to a rapidly changing interior life, something which is lacking in the symptom reduction approach that many veterans receive.

Community Engagement

Profound change after war shows that the homecoming of veterans is neither an individual pursuit nor simply a medical or diagnostic problem. The phenomenon illuminates how an integrated conceptualization of homecoming should includde broad social involvement and community engagement. The relationships among veteran homecoming, the VA, PTSD, and the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM-5*; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) may overly simplify experiences of profound change. For instance, combat-related PTSD has relied almost exclusively on cause-and-effect factors for diagnosis, whereby a veteran's distressing symptoms at home are assumed to be the direct result of prior events in combat. While causality may be a legitimate factor, on its own it fails to account for a host of other influences. Quite a bit of time and life experience may elapse between combat and coming home, such that the conceptualization of postwar stress as a narrow linear equation in which A causes B has been shown to be problematic (Paulson & Krippner, 2007). Likewise, the operationalization of PTSD through the lens of the *DSM-5* remains focused on the individual and does not address higher-order factors, such as the fact that the rate of PTSD in veterans decreases as cultural support for war increases (Greenberg et al., 2008) or the argument that higher levels of moral attunement may signal an increased risk of PTSD (Kempton, 2008). Sociological research on the relationship between social abandonment and PTSD-like symptoms raises questions about the proximate causes of trauma (Brown, 2012). If homecoming and combat-related phenomena are primarily conceived of in individual terms, there may be a failure to recognize the inevitable changes that war has wrought on individuals and their society at large (Tick, 2005). An ethical diagnosis of PTSD must rely upon the clear articulation of personal and communal sources where individual notions of disease and disorder are secondary to societal notions of the same (Beshai & Tushup, 2006). Community engagement is critical for new conceptualizations of homecoming; specifically:

> Practical and theoretical anchors for understanding and treating PTSD rest on deep, foundational social, psychological, philosophical, and existential questions …and the dangers associated with the increased clinical attention to the condition are that these difficult, fundamental issues are overlooked in favor of approaches that ignore important nuances and deal merely with symptoms, approaches that offer respite from bad dreams, or tranquilize a veteran who has been overrun by paranoia, without fully restoring the person. That kind of profound recovery relies on an equally profound awareness of the circumstances involved in a person's life, as well as the nature of the trauma. (Paulson & Krippner, 2007, p. xvi)

Conclusion

Profound change after war is a phenomenon that weaves together key experiences, awareness,

a new expanded self, and ongoing impact into an integral narrative. Profound change is just that: profound. It has qualities of entireness, fullness, and pervasiveness. It emerges, reemerges, and does not shy away from conflict. It brings about healing just as it brings about disintegration, because when the self expands, ego strength and social support may or may not be in place. Key encounters in combat, both traumatic and nontraumatic, bring veterans onto sacred ground and into dreadful places. Profound change after war defies the easy dichotomy of good experiences versus bad ones and instead paints the homecoming landscape with the full colors of a developmental leap. Profound change echoes ancient homecoming myths and yet roots the traveler within the confines of life as presently lived. Phenomenology conceives of the hero's journey as the hero sees it and conceives of homecoming as the veteran sees it. What is clinically convenient, politically expedient, or financially lucrative is set aside and attention is given to the essence of the things themselves and the evidence within them, "we want to go back to the 'things themselves' … and thereby bring ourselves to the evidence" (Husserl, 1901/1968, p. 6). Homecoming as a mutual endeavor between veterans and society bears out what William James (1880/2009) described as how the "the community stagnates without the impulse of the individual. The impulse dies away without the sympathy of the community" (p. 50). The phenomenon of profound change after war conceives of coming home as just the beginning, rather than the end, of the journey.

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