

War's Over, Come Home

Preface

"This searching for Andrew is ripping our family apart," I said to Eliza.

"It could do that," she said, "Or it could bring us closer together."

I awoke this morning with a sense of urgency. In a wild thrust of the lance against the spinning-sputtering propeller of the faltering windmill that is our American society today, I want this book to help us find our son Andrew, two-tour Marine veteran of the Iraq war, who has severe Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome and is homeless.

I picture a thoughtful, middle-aged woman picking it up at an East Coast airport, reading the first few chapters while aloft, and later when taking an Uber to her California or New Mexico or Washington State residence, contacting us after spotting Andrew marching along the shoulder of a road. It is a long shot. But it is not nearly as long a shot as some of the leads we've followed up on over the past five years, flying thousands of miles and spending thousands of dollars on flights, rental cars, hotel rooms, detectives, lawyers and meals.

Andrew has PTSD, a deep emotional wound "resulting from exposure to an overwhelmingly stressful event or series of events such as war, rape, or abuse . . . a normal response by normal people to an abnormal situation." He is a homeless survivalist, a paranoid schizophrenic, has been in and out of veteran's facilities. HIPPA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act), originally designed to "provide privacy standards to protect patients' medical records and other health information provided to health plans, doctors, hospitals, . . ." is one of the greatest obstacles to overcome, that and the bureaucracy of the Veteran's Administration, state governments, and police departments. Andrew refuses to seek help. He has threatened to shoot himself. Meanwhile, twenty-two veterans commit suicide a day. Hard to believe. Horrible to believe. And he has threatened to shoot others. We've told the police. He is left to roam.

To describe Andrew in this way objectifies him, makes him a stereotype, a faceless, nameless, homeless veteran standing on the corner of an American city. There are thousands out there who fit this profile. You see them in wheelchairs, a blanket over their laps hiding the absence of legs, a “Vietnam Veteran” cap perched on long, thick, gray hair, and a cup with some change at the feet that they don’t have; you see them standing by the entrance ramp to Interstate highways, the business and pleasure of America speeding by, tractor-trailers carrying thousands of pounds of construction materials, SUV’s carrying husband, wife and three children on their way to the beach; they hold signs up “Afghanistan Vet. Can you spare some change?” with one arm, the sleeve of the jacket to the other arm hanging, empty; they are either broken on the outside or broken on the inside; they might have a twitch; they are overly vigilant—constantly looking over the shoulder; they feel crushed, shattered, beaten.

They have shut themselves down. Some feel dead inside. Either their family told them they had to leave home—after one last outburst, punching of walls, smashing of furniture—or they left of their own accord, or they have no family. Their anger is debilitating.

Some experience sudden, unexpected hallucinations and flashbacks; there is no way to prepare. The cliché, but it is true: a car backfires. The vet standing on the corner begins to shake, to tremble, or even dives to the ground—he sees the Humvee with his buddies in it being blown into the air; he steels himself for the next explosion, for the upcoming blast from a dozen enemy AK-47s. Another vet who used to play and joke at parties with his nieces and nephews, does not talk, seals himself off from humanity. Another—to blunt the force of the painful memories— turns to drugs, but a price is paid: the drugs also block his joyful memories.

Any vision of the future is pessimistic, giving vets with serious PTSD a “doomsday orientation.” Emotions are turned off; many are unable “to feel compassionate, intimate, tender, sexual,” Innumerable, unpredictable stressors set off flashbacks that can last for hours. Sleep is difficult, only for short periods, and sometimes flooded with excruciating nightmares.

Thousands of soldiers returned from Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan and were able to recuperate from their PTSD with therapeutic treatment, with the administering of the right drugs, with hard work and support from a loving family; they were able to adapt to civilian life, to develop a career, buy a house, raise a family; they sleep between the clean white sheets of a double bed with the mother of their children; they live the American Dream.

Others, America leaves behind. They are the detritus of our wars. Sleeping in soiled sleeping bags not unlike the ones they had in Vietnam, Iraq or Afghanistan, camping on concrete sidewalks, under highways, and on the ground in the city, state and national parks of America, they live the American Nightmare. They are wary, senses ratcheted up high, on the edge of paranoia. No longer do they have a trustworthy lookout for the Vietcong guerilla, the Iraqi or Al-Qaeda or ISIS or Taliban assassin. They sleep lightly, keeping an eye out for a desperate American tempted to rob them, or for a righteous American wanting to get this homeless man out of “my back yard.”

Andrew is one of these thousands. Andrew is my son whom I raised and whom I love. And every one of the over forty thousand homeless American veterans also has or had a father, most of whom raised and loved them.

After Andrew’s second tour in Iraq ended in 2009, he returned to the United States, was honorably discharged at the rank of corporal after earning two service medals, three service awards, and a Letter of Appreciation. Gradually, but with increasing force and intensity, over a four-year period, he began losing jobs, losing apartments, losing friends. He became more and more paranoid, experiencing an onslaught of hauntingly painful false mental images that were real to him: His friends had turned against him. His girlfriend was having an affair with his uncle. His brother was in the DEA or FBI trying to ruin his life. His sister was going out with Carlos, his best Marine buddy, his roommate in Iraq. He descended into the unceasing nightmare of trusting nobody. Started having hallucinations. And now he’s on the streets or in the mountains or along the banks of a river. He’s no longer smoking cigarettes. He’s stopped drinking alcohol. He’s quit all drugs. He’s walking.

He's walking through the coronavirus pandemic. A high percentage of the homeless are dying. How can he remain uninfected? Does he have a facemask? Is he using a bandana for a facemask as he saw me do for years mucking out stalls, unloading hay, working in dusty areas on the farm? There’s the difficulty, if not impossibility, of keeping clean, of staying six feet apart from other homeless men and women and children, of breathing in uninfected air in homeless shelters, of getting treatment.

Headlines: “Trump Administration Models Predict Near Doubling of Daily Death Toll by June.” “Trump Administration Projects 3,000 Daily Deaths by Early June.” “U.S. DEATHS

NEAR 100,000, AN INCALCUABLE LOSS.” The energy hisses out of me. It’s June of 2020. The Death Toll will rise and rise as 2020 marches through the fall and winter.

He’s all right. He’s all right! He’s smart and he’s outside and he’s away from everyone.

An-drew

Can-do

He has a routine. Has a mask. Has places to wash his hands with soap. Is not sleeping in homeless shelters. Is spending most of his time outdoors. Is maintaining a rigorous early morning workout with Marine Corps discipline.

Our daily thoughts, mind drifts, meditative peregrinations, as we drive or walk, as I split wood or mowed or rode—are a string of interconnected worries: Where is he?, can he stay away from homeless people who have the virus?, is he knowledgeable about the virus?, could he go to the VA and be tested?, would/could they put him in quarantine?, how can he wash his hands

War’s Over, Come Home is the story of a family living in constant threat, under daily pressure, ready to throw pajamas, toothbrush, notepad, pen and binoculars in a carry-on bag—as I was five days ago—and fly anywhere in the USA on the notice of one Facebook post, one text, one hazy, grainy emailed photograph of a tall youthful homeless man with a beard.

The homeless. 568,000. Many sleep on sheets of cardboard several feet away from multi-million-dollar steel and glass and marble monuments to Ozymandias topped off with billionaire-leased penthouse apartments that scrape against the sky a quarter of a mile up. In *War’s Over, Come Home* my aim is to put the reader on the street with these homeless Americans, and put the reader in the living room, in the kitchen, in the hearts and minds of relatives and friends searching for their sons, cousins, brothers trying to help them, but being hindered by HIPPA, by federal laws, state laws and the unwieldy, overwhelmed VA. The great irony: The NSA or CIA or FBI or NCI with all their computer files and modern surveillance techniques can locate a terrorist in America in a day or two. The CIA can send a drone up, 6,000 miles away in a foreign country, pinpoint the exact, two-feet-in-diameter space of a terrorist leader driving down a desert road in a line of black, nondescript armored SUVs, hit the correct SUV with a missile and blow the terrorist leader into bits and pieces impossible to gather for a grave. But we can’t find our six foot three, long-legged, fast-walking, bearded son we love in this vast country of our own we want to love.

Andrew was a skilled marksman—as a boy with his BB gun, then his pellet rifle; as a nineteen-year-old in the Marines with his M-16. I look down the barrel of this pen and through its cross hairs, squint, as he used to do on the range. Focus. (Marine mantra of Andrews's: *Slow is smooth. Smooth is fast.*) Breathe in . . . , breath out . . . , as he used to do, slowly tighten my finger on the trigger—aiming at the bull's eye of this quixotic undertaking: a narrative of what a father—one father among thousands—is going through searching for his son, how this search affects his relationship with that son, with his two other children, with his wife, and with so many helpful citizens, policemen, veterans, homeless men and women, receptionists and social workers at homeless shelters, clerks at hotels, and flight seat companions he meets along the way.

War's Over, Come Home is a reconnaissance mission, a search for something very specific, a son, a brother, a future brother-in-law who is running away from war memories, from nightmares, from hallucinations, from his close and loyal friends, from his father, mother, sister and brother who love him. The mission is conducted in splintered pieces of America that have broken off and drifted away from the jigsaw puzzle of the “United” States we grew up piecing together so neatly and precisely in first grade, shattered fragments of America no longer fitting together that are impoverished, malnourished, destitute, drug-ridden, crime-ridden, have no laws besides survival of the fittest, and are a disgrace to our forefathers and the history of our country.

I hope readers will keep their eyes out for a tall man of thirty-six, quiet, gentle and polite if having to speak, reddish-brown beard, hair over his ears, baseball cap (wool cap over the baseball cap in the cold months), blazing blue eyes, delicate nose like his sister's, frame backpack, tent neatly tied to the top, sleeping bag tied to the bottom and moving. He's walking. He's eating up the miles. Long strides. Never staying in one place long. On the West Coast. Or in the Southwest. On his own. By himself. Hour after hour. Last seen by his Uncle Graham early one morning in a park in Albuquerque: Running. Running one mile, two miles. Looping around the park. Three miles. Running, knees a little higher than most, with a long stride, the stride I used to run alongside when he was a teenager before we'd round the turn, he'd see the finish, our mailbox, and he'd pull away.

We'll find him.

Patrick Smithwick
Prospect Farm, Monkton Maryland

June 2020