"The Things They Carry In Their Pockets"
A Ministry of Listening to Veterans in Transitional Housing
By M.A. SEMPARI
August 2014

"All men carry the figurative weight of memory and the literal weight of one another."

Tim Obrien "The Things They Carry"

Veterans Building – Center Street, Berkeley CA
I am a chaplain for a non-profit organization in Berkeley CA. I provide spiritual care for twelve male US Military Veterans in a two-year transitional housing program. All twelve veterans were unhoused (homeless) prior to entering the transitional housing program.

In addition to providing spiritual for the veterans in transitional housing, I lead an outreach team consisting of my self and two veterans. The goal of our outreach team is to locate veterans “in need,” and connect them with the proper resources that can meet their needs.

We work for Support Services for Veterans and Families (SSVF), an organization funded by The Veterans Administration. The outreach program has been in operation for three months. At this early stage of development, we spend most of our time building trust with veterans by listening to their stories.

My work with the veterans in transitional housing consists of “Round Table” group conversations, where anyone is free to participate or not. The men appear to find comfort and strength sharing their initial stories amongst their fellow comrades. In addition to “The Round Table” conversations, I meet with the veterans one on one in my “Office in the Park.” My office is a park bench across the street from the Veterans building in MLK Park.
"The Round Table"

My Office – MLK Park – Center Street, Berkeley CA
"The Things They Carry In Their Pockets" is an idea inspired by Jess Goodell in her book "SHADE OF BLACK." In chapter 13 "Personal Effects," Goodell goes into great detail about the personal effects found in dead soldiers pockets. Goodell’s extraordinary curiosity and self-reflective insights concerning the personal meaning of the items found in the dead soldiers pockets, led me to wonder what veterans carry in their pockets.

Due to the time constraints of this project, I have chosen and interviewed veterans in the transitional housing program. The information acquired is limited in scope and not representative of all veterans. It is my hope to extend my future research to include a broader spectrum of veterans.

I have assigned each veteran interviewed an alias name. All veteran’s interviewed gave their consent for their stories to be used in this project.
STATIONED – Yakutsk Japan
POSITION – Catapult Steam Operator
AGE – 37

CARRIES IN HIS POCKETS:

**RT Back Pocket** - Large chained leather black wallet – ID & Cash

**LT Back Pocket** - Papers of any type he may collect throughout the day – Business cards, job applications, pamphlets etc. His left back pocket is his filing cabinet

**RT Front Pocket** – Electronic Cigarette
**LT Front Pocket** – Cell Phone

‘Shorty’ believes, *“If it does not serve a purpose, don’t carry it in your pockets.”*

As I continued my conversation with ‘Shorty’ I asked him if he had a sentimental object that has been with him a long time, an object that is near and dear to his heart.

‘Shorty’ paused for a moment, then with a sparkle in his eyes and a smile on his face he said, “Yes I do, I will show you.” ‘Shorty’ returned with a maroon bath towel in his hands. The towel was faded and frayed on one end. Smiling proudly, while holding his beloved towel, ‘Shorty’ shared his towel story.

“My wife, now ex-wife Kimberly gave me this towel, when we got our first apartment together. That was in 2000. This towel has been
with me for fourteen years. It is my most treasured possession. My towel reminds me of a time in my life when I was happy and loved. My towel and I have a shared a long history together”...(tears form in his eyes and he chokes up).

“When my wife and I split up, the only things it took were some clothes and my towel. I have used my towel for bathing, it’s been my pillow, my scarf, it’s protected me from the rain, and I used it to keep my cat warm when it was cold outside.”

“I’ve lived on the streets, various shelters and encampments across the United States; my towel has remained with me through it all. It is the one constant in my life. When anyone else looks at it, all they see is a faded and frayed maroon towel. When I look at my towel I see my life. My towel brings me comfort and hope.”

‘Shorty ‘adds, “To answer your question chaplain, about what I carry in my pockets...If my towel fit in my pocket, I would carry I would carry it with me all the time.”
NAME: “Video Man” (VM) – US ARMY 2002-2004
STATIONED – Iraq
POSITION - Sniper
AGE - 33

CARRIES IN HIS POCKETS:

RT Back Pocket – Wallet & ID
LT Back Pocket – Nothing
RT Front Pocket – Cell Phone
LT Front Pocket – Cigarettes, Lighter, Rolling Papers

‘VM’ is in constant motion...Cleaning, cooking, pacing, and exiting
and entering the building to smoke. He plays “KILLER” video games,
developing strategies for *The Perfect Kill*. He says, “It calms me.” ‘VM’ suffers from PTSD, Moral Injury and TBI. ‘VM’ is inwardly and outwardly angry, he has been hurt by life and war.

When I first began my interview with ‘VM,’ he curtly stated, “I don’t have anything that means anything to me. I have nothing of sentimental value in my life.”

With the encouragement and prodding of other vets in the room, ‘VM’ said, “I do have something, my belt.” He proudly lifted his shirt to show us his beloved belt. ‘VM’ said, “I’ve lost everything over the years, I don’t like things to mean any thing to me, cuz if you loose it, it hurts like hell...and I can’t afford to feel that kind of pain...it's too dangerous!”

‘VM’ continues, “I always wear my belt, it’s always on me or with in arms reach...I got this belt as soon as I got out in 03...I've had it since then.” He goes on to say, “Ya know why it’s so special?? Because the buckle is made of a certain metal that can’t be detected by security devices that they have in airports and places like that...I know it sounds weird, but my belt makes me feel safe, and yeah in a strange way it brings me comfort.” “I've been through a lot since I got out, and my belt has seen me through it all...Mother F..king weird when ya think about it...A F..king belt...Go figure!” ‘VM’ proudly lifts his shirt again to display
his belt, and once again grins and says, “A Mother F..king belt, try to
figure that one out!”

NAME: “Science Friday” (SF) – US ARMY -
STATIONED – Germany
POSITION – Border Patrol
AGE - 55

CARRIES IN HIS POCKETS:

**RT Back Pocket** – ID only – No Wallet
**LT Back Pocket** – Nothing
**RT Front Pocket** – Cigarettes & Matches
**LT Front Pocket** – Cell Phone

‘SF’ is a quiet, reserved and soft-spoken man. I asked ‘SF’ if he had
an item that held sentimental value to him. ‘SF’ replied, “I have nothing,
everything I owned was destroyed when my apartment caught on fire,
there was nothing left, I’ve had to start all over... The things I valued
most and meant anything to me were my photographs, they held my life story...Now all I have are the clothes that have been given to me...My clothes hold someone else’s story, they don’t mean anything to me.” A sadness appeared in ‘SF’s’ eyes as he said, “I don’t ever want to own anything that means something to me...it can be destroyed or taken from me at any time, the pain is just too much to go through...If I don’t own anything that means something to me I don’t have to worry about loosing it.”

I have known ‘SF’ for eight months, in that time I have noticed that ‘SF’ always wears a faded purple baseball cap, with the word FOX printed on the front. I inquired about the history of the cap. ‘SF’ said, “I got this cap when I entered the shelter, it belonged to someone else...I liked it, so now it’s mine...I guess it means something to me, however, I like to look at it like I don’t have to be bothered combing my hair, so I just wear the cap...It serves a purpose...After all who would ever take a dirty, faded baseball cap.”
STATIONED – San Diego CA
POSITION – Boiler Operator/Technician
AGE - 63

CARRIES IN HIS POCKETS:

RT Back Pocket – Wallet & ID
LT Back Pocket – Nothing
RT Front Pocket – Cell Phone
LT Front Pocket – Cigarettes & Lighter

‘RT’ loves TV. He is a classic old movies buff and loves horse racing and sports. ‘RT’ is a rather cranky man with long white hair, a
rough exterior and kind heart. ‘RT’ lived with his parents in their family home until his parents died in 2010.

When I first interviewed ‘RT’ he said, “I don’t carry anything in my pockets...Upon further prompting by his fellow veterans, ‘RT’ said, “I only carry things I need.” (See above list) I asked ‘RT’ if he has any sentimental items that he has kept with him over the years. ‘RT’ gruffly replied, “I have nothing.” As we continued the conversation, a smile appeared on ‘RT’s’ face and his eyes lit up. He said, “I have a stack of original newspapers from JFK’s assassination...They are just like new...I have them wrapped in plastic and taped to keep them in good shape...For some reason I decided to collect them...They are one thing I still have.”

NO PHOTO AVAILABLE
STATIONED – Iraq/Afghanistan  
POSITION - Sniper  
AGE- 24

CARRIES IN HIS POCKETS:

RT Back Pocket – Wallet & ID  
LT Back Pocket – Nothing  
RT Front Pocket – Cell Phone & Ear Phones  
LT Front Pocket – Nothing

‘Rambo’ is our newest veteran to our transitional housing program. He is young, athletic, and physically fit. ‘Rambo’ is a “young soul.” He is severely morally injured, suffers with PTSD and TBI.

‘Rambo’ grew up in the US Military; his father is a Navy Seal.

Rambo’ spoke openly about his experience in Iraq/ Afghanistan, his body tense and rigid as he expressed his thoughts and feelings about the Iraq/ Afghanistan war. As we talk (in the presence of four other veterans), ‘Rambo’ tires to make sense of his experience as a sniper, and his involvement in a war he feels is totally “unjust.”

Tears began to gather in his eyes as he speaks..."They trained me to be a killer, and I’m good at it...But that’s not who I was when I went in...I did everything I was trained and commanded to do...and I excelled in it...What type of person does that make me now? I wasn’t a killer when I enlisted...But now I am...I lost who I was in the war, they
stripped me of my core identity and beliefs...F..K them!!! What am I
suppose to do now?”

Our conversation led into a discussion on Moral Injury, and how
MI affects one’s core identity. As our conversation continued, a sense of
relief came over ‘Rambo’s’ face...He took a deep breath and said, “That’s
what it is...I have been morally injured by war and the military.”
Many of the other veterans nodded in agreement. ‘SF’ said, “you are
telling my story.” The group chimed in in unison...”The military is
F - – ked Up!”

As we sat around the Round Table, I asked ‘Rambo’ what he
carried in his pockets. (See list above) ‘Rambo’ said “I don’t carry much
in my pockets, however I do carry my Army issued back pack with me
where ever I go. When I am “home” it’s always in my sight.” ‘Rambo’
quickly grabbed his backpack from his “rack” and excitedly showed it to
me. ‘Rambo’ has decorated his pack with his military medals. They
brightly colored medals bring life to his camouflaged Army issued
backpack. In addition to the medals, attached to the front of his pack are
a large carabineer and a knife in its black case. ‘Rambo’ quickly removes
the knife from the case; he flicks open the large blade and proceeds to
show me his military defense moves... ‘Rambo’ is highly skilled with a
knife, his moves impressive.
As I look closely at ‘Rambo’s’ knife, I notice blood on the blade...‘Rambo’ says; “It’s best to leave a mark of blood on your blade, it shows people that you have used it, and you won’t hesitate to use it again.”

‘Rambo’ says, “I feel safe carrying my Army pack... No one F—ks with me that way...It’s been with me through war... It’s part of me...My pack is full of stories...some of them my own, and some of them of my dead brothers.”

At the end of our conversation, ‘Rambo’ says, “I went into the military to serve God my country, and to get an education, however, I ended up as a highly trained killer...Now how is that going to help me get a job?”

Rambo's Military Backpack
There is a common thread that runs through the contents in each veteran’s pockets. The men only carry things that serve a purpose, nothing more and nothing less. The veterans interviewed carry that which is most dear to them, along with that which is painful in their hearts and souls. The things they guard and value most in their lives are their stories. Their personal stories are truly their own, no one else can claim them or steal them; for better or worse their personal story belongs completely to them.
“Knowledge gained through experience is far superior and many times more useful than bookish knowledge.”
- Mahatma Gandhi

SELF REFLECTION– “The Things They Carry In Their Pockets”

I was deeply moved by the stories the veterans shared in my paper “Things They Carry In Their Pockets.” I was surprised to learn that all the men interviewed carried only those things that served a basic purpose. I was saddened by the fact that they owned few if any sentimental belongings. I was struck with the harsh reminder that personal or sentimental possessions can be lost or taken from a person at any time, and when that occurs, the pain is often too great to bear. I will forever remember the words of the veterans, “Carry what you cherish most close to your heart and let it become embedded in your soul...Your story and your memories...No one can take them from you, because no one knows they are there...Keep them close to you and only share them with someone you trust...But even then, be careful not to tell them everything...Keep some special memories for yourself.”

As I looked around my apartment, I realized how many special possessions I have acquired over the years, and how I would feel if I lost them all. The pain I would experience would be devastating. I don’t know if I would have the courage and the strength as the veteran’s do; somehow war and life taught them, that no matter what no one can take what is most important in one’s life, one’s story.

I had thought in the beginning of my project that I would incorporate a ritual, or give the men a special token to carry in their pocket. I may still do that, however,
after discussing it with the veteran’s they said “That’s a good idea, however, a material memento is not necessary, you have given us what is most important to us...Your presence and company...We will always remember our times together...And as the years pass we will remember our conversations and smile...You have given us hope.”

I end with a poem by Heather Flood. I will give this poem to each of the veterans to carry in their wallets.

**God’s Flight**

On the ground sits a bird
that’s too afraid to fly.
Beautiful wings could make it soar,
but the pain of past failure is it’s lonesome cry.

God has said unto this bird,
"Trust and have faith in me,
for I will carry you in your flight.
The miracle of life is waiting for you to see."

The bird said to God, "But I can't fly.
I am weak. I will fall and feel pain
It’s happened before when I tried to fly.
I’m afraid of being hurt again."

His voice soft and reassuring, God said to the bird,
I created you, and I will protect you.
Your lonesome cry I have heard.
Have faith in me. That’s all you need to do.

So, stand up, bird, and spread your wings.
The wings I lovingly created to let you fly.
If you fall I’ll pick you up,
and lift you back into the sky."

With trembling legs and unsure wings
the bird finally looked to the sky.
It took a deep breath, and took the chance.
The bird began to fly.

"Thank you, God, for believing in me. Thank you for giving me wings. Thank you for your protecting hands. Your glory I will now sing."

God smiled unto the bird in its majestic flight. "Little bird, I'll always be with you, and will protect you with all my might.

You may stumble. You may fall. That doesn't mean that I don't care. I will watch over you, in case you need help, and then I'll be right there."

The little bird, once so scared, learned to soar to new heights. The occasional fall no longer scared the bird, choosing to have faith in God's flight.

— Heather Flood