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Odyssey Beyond Wars Oracle

Erin Cellelo, Director, Instructor, and Oracle Editor, Odyssey Beyond Wars
Emily Auerbach, Executive Director, UW Odyssey Project
Em Azad, Sarah Lensmire, Katie Arredondo, Odyssey staff support and photography
Gwendolyn Coale, Ben Garrison, additional Odyssey staff support
Beth Auerbach, Oracle Designer

We thank the Division of Continuing Studies for making OBW possible. We thank UW's Center for the Arts and Center for Healthy Minds for their financial support of OBW this year in the form of an Arts for Healthy Minds grant. Through this grant, we were able to bring in wonderful guests: Will Brockliss (Center for Culture, History, and the Environment); Sarah Marty (Four Seasons Theater); Molly Harris (UW), Doug Bradley and Craig Werner (co-authors, We Gotta Get Out of This Place); Nancy Smith Watson, Bill Watson, and Sam White (Feast of Crispian), Dan Grupe (Center for Healthy Minds), Jennie Mullins (Art for All), Brendon Panke (The Moth Madison), and Scott Shultz (The Heartbeat Center for Writing, Literacy, and the Arts).

The Soundtrack of Our Lives

Vietnam veteran Doug Bradley and UW-Madison Professor Emeritus Craig Werner helped us understand the importance music played in the lives of those who fought in Vietnam. Doug and Craig, co-authors of We Gotta Get Out of This Place: the Soundtrack of the Vietnam War, discovered that veterans were often reluctant to talk about their experiences, but when asked what song or songs defined their time in Vietnam, they were often able to tell their stories through music.

Scan me

Inspired by Doug and Craig''s visit, OBW students wrote about songs that form the soundtracks to their lives and designed their own album covers. Scan the QR code to access our full class playlist on Spotify!

The Soundtrack of My Life
by Melanie Lucas

The assignment is to create a soundtrack for a meaningful period of my life, similar to how authors Doug Bradley & Craig Werner connected music to the Vietnam War era in their book, *We Gotta Get Out Of This Place*.

I chose to create a soundtrack of 3.5 years of my time in the Army from 1990-1993 when I was stationed in Germany. Only 1 of the songs is from that particular time frame. All the others were recorded prior to or after 1993. I found songs that paint a picture of some of the major events or emotions I experienced during that time.

Scud missiles marked the start of the Gulf War. I remember coming from the 3rd floor dayroom of my barracks, on the way back to my room, hearing that the U.S. military had fired scud missiles on Iraq. People were gathered around the TV at the CQ's station watching the news reports and the white tracks of the missiles crisscrossing the dark sky. The first song I thought of to describe it was the pop song "Firework" by Katy Perry (2010), only because of the title, and a few of the lines:

"Make 'em go, "Oh, oh, oh / As you shoot across the sky, sky, sky./Boom, boom, boom / Even brighter than the moon, moon, moon./Just own the night / Like the Fourth of July."

Melanie's Soundtrack

1. "A Whole New World" (1992) from the Disney movie Aladdin
2. Rev. Timothy Wright, "Who's on the Lord's Side"
3. Katy Perry, "Firework"
4. Edwin Starr, "War"
5. Phil Collins, "In the Air Tonight"
6. Stevie Wonder, "Isn't She Lovely"
7. Coldplay, "Adventure of a Lifetime"

Then I thought of the R&B song "War" by Edwin Starr (1970). It's the way he says the very first word, "WAR!" It makes a big, in-your-face statement. It was a very serious, startling, and sobering moment to realize the U.S. had launched a full out air attack and the Gulf War had begun. None of the other lyrics in this song really speak to me about how I was thinking and feeling in that moment. The song does mean more to me now when I think of war in general.

"In The Air Tonight" by Phil Collins (1981) describes the ominous feeling I had of a war starting. A war that I would somehow be involved in: "I can feel it coming in the air tonight /Oh, Lord!"

"Adventure of a Lifetime" by Coldplay (2015) characterizes my whole time in the Army. It was quite the adventure! I like this song only because of the title & the beat.

I really enjoyed researching music for this assignment. There were so many songs I could have used. I felt the 7 songs I chose gave the best reflection of my time stationed in Germany.

Just Be
by Tammy Lambert

I have always loved music, but how can I use music in my life to "Just Be?" No matter what I'm doing: getting ready for work, driving to the grocery store, or just trying to relax at home, I always have music playing. Sometimes I have music in my headphones and have it help me to sleep or to concentrate on life struggles. Anytime I feel down and lonely, I listen to my favorite song. The line "If you could read my mind" reminds me that no matter how I'm feeling or what I've done, my friends will always be there for me. It also reminds me of simpler times, sitting at home with my family watching movies at home. I learned that friends are a person's rock, they're supportive in all circumstances.

I truly believe everyone should have a favorite song, something that makes your day better and reminds you of what you love and miss. Whether you enjoy pop music that makes you feel good, or metal that gets you pumped up, your favorite song can change your day and get you out of a bad or sad mood, especially when feeling anxious and scared. Music offers an escape from reality and in some instances a wonderful memory from the past. A favorite song offers three minutes of peace; a chance to breathe and clear your mind. Music has gotten me through some tough times: death, family illness, loss of friends, lots of drama, and especially reliving my military experience in Iraq and Kuwait.

As I wrote this paper, I came to a simple conclusion: my monsters don't look like yours – just like when I just, "Can't Be." Your monsters don't all look like mine. Monsters come in all shapes, colors and sizes (like humans.) Some can be simple and disappear into thin air. Some come into your life and can never be forgotten or taken away, but regardless of their physical presence they are still there, and this is something I also struggle with and not knowing how to let go.

Tammy's Soundtrack

1. Gordon Lightfoot, "If You Could Read My Mind"
2. Rob Thomas, "Pieces"
3. Sara Bareilles, "Gravity"

Thousand Cranes
by Carolyn Morgan

I never thought before I joined the military that I would have two beautiful children and then, shortly after, have them ripped away to go fight a war. I'm not even sure we all understood what was going on. This after all was the Cold War. I put my 6-month old baby boy to bed, walked down stairs to join my daughter who was one-and-a-half at the time and their father, who were watching TV, and saw breaking news that Iraq had invaded Kuwait. I thought, *here we go*. As Tears for Fears said—and I agree 100% even now with the current climate—"Everybody wants to rule the world" or whatever they can get their hands on.

We continued to watch the breaking news in shock when the phone rang. The person on the other end said very sternly; "Sgt Morgan, report to the orderly room with your bag ready for deployment." I kissed my daughter and her father goodbye and said I'd be back soon, don't wait up.

We had a young female missing—someone I mentored. I knew she was on leave and should come back. I gave her a call and she said she was not coming back. This was not what she signed up for and it was not her fight to fight. I told her it wasn't what I had signed up for either but we both knew we signed on the dotted line, if it came to this, to follow orders.These orders were coming from the Commander In Chief, this is real. All I kept thinking was of that Billy Joel song; "We didn't start the fire," but we had to do what we had signed up to really do. I could not convince her to come back, so she was escorted back by law enforcement. She was going to have to deal with a different kind of fire.

Carolyn's Soundtrack

1. Tears For Fears, "Everybody Wants to Rule the World"
2. Billy Joel, "We Didn't Start the Fire"
3. Hiroshima, "Thousand Cranes"
4. Lee Greenwood, "God Bless the U.S.A."
5. Bette Midler, "Wind Beneath My Wings"
6. Brooks & Dunn, "Boot Scootin' Boogie

We boarded a C-5 military Air Force aircraft not knowing where we were going. Are we going to be flying around in circles or do we have a destination that they are not telling us about, and how long are we going to be gone? None of us really said goodbye to our families. I'm not sure how long we had been flying around, but after landing first in Azores, Portugal and then in Spain, we were told to board again and keep on going. I keep thinking about how I've been ripped away from my children and am flying around the world in the clouds with the instrumental song in my head by Hiroshima called "Thousand Cranes." I just kept thinking about flying in the sky with the birds. I wished they could carry me back to my children.

We finally land at our final destination. Where is it you ask? We are told to grab our gear line up single file and stay on the tarmac as we deplane the aircraft. Stepping off the tarmac could get you stung by a scorpion or shot by a sniper. F**k…. We all realized we were in the Middle East, but where exactly? The United Arab Emirates, an airfield at 0200 and it was 102 degrees. *Ladies and gentlemen, we have reached our final destination.*

We all piled onto buses and were dropped off at an abandoned Russian Military Base. We had a lot of work to do to get our base up and running. Chow hall, hospital, sleeping tents, bathrooms, showers, laundry, fire department, cop shop, front gate, perimeter, just to name a few things on a fully functional military base.

The next six months were set-up and wait. Did our government and military leaders know what we were even going to do, or how long we were going to be there? We welcomed USO shows, troops from the front lines, and visited places like downtown Abu Dhabi. We were an official R&R Base far from the front lines, but what were the plans? We had been sent there with no end in sight and nothing happening. Then on January 17 at 0 hundred hours, the base commander knocked on the back door of the chow hall and told us to go out and look up in the air at 0100 hrs.

The crew from the motor pool had brought out vehicles for us to sit and stand on. The PA system started playing Lee Greenwood's "I'm proud to be an American" as we all watched the A-10 War Hogs take off in the night for the 100-hour Shock & Awe of the air and ground war. We at the end of those 100 hours were "Proud to be an American. God Bless/America." It was over and now we could go home. Two months later we were packing up and on our way.

I don't remember loading the aircraft, any of the stops, or the flight back to my children in South Carolina at Shaw Air Force Base – the children I had not seen for eight and a half months when they were ages one and a half and six months. There they were, at the end of the flight line, so close I could almost smell them. My daughter ran to me and gave me a big hug. My son had no idea who I was. I have no words for what I felt. It was around this time that Bette Midler came out with the song "Wind Beneath My Wings."

It was my children who kept me going – the "Wind beneath my wings" that got me through everything I endured on this deployment. Now I had to find a way to reconnect with my babies.

A couple of days after I returned home, their father felt he needed a vacation and returned home to Wisconsin for a few weeks. It was a perfect time for me to get to know my babies again. A woman at my daughter's preschool asked if she could sponsor her for an upcoming pageant. My daughter absolutely loved doing the pageants and went on to win each one she was in. Her brother and I traveled with her to each event and we had so much fun. It boosted her confidence and brought us closer. She had to do a talent, so the three of us all learned the dance and all the words to the song "Boot Scootin' Boogie." We made it our theme song and danced and sang to it every time we got the chance. If any one of us was sad, we played and danced to "our" song. At my daughter's last pageant, she refused to compete unless her brother could compete too. They both were crowned King and Queen and we had so much fun that evening and danced, danced, danced to our new favorite song.

"Heel toe docie doe."

My Soundtrack by Angie Nickels

Angie's Soundtrack

1. Pink, "Just Like a Pill"
2. Madonna, "True Blue"
3. Taylor Swift, "Shake it Off"

What is the power of music? How does it help? How does it transform you? What if I could tell you that these three songs helped shape who I am today? All these songs have a valuable life lesson between the lines.

Pink's "Just Like a Pill," 2001, is about the beauty of self-acceptance and the power of perseverance – two things that I've slowly learned as I've grown older. The song blends elements of pop and rock, going from sugary sweet to bitter, sound-wise. This fits the topic of it: the double-edged sword of falling in love with something – or someone – that ends up hurting you. Every lyric of this song spoke to me, but especially the line, "The middle of my frustrated fears and I swear you're just like a pill," which captured the struggle of navigating pain and seeking escape when I was caught in a cycle of hurt and dependency.

I also interpret this song through the lens of my ADHD, as a reflection of hyperactive, uncontrollable movements. However, over time, I have come to see the beauty in my hyperactivity mirrored in the song's themes. Another line "run just as fast as I can to the middle of nowhere" spoke to me. I came to see my hyperness as a part of me. "Just Like a Pill" ultimately celebrates transformation and empowerment, turning personal challenges into a unique strength, which is precisely what I've done in my life.

Madonna's "True Blue," from 1986, totally captures what real love's like–something I've been searching for my whole life. It mixes R&B and pop so smoothly, from that mellow start to the killer hook. I didn't get it until later, but it perfectly shows that lifelong love is real. As a kid, I practically lived on that jukebox in the bar playing it! It's a beautiful song about true, steady love. And that's exactly the guy I married.

Taylor Swift's "Shake It Off" from 2014 is all about not dwelling on negativity, right? It mixes bubble gum pop and an up tempo looping drumbeat. I've wasted so much time worrying about what others think. That line, "While you've been getting down and out about the liars and the dirty, dirty cheats, you could have been getting down to this sick beat," really hit home. Radical acceptance has helped me embrace that "shake it off" thing. It's about letting stuff go, you know?

Notes of Hope
by Pricilla Reyes

Pricilla's Soundtrack

1. Post Malone, "Congratulations"
2. Bruno Mars, "Talking to the Moon"
3. Adele, "To Be Loved"
4. Natalia Lafourcade, "Hasta La Raiz"

Each song in this collection marks a specific moment in my journey: some commemorated victories, others provided solace during moments of doubt, and several reminded me of the life and loved ones I temporarily left behind. Together, they form a musical narrative of my transformation from civilian to service member, capturing both the universal experience of military transition and my personal path through it.

Prior to entering the military, I was filled with daring pride about choosing a path so different from my peers. Post Malone's "Congratulations" captured my excitement about finishing high school and taking on the next chapter of my life. While most people supported my decision, not understanding the full journey ahead, my biological father, who had been absent throughout my childhood, dismissed my ambitions, saying, "She'll never make it through." When Post Malone sings, "They said I wouldn't be nothing/Now they always say congratulations," the lyrics fueled my determination to commit to this life-changing decision. This song became more than just a celebration of success, it provided comfort and hope, reminding me that I would not only join the military but excel in it, precisely because someone who shares my blood said I couldn't. During basic training, I channeled every ounce of anger from my biological father's hurtful words to not only excel at everything I could but also to remind myself that I am more than what others think of me. This song was one of the songs that carried me through the five am runs while others shouted to cadences.

Upon arriving at my first military base, in Great Falls, MT, I was overwhelmed with depression and anxiety about the unknown ahead. I didn't know anyone or even where the nearest BX was located. My first month felt like a repetitive cycle of constant angst, anxiety, and loneliness. Then one night, I received an invitation to hang out with colleagues I barely knew from work. Though I felt both excited and nervous, I'm forever grateful I chose to go. That night, I met Brianne, who would become my closest friend and companion throughout my military experience.

Music has been more than just a soundtrack to my military journey, it has been a reliable companion that both witnessed and nurtured my growth. From Post Malone's defiant optimism that powered me through basic training, to Bruno Mars's melodies that strengthened my deepest friendship, to Adele's raw emotions that guided my civilian transition, and finally to Natalia Lafourcade's cultural anthems that grounded me in my identity, each song carries the thread of hope that has sustained me. As I continue forward, these melodies remind me that hope isn't just an emotion I experienced, it's the force that helped shape me into the proud Latina servicewoman I've become. The notes of these songs still echo in my heart, marking each milestone where hope turned challenges into triumph, proving that sometimes the most powerful ally in any battle is the quiet certainty that better days lie ahead.

The Soundtrack of My Life by Joshua Rowe

Josh's Soundtrack

1. The Cranberries, "Zombie"
2. Hozier, "Unknown/Nth"
3. Deathcab for Cutie, "Here to Forever"

Music is extremely important to me. I was given a science project as a child that instructed me to build a simple radio and attach it to the water pipes of my parents' house for the antennae. This radio could clearly receive 101.5 WIBA FM. I began my love affair with music by devouring classics from the Grateful Dead, The Doors, Jimi Hendrix, and Led Zeppelin.

The songs for this album are among my favorites for many reasons. The lyrics have helped me form a shield between the awesome power of societal retribution and the goodness I still feel I have inside. From a purely Christian viewpoint, I am a terrible sinner who has transgressed, more than adhered to, the teachings and morality of the Bible. The viewpoint of the State courts of Wisconsin and its auxiliaries is that I am a convicted felon, a criminal dangerous to the community, and in need of constant monitoring, supervision, restriction, and punishment for life.

In the Army I was turned on to country music by my fellow Rangers. I am a huge fan of Allison Krause and John Anderson. I was stationed in Fort Lewis, Washington in 1993. The grunge scene was hot, and I couldn't get enough of Soundgarden and Candlebox. I wired headphones through my rucksack and into my helmet and played The Cranberries "Zombie" as we flew from Guantanamo Bay to Haiti in "Operation Uphold Democracy." The lyrics "In your head, in your head, they are fightin'/ With their tanks and their bombs and their bombs and their guns/ In your head, in your head, they are cryin'" were prescient because we had so much combat training and were excited to fight on the field of battle–but the people were unarmed, starving, and dying of AIDS. I felt we should have brought food and medicine, and I was ashamed of the warlike mindset I had brought instead. I made up my mind that I did not want to be a soldier for the rest of my life.

I am struggling with PTSD nightmare disorder from a vehicle accident while in the Army. For years I self-medicated with hard liquor to sleep, and the resulting trouble led to prison and suicidal depression. In a solitary confinement cell in Waupon Maximum Security Prison, I tried three times to kill myself by saving medicines and taking them all at once. I tried to reach out to the prison religious entities. The only response I received was a pamphlet about God slid under the door of the solitary confinement cell and a paperback Koran. I came to the realization that I simply had to survive prison, or all my children would know about their father is that I was a convicted criminal who killed himself in prison. I had to get through the confinement to show them, and the world, that I have goodness inside. I was hired as a GED tutor for mathematics and science. I enrolled in the available college courses offered. Then I studied for, and received, accreditation from the Library of Congress to transcribe textbooks into braille. I worked 8-hour days for 5 years transcribing science, history, and English textbooks for blind learners. The lyrics of Hozier's "Unknown / Nth" "Do you know, I could break beneath the weight of the goodness, love, I still carry for you?" gives voice to the way I feel I have goodness to give to the community, country, and culture that has excluded me from participation for criminality.

But the retribution does not stop when a person decides to change. The amount and nature of my crimes places me among those our society considers the most dangerous and unredeemable. The punishments are

life sentences. Without a way to atone for my transgressions, I am stuck in a cycle of progress punctuated by severe setbacks and punitive restrictions that jeopardize my efforts. The state corrections apparatus, and my community, has denied me housing, employment, and opportunities for improving life for myself and my family. It has created a feeling of being an outcast. I live on the streets, I am unable to surmount the things I have done. I will die a felonious criminal that was feared and excluded from the graces of the Good and Just. There is a strange communal mindset that everyone is a good, honest, and law-abiding citizen, and only a few weirdos break the law or stray from a Judeo Christian lifepath. The millions of Americans with a criminal conviction would indicate otherwise.

My Soundtrack
by Hakeem Williams

I chose these three songs because of their emotions, social commentary, and cultural significance. Among the standout tracks from this era of 1970/1980 are "Ooh Child" by The Five Stairsteps, "Everybody Plays the Fool" by The Main Ingredient, and "What's Going On" by Marvin Gaye. Each song encapsulates a unique blend of hope, resilience, and introspection that feels familiar to listeners.

"Ooh Child," with its uplifting message about overcoming adversity, is an anthem for me when seeking peace in difficult times. Similarly, "Everybody Plays the Fool" addresses the experience of love and heartbreak while emphasizing the importance of self-acceptance. Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On" reflects social issues, urging listeners to confront societal injustices while advocating for peace and understanding. These songs reflect individual struggles, triumphs, and challenges in their respective eras. Ultimately, these songs share a common thread: they convey a powerful message that despite life's trials and tribulations, there is always room for hope and change. I feel like no matter what, I will always keep faith and hope alive.

These songs – "Ooh Child," "What's Going On," and "Everybody Plays the Fool" — each have profound messages about hope, social awareness, and love's trials that resonate deeply within me. They remind us that through struggle comes growth; as Marvin Gaye soulfully states, "You know we've got to find a way." These lyrics will continue to inspire generations to reflect on their lives while embracing the shared human experience and letting you know to never give up and keep on keeping on.

For now, I am bolstered in my efforts to carry on by family, friends, fishing, and music. Here to forever by Deathcab For Cutie speaks to me in an encouraging way. "And the only way I seem to cope/Is by trying to hold onto hope/If just for a while." The constant and oppressive weight of retribution is debilitating. I have no refuge from the transgressions of my past. "Trying to hold on to hope" is a challenge. I work, attend classes, fish, and listen to music. There is an effect of music that can open my mind to possibilities that I cannot seem to envision when I am without songs I enjoy. The hope I cling to is that someday I will be remembered for my goodness, rather than my criminality. With lifetime punishments there is no path to redemption, only the sins of my past thrown daily in my face. With music as a laminate layer in my shield I bear the brunt of the angry power that would crush me to suicide otherwise. Family, friends, and fishing will only take me so far, my journey will fail without music.

Hakeem's Soundtrack

1. The Five Stairsteps, "Ooo, Child"
2. The Main Ingredient, "Everybody Plays the Fool"
3. Marvin Gaye, "What's Going On"

Philoctetes Bow

In Greek mythology, Philoctetes received the bow and arrows of Heracles as a reward for lighting the hero's funeral pyre. On the way to Troy, he suffered a festering wound and was abandoned on the island of Lemnos, where he survived alone for ten years, relying on the bow—whose arrows never missed—to hunt. When a prophecy revealed that the Greeks needed Philoctetes' weapon to win the war, Odysseus and Neoptolemus retrieved him and persuaded him to rejoin the fight, where he used his unfailing bow to help defeat Troy, proving both his resilience and the bow's power.

OBW students then wrote about their own "bow" – an item, skill, object, or quality, like Philocotetes', represents both their special abilities and identity. Here are their responses.

Some objects that I carry that represent who I am include a folded dollar bill in my wallet, an anxiety stone that my mom gave me, advocacy pins, and a picture of my loved ones. Each of these objects holds a piece of my identity. The dollar bill represents the New Year's traditions that my mom has kept alive for many years. The anxiety stone is a reminder of my mom's love and her care for me when I feel overwhelmed. The advocacy pins reflect my morals and values, showing how I advocate for others and where I stand on issues that have now been twisted to be political. The picture of my loved ones in my wallet represents the supportive family platform that is constantly cheering me on.

Some qualities and skills that I carry with pride are my empathy, kindness, directness, love, faith, and passion. Many of these were instilled by my mom, grandma, or other leaders who have shaped me, but each one brings me back to who I am as a person and what I want my existence to be on this earth. My mom has always told me that no matter what I do or who hurts me, I should always be kind because that is an attribute that no one can take away or control. These qualities are ingrained in how I love and care for others, how I maintain faith that things will work out, and how I use my voice, even when others may look down upon it. That is something very special to me. **(Pricilla Reyes)**

Faith, hopefulness, and a positive outlook are qualities I carry that help define who I am.

I always try to look at the bright side of things, in every situation. In dark times, I see how things could have been worse, and I'm hopeful that things will get better. I realize that bad situations and sad times can take quite a while to heal and overcome, but even in that, I can ALWAYS find something good in each day. Something or someone to be grateful for. Something to laugh about. Something beautiful or amazing to admire. Something to look forward to.

I often make notes about these things so I can go back to it later to encourage myself if I'm feeling down, or to just be able to revisit good times. **(Melanie Lucas)**

I've found that most of my life I have been alone to fend for myself outside of my family. I was and am usually the only black female in most settings I am in. Started out in school all the way up to my senior year in high school. I was the only black in my graduating class. In my jobs, I was usually the only black at the job, which made me the first at a lot of things. The first black female to join the 115th Fighter Wing at Truax Field in 1980. I've had to continue to move on and adapt.

In today's United States of America, I feel we are going backwards and are having to show and prove ourselves again as black women even more so to stay safe and to get anywhere at all. It doesn't matter if I am a civilian, military or veteran,

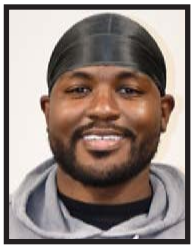
survival for black women and protecting ourselves and our families is not easy and is stressful but is necessary–what we have always done alone and in the shadows. **(Carolyn Morgan)**

I was very young when I learned to shoot a bow. My adoptive father was a bowhunter, and we boys had to practice until we could put all our arrows into a paper plate at 20 yards before we could go hunting. The difference between my father and me was that I practiced "instinctive shooting," the way I had read that First Peoples have shot bows for thousands of years. My father had a fancy metal compound bow with adjustable sights. I practiced and became proficient with a recurve bow, a bent stick of wood. Without sights, the archer looks down the shaft of the arrow and imagines the arc of the flight to the target. Instinctive shooting by an expert can be faster and quieter than a compound bow. It is conducive to stalking prey that when spooked will run, swim, or fly away quickly, leaving the hunter fractions of a second to fire an arrow.

When I was subject to numerous psychological tests in prison, several indicated that I was extremely aggressive. I found it hard to believe because I felt I was

an easygoing personality. With much time for self-reflection, I understood that like my archery style, I had made a conscious decision to live my life instinctively. This made me extremely aggressive, and unafraid of consequences. I was decorated for this type of behavior as a soldier, and I had many friends and girlfriends. I believed I was living perfectly and artfully.

I had a breakdown in solitary confinement and tried to end my life three times. When I eventually became determined to survive and succeed, I had to confront the lifelong instinctiveness I had cultivated to an extreme extent. My behavior had led to a psychological crisis, I despised rules and punishment, and now I was ensnared in the criminal justice system with more rules and punishment than I could possibly bear. I needed to change my behavior. I was not a Native hunter that needed to hone and perfect aggressive instinctiveness. I determined that part of my path to beneficial change was to cultivate restraint. There are few things in my life that require an aggressive, instantaneous reaction of instinct. Soldiers, law enforcement, first responders, and professional athletes commonly rely on instinct, but as for me, a calmer and more thoughtful approach will serve me well. **(Joshua Rowe)**



Philoctetes' cave, a symbol of isolation, self-preservation, and the journey to rediscover a greater purpose, mirrors the experiences of many veterans. They often find themselves disconnected from society or their sense of, I guess, mission after leaving service. In this context, the cave represents safety and stagnation, where the fear of vulnerability or rejection hinders or stops altogether re-engagement with others or personal growth.

In the lives of veterans and others, such caves can manifest emotional withdrawal because of trauma, physical isolation from communities, or avoidance of challenges that require stepping out of comfort zones. For example, veterans dealing with PTSD might isolate themselves to avoid triggers, sacrificing connection for what they think is their safety.

The courage to leave such 'caves' often comes through support systems like family, friends, therapy, or veteran organizations like Stand Down Madison. Programs fostering community reintegration and purpose-such as volunteering or pursuing education like Odyssey Beyond Wars help individuals rediscover meaning and connection. However, it's the personal resilience and the small steps towards vulnerability that truly inspire, as they play a critical role in overcoming this isolation. (**Hakeem Williams)**

Philoctetes' bow was a public declaration of power. My camouflage purse serves a quieter purpose. It's a practical object, yes, but also an identifiable link to my time in the Army. It whispers of a chapter that shaped who I am today – a part that I don't broadcast. While Philoctetes' bow told his story, my purse is a subtle reminder of my life as a soldier. The camouflaged exterior hints at this past, but what's inside is what truly defines me. **(Angie Nickels)**

I feel I am strong and dependable like a rock or free spirited and social like a flying butterfly waiting to see everyone's beautiful garden.

My communication skills are always wanting to help others out and define me as a person. I constantly want to go above and beyond to expect people to all work together in difficult situations.

At the end of the week or day, I feel I don't so much ever find myself and hope someone who knows me will.

I try to focus on one small positive thought every day so it can change the day.

I reach for things to do that I love to do.

Also I feel I am like this piece of paper: always reliable, rips easily which means I hurt quickly.

I can also be plain and am basic, but could write a book if asked to do so.

In the end I can be easily altered, constantly changing or challenging myself. **(Tammy Riege Lambert)**

Echoes of Shakespeare

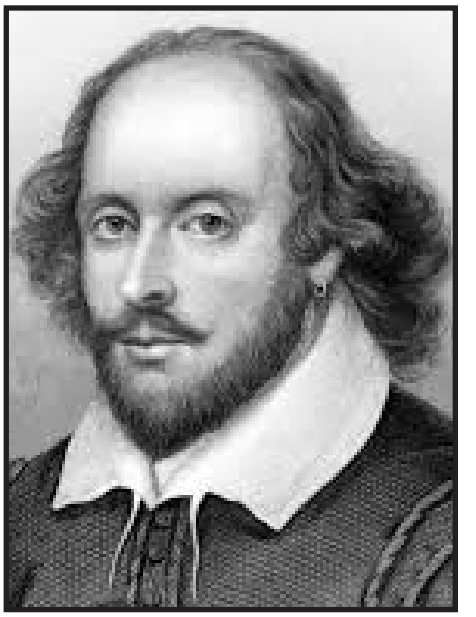
In this assignment, OBW students chose a Shakespearean monologue—one that resonated with them personally, or explored a theme like grief, loyalty, honor, or faith. They read the passage aloud, unpacked its language, and then reimagined it in their own voice.

Drawing inspiration from Shakespeare's characters—many of whom, like veterans today, wrestle with wounds both visible and unseen—students wrote their own monologues in modern language. The result is a moving collection that blends classic themes with contemporary experience, and demonstrates how old words can help us name new truths.

A very special thank you to Nancy Smith-Watson from the Feast of Crispian for her work with our class in this wonderful exercise! Scan the QR code to hear Nancy and her husband, Bill, also a FoC actor, perform each student's monologue.

Melanie **Pricilla** **Hakeem**

Joshua **Carolyn** **Tammy**



Looking Back

Final Reflections and Stories

Sophocles, Homer, Plato, Horace, Owen, and other writers we tackled this year all spoke across time about war, pain, honor, survival, and life's meaning. Students were asked to look back on all they'd read, discussed, and written about this semester in one final reflection that could take any form they chose – poetry, prose, or a simple list – in response to one of the following questions:

What is something you understand now that you didn't at the start of this year? What changed your thinking, or your feeling?

Write a modern myth – a story that explains something you've lived. What would your myth say about loss? Healing? Strength? Community? Perseverance?

Write about your story – not as something that's finished, but something still unfolding. Where have you been? What have you learned? What are you hoping for in your next chapter?

Pricilla Reyes

This class has been overwhelmingly and positively healing. I never thought I'd be able to open up about my military experiences the way I did. Through this process, I've learned that Veterans have autonomy – we don't all fit into the same category, and that is okay.

One of the most important realizations I've had is that there's a shared sense of healing, even when the wounds feel foreign. No one is an outsider in their experiences. I used to believe that my perceptions and experiences were unique or separate from others. But the truth is, while our realities may differ, the emotions we face within them are often the same. It's been profoundly healing to bond and open up with such an accepting group.

Walking away, I know that I can feel both pride and guilt, and I no longer have to struggle with which one defines my experience in the military.

Tammy Riege Lambert

Searching for a Home

My story isn't over yet…..

I don't remember ever feeling loved, safe, or secure as a child. My parent(s), not sure if it was my mother or my father, sent me to a Lutheran school as a child.

I have also always found it hard to write my thoughts on paper. Found it hard to visualize exactly how other home lives looked and felt. Love wasn't like gathering around a campfire; it was something I watched from a distance, always cold and wondering why the heat never made it to my house. I needed to feel warmth and comfort but never did.

My mom tried, in her own way, but she was lost too -- maybe even more than I was. Her pain almost poured into me, and I drank it like water, learning young that my needs weren't something to be spoken of, let alone met.

And then my dad died. I was ten years old.

I wish I knew more about him and why he did what he did. There's something about a loss that big, that final, at that age. It doesn't just leave a hole—it rewrites your story. The world stopped making sense, and in the silence following his absence, I heard something louder than grief: abandonment. The kind that makes your chest tighten for the rest of your life, the kind that whispers, "You're on your own now."

So, I joined the military. It wasn't just a choice—it was a lifeline for me. Somewhere inside me, I believed if I put on a uniform and gave my life to something bigger, maybe I'd find a home. Maybe someone would finally care if I lived or died. Maybe I'd learn how to be strong enough to stop feeling like I was drowning in invisible water.

I became a soldier and was deployed to the Middle East, which has impacted my life.

It felt noble. Purposeful. Like redemption. But the war didn't stay on the battlefield. It followed me home, crawled into my nervous system, rewired my brain. The sirens that meant safety to some meant death to me. The sound of a helicopter makes my stomach drop. A simple bridge overhead? Suddenly it's a threat. A trigger. A battlefield disguised as a highway.

Every day since, I've been surviving a different kind of war—the one inside my own body.

I struggle to feel safe, even in silence.

Even in sleep.

Even in love.

The trauma buried itself in my bones. It shaped the way I see the world: dangerous, unpredictable, always on the edge of collapse. It shaped the way I see myself: broken, needy, unworthy of gentleness.

I've learned to ignore my needs. I was trained in it. Conditioned to believe they were selfish or childish or weak.

So now, when I need help, I don't ask.

When I feel pain, I expect it.

When I feel joy, I flinch.

My body doesn't feel like home. It never really has.

And yet—there's a flicker. A part of me that's still truly searching. A part of me that believes there must be more.

I keep trying to slow down. To breathe. To listen. To touch the aching little girl inside me and say, "You matter. You're safe now. I see you."

Some days I can't. Some days I still believe I'm dying—of something, anything. But some days, I don't. Some days I hold myself with a little less fear, a little more tenderness.

This story isn't over.

And maybe, just maybe, Home isn't a place or a person or a job.

Maybe home is the moment I stop abandoning myself.

And I'm still trying.

Still here.

Still hoping.

I have always found it hard to write my thoughts on paper. I have also found it hard to visualize exactly how I would want or love my life to be as I grow old.

So many things are important to me, like love, health, possessions, location and, above all, my happiness to feel accepted and to just be me.

But at this time I now have found it a great deal easier to write my own story of how I'd love my life to be. You might ask, so what now makes the difference?

I have found that a big factor that has made a significant difference is to become more self-aware. With this class I have been working to make myself more mindful, being more present, and to try to meditate at some level daily which I struggle with slowing down. I need to find more balance in life and have always been the one that needs to rescue others as my combat medic/EMT in me needs to just not be in "ready mode" all the time.

So this short story about myself is…..Life will always and I mean always throw you curveballs, but the most important thing is controlling the outcome and fighting through it. I was a high school softball pitcher and remember when I would be on the mound throwing pitch after pitch and needed to talk to myself to find my groove. I remember games going in between innings and my arm needed ice, and I still went up and went back out and pitched to win the game. I must learn to fight through the pain and life when I need to conquer the things that I must get done.

For the children at school, veterans, patients, athletes I have worked with and have gotten to know. I especially mean the school aged children out there that don't think they are worth anything. Family issues, bullies, and cruel people in the world not knowing what respect and empathy means. YOU are worth it.

I believe I am a stronger person because of what I went through and continue to go through today. I plan to only get stronger with all the curveballs and struggles, even at times I still feel like giving up.

The people I have met in the classroom this past year and my instructor, Erin C., have deeply impacted me to believe in myself more, and resources are out there to be happy.

I say in this story that I am like a plain piece of white paper to most. I am reliable, rip easily–hurts quickly. I can be found by myself (alone) or in a pack of notebooks showing that I can have friends, but still can be alone even though I don't care to be alone. I am basic, but flammable and easy to burn and end up being damaged for good and not returned.

The mind can be such a powerful thing, but the agony and fear of learning to let go is the hardest thing to do. It is a powerful tool that shapes reality, influences our health, happiness, and success. I will now learn to shape my perception of the world and influence my actions going forward. So my mindset needs to do better as a whole and will be my main focus because I need change.

I find myself easily altered, constantly changing or challenging myself to just be me.

Angie Nickels

I understand Shakespeare.
I can relate to the stories and understand the language.
It really is all about time and life.

From Rubber Bands to Helping Hands

When I was 10, I'd pop out of bed before the sun on Saturdays and Sundays to help my dad with his newspaper route. While other kids were snoozing, I was in the back of the van munching on a Dunkin' donut, sipping hot cocoa on a mission.

I'd fold and stuff papers into plastic bags, snapping thick rubber bands like I was packaging gold. Truth was, we were broke. Not "skip the extras" broke, but "every dollar counts" broke. So I hustled. I wasn't just helping out—I was a tiny partner, doing my part to keep gas in the tank and the pantry stocked. Even back then, I knew how to roll up my sleeves and make it happen.

One morning I saw an ad on the back of the Denver Post. A bright yellow page, as bold and cheery as a summer sun, practically jumped off the paper. It was for the Sunshine Sales Club, and I was hooked before I even finished reading.

By that afternoon, I was a full-fledged member, ready to hustle. The club sent you a starter kit: a catalog stuffed with glittery holiday wrapping paper, order forms, a prize chart that looked like a treasure map, and a motivational letter promising a bike, or even a boom box, if I sold enough rolls. I could win them all—prizes galore!

I hit the neighborhood like a tiny storm in sneakers. Armed with a catalog in one hand and sheer determination in the other, I went door to door like a pint-sized sales tornado.

The rules were simple: every roll I sold got me closer to a prize. The bigger the order, the shinier the reward. I wasn't just pitching wrapping paper. I was selling possibility. Let me tell you, I made those holiday prints sound like limited-edition designer wallpaper. My mouth never stopped moving, and neither did my feet. Walking, talking, prizes – oh my!

Some kids were shy, but not me. I was out there charming neighbors, pitching sparkle-covered rolls like they were lost treasures. It wasn't just about the wrapping paper. It was about the thrill. The connection. The sweet satisfaction of a "yes" after a dozen "no's." It was the rush of being seen, being heard, and making something happen with nothing but my voice and a smile. And yes, I lived for the prizes. Those shiny incentives felt like gold medals to my achievement-hungry brain.

But as fun as it was, selling wrapping paper wasn't exactly paying any bills. I needed something that

could channel all my energy and people-loving spirit into something more consistent and profitable. So I kept my eyes open, always scanning for the next opportunity that would let me do what I loved most: connect, energize and inspire.

That same passion followed me into my 20s, when I became a scrapbooking consultant, turning my love for storytelling and creativity into helping people preserve their memories. It felt more like catching up with friends than doing business.

In my 30s, I started craving something even bigger, something that pushed me past the parties and the paper. I realized it wasn't the products that lit me up, it was the people. The connection. The way I could walk into a room and spark energy, conversation, and community.

That drive led me to Curves for Women. And let me tell you, it was more than a gym. It was a sanctuary for sass, sweat, and serious self love. I helped women find their inner strength, beauty, and badassery, one 30-minute circuit at a time.

We weren't chasing thigh gaps. We were chasing confidence, energy, and the joy of moving our bodies. Every drop of sweat was a badge of honor, and every milestone felt like a prize – no glittery catalog needed.

I watched women come in hunched by life's weight and walk out standing taller, stronger, and more alive. It wasn't just fitness; it was transformation. I was right there cheering them on, with a "change stations now" attitude.

In my 40s, I joined the board of Stand Down Madison, a nonprofit supporting veterans at risk of or experiencing homelessness. For the last ten years, five as president, I've led the organization through growth, change, and impact. From organizing events to connecting veterans with life-saving resources, I've poured my energy into something that truly matters. Every bit of charm, hustle, and heart I learned selling sparkly wrapping paper as a kid now fuels a mission that's bigger than me.

That early hustle taught me grit, gab, and how to turn strangers into allies. It taught me the joy of lighting someone up with connection. And it showed me how to harness my energy into something meaningful.

The prizes just keep getting better.

Hakeem Williams

Back in the days before electronics took over our lives, my two brothers—Keith, Elijah—and I had this game/tradition when my grandmother would tell us to stop running in and out of the house and get outside. We called it “journeys.” We would have what we called “journey sticks,” which were really just random sticks we picked up from the ground, and we’d wander around this big grassy wooded area behind my grandmother’s house.

Our favorite thing was flipping over rocks and seeing what bugs we could find. It was simple fun, but it felt like we were uncovering secrets. One day, though, our journey was a little different.

We saw a squirrel sitting on an electric pole chirping (yes, they chirp). Now, squirrels are usually pretty agile creatures—masters of balance —but this one seemed to be having second thoughts about its decision to cross these wires. As we stood there watching, it happened: the squirrel misjudged a step, touched something it shouldn’t have, and got electrocuted. It fell to the ground with -- I’ll never forget this -- a little plop noise.

I remember we stared at his lifeless little body on the ground. That was probably the first time I ever witnessed death in any form. Keith, my oldest brother, broke the silence by saying, “Well damn.”

Elijah, the middle brother, said we should give it a funeral because, why not? I mean, what else would we do with a dead squirrel? So, there we were—three kids standing around a dead squirrel, trying to figure out how to honor its memory while also being too scared to touch it. We argued for what felt like hours about who would bury it until Keith finally grabbed some leaves and used them as makeshift gloves to move the squirrel into a shallow hole we dug with our journey sticks.

We named him Live Wire (apparently irony is something kids understand instinctively). Then we covered him up with dirt and marked his grave with one of our sticks.

That day stuck with me for years, not just because it was my first encounter with death, but also because the house where Live Wire met his end was tied to another loss later on: Keith’s death. See, my brothers were playing with a gun, and one of them accidentally shot Keith.

After Keith passed away, going on “journeys” wasn’t quite the same. Elijah and I tried to keep up the tradition, but every time I saw a squirrel darting across power lines or scurrying up trees, I couldn’t help but think of both Live Wire and Keith. It was like they were connected somehow—a reminder of how fragile life can be.

Even now, as an adult, whenever I see a squirrel doing something reckless (which is basically all f**king squirrels), I think back to those days with my brothers—the laughter, the arguments over who had to bury Live Wire, and all those adventures we shared together before everything changed.

Sometimes I'll call Elijah out of nowhere and say, "Hey…remember Live Wire?" Without skipping a beat, he'll laugh and say, "Yeah, I remember." But then there's always this pause where we both remember Keith, too—his laugh, his sense of adventure—and suddenly it's not just funny anymore; it's bittersweet.

What I've learned from all this is that nothing lasts forever, whether it's squirrels on power lines or brothers who go exploring with you. But that doesn't mean you can't enjoy things while they're here. Life is unpredictable—it can be taken away in an instant—but those moments of joy and connection? They're worth everything -- just like the ones I've formed here in Odyssey.

Who knew a simple hug from Carolyn could lesson my depression, or texting Josh about fishing could take my mind off things, or sitting and telling Angie all my problems, or making connections with Erin, who has helped me tremendously, or the wonderful connections I've made with Priscilla, Tammy, and Melanie.

So, if you ever see me staring at a squirrel for longer than seems normal…it's not just about the squirrel and I promise I'm not crazy. I'm just remembering Live Wire…and Keith...and that life is short but full of moments worth cherishing. So, enjoy the things and the connections and time you have with the people in your life now.

The Grass

Did you hear about the grass that grew
Through cracks where no sunlight ever knew?

It stretched its blades toward skies so blue,
but no one watered it, 'cause no one knew.

the roots found strength in dry ground,
A place where love was never found.

The soil was dry; the air was cold
Yet still it stood, strong and bold.

The grass mother's shadow nowhere in sight,
Her dreams consumed by drugs cruel plight.

She vanished often; her voice grew thin
The grass learned early not to depend

And as for its father? A ghostly name—
A fleeting whisper without a claim.

No guiding hand or watchful eye—
Just empty echoes beneath the sky.

But funny it seems how dreams survive—
Even when hope struggles to stay alive.

The grass kept growing against all odds,
Reaching higher toward unseen gods.

So here's to the grass that grew alone,
In cracks and dirt where love never shone.

Long live its fight; long live its will—
For even in darkness, the grass grows still.