

Operation Homecoming: Clarity and Perspective
Notes after watching the DVD • May 3, 2008
[/www.nea.gov/national/homecoming/index.html](http://www.nea.gov/national/homecoming/index.html)

Operation Homecoming (O.H.): Writing the Wartime Experience is a NEA program for U.S. military personnel and their families. This unique literary program preserves the stories and reflections of American troops who have served on the frontlines in places like Afghanistan and Iraq.

The DVD is extraordinary. I recommend it to everyone. You can rent it from NetFlix <http://www.netflix.com/> get it from your library or purchase from Amazon or other vendors.

The idea behind O.H. was to create a conversation between people who might not, under ordinary circumstances, talk to one another. (Some of what is written here was taken as notes from the documentary – so they are not my words.

- The NEA looks on this as a forum to give the little guy an opportunity to tell his story. “The guy at the bottom of the food chain has as much to say as the guys at the top of the food chain.”
- Dana Gioia, Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, spoke eloquently about the background of O.H. He said, *Art serves some basic needs and this program was designed to address several issues:*
 1. The Basic Human Need to give clarity and perspective on what one has experienced and what one feels.
 2. A Literary Purpose. O.H. gives the average soldier permission to write and to express him or herself.
 3. A Historic Imperative – to be a record of what individuals go through. *Literature captures the dailyness of existence.* What we hear is the “writing of the experience”
- O.H. creates a conversation between people. Between average people, not writers, not academics, not historians, but the people at ground zero – wherever that might be. In this case they are soldiers in Iraq, but they could be patients with serious disease, teachers, students – any group.
- In O.H. we hear from *people going through enormously trying periods of their lives. Art matters most at these times for it gives clarity and perspective.*

The writer, Tim O'Brien, had a few things to say in O.H. The soldiers' writings gave them an opportunity to record the *knowledge that they were toting around with them*. Kind of like the title of his great book – "The Things They Carried." The O.H. writers try to communicate what they have done and experienced. Their pieces help us to understand and appreciate how the human soul experiences war.

The premise behind O.H. could be applicable to Cell 2 Soul and related endeavors. These are not expert chronicles. Not forums for physicians, academics or podium animals to explain reality to others, but the kind of the thing that was meant by those great Biblical lines: "And I only, am escaped alone to tell thee." These web sites, blogs, books, DVDs are places to highlight the eloquence, the insights and the creativity of Everyman.

If we give create a forum for soldiers, patients, students (the guys at the bottom of the food chain), if we convince them that they have important things to say, and if we listen attentively to their words a dialogue will emerge that will be a continuous source of education and enlightenment.

From one of the O.H. web sites:

"In 2004, the NEA created Operation Homecoming to help U.S. troops and their families write about their wartime experiences. Through this program, some of America's most distinguished writers conducted workshops at military installations and contributed to educational resources to help the troops and their families share their stories. In addition to those works published in the anthology, all of the writing submitted by the troops will be preserved in an open, national government archive."