Talking and walking through home-less-ness

by Terence Connellan

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Abstract

This article reflects on the meanings of home through lived experiences of being without one. It offers readers an opportunity to see a city in a new way: by accompanying four people as they journey back to places where they had slept rough or found temporary shelter, and reflect on significant places and events. Through double listening and careful questioning, the author highlights their preferred identities, building on their own rich descriptions. Each person was invited to choose their preferred way of documenting their story.

Key words: homelessness; walking; therapeutic documents; re-authoring; narrative practice

I explored the concepts of 'home-less-ness' and being sheltered with four people who had experienced the hardships of having 'no fixed abode' (Hanslow et al., 1999). Chuck, a 66-year-old white Australian man, had slept rough for 12 months; Sylvia, a 46-year-old Aboriginal woman, had lived on the streets for several years as a teenager; Luke, a 46-year-old white Australian man, became homeless after losing his job; and John, a 32-year-old white Australian, had been homeless as a young person. This paper also includes some of my own story as a person with lived experience of home-less-ness. Our experiences of home-less-ness were explored through double-storied conversations, externalising, re-authoring and therapeutic documentation. Our conversations took place while walking in significant locations in and around the parklands of Adelaide, South Australia. These parklands, which offer a neat boundary around the city, were a colonial imposition on Kaurna people and Country. They give modern Adelaide an external beauty but evoke a cruel history of dispossession and another experience of home-less-ness.

Home-less-ness

The hyphens I have used in 'home-less-ness' emphasise the different concepts this word carries: ideas about home, having/not having and 'being'. Home is discussed below. The 'less' part suggests that something is lacking and reflects the expectation that everyone should have an address. The 'ness' suggests a state of being and a link to identity. The German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1996) argued that the sense of being with or without something (like a home) need not stipulate one's ontological wholeness. This resistance to being defined by societal labels of deficit resonates with those who live on the margins, and those who are not bothered by normative concepts of being (Popkin, 1999; Passaro, 1999).

Meanings of home

To me, home is a place of comfort and security where needs can be met. This implies protection, not only from the elements of wind and rain, but more crucially, from the mental anguish of not being able to control who comes into my space. When I was without a stable home, staying frequently in hostels, there was no division between inside and outside. I could not control who was coming through the door. If I am in control of who and what is coming into my environment, I am at home. I can endure physical discomfort, but mental pain hurts more. Therefore, mental anguish and insecurity are truly what it means to me to be without shelter.

The issue of home-less-ness is entwined with the dispossession and invasion of ancestral lands. Home is not something that can be defined by four walls, a roof, fences or land treaties. For Indigenous peoples all over the world, home exists in circular, not linear time; it operates within the rhythm of the seasons, of communal understandings and of oneness with Country (Kwaymullina, 2020). Home to Indigenous Australians is deeply entrenched in the materiality of the Earth. Indigenous peoples have been *made* homeless (Lester, 1999).

Significant places

Reflecting on a time when I was without shelter has not been easy, but it has helped me strengthen my own preferred story and prepared me to use this lived experience to help others (Collins et al., 2016). One of my reflections has been about the significance of locations in my experience of living without a fixed address. Walking down a particular street or through a particular park can evoke visceral memories. For the eight years in which I lived in and out of homeless shelters, my days were defined by routes and routines:

> *I am a young teenager sleeping at Burdekin, a shelter in the Adelaide CBD, with 10 other guys, all between 15 and 25 years of age. I've been there for three weeks now. We have to leave at 7 am so we start our walk then. We can only return between 7 pm and 10 pm. First, we walk from Birdy (our name for Burdekin Place, close to Victoria Square) to Chisholm (on the corner of Pulteney Street and South Terrace). This is where the girls and our girlfriends are. Chisholm is right next to Afton House, a men's hostel where we can go when we turn 25. We all know each other and meet there. Together we walk to the Hutt Street Centre only a few minutes' away. There we get a free breakfast and access other services. We must take a straight route, and not turn left or right into smaller streets where apartments and businesses have their territory. It feels safer to walk straight down a main road, which has less obvious surveillance. If we step off the main roads, questions are asked. People*

lean over balconies and ask what business we have being there. Some even call the police. So, it's down King William Road to South Terrace and on to Hutt Street. This is the route that is safe and accepted. Also, it is a daily routine: a route and a routine make some sense of a life that is often empty of sense. We try to stretch out the time at Hutt Street because the days are long. During the day we are expected to look for permanent housing, so most days we go to Service to Youth Council's (SYC) Trace-a-Place on Currie Street. It's tough because we're all competing for a place to call home. We are told they prioritise by the level of our need or risk. Hardly anyone ever finds a place. After SYC we are left to our own resources.

Specific landmarks and sites can evoke memories of past pain, but can also be markers of survival and strength. I decided to invite the four people who had agreed to share their stories with me to walk and talk in places that had been significant to them during their periods of home-less-ness (on walking and narrative practice, see Darmody, 2019). The following stories offer contrasting perspectives and describe differing challenges but all share experience of being without a stable home.

Walking in Wirraninthi the West Terrace Parklands with Chuck

Chuck is a 66-year-old white Australian man who spent 12 months living on the streets of Adelaide. I asked Chuck about how he had survived. He told me he had met a group of about seven men who had set up camp in the West Terrace Parklands. At the time, Chuck had been sleeping anywhere in the Adelaide CBD and did not feel safe. Noting that safety was important for Chuck, I asked what drew him to approach that group of men. Chuck said he valued belonging to a community and the solidarity it brings, but before approaching the group he needed to be certain that they were not doing drugs because he wanted to be away from that influence. This highlighted a number of values that were important to Chuck. After getting to know the men, Chuck asked if it would be okay for him to stay with them. Permission was not granted immediately: they told him it would require a meeting and a majority vote. Fortunately, the vote to include Chuck was unanimous. This acceptance was a relief: there was now a place he could go every night and feel safe. He would not have to wander in search of a position not already taken, and wouldn't need to remain constantly alert while lying alone.

Chuck's new community helped each other. One example of this was an agreement that everyone had to raise five dollars a day. This money would be pooled and the group would go to a butcher on Grote Street with whom they had built a good relationship. There they would purchase meat and bread for a barbecue to feed everyone. This was repeated nightly, and the public barbecue in the West Terrace Parklands had become a significant place in Chuck's personal history. His participation in the solidarity and inventiveness of providing and sharing a meal together was testimony to Chuck's own generosity of spirit.

I asked Chuck if there had been any conflict in the group, and if so, how it was dealt with. Chuck told me they had developed accountability to and responsibility for each other. If a member of the group was in trouble, they met to decide what action should be taken. It was a form of community justice and one that worked well for them, helping to maintain harmony. Rivas and Rosen (1999) noted that shelters set up by organisations like the Salvation Army adhere to a religious code. When a group (like Chuck's) establishes its own code, its members gain a liberating independence from institutional codes. One of Rivas and Rosen's participants said: 'Being self-governing helps to rehabilitate the individuals. It keeps people in touch with what's happening in the real world, taking responsibility, taking part in something bigger' (1999, p. 68). When an independent group of people who are not traditionally housed takes responsibility for self-organising, then specific and necessary social skills are learnt. These skills can assist them in surviving, and in transitioning to function in the mainstream community later.

For Chuck and his friends, winter in the Parklands was cold and difficult. The men had been told not to light fires, so they all sourced decent sleeping bags to keep warm. When Chuck eventually secured a Housing Trust (government-owned) apartment, he took his sleeping bag and went to sleep on the floor. Today, approximately fifteen years later, Chuck's home is fully furnished. I asked him how he had done this. Chuck said he had remembered what his uncle taught him: how to 'trade stuff' to get by. He had also acquired similar skills with the group on West Terrace: he swapped fruit for furniture. Chuck said these skills had enabled him to live and furnish his whole house. I asked him if he had bought anything and he proudly

said that the only thing he had paid money for from a shop was his television. I asked whether having this furnished home had changed his family life in any way. Chuck responded that he now proudly receives visits from his daughters, who have been so pleased to get their dad back. He added that it makes his heart fill with love and happiness to have them in his unit.

Life after home-less-ness was not without challenges. Chuck still needed to go into the city to get his medication from a chemist on Hindley Street, near the train station which used to be a meeting place. Chuck was strategic about when he moved through these spaces and the routes he took to avoid certain people from his past life.

I asked Chuck what he would like to say to the system that had let him down in so many ways after the accident that led to his home-less-ness. We talked through some possibilities for documenting his experiences and decided on a letter that he might or might not post to the Housing Trust. In line with Chuck's commitment to fairness, Chuck penned a letter but did not address it to the entire housing system because he recognised that some people were exceptions. Instead, he opened his letter with 'Dear System Majority'. In so many ways, Chuck's letter was an example of how to live one's life. I felt humbled and deeply moved by it. I think it was also a useful exercise for Chuck to write the letter because it reinforced his strong sense of self-worth and his ability to survive.

Walking through caravan parks with Sylvia

Sylvia, an Indigenous woman and mother of four, had lived on the streets of Adelaide between the ages of 14 and 18. She is now 46. In meeting with Sylvia, I was alert to potential operations of power and privilege as a white person interviewing an Indigenous person, particularly in relation to home-less-ness. It was important to note that not everyone wants to talk about their experience. Silence can be a deep part of communication. There can be fear of being profiled, or made to feel unequal and rootless. Indigenous author Ambelin Kwaymullina (2020) has said that often silence is choosing to be silent. That choice is a demonstration of pride, which can ultimately help to build an alternative story.

Sylvia described her time on the streets as a period of extreme difficulty. I asked Sylvia about how her Indigenous heritage affected her time living without shelter. Sylvia said she was constantly racially profiled by police and had been imprisoned with unmanaged drug and alcohol dependency. I asked her how this made her feel and what she did to cope. Sylvia said that she had felt robbed of her self-worth. She found herself drinking in the various parklands and sleeping with older men for money to survive and to have a place to sleep (see Browde, 1999). Sylvia was resourceful in securing safety, a semblance of love and a place to shower. She was not successful in finding work and put this down to racism and her age. Knowing Sylvia had come a long way and that the person she spoke of was now distant, I asked her if she might name her younger self. Sylvia said that her 'working name' had been Trudy, and that this was a name she identified with her old life.

The places of relative safety that Trudy found were in caravan parks on the outskirts of Adelaide and within metropolitan Adelaide. To gain a richer description of Sylvia's alternative story and values, I asked what a caravan in a park could provide. She replied that, at least for a short period of time, they offered some respite from the demands of others (especially men). However, it was a tumultuous existence framed by fear and insecurity. We explored what the word 'insecurity' had meant to her at the time and what security might have looked like. Sylvia said that not knowing where she would sleep or when she would shower made Trudy feel insecure. Having a house, job and loving family was what Trudy dreamed of and where she thought she might find security. Trudy's experience of caravan parks and short-term accommodation offers insight into the troubles of transience, and the solace in being beyond suburban scrutiny.

I asked Sylvia if Trudy had developed any ways to deal with judgement. Sylvia said that Trudy had escaped the surveillance that came with welfare housing by securing a spot in a caravan park. She went on to say that Trudy found it very difficult to cope in ordinary society. To invite Sylvia to articulate her rich analysis of societal hierarchies, I asked what she meant by 'ordinary society' and how it affected her. She responded that as an Indigenous woman, she was already displaced from her heritage and Country; her sufferings were beyond time and ran in her blood (see Lester, 1999). The loss of Country, community and 'home' were forever with her.

Sylvia now has a much-loved son who is differently and wonderfully abled but encounters multiple health issues. Sylvia mentioned that she did not like talking about

Trudy in front of her son, to whom she desperately wanted to give stability, continuity and love. It was clear that Trudy's memory still interfered with Sylvia's equilibrium and striving for peace. I gently asked Sylvia if we might rewrite her story in a way that that honoured her skills and re-graded her personhood. Sylvia agreed and this is what we wrote:

> Sylvia is a strong mother of Indigenous heritage who fought the battles of life on the streets through endurance and intuition. As a young girl she dug deep into her personal resources and was able to find adequate shelter, no matter how temporary, so that she and her children were safe, clean and fed. At times, Sylvia felt something was taken from her, but she quickly regained it and moved away from those places and people of danger. She put Trudy behind her. This incredible strength is testimony to Sylvia, a powerful woman, someone who rose above the prejudices of society, studied social work, found employment and established a safe home for her children.

Sylvia had found work as a social worker and was able to purchase her own home where she now lives with her youngest son. I asked Sylvia if she would like to share her experiences as a contribution to others. After some reflection she said she would write a letter to vulnerable young women. She wrote a two-page letter with her favourite fountain pen; it is something special. I'll quote a little bit here:

> I felt I had lost my soul, and in that darkness, I reached for even a little glimmer of light. It is this light that I would love for you all to find too. It can be a dream, no matter how small. Seize it! Build on it. Never let go. Never stop believing. This is how I did it.

Sylvia's letter goes on to provide practical advice on seeking professional help and returning to study to develop skills that can help in finding a job and, ultimately, a permanent home. I asked Sylvia what it had been like to write the letter. She said it was a reiteration of what she offers in her practice as a social worker, but it was helpful for her to write it down by hand as a reminder to herself of her own hard-won independence.

Walking in Morialta Conservation Park with Luke

Luke is a 46-year-old man who had lost his job at a school due to homophobic employers. As a result of this and without a reference he struggled to move forward. Luke turned to selling drugs to survive, pay rent and eat. However, his neighbours saw people coming and going and called the police. I sensed that Luke wanted to distance himself from that time and I thought that externalisation would be useful. I asked what he would call the Luke of that time, and after some time he suggested that Struggling Luke was suitable. Struggling Luke felt he had been targeted purely for being gay and attending night clubs (see Miers, 1999). He said it seemed as if those judgemental people only saw the persona (dealer-player) Struggling Luke, who was an external force messing around with the 'real Luke'. I noted that even at that time of pain, he had been able to distinguish between his preferred self and Struggling Luke. I asked Luke to tell me more about the effects of the judgements. He said they evoked fear, and that one night he had been badly beaten by a group of men outside an apartment building on East Terrace in the city. This landed him in hospital and left him suffering with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Eventually, the agents renting Luke his house were notified that he was conducting illegal activities and his lease was terminated. They did not provide him with a reference so he was unable to find a new place. Struggling Luke found himself sleeping on sofas at friends' places, but these friendships were strained by the new pressures introduced. I wondered if this might be an opening to an alternative story and asked Luke to tell me more about those friendships he was sensitive about. Luke said he valued real and lasting relationships, and his sense of loyalty and accountability to his friends was sacred. He chose to sleep in his car, rather than at friends' places, to retain those valuable friendships. Luke said that having already experienced homophobic abuse, he felt it was better to remove himself from involving his friends (see Miers, 1999). He chose isolation over inadvertently tarring his friends with a tainted image. Luke said he chose his car over hostels as it felt safer. He and his cat slept in carparks along the beach. He added that he liked being down at Semaphore as it was near the school where he once worked and the proximity to the ocean made him feel more peaceful. However, during the daylight this all changed for Luke and he would leave the Semaphore area. He said, 'I know too many people in Semaphore, and they are the people who

misjudged me and cost me my job'. Luke was afraid of what might happen if they were to cross paths. I asked him where he went, wanting to understand his coping mechanisms. Luke said he would visit coffee shops as far afield as Unley. He made sure he was always clean and well-groomed and knew there would be less likelihood of homophobic abuse in an affluent suburb like Unley. Sometimes he would go to Morialta Conservation Park and spend the day by himself, walking along the trails or sitting and reading books. Luke was able to distance himself from Struggling Luke, who was judged to be a risk to society, and to present himself as the preferred Luke, who loved books, cats, nature and pleasant surroundings. This was also the Luke who retained relationships.

Luke and his cat now have an apartment and Luke had found work as a computer repairer. He had amassed enormous resources, skills, insider knowledge and abilities, and I asked him how he felt about documenting these. I knew Luke had an artistic side and suggested using the Tree of Life metaphor (Denborough, 2008) to draw his periods of growth, storms and survival. Luke has quite a sense of humour and he chuckled as he doodled in his cat and car and other significant markers of survival. I asked Luke if he would like to share his story with others and receive feedback and he was excited about the idea of being heard and his story being of value to others.

Walking through city streets with John

John was a 32-year-old man who had lived on the streets with me and became a good friend. I asked him how he had ended up without a home and why the youth shelter was the only place he had to go. 'I punched on with my dad a lot, and because all my mates lived happily with their parents, it was hard for me to stay with mine'. We walked down Frew Street in Adelaide where Burdekin Place once was. Immediately both of us had plenty to talk about. John said to me, 'Remember the bars?' I replied, 'Of course! And when they put cameras everywhere'. Then John said, 'Yeah, they didn't trust us much, ay?' He laughed. 'Do you remember how we covered the cameras with shaving cream?' We chuckled at our craftiness.

We also spoke about some of our friends at Birdy, and what had happened to them. Some were serving life in jail; some had died by suicide and others had been murdered. This was extremely difficult for us to talk about, but we felt it was a necessary and rich discussion because out of it came what we held to be important in life. John recalled being with Michael, a mutual friend, the night he was fatally stabbed in the neck on Hindley Street opposite the Rosemont Hotel. I asked if he wanted to go back to that spot – it was always the participant's choice where to go. He said, 'No that's too much. It would do my head in'. In a while he said, 'Let's go sus out Chisholm [a women's shelter] and Afton House [a men's shelter], but I don't want to hang out front'. I asked him why not. He replied, 'not keen to see anyone from there'. We started walking and John said, 'Those guys and girls are all on drugs, Bro. I want nothing to do with that stuff'. I asked him why it was so important for him not to associate with them and he said he did not want to get tempted or mixed up with drugs or crime. John added that this was because he was a dad now, and could not get mixed up in anything that might place his daughter at risk. We got to Chisholm and went to the park across the road. We sat for a while in silence and John remembered how he had loved coming there to sit in the sun on the soft grass. It had provided a little sanctuary in those times of turmoil.

Because I had been with John during his time without a home, I knew how prevalent marijuana had been during those days, and remembered that he had smoked a lot. I asked John how he had stopped smoking weed. His reply was, 'body building, Bro. It keeps me going – that and my little girl'. He spoke strongly about his love for his daughter and how she had changed his life. John stressed that he would never do anything 'to stuff that up'. I asked John how he would like to document his new life and suggested a letter to himself. Instead, John decided to write a loving letter to his daughter, Michaela. He wrote about how much he loves her and loves doing things like riding bikes with her, and that he wants to protect her from bad experiences. He wrote that one day when she is older, he may share his life story with her. It was a beautiful act of love for John to write this down, and, as with Chuck, it reinforced his new life.

My use of narrative practices

During these conversations, I took particular care to enable people to talk about periods in their lives that were tough in ways that were not retraumatising. I knew I could not just go in and ask questions; relationships of trust needed to be built with time and sensitivity. I carefully considered all the questions I asked, monitoring paralanguage and verbal language,

and offering choices to participants (White, 2007). For example, for John, it was too painful to go to the place where Michael had died, so that absence was respected almost as a moment of prayer. Being still with the participants assisted an embodied knowledge (Merleau-Ponty, 2002) of what to elicit, and these are skills honed over time. Sylvia's stories of abuse and Chuck's split with his wife were, *if* they wished, for another time and place, and at *their* choice.

Documentation was used to solidify preferred stories, and make them available in a way that could be read and re-read. The form of documentation was negotiated with each person. Luke's Tree of Life, for example, drew on his creativity and became an illustrated testimony which included some of the storms of life.

Conclusion

The meaning of home is different for everybody, especially for Indigenous peoples for whom home is Country. In this paper, the multiple meanings of 'home-less-ness' were explored. As we walked through significant places, memories and sparkling moments were evoked. These became starting points for building alternative stories. The act of walking outside avoided some of the hidden power structures of built interiors, and talking became freer. Going to the actual places where people had slept rough or found shelter stimulated memories and rich descriptions. The stories were all audio recorded and augmented with the participants' own letters or drawings.

I feel deep gratitude to the four people who shared their stories with me. Such stories should be made visible and audible so people in an unsheltered situation are no longer frequently made to feel invisible 'like a leaf on the ground' (Baker, 1999, p. 41).

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