

FINDING HOME

Seeing Humanity through Stories of Homelessness

Oluremi Ann Oliver



Life Stories Shared by Individuals Served by FrontLine

With support from Cuyahoga Arts & Culture, FrontLine Service and Ms. Oliver participated in the Center for Performance and Civic Practice's (CPCP) Learning Lab, a professional development program for artists and non-profit organizations rooted in civic, social, public, and placemaking practices. In the program, artists and local nonprofits built partnerships and received funding to explore and implement co-designed, arts-based projects. In this partnership, Ms. Oliver provided a safe, trauma-informed, and culturally sensitive space for those who receive services from FrontLine to share their stories while also supporting others in the group. These shared experiences helped build community and provided an opportunity for participants to not only express themselves verbally but to also be heard.

Images seen throughout this book were created by professional artists and participants of FrontLine's art workshops for formerly homeless individuals.

Front Cover Art: *View Series—Teal View* by Elaine Hullihen
Back Cover Art: *View Series—Blue View* by Elaine Hullihen



Truth

Who am I? Can you see me?

I can list the entire chronology of my experiences that led me here. Some would say that the worst of these is who I am. I'll share just a little of my experience.

As a 15-year-old, I was kicked out of my family, out of my home, because I was a girl attracted to girls. I didn't know the term "homophobia" then. I did know that what my behavior triggered in my family, triggered the same in my community, triggered it as well in my church. My attraction to girls became the only measure by which I would be evaluated in every area of my child's life. Those who had protected me, the institutions that provided guidance, shelter and safety, that gave cover and time to me as a youth growing up, now became the source of my rejection. I became suddenly "homeless." No plan, no roadmap, no app to lead me. I had only an inner desire to live and even that would be seriously tested over time.

At first I was able to spend a week or two, a few days, a day at a time, on a friend's couch. Over time that was no longer the case. The couches became fewer and farther in between and as my physical condition deteriorated, the opportunities dwindled to none. I couldn't maintain my appearance. I couldn't maintain my hygiene. Homelessness will do that...

"Restrooms for patrons only"

No money, no access.



Truth by William Martin Jean

And it was not just that I was losing access to places where I could clean myself, I was also losing the desire to do so. To be so rejected as a young person was unbearable. A death blow to my personhood. So I began to cover it up. I covered it with foul language, foul looks. But I had to eat and I had to sleep. And over time I began hustling the only thing that I had at my disposal: my body. Prostitution gave me access to shower from time to time; to eat from time to time; and finally to buying the drugs that numbed me to the misery in all of that.

But this story that I am sharing with you now is not the whole story. It may not even be the most important part of my story. I am telling you now that my experiences were never meant to define me. In truth the most significant part of my story is the part that I will share with you now. The story of how I survived all of this is the story of my personal strength. This is possibly a contradiction to how I am judged in the world based on these events and circumstances. How I became strong was due to a process of going through some things; some harsh and hurtful things; destructive and dangerous things. I went through them; I did not become them.

Through it all I was able to protect something deep within my core. I was able to keep it alive even when for several years it lay dormant; dormant but not dead. My strength kept me alive despite being seen as a pariah. It kept me alive even as I was deliberately ignored or even worse, not seen at all. I did that. I kept that part of me alive so that I could stand today, for me. That inner strength is what got me through. **Can you see me now?**



Used to Be by Robert

A Big Heart

I have loved so many, so many. My big heart has filled with the love of everything, from the smallest bloom and the tiniest blade of grass, to that stumbling addict who took up residency right behind the big monument in the park. I was sleeping on a nearby bench, when he came along, talking under his breath to someone I couldn't see but who clearly existed for him. And even though he woke me up, somehow that initial appearance; his talking, his seeming lack of awareness of my space or concern for my privacy, none of that bothered me really. I understood those things. To live on the street requires a certain amount of self-companionship. It requires you to see and not see, just as your very existence seems to require a definite blindness in others. They, the others, hold their breath, cast down their eyes, or in some other way divert them so as not to make eye contact with us. But we have been seen. We were spotted long ago by someone riding a bus and made uncomfortable when we sat too close. Or perhaps it was the woman walking down the street so preoccupied in thought that she didn't notice us there on the sidewalk and when she just barely stumbled across our extended foot, she clutched herself so tightly that she muffled her own scream. Her mouth wide open could expel nothing; not a breath, not a sound. Yet her body in its distortion expressed the horror of it all. It was a horror we saw from time to time; whenever our worlds collided. To them we are not "others" but some species barely existing above the sidewalk. In truth, to them, we are less than a sidewalk. People tend to look at the sidewalk if only periodically, to see if it is level, to see if it has cracks or holes. To see if it has buckled or caved. To see where it ends. They interact in quite the opposite way with us. The assumption is that we are not (on the) level. They project the holes

and cracks onto us and sometimes we buckle and cave from the weight of it all. Sometimes. Sometimes and mostly, we stay out of sight or at least we close our eyes to them. Sleeping at the side of a building with our backs to the sidewalk, we brave being assaulted; kicked, spat upon by passersby. Many of us take to the parks, the woods of the city. There we can live, if unnoticed, with our voices, the unseen friends, the recluse and the evicted. If we are temporarily lucky we can find a home there, when the weather permits. And if we are durable enough we can stay even beyond permitting weather.

So when my new neighbor moved in, across from my bench, I was not surprised; a little wary perhaps, but not surprised. Something had driven him here. Perhaps it was the story shared with his invisible companion. Perhaps it was the story he sought to lose; to lessen its impact by repeating it incessantly. Maybe it was some kind of meditation, or a day in and day out bedtime story he told himself to soothe himself. It wasn't for me to know.

That big heart of mine could love that story and the character who bore it anyway. Just as I loved that bloom; that blade of grass. Just as I have loved and clutched to myself this heart that I kept layered under hurt, rejection, invisibility. In a world that I thought was deaf to me, I lived by my heart's rhythm. I protected it and I kept it beating until one day when two visitors came to our park and I could feel their heartbeats too. Two young men. It was as if their hearts were speaking to me. "You don't have to live outside." I heard them speaking from their eyes and their hearts. They spoke other words I couldn't really translate but that I felt like "trust." So I followed them. I followed them here. And I've been living here now for six months; slowly, slowly removing the layers. Allowing my big heart to expand, safe and uncovered. Allowing myself to be seen. Removing my invisible cloak, Yeah, I had one. I'd worn it so long I had actually

forgotten that I had it on. No longer clutching, my arms now extend and reach out. They reach out to the angels who brought me here. Someday; someday soon I'll be able to reach back and bring someone here who is living on the street like I was. Maybe the man in the park with the story will come inside. But in the meantime, the angels, those two young men who brought me here, continue to go out to the places where the invisible reside, **to bring them home.**



A Big Heart by William Martin Jean

A Place to Breathe

Some people I know have a real problem with that word “homeless.” One friend of mine says “unsheltered” and I get it; that is what we were. “Unsheltered.” But to me that word carries a different load. For me it puts that onus on society, on others and there is truth in that. But at that time, the bottom line for me was that I didn’t have a home. I didn’t have a place, a space, a room where I was safe and could shut my door and keep people out if I needed to, and I needed to. So for much of my teens and up until recently, I used mostly alcohol to “protect” myself. I used it to cover me so that I didn’t feel as much. It provided me with a kind of fog in which I lived unseen. And now, living here, what I cherish is living in a place where I can welcome someone in; someone of my choice. People who are sober; trying to maintain their sobriety. That’s who I want around me because that’s who I am. I am a woman who is working really hard to maintain my sobriety. So for me, saying that I was homeless is a way to confront the reality of what my situation really was. I didn’t need to sugarcoat it then, when I was dead in it, and I don’t need to sugarcoat it now, now that I am housed. And I needed to look closely at myself. I’m not saying that my friend’s point of view was wrong. No, no. It was and is the right thing for her. I am just owning up to what I have to do, how I need to think, how I need to look at things to stay sober. I have had to face my circumstances and how I have impacted and at times created them with my behaviors, for good and for bad. This was necessary for me to be sober.

I didn’t always see it that way.

In the past I have stepped into space that I didn’t understand and could only appreciate at the most basic level. For example, I went to my first group therapy sessions at FrontLine quite frankly because they gave out snacks. I was still living on the streets; squatting wherever I could. I went to that first session because my friend told me to come with her... for the snacks. The first few times I went, that’s about all I got out of it; snacks. By about the fourth time though, I was listening. Probably before then. By the sixth or seventh time I voluntarily shared with our group counselor what I believed landed me on the streets.

My story was that when I aged out of foster care, the minute I turned 18, I was on my own. I had a few clothes, a toothbrush and exactly \$25. No family to connect to. And no clue. That was my story. There was another person in the group one day who shared a similar story to mine. I started seeing myself in their story. Not everything, of course, but enough to make me look in a mirror. Something I had avoided for some time. Then there were “old heads” around me who I really thought were nothing like me. People who had been on the streets for years; who had abused drugs for years. I began to see where my story was leading me. I was learning all this as I sat in group with other “unhoused” individuals. I was experiencing a shift in view; primarily my view of myself. So I kept coming. Not just for the snacks anymore. Now I continue to come for my life. My life off of the streets. My life with a room and a door that I can open and I can close. My life in a space where I am safe. A place where I am housed. No, I am no longer unhoused or homeless. **Now, I am home.**

At Home with Myself

“Yeah, I was **homeless** and I’ve stayed at this shelter for the past two years. But it’s time now to **move outta here!** Don’t get me wrong. I am **grateful** for this place because without it I would definitely be locked up. And I mean that! Locked up! That is so clear to me. See, when I came here I came out of an abusive situation. I wasn’t being abused; the abuser was me! If I hadn’t left that house I would be back in prison right now. I came here because I knew how sick I was. And that poor alcoholic man of mine was no match for me! He wasn’t, because he cared about me, didn’t want to hurt me, and honestly wasn’t strong enough to beat me anyway. The truth is that my rage, and I was full of it, my rage was **killing both of us**. He was taking the physical brunt of it and my spirit, my heart, and actually my health were being destroyed by it. And I knew that I had to leave that house and my man before I did something really bad to him.

Honestly I was being led to this place for quite some time. The need I had to release the anger that I carried all the time was pushing me here. And I am so thankful that it did. I had a deep wound and in the tradition that I grew up in, you were never supposed to talk about it.

When I said that I came out of an abusive situation that was true. But it didn’t start there when I abused my boyfriend. It started when I was a child in my childhood home and I was sexually abused for several years by a close relative. And the thing is, I **told** my mother and she let me know that that was not acceptable behavior. No, it was not acceptable for him to “touch” me and worse. She also said that it was unbelievable that he would even do that. But then she said that it was **shameful** for me to talk about it. **I** was made to feel wrong. More

so than the person who was abusing me; **I** was the one to blame; **I** was made to keep quiet and to own the problem. And so I carried it all by myself. I kept it all to myself. I kept the secret and it **raged** inside of me.

The self-destructive, self-medicating behavior that grew from that hateful secret eventually got me locked up. I was fighting any and everybody all the time and ended up with multiple assault charges. Being in prison only made the problem worse; there were so many more people to fight with. So many people like me with addictions, trauma and secrets. Crack cocaine and alcohol were my medications of choice. And I got them the same way most addicts get theirs; by any means necessary. Being incarcerated did little to curb that need for drugs, and it did nothing to quiet the growing rage inside of me. It was when I got out of prison that everything I’d used to basically protect that little girl inside of me was failing. At first I was out on the street, literally homeless. Then I moved in with a family member and when that didn’t work, I moved in with my boyfriend. There I finally realized the harm my rage was doing to him and at the same time I realized how I used it to keep the secret. I moved out of his home and moved into the women’s shelter. At the urging of a counselor there, I started coming to FrontLine for group sessions. And I’ve been coming ever since. It was here, in the safe space of group therapy sessions with other people who were experiencing homelessness, it was here that I began giving up my secret. It was here that I faced all the ugly things that the secret of my own abuse was the basis of. I am coming to terms with the abuse. I am forgiving my abuser. Not excusing him, I recognize how **f***** up** and **sick** he was. I realize now, that is not who I am, and I can be about the business of unpacking those bags. I am forgiving myself. Not excusing myself but rather facing the truth of my past and everyday trying to do better; to love myself more. I will come to the group sessions at FrontLine for the help I receive there. I will come because I see how sharing my

story has helped me to unpack the baggage I've been carrying around. And I will continue to come because I am seeing how sharing my story helps others shed theirs. No more secrets imposed on me by others; my life belongs to me. Now I can live with myself. **Now I am at home with myself and I think I am ready to live at home with others.**



A Place to Breathe by William Martin Jean

From Yesterday to Feeling Again

“**Nothing.**” That’s what I felt. At least most times that is what I felt. And those times when some other feeling seeped in, I did my best to wipe it out; smother it with whatever substance I could find. Alcohol mostly was my go-to because it was more easily and cheaply accessed. My level of drunkenness demonstrated just how much I didn’t want to feel. To live with the goal of not feeling is a heavy, heavy weight on the heart. I bore that weight as long as I could; as long as my poisoned liver could no longer sustain me. It was one winter in Cleveland where I was living on the street, it was then that I found myself drying out in a hospital. I had been found passed out on the street and taken there. And it was there that as I slowly thawed (Cleveland winters can be brutal), as my liver and my heart were attended to, it was there that I began to feel again. That I had been rescued by the invisible hand; that the hand had led help to **me**, is a grace for which I am completely humbled and will forever and always be grateful.

But let me go back a ways in my story and maybe then you will understand where I am coming from. I mean that literally because **where I am coming from** is as important to my story as **where I stand today.**

I grew up right here in Cleveland and I had the normal life that poverty affords. I mean materially I didn’t have a lot but neither did the people around me, so that felt normal. I had a family; two brothers, a mother, and a father. When I was about 9-years old, my father lost his job and the drinking that had been occasional, became heavier. When I was 10, my parents split and my dad moved away. That hurt; hurt everybody. Mom worked all the time and slowly me and my brothers began to spend more and more time unsupervised, more and



Untitled by Meghan

more time in the streets, and more and more time getting into trouble. I was 13 when we were removed from our home and put in foster care. I was not placed with my brothers. The home I was placed in was not bad; it was nice enough really... but I was 13. I was angry. I was hurt and I was lost. No matter how nice those people tried to be to me, I couldn't receive it. I was full of rage and I did everything in my power to turn them against me. When it finally worked, I was placed with another family and this time, I ran away. I ran to the place I thought I knew; the streets. But I didn't know the streets. The streets knew me. They had seen so many, so young, so naïve, scared kids who put up a hard front but underneath it all, they were hurt. That was me. A few years later that person living on the streets was **still** me but with the cover of stuffed feelings and alcoholism. For years I managed to "live" like this until that day I passed out on the street and a young man from FrontLine found me, got me to the help I needed to get into recovery. Through the group sessions and all the services I get at FrontLine, **I feel myself getting better and better!** That's right... I can **feel**. The good, the bad, and the ugly. Who knows, I may even be able to find my family again. That is once **I've found myself**. And I am **feeling that!**

Gratitude

“Look up man! What do you see?”

This guy was always making jokes. Funny I should say that about him because this guy, just a few months ago wouldn't talk to anybody, much less make jokes with you. Probably because of the years he spent living on the street. Guarded. Keeping himself safe by keeping to himself. Now? You can barely shut him up. “Look up, man!” What. Do. You. See?” I'm shaking my head now, where is he going with this? I ain't got time. Well, actually I got nothing but time.

Okay. What do I see? Without looking up I say, “I see the sky, the clouds. I see the sun, the moon. Space that's what I see. Nothing more than space. Space and stars.” And I say this with attitude, like “Fool! Everybody knows what's up there! What kind of games are you playin' man?”

This answer of course, doesn't satisfy him. He looks at me sideways with a kind of faked disgust. And he tries again. “Man, we're in a room. Look up! What do you see?” His tone is not really joking at all. He's not disgusted with me. He's not mean or impatient either. Actually he's being very patient with me. Like you would with a child when you confront it with what is obvious to you but you realize that it's not obvious to them. You recognize that time is needed for his dawning awareness. No, he was not playing a game with me at all. Now I'm beginning to understand what he is asking me. We're in the community room of our apartment building. When I look up I see only the ceiling. And it hits me. That's what he's talking about. That is what he wants me to recognize. The ceiling; the roof over our heads! And he's not *joking*, he's quietly **joyful!** And

that joyfulness is his expression of **gratitude**. He is grateful to have a roof over his head! And he's bringing that same awareness to me. Yes, I have time on my hands; nothing but time. And how wonderful that is. How wonderful. And I'm loving it. **Nothing but time... and a roof over my head.**



Gratitude by William Martin Jean

Final Thoughts and Reflections

Let me begin with a word of thanks for the opportunity to put some of these stories to paper. This entire process proved to be so much more than I expected it to be. Serving as the Storyteller/group facilitator required me to listen with an ear for meaning and another ear for memory. I listened to the participants' individual stories and their reactions to, and reflections about their own lived experiences. I then had to remember the linkages within those shared stories in order to create composites (six composite stories) that were, to the best of my ability, true to their accounts, respectful, and without my opinion and judgments. Not an easy task but one that I worked diligently to accomplish, and one that definitely helped me to grow as a Storyteller.

What made this project successful in truth was that the sharing within the storytelling sessions was so present moment, reciprocal, mutualistic and honest. The way that the participants shared, listened to each other, and responded with such respect and loving kindness was for me a demonstration of community at its best. In this space participants listened from the heart and from the intellect. It was a beautiful thing; an absolutely beautiful thing.

My hope is that you, the reader, experienced the shared human story in each of these offerings. I hope that like me, you will never turn away from someone, ignore, or avoid in any number of ways someone who is homeless again. It is my desire that we will suspend judgement of each other and be open to the incredible story that each of us is.

We are gifted by the existence of each other. It is my hope that when we meet, whether “temporarily housed”, “permanently housed”, or “homeless”, we can acknowledge that we are all threads in the same cloth; it is the cloth of our humanity. And what a beautiful and vibrant cloth it is.

Oluremi Ann Oliver

STORYTELLER

Oluremi Ann Oliver

Oluremi is a Storyteller and poet who often uses African cultural traditions, as well as current events, to inform, enhance, and invigorate each storytelling session. She has shared her stories and poetry nationally, as well as internationally in Ghana, Nigeria, and Kenya.




Oluremi is President Emeritus of the Cleveland Association of Black Storytellers, Inc. (CABS) and has also served as co-Affiliate Director of the National Association of Black Storytellers, Inc., headquartered in Baltimore, Maryland from 2016 to 2020.

Her work as an Early Childhood Specialist and Consultant working with children and families for over 35 years has also informed her storytelling practice and she continues to advocate for families and children through her performances. She was honored with an invitation to give a keynote address and to facilitate workshops at Nigeria's inaugural early childhood conference hosted by Greenmeadows Nigeria, a teacher preparatory college in Lagos, Nigeria.

Oluremi believes that storytelling is a service that has the capacity to open minds, to soften hearts, and to elicit positive change, and she is grateful for every opportunity to share this powerful gift. Her current work facilitating storytelling groups with underserved populations is a testament to that belief.

FrontLine Service is committed to seeking out and serving those in the community who are the most vulnerable: children traumatized by violence, individuals who are homeless, and those who are struggling with a mental health crisis or thoughts of suicide, serving them with empathy and commitment to their dignity and intrinsic worth. Last year the agency served over 25,000 individuals, helping them overcome the barriers and severe challenges in their lives.

Stories shared for this project came from men and women who are being served in a variety of FrontLine Service's programs, including:

-  Permanent Supportive Housing - Housing and on-site support services for adults and families who are homeless and have severe mental illness and substance abuse disorders
-  Dual Diagnosis Treatment - Transitional residential facility providing integrated mental health and substance abuse disorder treatment
-  Group counseling provided for people experiencing homelessness

FrontLineService.org



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