CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM

IN THEIR OWN VOICES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

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INTERVIEWEE: Benjamin Hertwig

INTERVIEWER: Michael Petrou

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Benjamin Hertwig

Interviewed 20 February 2024

Michael Petrou (00:00):
We'll talk about some of the things we talked about during our previous interview. But I'll ask you to read some poems and chat a little bit about your deployment and coming home. I'll begin by getting this recorded that I'm here with Benjamin Hertwig. It's February 20th, 2024. Benjamin is a veteran of the Canadian Army and of a deployment to Afghanistan. He's now a poet and a potter and a painter and a teacher, too, I believe.

Benjamin Hertwig (00:31):
I have taught, yeah, not teaching at the moment.

Michael Petrou (00:34):
Let me just begin by asking a little bit about where you're born and grew up.

Benjamin Hertwig (00:38):
I was born in Edmonton, Alberta and grew up here as well. Lived most of my life there.

Michael Petrou (00:46):
Tell me about your decision to enlist.

Benjamin Hertwig (00:48):
I joined at the age of 16. I'm the youngest of four children. My brother was already in the military at that time. My sister was in the military. My dad was in the military. I was not a particularly, studious student. And I did the [...] I forget the name of the sort of enlisting when they see what you're suitable for or what skills you have. And they said, "Well, you would be good for the infantry." I assume that meant I got a rather low score on the test at the time, so I just thought this is what I would like to do for the rest of my life. My family had done it. My grandfather was in the military, my great-grandfather was in the military. And so it was just sort of a family tradition.

Michael Petrou (01:46):
What was the draw for you? What seemed attractive for you?

Benjamin Hertwig (01:51):
I mean, I very much looked up to my older brother, and he was also infantry, and […] to tell you the truth, I don't know if I had thought about the trade a whole lot other than this is kind of what my family does. And so I'm not very good at school, and this is what I'm going to do too.

Michael Petrou (02:12):
Did you consider the Regular Forces?

Benjamin Hertwig (02:14):
Yeah. After, around the time that my brother had moved out here to Ottawa [Ontario], I had considered trying to do selection as well at some point, but Afghanistan happened, and that sort of changed the trajectory of my life and military career, certainly.

Michael Petrou (02:34):
Let's talk about Afghanistan. So you enlisted in 2001, you said, I believe you said you were 16, and you deployed in 2006, if I have that correct?

Benjamin Hertwig (02:43):
Yes, spring of 2006.

Michael Petrou (02:44):
OK, so you spent a few years in the Reserves up to that point. What was the draw to want to go to Afghanistan? Because you would have had a choice.

Benjamin Hertwig: (02:53):
Yeah, I definitely […] it was something that, I wouldn't say it was for particularly noble reasons. It wasn't—a lot of people at the time thought, oh, it's going to be for building schools for Afghan children. For me it was adventure. It was my friends are going, and I wish to be going as well. I did not want to get left behind while they were going, so. Yeah, adventure, see something new. My brother had already been to Afghanistan at that point. He had been to Kabul [Afghanistan], not Kandahar [Afghanistan]. But I thought, oh, this is what my regiment is doing, and I want to be a part of it.

Michael Petrou (03:33):
What did your brother tell you about his deployment?

Benjamin Hertwig (03:36):
So his deployment in Kabul would have been a few years previous. And I was living with him at that time and a few other military people. He didn't tell me a whole lot about it. I think in terms of Canadian tours, it was a relatively quiet one. I remember they were in the, I think, the presidential palace in Kabul, based out of there, that kind of thing. So I saw photos, but we didn't talk a whole lot about his experience in Afghanistan at that point.

Michael Petrou (04:14):
You mentioned you considered the Regular Forces at one point, but prior to Afghanistan, you had already been in for a few years as a reservist. I mean, had you thought about making the switch at that time or [...]

Benjamin Hertwig (04:26):
No, not previous to the tour. I think I always wanted to do sort of a tour with the Loyal Edmonton Regiment first, kind of as my brother had done, and then go from there.

Michael Petrou (04:39):
Tell us about the preparation process before you left. What does that involve?

Benjamin Hertwig (04:45):
Yeah, prior to deployment, I think it was pre training started as early as late spring, summer of 2005 out in good old Wainwright, Alberta, which I think has a similar reputation in Alberta to what Petawawa has in Ontario. Not necessarily the most desirable of military bases, but it felt like summer camp honestly. A whole bunch of my best friends at the time, all of us in Wainwright [Alberta] training for Afghanistan. And I mean, I think it was, the tour that I was a part of Task Force 106, was the first of the large-scale tours in southern Afghanistan. So, at that point, a lot of the training that would later be developed, the villages and sort of that whole immersive experience had not yet been done, so the training was pretty rudimentary in some ways, I would say, because Canada had not yet—I mean, other than the initial deployment in 2001—had not spent a great deal of time in southern Kandahar and seen the conditions there.

Michael Petrou (06:00):
I want to make sure I have my details right. The first tour is Roto 0 [first rotation during Phase I of Operation ATHENA]. Do I have that—?

Benjamin Hertwig (06:04):
Yes.

Michael Petrou (06:04):
There was someone there like I guess late 2005, beginning of 2006, then you were the second deployment. Do I have that right or [...]?

Benjamin Hertwig (06:11):
Yeah, I think the one before us that was the one that the diplomat Glyn Berry died on. I think that one was mostly a preparation tour, so not so much on the ground combat operations yet as sort of preparing Kandahar like KAF [Kandahar Airfield] and surrounding areas for a larger deployment.

Michael Petrou (06:34):
What was your mindset then during this training period?

Benjamin Hertwig (06:37):
What was my mindset? I was 19 years old, not thinking in a particularly large scale. Not thinking particularly complex thoughts about the war. More so that every day is its own thing. And I'm with my friends, and I like being with my friends, and I like the training, and I like being in the bush. And I'm excited to go to Afghanistan.

Michael Petrou (07:09):
You've written a couple poems about this time I was hoping you could read for us. The first one is, "Weekend Leave Wainwright to Edmonton." Do you mind reading that and telling us a little bit about it?

Benjamin Hertwig (07:22):

I haven't done—prior to Covid I had done many readings—and since Covid, I haven't done nearly as many. So some of these poems are it's almost like returning to them after a long time away, so. "Weekend Leave Wainwright to Edmonton." It's early in the collection, and I mean, this book in some ways follows a fairly typical chronology or trajectory of before, during and after war. And this is very much a before poem. "Weekend Leave Wainwright to Edmonton." [reads from his book] "Skunk, musk and alfalfa drive through teen burgers, the long straight line through fields and barbed wire, fence posts, grain elevators, swimming in clover, asphalt and glass under the city's halogen halo. Home smell up till midnight. Finishing *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* sitting on your bed wondering if you will be afraid when you see blood. And if you die will you be saved. And the girls at school will like you more for having gone to war.|

Michael Petrou (08:54):
So tell me a little bit more about that fear, or wondering if you will be afraid, I suppose, and contemplating your own death.

Benjamin Hertwig (09:02):
Yeah, I mean, I think it was not so much a mortality question at that point. I had not yet seen anyone die in the military or otherwise. Most of the people I was with, myself included, even though we knew death was a reality, it was not something that we knew in a deeper sense. I think we all felt invincible. We all felt that death is something that happens to other people, and it would not happen to us. I think the idea of being afraid was more: would I embarrass my family, my family tradition? Would I embarrass my brother? Would I embarrass my father? Would I do the things that I'd been trained to do, or would I be afraid in that context? So yeah, I think while the fear of death, I think, only set in later after having seen kind of the realities of the war at that point, it was more, I want to go over, and I don't want to embarrass myself

Michael Petrou (10:12):
What about this idea of kind of romantic death of the girls liking you for having died? What was going on there?

Benjamin Hertwig (10:20):
Yeah, I think […] so I had done one year of undergrad at university prior to deploying to Afghanistan, and I was horrible. I had failed a whole bunch of my classes. And yet I remember being in university thinking, I just don't want to have to return back to the city not being a veteran. I really, really want this experience. I really want to know what it's like, what it feels like, and to be able to be proud of that or kind of proud of my experiences as a soldier.

Michael Petrou (10:58):
What did you imagine that would have changed when you did come back as a veteran at that point?

Benjamin Hertwig (11:04):
That perhaps the status of being a veteran would sort of confer something special upon me, that people would like me more or respect me more, or kind of like I say in more crass terms here, that the girls would think I was more kind of desirable for having gone to war, that kind of thing.

Michael Petrou (11:32):
There's a poem about your departure, about many things, but about your departure as well, a "Drunk Driving." Can we read that?

Benjamin Hertwig (11:38):
Yeah, so "Drunk Driving" this is a poem that takes place in the neighbourhood that my wife and I live in again now. So this is a poem set maybe 100 metres away from where we bought our house now. And the context was shortly before deploying to Afghanistan, we had finished the pre-training portion in the Wainwright Wilderness and had returned back to Edmonton and the barracks up by Griesbach [Alberta].

Benjamin Hertwig (12:10):
And I was going to church, and a man from church who knew I was in the military and going to deploy to Afghanistan, volunteered at an inner-city program for kids. And he said, "Oh, well, you should come. You should come just hang out with some of the people." And I remember coming. I came in uniform after a day of training and got there and none of the people, none of the boys, wanted anything to do with me. I think people in uniform, perhaps they'd had bad experiences before.

Benjamin Hertwig (12:47):
So I went back the next week and changed out of my uniform, and over the two or three months before deploying, went there at least once a week and spent time with a group of boys, two in particular, who I got to know quite well in that short time. And then I deployed to Afghanistan, and I remember coming back from Afghanistan and going back to the program and asking about those two boys, the director, if they'd been around and he said "No," that he hadn't seen them since shortly after I left.

Benjamin Hertwig (13:22):
I think this poem, for me, it was sort of a revolving door scenario. What might have happened had I not gone to Afghanistan? Would I still be in contact with those boys who the director later told me at least one of them had joined a gang. Would my life be different? Would their lives be different? Obviously, I don't knows and can't know those things, but that was what I was thinking about when I wrote the poem. So "Drunk Driving."

Benjamin Hertwig (13:57):
[reads from his book] "There was a time you drove home drunk but didn't considers it as such, for you were going overseas in a matter of weeks. "Come to the drop-in centre," the man at church said. "It'd be good for the boys to see a man in uniform." The street kids ran from the uniform until you changed into something else and walked to the rink together. Jeans crinkling in the cold.

Benjamin Hertwig (14:30):
The three of you chose to wear women's skates because you could. The picks at the front made the three of you fall all over the ice. The halogen lights made sure everyone saw the two boys,

Chris and Junior. They thought it was funny as hell. The bruises on your knees didn't matter because you were leaving for Afghanistan in a matter of days, and the boys were used to bruises.

Benjamin Hertwig (15:02):
You woke early. The snow was deep. Your mother made strong tea for the drive to war. The boys didn't want you to go. The night before, they held on to your arms. You felt like a father. You liked them. And skating too. Not the idea of being a father quite yet. You got on the plane. In your memory, it was still dark. In your memory, you didn't fall asleep at all. In your memory, the boys weren't used to being left behind."

Michael Petrou (15:57):
So on that departure, can you kind of take us back to the trip to the airport, the flight over Afghanistan? I'm sure there was a stop along the way. What was going through your head as you're making this trip?

Benjamin Hertwig (16:14):
What was going through my head when I was preparing for Afghan—or the trip over? [pauses to reflect] I'm not sure there were particular thoughts beyond sort of being enmeshed within the culture of the platoon. And the people next to you are people you love and trust and have spent most of the last year with have maybe some of the guys on the tour I'd been on basic training with, had known as long as I had been in the military.

Benjamin Hertwig (16:58):
So uncertainty about what the war itself would be like, what we would be doing. We didn't know those things. What our platoon responsibility would be. I think wanting very much and desiring to be in combat, sort of just hoping that kind of the skills we'd been taught as infantry soldiers would actually be used, worried that we'd go over and nothing would happen. So very much, I think, wanting to be in the middle of things, not necessarily knowing what that fully entailed, so.

Michael Petrou (17:32):
Well, what did it end up entail? Tell me a little bit about your duties and your deployment.

Benjamin Hertwig (17:36):
Initially, for the first little while, we were tasked with gate guard, which we were all really bummed out about because what's the point in training for all of this, flying over to Afghanistan and then being stuck on the gate with sort of our reasoning. And then we were stuck out at the ammo dump, guarding the ammo dump for a while. And then only it was maybe a month into the tour where our responsibility became convoy security and convoy escorts. And within that, were all manner of activities.

Benjamin Hertwig (18:11):
So you might be attached to different groups sort of going to the various forward operating bases, providing security for the vehicles that were providing the bases with rations, medical supplies, driving people out, driving reporters out or dignitaries out, that kind of thing. And then, you might get sent out, as I was, to work with the Americans for a while, or to provide security for a vehicle that was providing American soldiers with rations. Or you might go out on a

convoy to a FOB [Forward Operating Base] and get stuck there for two weeks sort of thing as I was at fob, FOB Wilson in Helmand Province [Afghanistan]. I went out there not knowing how long the convoy would be, and I think we ended up spending ten days or two weeks out there kind of thing.

Michael Petrou (19:03):
There's a couple poems you write about your time during your deployment. I chose "Care Package Kandahar," but are there favourite ones that you have about your actual deployment that you'd like to read as well?

Benjamin Hertwig (19:16):
Yeah, I think one poem that I do read quite often when I have, which I think is, one I return to, is called "Fruit on a Wooden Table." And I'd happily read both for you.

Michael Petrou (19:33):
Yeah, that'd be great.

Benjamin Hertwig (19:34):
Yeah, so the context of "Fruit on a Wooden Table." I was attached to a company of American soldiers from the 10th Mountain Division. And I was the security for the HL, the HL, the military semi truck sort of thing that was providing the American soldiers with rations for however long they were out. The driver drove the HL and I sat next to him and provided security.

Benjamin Hertwig (20:05):
For about ten days, two weeks, we followed them wherever they went, all over Kandahar Province, Helmand Province as well. And there were a number of sort of firefights or engagements that they were a part of initially. And I remember one and I believe it was out in Helmand and, uh, part of the convoy was up sort of receiving and returning fire from a compound mud wall and then off to the side of the compound was sort of a cluster of mud huts, and things were getting increasingly sort of tense. And I was told to go along with another, an American soldier, go to that cluster of mud huts and ensure that there are no insurgents there, no sort of military age fighting males there.

Benjamin Hertwig (20:55):
So I remember running down this other soldier, I remember kicking open the first door, and it was dark inside and something kind of fluttered and hit me in the head, and I flailed very kind of dramatically in the dark. And it was a chicken. I'd been hit in the head by a chicken, chicken coop. And then I kicked open a second door, next to it, and maybe ten, 15 feet in front of me stood an Afghan woman with her face uncovered. And up until that point of the tour, I had not seen many or any Afghan female adults with their face uncovered, because in Kandahar most of the women wore burqas.

Benjamin Hertwig (21:44):
But because I'd kicked open the door to her home and she was not expecting anyone or anticipating anyone, her face was uncovered. And I remember standing there holding my rifle,

feeling somewhat uncomfortable and she did not call out. She did not cry out. She just stood there making eye contact with me and refusing to break eye contact. And I remember lowering my rifle and backing out and going back towards the main firefight. But the image of that woman has remained with me, her sort of bravery in that moment, her refusal to break eye contact. And I remember the feeling of being in her room was, I would say, one of shame.

Benjamin Hertwig (22:39):
What am I doing in here? I do not belong in her living room. I do not belong here. And for me writing, I think the things we write about are the things we're working through, often enough. And for me, the image of that woman is something I've returned to on a few occasions. And I've been asked by people, "Well, what would you say to her if you had a chance?" And, I mean, I will never have a chance. I will never likely be back in Afghanistan. I don't know if this little, compound in the middle of the Helmand desert even has a name. If it's on any map, I will never have a chance to say anything to this woman.

Benjamin Hertwig (23:23):
I guess the poem is a form of an apology. I'm sorry for kicking open the door to your home. I'm sorry that you had to experience that. "Fruit on a Wooden Table." [reads from his book] "In the broken calm of four walls and floor of earth. You have seen visions and bodies inflame. The body of Christ shed for you do not belong. Gunfire and bomb song. You do not belong. Her eyes are cold. A face of wind. The place you stand is holy ground. Take off your boots, point your rifle towards the floor and leave the way you came. Through the kicked in wooden door. Pass the table with a bowl of fruit."

Michael Petrou (24:23):
The "you who does not belong." This is you.

Benjamin Hertwig (24:26):
[nods]

Michael Petrou (24:27):
You said earlier in our conversation that […] you talked early on about things that changed in Afghanistan. You had these ideas before you went and then much changed once you got there. Was this one of those things, this sense of whether you should have been there at all?

Benjamin Hertwig (25:20):
Yeah, I think, I mean very much sort of an embryo at that point because there were lots of people who did want us there. The Afghan interpreters and other locals would say, "Oh, we're so happy that you're here." But then you would go to the more remote areas of Afghanistan, southern Afghanistan, and drive by the poppy fields, for instance. And if someone was working in the poppy fields and they looked up and saw you, they made it very clear by the expression on their faces that they were not happy to see you. And the reality of being outside the wire and sort of outside some of the military infrastructure that had been built up was seeing people who did not want you to be there and were not happy to see you.

Benjamin Hertwig (26:12):

And I think that was—and while I think we had been told, of course, that there would be people who would not want us there—the reality of that and seeing ranging from children to elderly folks, that they were not thrilled to be seeing coalition soldiers or that they did not trust coalition soldiers or know what to make of Canadian and American military convoys driving past their small sort of mud huts in these up armoured military vehicles. It was, I would say not disillusioning, but definitely eye opening.

Michael Petrou (26:58):
What else changed for you over the course of your tour?

Benjamin Hertwig (27:03):
Yeah, I think. [pauses to reflect] I mean, I think at a very basic human level, seeing people die changes you, whether that's Afghan civilians or Canadian soldiers. That being in the presence of death makes you re-evaluate your own life and your role within it. And I think the things that I saw, some of the effect it had on people close to me made me just wonder whether this is what I wanted to be a part of. Whether I had actually ever really thought through what the mission actually was, what my role within it was, and whether we were doing anything that would actually bring about change. And I think after the tour, I no longer had good answers to those questions. Before I had sort of some of the wrote or prepared answers, while I was going over. But after I was, I just don't know. I don't know what we are doing or whether it will change anything.

Michael Petrou (28:27):
Well, you had said earlier that this is something that you wanted to do. You had said earlier on that this was something that you wanted to do for the rest of your life, and then that changed as a result of Afghanistan. Explain that shift for me.

Benjamin Hertwig (28:44):
Yeah, I think Afghanistan was hard. Hard on me and hard on a lot of people. And I think I had thought going to Afghanistan that the people I was with would be my friends and brothers for the rest of my life. And then the tour in Afghanistan, lots of infighting within the platoon, lots of unhealthy sort of dynamics within the platoon. And then that compounded with the death of people within the platoon, both during the war and after. […] I think the reality of military life was not what I had had expected it to be, that, I just wanted to do something different. I no longer wanted to be a part of that at that time.

Michael Petrou (29:51):
Can we read "Care Package Kandahar"?

Benjamin Hertwig (29:53):
Yes, certainly. [flips through book] I know it's in here somewhere. "Care Package Kandahar", [page] 38. So we would often receive care packages in Kandahar and that was one of the things I generally looked forward to the most. And my parents, and my mother in particular, was always very good at sending care packages along. And you'd get out, you'd be outside the wire maybe three or four days or a week, and you'd come back and there might be a care package waiting on your bed. And that was definitely one of the highlights.

Benjamin Hertwig (30:42):
And then the care packages, though, I think, and the things within them, made me think of my life at home and where I'd previously been. And I was already changing and had seen and experienced things that were changing me and made me wonder how I would fit in when I returned. The things that I had previously been taught. Being from a military family, whether, that sense of belonging was already in the process of being altered or changed. I think that's one of the things this poem is about.

Benjamin Hertwig (31:21):
"Care Package Kandahar." [reads from his book] "The package is waiting on your bed, nested in mottled green. Of sleeping bag and ranger blanket. Box the colour of sand. Packing tape. Familiar ligature of your father's Sharpie scrawl. Flick the knife you bought at the PX [post exchange]. Operation Enduring Freedom flashes across the blade, then sinks into cardboard flesh. A set of coloured pens. A handwritten card with a Psalm. Gummy Coke bottles. Chocolate cookies, a photograph eight by ten. Smooth. Your childhood church. Smell of hot wax and communion wine. Congregation splayed under altar next to the cross. A reproduction of William Holman Hunt's "Light of the World." The children hold a homemade banner. "God bless you, Benjamin," they say. See the sun in their hair. Touch the stone of their blessing. Place the photo face down, then bury it back in the box."

Michael Petrou (32:51):
How did it feel to get these misses from home, from this other world at that time?

Benjamin Hertwig (32:56):
Yeah, I think it made me feel guilty in some ways. I think the image of children that I had watched grow up, who were happy for me and eager to send me sort of their greeting or blessing, being in Afghanistan. And at that point, had already seen Afghan children die or Afghan children in a variety of, sort of life altering situations for them. And seeing those children alongside them made me sort of see some of the disparity between the way I had been raised and the way these Afghan children were experiencing reality. And it, I think, the fact they were trying to offer me something encouragement for being in Afghanistan, and at that point, it made me feel worse because I wasn't sure what we were actually doing or whether we were actually supporting people, or.

Benjamin Hertwig (34:12):
So seeing those children in that context just made—I did not want to see them. I did not put up the picture on my wall. I kind of hid it away. And I think a part of that, too, is you're still in a war zone. And while thoughts of home, I think, provide comfort for some people, they also feel like a very different world. And after having seen people die, am I going to return to this world? Am I going to be different? Are they going to recognize me? Can I be proud of the things I have done? And I didn't know those things anymore.

Michael Petrou (34:49):
Is that why you buried the photograph face down?

Benjamin Hertwig (34:52):
Yeah, I think so.
Michael Petrou (34:54):
Were you writing poetry already at this time while you were over there?

Benjamin Hertwig (34:58):
No, not at all. I did not write. I did not keep a journal. I mean, I have one or two emails that I sent at that time, but I was not someone who had any facility with words, I would say. I mean, I read a little bit, I remember reading in Afghanistan. But I thought writing was something other people do. That's not something I'm interested in or thought that I would do in the future. I did not think, oh, this is going to be a poem one day. Not have any thoughts like that at all. It was […] writing only started, later, primarily, I would say, as a way to process what I had seen.

Michael Petrou (35:46):
What were you reading? You mentioned reading a little bit while you were there. Were you reading things that resonated with you particularly? Yeah.

Benjamin Hertwig (35:52):
I remember a few of the things I read. And I still have a copy of this book. An English prof had told me to read T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land and Other Poems*. And I remember reading it and finding the word somewhat magical and not having a fucking clue what was being said within the poem, so I didn't understand any of it. I just read it because he told me to because he said, t was worth reading.

Benjamin Hertwig (36:23):
And another book I remember reading was, and this one probably took me the majority of the tour, two or three months, Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*, which I started disliking, I think, within about 50 pages, but I was stubborn and said, "Well, I'm not going to let Ayn Rand defeat me, and I'm going to finish this book." So I finished it and it is two months of reading I will never get back, but […].

Michael Petrou (36:57):
Tell me about coming home.

Benjamin Hertwig (37:02):
Yeah. Coming home from Afghanistan. So, came back in, I believe it was late August of 2006. Someone from my platoon had had just died in a vehicle accident. A number of other people were injured. A week or two previous to that had been a part of a rather large suicide bombing where two Canadian soldiers died and numerous Afghan civilians were killed as well. And I was completely overwhelmed. I did not have the distance or emotional language yet to put into words what I had seen other than this is overwhelming.

Benjamin Hertwig (37:51):
And because I was a reservist and things were, I think, very unstructured at that time, I remember coming back and doing a few sort of release activities. And then you've been attached to this group of people for a year, perhaps longer. Some people have died within the platoon, and then

suddenly you're on your own and there's no formal structure. You're not waking up with this group of men around you. And you are in some ways and quite radically are on your own. And at that point, I already felt like I wanted to leave the military. I was trying to push everything aside, including some of the people who I had been very close friends with. Just I didn't want anything to do with it.

Benjamin Hertwig (38:42):
And I remember getting into arguments with my family, my brother, my dad, who wanted me to reconsider and stay in the military. And I was I stayed in for a year to kind of respect my dad in the Reserves, but I didn't show up for any of the training or maybe just a few kind of Wednesday evenings at the at the drill hall kind of thing. But I didn't want to be a part of it anymore. But at the same time, the things I had seen were very much a part of me, though I had not even begun sort of to unpack or process them.

Michael Petrou (39:20):
Was there anyone that you could talk to, or you did talk to?

Benjamin Hertwig (39:23):
Yeah, I can't remember if we spoke about this previously, but there was one incident that I remember, that left a very, kind of deep mark on me and it was with my grandfather. This would have been weeks after, weeks or months after returning from Afghanistan, feeling very overwhelmed, not necessarily wanting to be a part of large gatherings or family gatherings, but we were having a celebration, I believe it was for my dad or my dad's birthday, something like that.

Benjamin Hertwig (40:05):
And someone, one of my aunts or uncles mentioned someone from my platoon who had died. And I remember kind of choking up and starting to cry and not being able to stop and kind of trying to get away from people and just still not being able to stop the tears. And it was a very small house and kind of feeling claustrophobic and nowhere to escape to within it. And my grandfather stopped me in the [pauses] hallway. And he was a bit of a [...] he was the life of the party. He was always chatting and joking, and he was very serious, which was uncharacteristic for him, and he just kind of touched me on the shoulder and said, "I know, I understand." [pauses]

Benjamin Hertwig (41:24):
And I think at that point […] I wanted so deeply, I think, to be understood or to be able to share. And I did not yet understand myself. But that very brief moment of recognition, not asking me more questions, not asking me to explain myself, not [...]. Just "I understand." I think, that meant more to me at the age of 20 than I than I knew at the time. Yeah.

Michael Petrou (42:23):
Why did your grandfather understand?

Benjamin Hertwig (42:25):

He was a veteran of the Second World War. I mean, he was in the Austrian military and had lived through the realities and horrors of conflict himself and had seen many of his own sort of friends or comrades of his age group die. He didn't really talk about it to us as children. Although in hindsight could see the impact it had on him as a young man, and then on the way he raised his family and his anger issues, his inability to express love. All of these things which I think I only emotionally understood years later, maybe even after he had passed away. But it was one older soldier seeing a younger soldier who I think felt kind of overwhelmed and helpless and kind of reached out.

Michael Petrou (44:01):
Did you recognize that connection that you shared with him at the time?

Benjamin Hertwig (44:07):
I would say that it felt [pause] it felt good. And as if I was being seen. But I was 20 years old, and I think so wrapped up in my own story and my own kind of grief and still, so I would say, elevated or kind of physically in my body in some way, still kind of feeling like I was in Afghanistan. I didn't, I think, kind of recognize fully until years later how much that moment meant to me.

Michael Petrou (45:00):
Well, there is a poem you write about your grandfather. I was hoping you could read "The Liturgical Leap into Monday."

Benjamin Hertwig (45:07):
Yeah.

Michael Petrou (45:08):
"Or Some of the Things You Wish You Told Your Grandfather."

Benjamin Hertwig (45:23):
"The Liturgical Leap into Monday Or Some of the Things You Wish You Told Your Grandfather." [reads from his book] "One Sunday after your or my war, you leapt across the grave, clear across black robes, flapping like a bird. This isn't a metaphor for resurrection. The grave was real with a body inside. You were presiding the liturgy. The grave was collapsing. You didn't wish to fall in. You leapt. These are stories I have never seen you run or leap. You were old before I was born. A few weeks after that service, a second widow stops to ask a question. "Pastor," she asks, "When you bury my husband, would you leap across his grave too?" You did not laugh, though maybe you wanted to. You did not tell her that leaping is not part of the liturgy for the dead. [flips page]

Benjamin Hertwig (46:45):
When I was 12, we came upon your car in the ditch. The baby blue sedan flipped like a beetle on its back. Tires spinning, you crawling out the window with the finger of blood on your forehead, and a face flushed and pale as marbled beef. You lived, though you prophesied death every Sunday. First from the pulpit, then standing on the porch, waving us into the gloom. "This is the

last you'll see of me alive." A mantra as familiar as the palette bloom of prairie fire in late summer. And the tiger lilies you told us not to pick because they only grow once.

Benjamin Hertwig (47:37):
Week after week, I sat in the back seat and your son, my father, honked the horn and farewell, backed out onto the highway where logging trucks kicked up dust and gravel. Until 15 years later, the road was paved, and you were in the hospital. I think you were afraid. [flips page] Omma's 86th Nativity. You are supine, surrounded by family, the panoply of hospitals, the machinery of grief. She is absent. She recalls little now. Not how you slept in separate bedrooms or your voice like smooth liquor and afternoon café. Hardy as *nusskuchen* [German hazelnut cake]. How you spoke often but mumbled and muttered more than you spoke.

Benjamin Hertwig (48:41):
With your grandchildren. You are gentle, not always with your children. *Schlaf schön, träume gute und Gott schütze dich*. Sleep well, dream deep and God bless you. You make the sign of the cross on my forehead. Your touch is light like a child's. On Sunday, they take you off life support, leaving only the leap. The cadence of your speechless breath." [closes book]

Michael Petrou (49:27):
Thinking about your grandfather makes me wonder about what are the universal, or if there are universal experiences, that veterans share irregardless of where and when they served. What do you think?

Benjamin Hertwig (49:47):
I certainly think there are similarities, and I think very deep and profound differences. I mean, I think the things that my grandfather saw were—I mean, it's not a competition—but I think he saw things that were in a prolonged way far more brutal and gruesome and life altering than things I had seen. I mean, he was wounded himself in a severe way. And yet, I think that feeling of being overwhelmed, the feeling of seeing violence, perhaps for the first time in a military context, I think those things are universal. And I think he, as an adult, saw the pain that perhaps he had himself experienced or felt as a young man.

Benjamin Hertwig (50:44):
But for cultural reasons or for other reasons, I think people of his generation and men were not taught that sharing your emotions or sharing your pain was a good or healthy thing to do.I think he bottled it up and it came out in in other ways. It came out in perhaps drinking too much or in anger or in feelings that he did not understand. And I think for me, while I grew up in maybe a culture where it was still sort of suck it up, move on, keep going, I think I did eventually find language or was taught language to process some of those heavy things or those difficult emotions. I honestly wish he had had that opportunity to because I think his life would have been very different and he would have had a lot more joy, I think, had he been able to express the things he struggled with after the war.

Michael Petrou (52:02):
What was the language that you acquired and how did you acquire it?

Benjamin Hertwig (52:09):
[pauses to ponder] I mean, I think one of one of the primary things was sort of the language of empathy. Empathy for myself, empathy for other people. That feeling angry or feeling confused or feeling hopeless, that it was OK to feel those things and that by acknowledging those feelings, by expressing those feelings, they lose some of their power to control you, and that those feelings don't necessarily have to dictate how you live your life.

Michael Petrou (52:51):
What role did writing have in that process for you?

Benjamin Hertwig (52:54):
I think writing for me was huge because for me, initially, I didn't trust these stories with other people. It wouldn't be something that I would willingly broadcast or share. And, I think writing initially was very much a private thing. It was something that I just, I was going through a very difficult time. It would have been right after my grandfather passed away. I had gotten married a year or two after returning from Afghanistan very young. My marriage had just ended as well and I think those two things sort of came crashing down on me alongside all of the things from Afghanistan that I had pushed aside.

Benjamin Hertwig (53:48):
And suddenly I needed to process, and I needed to process the death of my marriage, the death of my grandfather, and the death of who I was before Afghanistan, which I had not yet done. I think it was a time when writing alone after work by myself, not with the intention of sharing with anyone, but just because it felt good in a way. It was like a glass of water. It was something my body craved. It was a release that I did not have before or know how powerful it would be for me. And I think expressing some of those things, expressing, writing about the suicide bombing or writing about the nightmares after the suicide bombing, it took some of the power of those events, and kind of gave me back some control, I think, within, within my own life.

Michael Petrou (55:02):
What do you mean by the death of the person you were before Afghanistan?

Benjamin Hertwig (55:05):
Yeah, I think the death of the 16, 17, 18, 19, 20-year-old boy who was proud of being from a military family, proud to identify as a soldier, who had a very secure sort of place in life. Thought that he understood his role within the world, knew what he wanted to do, and all of those things being taken away after Afghanistan. The theological or religious or comforting mythologies, perhaps, that I had relied upon earlier in my life they did not provide comfort anymore. They did not answer the questions that I had at that point. It was very much, I think, a process of building back a new life from the ground up, kind of recognizing that, well, I might share similarities with that person or share some of the same experiences, but I am not the same person. I am not the person who I was before leaving for Afghanistan.

Michael Petrou (56:24):
You mention religion, or at least church going, does permeate a lot of your poems. Are you still religious? What role does that play in your reckoning with some of these questions today?

Benjamin Hertwig (56:45):
Yeah, I would say that I am still religiously inclined, although perhaps now I'm sooner to acknowledge that I don't have the answers to all of the questions, whereas previously I think I would have had a list of answers to the questions, whereas now I'm not sure. The world is a magical and mysterious and hard place to be. And this is something that a structure that provides meaning for me, but it does not have all the answers. It does not take away all of the pain. It does not solve all of the world's problems, whereas I think younger Benjamin would have said, "These are the things that will fix the world. These are the things that will make things better."

Michael Petrou (57:43):
Your grandfather was a minister or a preacher of some sort? What church?

Benjamin Hertwig (57:49):
He was Lutheran, a Lutheran church. In Austria, after the war, I think he went to seminary. He told me it was a part of, not a promise, but when one of his fellow soldiers had died in war and he was sort of, I think, the last person to see this person before they passed away and was able, I think, to provide something for that person, some comfort. I think he wanted to do more of that. And I think he thought for him being a pastor would give him that opportunity.

Michael Petrou (58:30):
There's another poem that speaks a little bit to, I think, some of these perhaps shared experiences among soldiers, "Somewhere in Flanders/Afghanistan."

Benjamin Hertwig (58:51):
"Somewhere in Flanders, Afghanistan." So, obviously, a reference to arguably the most famous poem in Canadian history, not just the most famous war poem, John McCrae's "In Flanders Fields." And this would have been a poem that I had heard every year growing up in school. I remember reciting it at either the Grade ten or Grade 11 Remembrance Day or Remembrance Day ceremony at my school in uniform.

Benjamin Hertwig (59:33):
And I remember hearing the poem read after I returned from Afghanistan by a colonel in my regiment. And I remember hearing it after Afghanistan and feeling angry and angry at John McCrae in some ways. Obviously, John McCrae did end up dying in the war, after he had written this poem. But I wanted to ask John McCrae how he could speak in the voice of the dead. How do you know what the dead would say? I mean, you were very much alive when you wrote this poem, so how can you say we are the dead? These are the things that we wish to pass on to those who are living. And I carried that anger for a few years and stopped going to Remembrance Day ceremonies and eventually I thought, I'm going to write about this, and these are some of the questions I wish that I could have asked John McCrae.

Benjamin Hertwig (1:00:41):
I often think of Wilfred Owen and John McCrae, both soldiers, certainly not naive. Both soldiers experienced the trauma of war, the horror of war, the reality of trench warfare, and gas attacks. And yet John McCrae wrote a poem in some ways that I think feels quite removed from the horrors of war, whereas someone like Wilfred Owen and "Dulce et Decorum Est" wrote a poem

that I think is all about the brutality of war. And I wanted to ask, how could two men who had experienced very similar things write such dissimilar poems? So this poem is about some of the questions I had for John McCrae in particular.

Benjamin Hertwig (1:01:30):
[reads from his book "Somewhere in Flanders, Afghanistan. In Flanders Field, some shit went down. Flowers, crosses, the dead, etc. etc. but the dead do not speak, John. Sometimes they leave letters. Sometimes they leave a room full of porn and candy wrappers that someone else has to clean. *Carthago delenda est.* Carthage must be destroyed. So on, so forth. You served our country, whatever that means. But I'm tired of hearing you go on about birds and sunsets and torches and God knows what else. I'd rather meet your hundred-year-old ghost on Remembrance Day, when everyone's drinking to forget the shit we volunteered to do in a country that wasn't our own. I'll buy you a beer, though, I don't really drink much since my wife left. I don't sleep much either. Nobody sleeps well after war."

Michael Petrou (1:02:52):
Did you ever start sleeping again?

Benjamin Hertwig (1:02:58):
Yes, I would say that the nightmares I had after Afghanistan, which dominated my sleeping life, for a number of years. That I don't have them as often, that they don't hold the same power or terror for me. I would say the energy of war, the sort of frantic, elevated physicality of it has never fully left, so I think […]. Yes, I sleep better, but I'm still the product of my experiences and sort of that the reality of war, I think, will always be a part of my waking and sleeping life in some ways.

Michael Petrou (1:04:04):
Did you start going to Remembrance Day again?

Benjamin Hertwig (1:04:09):
Have I started going to Remembrance Day ceremonies ever again? I have been asked to read at a few school Remembrance Day ceremonies, to read from this book of poems, and I feel very conflicted about it. I feel kind of honoured still, that people would ask me to talk about my experiences and sort of read things I wrote about my experiences. And at the same time, Remembrance Say sometimes still makes me angry.

Benjamin Hertwig (1:04:47)
It still makes me [...] I remember I went to one school in the Vancouver area and the students, maybe ten, 11-year-old, and it was, I think, a boys' school, primarily. They were goofing around, fooling around, not unlike a platoon of young soldiers. And the teacher was getting very angry at the boys, and they were playing with the candles, and he said, "Stop playing with those candles. Those candles are each a dead soldier." And I thought, I mean, no they're not. Those are candles, and these are young boys, and we were young boys. And I feel more sympathy for the young boys playing around, fucking around, than I do with the teacher who's trying to […] tell the boys something about warfare and remembrance, which I'm not sure I fully believe. Yeah.

Benjamin Hertwig (1:05:56):
But to answer your question, I generally don't go to cenotaphs. I don't do much by way of those things. But I will seek out pockets of calm or quiet or ways to remember people in my life who've been impacted by war. I still will think and pray about men from my platoon who died during and after the war. Remember them in my own way. And yeah, if I'm asked to read or talk about my experiences, I generally am happy to do that now too.

Michael Petrou (1:06:41):
What are the things you're not sure you believe anymore? What are you conflicted about?

Benjamin Hertwig (1:06:46):
Yeah, I think for me Remembrance, I mean, and I think maybe it's to my own personal relationship with Remembrance Day as a young soldier, which was very much about getting drunk. Even before I had experienced, any combat or any violence and just sort of the feeling that you are being asked to feel a certain way or remember in a certain way, even if your feelings on a particular mission have changed or if you feel like even as the war in Afghanistan has now come full circle and Canadians have withdrawn, tens of thousands of lives, both Canadian and Afghan, have been lost. And Afghanistan is once again, under the control of the Taliban. And wondering what function does remembrance play in what happened in Afghanistan? Are there healthy ways of remembering? Are there unhealthy ways of remembering? Are there ways of remembering that lead to further conflict? Are there ways of remembering that lead us away from conflict as a nation? When I think of Remembrance Day, sometimes it just feels sort of like a rote performance, students reciting "In Flanders Fields," even though they don't necessarily know what it means, or why they're being asked to do this.

Michael Petrou (1:08:27):
Can you tell me about and read "Home Again"?

Benjamin Hertwig (1:08:48):
[flipping through his book] "Home Again," a poem shortly upon, shortly after redeployment back to Edmonton. You are again in a familiar environment. You are seeing new people. You are a young man. You are interested in a relationship. And yet you are not the person you were before. And even if you're trying to push aside the things you have seen or the experiences you had in Afghanistan, those things are a part of you, the altered you, the new you. And try as you might, you cannot push those things aside completely. And I think that's what this poem is about. Being in a familiar context, but feeling very much like a different and very insecure person.

Benjamin Hertwig (1:09:55):
[reads from his book] "Home Again." Marry the first person who asks you not to go. Fold in the dead with flour and yeast. Watch the dough rise. Wash your hands. Wonder where the rifle's weight has gone." [closes book]

Michael Petrou (1:10:28):
Tell me about the rifle's weight.

Benjamin Hertwig (1:10:32):
Yeah, so I still sometimes—I wouldn't say nightmare so much now—but I still sometimes have dreams where in my dream I could be in a variety of different contexts. I could be back in Afghanistan. I could be in the training area in Wainwright. I could be on a parachuting course in Trenton [Ontario], any of a number of different contexts. And I wake knowing that I am missing something, that I'm looking for, something that I cannot find where it is. And that thing, that object often enough is my rifle, which, as an infantry soldier, you are trained to believe is, not only your personal protection, it is what protects you and the people around you.

Benjamin Hertwig (1:11:32):
And so you are responsible at all times to know where it is that it is in working order. And you are tethered to this thing, and you have it. You carry it everywhere with you, when you're in Afghanistan, and the feeling of suddenly coming back to civilian life and not holding something in your hands having empty hands, it feels wrong. It feels like you are doing something that is in some fundamental way, dangerous and immoral, almost. And you keep looking for something to take the place of that feeling of holding this object which has become a part of you in some ways. And yet it is gone. And I did not want to own a rifle after Afghanistan. I did not want anything like that. And yet, that feeling of empty handedness, sort of remained.

Michael Petrou (1:12:33):
What is it about the rifle that you miss? Tell me more about that.

Benjamin Hertwig (1:12:49):
I would say in some ways the rifle was, or can be a simplified projection of confidence in an ideal. I know what this weapon is capable of. I know how to use it. I know where I'm supposed to point it. All of these things suggest that I have a mission, and that I know what the mission is, and that I am capable of fulfilling the goals and objectives of that mission. And so it's a contained worldview that made sense to me. And I think the absence of that rifle forced me to encounter and sort of deal with a new reality that I no longer knew what the mission was, that I no longer knew how to support the mission, that I no longer even knew what I wanted in life, necessarily.

Michael Petrou (1:14:01):
What do you replace it with?

Benjamin Hertwig (1:14:04):
I mean, I think for me, I was always looking for something for my hands to do that was productive, that would bring life rather than take life. And I think for me, I replaced the rifle with the pen in some ways. I replaced the rifle with the paintbrush. I replaced the rifle with things that helped me make sense of the world that I was living in that was no longer sort of a militarized world. And at some times I still yearn for that feeling of confidence that sort of the rifle brought with it. The feeling that you know and understand this world very well. And I don't know that anything has ever fully replaced that feeling much in the same way that, try as I might, I will never be the person who I was before Afghanistan. That that that person is gone.

Michael Petrou (1:15:21):

Can we read “Iconoclast”?

Benjamin Hertwig (1:15:23):
Mm-hm. [flips through book] Page 40. “Iconoclast. The war is over, and we are still here. If the good angel had told Faustus to go fuck himself, the metaphysical baggage of war and peace, heaven and hell would have spilled out on the dark floor of the study, like a bowl of peanut shells. But the angel spoke of love, and the pitchforked devils dragged him down. The war is over, and we are still here.”

Michael Petrou (1:16:50):
Tell me about this poem.

Benjamin Hertwig (1:16:56):
When I look back at this poem, this is, I think, not quite a decade after I wrote it. When I look at and read this poem now, I see someone who is reckoning with and struggling with guilt. The refrain that bookends the poem. “The war is over, and we are still here.” That would have been shortly after I found out about the suicide of a man from my platoon who I was with in Afghanistan.

Benjamin Hertwig (1:17:36):
The feeling of guilt over the people who did not come back from Afghanistan. The people who took their lives after Afghanistan. We, I, am still present. I am still here. And I don’t necessarily know what to do with that. And I think some of the tension in the poem comes between taking yourself too seriously or not taking yourself seriously enough at all. And I think one of the things I’m searching for in this poem, I think, is vulnerability. What does good and healthy vulnerability look like?

Michael Petrou (1:18:21):
How did you or how do you deal with that guilt?

Benjamin Hertwig (1:18:25):
Yeah, for me, a big part of that has been counseling, sort of processing the feeling of responsibility over the death of individuals, thinking what might I have done differently and just radical acceptance. Recognizing kind of my shortcomings as a 19 or 20-year-old. Thinking of ways I might have been there for someone and at the same time forgiving myself for withdrawing from people or from not being present because I did not have the capacity to be and not thinking of myself as someone who has all of the answers or can solve or fix the pain that other people are experiencing, but that in being vulnerable and sort of naming my own pain, that is something that perhaps offers hope to other people who have felt similarly.

Michael Petrou (1:19:28):
Are you still in counseling now?

Benjamin Hertwig (1:19:30):
Yeah, not as regularly as I once was, but it’s something that I still do. And that has been very helpful for me and that I’m very grateful for because I think being in counseling has very much

helped me feel that I'm not alone, that the things that I'm ashamed of, the things that I am embarrassed of, the things that I feel like no one will understand. When you have a good counselor and someone who's worked with other veterans, they can say without you feeling like they're shoveling you sort of a load of horseshit, that there are other people who have felt this way, or that those things you're ashamed of or embarrassed of other people have felt those things too and you're not alone in those feelings.

Benjamin Hertwig (1:20:23):
And it takes some of the stigma away, some of the guilt. And I think and I very much wish that for people like the man from my platoon who ended up taking his life, that he had received the help he needed when he needed it. […] And for my grandfather as well, thinking what his life might have looked like had he had the benefit of counseling or kind of people he could trust in that way to share some of his own feelings of shame or inadequacy or regret.

Michael Petrou (1:21:05):
You've taught war poetry and war literature.

Benjamin Hertwig (1:21:09):
Mm-hm. [nods]

Michael Petrou (1:21:10):
To whom? And tell me about that, please.

Benjamin Hertwig (1:21:11):
Yeah, so I've taught war poetry and war writing on a number of different occasions. Two of the more memorable ones, I would say, when I was working on my PhD [Doctor of Philosophy] at the University of British Columbia, I was approached about teaching a pilot project through the Faculty of Education, for Canadian military veterans. And the course that I developed and taught was called "An Introduction to Writing for Veterans." And at that point, I had a fair bit of teaching experience already, but I had never taught exclusively a group of military veterans, many of whom were in Afghanistan, many of whom were processing some of the same things that I had been struggling with.

Benjamin Hertwig (1:22:07):
So teaching that course was both, I would say, one of the great privileges of my life and also it was a hardship. It was a few, maybe half a year before I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and many of the physical issues, that I would later understand to be MS [multiple sclerosis] related I was having in that context. And also, for many of these soldiers, most of whom had not been on a campus, university campus ever, perhaps. The course was both, I think, a healing and a heavy thing for them, because part of the course involved a life writing component. Maybe for the first time, some of the individuals in the room had put down some of the heaviest experiences of their life, and I think I was still very much processing my own things, struggling with my own Afghanistan related trauma. And yet I was being sort of asked to teach and to help these individuals work through their own.

Benjamin Hertwig (1:23:26):

And it was a very, very hard thing. You are absorbing again, some of the raw grief and trauma that you thought you had dealt with on your own. And it brings up, again, your own experiences or things that perhaps you're still struggling with. And I remember one class and—and I don't think the students even knew anything was wrong—but it was a very sort of lively and heated discussion, and it brought me back to a difficult place. And I started having a panic attack in the classroom, and I excused myself to go to the bathroom and I remember sitting in the bathroom for five minutes thinking, I cannot go back to that classroom. I just can't do it. I cannot stand in front of these soldiers and pretend like I have the answers or that I can […].

Benjamin Hertwig (1:24:22):
But I did return to the classroom and the course ended up being a very good one, I think. And I think a lot of, or a number of people in that course, expressed that it had helped them start to engage with their process, some of their own traumas. And regardless of where the veterans were at political affiliation, what, whether they felt that the mission was a just one or was ultimately flawed, I think I was very proud to be in that classroom offering some of the resources and support that I very much needed or would have benefited from when I got back from Afghanistan but did not have.

Michael Petrou (1:25:12):
Do you remember what it was that made you want to or need to leave?

Benjamin Hertwig (1:25:18):
What was it? I don't know that it was a particular thing that had been said, but sort of the raw energy of grief and some of the soldiers expressing how disappointed they felt or how let down they felt by either the people of Canada or the government of Canada, or that they felt forgotten. This would have been 2017, 2018, before the war in Afghanistan had officially concluded, but that they felt that people in Canada did not necessarily even know or remember the war in Afghanistan, and that they felt they felt a futility now that they did not know how to fix. And I think because some of those things were very much related to my own feelings of confusion about the war, that it was just too much for me in that moment and that I had to leave and that I had to sort of try and gather, gather my thoughts and myself again.

Michael Petrou (1:26:42):
On balance, when you look back at that experience now, I understand you talked about the having to confront some of this raw grief. Were there positive things that you got out of that experience as well that went along with the more difficult parts?

Benjamin Hertwig (1:27:00):
Yeah, I think the feeling of watching individuals gain some power over their own personal narratives again, and to see some of the healing power that can come from telling your own stories and feeling like your stories are heard, or that someone else respects or values your stories, even if that is not never published or never shared beyond the confines of the classroom. Having some of those individuals stand up in front of the room and read about the things that they were struggling with, the things that they had seen, that they did not know how to deal with.

Benjamin Hertwig (1:27:50):

I think that was very empowering and made me feel like that I was doing something that I could be proud of and that, again, I didn't have to understand the war in Afghanistan fully. I didn't have to understand the political dimension of the mission. I didn't have to fully know whether I thought the whole mission was worthless or worthwhile. All I had to do in that moment was be present to the people who were trying to tell their stories, and I didn't have to judge the content. I didn't have to tell them what to believe. I just had to be there, and I just had to listen. And that was a gift for them. And that was a gift for me.

Michael Petrou (1:28:37):
Can we read "Apple Picking After Afghanistan"?

Benjamin Hertwig (1:28:57):
[flips through book] "Apple Picking After Afghanistan. Robert Frost, for all that struck the earth, no matter if not bruised or spiked with stubble, went surely to the apple cider heap. You met her after the war. Got married, went apple picking. She never understood why, as a grown man, you pissed yourself when you left Afghanistan, so you never told her about the time you pissed yourself when you left Afghanistan. You were supposed to pick fruit. You fought a lot instead.

Benjamin Hertwig (1:29:53):
The mosquitoes lived much longer than usual. Well, after first frost. The apple drunk wasps nipped at your ankles like dogs. All these things happened in the fall. The time things are supposed to die. One night you went to the orchard together. Had sex to the smell of rotting apples. Windy, dry leaves. You slept in a Volvo outside the Catholic Church and ran the car to keep the cold away. You felt her body in the dark, the spire scratching the firmament. The car is covered with frost when you awake. You are still asleep, waiting for war to end."

Michael Petrou (1:31:01):
It's that "waiting for war to end" that I want you to explain if you can.

Benjamin Hertwig (1:31:13):
"Waiting for war to end" for me [pauses to ponder] is an attempt to vocalize the personal damage of war. The war was over for me. I had left the military at that point. I would never be a soldier ever again. I knew this. I would not fight in Afghanistan again. And yet the personal impact of the war on my life continued and continued. And I think I very much wanted the war to be a full sentence with a period at the end of it.

Benjamin Hertwig (1:32:07):
And yet, that was not the reality for me, that there was no full stop. That yes, I had returned. Yes, I was removed from the war zone, but that the war remained very much a living thing. That it was living inside of me. It was living within my experiences of trauma. It was living within the relationships I made after the war. My difficulty in being vulnerable, my difficulty in trusting people. All of these things were a product of who I became after the war. And I think that a particular conflict lives as long as, as the people who experienced it and the people that those individuals interact with.

Benjamin Hertwig (1:33:01):

So I think a war, even if now we say, well, the war in Afghanistan has a beginning point, 2001 has an end point, 2021—I think it was 2021 when the Americans withdrew. Even if we think of a war as being final, as long as there are individuals who have experienced that conflict, it's still very much a living thing. And I didn't want it to be. I wanted it to be done. I wanted it to be over with. I wanted to move on and live my life. And yet, I couldn't because I had not dealt with things yet or had not sort of acknowledged that impact upon my life.

Michael Petrou (1:33:42):
I mean, can there be a period if the person you were before Afghanistan is no longer exists then you're somebody different now because of the war. So how can there be an end point?

Benjamin Hertwig (1:33:56):
Yeah, I don't think that there can be I think there can be. I think there can be a new way of understanding my experiences or sort of processing it, but I'm no longer seeking a fully understandable conclusion to this story. I think that is one of the things that has helped me live more healthily, perhaps that I'm no longer trying to say that it's done, it's over. It's not a part of who I am. It's more the war will always in some ways be a part of me and how I view the world. And that's OK. I don't have to sort of run from that anymore. I don't have to pretend it's something that it's not.

Michael Petrou (1:34:50):
Can we read "Alternate"?

Benjamin Hertwig (1:35:08):
Mm-hm. [flips through book] "Alternate. It would have been easier to die in Afghanistan under cover of flames. Smoke the colour of sand. Tendons snapping, burning. Sexless ecstasy of release. Now you envy the dead."

Michael Petrou (1:35:46):
That last line about envying the dead. Can you explain that?

Benjamin Hertwig (1:35:51):
I think there were definitely times in my post-war life, when I very much did not wish to be alive. When I was not actively contemplating taking my own life, but where everything felt like too much, too intense, too difficult. And whether that was familial or personal, the feeling that had I died in Afghanistan, maybe my family would have been proud of me. They would have been proud of the individual that I was. But now they don't understand who I am. I don't understand who I am. It just would have been easier if there had been a conclusion, and everything had sort of been wrapped up, with finality in that way.

Benjamin Hertwig (1:36:59):
So I think wanting to stop feeling things, wanting to stop feeling the pain, wanting to stop remembering. It would have just been easier. And that thought, I no longer feel that way. I think that is a feeling I had at times when I was struggling the most. I mean, sitting here in this chair that there's so much that I'm grateful for. I'm grateful for my family again, renewed connections with my brother and my dad and siblings. Grateful for a loving and caring spouse. Grateful to be

connected with people from the military who I love and respect, even if I don't necessarily agree with everything. But at that time, I just wanted it all to be over. I didn't want to have to deal with it anymore.

Michael Petrou (1:37:58):
Have you reconnected with your military former comrades?

Benjamin Hertwig (1:38:02):
Yeah, not everybody, but there are certainly people in my life again, who I was with in Afghanistan, who I was went to basic training with as a 16-year-old. And I don't always agree with them on everything, but I recognize the importance of shared experience and being present for people. And that there is a goodness in sharing memories or experiences from a part of my life which feels very, very long ago. And I really value that and I value their presence in my life again. Whereas once I would have just wanted to push them all aside and kind of put everything from Afghanistan in a box and shove that box in a dark room. And now, I'm glad to have those connections again.

Michael Petrou (1:39:11):
What happened on July 22nd, 2006?

Benjamin Hertwig (1:39:14):
Yeah, that was a suicide bombing shortly before I returned to Edmonton. Two Canadian soldiers died in that suicide bombing. A friend of mine who I've recently reconnected with as well, his eardrums were burst in that explosion. I remember him sitting, sitting on the road, holding his ears, blood dripping out. He is now a lawyer, has a family. Life is good. But it was one of the most difficult days of my life, I would say. And one of the days that I would say changed who I was. Changed the direction of my life. Enjoying life taken so suddenly and unexpectedly, watching, Afghan children indiscriminately thrown into the back of a pickup truck after a second suicide bomber walked into a crowd of gathered Afghan civilians and blew himself up. Those are all things that I will never in some way stop thinking of or never be able to forget.

Michael Petrou (1:40:53):
Can you read the poem you wrote about that?

Benjamin Hertwig (1:41:04):
[flips through book] "July 22nd, 2006. The Afghan soldier transfixed by his feet, staring as if his eyes could put the blood back in. His *partug* [type of Pashtun clothing worn in Afghanistan] torn blood, slick and beet red. He calls out to someone. Walls of mud surround him. Arterial blood. A flood of red life. You touch his head. He's pretty much dead already. Eyes closing. The blood of poppy. Blooms cut. Leave this city. Your short war is over. Do not pity the dead. Buy yourself a new car or tell the truth. Tales of how stupid and shitty war is. How you pissed yourself. How he fell. How in your dreams his face floats in motion. Fish flesh on the bottom of the ocean."

Michael Petrou (1:42:32):
You said things change for you on this day, or this is one of the days that perpetuated some of the changes. How so?

Benjamin Hertwig (1:42:44):
I think in some ways, anytime we're exposed to violence, whether we are young or old, it changes us physically, mentally, spiritually. And yet the specific context of this incident is hard to fully explain. So double suicide bombing. The first bombing, where the two Canadian soldiers died. I mean, the feeling of that already is one of being overwhelmed and not knowing how to process it or what to do or how to fix things, and being in that position of extreme vulnerability and then having a second suicide bomber minutes later, walk into a crowd of people who've gathered to see what's been going on and blow himself up. It felt like something in my mind had broken or something had snapped. That I would not be able to, to put back together. Just that feeling of extreme vulnerability. And yet suddenly you're pushed even further. At that point, I felt like I was capable of anything that I could have that I could have [...] That I was so angry at what I saw that I could have participated in violence that later I would be very ashamed of.

Michael Petrou (1:44:31):
You talked about a man in your platoon that took his own life, and you write about, I think you [inaudible] at least two poems. But I do want to ask you about "Poem for the Dead After the War." Well, maybe if you could read it first, then we can talk about it if you don't mind.

Benjamin Hertwig (1:44:56):
[flips through book] "Poem for the Dead After War. A car accident takes the first. Cancer takes the second, a suicide comes third. These are simplifications, the kind that are not useful to anyone. The dead are not useful. They are dead. You occasionally see them on the street, heads bobbing and sidewalk rhythm. Buying smokes. Stooping into cabs. Smiling. They are dead. You do not think of them often. Most of the time."

Michael Petrou (1:46:00):
So who are these three?

Benjamin Hertwig (1:46:04):
Three men from my platoon. One who died in a car accident at the very end of our tour in Afghanistan. Another who, a few years after I returned when I was tree planting one summer, heard that he had developed brain cancer and was going to pass away from that, and he did pass away from that. And then the man from my platoon who committed suicide as well. I think this poem is about, in some ways the long afterlife of war that. These are people who I once considered family, who I saw every day, who I woke up alongside, who I went to bed listening to them snoring. Who I experienced some of the most intense things of my life with. And yet, life continued and they passed away in not necessarily exclusively military contexts, but that I could not separate them from the trauma of Afghanistan still, even if they died from something unrelated to it, brain cancer. That I still felt in some ways like we were a family, even as none of us, most of us had not been gathered together, maybe ever again and likely won't ever be all gathered together in the same space.

Michael Petrou (1:48:00):
And you write that you'd continue to see them?

Benjamin Hertwig (1:48:04):

Some, not everyone, but some people.

Michael Petrou (1:48:08):
No, in the poem you write about seeing them stooping in the KAFs.

Benjamin Hertwig (1:48:12):
Yeah, I think, and I still have that. I mean it's almost been 20 years now. Every now and then I will see someone who I swear is a man from my platoon who died in Afghanistan. The shape of his head, the way he walks. And it is, of course, never him. But the fact that my brain, some part of it, is still looking for that individual for, still looking for life beyond life means that he's a part of me. My story will always be entwined with his in some way and that's OK. And now when I see someone who reminds me of someone who passed away, it's an opportunity just to sit with that individual for a few minutes again and just remember.

Michael Petrou (1:49:23):
Tell me about the last time you wore your uniform.

Benjamin Hertwig (1:49:27):
The poem or the [...]?

Michael Petrou (1:49:29):
Well, you wrote about it in a poem. You can read the poem if you'd like and then give me the backstory.

Benjamin Hertwig (1:49:34):
That specifically is referring to a dress uniform, sort of our fancy, dark green, rich, scratchy wool uniforms, which traditionally we wore on Remembrance Day or other sort of more formal occasions. In this context, I wore it to bury the man from my platoon who had died in Afghanistan. And I think in some ways I was always proud of that uniform, proud of how I looked in it, proud of the way it made me feel. That I remembered my brother wearing that similar uniform and yet feeling already at that point, like, I do not want to be wearing this uniform. That I do not want to be associated with this uniform, that I want to move beyond this uniform, but still having to bury him and still wearing it and sort of that feeling of inner conflict of being in one place still, but wishing you were some someone else somewhere else.

Benjamin Hertwig (1:50:57):
[flips through the book] "Poem for the Last Time You Wore your Uniform. [adjusts] Poem for the Last time You Wore Your Uniform. His body weighed more in the remembering than you thought a body could. It was probably the accumulated mass of ten years pushing down on you, a divorce, a few doctor's visits, a degree or two. The boys you never saw again. When he was buried, you didn't want to be wearing your uniform. You didn't want to be wearing anything, but you shaved one last time. Scraped the skin around your throat, bled a bit and drove the hot highway to peers. It didn't feel right. Things were too green, too overgrown. Rank with weeds and heat. Dog shit in the tall dry grass.

Benjamin Hertwig (1:52:13):

The cameras are out. The news crews, the soldiers and parents and cousins. Everyone threw lumps of dirt into the hole. A cricket jumped in. The dirt crumpled in your hand. Dry. Infertile. You wanted winter again. A white sheet over everything. You didn't even get drunk when the funeral was over. And ten years later, your dad found the uniform in a black garbage bag at the back of a closet. $40 in the pocket, two 20s, the old paper kind. $4 for each year that had passed."

Michael Petrou (1:53:13):
This is while you were still serving, yes?

Benjamin Hertwig (1:53:17):
The?

Michael Petrou (1:53:18):
The funeral?

Benjamin Hertwig (1:53:19):
Yes.

Michael Petrou (1:53:19):
Did you accompany the body back home to Afghanistan? Or back home to Canada, sorry?

Benjamin Hertwig (1:53:25):
Yeah, I was not on the flight that his body was brought back on, but it happened maybe a week before we redeployed home. And then one of the first things we had to do as a platoon was, his formal burial ceremony in the small town where he was born.

Michael Petrou (1:53:53):
Can you read "May 2nd, 2001"?

Benjamin Hertwig (1:54:11):
[flips through book] "May 2nd, 2001. Blaze engulfs Boston Pizza Blockbuster. The Prince George story the morning after you noticed the smoke and burning plastic. The same morning, the pine beetles ravished the forests you are trying to replant, and the special forces prepare to kill Osama bin Laden, though he doesn't know it yet. You don't know it yet either. An old woman pokes her head into your motel room, shouts, "They got bin Laden! Shot him through the fucking head." The streetlights on 15th and Victoria change from red to yellow to green grass under your feet. Afghanistan feels very far away."

Michael Petrou (1:55:13):
One of the things I found curious about that poem is Afghanistan doesn't feel far away in so much of what you write. Tell me about that.

Benjamin Hertwig (1:55:31):
I think you are right in that the reality of this collection and the reality of writing it was that Afghanistan was rarely, if ever, far from my mind. And yet there is this constant push and pull,

this negotiation of who am I now in relation to who I once was. That Afghanistan might feel geographically far removed from where I currently am, planting trees in northern British Columbia in Prince George. And yet the reality is that I cannot even escape it in northern British Columbia, when I'm surrounded by wilderness and trees and bears, that the reality of the war is still intruding upon me. In this context in the [pauses], in the presence of a woman at a motel who is shouting about the death of Osama bin Laden, who was once, one of the people we were supposed to look out for in Afghanistan if we ever.

Michael Petrou (1:56:49):
Tell me about Omar Khadr.

Benjamin Hertwig (1:56:52):
Omar Khadr, former Guantanamo Bay detainee, former child soldier. In terms of, sort of broader perspective, certainly a divisive figure within Canada. Some people, people that I serve with, family members, consider Omar Khadr to be a terrorist who got away with it. Whereas I and other people that I served alongside think this was a child soldier who got wrapped up in something that was bigger than himself. And Omar Khadr and I are roughly the same age, both participated in the war in Afghanistan, and I had the chance to meet him after the war.

Benjamin Hertwig (1:57:51):
The first time I met him was at a Mountain Equipment Co-op. He had recently been released, and he was at the Mountain Equipment Co-op in Edmonton, where I was shopping for camping supplies for the next season of tree planting. And I recognized him—I'd seen him on the news on a number of occasions—recognized the damage to his eye, the one that had been wounded in the firefight. And I walked up to him, and I told him, "I'm glad that you were out of jail." And I happened to know through an Anglican community house that I was living at the time, one of the people, Arlette Zink, is her name, who's a professor at King's University who had reached out to Omar while he was still in Guantanamo Bay.

Benjamin Hertwig (1:58:44):
And I emailed Arlette and I said, "Hey, I ran into Omar" and turns out that Omar had emailed Arlette as well and said, "Hey, I ran into this former soldier." And Arlette said, "Well, maybe the two of you should get together for coffee or for a meal" and so provided contact information and we went out for a meal. And even then, I knew that certain people in my life, certain family members, would be ashamed of me or would think that I was fraternizing with a terrorist, or that I was doing things that I ought not to be doing.

Benjamin Hertwig (1:59:27):
But I remember feeling quite strongly then. My belief then, as it remains now, is this is an individual who got wrapped up in something that was bigger than him, and that I am glad that he is out of jail and has been returned to Canada and can live his own life. And I think for me, in some ways that friendship, which continues, Omar recently helped me—well, gave my wife and I his old piano, helped move it into our house, lifted most of it himself, and has been kind of a healing relationship for me. And the recognition that even if people disagree, that it's important for me personally to stand up and stand alongside, people I believe in, personally.

Michael Petrou (2:00:24):
Why is that relationship important for you? Why is it healing for you?

Benjamin Hertwig (2:00:27):
I think because, I mean, in some ways we were on opposite sides of sides of the conflict. Omar was fighting alongside the Taliban as a child soldier, and I was fighting for coalition forces. And I think neither of us are participating in any kind of military structure. Neither of us wishes to inflict violence upon other people. And we both survived the war. And even though maybe we had different ideological understandings, we were both taught to believe certain things as children or were raised in a certain way, that we are now living very different lives from our lives then. And I'm grateful for that.

Michael Petrou (2:01:20):
Can you read "View from a Slide you Once Slept Under"?

Benjamin Hertwig (2:01:43):
[flips through book] I wrote this bloody thing, so you'd think I know where to find.

Michael Petrou (2:01:47):
115.

Benjamin Hertwig (2:01:49):
Thank you. "View From a Slide You Once Slept Under. Before time and war and other old gods, you slept under stars like a flapping owl on the cooling crust of earth. Your bones were soft. Your body without form. Words of life fell to the ground like burning globes of fruit. You ate your fill. There was enough for all. You flew with the wind. Made love to the sun whenever it asked. But the truth is this. When you returned from the war, you didn't think of the dead much. You wanted to be a child again. You walked wide streets at night alone and counted stars under a slide. Owls watched you walk away at dawn. Only the owls were crows. Their feathers wet with rain."

Michael Petrou (2:03:12):
Explain this poem for us.

Benjamin Hertwig (2:03:18):
I think this poem is an attempt to present or capture sort of a prelapsarian version of innocence and experience. Say what life looked like, what cosmologies looked like, what the structure of the universe looked like or felt like when you were a child. When your body and brain felt pliant and when you felt that the world was a good place to be still, that the world was a beautiful place that contained possibility and then experience. An altered reality trying to remember what it was like to feel the magic of the world, to feel the possibilities within it. The shape shifting possibilities of the world. And I think that was something that I was very much looking for after Afghanistan, looking for something to sort of replace the void that I was feeling. So I walked a lot. I walked and I wondered, and I walked under the northern lights, and I walked on the streets where I was living. I slept in parks. I was just looking for something to fill the void of meaning. Something, a geographic sort of spatial container, in which to kind of experience hope again.

Michael Petrou (2:05:20):
Did you return to this playground that you had known as a child then?

Benjamin Hertwig (2:05:24):
I mean, for the purposes of this poem, there are a few different playgrounds, but the one I'm specifically referring to in this playground was, I biked from Jasper [Alberta] to Prince George one tree planting season. And I slept under a slide in the dark. And I think in some ways, which is not uncommon for soldiers after combat or after war, risky behaviour, looking for something to replace, sort of the thrill and the excitement of being in war, which is intoxicating and some strong feelings to replace that. And I think this, for me, was one of those circumstances where I was doing dangerous or risky things all to try and feel alive again.

Michael Petrou (2:06:24):
The last poem, "Exodus." I'm intrigued, but I don't think I understand it. Do you mind reading it and talking about it?

Benjamin Hertwig (2:06:32):
Yeah. And to tell you the truth, I'm not sure I fully understand it either. But I will definitely read it. [flips through book] "Exodus. I did not always hate. I rub a ball of beeswax between my hands to remember that hope is not by product or waste. But deep synderesis. New words springing from raw soil after rain." [pauses]

Benjamin Hertwig (2:07:28):
This time of my life, I was reading a lot by a well-known Victorian poet by the name of Gerard Manley Hopkins, a closeted gay priest. Led a quite difficult life died young. Half of his poems alternate between despair, and the other half present the abundance of a world that he still continues to find beautiful.

Benjamin Hertwig (2:08:11):
And I think for Hopkins, he wrote how the world is charged with the grandeur of God, one of his more famous poems. And I think for me, even though I did not necessarily believe some of the theological implications of what he was saying then I was looking for the world to be charged with, charged with, and grounded in goodness again, that I wanted the world to be good, that I wanted it to be a place of hope or healing, even if I did not necessarily feel that. And I think this poem is an attempt to remember that hope, as an emotion, as an action, as a posture can be very real, even if I don't presently feel it. And so I think it's an attempt to sort of speak into existence, a hope I wish I had.

Michael Petrou (2:09:27):
Is there a poem that's particularly meaningful for you that we haven't read that you'd like to?

Benjamin Hertwig (2:09:46):
[flips through book] I mean, I would say, "A Poem is Not Guantanamo Bay" or "Remember Your Body Again." I think those are [...].

Michael Petrou (2:09:56):

Let's do them both. Let's start with "Remember your Body Again."

Benjamin Hertwig (2:10:05):
"Remember our Body Again." I think one of the things that I learned after the war, as I continued reading and being exposed to new thinkers, I learned through the trauma theorist Bessel van der Kolk a very popular book called *How the Body Keeps the Score,* and hearing him speak and reading that book and learning how trauma might primarily be experienced, in our minds or as sort of a cognitive process. And yet trauma is stored in the body in ways that the body itself remembers, and that has an impact on our health, um, on, on our physical well-being.

Benjamin Hertwig (2:10:58):
And so much of my life after Afghanistan, what took place in my own head, in my own thoughts and my own dreams and my cognitive processes, and I forgot myself as a body. I forgot of myself as a physical being who moves through the world. And I think being exposed to a thinker like Bessel van der Kolk reminded me that part of the healing process was remembering and being engaged with my own physicality, my own sort of fleshiness my own body again. And that's what this poem is about.

Benjamin Hertwig (2:11:35):
"Remember Your Body Again. How cedar smells of God, and a Bach *cantata* [musical composition] makes you almost forgive your hands. How your dad drove a cream Mercury cougar while listening, while smoking cigars and listening to Leonard Cohen's 90s resurrection. A room in an old house with white curtains where your mother drank *cafe* in summer. Remember sweet grass and smoked moose hide. The embryotic hum of a potter's wheel. Lego on the floor. Clay that's stuck to your mother's hair. To your beard. To the creases of your hands. Remember your body again."

Michael Petrou (2:12:31):
Why is this an important poem to you?

Benjamin Hertwig (2:12:34):
I think this poem is important to me because in some ways it is a catalog of things that hold meaning for me, of things that historically have held meaning, memories of love and being sort of held in the love of a parent. And then later in life, the things that I either returned to or found for the first time, that made my hands feel like they had something positive to do. As we've talked about earlier, the rifle was gone, but I have other things in my hand. Again, I can shape clay on the potter's wheel. I can make things. I can make things that did not cause harm, but that bring a different value into the world.

Benjamin Hertwig (2:13:30):
And so this poem, I would say this collection, is not overwhelmingly positive, that it's a collection of difficult, heavy, hard things. And yet this is a poem where I'm thinking about the grounding things, the things that make life feel bearable at times. The objects that brought some shape or meaning into my life.

Michael Petrou (2:13:59):

That's interesting what you say about replacing the weight of the rifle. Do you mind reading that again? But just give us a title first.

Benjamin Hertwig (2:14:08):
Just "Remember Your Body Again. Remember your body again. How cedar smells of God and a Bach *cantata* makes you almost forgive your hands. How your dad drove a cream Mercury cougar while smoking cigars and listening to Leonard Cohen's 90s resurrection. A room in an old house with white curtains where your mother drank *cafe* in summer. Remember sweet grass and smoked moose hide. The embryotic hum of a potter's wheel. Lego on the floor. Clay that stuck to your mother's hair, to your beard, to the creases of your hands. Remember your body again."

Benjamin Hertwig: (2:15:07):
Even as I read it now and see things that sweetgrass and smoked moose hide, gifts from two different students, both of them indigenous, after I taught them. Moccasins and braided sweetgrass and things that I did not expect or hope for or necessarily even know about prior to. And yet they were given to me and gifted to me and provided a sense of hope and meaning and place in life again, that things I had not looked for expected. And yet they were good and that life could be good.

Michael Petrou (2:16:05):
And can you read "A Poem That's Not Guantanamo Bay"?

Benjamin Hertwig (2:16:13):
"A Poem is Not Guantanamo Bay for Omar Khadr. A poem is not the man who crushed mint leaves into milk and offered you lentils while you watched with rifle in hand. It's not the door you kicked open or the woman whose face was uncovered. The fruit on her table. The flap of skin. The white throated, fluttering chicken. It's not the night you drove home drunk, though you didn't then consider it as such. It's not the diesel fuel and burning shit that get some scrawled on plywood. A poem is not a dream that refuses to stop. The man with the hole in his foot. The Panjwai highway. The shards of Corolla. The man with the hole in his foot.

Benjamin Hertwig (2:17:12):
A poem is not guilt. A poem is not a way out of a poem. A poem isn't even a decade later when you were not a soldier, and he is not in jail. When Guantanamo Bay is mostly forgotten. When you meet for food at a local cafe. It's not the musk of yerba mate. The bowl of rice and chickpeas you share. A poem is not a way out of a poem, but the bowl before you is a bowl. And the chickpeas cooked only minutes ago. The table is next to a window. City trucks swath gravel off the street. A dog barks. Its slowly growing dark outside."

Michael Petrou (2:18:14):
What's the scene you're describing here?

Benjamin Hertwig (2:18:18):
The scene is the first time Omar Khadr, and I shared a meal together after meeting at the Mountain Equipment Co-op. And a feeling of connection, a feeling of being seen. A feeling of

surprise and possibility. A feeling of just sharing a meal as two people who had once been combatants in a war that may be neither of them believed in anymore, and yet that sharing a meal together was and remains a good thing.

Michael Petrou (2:19:13):
We've talked about this throughout our conversation, and you write about it in many of your poems, but I'm just going to ask you again: how has your time in the army, and I suppose in Afghanistan specifically, how has that shaped who you are today?

Benjamin Hertwig (2:19:40):
[pauses to ponder] I think […] my experience in Afghanistan changed the trajectory of my life, certainly. Without the experiences, I don't know that I would have wanted to go back to school. I don't think I would have become a writer without Afghanistan because the intensity of those experiences and those feelings demanded some kind of response from me. And I just found stumbled into writing as a path towards healing.

Benjamin Hertwig (2:20:21):
And people sometimes ask me, "Well, if you could go back in time, would you still would you still be a soldier and go to Afghanistan?" I mean, the person I am right now, where I'm sitting right now, I have no desire to be in the military again. It's not a life I wish to lead in. And yet we can't separate who we once were from who we are now. And it is and always will be a part of me. And I think there was a time where I felt shame about Afghanistan or didn't want to tell people. And now I no longer feel that kind of shame because I think I'm doing things in the world that I'm proud of, and that I'm doing things that make me feel grounded again and that I have a place.

Benjamin Hertwig (2:21:16):
I mean, as I've previously spoken about. family members who are still in the military or family members or veterans who disagree with me, I don't feel the need to judge them either. That even if I disagree with them on certain things, that I can still be present for them, that I can still hear their pain, that I can still help them process, as I even continue to process my own things. And I feel grateful to be in that place now whereas once I just wanted to push everything aside. Now it's a part of my life and I'm in a good place now.

Michael Petrou (2:21:59):
Are you still a PhD student at UBC [University of British Columbia] or?

Benjamin Hertwig (2:22:02):
Yeah, so hopefully completing and defending sometime this year would be the […].

Michael Petrou (2:22:09):
And what's the thesis on? I think you've told me before but remind me.

Benjamin Hertwig (2:22:13):
Yeah, so looking at the idea of grievable life in contemporary Canadian war writing. Which lives does a text present as being worthy of grief? Which lives does a text present as being not fully

grievable? But at the same time, my supervisor has asked me to do a fair bit of life writing in the thesis, auto theoretical in the sense that my own experience becomes the basis for my theoretical understanding of war and war narratives.

Benjamin Hertwig (2:22:46):
And I mean, at first, I tried to be sort of detached, keep a distance from things and not make it about my personal story. But at some point, when you are when you are looking at texts or stories or narratives that you were present at, that you remember yourself, it's hard to maintain the sort of facade of emotional distance when you are present at that suicide bombing. So rather than sort of trying to pretend like I had a theoretical distance from it, I, with the encouragement of my supervisor, sort of looked deeper into that and that became the basis for my theoretical kind of understanding of the war.

Michael Petrou (2:23:43):
Can I ask you another question about Omar Khadr and you sought that contact out, and why that relationship is important to you. I mean, you know, there are other, of course, there are thousands of Canadians that experience and had similar experiences as you did in Afghanistan. Why seek out or why is this relationship with someone that was on the other side unique or different or any uniquely valuable to you?

Benjamin Hertwig (2:24:14):
I remember as a young boy reading a book on my father's bookshelf, and I'm forgetting the name of the Colonel, *We Were Soldiers Once…and Young* [Hal Moore and Joseph L. Galloway], a book about the Vietnam War. And I didn't particularly love the book, but I remember seeing a photo of the American colonel years or decades later, with one of his Vietnamese counterparts. And somehow, as a child, finding that really beautiful. And I didn't really know why. I didn't—had not yet been a soldier. But I thought, oh, this feels special somehow.

Benjamin Hertwig (2:25:03):
And I think part of the value or meaning to me of my friendship with Omar has been the feeling that we were both raised in contexts that valued violence and warfare as a way to solve geopolitical issues. And I think neither of us really feels that way now. And I think there's a certain kinship in that. Recognizing that we are not necessarily who we were or how we were raised, that parts of that, maybe there is some continuing continuity still, but that we have lived and shaped different lives after conflict. And yeah, that's been a very meaningful thing for me.

Michael Petrou (2:25:59):
Would you be interested in going back to Afghanistan if that ever became possible?

Benjamin Hertwig (2:26:03):
You know, if I could go back to Afghanistan in a different context, not as a soldier, I would love that. Afghanistan, I think, is one of the most beautiful places on the planet. And I would welcome the chance to go back and do something not as a soldier.

Michael Petrou (2:26:24):
Why? And what would you like to do?

Benjamin Hertwig (2:26:32):
I'm not sure what I would do. I think for me and a lot of other veterans seeing the impact of the war on the civilians and people of Afghanistan has been really difficult, obviously more difficult for the civilians themselves living through it. But wanting and still in some way to be useful or—I don't want to say to atone for the violence of the war—but to remember somehow that the people of Afghanistan continued to live through the horrors of this conflict, and wanting Afghanistan to be a whole and healthy place where people can thrive. And so I guess that's beyond sort of my desire to visit or not, but more just wanting in some way to see Afghanistan as a place where young people have hope and possibility for a future again, I think.

Michael Petrou (2:27:55):
How did you feel watching the Taliban retake the country in 2021?

Benjamin Hertwig (2:28:03):
Watching on the news, the hopelessness of people clinging to airplanes and the futility, I think, of people trying to escape, it was heartbreaking and made me and many other people feel, I think, like everything that had happened was futile and was a waste of time and resources. And I think [pauses to ponder] yeah, there was no sense of satisfaction being like, yes, the confirmation that the mission was flawed. There it was just a sense of deep heartache and sadness for the people still living with the realities of war. And still trying to escape from a war zone itself.

Michael Petrou (2:29:13):
I don't have any other questions, but is there anything that you think is important that we haven't talked about that we should about? Anything.

Benjamin Hertwig (2:29:22):
I can't think of anything in particular. I feel like the questions have been quite wide ranging, I think. I mean, we've sort of talked about the veteran experience and I think, and this is something I really wish to state and that I think state publicly whenever I'm asked to talk about writing or war, that regardless of political affiliation, regardless of whether we're pro-military or pacifist or how we feel about specific conflicts, I think most of us can agree that people who are sent overseas should be taken care of when they return. And that is something I desire for all veterans that they would feel seen and heard and listened to beyond platitudes, beyond Remembrance Day ceremonies, that there would be real and authentic ways for vets and vets who are struggling to feel seen and heard.

Michael Petrou (2:30:47):
Thank you, Benjamin. Thank you, Dave.

TRANSCRIPTION ENDS