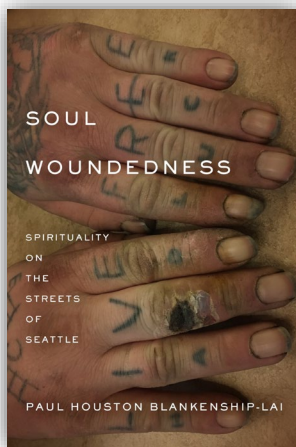


BOOK REVIEW

Soul Woundedness: Spirituality on the Streets of Seattle

By Paul Houston Blankenship-Lai

Reviewed by Camille Petersen



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Perceptions of Reality

In the book *Soul Woundedness: Spirituality on the Streets of Seattle* Paul Houston Blankenship-Lai explores the “relationship between homelessness, spirituality, and culture” among the homeless population on the streets of Seattle. Blankenship-Lai spent consistent and extended amounts of time getting to know the everyday habits and values of the homeless population, especially the younger adult population that he refers to as “street kids”. The situation is then portrayed in his book from three different points of view: his own point of view, which leans more anthropological; the point of view of his informants, or the homeless themselves; and the point of view of the organizations and individuals who attempt to assist the homeless population, mainly Christians and Christian organizations.

There are several themes discussed throughout *Soul Woundedness*, including themes such as freedom, love and acceptance. The author explored these themes from several perspectives: anthropological, drawing from many prominent authors of the academic field; religious, taking into account the viewpoint of those giving service to the homeless; and the individual lived experiences of the homeless themselves. This tripart exploration gives a unique view into the culture and spirituality of the homeless population.

Though I appreciated the differing viewpoints that were put forth, I wish that the author had more fully addressed the contradictory themes that I found prevalent with these views, especially in the views from the individuals of the homeless community. For example, freedom was a major theme in the early chapters of the book as Blankenship-Lai discusses the journey many of his informants had that resulted in their becoming homeless. Most of these journeys began with a feeling of oppression or restriction and a desire for freedom.

The lived experiences of the homeless that Blankenship-Lai described were shaped by how they viewed not only their situation but the larger world. “They spoke of apartments and jobs like prisons and poisons of the soul. They spoke of people who weren’t homeless as fools who’d been duped by capitalist overlords” (45). Many of these individuals actively chose to become a part of the homeless community in search of freedom. “The stories of how people became homeless in Seattle are rejection stories. They are also freedom stories. On the streets, I propose, rejection makes an experience of freedom possible” (47).

The streets of Seattle were an attractive place for homeless individuals to gather as they are a place seen as particularly suited to living free. “The perceived absence of social judgment renders a particular and

compelling space of freedom present” (48). Many of Blankenship-Lai’s informants said that being homeless gave them the freedom that they were craving. However, as Blankenship-Lai followed the stories of individuals it is revealed that this freedom that they craved and supposedly found was not true freedom or, at the very least, not a freedom that could last.

While they professed having found freedom, they also expressed the opposite. “Street kids often told me that they feel ‘fucked,’ ‘stuck,’ and ‘trapped’ on the streets. The real experiential freedom on the streets is always, it seems to me, eclipsed by the cruel reality of street life” (63). One informant called *Burrito Bitch* said that, “The freedom you find on the streets is real, but it is a freedom that will eventually kill you” (65). Another informant called *Lilith* staunchly proclaimed the freedom she found by living on the streets until she experienced a painful injury. “‘Well,’ she said, ‘now it is not a choice [being homeless]. Now I need help and to get the fuck out of here’” (65).

The theme of love and acceptance follows a very similar pattern to that of freedom. Feeling rejected by society, their families, religion, and God himself, individuals find what they perceive to be love and acceptance within the community of the homeless. Many of the discussions Blankenship-Lai had with homeless individuals included how good they felt within the community of the homeless. “Most street kids told me that they felt more connected to the human world when they became homeless. I found it surprising that their homelessness could provide a cure for the social isolation wounding them” (78). While they expressed to him how positive the relationships they found on the streets were, like freedom, love and acceptance were only an attractive but deceptive falsehood.

While Blankenship-Lai recognizes the discrepancies in the stories of homeless that were told to him, his view was that freedom, love and acceptance were not deceptive counterfeits—as I interpreted them to be after reading the stories he put forth—but meaningful realities. “Hangout spaces engender care. Since most street kids come from hurting nuclear families, the relationships they form with one another may be considered closer than biological family” (78). The love and acceptance expressed by those to whom he spoke after some time inevitably turned into hate and hurt. “While there is real, transformative love on the streets, the social conditions and personal experiences are dominated by unlovingness and heartbreaking, disorienting absences of love” (115).

Lilith, who was an informant of his for a long period of time, experienced this phenomenon when, “the charismatic street family that had enticed *Lilith* turned on her. She and *Lucifer* became objects of derision. They were outcasts among outcasts” (65). Another informant named *Hitch* was completely rejected from the community after a relationship turned sour. “*Reaper* and his friend *Mad* beat *Hitch* up. They told him that if he comes back to the Ave, they will kill him” (70). The relationships found on the streets, while perceived as strong and loving, do not last. “Relationships are deeply fragile on the streets. They can be life-threatening” (79). In a conversation about love, a couple of informants said the following: “Love,” *Steady* says, “is when someone sticks with you no matter what.” This was followed by a retort from his partner *Samantha*. “You need to be careful, though. Out here, everything you love goes away” (146).

Freedom, love and acceptance are sought after and then claimed to be found by the homeless population, though inevitably it seems they are then taken away by the reality of the conditions that come with homeless living. These same values are then offered by the Christians giving service to the homeless in the form of a loving God. The Christian experiences freedom, love and acceptance through their beliefs, and seeing a human need for these values among the homeless population seeks to share that experience. *Ben*, a Christian minister who serves the homeless often, told Blankenship-Lai that if he could have any question answered about the homeless individuals he served, “that he’d want to know how people come to believe something untrue about themselves: why people on the streets believe they are unlovely and unloved and without purpose” (121).

Soul Woundedness is an informative and interesting read. There is value in the stories and experiences of both the homeless individuals and the author who was seeking to understand the culture and spirituality of the homeless community. However, I personally do not agree with the conclusions that were put forth. Reading these stories leads me to conclude that individuals are not experiencing true freedom, but rather a counterfeit freedom; they are not finding true love and true acceptance, but counterfeit love and conditional acceptance. A person’s perceived experiences do not always reflect reality, though that does not mean that a person’s perceived experiences are not important. I believe that one of the purposes of anthropology is to increase our understanding of individuals and communities, and it is through the

expression of a person's lived and perceived experiences that we do so.

This book seemed to have a goal of discovering how those who wish to improve the lives of the homeless should go about doing so. By not addressing the conflicting perceptions of his informants, especially across time, I do not feel that the author was able to pull meaningful conclusions from his data on how to proceed from an anthropological perspective or a spiritual one. Still, the book has a lot of value for the stories it presents from the point of view of those who are experiencing homelessness. While I did not agree with the conclusions the author presented, the experiences described gave insight and information such that I was able to think through my own conclusions.



Camille Petersen is a working professional in the field of international education and cultural exchange. Her recent graduation in Theological and Cultural Anthropology included a thesis on the culture of the board game community, entitled, *The Reality of the Board Game Community: And the Connection, Identity and Experience that Creates It*. August 2024. Her research and professional interests include Cultural Learning, Christian Mission, The Culture of Gaming, and Christian Theology.

Author email: camille.petersen@eastern.edu
