
Learning through 'Story'

The ability of 'story' to teach lies primarily in its capacity to engage, and to evoke imaginative responses in the reader, drawing the story together with personal experience and creating new understandings that are powerful and enduring. When a 'story' opens our eyes to the circumstances and motivations that cause a character to act as he or she does, our empathy for the character grows. It compels us to be alert to the stories of others in similar circumstances - and challenges our assumptions and judgments.

Stories can give voice to the invisible and voiceless, to those who are seldom seen and heard above the noise of everyday existence (Osler & Zhu, 2011)*. The old, the disenfranchised, the marginalized can become known through 'story.' This is invaluable for those of us who care for people who have lost the ability to speak for themselves because of disability, illness or age. A 'story' can be sufficient to sear their experience on our consciousness and significantly alter our responses and understandings.

Stories provide us opportunities to explore and reflect (Osler and Zhu, 2011) and to better understand our values, identities and beliefs. As the struggles of the characters resonate with our own, we gain a greater understanding of the human experience. We are inspired to explore our responsibility to others and to engage in social action. The hope is that Lester's story, entitled "*Retake*," will inspire readers to explore new understandings of their experiences with the residents that they care for, and motivate them to question approaches to care.

RETAKE

A 'story' by Lois Thornton, R.N., B.N., M/Ed.,
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Somewhere, way round in the back of Lester's mind, a mosquito was buzzing, annoying. You know sometimes when you're just nicely in bed, settling into the darkness and out of nowhere, you hear that hum. It's out there and it's going to find some warm flesh somewhere in the dark. You don't know when, but you do know that it's going to get you. Until you can't stand it any longer and you have to turn on the light and get it first. That's the way it was for Lester, only that, as often as not, be damned if he could find the light switch.

This morning, that annoying notion was buzzing right in his ear, but Lester could not pin it down. If only it would move in for the kill and put him out of his misery. Maybe if he went down to the dining room the thing would jiggle loose from the back of his brain and move itself to the front where he could finally capture it. Besides, his friend Morley would be there. Morley had a way of talking to him that made him relax and helped his thinking to clear.

Lester had just begun his shuffling way down the long corridor to the dining room when a young nursing assistant caught his arm. "Oh no you don't, Lester", she said. She

took his hand and began leading him back to his room. "We don't go to breakfast in our pyjamas. And we certainly don't walk around in our bare feet. Let's get you dressed and then we can go to breakfast."

Lester turned without protest, allowing her to have her way with him. She would not understand about annoying notions; she wouldn't even want to hear. He stood in silence while she stripped him of his pyjamas, gave his privates a perfunctory wash, then helped him into clean clothes. She nudged him to sit on the edge of the bed, covered his feet with socks, shoved on his runners and pulled the laces tight. The dressing complete, she helped him into the bathroom and supervised while he washed his face and hands and gave his dentures a rinse. Toilet completed in less than five minutes. Smiling with the satisfaction of a job well done, she pointed Lester in the direction of the dining room and gave his back a gentle push.

There were two places still vacant at Lester's assigned dining table. Morley was there already, concentrating intently on the bowl of oatmeal porridge in front of him. Jack Brown was there as well. Jack was new at Lakeshore

Manor. He had moved into the room of their friend, Fred McKellar, just the day after Fred had died. "When one wears out, you get a new one," Morley had quipped the first time he met Jack.

Lester noticed that Morley's roommate, Fletch, was not in his usual spot at the table. A guilty feeling of relief welled up in Lester's chest. He liked Fletch. He really did. But Fletch tended to say just whatever came into his head, and much of the time what he had to say just wasn't kind. Lester didn't feel like dealing with that this morning.

"Morning, Lester," Morley said. He pushed himself to standing with his strong right arm and pulled out a chair making it easier for Lester to sit. "I thought you weren't coming this morning."

"Where's Fletch?"

"Oh, he had a little accident. You know." Morley's voice trailed off, his eyes focused on his breakfast, suddenly embarrassed. "He'll be along."

"Good morning Jack", Lester said looking at the man across the table. "Are you feeling better this morning?"

"Tolerable, tolerable. My back aches something fierce and I can hardly turn my head for the pain. Woke up this morning with an upset stomach. Thought I was going to throw up. Must be constipated again."

Lester was sorry he had asked.

"Good morning, Lester. I'll be right there with your breakfast," called Anne, the morning server, from across the room. In less than two minutes she placed a steaming bowl of oatmeal and a slice of crispy whole wheat toast in front of him. Lester stared at the food. He knew what it was but couldn't seem to figure out what to do with it. The buzzing at the back of his brain was getting louder.

"Aren't you going to eat, Lester? Your breakfast has gone all cold." Anne was beside him then, lifting the spoon to his mouth. The table was empty except for him. How long had he been sitting there unaware? Lester pushed Anne's hand away. He staggered to his feet then stumbled and sat again abruptly.

"Just stay right there, Lester. I'll get some help and we'll get you back to your room. I'll bring you something to eat when you're feeling better. Room service for you this morning, buddy."

The next thing Lester felt was being wrestled into a wheel chair and then rolled into bed, the bed rails up around him like a jail cell. He could feel the broad, white belt around his waist, pressing under his diaphragm, the belt they always used when he misbehaved; to keep him safe, they always said. But Lester knew better. It was punishment, penance he had to pay for a long life of sins and poor behaviour.

The mosquito in his head was still buzzing but fainter now. He would have to figure it out later. Right now he was too tired to do anything, too weak to struggle. Blackness closed in on him and he slept.

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The light around him was getting brighter and he stirred awake in the cool dampness of the morning air. A red glow from the rising sun was staining the sky just over the top of the bunker. His fingers stretched, and then closed tightly around the slender muzzle of the gun that lay close at his side. He could hear others in the troop beginning to stir. The night watch was nearly done. It was time to start again.

It had been a quiet night. He had slept for two full hours after he had finished his watch. He pushed himself to sitting position and nestled the gun against the wall of the fox hole. His buddy was still on watch so he had a little more room to move. He reached for a tin of beans on a small board placed as a shelf into a crevice in the dug out soil. Breakfast was always cold these days. He hadn't had a whiff of coffee in weeks. A scuffling sound at the entrance to the fox hole caused Lester to turn, alarmed. The grinning face of his buddy, Jim, soon appeared and Lester relaxed. Lester and Jim had met during their final four weeks of basic training. They had been assigned to the same unit and had crossed the Atlantic together on the HMS Majestic.

"Have you got the bacon and eggs on yet?" Jim asked.

"Sure have," Lester said, brandishing the can of beans. "Delicious, too. Grab a spoon."

"Quiet night," Jim said, "Jerry must be resting up for a hard day's work."

Boom! The crash pounded on the ear drums of the two men. The fox hole trembled; its walls disintegrated into rivulets of soil.

"Let's get out of here!" Lester shouted into the din.

Outside the early morning sky was lit by mocking gun fire. A gaping hole not more than 100 feet from the fox hole was evidence of the shell blast that was still ringing in their ears. Another blast sent a tsunami of sound waves crashing onto their ear drums, so powerful and close that they fell backwards into the mud. Lester was aware of movement around him; infantrymen taking cover, hugging the ground to their bellies, others scrambling for the 60 mm mortar set up on a sheltered promontory ahead of the company. Return fire was likely to be useless in the face of the inferno unleashed before them.

An icy fear froze solid in Lester's gut. He flattened his body against the wet earth trying to make himself disappear into the mud. Jim lay motionless just to his left, blood covering his face and matting his hair. "Damn him," Lester thought.

"We were supposed to stick together through all of this."

Lester clutched his rifle close to his belly and began to wriggle himself backward through the mud. Oblivious to the blood that was leaking from his flank, arms pushing, he searched for shelter. He edged slowly back away from the mortar fire in front of him. A soft moan rose from behind him just as his feet connected with a firm mound that gave way slightly as he pushed. A soldier lay face down in the mud; blood was spouting from the severed stub of his left arm. Lester kicked out pushing his foot into the soldier's belly until he rolled partially on his side. Slithering around the dying soldier, Lester wedged himself between the body and the ground, taking comfort in its diminishing warmth. He buried his face in the soldier's back in an attempt to obliterate the surrounding chaos. Then all was still and Lester lay cocooned in a velvety blackness.

The band around his waist was smothering him, pressing upward on his diaphragm, squeezing the air out of his lungs. He gripped the belt and gasped for breath. "You get what you deserve, coward, good for nothing." The voice in his head jeered and accused him. Behind his eyes, images of Jim lying face down flashed like black light. He looked down at his own hands gripping and twisting the broad white belt that secured him to the bed, staining it with the blood of fallen soldiers.

"Take it easy soldier," said a soft cool voice somewhere above him. "You're safe now. You will be all right."

Lester felt a hand caress his forehead and push back his hair. "Put this under your tongue and don't bite it now," the voice said again. A thin glassy rod was slipped between his teeth and under his tongue.

"I'll let the doctor know that your temperature is still high and I'll bring you something for pain right away. That will settle you down. Try to rest. I'll be right back."

"You should be dead, coward." The voice in his head started again. "You should be out in that field with Jim. You're covered with your buddy's blood."

Lester could feel the thick substance dripping from his hair, sliding silently over his face and covering his chest and arms. He raised his hands swiping at his cheeks to remove the sticky liquid, but it just kept coming, drenching his clothing and the bed clothes. He was writhing now in horror. He pulled at the belt with all his might, twisting and tugging to free himself.

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"Crazy old bastard's going to hurt himself if he doesn't set™ down. Then there'll be hell to pay. Go get Lisa to bring him a shot, will you? I'll see if I can get him cleaned up a little. Without him knocking me out."

Lester could hear the voices swimming toward him. They seemed to be cutting through the buzzing that had started again in the back of his head. Rough hands grabbed him at the shoulder and the hip, thrust him onto his side and pinned his hands to the bed. He kicked frantically and ineffectively into the air.

"Take it easy, Lester, we're just trying to change your sheets. They don't pay me enough to take this shit. The little bastard could really hurt somebody." This time the voice was loud and clear. Lester kicked again and arched his back against the bed.

"It's about time you got here. We can't do a thing with him. We'll just have to leave him in these wet sheets until he quiets down. I don't know what gets into him. It's like he's in a combat zone or something."

Lester felt a sudden sharp stab in his right buttock. He lay quiet while the buzzing in his head grew louder. Then the buzzing started to move past his ears, his temples, to his forehead where that mosquito sat poised ready to take a blood meal. Lester slapped. "Got 'cha." The buzz was gone. Lester's world was still.

Epilogue/Questions for Reflection

We all have stories that give meaning to our lives and through which we explain who we are. Stories allow us to give voice to experiences, to share our selves with others, and to be connected to a community of humanity.

Readers are encouraged to reflect on any number of questions about Lester's life, and how his behaviour is a product both of his current circumstances as a nursing home resident and a person with a traumatic past. Several questions have already been suggested for consideration.

1. What is the significance of the "buzzing" that Lester feels in his head? How does the "buzzing" effect his perception of the world and his reactions?
2. How would you interpret Lester's agitated behaviour in light of his past?
3. Lester's past and present are all mixed up together in his mind. As his caregiver, how would you help to give him more security in the present? Do you think it is important to honor his past?
4. In what way does the nursing home environment contribute to Lester's aggressive behaviour?
5. Do you think that the caregivers' behaviours would be different if they knew Lester's life story? How so?
6. What is the significance of the title, 'Retake'?

* Osler, A. and Zhu, J., Narratives in teaching and research for justice and human rights, *Education, Citizenship and Human Rights*; 6(3); p.223-235; 2011.

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