

Cancer healing, losing and finding the plot

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Introduction

'You've lost the plot!' is an exaggerated and exasperated cry when people feel others have gone dangerously off the tracks...the tracks as they see it. Losing the plot is a familiar and scary situation for those who have just had a cancer diagnosis. Why me? Help! What is happening? The individual may flounder and veer, crashing around and certainly losing any idea of where to go next, how to get there, inundated by feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, searching for answers and perhaps finding none. Losing the plot indeed. The stress grows, the person is indeed in danger of 'cracking up'. Here are the words of someone trying to recover their sense of self after memories of the Holocaust re-surface *"I don't know if writing helps me to overcome the past. I just know that I cannot talk, tell or think about what happened as an adult. Or in other words, when I remember, I become once again the child that I was, and everything returns and reappears before my eyes. The person that I am today must walk very carefully with these memories because they can become very dangerous. It is as if I am walking on a frozen pond, all the time watchful not to tread too heavily. That means not speaking or thinking about what happened from the viewpoint of the adult I am now. That would be like jumping on thin ice. The ice could crack and I could sink into an abyss. And I know that I might never get back"* [1].

'The ice could crack and I could sink into an abyss'. What fears lies in those simple words, applied here to Holocaust memories it is true, but also perhaps applicable not inappropriately to what is under discussion in this short article. There is of course no 'going back' after one has received a cancer diagnosis. The word "trauma" implies something static: as it were a "thing" in the mind. This tends to distract attention from dynamic and reorganising processes in the traumatized person's mind, body and relationships to others that may happen after being exposed to the trauma of diagnosis. These processes will also depend on the level of personality organisation, on past traumatizing experiences which can be re-stimulated by the diagnosis (what Freud called 'Nachträglichkeit' - 'afterwardness'... in one sense, Freud's theory of deferred action can be simply stated: memory is reprinted, so to speak, in accordance with later experience) and, most importantly, on the context that meets the survivor afterwards [2]. It is the person's own response as well as the responses of others that to a large degree will determine the fate of the traumatized person. While psychoanalysis can be a helpful way forward, both as a practical tool and as a theory to understand the mind's relationship to the body, rewriting the individual narrative, or plot, can be effected in other ways, which was the reason for the inception of this sit www.cansurviving.com.

Traumatized recently diagnosed people may struggle with mental and bodily pains which are difficult to understand and even more difficult to put into words. These pains may indeed intensify after classically prescribed cancer treatment is deemed to be 'over', as we have found. The pains may be expressed as dissociated states of mind,

as bodily pains and other somatic experiences and dysfunctions, as overwhelming thoughts, feelings and fears that the disease may return. The effects of both early and later traumatization may show itself in many diagnostic categories with symptoms characterising PTSD: post-traumatic stress disorder. These may include depression, addiction, eating disorders, personality dysfunctions and anxiety states. Traumatic experiences are painfully felt, setting their mark on body and mind without being properly symbolised. They are not symbolised, or deficiently symbolised, in the sense that they cannot be expressed in narratives in such a way that meaning can emerge that can be reflected upon. They remain concrete, retaining their original traumatising effect, often felt concretely in the body. The traumatic experience of diagnosis may also remain in the mind, appearing as dissociated or encapsulated fragments that have a disturbing effect on mood and mental stability [3]. Experience tends to become deprived of deep emotional meaning, and panic sets in. Mourning is not possible, and melancholia assails the mind, preventing any kind of 'moving on'. For a psychoanalytic commentary on this effect as seen in a film [4].

The author Christopher Booker analyses what he calls 'The Seven Basic Plots' in his book of the same name [5]. He asks, why do we tell stories? Are any of these 'basic plots' relevant post cancer diagnosis? The top book pictured on the cover of Booker's own book is 'Overcoming the Monster'. 'The Quest' comes further down, then 'Voyage and Return', then 'Rebirth' right at the bottom of the pile. Part One of the book is called 'Seven Gateways to the Underworld'. The author says 'at first sight each is quite distinctive [5]. But as we work through the sequence, we gradually come to see how they have certain key elements in common, how each is in fact presenting its own particular view of the same central preoccupation which lies at the heart of storytelling'. The central preoccupations of those diagnosed with cancer have been outlined above: Why me? Why Now? What can I do? The narrative has suffered a drastic change: can it be altered and enable the diagnosed person to carry on with life? Can one 'find the plot' again having lost it?

Narrative research emerged as a discipline within the broader field of qualitative research in the early 20th century. A narrative is normally recognised as being 'a series of connected events' - which then form a coherent story in the mind. The great psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion worked with psychotic people who for one reason or another had experienced a break in connective linkages: they lived in an unconnected world and Bion coined the term 'bizarre objects' for what he experienced as happening in the consulting room, as these bizarre 'bits' were projected not only into him but into the concrete objects in the room [6]. In a sense these people had become fragmented,

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terrified and alone, as cancer patients very often feel. Some internal or external trauma had rendered them unable to think and make ordinary connections in their minds. He says elsewhere in the same book: 'before an emotional experience can be used for a model its sense data have to be transformed into alpha elements... [thinkable thoughts] The narrative form is associated with the theory of causation...' (p.74) [6-9].

So, if we think about Booker's seven basic plots, let's see if they can indeed be related to the trauma of cancer diagnosis [5]. First up is 'Overcoming the Monster'. It is of course well known that via the medium of what analysts call 'projective identification' people and countries round the world can assume the mantle of 'The Monster'. Well, cancer too can indeed assume the proportions of 'The Monster' in peoples' minds. On the international group-built site www.cansurviving.com now accessed in 48 countries there is a Library Forum, and one of the excellent books reviewed is Siddhartha Mukerjee's 'Cancer, the Emperor of All Maladies.'. Cancer here is seen as 'The Emperor'- all powerful and malignant. This book is a revelation, says the reviewer, Ricky Emanuel. He goes on 'It is written by a sensitive oncologist and it won the Pulitzer prize for non-fiction in 2011. Dr Mukherjee said he wrote the book as a very long answer to a question posed to him by a patient, as her oncologist, to try and address the question "what am I battling?.. He writes the book as a "Biography of Cancer", as if cancer is a person whose life story he is recounting: the Monster 'Emperor'. He shows how cancer is thought of throughout history and how the way it is conceived of changes the way it is treated. He calls it "a portrait of an illness over time". It makes fascinating reading (as the reviewer says) as the author manages to convey complex information in a simplified way which only someone who knows their subject well can do. His own humanity and compassion shine through reflected in his first name (which means 'one who has accomplished a goal') as the book is full of the "stories" of his patients and researchers, including both successes and failures. The most interesting part of the book for me' the reviewer continues, 'was how he described how seeing Cancer as an enemy to be defeated in the "war against cancer" formulated by Richard Nixon had profound effects. Although it drew attention to the disease and with it a lot of research funding, the treatments like radical mastectomy were often brutal in the way an army may approach a dangerous enemy'. Here is 'The Monster' write large. 'Only by knowing the adversary or ceasing to see it as an adversary but as something to be understood and related to based on this understanding, treatments changed.'

So after demystifying the myth of 'The Monster', what comes next? What this international group-built site aims to do is to help the recently diagnosed, and those in the ensuing years afterwards, explore alternative as well as complementary methods to aid the healing process. So 'The Quest' (Booker's next basic plot) is to find ways to aid the body to stay free of cancer. With this in mind the first Forum is 'Where do I Start'? This is accessed by those beginning; what is in cliché terms called 'The Journey'. This is an excerpt from that Forum: "Are you blinded by science?" is the question asked here. And I quote further from this Forum: "We all once felt that way...just remember to take it slowly- eat real food (there are many ideas on the diet forum), and remember this cancer took a LONG time to grow in a body that wasn't too healthy either physically, or perhaps emotionally- so don't be rushed or coerced by anyone, doctors, family or friends ... Try not to fall into the urgency trap...but you may need to be prepared for some opposition and lack of support. You need to transform your whole person but it won't happen overnight so don't despair, even if you have days when you feel despairing- feel the despair but try not to BE it... just do your best each day. Slowly find out what works best for you... this stuff is work, it works, and you're worth it...And always remember:

Little hinges open big doors...If you can afford it buy a juicer as a new start, and start with a green juice every day: and then listen to our Radio Programme which should help you navigate your way. We're all here to help too..." Allied to this we have a 'Restaurants that are Vegan Friendly' forum and a forum for 'Personal Stories'. People starting out on The Quest can be heartened by hearing the stories of others, as well as feeling contained by our 'Meet the Team' Forum- others who work tirelessly to keep the site vibrant.

So on to 'Voyage and Return': The voyage out from the harbour of earlier 'certainties' may seem stormy, but over time the waves settle, and the logo of www.cansurviving.com shows a little ship sailing on calm seas. Survivorship and sailing on: it's an active process as the name of the site indicates; not lying back and gasping 'heal me' but getting back into the driving seat, even though one has to tolerate the down days (and yes there is a Forum about Depression too). Meditation in various forms is talked about on the 'Mind and Spirit' Forum', and again there is no prescribed route: the individual finds out what works for them, which may then change over time. We see ourselves on the Cansurviving Team as a sort of chandlery where people can load up with what they need, for themselves, rather than having anyone prescribe it for them, however well-meaning those people may be. So via 'The Seven Gates to the Underworld' (and it can feel pretty dark on the difficult days) the individual may get to the last of the seven plots: 'The Return'. It won't happen all at once, and along the way one does need to acknowledge that we all have to die sometime ('Will you or Wont You?'). There is 'Creativity after Diagnosis' Forum, with people from little Shirley Temple and the artist Matisse to 'ordinary people' finding this 'wake-up call' helps them to feel 'fully alive'. Creative wellsprings become stronger in the face of adversity. This site is not about creating a revenue stream, but a new stream of conscious awareness which affects how we live our lives post-diagnosis. Eve Ensler, creator of the 'Vagina Monologues', was diagnosed with Stage 3-4 cancer several years ago, as she says on this Forum. 'Cancer was just like a smash into the wall. When I sat there and they said the cancer might be in your liver too, it was like a new world. Wake the fuck up, sister! And I bless it...Was I glad to get cancer? Are you kidding? Of course I am. I wasn't in the beginning. But then I really got it. I'd always been out to prove myself: was I going to prove myself to death? Now? I'm missing seven organs and 70 nodes, and I'm functioning. How would I not love this body? Once you live in your body, you can just be'.

All of this is backed up by our vital Research Forum, headed by the respected researcher Teleny, who also works for 'What the Doctors Don't Tell You.' More and more research emerges which supports nutrition and taking care of the mind as well as the body as being the way through here, not the more conventional 'cut poison and burn' strategy.

This site in all its multifarious aspects and Forums for people to browse and come back to again and again, as we see that they do, may not appeal to all; there are those who would really rather rely on 'orthodox' methods even though more and more research indicates that this is certainly not the only way. And those who are not psychologically minded may find it questionable that the power of the group and the resultant 'group mind' can help so many people. This article does not address the question of whether such 'work group' functioning constitutes 'scientific' research, which is a term both used and abused in many circles. There is much debate on this subject which is beyond the remit of this article. However, the more research into cancer healing, where the experiences of individuals joins with research into psychoanalytic research into groups and group functioning,

pioneered by the great psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion, (for other writers on the subject a web-search will be helpful) the more knowledge will be accumulated, which is surely the way forward for anyone diagnosed with cancer. I have worked as a psychoanalytic psychotherapist for over 30 years hence my drawing on psychoanalytic research both to set up this site and to write this article. As Bion advised, it is good to 'keep your questions in good repair' rather than feel there is any one answer to many of these vexed questions. 'Vexed' is a good word as it sums up how angry adherents of different schools of thought can become.

But perhaps if we accept that fighting is not the best option, then this piece may be approached with 'an open mind'. It is perhaps also useful to ponder how ideas become ideals and then morph into 'idealizations'. As the philosopher Appiah insists: 'we should not allow the plurality of useful thoughts to undermine our belief in the existence of the truth, leaving us with nothing but a disparate collection of stories' [10]. He quotes the 19th century philosopher Hans Vaihinger who said that we can often learn a great deal by treating a subject *as if* it conformed to a certain theory, even though we know that this is a simplification. He says that such fictions 'provide an instrument for finding our way about more easily in the world' (p: 14) [10]. What we suggest on the cansurviving site is that there are new stories which can help us, rather than having to rely on 'the old ways'.

Which leads us back to the central idea here about losing and then finding the plot again- 'The Return'. Perhaps I might be allowed to end with a personal story here: When I first was diagnosed with cancer I dreamed of driving in my car into a huge black cloud. I could see nothing. But I could see that further along - but how much further along- the cloud turned into thin fog, then who knew what came next? Yes, a storm was brewing. I can now look back, and I really resonated with something Haruki Murakami said in his novel *Kafka on the Shore*.

"Once the storm is over you won't remember how you made it through, how you managed to survive. You won't even be sure, in fact, whether the storm is really over. But one thing is certain. When you come out of the storm you won't be the same person who walked in. That's what this storm's all about". One of our members posted a story told to her children at school: the buffalo heads right into the storm, while cows try to run away and are overtaken by it anyway. 'The Return' takes time, but like Odysseus, we come back 'home' with new thoughts and ideas, and new ways of being. This is in a sense the last story in Booker's volume: 'Rebirth'.

What I have described here is how this site can aid in confronting 'The Monster', beginning 'The Quest', starting out on the 'Voyage' and then 'Returning', finally reaching the stage of 'Rebirth'. Plato's Parable of the Cave describes how we may all be chained to one way of looking at things. The paradox mirrored by Plato's parable, as Booker (op cit

p.699) says, 'is that it is the very nature of our limited consciousness which stands in the way of seeing how much stories (such as those outlined here) can teach us about our limitations'. Losing the plot after cancer diagnosis is just the first step in finding something new which can then be communicated to others, to take or leave as they see fit.

I would like to end with both some words and a song. A member from Australia said "I heard about this site from some colleagues in the USA. They said it was the best site on the web for healing cancer". Since there are over nine million of them that is quite an accolade. I hope this article will widen the ever-growing remit of this free site, with its growing membership, and help more people become cansurvivors and thrivers rather than cancer victims, as they experience the power of containment and group support, finding the plot once again. A singer-songwriter has written the site a song called "Take a Look Outside the Box"--- <http://www.jpkkalliomusic.com/outside-box/> (also on the site)-that's also a good way to end, to keep on thinking, not in competition with anyone, but in cooperation, in order to help women and men and children too who receive a cancer diagnosis, go on to live their lives fully, being contained by the group of which they are now a part, and working through those 'Seven Basic Plots' to an authentic new way of living life..

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