

Remembering Our Mentor, Dr. Lester B. Brown

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Abstract: Dr. Lester Barney Brown was an American Indian, two-spirit man who was a mentor to many students during his career at California State University, Long Beach. This is a brief remembrance of his work with personal accounts by the author, a colleague, and some of his students.

Keywords: Native Americans, Task-Centered, Two-spirit people, mentoring, teaching

Early years

Dr. Lester Barney Brown was my mentor and friend. Lester claimed an American Indian identity and knew he was an American Indian, but he did not really know his family tribal history. Lester was from a small town in South Carolina (SC) named Whitmire; he liked to say that he was a “mill boy” (personal communication, J. Oliver, June 3, 2015). South Carolina had long a history of forcing Indians into the category “free people of color” or “people of color,” although local whites also called Indians “settlement Indians” and other more pejorative names. Whitmire is about an hour southwest of the present-day Catawba Indian Nation reservation.

Both of Lester’s parents were raised without parents. His mother was raised by her extended family, and his father was raised in an orphanage. Lester’s parents did not claim any tribe; that was common among Indian people in their region who knew they were Indian but – because of the historical disease, dispossession and enslavement of most South Carolina tribes – didn’t have any connection to their former tribal names, languages, histories and cultures (Perdue, 2007). Lester’s parents may have been ashamed of their Indian heritage. They passed as white most of their lives and raised Lester and his siblings as white; however, they did tell their children that they were Indian when they became adults. The news that they were Indian did not change Lester’s and his siblings’ lives that much, but Lester was determined not to be ashamed of who he was. Lester did not bow to the racist attitudes of others. Instead, he developed a determination to help other Indian people, which he maintained throughout his life.

Getting to Know Lester

Though raised in the Bible Belt, Lester was an atheist, and he believed it was important to

demonstrate to others that atheists could be kind, moral people and still not believe in God. He did not campaign against religion; he had struggled with faith, especially because his faith (Christianity) so strongly rejected homosexuality. I believe he had come to call himself an atheist out of his strong humanist ideas.

I cannot remember exactly when I met Lester, but it was early on in my career at California State University, Long Beach (CSULB). In January 1991, I had been hired as the director of the American Indian Studies (AIS) program at CSULB. Lester was already a member of the tenure track Social Work faculty at CSULB and was working on becoming a tenured professor in his department. Lester and I became friends through our work and Lester’s involvement with the American Indian Student Council (AISC).

Before his hire at CSULB, Lester had previously held positions at the University of Chicago, the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, the University at Albany, SUNY and Wayne State University. By the time I took the position in AIS, Lester had been at CSULB a few years. Lester was hired at CSULB in 1989. Lester once told me that he wanted to be at CSULB because Long Beach and he had the same initials: L. B. He was always figuring out how to make others laugh. Over time, Lester and I became close friends. He was reliable. He always made time for the American Indian Student Council (AISC) events, and he did not just show up for “face time;” he actually worked the events and stayed the entire time. In this way, Lester made it clear he was going to support the Indian students and me. For all of his joking, there was also a serious academic side to Lester.

Scholarship

Lester graduated with all of his degrees (B. A., A. M. and Ph. D.) from the University of Chicago (UC). He followed his older brother to study there, and I believe that the core of Lester’s identity was formed there, too.

Lester completed his A. M. and Ph. D. at the School of Social Service Administration (SSA) where he met the woman he called his “other mother,” Laura Epstein. Lester was part of a cohort of SSA students who completed their dissertation research applying task-centered models to a variety of issues. Lester’s dissertation work was on using task-centered theory to increase clients’ problem solving acumen. Laura Epstein was a writing partner to Dr. William Reid (Lester’s dissertation chair), and she was a teacher and researcher at SSA for many years before she left due to illness. At SSA, Lester began what would become a life long mother-son like relationship with Laura, and even after he moved across the country, they would visit each other often. When Laura died, Lester served as the executor for her estate and held the copyright to her books.

Lester’s experiences at the University of Chicago were not all good. He struggled with accepting his sexual orientation. The realizations that he was gay and that his life would never be easy were hard realities to accept. Lester always said that no one would choose to be gay if they could be straight. He was always angry when people would say that being gay was a lifestyle or a choice. Lester had some long romantic relationships throughout his life, but he did not make a life long partnership. Many of Lester’s friendships, however, were life long, and he devoted himself to his academic work and teaching.

Teaching

I called Dr. John Oliver, who is currently retired from his professorate at CSULB, to interview him about Lester’s teaching career. Dr. Oliver (John) worked closely with Lester at several universities. John, along with his wife Nancy (also a retired professor of Nursing at CSULB), were Lester’s long time friends and colleagues; they took care of Lester for several years after he became ill. John and Nancy are both currently living in Long Beach.

After graduating from SSA with his doctorate, Lester was briefly an instructor at SSA. He was also a clinical supervisor at Jackson Park Hospital (near UC’s campus). Since he was a clinical supervisor, he directed other SSA doctoral candidates who were using the task-centered model in their research. Soon Lester would follow his dissertation chair, Dr. William Reid (Bill), to Milwaukee, where he first

met John. At that time, John was the associate dean there; he and his colleagues were “raiding” the University of Chicago to help build Milwaukee’s new program in social work. Bill Reid suggested that if they really wanted to build their clinical program, they needed to hire Lester (J. Oliver, personal communication, June 2, 2015). John, Nancy and Lester became fast friends, and John would later work with Lester again at both Albany and CSULB.

John recalled that Lester had “unbelievable” clinical and curriculum development skills. Lester taught the human behavior sequences, clinical practice, research classes, and he also liked to teach field instruction and supervision. Lester also spent a great deal of time supervising master students’ thesis work. He was especially interested in developing curricula relevant to many diverse populations groups including lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT). He also taught some of the earliest classes on working with human immunodeficiency virus or acquired immune deficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS) patients (personal communication, J. Oliver, June 2, 2015). At Albany and Wayne State, Lester was very busy writing grants to support his work with (HIV/AIDS) patients. John recalls that Lester got a lot of grant money during those years in the mid to late ‘80s. While at Albany, John and Lester wrote a series of books for practitioners on working with African-American, Hispanic and gay and lesbian clients (a total of three books). These books were adopted by the State of New York as guides for social workers and other service professionals in NY state agencies. John and Lester also developed minority student recruitment and retention strategies that they presented on at various conferences and for other schools of social work. John said that at every campus where Lester taught he advocated for minority students and hiring minority faculty. As a result, every one of the social work programs where Lester taught became much more diverse (J. Oliver, personal communication, June 2, 2015).

Research

As previously stated, John had already worked with Lester at Milwaukee and Albany and when John moved to CSULB, Lester also applied for a position there. John recalled that Lester was living with a long-time partner while at Wayne State, and John did not think that Lester would move, but in 1989 Lester joined the Social Work faculty at CSULB. While on faculty,

Lester wrote one of the first books on the social issues and service needs of American Indian lesbians and gays. Lester's book, *Two Spirit People: American Indian Lesbian Women and Gay Men* was published in 1997. It is an edited volume that explores the identity and social service needs of two-spirit people as contemporary individuals with important roles in their communities. Laura Epstein wrote the forward to the volume and Duane Champagne, the Director for the UCLA American Indian Center, wrote the preface. Also in 1997, Lester co-authored the book, *Gay Men and Aging*, with Terry Cook. In 2001, Lester edited a volume on the task centered model originally written by Laura Epstein: *Brief Treatment and a New Look at the Task-Centered Approach*. The book was a reissue of Laura's original book, *Brief Treatment: The Task Centered Approach*. Laura passed away in 1996, but they had already had many conversations about how Lester should update and edit the book for a new publication. In the preface to that volume, Lester explained how he worked to keep true to the portions of the book that Laura had written while making edits and updates where needed. Parts one and two were essentially Laura's work. Lester updated the book with a totally new third part that details the application of task-centered theory to work with surgical patients, HIV/AIDS patients and to work with homeless families and individuals.

More than any other book that Lester wrote, his work on Two Spirit people has been most widely referenced in social work and Native American scholarship. In the chapter on identity, Lester carefully laid out his case that American Indian cultures identified six gender styles. He also did a detailed review of all the literature to define those genders, especially "not-women" and "not-men." Lester argued that American Indian communities were not easily categorized into the rigid sexual identities that Western societies, for the most part, accept today. Not-women and not-men appeared to be bisexual, but Lester cautioned that labeling sexual expression is not an easy task, especially since "most reports seem to imply that most women, men, not-men and not-women enjoyed sexual expression irrespective of their partner's gender" (Brown, 2001, p. 15). The historical record was not clear or objective since most of these accounts were written by non-Indians whose perspective was that Native peoples' acceptance of sexual difference was

evidence of their overall immorality. Lester also cautioned that those writing these accounts were often focused on male behavior, especially on men who expressed a not-woman gender; these accounts also generally disregarded women. He did a very careful literature review for this chapter, and it was clear that he was trying to parse out these gender identities and at the same time keep from implying that there was some way that we can fully understand pre-contact American Indian sexual expression and feeling from the historical record that we have; that is not possible. Finally, he argued that lesbian and gay American Indians were a new sexual identity (newer than women, men, not women and not men) that emerged during the 1960s through the civil rights and gay rights movements (Brown, 2001).

An important point about the work that Lester did in both the title and authorship of the book, *Two Spirit People*, is that he deliberately chose to list lesbian women before gay men in the title and text of the book, and he asked his female students to author chapters in the book. In fact, women author most of the chapters in this volume and where Lester is the co-author, he deliberately chose to make the woman the lead author. Lester and I wrote one of the chapters together and we discussed his rationale for giving women priority. There were several reasons for Lester's insistence that women get listed first: 1) he felt that Laura Epstein did not get the recognition that she deserved for all the work she had done on task-centered theory; 2) he wanted to model the type of behavior he hoped other men in the social work profession would also follow; and 3) he wanted to list lesbian women first because he felt that the literature on lesbian women and gay men tended to focus on men much more than women, again revealing a Western bias against women.

From Colleague to Mentor

Lester was the main reason I entered the MSW program at CSULB. By the time I entered the program, Lester and I had a very close relationship. Lester and I would call each other first thing every morning. If we both had time, we would have coffee together at the campus coffee shop just down the walkway from our office buildings. Lester spent most of the time doing two things that he also loved: smoking and drinking lots of black coffee. Most days we would sit outside and just talk. We both loved to people watch and sometimes mine or Lester's students or other colleagues would

join us.

Lester was my masters' thesis chair, but I did not take any other classes with him as my teacher because he did not want to have the dual relationship where he would have to determine a grade for me. He took his role as a social worker and social work educator very seriously. Lester was determined to help guide me through the program. While I worked through the MSW program, he advised me as I applied for doctoral programs. Immediately after I left the position of AIS director, Lester stepped into that position and was the director of the program for at least a year until Dr. Troy Johnson, another professor in the AIS and History programs, could take over those duties.

Lora Remembers Lester

This article prompted me to contact several of my fellow Lester-mentored American Indian students that I am still in contact with. Lora Zumwalt (Mohave) wrote to me via email:

My remembrance of Dr. Lester B. Brown, or Dr. Brown as I called him, was during one of the graduations at Cal State Long Beach. During the year, he had asked various people to get their tribe to send him a flag. When graduation came, the flags were seen flying high and proud among all the other flags from different countries. It was a beautiful sight. He was a very dedicated mentor and helped me make it through to my Master's in Social Work to graduation. He also helped me by letting me know about employment opportunities. He was fun and always had time for his students (personal communication, L. Zumwalt, May 23, 2015).

Lora attended CSULB from 1992-98, earning a BA in Psychology in '94 and an MSW in '98. Lora was an active member of the AISC. That was where I met her and where she met Lester. As an MSW student, Lora did internships at the American Indian Counseling Center in Los Angeles County and with the State Department of Rehabilitation. After graduation, Lora was employed for several years by the Long Beach Unified School District's Educational Opportunities for Native Americans program (EONA). Lora was adopted out as a child and did not know her tribal history until 2009 when

her adoption files were opened. She knew she was Native, but did not know her tribe. Finally in 2009, she was able to learn that her birth mother, already deceased, was Mohave from the Colorado River Indian Tribes. She is currently self-employed and living in Nevada with her partner, Onowa Kaye (Hopi, Navajo, Goshute) (L. Zumwalt, personal communication, May 23, 2015).

Harrelson and Lester

I spoke with Harrelson Notah (Dine) who is an Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) Counselor at CSULB. Harrelson did his undergraduate and MSW work at CSULB. Lester was Harrelson's thesis chair for a time, but Lester took a leave of absence for health reasons before Harrelson finished the program. Harrelson recalled that Lester was funny in that he was too impatient to wait for paperwork or university requirements (white tape) to get things done. Harrelson remembered that Lester was the advisor to the Associated Students of Social Work (ASSW) and AISC. When students needed something that required money, he often would just give the group leaders the money from his own pocket rather than wading through the university system for student clubs to pay the expense. He would say, "Here's the money, just go do it" (H. Notah, personal communication, June 2, 2015). He would also treat the student group leadership like partners: "He'd say to us, you take care of this part and I'll take care of the rest" (personal communication, H. Notah, June 2, 2015).

Lester also took that approach with Harrelson when he went to see him about applying for graduate school. "I had no idea about the social work program. Lester sat me down and said 'What do you want to do with this degree?' and from there I got the application (for the MSW program) and he just said to me 'Just write the personal statement and I'll take care of the rest'" (personal communication, H. Notah, June 2, 2015). Lester mentored Harrelson through the MSW program. Harrelson really liked that Lester always worked from a proactive community-based approach and that his mentoring was often more of a partnering than telling him (students) what to do. Harrelson recalled that Lester would often give him the keys to his office when he needed to print out papers or make phone calls. Harrelson remembered that Lester treated all of his students the same way: if they needed something they would ask Lester and he would find a way to help.

Harrelson said that Lester always found the Indian students in the MSW program.

“I don’t know if he recruited them there or if he found them after they came, but he always ended up being their (American Indian students’) thesis chair. I know because he was thesis chair for another Indian, a girl, who was in the program the same time I was” (H. Notah, personal communication, June 2, 2015).

Harrelson remembered that he and other students presented at a major conference with Lester on applying task-centered strategies to student recruitment and retention. Harrelson also thought there was an increase in the number of Native American students in the MSW program while Lester was there. Now, Harrelson says that he is still using the task-centered strategies that he learned from Lester with the students he sees in EOP. Harrelson lives in Redondo Beach with his wife Cristina (Dine) and their children, Natalie and Tyler.

Shannon Recalls her Mentor

Shannon K. O’Loughlin (Oklahoma Choctaw) transferred to CSULB from Fullerton College in 1994 and graduated with the first degree in American Indian Studies through the Interdisciplinary program. When I asked Shannon to recall the first time she met Lester, she said, “He was just always there!” (personal communication, S. K. O’Loughlin, June 6, 2015). As we talked, she remembered sitting at a table selling t-shirts with Lester during her first AISC pow-wow in 1995.

“We just sat at the t-shirt table. He had the bawdiness of my grandmother. He just said what was on his mind. I think he shocked other people and himself. He was hilarious! I felt special that he wanted to spend time with me” (personal communication, S. K. O’Loughlin, June 6, 2015).

Shannon eventually became the vice-president of the AISC, and she recalled that Lester was extremely insightful in helping her to understand the motivations of other people and how to handle conflicts in the group. Lester guided Shannon through the process of earning an American Indian Studies B. A. degree through the Interdisciplinary program. While she was still a member of the AI

Student Council, Lester, Shannon and several other students tried to form a support group for American Indians with HIV/AIDS. Shannon recalled that Lester took her through a process of training to help her get ready to be a group leader. She recalled not feeling that she really knew what she was doing, but “he just encouraged me, gave me the confidence that I could do it” (personal communication, S. K. O’Loughlin, June 6, 2015). The group was not a success, but Shannon was grateful for the experience. Before her graduation, Lester nominated Shannon for the Outstanding Graduate for the College of Liberal Arts and she won. During her graduation she and several other American Indian students wore their tribal regalia and they had a drum there to play during the ceremony. “Lester got all that done and he never made it seem like it was a burden. It was his pleasure to make these things happen” (S. K. O’Loughlin, personal communication, June 6, 2015). After her graduation, Lester got the campus newspaper, the ‘49ner, to interview Shannon for a story.

Shannon was accepted into the J. D./Ph. D. program at the University of Arizona. She completed her law degree and left the program to pursue a private practice career specializing in federal Indian law.

“After graduation he continued to be my mentor. He tried like hell to keep me from going to Albany... He always advised me and he was always right!” (personal communication, S. K. O’Loughlin, June 6, 2015).

Shannon explained that she went to Albany anyway and found that relationships in New York were more challenging and that she was always trying to figure out where she stood with many of the people she worked with there. She recalled that her decision to move to Albany was the only time she could remember when Lester was displeased with her. Shannon also stated that one of her regrets about her relationship with Lester is that she was not able to be with Lester as his health was declining. “It was after my grandmother died and I was sick of people dying on me” (personal communication, S. K. O’Loughlin, June 6, 2015). Shannon was living on the East Coast when Lester died. She was not able to attend the memorial service for him in Long Beach.

“He was constantly giving. All you had to do was show up and he would just give himself to you. I can’t say enough about the fact that Lester was one

of the only persons in my life who was just there for me and didn't want anything from me" (personal communication, S. K. O'Loughlin, June 6, 2015).

Shannon is currently the Chief of Staff for the National Indian Gaming Commission. She lives in Washington D.C. with her husband Christopher Keller and their son, Wolfgang.

Putting Things in Order

I would be remiss if I left the reader with the impression that loving Lester and being his friend was always easy. It was not. Lester could be extremely exasperating, especially when it came to taking care of himself. I do not know when Lester developed diabetes (type II). For all the time that I knew him, Lester took insulin shots before every meal. As I said previously, he also always smoked...a lot; but he constantly said that he was smoking fewer cigarettes or smoking "safer" cigarettes. At some point, Lester also developed high blood pressure and high cholesterol. Diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol are stress related conditions common to a lot of ethnic groups, but American Indians are often cited as having the highest rates of type II diabetes in the U.S. (DHHS, 2012). Diabetes increases the likelihood that you will also develop high blood pressure and high cholesterol. Smoking intensifies the bad effects of all of these conditions. Lester was a typical diabetes sufferer in that he took his insulin as prescribed by his doctor, but he then ate whatever he wanted. I distinctly remember that Lester would tell me after eating a bite of cake or a whole slice, "don't worry, I took a little more insulin today because I knew I was gonna eat this." John Oliver recalled that Lester appeared to ignore all of the conditions that plagued him, preferring to behave as if he did not have to be careful about what he ate or drank.

When I finally finished my doctoral program at SSA in 2005, I moved back to California and took a position at San Diego State University (SDSU) in the social work department. Lester appeared to be doing really well. He came down to San Diego to visit me, and he took my kids and me to the zoo. We kept in touch and Lester promised me that he would make sure to help me get tenure at SDSU. I did not know it at the time, but Lester had already had some

mini strokes, though nothing that put him out of work for long. Lester and I made plans to co-present on task-centered research at the CSWE in Chicago in February, 2006. Our proposal was accepted, but at the last minute Lester told me he was not going to be able to attend. I went by myself and presented without him. A number of Lester's friends came to the presentation expecting to see and hear from Lester, but they were disappointed. Some time later, Lester began sending me some things from his 30 some years in academia. He sent me his UC graduation robe and cap and many, many books he had collected on the task-centered model and other race and social work issues. He told me that he was cleaning out his office and taking a medical leave from work.

At some point after this, Lora Zumwalt called me to tell me that Lester had had a stroke and was in a coma in the hospital. I called John Oliver to hear his report about what had happened. John and Nancy were picking Lester up for dinner, but after ringing the bell, he never answered his door. They knew he was home because they had called and he answered before they left, but at their arrival he did not appear to be at home. After the emergency workers broke down the door, they found Lester in a coma on his bathroom floor. Lora told me about going to the hospital to see Lester while he was still in that coma. Lora told Lester that he was not gone yet and that he had to come back and suffer like the rest of us. I asked Lora if I should go see Lester, but she told me that it would not be worth my time because Lester probably would not remember if I had been there or not.

Months passed and Lester went home. He had recovered, but he was never the same. When I saw him next he was rail-thin. His hair had been shaved in the hospital because he apparently hit his head falling in the bathroom during his stroke; he had about two inches of growth by the time I saw him. After I accepted a job in North Carolina I went up to Long Beach to spend the day with Lester and several of our mutual friends. I recall us all having a meal at a local restaurant that Lester said was one of his favorites (The Magnolia Café). When it was time to go Lester told me not to go to North Carolina because he would never see me again. I told Lester that we would always be able to see each other because I would come back for conferences and other trips, but in the end, Lester was right. I just didn't want to accept what was happening.

Lester Makes his Transition

John and Nancy became Lester's caretakers. They became the only family that Lester had beyond his students. Lester had taken care of both his sisters before they both passed and the rest of his family were on the east coast, so John and Nancy and some of his students took on the major tasks of caring for Lester. "Every time that we thought he was gone, we'd go to the hospital and Lester would come back and be up and walking around" (J. Oliver, personal communication, June, 3, 2015). John and Nancy ended up caring for Lester for about two years. During those years, Lester had a series of health issues and probably several other strokes before he passed away.

When Lumbee elders pass away, other elders at the "sittin' up" or wake will often say "She or he is doing what we will all have to do someday." John likes to say that Lester "made his transition" on February 16th, 2009 (J. Oliver, personal communication, June 3, 2015). Lester's official cause of death was a myocardial infarction, but John said that Lester's body just wore out. John and Nancy made sure that Lester's students, colleagues and remaining family were notified and they invited everyone to Long Beach for a gathering to celebrate Lester's life. Later they sprinkled Lester's remains in a place that he chose. To the end, Lester did what he wanted to do, ignoring his body, the advice of his doctors and that of his friends. He continued to try to do whatever his body would let him do. He died still trying to advise his students and help us make important life decisions. I feel certain that when Lester told me that he would never see me again, he knew he was dying. I was very sad when Lester made his transition, as were all of his students and friends. I loved him, but I accepted his death because

it was clear that Lester's body could no longer do all that he still wanted to do.

I have never met anyone else like Lester. He taught me so many things. I could not begin to list all of them here. I think the most important thing he taught me and demonstrated for me daily was how to accept people who are different from you. That seems like a very simple lesson, but it is not. In social work we repeat it over and over again to our students, that social workers have to be willing to begin where the client is and that must include accepting them for who they are. Lester had that lesson "down." He did not say it so much as he lived it.

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