

A LIFE STORY: Told Through the Voice of Dementia

This narrative presents a glimpse of a relationship which developed far beyond the confines of a research study. Roles of clinician, researcher, and loving friend all crossed into one heart.

By Maria C. Bartlett

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Above all, this is a love story. I did not intend it to be. The heroine is an old demented woman whose name is Bunny. Like a gossamer romance, she did not know my name but said she loved me. I, likewise, returned the gift. She is the old woman I could become. Based on a life which spans the century, her story tells us much about what it means to be human.

Candid, uncensored and charming, she is both amusing and bemused. Frankness penetrates her reminiscence about life, its mysteries and meaning. I listened to her remarkable account, told again and again in much the same way, over the course of the year she turned 95.

Despite the richness of the tale, there was much left untold. I can forgive that she "forgets." In the shadows of her mind lies a graveyard of memories.

"Now is the best time," she says, despite living in a nursing home. "I thought I wouldn't like it and I'm crazy about it. They give you a freedom of speech and freedom of thought and freedom period. They have what they call a brain wash which is wonderful. It's so different." She displays an unusual optimism for someone confined to an institution which sets her apart from the hundreds of other nursing home inhabitants that I have known. Not sad, depressed or melancholy, Bunny is animated, funny, pointed, and affectionate. Her wit and sharp mind are interspersed with occasional memory lapses.

She lives in a nursing home on the same street where she grew up. The home is adjacent to the city park where she was once the superintendent, as was her father and grandfather before her. But she has little memory of that. A street not far from the nursing home and park is named after her family for their civic contributions to the community.

Her stories invariably begin with the introduction of



Henry Shaw, whom she describes as a family friend. A wealthy philanthropist at the turn of the century, Shaw built St. Louis' Botanical Gardens. As Bunny tells it, "He came to this country with nine dollars. He went to New York, 'But they had the Empire State Building.' He went to Chicago and said, 'They've got Lake Michigan'. Then he went to St. Louis and said, 'Well, they're not too bright. I think I'll settle here.'"

The first time Bunny told me she was "walking on lily pads in Henry Shaw's Botanical Gardens," I presumed this was evidence of the disease at work or an indication of a rather lively imagination. It was neither. Not being a native of St. Louis I was woefully ignorant of this story, which is one of the city's well-known historical anecdotes. Henry Shaw designed an experiment in which the public was invited to 'walk on the lily pads of the pond in the Botanical Gardens.' Context and experience create meaning. It was easy to dismiss the "lily pads" as a sidestep from reality. But whose reality? How often do we discredit others experience when it is not our own?

Growing up she spent much of her time with her older brother, Jim. She often repeats the following advice from Jim, 'Now Sis, you've got a good mind. Always go with someone who has a better mind. There's always somebody that has a better mind than you. So be modest.' Bunny said, "I found myself doing it because I was mad about my brother."

In response to my asking

whether she had married she said, "No, I didn't marry. Isn't that terrible? I wonder why I didn't marry. Why didn't I marry? I didn't seem to lack anything. That's where I was dumb I guess." When I asked her if she had a sweetheart she replied, "Well no. Now that's one thing I guess you could say my life maybe lacked. I'll put it this way. Apparently the life I lived I didn't need a boyfriend. I was complete within myself. I sound stuck up. But I wasn't stuck up. I just didn't yearn to have a boyfriend."

She describes herself as having been "a damn good tennis player. Damn good. I'm bragging now, but it's all very true...I was real good. Oh yes, I was excellent! I was considered tops. They couldn't beat me. They said, oh no you'll never be able to touch her, she really can bat that ball. They said don't get conceited and I said, well why shouldn't I, I play tennis better. I accepted the praise. But I never did anything with my praise. I



never went out and got a wonderful job and did things like that. Now that's really a point. That's really a funny point that I never really accomplished anything because I didn't have anything in my mind to accomplish. Is that unusual?" I asked her about the tennis competitions and she replied, "I'm not in competition now because I figure that I'm sort of elderly, so to speak. I don't mean that I'm shaking all over or anything, but I guess I lack ambition. I don't want to be. What do I want to be better for? I used to have a fine past. I don't let it go past. At one time I was pretty good."

Her parents are remembered this way, "My father was a wonderful guy. I was very, very, fortunate. I was fortunate in the mother I had and I was fortunate in the father I had...You know I don't know what he did for a living, he must have done something for a living. He just must have been a damn good guy. Maybe there's something that he got himself in a frame (points to his picture). I don't know."

On September 30, 1994, Bunny turned 95. She remembers the date but not the year she was born. "I'm awfully old," she says. I am visiting her in her room at the nursing home with three of her friends, Bunny's lawyer and his wife, and a woman who once took care of her when she lived at home. In the spirit of celebrating Bunny's life, we played my video of her from the previous summer. As she watched herself on the screen she commented, "Why don't you say something... She talks too

much... Why don't you wash your hair... Don't you think she's said enough... Why do I talk so much... Don't tell them everything... Help her God, she needs help... Don't tell it all... I don't like women that talk too much." Midway through we stopped the tape because she did not seem to enjoy it. Her comments were admonitions both to her and about her. To be participant and observer offered her a unique glimpse of herself, but she didn't really care to look. However, the interviews themselves reveal an interest and joy in talking about her life, a thrill that someone cared to listen.

On December 11, 1994, I made a holiday visit to Bunny. Before I had my coat off she asked, "What is dementia praecox?" She had heard the words from an aide, she said. "Of course" she knew what dementia was... and alluded to the loss of the mind. "I'm a little nutty, you know, but does that make me demented?" Her ability to converse about dementia offered a detached analysis from the "observed." The conversation continued with her asking me, "Why don't you move in here? There's room in my bed... We've always liked each other, we're both a little goofy..." "Sometimes I get real smart and you can't follow me. Do I know it all?" No, I don't want to load up."

At Christmas I brought her a small poinsettia plant, and she thanked me by saying, "I know you love me." As I left she said, "Love me always. I'm so glad we love each other."

James Taylor has said in

song, "The secret of life is enjoying the passage of time." I imagine Bunny to have been in on this secret all along.

I saw Bunny many times over a two year period. Most of my visits had no purpose, no research agenda, no clinical intent. I went to see her because she made me feel better about life and the world, and because she was always glad to see me. Like a junky, I would go get a Bunny "fix." She was an anti-depressant with no side effects, and gave new meaning to the term "addictive personality." We would exchange terms of endearment and joke about our "mutual admiration society." I never saw her maudlin, or angry or depressed. There was immediate recognition by Bunny of the context of who I was, "Oh, you're the one that asks me all those crazy questions, who do I like, who do I hate..." but she never once knew my name.

Being in the middle ages, I asked her what I now view as an impertinent and irrelevant question, "what is it like getting older?" I have learned that this is not a subject that engages the older person. The reality seems to be that it is too much to contemplate. In other words, don't ask. Despite not getting a direct answer, I did get the message. Much was communicated to me through the experience of being with and talking to older people. Aging is my struggle now, since I am not quite there. Soon there will be a time when I won't want to think about it either, for it will be upon me.

In my search for positive archetypes in aging I have found

Bunny. Had I not met her, I doubt I would be so willing to consider the possibility of my own senility and inevitable decay. I was transformed by knowing Bunny and I feel others may be too. □



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