Art Lerner: First Impressions; Lasting Memories

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It was September, 1979. The place was New York City. The event was the annual convention of the American Psychological Association (APA). I was an instructor teaching psychology at a small rural Piedmont North Carolina community college. I was at the convention with a friend to present some research we had conducted on religion and mental health. However, as a side bar to that major presentation, I had been invited by the humanistic psychology division of APA to make an informal presentation on the use of poetry in therapy. The presentation was to take place in the suite of the division's hospitality center. When I arrived, there were approximately 20 people in the room seated on couches, chairs, and even the floor. All seemed older and more experienced than I, but they also appeared friendly and receptive.

As I began my presentation, I recounted incidents in my own clinical life where I had either used a poem or a client had brought in a poem that had made a significant difference in his or her life. I told the audience that although I was a novice in the use of poetry in counseling I had recently ordered a book entitled, Poetry in the Therapeutic Experience. The author of the work was a psychologist from Los Angeles named Art Lerner. “That's L-E-R-N-E-R,” I said trying to emphasize the point that there was a place for poetry in clinical settings and that there was at least one authority in the field.

“T'm Lerner,” came a voice from a man in a blue sweater on the couch in front of me. “Oh,” I replied. “I hope I'm quoting you correctly.”

“Go ahead,” he stated. And so I did.

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After the presentation was over Art approached me. Instead of just saying something mundane and leaving the room, he inquired, “What are you doing for dinner?” I explained that I was going to dine with a friend who had come with me from the community college to which he replied, “Bring him along.” So I did. That evening, in a New York deli, I got to know Art and his wife, Matilda, on a first-name basis. Art was already established as a leader in the use of literature, especially poetry, in therapy. Why he chose to invite me to dinner with him that night still amazes me. I sat in awe and with a funny feeling of fascination. I could not believe I was in the presence of such a wise and kind person. Art gave me a lot of food for thought during the meal and picked up the tab as well.

That September was the beginning of a relationship that lasted almost 20 years. The next year Art invited me to make a presentation at UCLA on poetry in educational settings. I accepted and asked my students to bring in poems they found meaningful in their lives. The response was overwhelming. Thus, I arrived in Los Angeles with great anticipation and an armload of poetry. Art was teaching me even though he was 3,000 miles away. He broadened my horizons in regard to who I was and what poetry as a tool in therapy was. I learned more in preparation for that trip and in my interactions on it than I can possibly convey. I was immersed in a new field. To make matters even better, Art was not shy about introducing me to others in attendance. Though my part on the program was relatively small, my network of professional colleagues in the profession grew exponentially overnight. Poetry in therapy came to be personally relevant to my life and the lives of those whom I taught and counseled. My thoughts flying back from L.A. had a life of their own but one idea kept repeating itself: “There’s something about this man and what he is doing. I need to know more.”

That needing to know more came sooner rather than later. Art started calling me regularly and talking with me about both what he was doing and what I was doing. We not only talked about poetry but also covered topics such as the Civil War, current events, and religion. He seemed intrigued that I had a dog named “Eli.” “Eli is a good Jewish name,” he said. “By the way,” he inquired, “what do you think my religious affiliation is?”

When I moved to Connecticut to take a position at a small Jesuit university, Art continued calling. His calls were welcomed because they always left me with new knowledge and a good feeling. One Saturday morning in April of 1982, he said: “I’m going to be in New York City on Thursday. Why don’t you come spend the day with me? We can talk about poetry therapy, eat at the United Nations, and I’ll introduce you to my editor.” So I took the train into the city, met Art at his hotel, and had lunch with him at the United Nations before visiting his editor in a book-filled apartment that seemed filled with success and expectations. The relaxed nature