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Healing Spaces

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## JAMES JOYCE'S ULYSSES 100 YEARS LATER: FLYING BY THE NETS OF NARRATIVE

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In thinking about the theme of this issue of the journal I wanted to explore two great works in literature and what they illustrate about the mind as a healing space. It is exactly 100 years since James Joyce's modernist masterpiece *Ulysses*[1] was published. I have been reflecting on *Ulysses* since I finished reading another masterpiece published in the same year, 1922, John Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga*[2]. The contrast between the two books is striking and seems to me to epitomize a fundamental tension still being acted out 100 years later: how best to approach suffering both in medicine and in life.

*The Forsyte Saga* tells the story of an upper middle-class family living in London in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The main protagonist is Soames Forsyte who makes a disastrous decision that blights his life and the lives of members of his family over the following 50 years. Soames falls in love with and marries the beautiful Irene who finds that she cannot love Soames. What follows is marital unhappiness, infidelity by Irene, marital rape by Soames, the death of Irene's lover, a long-delayed divorce, and at the end a blighted love affair between Soames daughter and Irene's son (they had both remarried). It feels like a net,

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which was set when Soames and Irene made their original mistake of getting married, tightens and tightens further as the book progresses and destroys lives in a way that seems inevitable and unavoidable. There is no escape from that very plausible narrative net.

*Ulysses* which also involves marriage and infidelity unfolds during a single day in the same era (June 16, 1904) in another capital city, Dublin, at that time also part of the British Empire. The main character Leopold Bloom is, like Soames Forsyte, cuckolded by his wife Molly. In a book structured loosely on Homer's *Odyssey* we follow Bloom through a day in Dublin. We meet him making and serving breakfast to his wife in bed. He leaves home and travels around the city aware and constantly reminded of his wife's planned assignation with Blazes Boylan. Both Bloom and Soames Forsyte experience suffering. And yet there is a marked difference in how the events in the book are portrayed. There is no narrative net, and no overseeing narrator to wield such a net. The book is more like series of tableaux in which we hear what the characters are thinking and feeling moment to moment (stream of consciousness). Are there characters we like and dislike in the book? Yes, but no plot in which there are inevitable consequences to actions. It is more like a day in our own lives in which things simply happen one after the other, often unpredictably. It is like the direct experience of a day before we have turned it into a story of some kind. The book includes the main characteristics of mindfulness – moment to moment non-judgmental attention and awareness. Unlike *The Forsyte Saga*, *Ulysses* ends with a sense of freedom and energy where Bloom's wife Molly performs a long soliloquy on her life ending with a Yes to Bloom and to life.

The contrast relevant to medicine that I see between the two books is between narrative medicine and mindfulness as ways to address suffering. In the narrative approach we take patient's stories very seriously. We empathize with their suffering, and we seek ways forward that honor the patient's meaning and story as avenues to healing. However, sometimes our stories cause suffering and are the main obstacle to healing.

I recall an event that occurred in a 3-day course that I took aimed at transformation. One of the rules of the course was that participants were required to stay seated during the 3-hour segments in the which the course took place. The only exception was if they provided a doctor's certificate attesting to a disability necessitating their moving around. One participant, a man in his 40's from a military background refused to remain seated despite the absence of a doctor's certificate. In a heated interaction with the leader of the seminar this participant was adamant that this was a long-standing problem for which he had consulted many doctors who agreed because of a serious back problem that it was essential that he not remain seated for long periods. The leader replied that, unfortunately, if he could not provide a medical certificate he would have to sit down. When the participant continued to walk around the leader asked his assistants at the back of the room to call the police and have this disruptive participant removed from the room. The participant sat down and remained seated for the 3 days of the seminar.

Most surprisingly, at the conclusion of the seminar the participant thanked the leader. This had been a breakthrough in dealing with a back pain that had affected his life for many years. It seems to me an example of healing that resulted from rejecting a story that this person had carried around for many years, a possession that he needed to let go of in order to heal.

One of the features that Galsworthy stresses about Soames Forsyte was that he was a man of property. In Soames case this sense of property extended not just to money, buildings, and other possessions but to people, including his wife. But perhaps the property that Soames holds most destructively is the story he carries with him about who he is and what that means to himself and others.

By contrast, in *Ulysses* the main protagonist, Bloom, is a man without much in the way of material possessions. He would certainly not fit Galsworthy's designation of a man of property. He is attempting without much success to sell an ad in a newspaper. He does not treat his wife or anyone else as property. But it is the mindful way that the book is written that frees Bloom and us from the heavy burden of suffering that Soames Forsyte carries. It achieves this effect by having us experience, via the language used and the style adopted as well as the device of stream of consciousness, what is happening moment-to-moment in that single day in Dublin. The best analogy I can make is that it is like sitting in mindful meditation with continually new sensations, feelings, and thoughts arising that are then replaced by new sensations, thoughts, and feelings and so on till the book finishes. As soon as we stop and try to make sense of what is happening, we have lost the thread of the book. What remains is an experience. Personally, I find that *Ulysses*, although challenging to read because of the absence of a plot, leaves me with a sense of renewed energy rather than the mild heaviness and depression at the end of *The Forsyte Saga*.

A key difference between the books is the treatment of time. In *Ulysses* time is reduced from the roughly 50 years of *The Forsyte Saga* to one day. Within that day each segment and each moment are presented separately without a strong narrative thread tying them together. The result is that neither Bloom nor we as readers are trapped by the narrative net that closes in on Soames Forsyte.

And yet I wonder what happened with Bloom's and Molly's relationship on June 17 (the day after the book took place) and in the subsequent days, months, and years. I wonder the same about the participant who refused to sit during that course. It appears to me that the effect of Joyce's writing is congruent with the Buddhist tenet of no self. Our idea that we have a **self** is a story that we make up from our experience over time. I believe that one intention of Buddhist practices, including mindful meditation that focuses on moment-to-moment experience, is to free us from the story that we hold about ourselves so that we can experience life more fully. If, as Eric Cassell states[3], suffering occurs when there is a threat to our sense of intactness as a person then the clearest way to relieve suffering is to let go of the story of that person that we identify as ourselves. I do believe that this is part of the process of healing – a move towards a

sense of integrity and wholeness (and aliveness) that occurs in response to injury or disease. Yet we will repeatedly be caught by those powerful nets of narrative given we desire a sense of meaning and stability over time that is such a strong feature of Galsworthy's book.

How do we make space for these two approaches to suffering in clinical practice? We need to make a distinction between content and presence. The **content** of the patient's story will usually be a narrative with a plot to which we must listen with respect and emotional engagement. To do less would be to dishonour the personhood of both the patient and the caregiver. At the same time, we must bring a mindful **presence** that allows us to listen without judgement to each separate element of the story as it unfolds from moment-to-moment. It is the combination of these two approaches from the writings of Galsworthy and Joyce, respect for narrative content and plot (Galsworthy) combined with the mindful freedom from being trapped by story (Joyce), that constitutes the whole person care approach to medicine necessary for the relief of suffering and the creation of a space in the mind for healing. ■

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