

She was a stout lady, put together too solidly to be called "fat". Her hair was grey, almost white, long, and pulled back from a center part, fastened somewhere in back. Her name was Helen Lester. She was my teacher in the 7th and 8th grades at Seattle Junior Academy.

Her features were delicate but her cleanly-defined jaw gave an indication that this lady could be completely resolute, should the need arise. Every once in a while, the need arose. Most of the time, Mrs. Lester was as polite as a bank teller. But none of her students ever formulated the thought that they could somehow take advantage of her good nature. She was just too smart for that.

Mrs. Lester had something that I always coveted: a little, neat nose. A lot of the time, her nose was pinker than the rest of her face, and I remember her carrying a handkerchief or Kleenex when she walked around the school. What I don't understand is, how could she be so nice to everyone who wanted her attention (and everyone always did want her attention!), and at the same time, address the million and one matters in front of her? Mrs. Lester, can I do this? Mrs. Lester, can I do that? Mrs. Lester, Mrs. Lester, Mrs. Lester!

I associate her with the giggling of children who have been told that recess is over and we're going to work with fractions now, ahem, children! Recess is over, will everyone please take out his workbook and paper? There would be rustling, papers would slide off desks and have to be retrieved from the floor, books were retrieved and slapped on top of the student desks, and the giddiness of wins and losses on the softball field gave way to remembering: invert and multiply.

So it would go, afternoon after afternoon, class after class, day after day, up until the time that we would graduate and face the world on new terms. Those terms would require that we use whatever we had put together inside our heads to figure out how to solve problems that were increasingly grown-up types of problems. They involved money, rent, pregnancy, college--all the things you wanted to be free to decide for yourself, but now that the time had come, found it impossible to come up with answers that inspired confidence. What was the right path to take? Did we want happiness or did we want success? Sometimes it seemed that you had to choose.

One of the things that endeared Mrs. Lester to me more than anything else was her reading to all of us, after lunch and recess were over. We would start to become aware of her voice, relating an incident from the book that she held. There were too many other things to be aware of to pay total attention to what she was saying. We were still sweaty from recess, our hair had to be brushed aside so that it didn't keep flopping in our eyes, our socks had to be pulled up, and visualizations of a last play on the baseball diamond kept coming back to distract us. But gradually these attentions to the moment died down, and Mrs. Lester's voice continued on and on, and we all became calm and listened to the story. She never had to admonish us to quiet down, because she seemed to

know that all the initial rustling was a prelude to suspension of thought. All that we became aware of was her voice and the progression of the story.

The story that I remember best was called "Red Shoes for Nancy". It is about a little girl who was born with a medical condition called "hemangioma", and it is a very serious condition. The little girl was named "Nancy", and she only lived to be twelve. But she wasn't a sad little girl! She had ambition! And her biggest ambition was to wear some pretty red shoes on her two pretty little feet. The pretty red shoes could be managed, but the pretty little feet could not be; to try to control her disease, Nancy eventually had to have her legs amputated. But she never gave up thinking how pretty her feet would look if they could be encased in eye-popping red shoes.

This will, the will to enjoy life to whatever extent enjoyment offered itself, to refuse to give up on happiness, was the central theme of this true story. Writing about it today makes me cry, remembering the tale that was told in little episodes, after lunch, every day. And that is exactly what Mrs. Lester did. Being a grown-up, and knowing that these stories are often tales of what happens to real people, knowing that sadness and loss must often be borne, she would cry. Mrs. Lester was no stranger to empathy. I suggest that it did to her what it does to all of us: it slid a needle into her heart, while at the same time it made her life amazingly rich.

Of course all of us hard and healthy young students could not imagine why relating a story about a person who didn't even exist any more could move a person to tears. Old people were so funny! That's what we thought. It was a luxury for us to be able to think that way. We had never been exposed to tragedy, to the death of someone we loved. We had never had to worry about what we were going to eat tomorrow, or where we were going to sleep tonight. Worries were made up of wondering if our peers liked us or not.

So when Mrs. Lester began to try to control her emotions as she got near the unavoidably sad ending of "Red Shoes for Nancy", and she sniffled and used the Kleenex she kept balled up in her left hand, we kids would laugh to ourselves. We wanted to keep that emotion at bay. We did not want to know, truly, what it would be like to be happy about new red shoes, red shoes that would be the closest thing that this wonderful, optimistic little girl would think of as fulfilling a dream. What would it be like to never be able to walk? And still want to be a kid and have fun? We didn't want to think too hard about these things, and so we laughed at the tears that such tragedy might engender in our own selves. We laughed so as to keep the reality of sadness at bay.

But Mrs. Lester did not keep reality at bay. She met it and dealt with it. The instance of her ability to take on fate was represented most sadly, most clearly, by the passing of her beloved husband, in the early 1960's. Imagine to yourself, what you face if you're Mrs. Lester: the raising of 4 fatherless children, one of

them with a congenital heart condition that lead to her early death, a job that utilizes all your innovation, your patience, your energy, (teaching middle-schoolers in the 7th and 8th grades) and pays almost nothing. How do you cope? How did Mrs. Lester cope?

I feel so ashamed now when I think about her situation, how scary it was to be virtually alone with the responsibility of raising 4 young children, and no money to speak of. I feel ashamed because I had no way to grasp the enormity of her situation. Back then, I resonated with Mrs. Lester because she had lost the love of her life and no longer had a spouse to come home to. Nowadays, I see that losing your spouse is only one of the hammers you get hit with, if you have children that you're responsible for. Maybe the show doesn't really have to go on, but the children certainly do!

So I don't know how Mrs. Lester coped. She did seem to. I'm sure there were thousands of tears that we did not see. How I wish I could hold her now, could hug her and show her how wonderfully things turned out. But death took her away, and when I reach for her hand, all I grasp is air. That is why it's so important to tell people you love them when they're there, and alive.

One other thing about Mrs. Lester I have to mention. She always looked so neatly dressed! She was not slim. She was maybe five feet five inches tall and very sturdily built. As I remember, she favored shirtwaist-type dresses, and they always looked ironed. I don't remember her ever wearing a knit t-shirt and skirt. She dressed in a way that seemed fresh and polite and ready for business. I see her now, standing at her desk, nose a little pink, a freshly-ironed shirtwaist covering her frame, saying, "OK guys, it's time to start, everybody take their seats." It doesn't seem that long ago, really. About 1961. But the past can never be recovered, only remembered. My cup comes up empty when I reach out for Mrs. Lester's hand; but my cup comes up full when I remember her many kindnesses, her conversation, the things that made us all laugh. But cup full or no, Mrs. Lester, I miss you so much.

Cynthia Vautier