

Lesson from the swamp

A client of mine works with Indigenous men in prisons. His friend, incarcerated for domestic violence and breaching intervention orders, was approaching a Parole Board hearing and had asked: “My wife and kids need me at home, what can I do so I don’t end up here again?”

My client, familiar with the HG approach, was given a standing ovation at a national conference after describing his use of therapeutic storytelling with Indigenous men. His success comes from an awareness that a well-constructed and appropriate response could elicit intellectual assent with lots of head-nodding and agreement, but have little effect on the emotional brain that drives the abusive behaviour. He realises that to impact the abusive behaviour he has to use the language of the emotional brain – metaphor, or stories with sensory-rich metaphors embedded in them. He asked me if I could write a story to raise the prospects of his friend not ending up in prison again. His friend’s totem is the eastern brown snake.

<i>Lesson from the swamp</i>	<i>Author’s Notes</i>
<p>I hate prison. I ran amok when I was a little fella – away for three years. Three years lost that I will never get back. I learnt but. Only visit them now, not stay in them. Prison is like a big swamp. You can’t get around and you can’t get out. Nowhere safe nowhere to stand firm. You try but that stinking oozy mud just keeps you stuck. Nowhere to stand upright. The mud pokes up between your toes like poking a reed into a bee’s nest. Nothing sweet here but rotten stings. Can’t trust anyone, it’s stinkin’ lonely. Some people care, but not many. And visits are too short.</p> <p>Yeah I hate prisons and I hate swamps. We used to go looking for long-necked turtles in the swamp. Goose eggs too. Watching for crocs all the time. Crocs and snakes, I don’t know which is worse. Both bad news.</p> <p>I remember one time in way too deep and stuck. Every time I put my foot down it sank down, down, down. Too many reeds to swim, I thought I was a goner. I remember looking at some pelicans swimming by and wished I had a canoe so I could glide on the water like they did. Looking up, I could see the spirit birds, they were everywhere. Then I wished I could fly like they did, feet tucked up not stuck in black stinking mud. Must have got out somehow, because here I am. It reminds me of a story.</p> <p>It was a long time ago, and a long way from here but it is like yesterday and where we are now. A big eastern brown snake, you know what they are, they strike and bite. Everyone is afraid of them and keep out of their way even their mate and little fellas. That’s why they are nearly always on their own. Dangerous and lonely.</p> <p>Well one day this big brown was in the swamp looking for eggs. He was not looking for trouble but trouble found him. It sure did. Somehow the reeds wrapped themselves around his scales and held on and no matter what the big</p>	<p>While this is clearly a case of ‘putting words in someone’s mouth’ I make no apology. This response is what I would say if I were he, and he is free to take what suits his ‘voice’ and ignore what doesn’t. This is very necessary because you have the words of an old white guy being spoken by a younger Indigenous Torres Strait Islander man.</p> <p>Rapport is crucial in encounters like this. These observations of prison help this sense of connection. I want the listener to feel ‘this guy understands’.</p> <p>Notice the ‘sensory-rich’ metaphors: ‘oozy mud between the toes’.</p> <p>One thing I have noticed with Indigenous men is the way anything to do with ‘country’ resonates with them. So it doesn’t matter if the listener has ever gone after turtles or not, he will relate to it well.</p> <p>He will also relate to the birds and animals, and then of course his totem; ‘everyone afraid of them’ suits the story as well as actually being a characteristic of the eastern browns.</p>

snake did, he couldn't get free. The harder he tried the tighter those reeds hung on. He was a goner for sure. Tired and beaten, he was almost ready to give up when all of a sudden he heard someone talking. A deep voice, one of those voices where you wish he would start singing. If a didgeridoo could talk it would sound like this. That's strange he thought "I'm not one to listen to anyone, deep voice or whatever. I just do what I do. I don't need anyone telling me what to do". But somehow he sort of listened - well you see he was caught - couldn't do anything and couldn't go anywhere. Well and truly tangled in those rotten reeds.

The voice went on. The big old eastern brown could feel it as much as hear it. "Do things differently and you will be free" said the voice over and over again. It had an authority about it - as though it was coming from someplace deep. It puzzled the snake. But he didn't ignore it. He began to wonder what he could do instead of fighting to be free. And the more he wondered, the less he struggled. For thinking took as much effort as fighting and tired as he was, he couldn't do both. And then an amazing thing happened. The reeds started to let go. First around his head, then his body, and finally - at this stage the big old brown was completely relaxed - his tail was able to move again. It felt so good. He forgot about the voice; didn't even bother where it came from, and headed for the edge of the swamp. Over near the long grass. But, and nobody's quite clear how this happened, he didn't get there.

Standing on the edge of the swamp was a bullfrog. Now normally the big brown would have struck it in a flash. But the bullfrog was talking, what's more it was the same deep voice that talked in the swamp. The big brown was puzzled, but he listened. "You got free by not fighting, but you are not really free even if you're not in the swamp and no reeds around you. It will be somewhere and something else that will hold you back. You will be fighting and lonely and trapped again if you don't learn the lesson of the swamp". For the big brown, it felt very strange talking to the bullfrog instead of eating it. But this whole thing felt very strange, even confusing. But somehow worth paying attention to, for after all, he was a goner in the swamp and now he was free. Well almost. "So what is the lesson of the swamp?" he asked.

The bullfrog just sat there, you know how they do. Fatty legs up beside their belly, big head with no neck, and eyes looking straight at you. "The lesson of the swamp" said the bullfrog slowly is "when you fight the wrong thing you never get out of the swamp. Some never get out, and die there. Some just stay alive by stuff floating nearby. And some, not many - and this is you Mr Eastern Brown Snake, are lucky enough to listen to ancient wisdom: 'Do things differently and you will be free.' But as I say, some get out of the swamp and get tangled somewhere else by something that holds them just as tight. They are not free at all. And I am afraid that will be you Mr Eastern Brown unless you understand the lesson of the swamp. Doing

When using creatures as speakers, it is essential that the voice has distinctive characteristics.

"I'm not one to listen ..." Now I don't know if this is true of the listener or not. I can however, make a guess that having broken intervention orders, somehow the message hasn't got through to him.

For this listener, as with a lot of Indigenous men, very likely a selective listener. 'Someone talking' could be ignored, but not 'one of those voices'. Notice the suggestion 'I just do what I do, etc'. Very powerful, remember this is now the man's totem - the very core of his identity speaking, not just 'someone'.

Notice too, the link between thinking and fighting, and the suggestion that he can't do both. Chances are he has been fighting instead of doing any necessary thinking. It is good for him to hear this from his totem.

The 'long-grass' for Indigenous people in the Northern Territory is synonymous with areas where they can be left alone. A large area surrounding Darwin is called the 'long-grass', authorities rarely go there.

The voice now has an identity. Notice the 'normally would have struck it' but he listened phrase. Chances are something like "Now you mustn't hit your wife, just calm down and listen to her" hasn't had much effect. Now however, different story - literally. Embedded in the story, the vital idea of listening not hitting, sneaks past the 'watchful dragons' of the rational brain and impacts his pre-conscious brain - where the impulse to hit originates.

Not answered straight away, instead imagery to link the answer to the authority of the bullfrog. The listener needs to 'see' it as well as hear it.

'Some die there ...' Unintentional reference to the tragic Indigenous deaths in custody. I wondered about taking it out but chose not to. I believe it adds impact to the central point of the story: 'fighting the wrong

things differently is not just to get you out of that swamp, it is for your life to change so you don't get tangled with anything else, so you can live free".

The big brown's head was raised now, it could have struck but it didn't. The bullfrog was not afraid and said, its big eyes looking right through the snake's head "Well done Mr Eastern Brown" and before the snake could work out what he had done well, the bullfrog continued "You could have struck me but you didn't, that's different. You could have eaten me and be hungry tomorrow, but you are learning stuff that can work for you, keep you free that is, for the rest of your life. How good is that".

The snake didn't know what to say. This was too much - talking with a bullfrog instead of eating it. A bullfrog of all things, what would it know? It was weird but the bullfrog seemed to know what the snake was thinking because it said "You may wonder how I know these things Mr Snake", his belly puffing up a bit. "Well I can breathe underwater. There the kookaburras can't get me, and I can live in the long grass just as well. There the barramundi can't get me. I can't strike like you but I live free and help my mate, and teach my little fellas - tadpoles at first - to do the same. That's what freedom is for. Nothing to tangle me. I skim over the mud without getting stuck and between the reeds without getting tangled. I live my life without fighting. I don't need to strike anything to be a proud bullfrog".

When the bullfrog saw the snake was still listening he continued "I know you really want to be free, that's why I helped you out of the swamp. To help you live free, to have your mate like you, and be by your side. And your little ones look up to you as you stand proud with the dignity of an ancient warrior. This comes from knowing when to fight and when to relax; to know what to strike and what to let go. It's like breathing under water. You have to try it, for it's the only way you can stay free".

"When you feel like fighting, hold your breath. It will give you time to work out whether to fight or relax. You will have found that fighting hurts people and drives them away from you. Relaxing, they gather around you. When you feel like striking, hold your breath, it will give you time to work out whether to strike or let go. You will find striking porn, grog and gunja brings out the noble warrior heart and when you do, other men will respect you because everyone admires courage and bravery. They will gather beside you and, shoulder to shoulder, you will strike and kill for it is a proper fight. The mob gets free of stinking mud and reeds that grip and tangle. Everyone wins and the bad stuff dies. Fight the wrong thing and you will never get free - that is the lesson of the swamp".

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thing' means you never get out of the swamp/prison. With a parole meeting coming up, this will not be lost on the listener.

Vital phrase 'could have struck it but he didn't'. Repeated by the bullfrog for impact. I don't want to labour the point, but I am sure you are seeing the value of story/metaphor over normal dialogue. The listener is relaxed and engaged, and so much can be woven into the narrative, even repeated.

Remember, by this stage the listener *is* the snake, the one who would normally hit not listen; strike not think; and ask 'what would a bullfrog know?' So while we are dealing with the pre-conscious brain, the conscious is still engaged – enough to recognise that the snake represents him.

Getting 'stuck' and 'tangled' are recurring themes as well as 'getting free'. Notice the way they re-appear through the story. Then the 'no need to strike' idea.

These final paragraphs are the most profound, yet they come from the natural flow of the story. Apart from an introductory sentence, it is all direct speech to have the 'authority' of the deep voice without interruption.

Don't be concerned about 'knowing when to fight and when to relax' not actually being like 'breathing under water', its value is in the idea of something seemingly difficult yet worth a try, as well as the 'holding your breath'. There is no doubt the listener would have been told to control his anger by holding his breath, but probably not in the context of a metaphorically-rich story.

The first paragraph of the story has the listener seeing himself as 'dangerous and lonely', the final has him, still dangerous, but portrayed as a brave warrior standing shoulder to shoulder.

NOTE: The parole application was successful, and board members were clearly impressed.