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Vivian Bullwinkel: A model of resilience and a symbol of strength



Margaret McAllister, RN, Ed D, FACN*

School of Nursing and Midwifery, Higher Education Division, CQ University, Queensland, Australia

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Summary

Background: The story of one of Australia's most well-known women in history, Vivian Bullwinkel, is a symbol of strength for nursing. She and her companions who were prisoners of war during World War II, refused the position of victim and went on to contribute much to the world after their ordeal.

Discussion: These women embody important elements of resilience that it is our duty to convey to generations of nurses so that they may be inspired to rise above adversity, foster connection with like-minded others, use adaptive coping mechanisms and soft power, be gentle yet persistent in their resistance practices, and most of all to do good work throughout their nursing careers.

This paper argues that oppression theory provides only a limited understanding of present woes affecting nursing. Resilience theory suggests future actions and is therefore further enlightening. By examining the experiences of Bullwinkel, students can be assisted to see that stress has been a constant theme across nursing history. However ways of rising above adversity can be illuminated by critically and deeply examining aspects of iconic leaders and heroic stories such as can be found in the life of Vivian Bullwinkel.

Summary: Students who are offered the chance to examine this symbol of strength in our profession may decide to internalise some of the positive traits and resolve to use the behaviours she and her contemporaries used to help them create for themselves a fulfilling career, pride in their profession and strong sense of purpose.

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Introduction

Film buffs will all have heard the name Cate Blanchett who is a great actor, although not every film she starred in was a hit. Even fewer will light your imagination for learning how to nurse. But the film "Paradise Road" (Beresford, 1997) is an exception. Based on fact, the film provides a vivid insight into what living in an internment camp during World

* Correspondence to: School of Nursing and Midwifery, CQ University, 90 Goodchap Street, Noosaville, Australia.
Tel.: +61 5446 7082.

E-mail address: m.mcallister@cqu.edu.au

War II in Malaysia must have been like. It also reveals the tenacity and fortitude of the women, many of whom were nurses.

The film is also a good way to explain to students that secondary source material can sometimes obscure, conflate and mislead from the facts (Nelson, 1999). As Fletcher (2011) also explains, the story of women's and nurses' mistreatment during this war led to such intense media attention that some issues may have been over-emphasised and others not mentioned at all. This is why historical texts (Twomey, 2007) and documentaries, such as "Sisters in Arms" (Chilcott, 1999), featuring first person accounts from survivors, and diaries of the prisoners themselves (Jeffrey, 1997) which were often recorded almost immediately that events occurred, provide a more authentic and detailed account. Many of this primary and secondary source material is available in the Australian War Memorial.

Limitations of the film notwithstanding, the story of nurses and women during World War II is part of Australian history, and one that ought to be discussed within nursing education so that students are informed. As numerous historians and critics have warned, history learning in nursing ought not be limited to romanticised, or idealised versions of the past (Buchanan, 1999; Nelson & Rafferty, 2010). It is also not just icons and heroes whose history needs to be learned because there is important learning to be had in exploring the "bad" stories that nurses need to hear in order to prevent such events from ever recurring (Shields & Benedict, 2012). Nor should this exploration pursue and misguidedly perpetuate nursing tropes such as that nurses are inherently and always good, self-less or heroic (Nelson, 2006) but at the same time, nor does discussion need to shy away from stories that are inspiring.

One such inspiring story from history is the experiences of Vivian Bullwinkel's survival as a captive during the second world war, and her achievements following trauma (Manners, 1999; Shaw, 2012). Learning about Bullwinkel may help students to feel inspired and connected, and more prepared to go forward into nursing, armed with clearer resilience strategies and purpose. This is one of the powers of history learning.

The aim of this paper is to facilitate guided critical reflection on the story of Vivian Bullwinkel, who it is argued, remains a vital symbol of resilience for nursing.

The problem when history of nursing is not learned

History learning is part of liberal education and well-rounded students of health professions are those who experience excellent vocational as well as liberal education (Ballat & Campling, 2011; Nussbaum, 1997). Humanities-based learning, using material from history, painting, music, film, fiction and/or poetry, engages multiple senses in learners and encourages them to engage deeply with the subject matter. Looking at a phenomenon in only one way, say through the lens of science, has a tendency to lead people to categorise experiences, and this in turn leads to foreclosure of other experiences (Eisner, 1997). As the artist and educator Elliot Eisner (1997) says, learning through the arts keeps perception alive and opens up the world to new possibilities.

In nursing education today, the emphasis is very much on technical skill development and this of course offers the benefit of promoting procedural competence. However, the *soft skills* of nursing that are so highly valued by vulnerable patients and their families – the skills of empathy, compassion, conveying hope and resilience – are being overlooked (Schout, de Jong, & Zeelen, 2009). Moreover, the *critical thinking skills* needed so that nurses can make complex decisions swiftly and with clarity are also being missed (Benner, Sutphen, Leonard, & Day, 2009), in part because there is now little space for the knowledge play and dialogue that are cultivated through engagement with the humanities (Graff, 2003).

A lack of connection to the past makes us more fragile, we only develop shallow roots and are made vulnerable in a changing climate. We might tolerate or accept things, not knowing that there are reasons to stand our ground, and fight for things that have been hard-won. Examples are wages, conditions, education, and rights and limitations placed around the name "nurse", "nurse practitioner", or "mental health nurse."

Without an awareness of the amount of blood, sweat and tears that people dedicated to growing this profession in Australia over the past 150 years, some nurses might think that it is sufficient to work a shift and the contribution to the profession is over. With this individualistic attitude, the collective group will wither (Hofstede, 2001; McFeeters, 2003).

For a community to thrive it needs people to see the value of the whole, that it is more than the sum of its parts. For the young to mature strongly they need close guidance and positive role models. The community needs traditions, memories, rituals. It needs to remember defining events and share them with those who do not know about them (McAllister et al., 2011). It needs to continually investigate its own practices and verify to the world that nurses have value and are needed.

Lack of awareness of the struggles nursing has overcome in the past, could ultimately impact negatively on our profession – its stability, the quality of the people being attracted into it, and our professional public image.

The value of history learning for nurses and nursing

Learning through history can build in students an awareness of *continuity and change* within society (Dingwall & Rafferty, 1988). For example, knowing that there have long been social struggles that a profession has been engaged in can put your own present concerns into perspective. At the same time, appreciating the enormous changes that have occurred in health *can build respect* for predecessors and *excite people to be part of the ongoing changes* and developments that are needed (Madsen, McAllister, Godden, Greenhill, & Reed, 2009). Awareness of the past can *build a sense of connection and strengthen sense of community* (D'Antonio, 2010). Learning from the past helps people to see that they are not just an isolated individual but part of a group that has a long history. It can illuminate heroes who can be *role models* and *symbols of strength* (McAllister, Greenhill, Madsen, & Godden, 2010). It can also convey warnings and encourage critical thinking on practices so that

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