Life is a Journey: Which Path will you Take?

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Abstract
When queried about writing a brief article, I wondered what I could say that would be meaningful and beneficial to my nursing colleagues. After reflecting, I decided to invite you to join me in a brief reminiscence of our nursing journey. This brief reminiscence will take us through three phases: where our nursing journey began, where it is taking us, and what we can do to maximize our time before we reach our destination.

NIGHTINGALE’S THOUGHTS ABOUT NURSING
Let me begin with a little bit of history and explore with you when nursing began its journey. Florence Nightingale, the founder of modern nursing stated in 1868 (148 years ago)

“Nursing is an art; and if it is to be made an art, it requires exclusive devotion, as hard a preparation, as any painter’s or sculptor’s work.” Nightingale also expressed, “For what is the having to do with dead canvas or cold marble compared with having to do with the living body – The Temple of God’s spirit?” She concluded with, “It is one of the fine arts; the finest of the Fine Arts” [1].

MEANING OF NIGHTINGALE’S THOUGHTS
What do these thoughts mean to us today? Nursing is not to be taken for granted. It should be considered a high level endeavor with a focus of great devotion and respect for the individual the nurse cares for in any setting. The therapeutic relationship is paramount to the care of the patient but not without key emphasis on skill and knowledge. Excuses are given for the physician who has no “bedside” manner but a nurse could never continue with that identity. Nightingale would expect every nurse to excel in applying knowledge that leads to improvements in patient outcomes. Every nurse would be expected to focus on excellence in the promotion of health care by continuous self-evaluation and life-long learning though advanced education as well as the certification process, signifying that nurses possess expert professional knowledge and skills.

HEALTH AS A PRIORITY
Nightingale saw health as a priority for everyone. Today, our society is confronted with the pros and cons and the politics of what is health care and who can receive it. At the World’s Fair, known as the Columbian Exposition held in 1893 in the city of Chicago, Illinois, Nightingale contributed a remarkable paper, entitled, “Sick Nursing and Health-Nursing,” which was read at the nursing congress [2]. Emphasizing the importance of illness prevention which has now become a major topic since the end of the 20th century, Nightingale was again more than a century ahead of that time. In calling attention to nature’s role, the body, soul, and spirit in the healing process, she laid the foundation for the modern holistic nursing movement. Nightingale wrote in the 1880s that it would take 100 to 150 years before educated and experienced nurses would arrive to change the health care system. We are that generation, we have arrived to transform health care and carry forth her vision of social action to create a healthy world.

Many of us entered the nursing profession with this goal in mind, (create a healthy world where health is a priority for every human being) but somehow through specialization, increased work load and technical demands, many of us have deviated from this original goal. Patients are often seen as a number of parts, without much attention paid to the whole person. We, as human beings, are much more than the sum of our parts, and are much more than the particular diagnosis by which we are defined by the health care system. The practice of nursing seeks to care for the total human being; recognizing the dynamic interconnectedness of the patient’s body, mind, and spirit with the nurse’s body, mind, and spirit.

CONCEPT OF HEALING
Nightingale is considered to be one of the first holistic nurses. She believed that nursing care should be focused on unity, wellness and the interrelationship of human beings and their environment. The philosophy of caring for the total human being is the essence of holistic nursing and for that reason it can be practiced in any care setting. As a nurse, my interests have focused on how Nightingale integrated the art and science of nursing. But I am also fascinated by her concept of healing and how one can become an instrument of healing. Nightingale’s vision has inspired in me a deeper, richer, more compassionate and holistic view of nursing than I had ever conceived. I believe
this awareness is valuable not only for nurses, but for anyone who has ever been drawn to ease the pain and suffering of another.

SELF-CARE

In order to become an instrument of healing, nurses need to be aware that we can only give so much to another person otherwise we become exhausted and of no use as a nurse for others. Even Nightingale noted that nurses need to take care of themselves in order to take care of others. She stated in a letter to her nursing students, “how can we serve our Patients well, or glorify God in our work, when half-hearted, weary, and dull, as is so often brought on by lack of proper care of the wants of our bodies, fresh air, regularity in going to bed and getting up, taking proper an sufficient food to nourish us” [3].

A noted nursing theorist suggests that we need to develop a routine of self care practices in order to continue to bring to the patient an authentic practice of compassionate care. In order to engage in this authentic care, nurses must first be able to engage in compassionate self-care practices for themselves [4]. Some self-care practices might be simply using mindful meditation where one begins focusing briefly on a pleasant place, picture, or thought. Other self-care practices include but are not limited to journaling, exercise, good nutrition, listening to music, dancing, going for a walk, taking a deep breath, resting briefly, riding a bike, reading, swimming, praying, gardening, snuggling with your pet, being with nature, enjoying a cup of tea or coffee, practicing yoga or tai chi, doing something you always wanted to do, or just do nothing.

YOUR PRESENT-DAY JOURNEY

You are what Florence Nightingale envisioned. She was bright and gifted; she wanted her nurses to be well-educated and well-informed (Science). She cared about her patients; she wanted her nurses to care and be committed to their patients (Art). She knew that every individual was not just a physical manifestation but an integration of a physical existence (the body) with the mind and the spirit. One cannot be separated from the other—this is what makes every person unique. When we collectively join together our bodies, minds and spirits, our energy escalates. This energy can be comforting, healing, calming, invigorating, or whatever is needed. Think about the time or times when you have entered a place and you have experienced comfort, joy, or discomfort and sadness. What phenomena are occurring? Many of you, if not all, are well aware of what is taking place. Energy is flowing in a positive or a negative mode. When we enter the patient’s presence, we bring our body, mind, and spirit energy to the encounter and connect with the patient’s body, mind, and spirit. When we are fully present with the patient, this is the height of the nurse patient relationship. This is the holistic moment that Nightingale emphasized. The holistic moment embraces and integrates the nurses’ knowledge and skills with presence. One is not more important than the other. When you combine presence with expertise of inquiry, analysis, critical thinking, and communication; you are better prepared to meet the all-embracing needs of the patient.

You are the products of Nightingale’s great legacy; be an advocate for social justice, including a commitment to the health of vulnerable populations and the elimination of health disparities. Keep learning, be creative, love yourself and others, and take time to take care of yourself. Be mindful of your impact on everything you touch. If you do, you’ll find others will greatly benefit from your presence, skills, and knowledge. Share your expertise, be a role model for others and support individuals to achieve their highest potential.

Unbeknownst to me, Florence Nightingale changed my life when I first observed role models in nursing during my first year of high school. At that point, I decided what I wanted to do with my life. I have not regretted my decision to become a nurse that I made more than 50 years ago. All of us are on a journey. We all have one thing in common; we all have the same destination. How we reach our destination is up to each and every one of us. Some of us will take detours, encounter roadblocks, obstacles, and some will merge into the speed lanes. Whatever path you take, I hope you will listen to and follow the wisdom of Florence Nightingale and discover that your life as a person and nurse will ultimately be whole with meaning. May your journey follow the lead of Florence Nightingale, encouraging you to develop significant changes with your body, mind, and spirit resulting in quality health care throughout the world.

REFERENCES

1. Nightingale F. Una and the Lion. Cambridge. 1871.