

Annie Parry -Sermon:

Which Came First – The Nurse or the Unitarian Universalist ?

When I began to write this piece I had the idea that I was a nurse first, that nursing informed my decision to become a Unitarian Universalist., However, as I wrote and delved deeper into the story of how Nursing and Unitarian Universalism might intersect, I found a new way of seeing both - and my place in the story. It surprised me to realize that nursing is a kind of ministry. Here at Live Oak, the concept of “ministry” is interpreted as someone who is involved in helpful acts that contribute to someone or something other than themselves. This is what nurses do.

We know nurses from what is portrayed in the popular culture. Nurses are seen in hospitals where they work with doctors, triage in emergency, deliver patient care and medications, talk about health, take blood pressures, start IV's and assist with surgeries. They help babies, the old and the infirm. (Did you know that it wasn't until the 1960's that nurses were even allowed to take blood pressures? But Nurses do not just serve up “health”; and “patients” can be individuals, families, communities or even entire populations. What is Health anyway? – One person's state of health might be another person's state of fear.

The World Health Organization established in 1947, defines health as, “**a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being- and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity**”. In my vision of nursing I hear the following U.U. core beliefs-

- the affirmation of and the promotion of the inherent worth and dignity of every person;

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- in justice, equity and compassion in all human relations;
- the free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- the goal of community with peace, liberty and justice for all and a respect of the interdependent web of all existence of which we are apart.

To strive for client health as defined by The W.H.O is a tall order which resonates with U.U. principles and to me, it seems the essence of what it means to be a Registered Nurse.

I am not that old...but I have been a nurse so long that the first day I stepped onto a hospital ward in 1976, I had to wear a starched white dress/uniform, my Toronto Western Hospital's nursing cap - a black ribbon stripe across the front, white oxfords and white stockings –only and always white stockings - and I was proud to wear it all. In spite of derogatory images in the media and a surplus of nurse's jokes, most nurses are proud of who they are and of what they do.

It is not clear to me exactly when I first decided to be a nurse. I recall a time when I was about 8 years old being asked that perennially awkward question that some adults ask children and children dread. You know the one - "And what do you want to be when you grow up"? Even at that age I realized how "too-soon-to-tell" this question was. I needed a quick escape in case the aforementioned intrusive adult probed deeper into more uncomfortable personal realms. Somehow and from some unpremeditated place in my developing psyche I blurted out - "Nurse, I want to be a nurse". This answer allowed me a quick exit - and it seems right there and then - my fate was sealed. I probably played with pretend medical kits as a child but my older sister claims that I pretty much ignored her the summer she spent confined to bed after hip surgery; and

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when I decided on nursing she was flabbergasted. I spent more time arguing with my brothers about fairness. Yet, by my early teens I reluctantly took on the role of a real-life care-giver to my mother- and I continued to do so for parts of the rest of her life. Before I was in high school my mother was on crutches and then in a wheel-chair. She suffered from osteo-arthritis, hip surgeries gone wrong, and other “too-numerous –to- list” medical maladies. Sadly, prior to her death from a massive heart attack at the age of 64, my mother lost a leg, and had a stroke which left her partially blind.

By then I was almost 33 years old I had supported my mother - and father through much of this and more. By then I was an RN and I had matured (some) and learned as a nurse how to help my mother, not only with her physical care but as an advocate when her health care providers were not as “care- full” as they could/should have been. So – how did I get from being a dutiful but resentful teenage caregiver to a compassionate, committed nurse? Instead of going to college following high school, I left home and worked at a bank. I did this partly because my parents (I mean my dad) didn't support the idea of wasting money on an education for a girl who would just get married and have children ...seriously ...and partly because I needed my own life and independence.

As the universe would have it however, I soon realized that what I enjoyed most about working at the bank was the customer contact – particularly interactions with clients who were Second World War Holocaust survivors who would come in to deposit their monthly reparation checks from Germany. Their stories opened up new worlds of suffering and survival for me. Slowly and quietly at first -but surely, the voice from my 8 year old psyche called to me, “a nurse – I want to be a nurse!”

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When asked by the Dean of Nursing, “why do you want to be a nurse?” I answered “Because I want to help people” – and I meant it - but even before I completed nursing school, I knew I wanted to work in the community to keep people healthy and out of hospitals. So, I set my sights on getting my degree. In 1986, after 10 years of nursing as an RN in hospitals and in Canada’s frozen north, that is what I did. When I went into nursing to “help others”, I had no idea how many of the “others” I would minister to over the next 35 years would be my own children, friends and sometimes complete strangers on the street. That street is what led me to Live Oak.

Live Oak is the first congregation – Unitarian or otherwise that I have joined. We were not church-goers when I was growing up, in fact – religion was a subject of much argument and discomfort around my house - since my family was of one color of Irish background and my sister married a boy from the other color. My father was a devout and angry atheist while my mother was a lapsed Episcopalian (or “an Anglican” as they’re called in Canada”). My sense of unseeable God-like forces is more in the “still-working- it-out” category. Partly through my experiences as a nurse, I have come to believe in the existence of something divine beyond words and worlds. When I hear of past-life experiences, premonitions or a near death encounter, when I witness the miracle of a baby being born or a wound healing - when nature seems imbued with a life force, to me it feels holy and touched by something beyond my comprehension. There have times like this in my nursing career- when I have felt something that I interpret as “other and divine” - and which has on occasion left me in awe. Nursing, with its images of bedpans and wires may seem an odd place to encounter the numinous, but these are the unexpected gifts that make nursing worthwhile.

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I have been privileged to be with dying patients – both in hospital and in their homes. One memorable death early in my career was of a Hasidic Rabbi. Alone in the hospital room with him for a short time after resuscitation attempts failed, I saw an aura-like light rise from his body. Then, it felt like his energy or essence just left - and the room felt cold, different. Another time I held the hand of an older woman physically decaying and wracked with pain. Desperate, she asked me “how can this be happening”. We talked about life, randomness vs. destiny, trauma, reincarnation and doubt. She wanted to believe, needed to believe in something other than the immediate circumstances of her life. I think it would have been cruel of me not to actively listen to her about divine “Otherness” and the possibility of hope for something else beyond. No one can really know and for some people, doubt and hope may offer comfort. Nursing is much more than pushing pills and bandaging wounds.

As a nurse, I have often had to draw on all my life experiences – and those of others so I can work towards whatever is closest to a state of, “physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” for the patient (client/family/community/population) in that moment. Maybe nursing means helping a client live in pain or die well. Maybe it means firmly supporting a person towards independence and out of a habitual “sick role”. Maybe it is flying in a helicopter with a medi-vac patient, teaching a parenting or retirement class or helping moms in an underprivileged community plant an organic garden so they can feed their families. Maybe it is being an administrator or talking with native people in the far north about AIDS and birth control; or visiting a lonely senior once a month. Nursing can be arranging free bus fares for pregnant women so they can make their pre-natal

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appointments or writing letters to the Governor to protect funding for homeless shelters. We Nurses wear many hats and carry many tools; and when we do our best work, we are invisible. Who here hasn't heard of the British nurse, Florence Nightingale? Venerated in history as the person who changed nursing forever, Nightingale trained 3 months in Germany at the first nursing school in Europe which opened in 1836. After the Crimean war, where France and England joined forces to protect Turkey against Russia – (recall "Tennyson's The Charge of The Light Brigade"), she went on to start the Nightingale Training School for Nurses in London. There, Nightingale introduced nursing curriculum and minimum standards of care. What I didn't know before is that Florence Nightingale was a Universalist. The main belief that distinguishes Christian Universalism from other forms of Christianity is that Universalists believe everyone is worth saving. Florence's altruism and her mission to save lives likely reflected her beliefs in the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

Considered archaic by today's standards, The "Nightingale Pledge, a traditional vow taken by graduating nurses, is still used in whole or in part by nursing schools: New nurses make promises of purity and abstinence from "whatever is deleterious or mischievous" and, "to obeying doctor's orders"...the sort of stuff you cross your fingers to. However, it does require a new nurse to make a vow to, "Do all in my power to maintain and elevate the standard of my profession, and hold in confidence all matters committed to my keeping ... in the practice of my calling; And, devote myself to the welfare of those committed to my care".

I am pretty sure I had to say a version of this vow at my commencement and some words likely caught in my throat – yet the spirit of this vow is imprinted on me forever.

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More worthy legacies of Nightingale's humanitarian work include the International Red Cross Movement - founded in 1863 and the Geneva Convention in 1864. Both were written and forged by Swiss Nobel Peace Prize Winner, Henri Dumant, a Unitarian. Dumant acknowledges his inspiration for these agreements came in part from the work of Florence Nightingale who he campaigned with to bring these paradigm-shifting accords about as well as from the work of America's Sanitation Commission which we will hear more about in a minute.

The International Red Cross Movement's purpose – in a nutshell - is to relieve human suffering, whenever and wherever it occurs, and to promote world peace. It does not care what nation, race, belief, class or political party you are but only whose need is greater. The I.R.C.S. does not take sides; it is independent and autonomous, is staffed by volunteers and does not work for profit. Its purpose is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for human beings." I'd like to think, when I am my best self, nursing or otherwise, these are the ideals that I try to hold to.

Another paradigm shifting nurse closer to home was Clara Barton. Probably not coincidentally, she too was a Universalist. Born in Oxford, Massachusetts in 1821, Barton cared for others fiercely and became a Civil War nurse involved in the American Sanitation Commission. Formed in 1861, it was the first health and social welfare project of such large scale ever organized in the world that it set about collecting and distributing resources to hospitals during the American Civil War. It pooled and coordinated the efforts of tens of thousands of volunteers spread over thousands of miles. Its policy of treating captured, wounded Rebels as well as the North's injured inspired the Geneva Convention on War. Barton traveled to Europe after the war and met Nightingale and Dumant. When the Dumant conceived the International Red Cross in Europe, the organizational design was inspired by Nightingale's work and modeled

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after the Sanitary Commission. Once back in the USA, Barton lobbied 20 years until the American Red Cross Society was established in 1881 with the help of other Unitarians such as Henry Whitney Bellows and Thomas Starr King.

Besides leading the American Red Cross for over 20 years, Barton worked with Susan B. Anthony in the suffrage movement, and became an active abolitionist. Words Barton wrote in a letter help us to appreciate her passion: “It irritates me to be told how things always have been done ... I defy the tyranny of precedent. I cannot afford the luxury of a closed mind [...]” Universalist and humanitarian principles seem to be behind much that is good in the world.

A lesser known nurse from the chronicles of U.U. history is Dorothea Dix. Born in 1802 to a nomadic Methodist family who distributed hand-made religious flyers that advanced a hellfire and brimstone theology, young Dorothea was over-worked and neglected as a child. She ran away at age 12 and by the age of 14 had started a free school for poor children. Her independent life led her to the Unitarians of Boston. Eventually Dix served as Superintendant of United States Army Nurses.

Appalled by inhuman conditions of jails and “almshouses” or “poorhouses”, and driven by a deeply felt moral sensitivity, Dix worked to improve these abysmal institutions both at home and abroad. She did this, cared for soldiers in the Civil War and then spent the rest of her life campaigning to revolutionize over-crowded and inhumane conditions of hospitals for the mentally insane in America. Dorothea Dix was another nursing hero impassioned by Unitarian beliefs in justice and dignity for all persons.

I am far from being such a hero. I am “just a nurse” who cares about her patients

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and her community – like many other fine nurses I have met over the years. Nursing is not just a job – it is humans caring for others in life-altering terms. But, if I look back through a long enough lens, I think, without realizing it - I was a U.U before I was a Registered Nurse. Maybe that is it –like many of my nursing sisters before me, I have always believed in and tried to act on the basic principles of Unitarian Universalism ...but I had to go to school to become a nurse.

I'd like to close with the last 2 lines a much longer poem written by Clara Barton:

The Women Who Went to the Fields:

'They would stand with you now, as they stood with you then,

The nurses, consolers, and saviors of men”.