Relighting the lamp

If there is light in the soul,
There will be beauty in the person.
If there is beauty in the person,
There will be harmony in the house.
If there is harmony in the house,
There will be order in the nation.
If there is order in the nation,
There will be peace in the world. (Chinese proverb)

There is a relationship between caring and peace in our personal lives and caring and peace in our world. Light and ritual are both metaphors and symbols for nursing to imagine another way, beyond the modern, of how things might be. It is ritual and light which can create a path to reconnect nursing with its past–present–future. If any one image pervades nursing’s history, it is the light of Nightingale’s lamp, radiating the meaning of nursing’s light and energy to the world.

Postmodern/transpersonal nursing is about ‘relighting the metaphorical lamp’ (Bradshaw 1996) and helping nursing to reintegrate, reconnect and provide continuity to its own wholeness, wholeness that has been wounded during nursing’s modern era.
Rituals become an outer form of myth; they are acts that are repeated as archetypal actions across time. Fox (1991) believes that we need a revolution in ritual. Barry Lopez, the naturalist, said one element of myth (and ritual) is to separate the authentic from the inauthentic (1989). The power of both is to nurture, heal and repair a spirit of disarray. When myth and ritual are integrated, we use story power to reorder a state of chaos and confusion by contact with some pervasive, archetypal truths. Art and architecture, along with myth, ritual, metaphor and symbol, can all be invocations, opportunities to ‘recreate’ order and harmony and select enduring relationships with our interior and exterior landscapes (Lopez 1989).

One learns a landscape not by knowing the name or identity of everything in it but by perceiving the relationships in it, by grasping the whole. It is through this tacit knowledge that we engage in a quality of consciousness transformation brought about by the art, ritual, myth, metaphor and symbol. Steven (1953) wrote of the ‘symbolic language of “metamorphosis”’, reminding us of the relationship between metaphor and metamorphosis, both involving a transformation in the world of consciousness, of meaning.

As Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. xix) and Dillard (1982) reminded us: ‘God help us, we are all condemned to meaning’. Meaning is the rock, the foundation—the rock is all there is, in Dillard’s sense. Yet this meaning from myth, ritual and metaphor is precisely what brings forth the mystery, expressed in universal themes to help us understand our world. These themes become guides toward the light of our being, from birth to death, through the passage of time, and through the journey of this life, and those past or future.

More specifically, rituals are how people have always passed on their value system to the young, the next generation. During the modern era, nursing became isolated from its rituals and values; yet it is through ritual
that a community heals and enlightens itself. It is ritual that brings forth opportunities to celebrate and release—to let go of the modern sterility and disconnection. Light and ritual are used by individuals and groups to celebrate, heal, remember and reconnect with their members and their meanings.

Light is one of the privileged metaphors across premodern and modern times. In premodern time, light was used in the language of mysticism, in religion and by the Greeks and Eastern religions. Ironically, the modern era was considered to be the age of enlightenment, meaning we were rational and had control over our destiny, nature and other living things. It was the age of moving at the speed of light, of the quantum physics language of paradoxical wave and particles of light. It was the age of government, science and the military use of atomic light-energy pinnacles of accomplishment. The enlightenment used energy as light to harness for functional destructive/protective use. The enlightenment was to take us from the primitive dark ages, past and beyond the renaissance, into rational—cognitive awareness.

Perhaps this postmodern Era III/Paradigm III and beyond can best be captured metaphorically as the age of light, which takes us into a new relationship with our being-in-the-world as embodied forms of light, intersecting and coming into our light, metaphorically and evolutionary. We are becoming more god like and divine as we move towards the light of our divinity, a level of connectedness, the oneness of all, attending to the implicate spiritual unfolding and evolving—as the ‘lightness of “being”—wherein the light of the universe is enfolded and embodied into our very existence.

Other plays on this age of light come from developments in quantum physics that suggest matter is condensed as frozen light. Light is the means by which the entire universe enfolds into itself. Light is the fundamental activity in which existence has its ground. Light also represents immediate
contact—very high energy. Light is clarity; light illumines; light is energy. Light is love, compassion, understanding and caring. Light can make us whole or heal us.

Light radiates itself as being through particles, ‘events’ and shadows, through illness, pain and suffering; in shadows, light is revealed. Light radiates itself as life spirit rather than matter; the cleansing wave, the flicker of hope in the night and darkness of the modern era, which is now passing, and which must pass into the light.

A candlelight ritual

If there is any one symbol that represents Nightingale and nursing across time, it is a candle and the light that it produces. A candlelight ritual is ingrained in nursing’s collective unconscious, but it has been buried, dormant during this modern technological rise. A candlelight ritual of passing and spreading the light represents a periodic regeneration of nursing and the profession of nursing in the best tradition of Florence Nightingale. Such a symbol and myth brings back the best of caring—healing practices to society, allowing the system to use both sides of its brain—honoring the sacred feminine energy along with the balancing of the whole.

A candlelight ritual is both a premodern and a postmodern image that provides integration, continuity and connection for a restoration of what is missing in modern science and technology. It serves as a symbol for ‘relighting the lamp’ and carrying the light from one century to another. Since 1991, I have consciously and intentionally begun to reintroduce the ritual of candlelight into nursing.

I repeat my personal story here as an invitation to nurses and nursing to heal and transform themselves and the profession, for another era of human history. In doing so, the ritual helps to simultaneously reconnect nursing with its universal truths and archetypal ground of being, so that it becomes more whole, more complete and more mature, letting its light and energy shine into the world.
Personal story

Recreating a meaningful ritual

Recreating meaningful ritual with candlelight began after my Fulbright research and study in Sweden and other Scandinavian countries in 1991. There, in the northern most part of the globe, I became acutely aware of the light/dark cycles of nature in the Arctic Circle where, during the winter months, there is often little more than 1 hour of daylight. This focus on light was mirrored in the midst of daily Swedish life where there was always special attention paid to light and beauty, usually in the form of freshly cut flowers and the frequent use of candles.

What also stood out in my memory was the prominent use of candlelight during most of my talks and lectures. This simple act often transformed the setting and clearly had a role to play in the atmosphere of any seminar, lecture or talk that I delivered.

Thereafter, I began to use candlelight to create a different atmosphere for teaching and learning about caring and healing. For example, upon my return from Sweden, I offered my first national doctoral theory seminar, held over a 4-day period in Colorado. This time, however, I did two things differently. First, I scheduled the seminar outside the sterile institutional, medical setting, instead holding it on the Boulder campus, at the Alumni Center, formerly the residence of the university president. Second, I brought a candle and lit it as background for the setting.

The setting was a large, beauty-filled living-room arrangement, with oriental carpets, fireplace and overstuffed furniture. We arranged the seating in a circle, instead of rows. In doing so, I had almost unconsciously created a very different mood of esthetics, intimacy and relationship; a sense of trust and safety for learning emerged very quickly. The focus of the seminar was on caring theory and caring as an ontology, an ethic and an epistemology, all resulting in a different level of praxis and a different way of being, something that was being experienced in the pedagogy itself.
As the week progressed, without ever mentioning the candle, each student independently went out and bought their own candle. As the class came to a close at the end of the week, the students collectively and spontaneously started creating their own closing ‘ritual’, using the original candle from the seminar.

Each student lit her or his candle from the original candle, with the expressed purpose of ‘honoring their own and each other’s light’, and of taking the ‘light of nursing’s caring and healing’ back to their colleagues and home institutions and ‘passing it on’. This began in January 1992.

After the spontaneous student-generated candlelight ritual of ‘passing the light’, I followed their lead. Within days of the seminar I was scheduled to travel to New Zealand and Australia. On my journeys, I continued the candlelight ritual with other colleagues, inviting them to reconnect with their light and pass it on.

Since then I have recreated the candlelight ritual with nurses throughout the US and in many countries and settings around the world, inviting nurses to relight the metaphorical lamp, the light of our being, and to transform themselves, returning to their inner and ancient light as a guide to our future.

The ritual

The candlelight ritual begins by telling the story of the cycle of light and dark in Sweden, and continues with an account of the doctoral student seminar candlelight ritual. Then, using what I now call the ‘transformer candle’, which I carry with me, I recreate the ritual by using it to take light from my original 1992 candle. I then pass on the light, from the original candle, to a new candle which I leave with the group.

The light from the original candle has now been passed around the globe at least twice. There is a passing of the light from the original candle to the newly lit candle, which is left with the sponsoring institution or group. In many instances, even in formal addresses, nurses from the
audience have brought their own candles, lighting them from the new one and returning with them to their own setting, to pass on the symbolic light of nursing reawakening, creating points and circles of light throughout the globe. Some who have participated in the candlelight ritual are using their own candles to continue the ritual in their own work, reigniting, regenerating and passing on nursing’s caring and healing light in the world. Thousands of nurses around the world are now engaged in and committed to continuing this candlelight ritual. I trust that nurses’ and nursing’s inner and outer light will continue until we reach a critical mass for the new millennium.

‘Holding the light’

The original candle I used in 1992 is now housed in my office at the Center for Human Caring. It is positioned there symbolically as a place that is attempting to hold the light of nursing’s caring and healing, and to pass it on to nurses around the world. One of the associates in the UK described her use of the candlelight ritual with nurses at a European nursing conference, and reported that ‘the nurses were on their feet applauding, even before the act was completed’.

Nurses and nursing have been cut off from their rituals and archetypal ground of being; nursing has had its light put out, so to speak. When opportunities are offered to reconnect with this level of our being and purpose, a deep level of healing occurs. Nurses talk about ‘coming home’ to this kind of practice. We are now called upon, wherever we are, to provide space to both metaphorically and literally hold the light and pass it on. All of this evokes what Lewis Mumford (1970) said: ‘It is only in a return to our human center, our own light, that transformation can occur’.

The Center for Human Caring and the caring–healing work of nurses and others around the world can join together to recreate meaningful ritual from the light of our center of being. Any and all are invited to
participate in passing on the light. For it is through ritual that a community heals itself, ensouls itself, enlightens itself and brings forth opportunities to celebrate and to let go; to begin anew, celebrating a remembering of the light and dark cycles of evolution, change and continuity. The candlelight imprints the archetypal memories of past, present, and future, collecting and gathering them, bringing order to nursing’s evolution across time and space.

I recall the Native American saying that every day one should do an act of power and an act of beauty. The act and art of recreating meaningful ritual through relighting the light and passing it on is both an act of power and an act of beauty, calling forth beauty and light into our life and our institutional darkness.

I leave you with the Navajo chant:

‘Walk in beauty’—bless the times when inner peace radiates outward, connecting with the order and beauty of nature (the whole).

May you, too, walk in your own power, your own light and your own beauty, and pass it on ... radiating caring, healing, and peace to greet the new world.