

Development of a Holistic Nurse

By SHANDA N. WHITTLE, DNP, RN, CNL, Caritas Coach®

Holistic nursing care is something I've strived to provide my entire career, though it wasn't until I wrote down my story of being a patient that I truly learned what holistic nursing was. This discovery came after being a nurse for 14 years and getting a caring, healing endorsement for my memoir from Dr. Jean Watson in 2016.

I entered the field of nursing wearing my heart and my past on my sleeve. In thinking about this and looking back to when I entered nursing school in 1996, I wore my past in much the same way Nathaniel Hawthorne described in his book *The Scarlet Letter*. This wasn't because I was born out of wedlock, but because my illnesses and family situation were filled with

social stigmatization that led me to feel shameful and depressed. This was all started by a mosquito-borne illness I acquired as an infant while living in Boulder, Colorado.

Resiliency and empathy grew inside of me during my first three decades of life as a child to mentally ill parents... as an adolescent patient disabled by intractable temporal lobe epilepsy...and as a 25-year-old nursing student diagnosed with a brain tumor.

These experiences created a beautiful garden of compassion in a life that was dark and full of fear. By the time I graduated from high school, I had been told I would never be able to drive, go to college, live on my own, or have children. My



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illness raged through my brain, creating thunderous storms my neurologist was unable to control. Once high school ended, my fate loomed dark and ominous in my thoughts. The closer I got to the end, the more I felt the walls of my life closing in on me, crushing my hopes and dreams, bringing thoughts of suicide to my mind.

Fortunately, my life was set on a different path with the help of discoveries made during our country's first “Decade of the Brain”. I entered a research study at age 19 and became one of the first patients in the country to undergo a new type of surgery for my type of epilepsy. I learned how to drive when I was 21 and was finally given the chance to go to college. I knew I wanted to join a profession that helped others-my initial choices being social work or psychology. I changed my mind after my uncle, a social worker, introduced me to the nursing shortage that was rapidly increasing in our country during the mid-1990s.

Upon graduating from nursing school and becoming licensed as a registered nurse, many of my classmates followed the recommendation of our nursing professors and entered areas of medical-surgical nursing. It was a recommendation made to ensure we would get more experience before we decided on a specialty field. This was a decision I didn't need to make. I had entered nursing school knowing I wanted to care for the most vulnerable populations in our healthcare system. This desire of mine came from my early experiences as a patient that had left me vulnerable to the abuses of others when I was unable to defend myself.

My early work as a registered nurse was devoted to caring for patient populations with Alzheimer's disease, end-stage AIDS, and brain injuries. This work tested my resilience and introduced me to the extent of unfortunate stigma in our healthcare system. My heart was heavy with empathy for these patients. I felt their plight of hopelessness and silent despair because it had once been mine.

This work led me into the field of mental health where I care for one of the most vulnerable patient populations in our healthcare system. It is here that seedlings of my early experiences as a child and patient began to grow and spread in the garden of compassion I had once hidden and nurtured as a means for survival. The result of this growth and my experiences give me the ability to see and care for my patients as whole beings.

In April of 2018 I traveled home to Boulder, Colorado where my story began in 1974. It was there that I started my journey to become a Caritas Coach® with Dr. Jean Watson and her loving group of holistic nurses and leaders. Dr. Watson talks

about writing as a way to learn about herself and to express what she needs to express. I used to feel uncomfortable speaking about my illnesses and time as a patient, but it is an anxiety I overcame by writing a book about these experiences and how they brought me into nursing. Now, I use what I've learned from Dr. Watson and her group of loving nurses to further grow the garden of compassion I planted such a long time ago.

Florence Nightingale identified nursing as a “calling.” This is something I believe to be true. In 2020, Dr. Watson supported my work to care for healthcare professionals traumatized by events in our complex healthcare system, writing:

Shanda Whittle is an inspired Caritas conscious leader, committed to offering caring-healing programs for those who are hurting from trauma and life's injuries. Her authentic dedication to assisting those in need is motivated by her vision, passion, moral ideals, for offering compassionate human service, when conventional support systems are not available. (J. Watson, personal communication, 2020)

I feel as if Dr. Watson's caring energies are what guided me into the field to fulfill my calling home to Boulder and bring my story full circle. Thank you, Dr. Watson. And like the moon, I may shine bright one night, but may be covered and hidden the next; I may be full and whole some days but may be small and weak another. Yet one thing remains sure every night and every day-like the moon, I will always be there (no matter what) to care, protect, and heal others who need help as I once did. This is my journey as I continue to find my voice and develop my practice in holistic nursing and caring science.

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