My Caritas Journey/A Reflection on Jean Watson’s Visit

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On September 28, this writer joined a van-load of Nursing faculty from Tulsa Community College and made the jaunt down the turnpike to Oklahoma City to literally “sit at the feet” of Dr. Jean Watson, a nursing theorist whose theory on human caring (Caritas) is often quoted both in nursing literature and in thousands of research papers, theses, and dissertations around the world. My particular journey to that chair in the ballroom of the Cowboy Hall of Fame and Western Heritage Museum began in 2009, when another group of Tulsa Community College faculty wrote a grant proposal with the goal of assisting us in becoming more versed in Complementary and Alternative healthcare practices so that our students could prepare themselves for care of self and others. We had no idea what a life-changing experience it would be.

I had been discouraged and disillusioned for several years about nursing and nursing education; it seemed there were more ways for a student to fail than to be successful, and that complexity and technology were valued over compassion and kindness. Applying the Caritas Processes (Watson, 2008) to nursing education has allowed me to find the identity and direction within our discipline that I had lost. It has my raised my confidence and expanded my consciousness. It has brought me a more acute awareness of what nursing is and what it is not. It has deepened my journey with my students and colleagues, and has made me determined to bring healing to my work. Lastly, but probably the most important consideration, it has spelled in no uncertain terms that self-care is not a frivolous pursuit; it is of primary importance in my life and the lives of all nurses.

Over these past two years, I have had the privilege to learn about the true nature of nursing with Dr. Watson, Dr. Janet Quinn, and the dedicated (to the principles and processes of Caritas) (Watson, 2008) and gifted faculty of Watson Caring Science Institute. The Human Caring and Healing Program at the University of Colorado consisted of two weeks in Boulder (since Dr. Watson’s retirement, it is no longer offered in that format), and completion of the requirements took another year. As Dr. Watson discussed the role of the Sacred Feminine in nursing’s foundations, and the dance between the male and female archetypes in today’s healthcare dramas of curing and eradicating versus healing, (Watson, 1999) I became aware that my final project had been unfolding unconsciously even before I went to study in Boulder.

Since 2002, I have been part of an international community which supports numerous dances around the world. One of these, the Sun-Moon Dance, is held in Skiatook (Ok). It is a three-day dance which embodies relationship between the Sacred Feminine, Sacred Masculine, and the Creator. It was a vision of a Shaman, teacher, and healer, Joseph Rael (Beautiful Painted Arrow), from the Picuris Pueblo of New
Mexico. Joseph envisioned dances for “all the people,” which include women (Scarbrough, 2007).

When I presented my project proposal to Dr. Watson in the closing days of the Human Caring Program, I had suggested a presentation for the faculty regarding “what I learned in Boulder”. Her response was a skeptical, “That’s what they want you to do,” which motivated me to look deeper.

Back in Oklahoma, the dance, its rituals, drumming, and beloved friends, drifted into my mind. I wrote Dr. Watson a new proposal, using the dance as my creative gift to Nursing and to her work on this planet, and her response was ecstatic. Four loving, amazing artist/healer/seamstress friends contributed to the creation of the garments, including a shawl which was painted with the Watson Caring Science Institute’s lotus, the sun-moon, and Chinese characters for caring: “passage-way to the heart.” Each knot in the fringe that rings the shawl represents a prayer for Dr. Watson’s work, life, family, or happiness.

I presented the beautiful shawl to Dr. Watson at the Caritas Consortium in The Woodlands, October, 2011. Each time I see her, my heart leaps with that same joy we shared at that moment. This past summer, at the celebration of her retirement from the University of Colorado, she shared with me that she has kept that shawl in an honored place in her home. That energy of the dance is part of the shawl, as is the love I feel for this Caritas work. The winding, synchronistic path we walked over that two year period, which brought together those two loving communities, as well as my community of educators at Tulsa Community College, is a source of continued gratitude and wonder. Caritas Process 10: “Opening and attending to spiritual, mysterious, and unknown existential dimensions of life-death-suffering; allowing for a miracle” (Watson, 2008) was weaving its magic in all of these movements of spirit.

In the past year, I continued on my Caritas Journey by completing the Caritas Coach Education Program, which further deepened my connection with this Sacred Work. I was further blessed by the guidance of a mentor whose love, encouragement, and skillful application of Caritas and scholarship were inspiring and informative in a deep way. This Way of Being and Becoming as a nurse is in the fabric of me now, and is part of every breath I take. The Dance lives on. It is good. All My Relations.

Anyone interested in the Caritas Coach Education Program, Caritas Consortium, or the WCSI’s Human Caring Program can find information at http://www.Watsoncaringscience.org or you may contact the writer at Nancy.vitali@tulsacc.edu

References:
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Below: Dr. Jean Watson, Nancy Vitali: Woodlands, Texas, October 12, 2011