

# Nursing: Seeking its Source and Survival

(Editorial)

By

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**“...all this is changing and must change if nursing is going to be anything more than a technical assistant model for an evolving medical science, or, if not a technical assistant, then perhaps an ethical or philosophical assistant, but not a distinct health profession which works as a mature partner with other distinct health professions” ...**

Jean Watson, 1999:xxiv

**T**he crisis in modern medicine and nursing for this new millennium seems to lie in the lack of a meaningful philosophy for the nature of our practice and the deeper dimensions of our work. It seems that nursing's very survival is at stake at this moment in its history. Thus, it is a deeper level of nursing, its very source, which must be explored and excavated for this new era in human history.

Nursing's job has been too small for the nature of its work with and for humanity. An expanding worldview is upon us, whereby we must treat ethical, philosophical, non-measurable, aspects of our work, such as values, deep beliefs, intentions, and the caring consciousness, which informs our humanity, with the same attention we have given to physical disease, hospital-medical oriented tasks, and institutional demands in the past.

One consequence of this shifting reality is a call for nursing to reconsider the very

source and core of its existence and whether it is grounded enough to survive this new reality. Global concerns, social injustice, and the diversity and disparities of human experiences across cultures, generations, geography and class, along with a deep spiritual longing, raise the ante as to how, and how well, nursing can engage with, and enter into, this new undefined, ambiguous space (Watson, 2001).

Nursing worldwide has been so confined and controlled by external material, physical reality, found within Westernized medicine and institutions, that it has almost lost its own heritage and purposive existence. It has been so consumed by the modern demand for “technological competencies” it now is faced with having to restore the under-developed “ontological competencies” so essential to nursing's maturity and survival as a distinct caring-healing profession. It is now charged to redefine itself and ask new

questions regarding is *raison de etre*, such as:

*“What will nursing be,  
What will nursing become,  
How will nursing be defined/redefined,  
When the systems that have defined it,  
controlled it, and given it its identity  
are no longer there, standing behind it?”*  
(Watson, 1999)

(Because these systems, too, have been reconfigured, redefined, or collapsed into non-existence).

So, where does nursing stand in relation to these pressing questions for our time and human history? One way forward in this exploration, excavation of sorts, is for nursing to ask itself what is the real nature of its purpose and its larger tasks for serving humanity?

It seems to me that nursing’s greater teleological purposive task goes far beyond the limited industrial-technical-medicalized-institutional view of humanity and life it adopted during the past modern era of human history. We can now awakened anew to the larger fact that nursing’s task in the world community, coincides and intersects with the common task of being human and humanity itself. These shared tasks include (\*Watson, 2002, also influenced by Longacre, 1999):

- Healing our relationship with self and other/s, and our place in the wider universe;
- Finding meaning in our own life and health-illness concerns, as we re-awaken to our profound compassionate, caring and healing service in the world;
- Understanding and transforming our own and other’s suffering;
- Deepening our understanding and acceptance of impermanence, the expanding-contracting of all life cycles (birthing-dying/ the dark and light), including preparing for our own death.

In considering these rhythms of life and experiences of humanity that nursing encounters, witnesses, participates in, and often transforms, is a call for nursing to awaken to its own humanity. In is here in the deep recesses and silences of nursing’s heart that we awaken to our source, our philosophical traditions and inspired/in-spirited ideals, that we become once again, true instruments of healing, returning to our roots and our deepest ethical ideals and values for human service.

What are these deep roots and philosophical traditions and ideals?

For Nightingale, nursing was a spiritual practice, and spirituality was considered

intrinsic to human nature and a potent resource for healing; she was clear about nursing being a calling; she articulated nursing's healing role, working in harmony with nature. In this heritage, nursing and its focus on caring and healing in harmony with nature and environmental conditions, was a form of values-guided, artful practice, attending to basic human essentials, grace and beauty.

Such a tradition of caring and healing, is congruent with contemporary and futuristic directions whereby the nurse's values, ethics, consciousness and intentions have to be cultivated for mindful, reflective practices, that engage the mind, heart and embodied spirit of the nurse. In this timeless, yet ironically, futuristic view there is a relationship between values of love and caring that can be named and claimed, engaging the nurse's authentic presence within a caring moment.

In a Value's-based approach to our practice we are charged with a call for renewal of our professional ethic and ethos of caring and healing. In this Value's-based focus for nursing, stemming from our heritage as well as extant theories and philosophies, we acknowledge that the human dimensions of nursing's work are the essential ingredients, not the tasks and physical skills alone. It seems that somewhere along the way in modern

nursing's rise, we have forgotten, that in taking care of people, we are given the greatest honor one could have. It is here in this deeply subjective-intersubjective space of human caring relationships that nursing touches the sacred in the midst of the profane. To clarify and claim our deep human values and caring stance as the basis for practice is a restoration of the heart of nursing.

Otherwise, a profession that loses its values is soul-less; it become heartless and therefore is worthless. The worth of a profession is in clarifying, articulating, and manifesting its values through action. Our values renew our energy and clarify our *raison d' etre for Being and Becoming*; our purpose for compassionate service to humanity. It is through our values of caring and healing and holism that unite us, rather than separate. When our Values are congruent with our actions, we are in harmony; we may even say we are healthy, we are whole.

By cultivating mindfulness of Values, such as loving kindness, caring, compassion, gentleness, calmness, we communicate a consciousness that begets caring, calmness, gentleness and wholeness/healing. By not being mindful of Values, we can beget the opposite, which can be harmful to self, other, the system, our world. Nursing, collectively, is the keeper of common Values that serve

society. Nursing seeks to sustain and preserve caring, wholeness, and humanity, across worlds and time, whether caring is threatened, individually or institutionally.

In redefining nursing for this new/old turn in our history, we recognize that we are the culture; we are the human environment (Quinn, 1992); we create the caring field. We recognize that the self of the nurse and his/her consciousness and basic values serve as the human-environmental field, affecting our way of Being-Becoming, Seeing what is possible. It is our Values which become our starting point and influence where we end up; it is our Values which give us courage to envision/re-vision what might be possible, rather than conforming to what already has been.

In awakening to the humanity of nursing, the nurse is invited, if not required, to re-pattern his/her own field of Being, in the direction of an expanded caring-healing consciousness, becoming more clear about nursing's heritage and value based practices. These tasks are carried out from a deep philosophical tradition that calls upon us to cultivate a caring consciousness and an ethic of caring as foundational for our practice. This consciousness in turn allows us to re-pattern our own field toward higher/deeper healing aspects of our work, connecting with the spirit-filled

perennial tasks of humanity we share with others.

The wider/deeper science model within which caring consciousness, values, caring ethic and intentions reside is often called "noetic sciences" (Harman, 1998) Or it may be considered a "noetic emphasis within the human sciences" (Harman, p.32). Noetic comes from the Greek word *nous*, which refers to mind or direct ways of knowing (Schlitz et. al. 2001). Noetic sciences seek to further explorations of conventional science into aspects of reality – such as mind, consciousness, spirit, which includes Values; these aspects of reality, include, but transcend physical phenomena.

When noetic caring consciousness is incorporated into a shared framework for nursing practice, one begins to awakened scientifically as well as ethically, to the importance of one's Values-spiritual belief system, as a conduit to access universal life energy. This noetic, mind-body-spirit field awareness, in which caring consciousness and ethical intentions are theoretically located, seeks to access the universal, life-spirit energy, via one's deep intentional focus on a specific mental object of attention and awareness. This process invites Spirit- energy to enter into one's life and work and into the caring-healing processes and outcomes (Watson, 2002).

With such an integration or synthesis of perspectives, we entertain a view whereby health and healing is acknowledged as a relational process by which individuals maintain their ability to cultivate deep values, beliefs and meaningfulness in the midst of suffering and dis-ease. Additional attention is given to personal relationships, perceptions, thoughts, and emotions as fundamental points of connection between consciousness, energy, and unitary theories and society, that restore the possibility of human transcendence in the face of illness, disease, transitions, suffering, vulnerability and even death.

As nursing and nurses enter into this transpersonal aspect of our work, as we are re-patterned, so is our environment, our systems and our culture. We then, individually and collectively, become the transformed nurse; we become the ethos

and culture of caring and healing, living out our timeless heritage and most extant caring ethic, theories and philosophies in our lives and work.

It is from this new/old place of awakening, grounded in its own philosophical and ethical heritage, and clarity of extant views, that nursing can only then come of age as a mature health profession. It is from this new space that nursing is able to practice as a full partner with other health professions, but now for new reasons. It is from this awakening that nursing becomes that which it ironically has been all alone, a distinct caring-healing profession, but now is able to fully embrace, articulate, and enter into with grace and dignity for its future.

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