

GUEST EDITORIAL - SR CALLISTA ROY

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REFLECTIONS ON NURSING: A TIME OF CHALLENGE AND CHOICE

It is indeed a privilege to share reflections on nursing in the distinguished *Australian Journal of Advanced Nursing*. My experience in nursing over nearly four decades tells me clearly that we have entered a time of momentous challenge and choice. The end of the 20th century saw unprecedented growth in nursing as a scholarly and practice discipline. Yet the era also saw a time of great turmoil in health care delivery and seemingly ineffective efforts by nurses to improve quality of care in many countries around the globe. Facing this paradox is a challenge with far reaching implications.

I believe that nursing is in a position to encounter a world in transition that is like no other time in history. In this encounter we can make decisions that create visions and actions to promote the future good of humankind integrated with the environment.

Let me provide some background for my position and more importantly provide some principles for visions and choices based on understanding the heritage of nursing within the expanding universe.

Growth in nursing has been particularly related to nursing knowledge development during the last decades of the 20th century. As a profession, nursing utilises specialised knowledge to contribute to the needs of society for health and well-being. Pearson, Vaughan, and Fitzgerald (1996) note between 1986 and 1996 'the enormity of nursing's scholarly development and the almost total transfer of undergraduate nursing education to the higher education sector in most countries' (Preface). Scholarly development increased understanding of the focus of nursing knowledge and of how to create knowledge for practice. Nursing literature, graduate education including doctoral programs, and professional conferences around the world reflect the maturing of the discipline. Particular progress was made in expanding philosophical perspectives and related methodological inquiry. The awareness of relevant sociopolitical commitments began to increase. As with the development of any discipline, advances in one area stimulate activity in another area and each time the spiral moves to higher levels.

This iterative interaction is particularly productive in nursing as a professional practice discipline. For example, nurses enter graduate education with burning issues from practice. In these programs modes of thinking are exercised that produce new insights into how to frame questions for research. Results of such thought and research are presented at conferences and in journal

articles, which in turn affect practice. Likewise, seminal articles in the literature both stem from and stimulate innovative thinking about practice. In scholarly developments and practice, nurses are sharing concerns about quality health care and the values underlying decisions made.

Increasingly nurses in practice and academic settings share understanding of the nature and focus of knowledge for practice (US Consensus Statement 1998). Also scholar-practitioners have been united in programs of research that provide an accumulated research base for practice. At the same time, however, the need for cost containment ushered in an era of health care reform. Taking the United States as an example, serious cost containment strategies have been in effect since the mid-1990s; still this country far exceeds all other nations in per capita health care spending. As a discipline with a social mandate, nurses are eager to take responsibility for social transformation. Yet when market-driven principles rule health care reform, it seems that the well-developed scholarly practice discipline of nursing has been ineffective in transforming health care systems. Possibly there is no time in history when the need for a nursing influence on the whole system of health care delivery has been more imperative and could be more far reaching.

Given the juxtaposition of these developments and challenges, it seems reasonable to look more deeply at the role nursing can play to transcend the current impasse in health care. Nursing has always responded to the challenge of promoting health within the demanding needs of society. Florence Nightingale initiated systems of care for soldiers suffering in deplorable conditions far from their home country and thereby transformed both the images of the soldier and of the nurse. Her further efforts led to more effective military and civilian hospitals in both England and India (Donahue 1985). Similarly Lillian Wald brought new ideas to the health problems of immigrants living in over-crowded tenements in New York City and established community-based nursing whereby patients had direct access to nurses and nurses to their patients. Wald also fought for legislative reforms to rectify the causes of poverty and became one of the most influential health workers of her day (Donahue, 1985).

How are the challenges of the 21st century uniquely related to those of the late 19th and early 20th century and those I and my colleagues of the nursing classes of 1963 (undergraduate) and 1966 (masters) faced? The 1960s are known as one of the most volatile and creative decades of the 20th century. O'Murchu (1995) notes that in 1960

alone 17 African nations freed themselves from colonialism and that during the decade student movements changed the influence of ruling classes of European and American universities. On television we discovered our world and saw the horror of poverty, hunger, and deprivation in a place called the Third World. We witnessed war, mourned the assassinations of our leaders, and saw men walk on the moon. Young people began to visit the global village and to take part in communal movements to correct injustice, including the Civil Rights movement in the United States.

On another level, science also was re-defining our world. Elsewhere I have written about how discoveries in quantum physics and cosmology in the last century opened new vistas for nurses to include in their worldview (Roy 2000). Much of the creative energy of the 1960s, according to O'Murchu (1995), was redirected into the emerging information technology. Additional human resources were expended as major institutions such as politics, religion, economics, and education responded to threats to the familiar with efforts to guard the stability and security of the status quo. In time these efforts seemed irrelevant and the current generation arrived at a time of transition in which the old securities are gone, but new possibilities are at best vague and ambiguous.

What we know is that the current changes in the life systems of the earth are so extensive that a major epoch is ending (Davis 1988; Swimme and Berry 1994). Our world and all the systems within it yearn for a whole new way of being and we will do well to listen to the unfolding story of our universe, a coherent narrative of the origin and emergent sequence of irreversible transformations of the universe and the planet earth.

During the 67 million years known as the Cenozoic era, expansive life processes developed on the earth. Humankind appeared late in the era without having an influence on the development of life forms. However, Swimme and Berry (1992) note that the next era will be different. We are entering a new period of creativity in which the entire Earth community will participate. Human choices can create a Technozoic or Ecozoic era. Corporate establishments use economic control to create the illusion of human progress and remedies for all ills. Meanwhile too many of us live in mega-cities, drive on clogged highways, with our vision impaired by pollution of the air, and are troubled by issues associated with technology such as genetic engineering. The authors note that the human cannot make a blade of grass, but 'there is liable not to be a blade of grass unless it is accepted, protected, and fostered by the human' (Swimme and Berry 1994). Creating an Ecozoic era that brings human activities on the earth into alignment with the patterns of creative balance of the earth requires a comprehensive human consensus. All human professionals need to see their prototype and their primary resource in the integral functioning of the

earth community. For nurses in particular, who are educated to promote human and environment integration, this is a time of challenge and choice to be leaders in recreating the face of the earth.

The patterns of the creative universe provide basic themes from which to derive principles and values to guide human responsibility in the unfolding changes. Although authors use different words, I will call the basic themes diversity, unity, and self-identity. Swimme and Berry (1994) note that there has never been a time when the universe did not seek further diversity and they note the concern of biologist E.O. Wilson that we seem to be bringing about the greatest threat to the abundance and diversity of life on earth. Further, the essential unity of all things is seen in quantum theory. Bohn notes that 'quantum concepts imply that the world acts more like a single individual unit, in which even the 'intrinsic' nature of each part (wave or particle) depends to some degree on its relationship to its surroundings' (Briggs and Peat, 1984, p.95). Likewise, Swimme and Berry (1994) note that cosmogenesis is organised by communion: 'To be is to be related, for relationship is the essence of existence' (p.77). Within community the earth fosters self-identity. Every person and every thing is unique to self and expresses its own interior being, its self and its mystery. All of creation is made whole by individuals expressing who they are.

Nursing today faces the challenge of making the choices to lead the human community to healthy person and environment integration. Its principles, values and action plans will be based on the themes being discovered in the universe, those that have worked to evolve our current world and that will work to create the next era, one of diversity, unity, and self identity. Transforming worldwide systems according to these principles will take the kind of creativity and commitment seen in Nightingale and Wald. I believe nurses today have these abilities along with new knowledge and visions of the scope of the challenge before them to transform the life-sustaining systems of the earth.

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