

## **Keynote at Canadian Nursing Students Association's 40<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference in Hamilton, January 28, 2011**

### **Passion, Power and Politics**

I love that you have the word '*passion*' in your conference theme: "**Discover the Opportunities, Find Your Passion**".

I was so happy with your theme that I decided to talk to you about that very topic, about opportunities and passion, but I will talk to you about them in reverse order.

I will talk to you about passion first, and with respect to opportunities, I will be talking about power and politics.

So why talk about passion, power and politics? Because nursing is the very heart of the healthcare system in Canada and world wide. Yet historically, traditionally and to this very day in modern media and within health care itself, there has been a systematic attempt to deny or at the very least discourage nurses and nursing from the passion, the power and the politics that we are capable of expressing. Nurses and nursing have allowed stereotypical views to prevail and until now, I believe we have never really lived up to our potential.

Michael Valpy of the Globe and Mail says that nurses have the highest believability quotient with the public, more than all other health care professionals. The public gives nursing far more credit than we have ever given ourselves. That's why it's important that we start defining and living up to our expectations. Individual nurses and the nursing profession have both proven that we have passion, we have power, and as we'll talk about, we are more than capable of politics and changing this world.

### **Passion: *pas·sion* [ *pásh'n* ]**

So let's start with passion. How often do we link passion to nursing?

My task of defining the word, of course, began with a literature review. There are various meanings for the word, but to summarize, passion is defined as:

- Intense sexual love
- Strong emotion
- Outburst of anger
- Strong enthusiasm
- The suffering of Jesus during his last days. Interestingly, the origin of passion is *passio*, which is Latin for 'suffering'.

We definitely know passion when we see it.

The passion of the nurse, in popular media, tends to be linked with the sexual; rarely do we see a nurse's passion as emotion, anger, enthusiasm or even suffering.

The word passion in every day usage is often linked to sports. **"To win, you must have passion for the game, determination and complete faith in yourself and your team."** He is **"passionate on the ice"**.

Passion has also been linked to career growth and self-fulfillment. For example: **"follow your passion, and success will follow you"**. Oprah Winfrey has almost made a career out of the concept of passion. She says: **"Passion is energy. Feel the power that comes from focusing on what excites you."** Her shows and website are full of tips on **'finding your passion', 'identifying your passion', 'pursue your passion', 'live your passion'**. **And of course you can always 'shop' your passion at Oprah's website store!**

Think about the phrases **"passions run high"** or someone describing a meeting diplomatically, saying **"there was a lot of passion and emotion behind that issue"** meaning people can get upset and very angry.

### ***So how is passion in nursing presented?***

Well, this is one of the better ways we've been represented in the media.

This wonderful image known as **'The Kissing Sailor'** is one of the most famous pictures in the world, snapped by Alfred Eisenstaedt. In Times Square, New York City, on August 14, 1945, this sailor and this nurse (who is likely a stranger) are passionately kissing. The image manages to capture the sense of relief, exhilaration, the unbridled joy and the pure **passion** for life brought on by the news that Japan had surrendered and the most terrible war in history was finally over.

But as was noted, we also have the multitude of television and film images that suggest a nurse might be competent but her primary purpose in the show is related to her more **wild passions**. Take 'Hot Lips' Hoolihan, the nurse from TV's MASH, for example.

Unfortunately, exploiting the sexier **and the less professional passions** of the nurse carries on to this day.

It occurred as recently as November, 2010 on the Dr. Oz show (remember he spun off from being a regular guest on Oprah). Oz was doing a show about weight loss. On the show six women were fitted with high heels, retro nurses' caps and white dresses with red lingerie peeking out. The women danced briefly

with series host Dr. Mehmet Oz and the audience. Fortunately an American group called 'The Truth About Nursing' and the American Nurses Association expressed their outrage, indicating they expected more from a physician.

The show responded: "***We apologize if there were any hurt feelings.***"

In Canada, we're not left out of the misrepresentation of nursing. Consider this – as recently as October 2010 an Alberta brewing company ran a TV commercial depicting young female "nurses" clad in white tight mini dresses standing by while the male "Dr. Bubbly" revives a flat can of beer lying in a hospital bed. Fortunately organized nursing also stood up to this, demanding the removal of the ad from TV, the company's website and YouTube. I give kudos to the Registered Nurses Association of Ontario for organizing a fight-back campaign on this one.

We've also got the printed page to deal with. Consider all the harlequin style books that continue to be cranked out featuring the nurse. Here we've got 'Spanish Doctor, Pregnant Nurse', which cost \$5.75 Canadian in 2008.

The nurse role in these books is traditionally female but now suddenly there's a recognition that men are increasingly going into the profession. Consider this: 'Confessions of a Male Nurse'. The following is taken from the book's website: "There is romance! Will Steele win the heart of the handsome Dr. Storm? Drama! How will Steele stop the human A-bomb in the psych ward from blowing a hole in the ward? Pathos! Will that size catheter fit?"

Despite the image of 'Steele', male nurses overall in the media tend to be represented in a more positive and intelligent light. There is the adorable Gaylord Greg Focker, the male nurse in the recent 'Meet the Fockers' movie triad. There are other positive images, like the bumper sticker that says: 'My husband is a male nurse' and there is also the male nurse action figure. By the way, the small print on the action figure package says 'Physicians prescribe, nurses provide'. How cool is that?

### ***Power: pow·er [ pou' \_r ]***

As nurses, when we think about our profession, we tend to link the word power to our work more often than we do the word passion. But whether it is passion or power, I firmly believe that nurses and nursing still tend to underestimate themselves.

Power is described as the ability or the capacity to perform or act effectively; it is a strength, a force, an ability to influence.

As a profession, academically and intellectually, nurses know about power. Articles on power in nursing journals are abundant. There are academic articles with titles like:

- 'The Power of Professional Nursing Practice -- An Essential Element of Patient and Family Centered Care';
- 'Power and Empowerment in Nursing: Looking Backward to Inform the Future';
- There is an article in the October 2010 Journal of Advanced Nursing titled 'Satellite dialysis nursing: technology, caring and power.'
- There are even textbooks about power: 'Realities of Canadian Nursing: Professional, Practice, and Power Issues'.

Let's turn again to the popularized representation of nursing and power in the media.

We know that power can be seen as evil or unjust, but here we go again with the over the top nursing images. There is the coercive power of the Head Nurse like Nurse Ratched from 'One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest'. There are sometimes questionable abuses of power, like the ER nurse in the HBO show 'Nurse Jackie'.

So, how does nursing power live out in real time, in real life?

The first nursing power I ever witnessed was as a child at the dinner table. My mother, an ER nurse was describing an incident on her shift: a young girl had come in and badly needed her face sewn up after an accident. My mother knew the intern on duty that weekend would do a lousy job. She didn't let him touch the girl and phoned the 'staff man' at home on a Sunday and essentially told him he better get in there, weekend or not. He did.

There are lots of individual examples like that. There are times when I've said ***"Excuse me are you charting that? So you are going to discharge this man who is homeless 'to the street', even though he has just been diagnosed with pneumonia?"*** I usually got action.

In a recent article in the Canadian Nurse Journal, health policy professor Steven Lewis from Saskatoon wrote:

***"There are four nurses in Canada for every physician. Public opinion polls confirm that Canadians greatly admire the profession. Nurses populate every health sector and every corner of the country. They are synonymous with health care, compassion and good works."***

He goes on to say:

**“They (meaning you and I) are embedded in the system’s core, fully integrated into its structures. They are working and middle-class Canadians; we are they, and they are us.”**

**Lewis suggests that our numbers and reputation alone should transfer into real power over how healthcare looks. Politically, he says we punch way below our weight.**

**I would go further and say our numbers and reputation alone could and should transfer into powerful action on social justice, on the social determinants of health.**

### ***Politics: politics [ p\_l\_.t\_ks ]***

I’ve just started teaching part-time at McMaster University. I have two classes and I asked them both if they could name any nursing heroes, political or social justice leaders. Other than Florence Nightingale, neither class could name anyone. I knew that nurses tended to underestimate nursing passion and nursing power, but my students convinced me that we are even more estranged from the idea of nursing politics.

Politics can be daunting to us, but really it just means “of and for the people”.

It’s a process by which groups of people make collective decisions. The term is usually applied to the art or science of running government. It also refers to behavior within government, but politics exists in other group interactions, including corporate, academic, and religious institutions – like the expression ‘office politics’. Politics is “social relations involving authority or power” and it refers to the ways to formulate and influence policy.

When we think of politics, we usually think of politicians. For example:

***Tommy Douglas***, the Saskatchewan preacher turned politician, voted the most famous Canadian in 2004 and known as the father of Medicare.

***Nelson Mandela***, the South African anti-apartheid activist who spent 27 years in prison and upon release became President of South Africa.

***Aung San Suu Kyi***, the leader of Myanmar’s pro-democracy movement the National League for Democracy Party, Nobel peace laureate, recently freed from house arrest (15 of the last 21 years – after her opposition party won election) in the military-controlled country formerly known as Burma.

But politics is more than elected office or leadership of a political party.

Florence Nightingale encouraged us to engage in political action. She actually said:

***“We must create a public opinion which must drive the government, instead of the government having to drive us.”***

We know from history, film, the news, even from our own experiences that passion is what stirs the painter, sculptor or dancer to create great works of art. Passion is what drives us, it is what inspires us. So what really happens when passion + power + politics comes together and stirs the nurse?

Consider these amazing Canadian nurses where that is exactly what happened.

***Dorothea Palmer***, a nurse who pioneered the provision of birth control information and contraceptive materials when it was illegal. She was arrested and had a 23 day trial. She was acquitted in 1937.

***Clare Culhane***, a nursing student who was expelled for ‘insubordination’ but went on to protest Canada’s involvement in the Vietnam War and became a prison rights activist, documenting institutional prejudice against aboriginal inmates.

***Anne Ross***, Head Nurse of the Mount Carmel Clinic in Winnipeg who championed the needs of those who were poor and who were living in domestic abuse situations. She developed pregnancy counselling services when therapeutic abortions were finally legalized.

***Marion Dewar, a public health nurse who became Mayor of Ottawa.*** At the end of the Vietnam War, Marion Dewar witnessed the media images of abysmal refugee camps, grim boat conditions for fleeing refugees, and the slammed doors of many countries. She acted. She made the slogan ***“Think globally – act locally”*** come alive. While Mayor she helped launch Project 4000 – to find sponsors for 4,000 Cambodian and Vietnamese people coming to Canada. She created the spark that ‘imagined’ Canadians country wide, to open their hearts and homes to thousands and thousands of Vietnamese refugees who were fleeing persecution, war and homelessness in their own country. ***That was a moment of justice in Canada’s history.***

***Peggy Ann Walpole***, a Toronto emergency room nurse who asked the question “where were the homeless women coming from who entered the ER” and more importantly “where did they go when they left?” She went on to develop Street Haven: a women only drop-in above a ‘beverage room’, she also developed a women’s shelter and women’s housing.

***Dorothea Jakob***, a public health nurse who used her ‘CSI’ powers of investigation and research and identified lead solder in a kettle as a source for rising infant lead levels.

**Carolyn Davies**, a Nurse Practitioner who worked in a small village clinic in west Kenya for a month. She told me that something like 1 in 7 women die in childbirth and 1 in 3 people have HIV. She said ***“It’s the only place I have ever worked where the mortician was part of the team, so to speak.”***

**Maria Coady** – The title of a recent article in the Canadian Healthcare Network e-newsletter is entitled: ‘Maria Coady: A passionate nurse and humanitarian’. Coady had only eight shifts left in her contract in Cape Breton when Oxfam came calling in August, 2010. ***“There was this huge disaster unfolding in Pakistan and I was getting e-mails every day asking me to go, because I had been in Pakistan before, when they’d had an earthquake. So, to me, it was an obvious choice. I went to my management and said, ‘I need to do this.’”*** They said no. Coady says, ***“I was completely shocked, but, of course, that did not deter me. I knew that I was not being delinquent or irresponsible. I had made sure all the bases were covered, and that my clients were looked after and that everything was in place, so I just went.”***

In fact there are Canadian nurses working around the world on issues ranging from safe drinking water to environmental devastation.

At home, many are working on global issues like militarism and Canada’s involvement in Afghanistan. **Toronto nursing students** played an active role in the recent Housing Not War campaign.

At home, today, Street Nurses like NP **Anne Egger** are fighting poverty, hunger and homelessness. Here, Anne attends a rally that was addressing the issue of hunger and our provincial government’s cuts to social assistance and the special diet allowance.

This is important because when an issue like homelessness, hunger, or injustice affects one, it affects us all. Hunger for example is a desperate issue even affecting many students on your campuses. At the University of Alberta for instance, 2,000 students used the campus food bank this year, a 20% increase over the previous year.

Today’s nursing leaders like RAO’s **Doris Grinspun** and **Lynn Anne Mulrooney** are fighting, yes fighting to preserve and protect Medicare. They might even be having some fun doing it, such as here at the Toronto screening of Michael Moore’s film ‘Sicko’, where they make the point that we better keep working hard to save our system.

Also working hard to save our system is **Wendy Fucile**, RAO’s past President seen here passionately addressing the crowd and **Students for Medicare**, marching in the crowd!

Nurses individually have changed the world, but we rarely hear of them, we don’t celebrate them or encourage others to join them. My mother always claims that

**'nurses are their own worst enemy'**, but I say let's change that, remember the small print on the nurse action figure, **"Doctors prescribe, Nurses provide."**

So what if we begin to provide our passion, if we begin to provide our power, if we begin to provide our politics, if we begin to really get our act together, nurses as individuals and nursing as a whole could be that real force that brings about an end to social injustice.

From passion comes power and from power comes politics, and with respect to nursing passion, nursing power and nursing politics, we have yet to really live up to our potential.

To all my nursing colleagues, and especially to you - the next generation of nursing, please forgive me for stealing these words from history, but I would like to suggest that maybe it is time to stop asking what nursing can do for you, and start asking what YOU can do for nursing.

***Cathy Crowe***

*Check with delivery*