

I Want to Work in the Gift Shop Where Only The Flowers Die

by PAMALA K. McCARVER RN, M.Div.

After more than 20 years of nursing, I was considering ending my professional career. In fact, as I was leaving the hospital one day, I remember thinking I would rather be working in the gift shop, where only the flowers die.

I wanted to be free from the bondage of policies, procedures, meetings, computers, paperwork, and all the tedious rules that have bogged down the purity of holistic medicine. I was spending more of my attention focused on the rules and regulations of health care rather than caring for my patients, and it seemed that it was the patient who suffered in the end.

BURNOUT

I wondered if I had finally arrived at the decision to abandon the nursing profession and become a statistic in what has been described in our media as the “national nursing shortage” (Aiken, 2002; CNN, 2001; West, 2007). News stories often describe hospitals struggling with staffing critical patient-care positions, citing numerous reasons for this shortage. For example, Aiken (2002) reported that nurses are struggling to endure full careers, with many retiring in their late 40s or early 50s. In one study, as many as 50% of currently employed RNs considered leaving patient care within the past two years, and a study completed by the American Nurses Association found that as many as 54% of nurses would not recommend nursing as a profession (Palmer, 2003).



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My first experience with nursing burnout occurred five years after graduating from nursing school. I did not want to leave the profession that I had worked hard to prepare myself for, but I also did not want to become a frustrated bedside nurse and impose my cranky attitude on patients. Because I knew I had to do something different to change my attitude, I began studying people who not only endured in nursing but ended their life with great joy, purpose, and meaning – in spite of all the obstacles they encountered while attending to the needs of the ill.

PERSONAL CALLING

In my research, I found that many inspiring nurses lived long before the advances of 20th-century technology, and the daily hardships these caregivers dealt with made my frustrations seem trivial in comparison. For example, one woman – who I have personally modeled in my own care giving – was Catherine of Sienna, who lived during the late Middle Ages. Known to contemporary healthcare providers as the “Patroness of Nursing” (O’Brien, 2003), Catherine served the sick and needy, including lepers, with minimal tools in the most squalid conditions. At age 27, she led a group of people nursing the sick and dying when her town was overwhelmed with the Black Plague epidemic.

I also discovered that nursing has not always been viewed as a profession or a job but rather as a relationship that developed out of a personal calling (O’Brien, 2003). To some, nursing the sick has been a religious vocation supported by a personal spiritual belief system. Yet I wondered, “How were ‘they’ able to endure when life seemed so hard and there appeared to be no resolution in the near future?”

I found the answer in their sacrifice and devotion. The nurses were able to keep a balance between nurturing their own soul and their practical service, and some clearly described the importance of spiritual disciplines – solitude, fasting, prayer, private study, communal study, corporate worship, sacrificial service and sacrificial giving – in providing support for their nursing practice (Deen, 1959).

SOLUTION TO THE NURSING SHORTAGE

It seems hard to believe that something as simple as *caring for the soul* could remedy a complex issue such as a nursing shortage. All too often today healthcare providers have become more advanced in the care of the body and mind, almost to the exclusion of the soul. Until we begin to consistently nourish the soul of both the patient and the healthcare provider, overall dissatisfaction will remain in health care no matter how scientifically advanced we become.

For me, it would be much easier to work in the gift shop. But I know that I have been prepared and called to give care to the sick and dying. It is not an easy calling, but I have discovered there is no greater privilege than being present, listening, and giving of myself to another who is in great need.

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