

NURSING AS A CULTURAL IDENTITY

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An address to the Alumnae on the 45th anniversary of the closing of Saint Mary's School of Nursing

We have always discussed the profession and the practice of nursing but we do not hear about the culture of nursing. Francis Bacon in the 1600's defined culture as a particular group's way of life.

So, when we look at the three years all of us spent in nursing training – albeit different within the different decades – we do know that these were our most formative years and served to inform us and in some ways help to consolidate a particular view on the world.

The purpose of this talk is to look at that culture and how it has affected many of us and served to form our lens on the world.

My first introduction to the idea of the culture of nursing came when I was doing a course on gender and multiculturalism. It was a small class of 12 or so women and the professor asked each of us to define ourselves culturally. Where I was sitting I was the last to go and I became quite stressed as I began to realize that not only was I the oldest person but it looked like I was also the only person that did not have a clear idea of how I identified culturally. As he went around the room the women identified as Italian, Greek, Jewish, Muslim etc. and each of them defined what that meant to them. I felt that I knew certain things about each of these women as they claimed their cultural identity – family orientation, religious orientation and even historical legacies. There was a sense of a collective identification.

I was desperately trying to figure out what I would say. I'm Catholic but it did not define my lens on the world; saying I was Canadian also did not make me feel like I was being explicit enough and all of the other women in the room were in fact Canadian. And so, the question was looming for me "How do I identify culturally?" What group do I belong to? And as it came closer and closer to me I realized that I needed to reframe the question. So, I asked myself "What does someone need to know about me to know me or at least to have an idea of how I negotiate my world"? That answer was clear "I'm a nurse – and more specifically to me was "I'm a Saint Mary's Grad".

An interesting anecdote here is that my supervisor at McGill had once asked me why I needed people to know I was a nurse, why was that important information? When I responded by asking him why people needed to know he was an ex- marine he immediately got it.

The years that we spent in training had such an impact on us it provided an approach to the world that would last a lifetime and inform us in every aspect of our lives: our careers, our marriages, our mothering, our sense of self and our sense of others. If that isn't culture then I do not know how else it could be defined.

So now it is to look at how this ‘culture’ has informed our lives and what aspects have had the biggest impact. In some ways, I think that there are so many that one needs to focus on what each individual person might think was the most important for them. So, I will say right now that I am presenting what I think are the important ones for me and although I think that perhaps not everyone here may see it the same way, I do believe that what I will share has had some level of influence on everyone in this room.

I have chosen three main elements of our training that I believe have impacted my life and vision over the past fifty years.

The first of which every woman in this room shares. We worked hard! There were no lazy Saint Mary’s Students – so there are no lazy women in this room - you would never have got through training so you would not be sitting here right now.

Those early years taught us that we were capable of doing what needed to be done no matter how hard, no matter how tired we were and no matter how long the hours. We do not need to always work hard – we just needed to know that we could to start the process of self-confidence and achievement which would change our lens on our worlds.

There were also a number of different aspects of our working hard:

- 1) We did not complain about the hard work – we just all complained about the people who were not kind or mean to us. Complaining about the work could be viewed as incompetence and anyway everyone was in the same boat.
- 2) We learned not to ask for help but rather help others and hope that when our turn came we would be offered help. This was not necessarily a good lesson for women in this world but we did learn it well.
- 3) There was no mercy for a job left undone.

A classmate worked in the Operating Room over Easter weekend and had one of those weekends where it was 12 hours on Friday, 12 hours on Saturday and again another 10 on Sunday. The grad sent her home promising not to call her back. So back to residence, a bath, put her hair in curlers and off to the TV room. Then her buzzer went off and she was called back to the OR by the supervisor because she had left a stretcher in the hall. Harsh, yes. But for sure all of us who knew this story never left a stretcher in the hall again.

I do not think anyone would argue that learning to work hard in our teen years would not have a future impact on what we were capable of doing. So I will now share my ‘corny’ joke:

Three Saint Mary’s students – a junior, an intermediate and a senior discussing the ratio of work and play in sex.

Junior: I think it sounds like a lot of work!

Intermediate: No, I think it’s 50-50. 50 % work, 50% play.

Senior: You are both wrong. It is 100% play because if there was any work involved they would have us doing it.

Because I believe all nurses worked hard, it is my second aspect which I think sets Saint Mary's Grads somewhat apart and that is our values. We did not just learn how to nurse or to do the job; we were also taught how to respect all of our patients no matter where they came from – the street or the hill.

We were taught to always put the patient's needs first and it bordered self-effacing.

Now think about how this could have happened. Do you remember the "Prayer for a Nurse"? We said that every morning whether we were students or grads. And whenever I think of this little prayer I think of Mabel Smith and cannot imagine her allowing the day to start in Emergency without that prayer. Now please I am not going rogue religious on you but let's be honest if someone told another person that they were 'stupid' every day for three years we know what that would do no matter how confident or well-adjusted they were at the start – so why not the other way around.

Every morning we said this prayer and I will just recite two paragraphs:

Grant that the sick Thou hast placed in my care may be abundantly blessed and not one of them be lost because of anything that is lacking in me.

Help thou me to overcome every temporal weakness and strengthen in me whatever may enable me to bring the sunshine of joy to the lives that are gathered round me day by day.

Make me beautiful within for the sake of Thy sick ones and those lives which will be influenced by them.

This is not a religious aspect but it is spiritual and I believe that SMH students were taught that nursing was a spiritual endeavour. Were we really different? I think that we were viewed as different.

When I applied to the Montreal Neurological Institute the year after I graduated the DON gave me an interview straightaway. She offered me a tour of the hospital and when I asked her when I would know whether or not I had the job, she answered "Oh of course you have the job. You are a Saint Mary's graduate. If you have any friends that would like to work here please send them to me". However, it did not end there. When we were touring the hospital the head nurse on 2E asked her where I was going and the DON said 3 North. The head nurse responded "That is not fair. They already have a SMH grad and I have none. Why do they get two?"

We were seen as different and I do not believe it was because we worked harder. But perhaps we approached our work differently.

Now my third aspect is the level of responsibility that was given to all of us at such a young age. I know that when I trained by the beginning of our third year (I was 19) we were put in charge of an Obstetric floor with a Nursing Assistant as the only other person. Now not to say that they were not highly trained with years of experience but we were in charge and that could be very

daunting. There was always a supervisor that you could call but you better have at least tried to do it on your own. She was the last call not the first.

Think of how this has affected our lives – the level of self-achievement that we all graduated with. Children only need two things in life – one they can get from their parents and the other they need to get for themselves – love and a sense of self-achievement. When we walked out the doors of Saint Mary's as new young grads we all had earned that sense of self-achievement – we had proven ourselves. What a way to start a life!

When I think of this I know that we can all sit around now shaking our heads and wondering just how so much responsibility could have been laid on our shoulders at such a young age. But at this stage in my life I have come to the full realization that these were not burdens but rather gifts and this responsibility was the greatest gift of all.

This is why I am standing in a room of confident and accomplished women. This is why nurses have had an impact in so many areas in this world and as women with a professional background we are the generation of women that have participated in changing this world for women. So, our ability to work hard, the values that we bring to the quality of our work and the responsibility that we take on with self-assuredness and confidence are all the gifts that were given to us as struggling students developing an identity and forming a culture.

I would be derelict to walk away from this podium without looking at the world today.

Ten years ago, I was working as a night supervisor in Saint Mary's when the night nurse on 8th floor called in sick and the nurse that now needed to take charge was very nervous because she had never been in charge before. I went up to reassure her and when I asked her how long she had been working at Saint Mary's – I expected her to say 6 weeks – she told me two years!!

What woman in this room ever worked in a place for two years and had never been in charge?

So, we must look at the generation of today and recognize that they were not given the gifts that we were given and even though we can share the word nurse with them they have no idea what that word entailed for us fifty, sixty and seventy odd years ago. Some people look at this new generation with disdain but I empathize that our generation has strived to make things so easy that in it we may have forgotten the gifts earned through hard work, responsibility and the true meaning of interjecting love and respect into the work that we do. We may view the new generation as getting everything that they want but it was our generation that got everything that we needed.

I am so happy that I belong to our generation of women; I am so happy and honored that I belong to all of you and most of all I am so proud that together we share our beautiful culture that we call Nursing.