Nightinlightenment

A Tribute to "Notes on Nursing"

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"The world is put back by the death of every one who has to sacrifice the development of his or her peculiar gifts to conventionality."

I confess! I knew little about Florence Nightingale early in my career. The lectures about "the lady with the lamp" tending to British soldiers during the Crimea War powered my classroom naps. I recall suddenly waking as one nursing instructor shouted dramatically, "None of you would be here today were it not for Florence Nightingale." However, in the absence of elaboration, that statement made no impact on me. It was more than 10 years into my career when I discovered Nightingale's Notes on Nursing at a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Fellowship, led by a medical historian. Unsure of what I could contribute to the Fellows group that included 11 physicians, I consulted the historian. "How about giving an overview of Florence Nightingale's staggering impact on modernizing health care in hospitals and communities and in legitimizing the work of nursing? You have read Notes on Nursing?" he asked. I replied confidently, "It's been ages—but I will reread and present!" A white lie and a commitment to explore Notes on Nursing started me on the path to "Nightinlightenment," thus confirming, 10 years later, my nursing instructor's dramatic proclamation.

Notes on Nursing was published in 1860, three years after the Crimean War, where Nightingale succeeded, against all odds, in completely revamping care delivery to the military. Amidst the chaos and filth of the war hospitals, she devised a system of care that not only dramatically reduced the mortality rate of soldiers from 42.7% to 2%

but also served as a template for nursing care and hospital design worldwide. Nightingale was the first to systematically focus on the importance of the conditions of care or, as she called it, "sanitary knowledge, or the knowledge of nursing... how to put the constitution in such a state as that it will have no disease, or that it can recover from disease..." No other medical professionals of the time, including military doctors serving in the Crimea, focused on "hygiene" as the foundation of good care even as "germ theory" emerged in the late 1800s. Wounds were not cleaned, dressings were not changed, and excrement was not properly drained. Whether or not Nightingale "believed" in germs is moot; her system of care worked against infection and death from what was termed "zymotic causes," or death from diseases such as infection, typhus, or cholera that developed secondary to wounds incurred in battle. Nightingale used statistical analyses and dramatic graphic data displays to document spectacular outcomes in lowering mortality rates in hospitals. She was the first to practice evidence-based nursing and to widely disseminate results to the British public.

Notes on Nursing is an "enlightened" work, the wisdom of which I herein brand as "Nightinlightenment." Given Nightingale's knowledge of history and philosophy she may have explored the concept of "enlightenment," coined in the late 1800s by the German philosopher Müller who defined enlightenment as a metaphor for the "highest ideal," the "standards against which all others would be measured and on which all forms of human excellence would be modeled."

"Nightinlightenment" is clinical imagination supported by effective environmental design, observational prowess, administrative acumen, and self-determination. A review of the chapter headings of Notes on Nursing illustrates Nightingale's clinical and environmental design imagination. For example, she focused on aspects of the hospital environment or the "health of houses" that she believed foundational to good patient care: the pureness of air and water, efficient drainage of human waste given the open waste trenches that she found in the Crimea, general cleanliness to prevent infection, clean bandages, clean wound dressings, proper bed linens instead of canvas sheets, the availability of natural light, noise control, and proper nutrition. Nightingale's ideas and practices have evolved into sophisticated ventilation and heating systems in modern hospitals; infection control departments; prevention of sensory deprivation and sensory overload through noise control and lighting design on patient care units; and hospital nutrition departments.
She modernized healthcare with a laser focus on “putting the patient in the best condition for nature to act.” Time and evidence have supported her belief that the patient is in “the best condition” when caregiving practices and environmental conditions are enhancing rather than impeding healing processes. *Notes on Nursing* set the standard against which all nursing care thereafter would be measured and modeled. At first glance the chapter titles appear simplistic, even mundane; however, cleanliness of the hospital environment, bedding, noise, and ventilation were deplorable not only in the Crimean War hospitals but also in the regular military hospitals in Great Britain. Cohen asserts that “Much of what now seems to be basic in modern health care can be traced to pitched battles fought by Nightingale in the 19th century. Less well known, because it has been neglected by her biographers, is her equally pioneering use of the new advanced techniques of statistical analysis.”

Most importantly, *Notes on Nursing* advocated for formal nursing education so that the nurse knew human physiology, what to observe, how to intervene, and how to manage care including the management of those involved in that care. She promoted the combination of experiential learning with “book learning.” And, she ignored the Victorian ideal of women as devoted exclusively to family and childbearing, as constrained in other options. She believed that nursing was legitimate and important work for women and to that end, the Nightingale Training School for Nurses was opened in London in 1860 where the principles and practices catalogued in *Notes on Nursing* were taught and served as the foundation to professional nursing. Cohen asserts that in 1861 the British census found 27,618 nurses in Britain, and it listed that figure in the tables of occupations under the heading “Domestics”; by 1901 the number had increased to 64,214, and it was listed under “Medicine.”

Nightingale was not a typical feminist, defying and railing against Victorian culture; she instead combined her standing in society with an extraordinary work ethic and self-determination to promote her ideas and bring about change. Nightingale’s biting wit throughout *Notes on Nursing* was no doubt a compensating factor in her management of the oppressive culture of the time. For example, in *Notes on Nursing for the Labouring Classes*, a version of the book for the general public, she subtly emphasizes the importance of knowledge as the underpinning of nursing, “... we are often told that a nurse needs to be ‘devoted and obedient.’ This definition would do just as well for a porter. It might even do for a horse.” Further, in a similar vein in *Notes on Nursing*, she acerbically decries another popular Victorian notion.

*It seems a commonly received idea among men and even among women themselves that it requires nothing but a disappointment in love, the want of an object, a general disgust, or incapacity for other things to turn a woman into a good nurse. This reminds one of the parish where a stupid old man was not to be a schoolmaster because he was “past keeping the pigs.”*

Upon admission to a collegiate nursing program 55 years ago, two of my uncles visited my father to argue against my attending college to become a nurse. I was the first woman on either side of the family to gain admission to college. The uncles were not supportive; they advanced a financial argument. “You will be wasting money for four years and then she’ll get married and it’s all down the drain!” Then the protective argument, “You are not going to let her live there—bad things can happen!” My father did not acquiesce. As my uncles passed me on the way out, one of them growled, “So, did your boyfriend leave you? College? No way!” Shades of *Notes on Nursing*.

The uncles had no influence on my father’s decision to support my collegiate nursing education. My father believed in education for both men and women and he supported me wholeheartedly. Perhaps my father was Nightinlightened!

**REFERENCES**