

chapter one

THE POWER AND PROMISE OF EXEMPLARY NURSING CARE

Within most disciplines there are those who are recognized by their colleagues as being exceptionally competent practitioners. These people are sometimes called “expert,” “unusually competent,” or “extraordinary.” Their commonality is that they do their work in a remarkable way, and their actions and interpersonal interactions are regarded by others as highly successful.

This book is based on the findings of a 1998 study of the beliefs, actions, and interactions of a group of unusually competent oncology nurses. The investigation centered on the broad question: What is the nature of exemplary nursing practice? The chosen by peer nomination. These were the nurses their peers would choose to have care for them if they were diagnosed with cancer. Data were gathered through observation, interview, and narrative exchange. The moments that appear on the pages of this book are the exemplary nurses’ stories and excerpts from field notes I made during observations of their work (see Appendix).



Clinical nurses, nurse educators, nurse researchers, and nurse administrators may find this book of value. In a broad sense, the

images of exemplary nursing presented here could also have meaning for practitioners and theoreticians employed in human service fields other than nursing. In fact, the issues addressed are those basic to the experience of being human: life, death, and in between, caring. For this reason, the stories and poems that are the centerpiece of this work have potential to touch all persons.

SIGNIFICANCE FOR NURSES

Clinical nurses often work in isolation. Reading about the practice of others can be a method of learning alternative approaches to practice. In this way, the examples in this book may serve as models for beginning nurses, helping them learn both the tangible and the less tangible components of excellent practice.

Some of the descriptions provided are examples of how exemplary nurses achieve their levels of competence. From these, nurse educators can draw ideas to increase the effectiveness of their teaching. There are also worthy insights in this book for nurse educators concerned with providing continuing education for those who are already excellent practitioners.

For nurse researchers, this book is a source of unanswered questions. I anticipate that nurse researchers may use the descriptions, the questions raised, and the insights articulated, to stimulate their ideas and hypotheses for future research. One of the data collection strategies I used in this study, narrative exchange, I developed for this purpose. Certain data analysis approaches, including poetic interpretation and the use of images to convey the tacit and non-verbal, may be of interest to nurse researchers seeking innovative data collection and analysis strategies for qualitative research.

Nurse administrators may use the findings presented in several ways. For example, it may benefit them to have descriptions of the more intangible and immeasurable aspects of nursing practice. This information should be useful to administrators as they attempt to define and defend the distinctive role that nursing has in the delivery of health care.

SIGNIFICANCE FOR OTHERS

In one sense, this book describes aspects of a greater search for what it means to be human. As we search for meaning in our experience, and in the experience of others, we gain a fuller grasp of what it means to live in this world. Van Manen claims that, through such an exploration, we “become more fully aware of who we are.”¹¹ Those whose responsibility it is to provide service to others may find they are better able to achieve their goals if they first have a greater understanding of themselves. This work contains guidance for those who seek to become exceptional no matter what their field of service.

The nature of nursing is such that each day practitioners face some of the most fundamental and poignant issues confronting humanity. Understanding the beliefs of exceptional nurses may also illuminate our broader understanding of such issues. Ellis and Flaherty contend that “little has been done to unravel the complex manner in which emotion, cognition, and the lived body intertwine.”¹² I believe that this work begins to unravel the mystery.

DISCOVERING MEANINGS

To come to the understandings presented, the data were analyzed in several ways. The initial analysis was done by the study participants, the nurses who provided it voluntarily as they shared their narrative accounts and conversed with me.

Weaving the nurses’ narratives and comments with field notes and quotations from related literature provided additional perspectives. These elements were arranged in themes. The integration of the literature into the description of the themes provided an exploration consistent with a hermeneutic phenomenological approach. Poetic interpretations were also incorporated into the hermeneutic analysis. Hopefully, these poems provide both a summary of veiled meanings contained in the narratives, comments, and observations and a further analysis. In some ways, poems expose the tacit and

communicate the emotion of the situation described, leaving the reader with a greater understanding of the experience.

The final analysis is left to the readers to form their own insights regarding exceptional nursing practice. Much of the data is presented in verbatim form to facilitate this personal analysis.

In summary, this book attempts to convey research findings that include the context and humanness of the experience of exemplary nursing care. I hope what you, the reader, will take away from reading *More Moments in Time: Images of Exemplary Nursing* is a sense that you can be exemplary; that you can do small things with a sincere heart that will realistically change the world of people who need care; and that, even with the limits of the current health care environment, you can make a difference for the vulnerable people you care for.

THE ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

After I introduce the concept of exemplary nursing care in chapter 1, the second chapter sets the contextual basis for the book. I share my most vivid memories of oncology nursing in an attempt to establish a landscape against which a description and discussion of exemplary practice can be placed. In these memories I also introduce myself to you, exposing some of my values and possible biases, allowing you to decide how I may have influenced what appears on these pages. I have added relevant personal reflections on moments that have occurred since the book was first published. To expand the context for the book, I have also included a brief review of literature on the nature of oncology nursing plus comments from some of the exceptional nurses on their views of that subject.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 each centre on a specific theme that I discovered in my study of exemplary nurses. In these three chapters, stories, quotations, observational accounts, relevant literature, and poetic analysis are used to illustrate each of the three themes: the dialogue of silence, mutual touch, and sharing the lighter side of life.

In Chapter 6 I describe the essence of the experience of exemplary

nursing practice, joint transcendence. Other effects of the actions and interactions discussed in the sixth chapter include connecting and affirming the value of the patient and the nurse. Again, the nurses' stories and my poems are featured.

Major insights and implications for clinical nurses, nurse educators, nurse researchers, nurse administrators, and human services workers are presented in the final chapter.

The Appendix provides a summary of the research design and methodology used in the research that is the foundation for this book. This includes a description of ethical considerations, participants, limitations, and other elements of research design that might be of interest to readers.

For many years scholars have asked and attempted to address the question: What is nursing? Though I have tried to answer it here, many still search for a more complete appreciation. My hope is that those who choose to read this book will emerge with enhanced understanding of the power and promise of exemplary nursing care and at least a partial answer to one of the toughest questions I know.

I AM YOUR NURSE

I am your nurse.
I ease your pain.
I bathe your skin.
I make your bed.
I help you dress.
I meet your needs.
You heal me.

I am your nurse.
I feed you meals.
I give you rest.
I tend your wounds.
I sense your suffering.
I answer your questions.
You teach me.

I am your nurse.
I know your pain.
I share your loneliness.
I feel your despair.
I taste your joy.
I sense your spirit.
You touch my soul.

And sometimes,
for just a moment,
I am you,
and you are me,
and we are one.

Together,
we go beyond the limits
of ordinary experience,
to live the extraordinary.
