

Florence Nightingale: Timeless Pioneer. NU105

There are many different points of view as to what makes a leader. Some would say that leadership is a way in which one helps others to contribute in making something extraordinary happen. Others may argue that leadership is not just one facet of a person, but that it is an amalgamation of positive traits such as vision, honesty, integrity, self confidence and drive. There are many examples throughout history where individuals fought against insurmountable odds to bring about change not for personal gain, but for the betterment of their fellow man.

When looking back through the history of nursing, one name in particular that stands out in light of this, is that of Florence Nightingale. During her time she achieved so much for so many, and the tenements she set forth over one hundred years ago have been instrumental on molding the nursing profession into what it is today. The following paper will identify various reasons as to why Florence Nightingale is recognized as a nurse leader, and then not only identify some of the issues she had to overcome, but also the way she went about overcoming these issues.

One of the first things that Florence Nightingale addressed on arriving in the Crimea was the unsanitary conditions. Back in the 1800's, hospitals were dilapidated, filthy and usually infested with vermin. She saw the hospital conditions there were hurting, not healing the sick. On her return, she helped instigate these sweeping reforms of hospitals and their conditions not just in England, but in time throughout the world.

Another revolutionary introduction at the time was that of systematic record keeping and documentation (Florence Nightingale, 2008). This saw the beginning of recording that which was directly observable; objective data. Florence Nightingale moved forward with this and as highlighted by Lewis (1999), she utilized statistics to analyze data to look at trends. She was able to compile data on disease and mortality and present her measurable, objective evidence to others to help convey her point. She was able to use her keen mathematical mind to good effect to enable her to influence the opinions of others, especially others who were seated in powerful positions and held the reins of the means of change.

During the 1800's the nursing profession was ridiculed and satirized. Nurses were untrained and perceived to be drunks and sometimes also criminals. There was little to no training and no accreditation. What Florence Nightingale did for nurse training and education is one of the most shining examples as to why she is perceived as a nurse leader. What she wrote on and taught in the 1800's is still taught to this very day. Nightingale (1860) described how to go about tending to a patient; how not to be too hurried; how to sit and face the patient when talking to them; how to listen and attend to their words, giving complete consideration to them. These elements in nursing-patient communication are upheld today not just in every nursing classroom, but in every hospital across the globe.

It wasn't only on just training however, that Florence Nightingale wrote on. She also contributed greatly to nursing theory. Nightingale (1882) stated that:

Observation tells how the patient is; reflection tells what is to be done; training tells how it is to be done. Training and experience are, of course, necessary to teach us, too, how to observe, what to observe; how to think; what to think. (p. 1039)

This statement is the framework from which the modern nursing process is borne. When one considers that what she said was over one hundred years old, and still her works and theories are being taught to nursing students all across the world right here, right now, serves to indicate that she was a woman way ahead of her time.

Another way in which she changed the face of nursing was to introduce a new approach to care. According to Dossey (2005) Florence Nightingale's teachings and writings all contain the core elements of holistic nursing practice. She was the first to emphasize the study of the whole person with regard to care and not just the physiology. On the inclusion of dynamics such as environment, psychological, cultural and economical she created a more well rounded, richer picture of the patients that she was caring for and in doing so was able to increase the level of their care exponentially. The sick and infirm were no longer treated as just meat. Florence Nightingale helped to not only give them back their humanity, but their dignity also.

With all that she accomplished, one has to carefully consider the backdrop from where this was all taking place. The suffrage movement was still a very long way off, meaning that women didn't even have a right to vote, let alone instigate radical healthcare reforms. A women's place was in the home, tending to household, tending to children. Florence Nightingale had the benefit of a great education, which was almost unheard of for women at the time, and she used every ounce of her intellect to help further her cause.

The main protagonists she would come up against were the unwavering and loathe to changing medical field and the military, as well as politicians who would have rather kept the status quo. Some at the time would say that she was fighting for a lost cause but in going around problems a certain way, she was able to overcome these obstacles. Bloy (2009) put forward that in its simplest terms, Florence Nightingale was a social networker. Through her experience, she amassed a vast array of contacts and she used these contacts when and where she could to help move things forward. She had a great many friends, a great deal of which had both money and power. A great example of this is when she returned from the Crimean war, Florence Nightingale met with Queen Victoria and Prince Albert at Balmoral Castle and it was there where the initial stages of development regarding the Army Medical College began to unfold.

McDonald (2006) took this notion further, depicting her to be more of a political "actor" rather than a social networker. Drawing on her expertise of documentation, data collection and analysis, she produced research material of the highest quality. The exemplary standard of her work also lent it great credibility, and it was through this where she was able turn that heads and ears of the powers that be. Politicians and leaders alike knew that they could rely on papers and reports which she engendered, thereby making those in the seat of power sit up and take notice of what it was she had to say. Through the quality of her work helping her sway opinions and her diligent use of social networks, Florence Nightingale brought about some of the most influential and radical changes in the history of nursing. She changed the whole paradigm of care through looking at the patient as a whole and not just a single component of problem. She made the

nursing environment cleaner and safer not just for the patients, but the nurses that worked there also. She taught us how to be nurses over 140 years ago and her teachings have withstood the test of time. I personally read a textbook chapter on communication not three weeks ago, and when I read the same thing in her writing a short while ago, the hair on my neck stood up and a shiver went down my spine. She is indeed our timeless pioneer, and I have no doubt in my mind that she will feature in the nursing profession for many more years to come.

When I look around, and see what contemporary nurses are doing to champion for our cause, for patient rights and better conditions, it feels to me like there is a bit of Florence Nightingale's fire in all of us, and if she were alive today that she would feel a sense of pride in what she helped foster. She said once that all she will leave on this earth is a name, but she's left us so much more, and it's up to each and every one of us to continue in that same light. To me she is far much more than just a nurse leader. She was an ordinary person doing extraordinary things. To me, she is the epitome of a heroine; the embodiment of all that we as nurses should strive to be.

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