FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE AND ANDERSON COOPER

A week ago, I began thinking about writing this editorial knowing that I wanted to reflect on the World Health Organization’s designation of 2020 as the Year of the Nurse. This celebration recognizes the 200th anniversary of the birth of Florence Nightingale (May 12, 1820), the founder of the nursing profession. I have always admired Florence Nightingale and I have also always believed that Florence was a palliative care nurse.

After thinking that day about Florence Nightingale, I took an evening off to attend a lecture held as a part of a Distinguished Speaker series in my community. The speaker was Anderson Cooper, a well-known CNN journalist who I greatly admire. I thought it would be a relaxing evening, not thinking about palliative care, but rather just a stimulating evening to think about other events in the world. I listened as Anderson Cooper described his early career as a journalist exploring war-torn and impoverished countries including Myanmar, Somalia, Bosnia, and Rwanda. In recent years, as he has become a CNN evening news anchor, he has been recognized as a new breed of journalists who moves beyond the traditional unemotional reporter to an engaged, often passionate, journalist.

As I listened intently to Anderson Cooper, I realized that many of the personal and professional experiences he shared were about death. He spoke of losing his brother at age 23 and observing his mother’s (Gloria Vanderbilt) grief at the death of her son. He also described one of his first assignments in extremely difficult conditions in Somalia. He recalled for the audience an instance of sitting with parents as they used their last bit of clean water to bathe the body of their last child, a young son, who was a victim of the war and disease. He spoke of sitting with these young parents, hearing their story, recognizing that in his listening, the parents were affirming that this precious child had lived, also giving witness to their suffering.

At the end of the lecture, there was a brief time for audience questions. The event’s host asked Anderson about an occurrence during his coverage of Hurricane Katrina. This was a sensitive question, as I recalled the story of how Anderson was reporting from New Orleans in the days following the horrific hurricane. He witnessed firsthand the destruction, homes under water, and families who had literally lost everything they owned. He became outraged, while on camera, when politicians in Washington reported that “the rescue and recovery efforts were going well” when from his view and his physically and emotionally depleted state, nothing was going well. As the host noted, Anderson was widely criticized for his emotional response and outrage.

Anderson responded to this exchange by describing that very moment. But he went even further by describing that beyond the floods, destruction, and growing disease threats from lack of sanitation and water supply, there was a breaking point. That point of outrage was in seeing dead bodies left in the destruction, with no plan for caring for these people. Anderson described this moment of what we, in nursing, might call the moral crisis, where the basic dignity of humans, many whom were poor, was abandoned and ignored. His passionate description of this violation of basic humanity was a plea reminiscent of voices I have known in our field of palliative care, pleading for more humane care of the dying.

My evening out was not the reprieve I had planned from thinking about death or palliative care. It was instead a different lens, an awareness that the profession Florence Nightingale envisioned as nursing amidst the Crimean War fields is not a domain held only by nursing. Anderson Cooper reminded me that the values that provide the foundation of nursing as Florence Nightingale envisioned them and even the values underlying our generation of palliative care nurses are not nursing values but essential values of humanity.

Happy 200th birthday, Florence Nightingale. You would be so proud to see palliative nursing in 2020. It is precisely as you intended. And thank you, Anderson Cooper. Your passion, and your outrage, reminded me of what it means to be a nurse and that health care and society are best served when death is recognized as a sacred event and bodies are cared for after death in a manner that honors the life now ended.

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