

An unlikely Nightingale; writing and nursing.

Like many of us, I find writing is a natural way to process thoughts about practice. Recently, I wrote a novel, which I tend to say is about school nursing, but is really about other things besides; life, death and our love for one another, in each ordinary day.

Writing always came easily. Nursing, I never thought would.

I wonder if others of us continue to feel surprised by nursing? I was the dreaming teen who loved music and poetry, felt kindly disposed to my fellow humans, but was not aware of an early burning desire to nurse. At eighteen I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, or even quite who I was. But nursing took me and nursing gently shaped and influenced me, as it did all of us. Nursing stuck. And now, in my fifties, I find myself in a job which makes sense of all that went before. I know that writing about nursing matters. I know we can write to influence. I feel a huge debt of gratitude. And I find myself passionate about our profession, to a degree inconceivable when I set out.

Acclaimed author and nurse Christie Watson, describes similar surprise at the way nursing claimed her. She had not been expecting to become a nurse, but early on in her career she realised that writing and nursing 'come from the same place' and help us to understand love and grief.

A few weeks into my first ward, Grant of Simon Ward, St Thomas', asked me to sit with an elderly lady who was dying and had no relatives. All the befuddling afternoon tasks were suddenly lifted from me and I understood that to spend a whole shift being alongside someone in their last hours was important, precious and a huge privilege. I was not even being asked to help turn my patient or keep her physically comfortable. Those with clinical expertise came in to do that. My role was just to be alongside my patient, in our little side room, as Big Ben ticked on and The Thames flowed by and evening came.

Sister Grant would have known that this experience was seminal learning for an impressionable eighteen year old. I was loathe to leave at the end of my shift, but the night staff were kindly insistent. The next morning when I came in, the ward had moved on, the room at the end of the corridor was empty and the sun shone on a newly made bed, ready for our next patient. Sister Grant stopped by as I stood in the doorway, smiled and said; "Thank you and well done Nurse."

I have never forgotten that day or the influence it had on my practice and my writing. Reflective practice only really became formalised from about 1988, but nursing has always known about what Christie Watson terms; 'the space between the silences.' There had been extraordinary space created by a senior nurse, for one person to be alongside another in that liminal space between life and death. Another reason the experience stayed in my mind is it was the very first time I felt I had done well as a nurse, or got something right. And I had done that by being my true self and by *being*, rather than rushing about *doing*. I wrote in my diary that evening;

"Today made sense. I might have something to offer nursing, after all."

Writing can be a wonderful way of getting people to notice nursing. As a community nurse I try to describe the complexities of public health nursing and have found fiction can sometimes do this best of all, but I would urge any reticent writers among our brilliant SAPHNA community to put pen to

paper or finger to keyboard. The joy of writing about nursing comes, like nursing itself, from the diversity of our own individual style and experience.

In *Last Summer in Soho*, a health visitor team lead and school nurse are mulling over the point of their jobs, in the light of a tragic death of a child. The influence of Sister Grant and my Simon Ward patient is ever present;

"I just keep coming back to the importance of being there, alongside children and young people. We don't know how long their lives or ours will be. It isn't always about preparing them for being grown-ups, is it?"

"But for being alongside them now."

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Proceeds for this book go to School Nursing education and practice.