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What is This?
Reflections on Transformational Leadership

JoEllen Goertz Koerner, RN, PhD, FAAN

As the health care field moves into the 21st century, the discipline is moving into new forms of service and leadership. This article presents a view of Nightingale as a transformational leader from the vantage point of personality and from inspired commitment to social action. Values, beliefs, and the changing roles of nursing leadership in creation of new order are examined along with skills and capacities necessary to accomplish the task at hand.

Keywords: transformational leadership; personality style; social action; ways of knowing

In this time of unprecedented change and chaos, we demonstrate the natural tendency of reaching deeply to touch our own roots. For it is here, at the life giving core of existence, that the seeds of potential for continuing growth and unfolding reside. Florence Nightingale’s vision for nursing, and her life that embodied its essence, hold powerful models and metaphors for nursing and leadership that can guide the discipline into the 21st century (Lindberg, Nash, & Lindberg, 2008).

Change is an inevitable pattern of life—the shape and direction it takes depends on us. Everything we think and do has an impact on the world around us. To lead deliberately and with compassion is the call for transformational leaders. We must respond with the same spirit and dedication that Nightingale demonstrated in her life and work during the last half of the 19th century.

The late 1800s witnessed the end of a scientific paradigm that had focused on the perceptible physical world. This mechanistic model viewed the world as many parts working in clockwork fashion. It quantified them with tools of mathematics and physics in a linear “either–or” definition of reality. The late 1900s witnessed the emergence of new order—a quantum world focused on a wholistic, living systems view of reality (Hollick, 2006). It sees the relationship among the parts as well as the parts themselves. It qualifies them with tools from our conscious inner world. Values, beliefs, qualities, and essence are mapped and analyzed along with quantitative measures in a “this and that” circular definition of reality. A true union of “the art and science” of nursing is occurring as the vision of Nightingale is being birthed by us!

A transformational leader knows his or her own worldview (mental models) while appreciating and drawing on the view of others. The pattern of Nightingale’s conscious inner world is INTJ. This pattern created qualities and sensitivities that facilitated the unfolding of new dimensions of health and healing. How do you embody or embrace these capacities in your leadership pattern?

A strong preference toward introversion found Nightingale requiring and savoring solitude and silence. In this sacred space we conceive new order by connecting deeply with original dreams and visions arising from the unique potential of our own life. We get closer to our truth, as well as universal truth. Time spent in personal reflection, and communion with ageless wisdom, helps us identify our own life path. We can then transcend the pressures and demands of our contemporary homogenizing systems and move out from an authentic center. By infusing our own life with meaning we make a stand for the sanctity of all life. We operate from a moral

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premise that what is life-enhancing in the long term is just. Coupled with a value for harmony (health within the body and all aspects of life), the nursing leader becomes a moral agent for social good. The resultant work possesses quality, vitality, and integrity in a health-enhancing manner. How do you connect to and work from your own center of truth?

Though she rated high on intuition, Nightingale wisely used multiple ways of knowing in her life-work. The hidden springs of intuition fed her social imagination—original thinking preceded rational thought. To overcome the status quo we must have the freedom and courage to engage a staggering imagination. This requires careful attention to ourselves and others, developing the capacity to sense the subtle as well as the obvious. Part of intuition is recognition of the pattern of the whole in one subtle aspect of the phenomenon. How do you hear and respond to the symphony of life?

T.S. Eliot observed, “Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?” Florence’s life-work reflects the capacity to think wholistically. She demonstrated quick knowledge—a problem-solving approach accomplished through the nursing process. Simultaneously, she implemented aspects of slow knowledge—longitudinal examination of the issue over time. Her capacity to weave facts and stories is a fine example of “the art and science” of nursing’s combined power. How do you present your social and political agenda to various health care constituents?

Her capacity for judging—a penchant for order—fostered a comprehensive systems approach to life. Armed with an innate understanding of the interdependence of all things, she brought order to complexity. First she identified and prioritized the essential elements of an issue consisting of multiple and diverse parts. Appropriate relationships were then created among them to foster cohesion and synergy. Order takes the complications out of complexity. How do you order your inner and outer worlds?

Nightingale’s life is a fourfold mandala for social action (Skolimowski, 1994). She began with Hope—the scaffold of being and oxygen for the soul. She believed in the meaning of human life, giving people permission and urging them to believe in the better part of themselves. She also demonstrated its twin, Courage—the fuel that renews the energy of hope. Every new departure of human mind and spirit is an act of courage—arising from a life of authenticity. Nightingale had Vision—wings that carry us to new realms of possibility. We are lifted beyond rationality, propelled into a compassionate response to issues of the times. She also had Will—the intention to follow through on her compelling vision with commitment and passion. She was tirelessly inspired to shape new order as an artist molds clay into an exquisitely work of art.

Florence Nightingale’s life is a story of cocreation. She demonstrated the intellect to participate intelligently in her world. Her aesthetic capacity to savor and appreciate the feast of diversity in the universe led to the utilization of differences as a vehicle toward wholeness. As her life progressed she refined her spiritual sensitivity to touch the ineffable and be touched by it. Her life was guided by a philosophy of empowerment and affirmation. The breadth and depth of her capacities and qualities created a legend and a vision that is ushering the discipline of nursing into the next millennium—with dignity and grace. With care and compassion we will continue to support the people we are privileged to serve.

References


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