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Spirituality in Nursing Practice

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of my faith in my work. Embracing the wholeness of faith and its role in my work helped people appreciate my approach and to trust that I wasn't just relying on the law or on the literature or ethical principlism.

Faith profoundly shapes the decisions that people make about their medical treatments. Faith often plays a pivotal role in end-of-life care and decision-making. Recognizing the role of my faith gave me a deeper respect for the role that faith plays in the lives and decisions of the patients, families, and clinicians whom I serve as an ethicist. Their faith is their narrative. My narrative, my church songs about the corporal works of mercy and of hungering for justice, allows me the opportunity to assist staff in integrating those attributes into their daily work and to collaborate patients and families in their times of need.

I sing because I am happy. I sing because I am free. And I know He watches over me.

Spirituality in Nursing Practice

Regina Conway-Phillips

Acknowledgement. I wish to acknowledge, thank and bless my mother for her life, the life she gave me, and her brave demonstration of facing a terminal illness through faith, trust and prayer. For her doctors and nurses who cared for her during this journey my deepest and eternal gratitude. For my sister, my humblest admiration and appreciation for she who walked this path with me and continues to inspire and strengthen me.

Personally, I am a Christian and follow the principles of Unity, a new thought community that espouses that each individual creates their own reality and that God's presence is within each individual. I am a spiritual being and I am sustained by my faith.

Professionally, I have been a nurse for over 38 years in various capacities including clinical, administrative and academic. When I worked at the bedside in the clinical capacity, I always believed that a person's spirituality was most evident when

dealing with an illness. In practice, I frequently prayed with and for patients that I was caring for regardless of their religion.

In my administrative capacity I always encouraged my staff to feel free to incorporate their faith and belief into their practice. As an administrator I felt it important to be an example to my staff and allow them to see a professional practice in a spiritually faith-based capacity.

Now, in my role as an academician, I stress to each of my students that it is important for them to get to know themselves. I challenge my students to know and understand what they believe about themselves and others, what they value and why. I encourage them to really reflect and be very honest with themselves about their worldview and what influences has shaped this worldview, their faith, beliefs and values. I explain that it is important for them to know themselves before they can help others. In the health care field it is important for my students to feel comfortable when they encounter a patient in need of spiritual support.

Religion and spirituality are terms that are often used interchangeably in the health care setting. Although related, these terms have different meanings to health care practitioners, administrators, academicians and patients. Religion, religiousness, or religiosity is often referred to as membership and participation in the organizational structures, beliefs, rituals and dogma of religious faiths such as Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. While spirituality has been defined as believing in a Higher Power that guides ones life and is a source of unconditional love, peace and strength; as a result, one is able to cope with life's situations and maintain a positive attitude and assurance that all is well.

When presented with the opportunity to submit a story about how I, as a health care provider integrated faith into my practice, I jumped at the opportunity because I think it is an important factor in the care of others, be they patients, peers, students or oneself. One of the concepts I explored in my dissertation research was spirituality. I have always operated from a spiritual faith-based perspective both in my personal and professional life as a nurse and more recently as an academician. Personally,

I define myself as a spiritual being, governed by spiritual laws, guided by spiritual principles, living a human experience. I am a Christian and a beloved child of God, placed on this earth at this time to fulfill the divine potential and purpose I was sent to serve. I believe that every human being on the face of this earth is a spiritual being whether they acknowledge, believe it or accept it themselves. As such I believe we are all one with God and one with each other and I believe that everything in our lives happen for a reason and in due time. My faith and beliefs were never more clear to me than my experience in loosing my 84-year-old mother on January 18, 2013 after a four year battle with lung cancer.

Professionally, I have been a nurse for over 38 years in various capacities including clinical, administrative and academic. When I worked at the bedside in the clinical capacity, I always believed that a person's spirituality was most evident when dealing with an illness. In practice, I frequently prayed with and for patients that I was caring for regardless of their religion. I always felt it was a privilege to witness others resilience and faith. But it was as a cancer nurse navigator that I got to truly develop as a spiritual care provider. To begin, it was a series of serendipitous events that lead to my being in the position; I did not seek it, it was offered to me. Spirit guided me to accept the offer. I found myself embracing this role more than any other position I had ever held. Admittedly, at times I wondered why. My mother even expressed concern for my working with cancer patients because she knew how involved I became with my patients, but I assured her that I would be fine.

Working with patients that were facing one of the most frightening diagnoses one can imagine, yet demonstrating faith, trust and resilience was a life changing experience for me. Little did I know that it was preparation for my personal experience that was yet to come. Were it not for the navigator position I would not have been prepared to handle my mother's diagnosis. I had the knowledge, strength, and the faith to help my mother, my sister and our family through the experience, because no one in my family had been diagnosed with cancer before that time. I know it was God that had placed me in

the position to gain what I needed to be prepared. I thank God for divine order.

But it was my mother's faith that sustained us all from the very beginning. My mother prayed over, with and for my sister and I. She taught us how to pray, she taught us that we were spiritual beings and that we had a purpose on earth to serve God. She taught us to trust and have faith in God and she led by example. I was in the middle of my doctoral program when she received the diagnosis and the only thing she wanted was to see me graduate. At 81 years of age with metastatic lung cancer my sister, who is also a nurse, and I knew the prognosis. We were guided to the right doctor and the right facility thanks to one of the oncologists that I worked with. The oncologist that treated my mother asked me when I was going to graduate and then he promised my mother that she would be at my graduation, which was over 15 months away. On May 14, 2011, my mother made the trip from Little Rock, Arkansas and was in the stands as I walked across the stage to accept my PhD. I witnessed my mother maintain her faith in God throughout her four year ordeal as I had witnessed her face many other challenges. She was my exemplar. I know that God had everything in divine order and I thank God.

In my administrative capacity I always encouraged my staff to feel free to incorporate their faith and belief into their practice. As an administrator I felt it important to be an example to my staff and allow them to see a nurse practice in a spiritually faith-based capacity. In this capacity I did not shy away from mentioning God if I thought it appropriate at the time. I prayed with and for many of my staff when they suffered a loss in their families, even if it was just to sit quietly beside them or hold a hand. I was always comfortable providing comfort in stressful situations and never questioned the source of that strength.

Now, in my role as an academician, I stress to each of my students that it is important for them to get to know themselves. I challenge my students to know and understand what they believe about themselves and others, what they value and why. I encourage them to really reflect and be very honest with themselves about their worldview and what

influences has shaped this worldview, their faith, beliefs and values. I explain that it is important for them to know themselves before they can help others. In the health care field it is important for my students to be aware of the spiritual needs of patients and to feel comfortable when they encounter a patient in need of spiritual support. It is only in knowing themselves and being strong in their faith, belief and trust that they can help others. And by others I mean patients, family, friends, peers, everyone. We are all in this life together.

Interestingly enough, I have never faced any problems or issues as a result of my faith and spirituality neither as a clinical practitioner, administrator or academician. This could be because I do not look for issues nor engage in debate about who I am and what I believe. I feel it is important to provide holistic care and that includes spiritual care in any role I serve because it is who I am, a spiritual being. I feel it is important as a health care provider and academician because acknowledging and addressing the spiritual needs of those we serve is important to their health care outcomes. As future nurses and health care professionals they are to meet the needs and treat the whole being; physical, psychological, social and spiritual; and in so doing we meet our own needs as spiritual beings. I start each morning with a meditation: Thank you God for this day, my daily bread of life, love, wisdom, power, substance . . .

Namaste