

Caring, Compassion and the Spiritual Lighting of Florence Nightingale

A sermon by Karen Wolf

UU Congregation of the Susquehanna Valley

August 11, 2024

Much has been written about Florence Nightingale as she herself was a prolific writer. Lynn McDonald, in Canada has produced a 16 book collection of Nightingale's work. The British Library has the largest collection. Biographies by Cook, Cecil William Smith, Mark Bostridge, Barbara Dossey among others.

One of most interesting collection of Florence Nightingale materials in the US is by Country Joe MacDonald. I want to start with a brief excerpt from Country Joe MacDonald's tribute to Florence Nightingale

On the 12th of May, 1820, in the city of Florence, Italy, Frances Nightingale gave birth to her second child. Another girl. In honor of the city of her birth and in keeping with the tradition started by her parents, the little girl was named Florence. An unusual thing to do in a conservative time. This little girl was to bear no children of her own but to become perhaps the most famous woman of all time and give birth to the profession of nursing as we know it today. In response to a call from God to nurse the sick poor she was to turn her back on love, wealth, society and comfort the likes of which few will ever know to single handed champion a new direction for women of the world and health of all its citizens.

Florence Nightingale is much beloved figure in history and yet too often simplified as the "mythical lady and the lamp". Why do we talk about her in our UU sermons? She is often claimed as a Unitarian. But in truth she was raised as an Anglican. But, looking at the course of her spiritual life and practice, I assert that she would most likely join with the UUs today. Florence was greatly influenced by her father and grandparents who were Unitarian. Her grandfather was well known as a Unitarian abolitionist. As she grew into young adulthood Florence rebelled against the Anglican or Church of England, writing: The Church of England has for men bishoprics, archbishoprics and a little work.... For women she has what?" She was at this point contrasting this to the Catholic church, which supported the work of women in caring for the sick. But any chance of Florence Nightingale's conversion to Catholicism was countered by her belief in free thought.

She held a more than 30-year correspondence with Jowett the head of Philosophy & theology at Oxford about religion, including Buddhism, Hinduism, literature and the role

of women in the church- evidencing her belief in free thought for truth and meaning. She wrestled with the concept of God and believed that there was one God for all religions. The discrimination against Christians and against other religious groups was equally wrong in her eyes. She was known for her embracing the natural sciences. According To McCrae, (2015) " For Nightingale, the laws of science are the "Thoughts of God." Because of her deep conviction about universal law, she did not believe in miraculous intervention as an answer to prayer. Human beings must discover the laws of God and apply them for health and wholeness."

Influenced by her father and exposure to a wide range of liberal thinkers, Miss Nightingale repeatedly wrote about justice and the call for greater humanity in the world. Her copious writings included reports, news articles, books, and letters and covered topics of religion, gender roles, of the natural world, sanitation, hospital organization, nursing education, and care for the impoverished in Britain and India. She is well-known for her belief that women should have roles outside the home and be able to share in intellectual pursuits, further expressed in her "Cassandra" essay. Most of her writings are at the British Library in London.

Nightingale was a rebellious child and young woman. Her father decided to educate her and her sister Parthenope or "Parth". Florence flourished in education, while Parth preferred to retreat to work with her mother in "conventional" duties to prepare her for marriage. Florence's excellent ability at math was considered "unladylike" but she persisted to expand her knowledge. A tutor was secured to advance her skills. These math skills later served as a foundation for much of her life's work. She was so skilled that she is considered the "mother of Biostatistics" and was the first woman to be admitted to the newly formed British Statistical Society.

Given her intelligence and passionate thirst for knowledge, Nightingale found her way into intellectual circles. Despite being an introvert, she thrived and developed intense friendships that drew her closer to nursing and yet these repelled her as she saw them as selfish endeavors that took her away from doing what she was called by God to do. This caused her to jettison three suitors. But her friendships also enabled her travels around the world and exposure to different cultures and hospital systems. She reveled in the friendships of diverse poets, writers, radical thinkers, and politicians such as Lord Herbert. These shaped her own thinking about the world and helped her to build and use a network that she used as what might call today as a social influencer- but she was more than that. She was strategic in pushing for changes in hospital and health care administration, poverty laws, and education (for example, pushing for admission of women and person with less financial means to university).

As a young girl of 16 she had believed that she was called by God to his service — {During her lifetime Florence stated she has four calls from God-} But she was lost as to

what the call wanted of her in terms of service. She agonized over this and would be by today's standard, called depressed. While some compared her to a Joan of Arc, her call to battle would over time take a very different form.

A second call in 1853 clarified that she was to "nurse" and she sought out opportunities to learn more about nursing, but was frequently blocked by her mother as nurses in the Victorian era were viewed as (and often were) vulgar and drunkards- more often assigned to work in poor houses to care for the sick. She recognized and named poverty and hunger as fundamental to "social ills". While Florence found opportunities to care for sick relatives in their homes, throughout her lifetime, it was her work with the poor and orphans that solidified her desire to nurse, much to her family's chagrin. As she sought out opportunities to visit hospitals and evaluate the state of their care and nursing in France, Germany and England, formulated recommendation to change the status quo. A three-month experience working within the Kaiserwerth Hospital. This experience became the basis of her 3rd call, to serve in the Crimea in response to a request from Sir Sidney Herbert, a family friend and head of the war office.

Much has been written about the horrific conditions in the hospitals caring for British soldiers. Less discussed in popular writing is that Nightingale's use of statistics and the publication of a memorandum on the report *Mortality of the British Army*. She produced clear graphics to illustrate conditions that served to influence the government to reorganize and improve conditions.

Her work in Scutari proved challenging as military politics and religious divisions undermined the work of Nightingale and her nurses. Running the hospital and caring for the troops was exhausting work and Nightingale became ill with what was called Crimean fever. Upon return home, exhaustion, sequelae from the fever and most likely PTSD, caused Miss Nightingale to proclaim she was an invalid at the age of 37. This allowed her to control her expenditure of time and ultimately, do her writing without the major constraint of societal expectations for the over 50 years of her life.

After her retreat Nightingale became involved in reforms in India at the critical junction when India began a mutiny against British rule. She chose not to go to India, but instead applied her analytical skills to the challenges of health and sanitation in India, rather than just the concerns of military. Her extensive writing on this topic in the form of reports and letters to politicians and newspapers contributed to major improvements and the admiration of the Indian government. Miss Nightingale's analytical abilities exposed truths and gave meaning to her life, answering a 4th call to serve and using her statistical abilities for good.

Nightingale's retreat into her home for more than 50 years, while viewed as invalidism, was also her way to continue her work unencumbered by social expectations with her primary company, her beloved owl at side. Early in this isolation she wrote in response to her family's request that she spend more time with them:

No woman ever before directed the labours of a government office. She must be judge of when and how, if a woman chooses to undertake control, she should do it. No one else can judge how she shall do it.

Much of her time was in isolation was spent collecting and reviewing statistics about India, the health of troops, the sanitation and health the people. She worked behind the scenes to encourage the Indian officials to pursue democracy apart from colonialism.

As many of her contacts in the government office with India had died Nightingale returned her focus to nursing education, frustrated by lack of progress. I suspect that she saw the time was right to really push for more reforms as the ideas of formal nursing education were taking off around the world. She took interest in supporting improved training and even came out of her isolation to visit St. Thomas's, the location of the prime Nightingale school. She welcomed international visitors who wanted to replicate or inculcate her principles into their development of training schools for nurses.

But nursing education was also only one piece of her perceived plan. It was belief in an interconnected web of the world with culture, environment, education, economy and justice weaving through. She may be remembered as the lady with the lamp, but she was so much more.

I end with this final quote from Country Joe McDonald's tribute, which reflects the mythology and some of the truth of her life.

She (Nightingale) lived a long and wondrous life of 90 years. Through the Victorian age into the age of electricity and biology. From darkness into light. From a tortured secret life of sorrow and almost madness she emerged as a war hero and leader of a society of women that spans the world over to this day. She predicted her own fate ... that someday she would be "nothing but a name" ... FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE ... but that her works would live on forever."

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Ending:

<https://youtu.be/DPpo3qi4oIQ?si=6nIQP0WqYQrPMb5u> The Music is from Haydn Symphony No. 6 D Major Le Main Adagio-Allegro St. Lukes Chamber Ensemble