

## UNIT 1

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# Knowing the Self as Teacher



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# Then and Now: A Call to Pause

By three methods we may learn wisdom:  
First, by reflection which is noblest;  
Second, by imitation, which is the easiest; and  
Third, by experience, which is the bitterest.

—Confucius

It all began with Cherry Ames: *Cherry Ames, Student Nurse*; *Cherry Ames, Senior Nurse*. In those fictional book series, she was the smart, passionate and beautiful, and lucky (albeit shallow) nurse with an attitude who charmed me and countless other young teenagers of the 1960s. Cherry Ames enticed us into the corridors and operating rooms of hospitals, enamored us with the thrill of learning facts and saving lives, and tempted us with the romance that blossomed in the dormitory tunnels and stairwells. During those unnerving Vietnam War years, the lure for me was the irresistible science of biology and physiology and my foggy fascination with literature, art history, and social studies. Along with thousands of other baby boomers, I was hooked.

## LEARNING AND TEACHING

That was then; this is now.

In between were a baccalaureate nursing degree, years of acute care and critical care nursing, graduate degrees, and a venture into higher education, teaching first at a community college level and then at a university. Without a doubt, these alphabet soup adventures did not follow a precise plan; I floundered and flailed, bending as the breezes blew me. Incidentally, although it works for some, I find it difficult to suggest that a definite 1-, 5-, and 10-year career plan is essential.

Others may consider my career decisions uninformed, based on poor rationale, or even made under some duress. As part of the flounder and flail, I pursued a baccalaureate degree simply because Mr. Larry Stephenson, my

wise high school counselor, told me to. I had already selected a nearby diploma program because I marveled at the picture on its marketing brochure (perhaps it lured me in true Cherry Ames style). Instead, Mr. Stephenson convincingly handed me the application to the University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire, “Fill this out and mail it in by the end of the week.” After this persuasion and too mortified to admit that I didn’t even know where Eau Claire was located, I rushed home and gently unwrapped, so as not to further rip the creases, our 20-year-old ragged state map. Eau Claire, the “state’s most beautiful campus,” lay 200 miles directly west of my tiny hometown. Not surprisingly, I did not breathe a word about this to anyone at home. I was 17, from a rural impoverished family whose mother and father scarcely completed fourth and sixth grade and I hadn’t a clue about higher education. Mr. Stephenson, please hear my thank-you!

After a few years of staff nursing, I entered a master’s in nursing program at California State University–Los Angeles and focused on education. The tuition was minimal in California at the time and I thought I would have evenings, weekends, and holidays off as an instructor. I know, I know . . . I hear your chuckles and chortles—what was I thinking?

And then, more flounder. My decision to pursue doctoral education was delayed and fraught with hesitancy, self-doubt, and a lack of understanding about its value and career implications. The real truth is that I entered the PhD program at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee shaking and shivering. I felt like I was molded to the smallest space possible and I believed that I would never do anything that would take my own breath away.

Being a learner and a teacher has been my career—no, my life. After one year in an associate degree program, my faculty experience has been in baccalaureate and master’s nursing education. For 30 years, I have taught and learned with students at all levels in the classroom and in clinical settings, and with various synchronous and asynchronous technical methods. The content areas that have most absorbed me are nursing care of adults in acute care, education, leadership, research, and international collaboration. Throughout most of my tenure as a nurse educator, I have integrated an active practice as a staff nurse and professional clinical consultant into my teaching and scholarship role.

That was then; this is now.

## **A MOMENT IN TIME**

As they go on, the days plead for a pause. How have the years unfolded? Alice Walker, in her recent book *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For*

(2006), admonishes us to pause, noting that the moment something major is accomplished, we are so relieved to finally be done with it, that we are already rushing into the future. Perhaps this accomplishment is completing a graduate degree, ending a semester, taking on a new position, or earning tenure. In one way or another, we always seem to be bolting forward. Wisdom, she suggests, exacts a pause and demands that we stop, sit down, and reflect in a universal place of rest to bask in the warmth of wonder.

I must tell you about my recent experience around “pause.” I had the pleasure of co-teaching a doctoral course that focused on scholarly writing at Borås University College in Sweden with my cherished friend and colleague, Dr. Margret Lepp. As Margret and I planned each 6-hour day, she kept repeating, “We need to plan the time for a pause. . . . What are we going to do for the pause?”

At first I was confused about what she meant by using this word: *pause*. English was her second language; perhaps I misunderstood her meaning. But then, I finally got it. Margret meant that the class needed to take a break—we needed to plan for the class break.

Then, I must admit, my nasty ethnocentrism kicked in. I thought, how quaint, how “off” to use the term *pause* inaccurately in this way. I supposed this was similar to Margret using the word *sprinkles* when she meant *freckles*, or when she said we needed to get “installed” in our hotel room when she meant “check in.” “Pause,” I self-righteously chuckled to myself with a dose of smug.

But the more I thought about *pause*, the more suitable the term seemed. It reveals more than the class taking a break. *Break* implies broken and fractured, sounds pinched and creased. Just as Margret and I paused in our teaching and learning through the day, the class also paused, all to breathe with a sigh of curiosity and conjecture and warmth. This experience was one of a hundred like it where Margret helped me see, helped me pause to explore another moment in time.

## **PAUSES AT DEPARTURE AND ARRIVAL**

Pauses are fundamental especially when we gingerly edge into a new place, pass over yet another threshold, move into nursing education. Thresholds are sacred turning points—they mark the place where what is ending has not yet transformed into that which is about to be. Thresholds are the in-between spaces, the aerial gap flanked by two trapeze bars. As Amy Tan (2005) alleges, “to leave one place is not the same as entering another” (p. 141).

I thought about thresholds when I vacationed in Key West, Florida, and witnessed the partying that happens on the beach at sunset. Everyone heads

to the beach in the late afternoon. As the sun slowly sinks and colors caress the edge of sky, the party noise cranks up, notch by notch. But during the few minutes when the sun nudges the horizon, everything silences and everyone turns to the sinking sun. This is the threshold moment—the crossing place from day to night—and it beckons us. People stop moving and talking and singing and dancing to be present as the sun melts into the sea.

Pausing in this way demands self-reflection; it is the chronic restlessness luring us forward at departures and arrivals. It helps us “mind the gap” as we seize the next trapeze bar.

Pausing to self-reflect is pilgrimage. Yet *pilgrimage* is different from *journey*. We often use *journey* as a metaphor for moving, growing, developing. Journey includes longing, getting ready, setting out, experiencing doubt and hope. Journey symbolizes drawing near or anticipation and arrival.

Pilgrimage is all that, too: longing, getting ready, setting out, experiencing doubt and hope, drawing near, or anticipation and arriving. But pilgrimage is also “coming home,” coming back for reflection and redirection. As pilgrims, we place ourselves at risk.

First, a pilgrim does not return as the same person who set out. All that we think we know, all that we think we understand, all that we carefully plan and construct may be blown apart. Asking principal questions about who we are is risky, and we may learn things that we can’t foresee. Who we are, our soul life is always greater the more we come to know it. Parker Palmer (2004) cautions us that exploring our “soul truth” must be done “on the slant” because it is so powerful. He submits that “third things” are helpful in this slant approach. The third things can be a piece of art, for example, that opens the door to personal expression, that may “invite, not command, the soul to speak . . . giving the shy soul the protective cover it needs” (pp. 92–93). Third things can be writing, weaving, or walking—things that invite and take us gently inward and downward.

Second, on a pilgrimage there is a risk that we will be surprised by joy. We encounter people, places, thoughts, feelings, visions, and happenings that take us beyond anything we might imagine. And certainly, when we come home—when we reflect and redirect—we are never the same again.

Most of us probably do not make the world-renowned pilgrimages to Mecca, Canterbury in England, or Chaco Canyon in New Mexico, or do not participate in the Home Dance of the Hopi Indians. But the inner pilgrimage beckons all of us—the honorable pilgrimage that both changes and surprises us.

## YOU ARE YOURSELF

In our pilgrimage, in our self-reflection, we clarify who we are. We cannot look only to our role models, our heroes and heroines who have been “perfect” teachers for us, and strive to imitate them. Picasso described this effort at emulation: “You should constantly try to paint like someone else. But the thing is, you can’t! You would like to. You try. But it turns out to be a botch. . . . And it’s at the very moment you make a botch of it that you’re yourself” (Parmelin, n.d., p. 43).

Imagine being a poet and attempting to write like William Butler Yeats, Robert Frost, or Emily Dickinson. Someone once said of Yeats: *Proud Ireland hurt you into poetry*. In all probability, these poets had a specific event or experience, their own place or unique life that “hurt them” into poetry. We hear and feel their own textures when we read them. The relaxed and conversational voice of Frost is distinct from the spare and mysterious voice of Dickinson. They ask us fiercely, as we put our poet pen to paper, “What has hurt *you* into poetry?”

In the same way, we must ask ourselves in our own self-reflection, What has hurt me into nursing education? What assets do I have? Precisely, who we are and what we have are the only places we can begin.

Being clear about who we are and what we have brings me back to a recent flipside opinion essay written by a savvy 20-something journalist. Like many communities, the Midwest city I live in is struggling to enhance its culture and entertainment life. Questions about what will charm people to visit or relocate to our city always dictate the discussion.

Instead, this astute journalist challenged city leaders to analyze what the *community residents* wanted and needed to make life better, rather than trying to predict what would make outsiders drool. He shrewdly maintained that if the residents were happy and engaged in a good life—their culture and entertainment life—outsiders would quickly notice and flock to the city. It was the city itself and the people living in it that are the center, not how many water parks are close to the interstate or how many chain restaurants string along the traffic routes. Heeding the journalist’s counsel, then, we also must reflect on who we are and how we paint, and not be shallowly enticed by the “interstate water parks” in nursing education.

Admittedly, there is a shadow side to the pause, to self-reflection. Walker (2006) concedes that there may be a certain fear in pausing. Some of us may think that a pause has nothing in it, feels empty, or is worthless. Often we may see no end to it; we may not even see a beginning or a need for it. As a culture, we may not be in the habit of respecting, honoring, or even acknowledging the

pause. There is a rush to act, the distaste for hesitation, the absolute hatred for spending time in emptiness.

Carol Shields (2002) describes the dark silhouette of pause in *Unless*, a novel about Reta Winters, a fiction writer whose daughter plummets into an emotional crisis. Reta says that “ordering my own house calms me down, my careful dusting, my polishing. Speculating about other people’s lives helps, too . . . tricking the neural synapses into a grand avoidance of my own sorrow. The examined life has had altogether too much publicity. Introversion is piercingly dull in its circularity and lack of air” (p. 107).

Yet, we must respect and honor the pause though doing this may stifle, even suffocate us. We must plan a time for a pause in nursing higher education: to reflect and wonder; to explain, reconsider, and compromise; to lie fallow for a time; and to perhaps apologize and retreat. This pause demands that we stop our careful dusting and our polishing. A place to begin may be to peel back the layers of what we are dusting and why we are polishing. Whose house, after all, are we ordering?

In pausing to check on the house, to wonder in our pilgrimage, we realize the challenge of education is no longer purely intellectual, but rather in figuring out who we are. The process of becoming a teacher never seems quite complete. I’m always taken aback when I tell others that I’m a nurse educator. I yearn to ask myself: “You’re a nurse educator already?” Sometimes I even feel a charlatan, holding my breath lest anyone probe further. We must work at having a clear image of ourselves, to not see and shape ourselves through other people’s eyes. We must move, even if only in our minds, knowing perfectly well that when we dare ask the core questions about who we are we cannot predict all that will happen.

Albert Einstein connected wonder, the mystery of who we are, with emotion. Perhaps we don’t often associate Einstein with feelings, but he wrote, “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed. . . . To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their most primitive forms” (Einstein, 1931, p. 6).

The integrity of who we are is distinctively described by Siamak, one of Moaveni’s Iranian friends in her book *Lipstick Jihad* (2005). Siamak was using his experience with his forest-green Mustang convertible to discuss the “foolish idea that they (Iranian religious/political leaders) could take a Western concept, like democracy, alter it with Islamic attitudes toward women, and expect it to function properly.” For his “Mustang therapy,” as he called it,



Siamak cranked up Led Zeppelin and raced that antique ragtop around the streets of Tehran. To keep his Mustang running, the Iranian mechanic kept tinkering with it repeatedly, adding old Iranian parts, and then was shocked because it didn't work. To illustrate his point about integrity and authenticity, Siamak concludes, "It's the same with our politicians and intellectuals . . . they borrow Western concepts like democracy, stick in Iranian parts, and can't figure out why they've lost the juice" (p. 77).

In this pause, then, I must spend time with who I am. Who am I, without any parts added that don't belong, without mixing and affixing in ways that don't fit?

I must ask, who am I, not only what do I do? What I do is "doing education," that doing that breaks down teaching into shards and splinters: what we teach and perhaps how we teach. "Doing education" is when we think we teach only during our class time on Monday, Wednesday, Friday at 1 to 3 p.m. "Doing education" does not follow us home, insinuate into our evenings, and shade our thoughts as Maggie Jones did in Vaneta Masson's poem (Masson, 1991, pp. 56–60). Maggie Jones was the feisty and spirited woman of inner-city Washington, DC, who, as a patient, "followed" the nurse–poet home and affected Masson's daily life. When we merely "do education," then it does not follow us home.

Pausing at this threshold into nursing education, as we depart and arrive, means asking again in a multilayered and deeper way: Who was the Cherry Ames for you? Even though now she is described as a "porcelain-skinned, and vapid fictional nurse heroine . . . cultural equivalent of the Barbie doll" (Gorman, 2005, p. 90), the pause demands that we remember what hurt us into nursing, and then tempted us further into nursing education.

In pausing to remember then and now, in learning wisdom, the noble rituals of reflection invite the soul to speak and memorialize who you are. And then, how have the years unfolded through your practice and education? Focusing on who you are, not what you do, challenges you to ask what is right with you (not what is wrong with you). In this way, on the slant, you will see the beauty Einstein assured would reach us only indirectly.

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