



THE SHAPING OF COMPASSION: A NURSE'S STORY

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After years of trying, a beautiful baby girl was born to a very excited couple. They named her Pamela, and five days later celebrated by bringing her home from the hospital on Thanksgiving Day; it was truly a blessing for this seemingly infertile couple. As she grew and her personality developed, by age three it was clear she was a “helper” always lapping up the praise from her mother for picking up her toys, making her room tidy, and “assisting” in the kitchen. She was also a people-pleaser, she soaked up positive energy looking for those valuable words of approval for the good things she did. Life was good.

By the age of four, it was noticeable that she had acquired a personality trait of empathy. She loved animals and would shed tears over an animal's dead body in the street, and say, “Do you think this squirrel was a Mama with babies?” She would often notice when another child was crying and offer to hold a hand or a hug to make things better. She loved to give gifts to the neighbors – usually shiny rocks she had found. She was an intelligent child and began reading long before going to school. At first her mother thought she had memorized the words

in books, but it became apparent that she would accurately point to a word and read it!

Not surprisingly, the first day of school was a true celebration with pictures, new crayons, and pencils. This little girl was delighted to go to school and very obedient with her teachers. Who would have known within a few days of her idyllic school days, that her life would change forever? Strangely, one day her uncle came to get her at school and took her back to the neighbor's house saying, “You be a good girl and stay here for the afternoon.” He gave no reason and didn't say how long she needed to stay there. Very odd. So, she looked out the window to her house across the street at the many police cars that surrounded her house. And, shortly, she noticed familiar cars and family members arriving one by one. What was happening? And why didn't they want her there?

Later that day after what seemed hours, the little girl's uncle returned. He brought her across the street and sat with her on the front steps to the house. That's when the strange goings on were even stranger... He said, “I need to tell you something, your Daddy's not coming home

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anymore,” he said. His face was flushed, and he was teary-eyed. What? What in the world was going on? Daddy always came home in the afternoon. “Your Daddy is in heaven with God,” he said. Now it was beginning to make sense. She’d gone to Sunday school enough to know where God lived, and if her Daddy was with Him, he wasn’t going to be here anymore, he’s with the angels. All those police cars at her house were her Daddy’s friends, he was a policeman.

From that moment, my world changed. Yes, the little girl in this story is me. That was the day I grew up, I learned what grief and loss looked and felt like. I learned what a feeling of abandonment felt like. I wondered what I had done to cause this pain. The days of the three of us at the dinner table were gone, now it was just Mom and me, and she was so sad. The days after his death shaped me – I wondered if I was the only kid who had experienced such hurt and loss. My new job was to assure my mom, “everything is gonna be okay.” I wasn’t sure it would be okay, but I learned if you repeat something often enough, you believe it, and oddly everything becomes okay.

My days were filled with making good grades so Mom would be proud, reading, studying, and synchronized swimming. I learned how to cook

by age ten, and after that my job was to prepare dinner for my exhausted mother who worked all day to keep our home together. I learned the value of hard work, persistence, responsibility, and the Iowa work ethic. I learned an honest day’s work deserved an honest day’s pay and I learned reliability. I prided myself in keeping my word. I was being taught values and didn’t know it. I baby sat the neighbor kids to earn money for new fall school clothes and got my first “real” job at age 16 in a hospital kitchen making patient meal trays in the basement of the hospital. Not glamorous, but profitable in the eyes of a sixteen-year-old.

This was where I met nurses. My job was to bring the meal trays to the hospital wards for the nurses to serve. They were white from head to toe, pressed and clean; even their legs were white! They were kind to me, and I loved it. They were only missing wings to be mistaken for angels. They laughed with one another and seemed very happy in their work. I was mesmerized!

Fast forward through high school, marriage, a baby, and college. I continued to work to put my husband through college then, you guessed it, applied to nursing school. In those days, married women with children weren’t considered



nursing student material, and the Director of Nursing made this very clear. But, she said, I’ll make an exception, and if I did well...there would be others to follow me. Wow! She was letting me in! From this point forward, I learned what multi-tasking meant. Above all, I was a mom to a rambunctious 4-year-old who proudly taught sex education to the neighbor kids because, “my mom’s a nurse and she knows these things,” prompting a heart-to-heart discussion about appropriate discussions in the neighborhood.

Through the years, I’ve often wondered... is compassion learned or is it found in your DNA? As I began practicing my new trade, nursing, I found it felt very natural to me. I never had to be taught to care. I never had to be taught how it feels to walk in the shoes of another. No one ever taught me how to “feel” for another, I always seemed to know at some deep level in my being. Compassion was always part of my authentic self; it wasn’t feigned or artificial. I was often told, “you’re such a good nurse” and wondered exactly what that meant. Was there another way of being?

I’ve nursed more than 30 years. I’ve plied my trade in hospitals, in clinics, in college classrooms and in my neighborhood. I’m known as the neighborhood nurse and people call me all

the time for advice and resources – of course – I always recommend seeing the doctor. I can be helpful, however, until they can get that appointment. As the neighborhood nurse, I can recall one example of compassion.

I had met a young woman who lived nearby while I was walking my dog. Melissa was her name and upon a brief chat when she learned I was a nurse, her face changed to a sadness, and she said, “I’m so worried, I just found out I have a brain tumor.” She and her partner were newly married, I assured them both I would stay in their lives to see them through the rough spots of her brain surgery recovery. Who would have guessed after three months I would be helping them set up hospice in their home? Then began the daily visits until Melissa could no longer care for her own personal needs like bathing and toileting.

Soon it was obvious to me that her death was imminent, she was unconscious and bedfast. All her friends gathered and occupied the chairs throughout the dining room and living room. It was a vigil. I came by and asked for soap and towels to give her a bath. What?? A bath? It was the very least I could do to provide a bit of comfort. So, I gently washed her body and brushed her hair, talking to her all the while. “You



are so loved, Melissa," I said. "All your friends are here, everything is going to be okay." Familiar words of reassurance. She was quiet and serene – shortly after her bath, she silently passed away. Melissa's partner, Belinda, softly held her hand and wept. The hours of waiting were over; the suffering had ended.

Somehow, all the years of celebrating the happy moments with my patients, worrying over the many unknowns of illness and injury, and feeling heart-wrenching moments during the sad times has made me the compassionate person I am today. It's who I am at my core, I don't think it can be separated from me.

Compassion isn't something you can see, but you can feel it. Oh, most certainly, you can see compassion in someone's eyes and hear it in someone's voice. It's intangible; however, you can sense its absence. If compassion is a color, it would be light blue, the color of the sky. If compassion is an aroma, it would be the clean scent of a freshly bathed newborn. If compassion is a sound, it would be the whispering of a breeze in the trees. If compassion is a person, it would most definitely be a nurse, quietly, confidently, and resolutely doing what is right, needed, and selfless.

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