

# Cultivating Meaningful Moments in the Care of Others: Strengthening Attention to Compassion

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## RESEARCH

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## ABSTRACT

A nursing career is made of thousands of moments. What makes a moment meaningful and how do they influence the direction of a career? The authors explore these questions through reflective practice with undergraduate nursing students during their final semester of study.

**Key Words:** Meaningful moments, patient care, nursing students, compassion.

## INTRODUCTION

“Every moment and every event of every person’s life plants something in their soul. For just as the wind carries thousands of winged seeds so each moment brings with it germs of vitality that come to rest imperceptibly in the minds and wills of people. Most of these unnumbered seeds perish and are lost, because we are not prepared to receive them: for such seeds as these cannot spring up

anywhere except in the good soil of freedom, spontaneity, and love.” [1, p.14]

Thomas Merton

### An Invitation to Meaningful Moments

We invite you to take time to reflect on your day. Take a deep breath and picture yourself at the end of the shift. Imagine that while walking to your car or waiting for a bus, you make room for a short period of reflection beginning with the question, “What did I do that was meaningful today?” Follow this with the realization, “I will never have those hours again.” What insights or lessons can you harvest from this short period of contemplation that you can carry into the future to illuminate your career from this point forward, casting light on what truly matters in the life of a nurse? The philosopher and psychologist William James was fond of the idea that at the end of our days, our lives will have been about what we paid attention to. Is the same true for a nursing career or a nursing shift? The authors believe this to be true, so we asked, “How can our attention be guided toward what matters most?” For that is where the light of a nursing career dwells. Each day has its benefits for lifelong learning and how to be a better nurse for others and care for yourself as well.

In our nursing students’ final senior leadership seminar, we introduced a course assignment titled: My Meaningful Moment. We asked the students to reflect on an experience they had where they gained a vital insight about what it means to be a nurse in the most life-giving sense of the word. These students' shared stories became an indispensable part of their nursing education. Both nursing students and faculty members learned significant lessons and grew in their appreciation for nursing as a result. With each shared story, the power of attention to



meaningful moments was cultivated.

While a few of the meaningful moments were rather dramatic, most were quite simple. The circumstances and specifics of each story were different. The common theme, the golden thread stitching them all together, was that these meaningful moments revealed or reconnected the nursing student to their deeper purpose as a nurse. Each, regardless of whether it was a moment of joy or pain, success or loss, gave a glimpse of fulfillment in nursing that energizes and motivates the student to make the most of their career hours, to be attentive to what is most meaningful and fulfilling in purpose that can change practice and care of individuals and families.

### Meaningful Moments Personalized

Through these shared stories, we have educated and informed each other of the importance of advocacy, communication, human presence, and a commitment to nursing practice. Here are a few shared experiences that captured moments in time:

#### Meaningful Moment Example 1:

"I sat by my patient's bed and held her hand as she told her story of her trouble with the "health care system" and her diagnosis. The patient could not get her diagnosis as soon as she knew something was wrong. It was not taken seriously. It is now "stage two" ovarian cancer and the patient was about to have a hysterectomy and start cancer treatment. She wanted to be strong for her children and get better. She has taught me that life can truly change in the blink of an eye. She made me promise that if I feel symptoms in my life, I will do something about it and advocate for myself. We made a "Pinky Promise" together that I would do just that and it has taught me to advocate for patients, especially for those who are not heard." (Senior Capstone Nursing Student)

#### Meaningful Moment Example 2:

During my capstone clinical experience, my preceptor and I were assigned to the Obstetric (OB) triage

unit. We received a patient who was 23 weeks pregnant, who was unable to answer questions clearly because of her pain. I helped her change into a gown and began placing the Fetal Heart Monitor (FHM) and toco. I searched every quadrant of her abdomen but detected no heartbeat. My preceptor took over the assessment while I turned up the monitor's volume. Still nothing.

The room fell silent as the maternal-fetal team arrived. After their exams, the devastating news was confirmed—no fetal heartbeat. While the doctor spoke with the parents, I knelt beside this woman, holding her hand as she grieved. We later transferred her to a labor room to deliver her stillborn baby.

Moments later, another patient arrived. In the same triage room, I monitored another mother. This time, the fetal heartbeat was strong—she was in labor and admitted for delivery. The joy and excitement in that room sharply contrasted with the heartbreak we had just experienced minutes before.

That day made me realize how unpredictable and emotionally intense Obstetric (OB) triage can be in the birth process. Labor and Delivery is often described as joyful—and it is—but there's also sorrow. This experience showed me the emotional duality of this specialty, where life and loss often coexist." (Senior Capstone Nursing Student)

#### Meaningful Moment Example 3:

"I was in the bone marrow transplant unit and worked with a patient who was having a difficult time in his recovery. There were no visitors at his bedside. He was vulnerable and isolated. As a nurse, it is easy to provide care, support assessments, medications, etc. I worked with him for three days, encouraging him to set small goals and see positive outcomes with support. On the third day, he smiled at me, and I realized that the time I spent working with him was not just about the care, but also about the human connection and encouragement. I realized that day that as a nurse, the best care to give is simple and should include listening, compassion, and true value to one's life in care for another. He was valued and not alone." (Senior Capstone Nursing Student)



### Meaningful Moment Example 4:

"I was in the Emergency Room (ER) and my nursing preceptor wanted me to have nursing experience in the code room. A patient was arriving with chest pain and difficulty breathing. The nurses, residents, and respiratory specialists, all with assigned roles, were discussing among themselves how best to support the plan and the patient's condition. I introduced myself to him and mentioned to him my name and that I was going to put him on the monitor, draw blood, and do an Electrocardiogram (EKG). The patient was scared and there was much conversation going on with nurses and the resident teams. I tried to keep him informed and calm. He opened up about having a new grandchild. He took my hand and squeezed it and I continued to be at his side while I remained calm and kept him informed. There remained much conversation amongst the healthcare team. He was reassured that he was not alone.... I was there and will continue to be there for others as a nurse working for those who need help and are vulnerable in their lives." (Senior Capstone Nursing Student)

### CONCLUSION

Our students were sincerely moved and have grown through the sharing of each other's meaningful moments – so have we. The three authors have a combined nursing experience of 137 years and find this recollection and sharing of meaningful moments to be of tremendous enrichment for all nurses. The need to touch our deepest purpose is ancient, yet always present, for a nurse. We find this exercise of gifting our classmates and colleagues with our meaningful moments to be life-giving to a profession that gives itself to life. Beyond the physical touch lies empathy, the understanding of pain, injury, and hurt, as well as disappointment and profound joy, loneliness and

doubt, dreams and concerns. If we recognize these issues as important, then we must lead in developing models of care that better understand and value these attributes and roles, and most importantly, that we acknowledge and respond to basic human needs [2, p. 3]. Before nursing is a scientific enterprise, it is always a profoundly human endeavor. Shared meaningful moments help guide our careers. What about you? We encourage you to make it a practice among your colleagues to share your story. Perhaps this could be the way to begin a staff, administrative or faculty retreat as an articulation of our greater purpose. Please share your meaningful moment as part of your gift to the nursing and other health care professions with the authors

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors acknowledge that there are no conflicts of interest, financial or otherwise in the submission of this article for publication for Archives for Healthcare.

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### PEER REVIEW

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