

Existential moments of caring: Facets of nursing and social support

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with introduction and addendum by

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During Professor Krysl's residency at the center, she was commissioned to engage in the many facets of an academic health sciences center, ranging from experiences in the world of faculty and students to

specific clinical settings, such as the burn unit, neonatal intensive care, home and community visits, nurse-midwifery experiences, and so on. The work presented is a result of her subjective experiences reflected back to us from the day-to-day lives of patients and nurses in a cross-section of health care situations and circumstances. These poems help to convey new languages, new meanings, and new awareness of the intensity, beauty, and existential moments of nursing. Krysl's work captures the metaphorical and metaphysical wonders of nursing that truly make it an art and a science.

—*Jean Watson*

BACKGROUND OF THE POEMS

A writer by profession, I was invited by Jean Watson at the Center for Human Caring to address the matter of caring in the nursing profession. For nine months I talked with faculty and students at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center in Denver, and with nurses working in hospitals, clinics, and home care. I interviewed nurses, I read about them, and I dreamed about them in waking fantasy and during sleep. I accompanied them on their rounds and questioned them about their attitudes, their gut reactions, and the cues, invisible to an outsider, on which they based their decisions. Above all I observed them at work. I watched with the eyes of someone inexperienced and unfamiliar with the profession who had been extended the privilege of seeing into another world.

The five poems that follow are a small part of my work on the subject of caring. The poems address specifically social issues. Three of them, written from a nurse's point of view, describe the experiences of nurses working in community health. Two of these are set as home calls and attempt to articulate the nurse's very complex and intelligent reactions to the complicated situation of her client. The third, "Sunshine Acres Living Center," set in a rest home, describes a nurse's intricate awareness of one resident's psyche and state of mind and her beautifully spontaneous and personal attention to him.

"Burn Patient" is written not from a nurse's viewpoint but from the perspective of the patient. It attempts to trace the complicated conscious and unconscious impulses and the consequent "rationale" of a woman who has deliberately set herself on fire.

"Skin" steps outside both nurses' and patients' worlds. Its perspective is a much wider, more encompassing one, and this poem takes a definite moral position. The poem rejects the Puritan ethic of denying, subduing, and suppressing the body, and treats the skin, that medium through which we carry on human communication with each other, as an object eminently worthy of praise. The poem ventures even further afield, arguing not only that touch is essential to our physical well being, but also that this tactile form of communication (or lack of it) has important psychological and social effects and profound political consequences as well.

—*Marilyn Krysl*

Home Call: Mother and Child

*There's so little
 here: one table, not
 laden, one curtain, ripped,
 one blind shut. One bulb
 hung straight down. One woman,
 not well (a cigarette,
 and that look—someone who won't
 talk, because they've been beaten
 so the bruises
 don't show), and one
 boy, dancing over, no
 diaper, eager for the coin
 of cheap candy you lay in his
 hand. How he aches
 upward, a tendril attaching,
 reaching out of the dark, leaning into
 your yellow dress, unfurling his last
 leaf for you. She watches
 you, the one who has
 everything—a house she imagines half
 glass, where light
 pours in, and everything
 is already paid for, your
 yellow dress, the shine of health
 you wear with such casualness, the look
 of wealth and the power to make the right
 phonecalls, calls to people like you,
 who, when you call,
 will do what you say, pay
 what you tell them, when and to
 whom. You,
 who have at least two
 of everything, you lift her son
 to your yellow breast, that well-lighted
 place, where the air
 is clean and there's meat
 (lean) on the plate, the colors
 are bright,*

*and you don't
 hate yourself, waiting in line
 to pay for a sack of
 potatoes. Take me, her son
 begs, take me with you.
 She waits to see
 what you will do. You who
 have things, you who can
 do things, you
 who can do what you
 choose to, you
 who can do something for them,
 if you choose to,
 a little something
 or nothing.*

Burn Patient

*I did it
 myself. That
 I remember. Buying
 gasoline in a
 can, getting ready
 in my room—that dress
 my father liked
 still fit—then a long drink
 of water. I took
 my time. The water
 tasted like elixir. Light
 in a bar across the floor
 looked like something
 sacred, laid down
 before me. I remember then
 pouring the gas on my
 belly, and crying. It seemed
 sad, the water and light
 so sweet, that hurting myself
 was the only thing
 to do. But that*

*didn't stop me. It
had to be done, that
I remember. What I can't
remember now
is why.*

Sunshine Acres Living Center

*The first thing you see up ahead is Mr
Polanski, wedged in the
arched doorway, like he means absolutely
to stay there, he who shouldn't
be here in the first place, but in here
by mistake, courtesy of that grandson
who thinks himself a hotshot, and too busy
raking in the dough to find time for an old
man. If Polanski had anyplace
to go, he'd be out
instantly, if he had any
money. Which he doesn't, but he does have
a sharp eye, and intends to stay in that
doorway, not missing
a thing, and waiting
for trouble. Which of course
will come. And could be
you—you're handy, you look
likely, you have
the authority. And
you're new here, another young
whippersnapper, doesn't know
ass from elbow, but has been given
the keys. Well he's
ready, Polanski. So you go right
to him. Mr Polanski, good
morning—you say it in Polish,
which you learned a little of
when you were little, and your grandmother
taught you
a little song about lambs, frisking
in a pen, and you danced a silly little*

*dance with your grandmother
while the two of you
sang. So you sing it
for him, here in the dim, institutional
light of the hallway, light which even you
find insupportable, because even those who
just
work here, and can leave when their
shift ends, deserve light
to see by, and because at that moment
it reminds you of the light in the hallway
in the resthome where, when your grand-
mother
died, you were three thousand miles
away. So that you're singing the little
song and remembering the silly little dance
to console yourself, and to pay your grand-
mother
tribute, and to try to charm Polanski,
which you do: you sing, and Mr. Polanski
steps out of the doorway. He
who had set himself against the doorjamb
to resist you, he who had made of himself
a fist, Mr. Polanski,
contentious, often
combative and always
and finally
inconsolable
hears that you know
the song. And he steps out
from the battlement
of the doorway, and begins to
shuffle
and sing along.*

Skin

*Because skin is the first organ
to form in the womb, and first things
are of first importance*

*Because skin is the largest
organ—an adult's skin
weighs six pounds and stretched out
covers eighteen square feet*

*Because there is more of it to attend to
than anything else*

*Because the skin's resilience
can only be experienced*

*Because it feels far superior
to silk or challis
and in addition is lovely
to look at, nothing by Cardin
comes close to it*

*Because it's the organ with which we
experience wind,
which most loves water.*

*because, because, because, because,
and for all these good reasons
hurry out and touch someone now!*

*Delay in this matter
is not
a good idea,
you have delayed too long
already, your suffering brothers and sis-
ters
are waiting, you can hardly expect them
to wait
much longer, and remember
when you touch another
person,*

*the skin
gives off a chemical
which makes them
and you
feel better
more alert
more cheerful
more willing to take chances*

*more open to new experience
more generally obstreperously intent on
securing
the greatest good for everybody
and more likely to say NO to the MX
and YES to the levy for the public
schools*

*After all, it's
the organ*

*through which we take in
the light we give out*

Home Call: Schizophrenic with
Newborn, Commerce City

*She's
thin, and she has two cigarettes
lit, in the ashtray. What light there is
is a gray
lack, fumes
in the room, the carbon monoxide*

*of absence. There is no good food
in this house. Outside on the highway
Winnebagos and Mercedes
go by. The baby's
cry is like thread, so fine
it can't hold. The smoke of those
cigarettes, two ends*

*of a cut line. I go to work, run
the water warm, wash the new
daughter—here's a towel
we can use for a
diaper—hand her to
her mother. Jane
hangs back. She would
rather not, she of little
flesh, afraid this tiny creature
will consume what's*

*left of her. I remember, In Renoir's
painting Maternity, that mother, more fat*

*than buxom—she looked like the
wife of a burgher—nursing
a child whose legs kick
out, meaty and indolent,
and on the mother's face, that blank look
women of the middle class are
allowed, in which everything—everything—
is taken for granted. The first time
I saw that painting, mother and child
seemed one complete figure, so filled
this babe and breast the whole
just might burst.*

*I stood there and
stared in awe of such
surfeit, beyond any conceivable
need, and thought then
as I think here with Jane
how many others
this excess might feed.*

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ADDENDUM: CENTER FOR HUMAN CARING

In Fall 1986 the University of Colorado established the Center for Human Caring in the School of Nursing on the Health Sciences Center Campus. It is designed to be the experimental "think tank" of the school, which is exploring new ways to advance the art and science of human caring; these efforts range from specific curricular activities to new educational-research practice models. The Center encourages special initiatives that foster some of the epistemological, ontological, methodological, and praxis inquiries associated with new ways of knowing and thinking and being in a caring relationship. Formal faculty associates are exploring such areas as conceptual analysis of caring, music therapy as caring-healing modalities, the moral and philosophical basis of caring, caring ethics, role of humanities in a caring curriculum, and teaching and practice of caring.

The Center also fosters nontraditional, contextual, methodological investigations through approaches such as hermeneutics, phenomenology, literary analysis, and writing as methodology. Traditional empirical pursuits or methodological combinations are fostered as well, in addition to methods that explore the "shared humanness" of caring and healing and the ontological interconnections between humans, between humans and nature, and between the one caring and the one cared for.

Consistent with the nature of caring knowledge, the Center for Human Caring advocates an interdisciplinary approach to the study and teaching of human caring; it draws directly upon the underdeveloped connections between humanities, human caring, and healing practices, while not neglecting traditional biomedical knowledge and practices. Collaborative programs between and among other academic units on the Health Sciences Center and other campuses in the university are ongoing.