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# From the editor

## WHAT LANGUAGE DO WE SPEAK?

When I was a young, fresh academician, newly equipped with a doctoral degree, I often heard the refrain: "That is just a matter of semantics." This was uttered at those tense moments when someone asked a question or suggested a possibility that moved outside the realm of what was considered acceptable. Those were days when nursing was beginning to break into "serious" academic circles, when we looked to the "other" to mimic, to define, to assist, to show the way. In that context, the refrain "that is just semantics" was a powerful tool used to demand conformity. The refrain obliterated questions having to do with who we are, how we name things, what other possibilities might be created, what we might envision for the future, as well as the nature of what we were conforming to.

I am pleased to report that as the years have passed, I hear the "just semantics" refrain less and less, and now hear phrases like "What do you mean?" "I don't have a word for this yet." "What shall we call this?" "What I mean is . . ." I hear expressions of frustration, joy, relief, discovery, from those who are learning to comprehend the new languages of nursing theory and research. I hear a common plea for simplicity in language, and an expressed concern that people who are not nurses need to comprehend our language. There is growing awareness that much of the language with which we now think and write is woefully lacking in terms of nursing's perspective, that our perspective has great value, and that a new language is required.

The path before us calls for a high level of collective creativity. Our most common words need to be turned to the light of emerging awareness; hidden meanings must be explored and new meanings created. Adrienne Rich speaks of the recognition that precedes possessing a language that creates new possibilities:

. . . When we become acutely, disturbingly aware of the language we are using and that is using us, we begin to grasp a material resource that women have never before collectively attempted to repossess. . . . Language is as real, as tangible in our lives as streets, pipelines, telephone switchboards, microwaves, radioactivity, cloning laboratories, nuclear power stations. We might hypothetically possess ourselves of every recognized technological resource on the North American continent, but as long as our language is inadequate, our vision remains formless, our thinking and feeling are still running in the old cycles, our process may be "revolutionary" but not transformative. <sup>1(pp247-248)</sup>

The current health care crisis calls for revolution. The current nursing crisis calls for transformation. The words we use, and how we put those words together, can create a vision and a reality that is transformative. Our language will reveal who we are.

## REFERENCE

1. Rich, A: *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*. New York, W.W. Norton & Co., 1979.

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