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# From the editor

## LIBERATING NURSING HISTORY

Twenty years ago this winter quarter I gathered the data for my doctoral dissertation at the University of Utah. Today I am sitting in the College of Nursing at the University of Utah, in the same office occupied then by one of my major professors, with the great Wasatch mountain range looming behind my computer monitor. This journey back to the place where I began my academic career is eerie; so much is familiar, yet so much has changed. One overwhelming realization is how much of the "change" in this place is my own change. I see places, people, and events with a new eye, a new interpretation, and within a new life context. In preparing this issue of ANS (12:4) and in writing this editorial, I pay tribute to the people here, 20 years ago and today, who have provided an environment from which my own living history has emerged.

Part of my personal history has been the quest for understanding the situation of women and nurses. The quest began here in the College of Nursing at the University of Utah, where I recall observing during a faculty meeting that our relationship with medicine mimicked that of men and women in society at large, with women serving the interests of men and subsuming our own interests to survive. My view was not particularly popular then, but the responses to it were strong enough that I knew it was an idea of some merit. I did not realize then that the situation under discussion in our faculty meeting was not an isolated circumstance, but part of a persistent pattern rooted in women's history.

Like the histories of women, the histories of nursing and of nurses are confined by two persistent and interrelated social processes—invisibility and stereotyping. Most of the history that is currently written about nursing concerns organizations, institutions, profes-

sional and political relationships in which nurses assume a responsive or reactive role. Reading nursing histories, we learn little or nothing about nurses as people—their motives, ideas, personal values, how they viewed the circumstances of their lives. The contexts of their lives are often missing, or portrayed from the limited perspective of the present-day author. Where nurses are portrayed in some depth, they are often presented as stereotypes of the "exceptional" woman in "exceptional" circumstances. Such pictures create a false and distorted view of the past, and also obscure the essential historical patterns that continue in the present.

The histories that we do have are important, and the renewed interest in nursing's history is a significant signal that nurses are moving toward collective liberation.<sup>1,2</sup>

One of the challenges facing nurses today is to halt the persistence of our invisibility and our stereotyping. Becoming aware of the process, knowing that it is a changeable pattern in history, is the first step. Another step is "doing" history by revisiting pasts with new lenses of awareness that move beyond the processes that reinforce invisibility and stereotypes. Still another step is creating or "making" history, including documents of our own internal changes and professional journeys. In so doing, we can liberate the invisibilities and stereotypes of our lives as we live them.

## REFERENCES

1. Beddoe D. *Discovering Women's History: A Practical Manual*. London, England: Pandora Press; 1983.
2. Carroll BA. *Liberating Women's History: Theoretical and Critical Essays*. Chicago, Ill: University of Illinois Press; 1976.

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