

# Earth caring

This article explores the interrelationships of environment, nursing, and caring and challenges the readers, particularly in light of the ecology crisis, to examine the apparent anthropocentric emphasis of current human care and caring theory. The intent is to engage all nurses in thoughtful study and reflection and in fruitful, friendly dialogue.

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Helped are those who love the earth, their mother, and who willingly suffer that she may not die; in their grief over her pain they will weep rivers of blood, and in their joy in her lively response to love, they will converse with trees.<sup>1(p288)</sup>

**A**S WE ENTER the decade of the 1990s, in what ways do we expect to honor our earth connections and relate this wisdom to our way of being on this planet as planetary citizens who have chosen to enact our being as nurses? Is it possible through the economic model of our work world, where profit is the driving force, to successfully reconcile earth-caring values with those of the marketplace?

I suggest and am convinced that these are the primary and most salient questions of our time and for the foreseeable future. Indeed, the way we choose to acknowledge, to specify, and to work out these relationships through our personal and professional lives is linked directly to our survival, the quality of our lives, and the well-being of the planet. As a current environmental slogan asserts, "We are crew members, not passengers."

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## NEW ENVIRONMENTALISM

Recent polls put environmental issues at the top of Americans' social concerns, along with crime, drugs, and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), and ahead of the economy, nuclear war, and communism.<sup>2</sup> There is a proliferation of new periodic journals representing a range of environmental issues from the microcosm of our own backyards (*Garbage: Practical Journal for the Environment*) to global and international considerations (*Colorado Journal of International Environmental Law and Policy*).

The new environmentalism is broad based and local, a grass-roots movement in the making that could become a universal and potent political theme for the 1990s. Many are not so much protecting the environment as protecting their families, homes, and communities. Others, such as the "Greens,"<sup>3</sup> the "deep ecologists,"<sup>4</sup> and the ecofeminists,<sup>5</sup> acknowledge and champion a deep interconnection of all life with social processes, claiming that neither environmental nor social problems can be solved in isolation from one another. The Greens' social commitment and broad vision for a transformed society are outlined in their ten key values<sup>6</sup>: (1) ecologic wisdom, (2) grass-roots democracy, (3) personal and social responsibility, (4) nonviolence, (5) decentralization, (6) community-based economics, (7) post-patriarchal values, (8) respect for diversity, (9) global responsibility, and (10) sustainability/future focus.

## GROWING ENVIRONMENTAL INTEREST

Environmental groups have been proliferating in the last 10 years.<sup>7</sup> National, mainline

organizations such as the Sierra Club and the National Audubon Society report doubled and tripled memberships. The fastest growth, however, has been outside these groups. For example, the Clean Water Action Project has little name recognition but has 500,000 members. The Citizens' Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste has grown to 9,000 and increases by 100% yearly. Greenpeace USA is reported to gain 60,000 adherents monthly. Even so, the average citizen is increasingly estranged from environmental affairs. For many organization members there is little to be done other than send in annual dues and additional donations when canvassed for special needs. These monies usually support lobbying and legislative efforts. A vast number of Americans express concern about the environment but do not know how to turn their concern into action, to act personally as well as politically. Denis Hayes, a California attorney, hoped to change this through Earth Day 1990. As a student in 1970, he organized the first Earth Day, a national day for education, ecology fairs, and serious discussion that ultimately propelled political forces and resulted in congressional enactment of the Clean Air Act and the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency.<sup>7</sup>

## NURSING AND ENVIRONMENT

Is it important, or to what extent and for what reasons is it important for nursing to demonstrate or to claim linkage with contemporary or future environmental issues? The nursing literature to date is sparse in that regard. We know from a historical perspective, of course, that nursing can appropriately claim many social reformers, such as

Florence Nightingale, Lillian Wald, Margaret Sanger, and Wilma Scott Heide, whose work was closely related to environmental concerns.

A literature search of the categories *caring* and *nursing* in relation to *environment* resulted in 20 citations from the past 10 years. Of these, five were from nursing journals: radiation effects,<sup>8</sup> developing corporate smoking policies,<sup>9</sup> giardiasis water pollution,<sup>10</sup> chemical hazard identification,<sup>11</sup> and working in toxic environments.<sup>12</sup> The remaining English and foreign journals were from the fields of epidemiology, public health, anesthesia, and medicine. One<sup>13</sup> examined the relationship between fetal loss and occupational exposure of nurses to antineoplastic drugs and reported a significant risk for fetal loss in the first trimester. If this is an adequate representation of nurses' systematic reporting of their environment-specific work, we may want to rethink or redirect our efforts as caring responses in these ecologically troubled times.

## HOLISTIC NURSING PERSPECTIVES

A recent handbook<sup>14</sup> for holistic practice addresses the subject of the environment from a nursing perspective. An illustration in the chapter enumerates the physical manifestations of environmental hazards and reflects the themes identified from the literature review: noise pollution, air pollution, radiation, chemicals, water pollution, and land pollution. The definition of environment in the chapter is notable because it goes beyond physical parameters. The definition is as follows: "Environment is everything that surrounds an individual or group of

people; may be physical, social, psychological, cultural or spiritual; includes external and internal, animate and inanimate objects, seen and unseen vibrations and frequencies, climate and not yet understood energy patterns."<sup>14(p182)</sup>

A nurses' handbook<sup>15</sup> on wellness devotes a chapter to wellness in the immediate environment, which includes a discussion of the impact of sound, light, and color in relation to wellness. The internal as well as the external environment is considered. Variables other than physical are discussed.

A statement in support of a healthful environment was approved by the American Holistic Nurses' Association (AHNA) at their annual meeting during the summer of 1989.

The environment involves both our immediate as well as global surroundings. Many of us are aware of a need to expand our consciousness regarding environmental issues and believe that this can have an effect on our own personal and community well-being. Our concerns come from a reverence for the beauty of the earth which sustains us and is our home, our Mother Earth. Relevant environmental issues including preserving the integrity of the air, soil and water as well as issues such as global warming, acid rain and other equally challenging situations [*sic*]. We believe as holistic nurses, we have the responsibility for increasing responsibility in others regarding these issues through role modeling and educating within our communities. The AHNA encourages self-responsible behavior as well as participation

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in socially responsible environmental groups, to protect and support improvement of the health of our environment.<sup>16(p7)</sup>

Based on the foregoing information, nurses involved in wellness work and those claiming holistic practice are currently the most obvious in the environment-nursing relationship, at least in public pronouncements having to do with environment.

Another relational aspect is reported in the literature, although it is not highly visible at this time: nurse researchers are testing theory based specifically on Rogers' science of unitary human beings.<sup>17</sup> As one example, Smith<sup>18</sup> reports that the integrity of the mutual human-environment field process was strengthened through her work with an environment of varied harmonic sounds. In this quasiexperimental study, participants perceived themselves as rested following exposure to harmonic auditory input, "supporting the notion that human-environmental field process integration is strengthened when auditory input for those confined to bed is patterned."<sup>18(p27)</sup>

From another theory base, that of human care and caring, Watson<sup>19</sup> proposes expanded dimensions of human caring wherein human caring and healing become transpersonal and intersubjective, opening up a higher energy-field consciousness that has metaphysical, transcendent potentialities.

Smith<sup>18</sup> and Watson<sup>19</sup> and those of similar thought believe that we as humans inhabit, are integral to, and are in exchange with a universe pulsating with life, vigor, zest, and birthing. Our spoken language, as we know it now, falls far short of representing these realities. That is why some nurses, and oth-

ers, speak more accurately and eloquently in metaphor, which gives rise to varied and perhaps new investigational methods.

## HUMAN CARE AND CARING

Environmental concerns and issues elicit human caring in one form or another, be it self-interest or other directed. It seems that theory development in nursing on human care and caring might reveal specific connections with environmental concerns. So far, that relationship is elusive.

The basic philosophy of nursing's human caring efforts asserts that care and caring are the essence of nursing and the unique and unifying focus of the profession.<sup>20</sup> This direction, begun by Leininger<sup>21</sup> and others with similar vision and commitment, is gaining momentum, as can be noted in the nursing theory literature and by other indices, such as clinical research, schools of nursing philosophy, and service agencies whose activities are directed through a human-caring model.

I propose, for reader consideration, five speculations about the paucity of obvious linkages of human caring theory and praxis with the needs and claims of the environment. It seems reasonable to assume that the stated goals<sup>20</sup> of the International Association of Human Caring (IAHC) provide insight into human care and caring as conceptualized by the founders and the membership (with the caveat that goals can change as understanding evolves and as experiencing may direct over time). The first goal of the IAHC states, "Identify major philosophical, epistemological and professional dimensions of care and caring to advance the body of *knowledge* that constitutes nursing and to

help other disciplines use care and caring in *human relationships*”<sup>20</sup> [emphasis added].

## SPECULATIONS

The major points I propose for consideration are these:

1. Developmental stage: Human care and caring as theory in and of nursing is new, perhaps 15 years into its evolution. So far, focus has been on human-human interrelationships, which is hardly surprising given the conventions and legal parameters of practice. So lack of obvious engagement with environment as such could be a function of developmental process.
2. Expecting more than a given theory or construct can or should deliver: Perhaps it is unrealistic or illogical from an ontologic perspective for the caring model to accommodate environmental exigencies.
3. Anthropocentrism: The notion of *human* caring does not readily allow for nonhuman interchange of care or caring. Is it desirable, or even expedient, to particularize care and caring to humankind? If we do, what are the ramifications? Anthropocentrism is that world view that posits the human (usually stated “man”) as the ultimate aim of the universe. Subjugation of nonhuman species, compromise of the quality of the physical world, and various other forms of oppression and domination result from most forms of anthropocentrism.
4. Primacy of the intellect: Caring *knowledge* in human relationships

may be at the expense of *experiencing* caring; this can limit caring to “knowing about,” without living as a “carer” or “carer.” Intellectualization often means assigning recognition and rewards to left-brain activities while ignoring or trivializing right-brain intuitive or synthesizing functions.

5. Nurse “ownership” of human care and caring (“help other disciplines use care and caring knowledge in human relationships”<sup>20</sup>): Might we not learn about the nature of care and caring from many sources, including other disciplines? This statement can be construed as unilateral and elitist by inference if not by intent.

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The intention behind these reflections and observations is to share in public forum my concerns about environment, about the earth, and about caring, and to respectfully present these concerns for dialogue and, perhaps, for friendly argument, so that we all may grow and thrive.

Allen, a scholar from the Native American tradition, reminds us that all creation is dynamic, responsive, “for relationships among all the beings of the universe must be fulfilled; in this way each individual life may also be fulfilled.”<sup>22(p56)</sup> This old song from the Keres tribe expresses that belief:

I add my breath to your breath  
That our days may be long on the earth  
That the days of our people may be long  
That we may be one person  
That we may finish our roads together  
May our mother bless you with life  
May our life paths be fulfilled.<sup>22(p56)</sup>

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