Reawaken your sense of vocation by remembering nursing’s history

The element of vocation in nursing has been overshadowed by the quest for professional recognition. Aileen Walsh argues why the best traditions from our past should not be forgotten.

I recently heard scientist James Lovelock on the radio commenting that science had become a career choice rather than a vocation, just like nursing. Unpopular as I might be in stating this, I cannot help feeling he might have a point.

I remember during my own Project 2000 education programme that the idea of nursing as a vocation was explicitly expelled from the classroom. This reflects the feminist slant that has influenced the academic development of nursing in the UK; the word “vocation” has too much of a religious connotation, an association with a determination that the idea of nursing as a vocation was explicitly expelled from the education programme that the idea of nursing as a vocation was explicitly expelled from the education programme that the idea of nursing as a vocation was explicitly expelled from the education programme that the idea of nursing as a vocation was explicitly expelled from the education programme that the idea of nursing as a vocation was explicitly expelled from the education programme that the idea of nursing as a vocation was explicitly expelled from the education programme.

But what exactly does a vocational attitude to work mean? A Google search leads to the conclusion that a vocation is something people feel a strong inclination to do. It involves a sense of commitment and purpose that extends psychologically deeper than merely satisfying our own needs.

Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura (2007) identified that exceptionally creative people from a variety of professions had a strong sense of vocation, similar to the idea of religious vocation. They identified that these people had a sense of duty to do “excellent work as defined by the traditions and current standards of the particular activity in which they are engaged”.

In reading this I was struck at how a sense of connection with people’s professional past, an appreciation of the excellence previously achieved, is so significant in attaining excellence in the present and projecting into the future. Has something been lost in nursing with the bid for professional recognition?

The modern fallacy is that nursing can be an autonomous profession. But nursing was never, and will never be, an autonomous profession, except of course in the delivery of nursing care. Our relationship to doctors will always be subservient. Nurses have always, and will always, find ways to deal with this power difference, but let us not reward those nurses who take on “autonomous” roles more than those who provide excellent frontline care.

Much of what I have read about nursing history has been negative; examples such as the tidy wards and regimented discipline are now laughed at and seen as irrelevant. As I have considered these issues, I have begun to change my practice in the classroom. I have begun to introduce some of the discipline that I have heard my mother and retired colleagues speak about in their own work. During skills sessions I have stopped students, to consider how their posture and language can communicate a sense of being a trustworthy person to their patients. I have asked them to walk around the room and observe what untidy procedure trolleys communicate and how their competence might be affected by this. I hope that nurses in practice might consider doing the same, if they do not practise in this way already. The discipline and attention to detail for which nursing history has so often been laughed at, looked at through a different lens, could actually help to cure some of the problems we now face in ensuring that patients receive excellent attention to their most essential and immediate needs.

By remembering our sense of purpose, by remembering and taking the best from our professional history, perhaps we can reawaken our sense of vocation and regain some of the esteem with which our profession was held in the past.

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REFERENCE