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# FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE

**A DIFFERENT  
DRUMMER**

Florence Nightingale (1820–1910) was the founder of modern nursing, a legendary pioneer in hospital reform, and a ground-breaker in the women’s movement. Born in Florence, Italy, to a wealthy, aristocratic English family, Nightingale received her formal training at the Institution of Deaconesses in Kaiserwerth, Germany, in 1852. During the Crimean War, she took thirty-eight nurses to Scutari, Turkey, to serve in the army hospital there. Her improvements in sanitation and discipline among the medical staff dramatically reduced the mortality rate of the wounded.

Upon her return to England in 1856, Nightingale was given a grant to establish a training school for nurses at St. Thomas’ and King’s College Hospital, the first of its kind. She was an active reformer, pushing for improvements in nursing, hospital sanitation, army conditions, and the public health and independence of India. A prolific writer, her *Notes on Nursing*, *Notes on Hospitals*, *Suggestions for Thought*, and collections of her letters and diaries are still in print today.

Nightingale was a woman much ahead of her time, breaking numerous social taboos to become a nurse. Presented to Queen Victoria on her social debut, Nightingale came from an elite family that associated with the likes of Lord Palmerston and Lord Shaftesbury. Although her father was a non-conformist who himself educated his daughters in the classics and enlightened them on the political reforms of the day, her mother was strictly conventional and was shocked by Florence’s interests.

Perhaps known best as “the lady with the lamp,” this idealized symbol does little to convey the radical path she took in life, creating an acceptable vocation for educated women of all classes, nor the dramatic improvements she made in the medical sector. The passages below, from Barbara Montgomery Dossey’s biography, *Florence Nightingale*, show the strong social barriers Nightingale had to surmount in answering her call of God.

**Be Who You Are**

“God has always led me of Himself . . . the first idea I can recollect when I was a child was a desire to nurse the sick. My day dreams were all of hospitals and I visited them whenever I could. I never communicated it to any one, it would have been laughed at; but I thought God had called me to serve Him in that way.”

Florence Nightingale, *Curriculum Vitae*, 1851

**A Fiery Comet**

“My principle has always been: that we should give the best training we could to any woman of any class, of any sect, ‘paid’ or unpaid, who had the requisite qualifications, moral, intellectual & physical, for the vocation of a Nurse.”

Florence Nightingale, letter to Dr. William Farr, 1866

"Fifty years ago, the various facilities for nursing the wounded which are available today did not exist. People did not come out to render aid in large numbers as they do now. Surgery was not as efficacious then as it is today. There were in those days very few men who considered it an act of mercy and merit to succour the wounded. It was at such a time that this lady, Florence Nightingale, came upon the scene and did good work worthy of an angel descended from heaven. She was heart-stricken to learn of the sufferings of the soldiers.

"Born of a noble and rich family, she gave up her life of ease and comfort and set out to nurse the wounded and the ailing, followed by many other ladies. She left her home on October 21, 1854. She rendered strenuous service in the battle of Inkerman. At that time there neither beds nor other amenities for the wounded. There were 10,000 wounded under the charge of this single woman. The death rate among the wounded which was 42 per cent, before she arrived, immediately came down to 31 per cent, and ultimately to 5 per cent. This was miraculous, but can be easily visualized. If bleeding could be stopped, the wounds bandaged, and the requisite diet given, the lives of many thousands would doubtless be saved. The only thing necessary was kindness and nursing, which Miss Nightingale provided.

"It is said that she did an amount of work which big and strong men were unable to do. She used to work nearly twenty hours, day and night. When the women working under her went to sleep, she, lamp in hand, went out alone at midnight to the patients' bedside, comforted them, and herself gave them whatever food and other things were necessary. She was not afraid of going even to the battle-front, and did not know what fear was. She feared only God. Knowing that one has to die some day or other, she readily bore whatever hardships were necessary in order to alleviate the suffering of others."

Mohandas Gandhi, *Indian Opinion*, 1915

"Like a fiery comet, Florence Nightingale streaked across the skies of 19th-century England and transformed the world with her passage. She was a towering genius of both intellect and spirit, and her legacy resonates today as forcefully as during her lifetime."

Barbara Montgomery Dossey, *Florence Nightingale*

"Thanks to Nightingale and her colleagues, the image of the nurse was also completely transformed: She was now seen as an angel of mercy with a high calling. By proving that women could successfully serve as nurses in military hospitals, Nightingale had almost single-handedly awakened England to the idea that women did indeed have a capacity for purposeful work and could make major contributions to society. . .

"From the beginning of the war, Nightingale's popularity with the British public had been enormous because of the letters that the soldiers wrote to family and friends about her and the articles in the *Times* that described her tireless work on behalf of the sick and wounded. As work of her accomplishments spread, she became a kind of national heroine-cum-saint in Britain and beyond."

Barbara Montgomery Dossey, *Florence Nightingale*

## The Lady with the Lamp

By the time she was a teenager, Florence's life had already begun to revolve around helping her poor and ill neighbours. As a girl of fifteen or so, she often disappeared in the evening, only to be found by her mother at the bedside of an ailing villager, saying "she could not sit down to a grand seven o'clock dinner while this was going on . . ." Looking back, Florence wrote that she had always been in the habit of visiting the poor at home: "I longed to live like them and with them and then I thought I could really help them. But to visit them in a carriage and give them money is so little like following Christ, who made Himself like His brethren."

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Florence had been elated when she first became responsible for caring for her nephew Shore when Nurse Gale fell ill. As she began to grow in size and strength and flourish in her education, her innate gifts as a healer and her desire to be of service began to find expression in caring for her extended family and the larger world.

When Aunt Julia visited Lea Hurst, Florence went with her to visit the poor people in the nearby villages. Florence admired Aunt Julia, who not only did good, but also had an efficient system for doing so. Julia kept track of who was sick and needed return visits; which families needed clothing, shoes, blankets, or food; and which mothers needed help tending their flocks of children amidst the filth and poverty.

Although Florence's mother also paid visits to villagers, usually to distribute food from the Nightingale's table or to offer practical advice, "poor-peopling" was only a sidelight to her life; she was consumed with ambition for social success—not social service—for herself and her daughters.

In 1837, when she was just 16, Florence sensed dramatically that God was calling her. To what exact path, she was not certain, but she increased dramatically her nursing work among the poor.

... While Florence inwardly longed to find meaningful work, her duty to family continued to dictate her life. As a young lady in society, she was expected to be at the disposal of her parents, available at all times to show guests around the estates and make pleasant conversation. The family received many distinguished visitors, leaving Florence no time for the serious studies she wished to undertake. Although she accompanied the family on the regular round of seasonal visits and parties at Embly, Lea Hurst, and London, her thoughts were far away—with the plight of women and poor people who were the subject of the debate over Lord Ashley's Ten Hours Bill.

Mrs. Nightingale had no idea of the serious thoughts and desire for a meaningful life that occupied her younger daughter's mind. Fanny's plans for her daughters and her social ambitions were moving forward nicely. . . .

In the summer of 1844, family friends introduced the Nightingales to the famed American educator and philanthropist Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe, and his wife, Julia Ward Howe. Mrs. Howe would later become a well known suffragette and reformer as well as the composer of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic." The Howes knew England well; as philanthropists, they had previously visited numerous public institutions, including schools, workhouses, prisons, and insane asylums. On a visit to a prison with novelist Charles Dickens, the group watched the prisoners' daily routine of "ungrateful work," and Dickens commented, "My God! if a woman thinks her son may come to this, I don't blame her if she strangles him in infancy."

One morning, Florence asked to meet with Dr. Howe. She came straight to the point: "Dr. Howe, do you think it would be unsuitable and unbecoming for a young Englishwoman to devote herself to works of charity in hospitals and elsewhere as Catholic sisters do? Do you think it would be a dreadful thing?" From his conversations with family friends, Dr. Howe was well aware of Florence's struggles with her parents over her desire for a meaningful vocation, but his answer reflected his own conscience and his American understanding of the strictures of English society:

My dear Miss Florence, it would be unusual, and in England whatever is unusual is apt to be thought unsuitable; but I say to you, go forward if you have a vocation for that way of life; act upon your inspiration, and you will find that there is never anything unbecoming or unladylike in doing your duty for the good of others. Choose,

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Act upon your inspiration, and you will find that there is never anything unbecoming or unladylike in doing your duty for the good of others.

go on with it wherever it may lead you, and God be with you.

At this time in England, “nurses” were generally drawn from the ranks of the poor and unskilled, and usually remained in that state, with the exception of those women with natural healing instincts and intelligence. They also had a reputation for drunkenness and immoral conduct. This sad state of affairs had evolved for three centuries as nursing passed into its “dark ages” in England. Since the Reformation and the suppression of monasteries, the quality of nursing and hospitals had suffered in all the Protestant European countries but most severely in England.

When Henry VIII established the Church of England in 1534, he seized over six hundred charitable institutions and suppressed all religious orders. This seizure of church properties had a direct negative effect on women and nursing—women lost political and administrative control of nursing operations. Inexperienced civil administrators took over from religious professionals who were steeped in a culture of care that had evolved since the beginning of the Christian church. Women lost their voice in both hospital administration and nursing management. The whole medical system began a downward spiral of mismanagement, crowding, filth, and contagion. It was these conditions that prompted Howe to tell Florence that her avocation might be thought “unusual.”

. . . By late 1845, Florence had come to realize the need for training to learn the rudiments of nursing. . . . With the agreement of family friend Dr. Richard Fowler, for many years a doctor at Salisbury Hospital, Florence proposed to her family that she go to study under his direction for three months. . . .

The plans of the two forward thinkers ran into a wall of absolute conventionality. Mrs. Nightingale was horrified and called Florence “odd”; such a venture was totally beneath their class and unequivocally forbidden. It was unbelievable that Florence would even consider such unladylike behaviour. What if men who weren’t “gentlemen” made advances to her? Didn’t she care what others thought of her? Even Dr. Fowler’s wife, upon whose sympathy Florence had depended, felt that conditions at Salisbury Hospital were far too coarse for a lady of Florence’s upbringing. At this time in England, as Florence would later write, caregivers were “merely women who would be servants if they were not nurses . . . it was as if I had wanted to be a kitchen-maid.”

It wasn’t just the field of nursing to which the Nightingales so vehemently objected; doctors and hospitals were also included in their concerns. A unified medical profession, in the sense now known, didn’t exist. The rapid modernization and industrialization that was creating many new professions in England and changing others for the better hadn’t begun to reach the medical sector. Doctors were regarded as little better than tradesmen, and hospitals and nursing were little changed from the previous three centuries. The filth and stench of hospitals were such that only the poor and the destitute went there; those who could afford it were nursed at home.

Crushed, Florence poured out her feelings to cousin Hilary [Bonham Carter]. In a torrent of emotion, she revealed that she was thinking not only of nursing for herself, but also in terms of plans of an organization:

I have always found that there was so much truth in the suggestion that you must dig for hidden treasures in silence or you will not find it; and so I dug after my poor little plan in silence, even for you. It was to go to be a nurse at Salisbury Hospital for these few months to learn the ‘prax’: and then to come home and make such wondrous intimacies at West Willow under the shelter of a rhubarb powder and a dressed leg; let alone that no one could ever say to me again, your health will not stand this or

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that. I saw a poor woman die before my eyes this summer because there was no one but fools to sit up with her, who poisoned her as much as if they had given her arsenic. And then I had such a fine plan for those dreaded latter days (which I have never dreaded), if I should outlive my immediate ties, of taking a small house in West Willow. Well, I do not like much talking about it, but I thought something like a Protestant Sisterhood, without vows, for women of educated feelings, might be established.

But there have been difficulties about my very first step, which terrified Mama. I do not mean the physically revolting parts of a hospital, but things about the surgeons and nurses which you may guess. Even Mrs. Fowler threw cold water upon it; and nothing will be done this year at all events, and I do not believe—ever; and no advantage that I see comes of my living on, excepting that one becomes less and less of a young lady every year, which is only a negative one. You will laugh, dear, at the whole plan, I daresay; but no one but the mother of it knows how precious an infant idea becomes; nor how the soul dies between the destruction of one and the taking up of another. I shall never do anything, and am worse than dust and nothing. I wonder if our Saviour were to walk to the earth again, and I were to go to Him and ask, whether He would send me back to live this life again, which crushes me into vanity and deceit. Oh for some strong thing to sweep this loathsome life into the past. . . .

1849 and 1850 proved to be life-changing years for Florence. Seeing marriage as a definite barrier to becoming a nurse, she turned down a second proposal, much to her family's disapproval. Family friends, the Bracebridges, took Florence on a trip to Egypt, Greece, and Europe to relieve the tension in the Nightingale household. During this tour, particularly while in Egypt, Florence sensed another call from God.

[March] 7. Thursday. Gale all night & all day . . . God called me in the morning & asked me "Would I do good for Him, for Him alone without the reputation [self-interest]."

8. Friday. Thought much upon this question. My Madre [a nun she had met the previous year in Rome who advised her on hearing God] said to me, Can you hesitate between the God of the whole Earth & your little reputation?

9. Saturday. During half an hour I had by myself in the cabin . . . settled the question with God.

11. Monday. Thought how our leaving Thebes was quite useless owing to this contrary wind . . . but without it I might not have had this call from God.

12. Tuesday. Very sleepy. Stood at the door of the boat looking out upon the start & the tall mast in the still night against the sky . . . & tried to think only of God's will—& that every thing is desirable only as He is in it or not in it—only as it brings us nearer or farther from Him. He is speaking to us often just when something we think untoward happens.

15. Friday. Such a day at Memphis & in the desert of Sakkara . . . God has delivered me from the great offence—& the constant murderer of my thoughts.

16. Saturday–17. Sunday. Tried to bring my will one with God's . . . Can I not serve God as well in Malta as in Smyrna, in England as at Athens? Perhaps better—perhaps it is between Athens & Kaiserwerth [a training school for nurses in Germany]—perhaps this is the opportunity my 30th year was to bring me. Then as I sat in a large dull room waiting for the letters, God told me what a privilege he had reserved for me, what a preparation for Kaiserwerth in choosing me to be with Mr. B. during his time of ill

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health & how I had neglected it—and had been blind to it. If I were never thinking of the reputation, how I should be better able to see what God intends for me . . .

In her diary at Cairo she wrote: “Oh God, thou putttest into my heart this great desire to devote myself to the sick and sorrowful. I offer it to thee, Do with it what is for thy service.”

Marking her thirtieth birthday, May 12, 1850, Florence responded to God’s call with a deliberate vow, which she recorded in her diary.

“Today I am 30—the age Christ began his Mission. Now no more childish things, no more vain things, no more love, no more marriage. Now, Lord, let me only think of Thy will, what Thou wiltest me to do. O, Lord, Thy will, Thy will.”

The Bracebridges took Florence to Kaiserwerth, Germany, to see the nursing school. She became even more determined to become a trained nurse. However, her return to England proved nothing had changed at home. Her family did everything possible to distract her and thwart her plans. She recorded her frustration and near despair in her diary.

What am I that I am not in harmony with all this, that their life is not good enough for me? Oh God, what am I? The thoughts & feelings that I have now I can remember since I was 6 years old. It was not I that made them. Oh God, how did they come? Are they the natural cross of my father and mother? What are they? A profession, a trade, a necessary occupation, something to fill & employ all my faculties, I have always felt essential to me, I have always longed for, consciously or not . . . The first thought I can remember & the last was nursing work & in the absence of this, education work, but more education of the bad than of the young. . . .

But why, oh my God, cannot I be satisfied with the life which satisfies so many people? I am told that the conversations of all these good clever men ought to be enough for me—why am I starving, desperate, diseased upon it? . . . My God, what am I to do? teach me, tell me, I cannot go on any longer waiting till my situation sh’d change. . . .

The next year, in 1851, Florence met and spent considerable time with Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman doctor in America, discussing women and medicine. Dr. Blackwell encouraged her in her pursuit of formal nursing, and this friendship gave her the strength to go against her family’s expectations. Her notes in her diary sounded more optimistic and determined.

I must place my intercourse with those three [her parents and sister] on a true footing . . . must expect no sympathy or help from them. I have so long craved for their sympathy that I can hardly reconcile myself to this. I have so long struggled to make myself understood . . . insupportably fretted by not being understood (at this moment I feel it when I retrace these conversations in thought) that I must not even try to be understood . . . Parthe [her sister] says that I blow a trumpet—that it gives her indigestion—that also is true. Struggle must make a noise—and everything that I have to do that concerns my real being must be done with a struggle.

Her parents finally relented, and in October of 1851, Florence enrolled at Kaiserwerth, at long last launching her revolutionary career as nurse and medical reformer. About three years later, fully into nursing at this point, Florence writes her Aunt Hannah, revealing her deep conviction and satisfaction in pursuing her calling.

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Our vocation is a difficult one, as you, I am sure, know—& though there are many consolations & very high ones, the disappointments are so numerous that we require all our faith & trust. But that is enough. I have never repented nor looked back, not for one moment.

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Barbara Montgomery Dossey, *Florence Nightingale: Mystic, Visionary, Healer* (Springhouse Corp., 2000). Reprinted with permission.

### How Warm My Admiration

"You are, I know, well aware of the high sense I entertain of the Christian devotion which you have displayed during this great and bloody war, and I need hardly repeat to you how warm my admiration is for your services, which are fully equal to those of my dear and brave soldiers, whose sufferings you have had the privilege of alleviating in so merciful a manner. I am, however, anxious for marking my feelings in a manner which I trust will be agreeable to you, and therefore send you with this letter a brooch, the form and emblems of which commemorate your great and blessed work, and which, I hope, you will wear as a mark of the high approbation of your Sovereign!

"It will be a very great satisfaction to me, when you return at last to these shores, to make the acquaintance of one who has set so bright an example to our sex. And with every prayer for the preservation of your valuable health, believe me, always, yours sincerely, Victoria R."

Queen Victoria of Great Britain, 1855, in a letter thanking Nightingale for her service in the Crimean war

"The wounded from the battle-plain,  
In dreary hospitals of pain,  
The cheerless corridors,  
The cold and stony floors.  
Lo! in that house of misery  
A lady with a lamp I see  
Pass through the glimmering gloom,  
And flit from room to room.  
And slow, as in a dream of bliss,  
The speechless sufferer turns to kiss  
Her shadow, as it falls  
Upon the darkening walls . . ."

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "Santa Filomena," 1857

"At a Court of Common Council, 13 February, 1908, it was resolved unanimously: That the Honorary Freedom of this City, in a Gold Box of the value of one hundred Guineas, be presented to Miss Florence Nightingale, in testimony of this Court's appreciation of her philanthropic and successful efforts for the improvement of hospital nursing and management, whereby invaluable results have been attained for the alleviation of human suffering."

Resolution awarding Nightingale the Freedom of the City of London, 1908

### Questions

1. What is unusual about Nightingale's early involvement in helping the sick? How would you compare her service to that of her mother? What in particular did Nightingale learn from her aunt?
2. In the next section, Nightingale's "inward longing" is contrasted with the social constraints of her day. What must she have felt during this time? Why do you think Mrs. Nightingale "had no idea" of her daughter's desire for more than high society?

3. What is telling of Nightingale's questions to Dr. Howe? Why do you think she asked him? How does he answer her? What were the circumstances that would make nursing an "unusual" career? Why does he say it would not be "unladylike"?
  4. What are the components of the "wall of absolute conventionality" that Nightingale encountered in her proposal to work for Dr. Fowler? Why was this so? In her letter to her cousin Hilary, how did she describe the event? Considering the circumstances, do you think her mother was being unreasonable?
  5. Where did Nightingale's dream stand at this point, did she think? How was she feeling? Do you think she was being melodramatic? She said her life "crushes me into vanity and deceit." What did she mean?
  6. Nightingale told Hilary, "you must dig for hidden treasures in silence or you will not find it." What did she mean? Do you think this would always be so? Why or why not?
  7. How does her letter to Hilary reveal that her dream of nursing had grown? In what ways?
  8. In her diary excerpts from her trip to Egypt, what main issue was Nightingale wrestling with? Why is this issue so powerful? How did she overcome it? How would you describe her vows to God? What is the significance of her age? How long has it been since her first sense of calling?
  9. In the next section, "What am I that I am not in harmony . . .", what is Nightingale's main frustration? What is the significance of all the questions she poses to God?
  10. In the next note, she says Parthe says "that I blow a trumpet." How so? Do you agree that "struggle must make a noise"? What is the connection between Nightingale's "real being" and her sense of God's call on her life?
  11. In the final paragraph, what strikes you about Nightingale's tone and message to her aunt? How would you describe her outlook on her chosen vocation, now that she has been at it for a couple of years? What is the significance of her saying, "I have never repented nor looked back, not for one moment"?
  12. What do you take away from Florence Nightingale's story? Have you encountered similar barriers or social restraints in the pursuit of your own calling? What did they cost you?
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