

Hazel's Hairbrush
By: Lindsay Buttles

Hazel sits in her wheelchair in front of her vanity, her fragile fingers attempting to hold her guilloche enameled gold filigree hairbrush as she looks into the mirror. I take the brush and gently glide the soft horse hair bristles through Hazel's even softer, white hair. Hazel is 80 years old. I am her caregiver for the day. At 18, I am getting a history lesson by someone who can give me details that one cannot read from any history textbook.

Hazel met her husband when she was 15 years old, just before he left for World War II in 1940. When he returned he brought with him the hairbrush along with his marriage proposal. She was married at 17 and they had 5 children together. Hazel shared with me the difficulties of being a child in the 20s and 30s, the wars she has witnessed, and her experience of parenting over the years. Although this story has been told before, it is less about Hazel and more about how her life, her version of her history, has shaped me. This story is about how every single patient and family member I have met since Hazel, has changed me.

Hazel's hairbrush was the most beautiful piece of art I have ever held. I was instantly curious how she acquired this piece and how she felt the countless times she has used it. The brush she used with her babies developing inside of her, during the loss of her parents who meant so much to her, during times of marital struggle with her husband, during the happiest and saddest moments of her life. Through smiles and tears, the hairbrush alone is a symbol of Hazel's resilience and tenderness. Hazel is a symbol of the triumphs and tribulations in life that each one of us will endure, in our own personal way.

At eighteen I learned how beautiful my patient's life was. How fortunate I was to be able to care for her. As I wiped her eyes with a warm cloth, Hazel peered up at me with her blue eyes, dulled from years of life shining through them, similar to an oil lamp dimming before the fuel burns out. With each memory she spoke, Hazel's eyes would light up and joy would dance inside of her. These are the joys of nursing that go unnoticed. These memories of patients' pasts make the caregiver care so effortlessly and allow us to give with compassion as if the patient is our own loved one.

Holding Hazel's hairbrush that she held over and over again, washing her eyes that have witnessed many things during her lifetime, cleansing her body as she had done for years before, made me understand how precious each of my future patient's lives are and would be. As human beings, we all inadvertently abide by Maslow's Hierarchy of needs, but what makes those higher needs fulfilled is different for us all. Love. Safety. Security. Happiness. Despair. Heartache. The definition of those words are unique to our individual experiences and feelings. Nursing is an innate work inside of me, but caring has evolved from the stories of those I have cared for during my nursing career. My ability to care without barriers and care without consequence has grown from each patient who has taught me their history and definitions of their higher needs and feelings.

As a registered nurse, every patient I have physically touched has been touched there before. History is living on their skin, on their hand, in every breath they take, in the words they say and more importantly, the words they do not say. The twinge in her eye as I raise my hand to lift my stethoscope from my neck because she has been physically abused. The sadness in his eyes as I ask assessment questions because he heard the nurses do this many times while his

mother was in the hospital just a few months before with terminal cancer. The comfort the child takes in having a blanket knit by their grandmother because the hospital scares the child and the blanket smells like home. The history of our patients is inside them, in the stories they carry and the stories they chose not to share with us while we care for them and the personal items they carry with them. Each patient is a history lesson and history tells us how to take care of our patients.

I am moved by their histories. Moved by the memories of history flowing through every hug, heartbeat, teardrop, and whispered breath of my patients. Being moved is what keeps nurses nursing. This is the key to preventing nurse burnout and stagnation in our career as well as in our souls. My soul yearns for knowing the history of my patients and this is what makes nursing important to me. Nursing is not just a career, but a life path filled with my soul meeting the beautiful souls of others.