

The Art of Nursing

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I am an artist. My medium is care, healing, and human interaction. I am a musician. I perform among a symphony of sounds; without my part, the piece would sound incomplete. I am a designer. I create a space and a fit that are individualized and inspired. I am an actress. I utilize empathy to adopt new perspectives of others. I dive into vulnerability, opening my mind in an attempt to understand what lies beneath the surface and what influences outward behavior. I live to serve the needs of my masterpieces. I exist at the cornerstone between precision and chaos, between rigorous scientific principles and soulful creativity, and it is within this space that I am able to fulfil my life's purpose as a nurse.

Nursing is not just a science, it is an art, and I am an artist of care. This has been my guiding personal philosophy through my education and into my career thus far. I have always felt passionately in touch with my creative side and my artistic tendencies. From a young age, I was guided into the practice of analyzing and interpreting art, by mentors who did not shy away from challenging my peers and I with probing questions, encouraging us to think more critically, to look beyond the obvious, and to constantly dig for a deeper meaning. I remember taking field trips with this small group of peers to art museums to broaden our perspectives, participating in discussions about deeper meanings in literature, and writing about our perceived messages from works of art.

As a teen, I found my space to blossom within the performing arts; understanding music and theatrics became equally as important to me as nurturing the logical part of my mind with the structure of science courses. Our directors would work with us relentlessly on what we wanted to make our audiences feel. What emotions did we want to communicate through our work? Without a strong understanding of this, our work lacked purpose and depth. When practicing the craft of nursing, I ask myself a similar question, what do I want my patients to feel when they experience my care?

Whenever I was performing or creating, I loved knowing that I was sharing emotions with my audience. I was communicating with them by helping them feel something. It brought a sense of intimacy and closeness between me and a group of strangers. It created a connection. It is a sensation that has always brought me immense satisfaction, and it has been my goal to incorporate this into my professional nursing practice. To me, art in all forms is a way for an artist to communicate through feeling, ambiance, and emotion with an audience, and the core method of communication between nurses and patients aligns with this in a remarkably similar fashion. I believe nursing is the ideal career that allows me to continue creating this sacred connection between me and my patients. It is this link between my passion and my profession that continually gives me the most wholesome and fulfilling sense of purpose.

What classifies nursing as a form of art to me is the necessity of empathy: it is a central pillar in creating and showcasing high quality art, and in providing high quality nursing care. To communicate and create a connection with others through feeling and emotion, one must adopt another's perspective. One does this through empathy. In a simple, yet impactful cartoon

illustration to explain empathy, Dr. Brené Brown states, “Empathy is feeling with people. [It] is a choice, a vulnerable choice” (The RSA, 2013). If an artist desires to communicate her understanding of her audience’s feelings of pain and anxiety through her work, she must make the choice to connect with her own pain and anxiety deep within herself. A nurse must do the same to effectively communicate an understanding of the myriad of feelings that patients experience during a healthcare journey.

The most powerful testimony to the truth behind my philosophy came from a previous patient of mine. During our initial time together, this patient was in critical condition, under the heavy influence of strong medication, excruciating pain, and deafening anxiety. Days later, I cared for this patient again. I introduced myself, certain that the patient would not remember me, but to my surprise, the patient said, “I remember your voice. I remember you caring for me.” The patient was keeping a journal about all of the different sensations and emotions experienced during the hospitalization, trying to make sense of the swirl of dizzying events while under the influence of medicine and stress. The patient said, “I want to remember everything I can about this process and how I got to where I am, and I remember you and how you made me feel. I wasn’t aware of a lot, but I felt so calm when you were with me. I remember feeling like a small child, so overwhelmed by everything, and you must’ve realized that. You were confident and calm and I felt safe. You got me through the night, and I’ll always remember that.” This was one of the few times I was genuinely moved to tears of humbled gratitude by a patient. My nursing care had the exact effect that I always hoped it would. My healing and interactions were my tender brushstrokes and soothing harmonies. They were able to quiet the chaos, and help the patient focus on the feelings I was communicating, feelings of safety, peace, and serenity.

Now more than ever, there is an art to the nursing care I provide. As a pediatric cardiac critical care nurse, the majority of my patients are infants, recovering from life-saving surgeries to correct congenital heart defects. Communication through feeling has become even more crucial to providing quality care to these small patients, who cannot express themselves with words. I must craft a trusting connection between myself and my patients; not only is it necessary to quality care, we are taught as nurses that it is Erik Erikson’s foundational stage of psychosocial development. Infants may not be able to provide a testimony like the patient discussed above, but caregivers can. A parent once told me, “You have a very calming effect on my baby. I feel safe when you are caring for my child, and I can tell my baby feels safe too”. These comments fill me with the warmest gratitude, gratitude for the opportunity I have to keep crafting these connections between myself and patients of all ages as an artist of care.

True art gathers you, cleanses you, and allows you to feel. Art has the ability to reach beyond our biases, our agendas, or whatever else our mind may be under the influence of, and be the strongest influence over us. It quiets the extraneous noise in our surroundings and enables us to focus on feeling, no matter how foreign or uncomfortable it may be. Art holds our hands, looks us in the eye and says, “Just feel with me. That’s why I’m here”. This is what it means to be a nurse, an artist of care. To quiet the chaos, to sort through the mess, to hold your patient’s hands, to look beyond the surface, and to say “Just feel. Just be here, be present, listen to how you feel, listen to the feelings I am communicating to you. I will feel your pain and fear, and you will feel my strength and confidence. I will be present and we will feel together, every step of the way.” My healing can reach beyond the influence of the strongest medicine and anxieties that obscure the mind and provide clarity, strength, focus, and safety, as proven through the humbling

testimonies from my patients and families. As an artist of care, it is my duty to create a trusting space to communicate those feelings, to create a connection through empathy.

My artistic mindset and appreciation for the purpose of art has heavily influenced the way I practice nursing. The necessity of empathy to communicate through feeling classifies nursing a craft, a genuine form of art. Treating it as such fills me with a profound sense of fulfillment and purpose; it is a harmonious intertwining of my passion and my profession. I believe artists create because they feel, and their purpose is to communicate this with their audience, to create something that will allow both parties to feel together. I feel. I feel inspired, I feel potential, I feel motivation, I feel determination, and when you experience my care, my healing, I want you to feel and I will feel with you. We may come from different walks of life, speak different languages, or have opposing views of the world, but the core of our connection is what we feel, together. And this connection, this artfully crafted space of empathy, this presentation of my craft, my care, is nothing short of a masterpiece.

References

The RSA (2013). *Brené Brown on Empathy* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw>