

# CARING Thoughts

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## Paying Tribute to Nurses

It is highly appropriate that we pay tribute to the nation's nurses during the week of May 6 through 12 which has been designated as National Nurses Week. More than that, given their essential role in society, I would argue that we should honor these special men and women each and every day of the year. Nurses are truly angels of mercy. They literally make the difference between life and death on a daily basis. They operate in the rarified air depicted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel by Michelangelo, in that millimeter between the hand of God and the hand of man. They are the very personification of "caring," the one-word summary of the Golden Rule that runs through all the great religions of the world. Here are my five favorites:

Florence Nightingale responded in 1837 to what she believed was the voice of God calling her to care for the sick. She professionalized the field of nursing. "Draw near to God, not by rites and ceremonies, but by inward disposition ... simply do the thing that is good in itself," she said.

Clara Barton, the founder of the Red Cross in America, insisted that the organization be grounded in helping others by fighting "any evil that is adding to the sum of human suffering or diminishing the sum of happiness."

Lillian Wald, the founder of the Visiting Nurse Society of New York, is credited with organizing volunteer nurses to care for the immigrants who flooded into the United States at the turn of the 20th century in whatever setting they called home. She is appropriately recognized as the mother of home care in America. "Nursing is love in action, and there is no finer manifestation of this than the care of the ill and disabled in their own homes," she said.

Annie Wauneka was the first woman to be named chief of the Navajo. She worked for tirelessly to improve health care on the reservation, and succeeded in getting the Navajo to accept Western as well as traditional medicines. She is credited with virtually wiping out tuberculosis among the tribe.

"If something is not right, you must do something about it," explained Ms. Wauneka.

Mother Teresa would complete my personal pantheon. She told me she had been comfortable in a Calcutta convent teaching English and other languages to well-to-do Indian students when she received a call from God to create a religious order to care for the sick and dying wherever they called home. After receiving permission from the Pope, she said she sought instruction from nurses who were Catholic sisters. "I then returned to Calcutta to open my own hospice and home care organization. We are in the same business," she said. "I am a home care and hospice nurse."

As wonderful as these icons are, it is important to realize that they are role models, representatives of a class of people who are unselfish in the extreme, always placing the needs of others ahead of their own. Those who have made a decision to work as nurses deserve our profound respect. The work is very difficult, but immensely gratifying. This is particularly true of those special nurses who work, as Mother Teresa did, in home care and hospice. These good people are large of spirit. They do not work for the money. They know that there are few things that compare with the knowledge that they have helped a fellow human being who is ill and in need. Mother Teresa said it best: "There is joy in transcending self in order to serve others."

A philosopher once said that a nation is what it honors. In Washington, D.C., you will find lots of statues that appropriately honor those for their military service. However, there are very few statutes that honor the contributions of women and fewer still devoted honor nurses. If America is to reach its potential of being the greatest and longest-tenured democratic nation in the history of the world, we must do a better job honoring these special caregivers. We must encourage young people to follow in their footsteps. Let us join together during this week to thank all nurses and in a broader campaign to recognize more nurses. Let us find ways to honor them and follow their example to build a more caring America.

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