

SOMETIMES I WAKE UP IN THE MORNING and don't remember I have a cancerous tumor in my eye until the second or third cup of coffee. But then again I remember there are a lot of nurses who have cancer and life experiences with possible outcomes much different than mine. Life often deals us lessons that remind us of who and what we are all about. My experience with cancer has been a reminder of what is important in life. It has been a reminder of my purpose in becoming a nurse and being a nurse for over 31 years.

Thirty years ago I was a young "hot shot" nurse in an inner-city hospital NICU where chaos was the order of the day.

I considered myself to be a good nurse and on top of things going on around me. Our first son was born prematurely and was hospitalized in an NICU in another hospital in town, and that brought my world crashing down around me. He was discharged home in fine condition, and I went back to my job with a much different perspective on being a parent to a premie. I tried to treat parents in a much different manner—with more compassion and caring. In graduate school, I sought to understand the experience of other fathers of premies through research.

When I was diagnosed with cancer, I set out along a different path than I had planned. Initially my career was threatened by the unknown course of treatment and eventual outcome. But as I underwent treatment and came in contact with health care workers from the patient perspective, I learned many lessons. I received excellent care in a large cancer research center in Texas, but as I went through diagnostic testing and two major surgeries and radiation I started to once again realize the importance of a nurse's attitude and care concerning the patient. We say we "care" for our patients, but do we truly care in a compassionate manner? What does it mean to be a caring and compassionate nurse? Sure, there are people we deal with every day who are difficult to truly "care" for. Caring is more than taking vitals and administering medications in a proper timeframe and with good outcomes; caring is more than being good at starting IVs on an infant who seemingly has no veins; caring is more than being patient with a first time mother and father who ask about their baby's circumcision site for the umpteenth time. I discovered in the process of being a patient in a large hospital that caring has many faces: caring is providing a warm blanket to a patient who is awaiting surgery in preop; caring is calling the physician in the middle of the night and asking for another antiemetic for your patient who is experiencing a very uncomfortable bout of vomiting; caring is simply bringing a patient a cup of warm coffee an hour before the breakfast trays are served. These are seemingly small and insignificant tasks nurses perform daily,

Life's Lessons

but there is a big difference in the way we as nurses go about performing these tasks. Do we do them out of a sense of duty or out of a sense of making a difference in a patient's life, even though he or she may not remember your name? I am the first to say I am often guilty of being a task-oriented nurse. That is often the

measuring stick by which our work performance is evaluated and monetary compensation is distributed. Caring and compassion are sometimes hard to objectively measure; therefore, it may not be part of our daily repertoire. It is so easy to get caught up in the tasks of the day—taking vitals, attending high-risk deliveries, going head-to-head with a coworker over an issue—that we sometimes lose perspective. I am guilty of that as well.

I remember that about one month before graduating from nursing school I was on a natural high—the world was mine to conquer! During a clinical practice one day a nursing faculty member said to me, "You are very good, but if you don't show that you care for your patient, you are just another nurse performing routine tasks."

I tell this story to challenge each nurse, including myself, to make a difference in our patients' lives by showing care and compassion, even in seemingly small and insignificant ways that may never be recognized. Life tends to remind us through personal lessons of what really is important.

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