

# Love and Caring Ethics of Face and Hand—An Invitation to Return to the Heart and Soul of Nursing and our Deep Humanity

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This manuscript offers a new view of old and timeless values: the essential ethic of love, informed by contemporary European philosophies, and caring theory, as well as ancient poetry and wisdom traditions. It integrates some of the philosophical views of Levinas and Logstrup with Watson's Transpersonal Caring Theory. The metaphysics, metaphors, and meanings associated with "ethics of face," the "infinity of the human soul," and "holding another's life in our hands" are tied to a deeply ethical foundation for the timeless practice of love and caring, as a means to sustain, not only our shared humanity, but the profession of nursing itself. **Key words:** *caring, ethics of face, Levinas, Logstrup, Love, transpersonal caring theory, Watson*

Let us fall in love again  
 And scatter gold dust all over the world.  
 Let us become a new Spring  
 And feel the breezes drift in the heaven's scent.  
 Let us dress the earth in green,  
 And like the sap of a young tree  
 Let the grace from within sustain us.  
 Let us carve gems out of our stony hearts  
 And let them light our path of Love.  
 The glance of love is crystal clear  
 And we are blessed by its light.

—Rumi<sup>1(p117)</sup>

We as nurses are invited, if not required, to unite at this cross roads in nursing history, at this new century of time and confusion and questioning of nursing's survival to reconsider

what brings us together for a common purpose. Thus this article and message are not to gather up new knowledge, although they may do that, but rather they are intended to gather nursing together for a more basic common purpose: perhaps to seek what Wittgenstein called "reminders"—reminders of what we already know at some deep human, experiential level, but continually pass over in our day-to-day living.

As T.S. Eliot<sup>2</sup> asked in the *Waste Land and Other Poems*: "Where is the life we have lost in living? Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?"

It seems the task of nursing and health and healing is related to the very nature of our shared humanity. In viewing nursing at this deeper level, we realize that our jobs have been too small for the nature of our work and the needs of those whom we serve, as well as too small for the evolution of our individual and collective humanity.

When working with others during times of despair, vulnerability, and unknowns, we are challenged to learn again, to reexamine our own meaning of life and death. As we do so,

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we engage in a more authentic process to cultivate and sustain caring healing practices for self and others. Such care and practices elicit and call upon profound wisdom and understanding, beyond knowledge, that touch and draw upon the human heart and soul.

In this reminder of basic values that transcend all circumstances and time and place, we invoke the fullest and highest spiritual, spirit-filled dimensions into our work, allowing us to engage once again in compassionate service, motivated by love, both human and cosmic. From this place we offer to ourselves, and those whom we meet on our path, our compassionate response for fulfilling our chosen life's work and calling.

Just as it is in our personal lives that during crises of illness, tragedy, loss, or impending death that we ponder spiritual questions that go beyond the physical material world, it is here in our professional life, in its conventional, dispirited physical, technical, life form, deathbed of sorts, that we are given new freedom, new space to reconsider a deeper level of nursing. This may be the moment to reconsider what has always been the foundation of caring and healing, but must now be reconsidered again, for new/old reasons. Could the professional deathbed of sorts that we face in the conventional, medical, and nursing world be an opportunity for us as professionals to consider how we may live our lives if we had "only a year to live." What and how would we approach our last year to heal and be healed with so much unfinished business accumulated during this past century? How could we offer up our heart when we may be disheartened or in fear?

As Kierkegaard<sup>3</sup> might say, how do we encounter our *sickness unto death*, in this in-between existence—where spirit and matter have been torn off, split asunder, from our identity, our existence, our very being? Revisiting such foundational issues of infinity of humanity in relation to our caring may be the difference between life and death of a profession.

Having during the past few years come through a period of personal trauma and

loss that was and remains deeply profound, I find that I was ironically given the gift of Spirit—the opportunity to fully experience life and spirit in raw form, in the midst of deep suffering.<sup>4,5</sup> But the universal lesson from Buddha is that it does not matter how long you (we) have forgotten, only how soon you (we) remember. It is as if we have to be stopped to allow our souls/our soulful purpose to catch up with us. This insight may offer a moment of enlightenment for nursing as this crossroads of its survival, which may be the gift from this passage.

Perhaps it is only when we acknowledge how much pain and suffering there is in our broken hearts and broken spirits, our broken world—within and without—that we can return to that which is timeless that can comfort, sustain, and inspire/inspirit us. It is here in this broken, wounded place that we can quiet the outer pace, bow down, and surrender to the loving presence of the universe and all its infinity.

So within this framework of caring and love, we now have a new call to bring us back to that which resides deep within us, and intersects with the focus of this time and place to uncover the latent love in our caring work as well as connect us with contemporary philosophies that invite love and caring through our ethics of being-becoming. For example, the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas<sup>6</sup> and his notion of the "Ethics of Face" help us connect with this ancient and contemporary truth. Likewise, I acknowledge the work of Knud Logstrup,<sup>7</sup> a Danish philosopher who mirrors views similar to Levinas, but from the metaphor of "Hand," in that he reminds us that:

holding another person's life in one's hand, endows this metaphor with a certain emotional power...that we have the power to determine

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***We now have a new call to bring us back to that which resides deep within us.***

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the direction of something in another person's life . . . we're to a large extent inescapably dependent upon one another . . . we are mutually and in a most immediate sense in one another's power.<sup>7(p28)</sup>

Perhaps it is *love* that underpins and connects us through our metaphors of facing and holding another in our hands, reminding us of another dimension as to how to sustain our humanity at a deeper level at this point in human history.

Josephine Hart of the *London Times* wrote a compelling article on September 19, 2001, about the events of 9/11. Her article frames these issues more profoundly:

We learnt a new moral alphabet this week.

The letters which form the word *love* seemed empowered with more resonance, as though for all our lives we had not been spelling it correctly.

We learnt that the dying understood that they would not be forgotten and that the manner of their leaving would determine their family's ability to survive their death. We learnt that, with death crashing towards them and with no means of escape, men and women absolved their families of the edge of grief that leads to madness. They did not scream in rage "Why me?" nor babble in terror at what awaited them. They spoke a last "*I love you,*" then turned towards their ghastly fate with unbelievable grace. They taught us another way to live and to die.<sup>8(p9)</sup>

With the crisis of meaning in our lives and work during this era in human history, we may paraphrase W.H. Auden to remember that in the end, love is all that really matters: The Native American Indians remind us that everyday we should do an act of power and an act of beauty. By reconsidering the role and power of love, light, and beauty in our life, we bring back reminders of what is truly valuable, serving ourselves with timeless reminders that in returning to our own inner light, and inner love, we offer an act of power and beauty to our self and those whom we serve.

Perhaps the purpose of this manuscript and my writing of it, is more specifically to remind myself and others of one other basic thing: *that it is our humanity that both wounds us and heals us, and those whom we serve; and*

*in the end, it is only love that matters.* It is in entering into and participating with the great mysteries of the sacred circle of life and death that we engage in healing.

By attending to, honoring, entering into, connecting with our deep humanity, we find the ethic and artistry of being, loving, and caring. We are not machines as we have been taught, but spirit made whole.

From Rumi in the 13th century to Levinas (1906–1995)<sup>6</sup> and Logstrup (1905–1981)<sup>7</sup> in the twentieth century, we find the ancient truths of our work. We share the wisdom of these mystic poet-philosophers who captured the "Infinity and mystery of the Human soul, mirrored through the ethics of face" (Levinas's view); the fact that "we hold another's life in our hands" (Logstrup's view) and that "the glance," the mystical experience when eyes meet is ancient Rumi's reminder of how we mirror the human soul, through the eyes, the look, the glance.

In Rumi's words: "I see my beauty in you. I become a mirror that cannot close its eyes to your longing . . . These thousands of worlds that arise from nowhere, how does your face contain them?" And ". . . out of eternity I turn my face to you, and into eternity . . ." <sup>9(p12)</sup>

How can we dare to be so bold as to bring caring and loving and infinity of souls into our lives and work and world again? Because, without returning to this ancient place of cosmic power, energy, and beauty, we are inclined toward what Levinas referred to as a "totalizing of self and other"<sup>6</sup>—that is, a congealing of our humanity, separating us from any connection with spirit, with infinity, with the great divine—with no hope for healing and wholeness. A totalizing occurs when there is no relational engagement, no soul connection; thus no cosmic human field to engage our shared humanity. This totalizing of self and other, this turning away from the mystery of our shared humanity and divine connection, can be an act of cruelty to self and others; an inhumane act toward human civilization itself, perpetuating more inhumane acts, violence, and destruction of human spirit in our work and world.

So rather than asking *how can we dare* to bring love and caring together into our lives and work? We can ask: *How can we bear not to?*

Levinas reminds us the Infinity of the human soul, mirrors the mystery of humanity back upon itself to us, through our shared human connections, through "the face," "the glance," the facing our own and others' shared souls as routes to this infinity and mysterious circularity of life.

To engage, to dwell in this new space of caring, living our mystery of being and dying, reveals the very situation in which we exist. This new space becomes our basic foundation for being and sustaining our humanity. This cosmic perspective, which invites spirit, mystery, and soul back into our lives and work, raises our courage to ethically engage in life and all its depths of being. Somehow, knowing that we can endure the pain, with the joy; the hurts and humiliations with the forgiveness and praise; the suffering with endurance, dignity, grace, and poise, is tied to our infinite capacity to love and be loved, to become *love*.

To paraphrase Emily Dickinson: The mind is wider than the sky, cause it can hold it and Thee beside, can be transposed to: The heart is as wide as the sky, because it can hold pain and joy side by side.

Though we can find this deep ethic of being, in Rumi, Levinas, and Logstrup and other poets and sages through the ages, we are invited now to be present to our own and others' deeply human soul conditions and connections that embrace all the vicissitudes of living and dying. As Rumi again reminds us: To die before we die—to find that delicate balance between self-discipline (dying of ego) and cosmic surrender.

#### CARING MOMENT AS RADIATING FIELD OF COSMIC LOVE

I recently heard it said that when a nurse enters into a patient's room, a magnetic field of expectation is created. In this deeper,

more expanded way of thinking about the power, beauty, and energy of love, a *caring moment*<sup>10,11</sup> becomes an energetic vibrational field of cosmic love that radiates reciprocity and mutuality, which transcends time, space, and physicality confirming and sustaining our humanity and our connection with the Levinas' *Infinity* of the entire universe.<sup>4,12</sup>

The connections between caring, loving, and infinity become the process of facing our humanity as mystery, thus mirroring humanity of self and other back on itself. Such a human-to-human act of caring within a given moment becomes a basic foundation for facing our humanity, uniting us and the cosmic energy of love, as one. In Rumi's words: "I am here, this moment, inside the beauty, the gift God has given . . . this gold and circular sign . . ." <sup>9(p10)</sup>

Logstrup frames these issues and ethics of our artistry of being human, not only through the "look," the "face," the gesture, the glance, the voice, but also the Hands. He puts it this way:

By our value/attitude to the other person we help to determine the scope and hue of his/her world; we make it larger or smaller, bright or drab, rich or dull, threatening or secure. We help to shape his world not by theories and views but by our very being and attitude toward him. Herein lies the unarticulated and one might say anonymous demand that we take care of life which trust has placed in our hands.<sup>7(p19)</sup>

These views remind us that one's human presence never leaves one unaffected. Expressed compassion and caring is not only the word that is spoken or the eye that sees, leading to action. The gaze itself is an expression; the word is also a gesture framed in a voice, an intonation. In the intuitive expression, what is said can be welcoming, receiving, affirming, but it also can be a careless phase, a looking away—nonfacing of another's humanity and human condition . . . a "*totalizing* of another," setting and limiting, objectifying other . . . rather than an honoring of the "Infinity and mystery of the human condition and humanity" . . . a *facing* and connecting with the human soul and the

infinity of the mystery therein. The opposite of this, a turning away from facing our humanity, can actually be an act of cruelty. So, in these deep ethical philosophical views of Levinas and Logstrup, which unite with caring theory, we acknowledge that through our very being, through our human presence toward facing self and other, we *hold others in our hands*, for better or for worse, either opening horizons to infinity, or totalizing our own and others' humanity.

In this view of ethics and the metaphysics and metaphors of *love, face, and hands*, Levinas posited ethics as being beyond ontology: he placed ethics as the first principle of philosophy. It is acknowledging the ethical responsibility for the other, understood as vulnerability and proximity. In this view, love is originary. Love watches over other demands, such as justice.<sup>13</sup> The subject as *other* is an incomprehensible, infinite otherness. The human face is not a concept, it is not a figure which message can be captured by knowledge. It is the face in its exposedness, its nudity, as an opening toward the infinite that makes the one responsible for the *other*.

This view is beyond philosophy; it is not an ontology, it is not a normative theory, it is a metaphysics: it explains how *being-for-the-other* precedes *being-with-the-other*. This approach critiques Heideggerian ontology by positioning ethics as preceding ontology. Within this metaphysics, we dwell in originary love, cosmic, and divine.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, what is traced in Levinas' *Ethic of Face*, in Rumi, *mystic-ecstatic love* and mystery, and Logstrup's holding another in one's *hand* is central to all professions involved in human care; it comes before and informs clinical judgments and can serve as an epistemological foundation for any clinical care.<sup>13</sup>

To frame these profound truths as foundational to our humanity, we can relate for new reasons to some theoretical notions of transpersonal caring:<sup>11,14</sup>

- Each thought and each choice we make carries spirit energy into our lives and those of others;

- Our consciousness, our intentionality, our presence, makes a difference, for better or for worse;
- Calmness and mindfulness in a caring moment beget calmness and mindfulness;
- Caring and love beget caring and love;
- Caring and compassionate acts of love beget healing for self and others;
- Transpersonal caring becomes transformative, liberating us to live and practice love and caring in our ordinary lives in nonordinary ways.

To enter into this new space of love, caring, hands, and heart that sustain infinity of our humanity we can consider the following practices:

- Suspending of role and status: honoring each person, their talents, gifts, and contributions as essential to the whole;
- Speaking and listening without judgment, working from heart-centered space; working toward shared meaning, common values;
- Listening with compassion and an open heart, without interrupting: listening to another's story is a healing gift of self;
- Leaning to be still, to center self while welcoming silence for reflection, contemplation, and clarity;
- Recognizing that a transpersonal caring-loving practice transcends ego self and connects us human-to-human, spirit-to-spirit, where our life and work are divided no more;
- Honoring the reality that we are part of each other's journey: we are all on our own journey toward healing as part of the infinity of the human condition: when we work to heal ourselves, we contribute to healing of the whole.

In conclusion, the crisis in modern medicine and health in this new millennium seems to lie in the lack of a meaningful perspective on the very nature of our humanity. It seems that somewhere along the way modern medicine has forgotten that it is grounded and sustained by and through the

very nature of our being and becoming more human.

We have forgotten that we are nurtured and sustained by love, by grace, by the beauty, and depth of life. We are reminded that our wounded humanity, including our vulnerability, suffering, and joy, the light and shadows of our teeming humanity, we enter into and contribute to connecting with the infinity of the human soul, life itself, and all the vicissitudes that encompass and surround our humanity.

Addressing the role of our being and becoming more human, through the phenomenon, the metaphysics, and ethic of love and caring allows us to more fully "face our humanity." These considerations are critical to engage in healing practices for ourselves and for those whom we serve.

This process of connecting with Logstrup's and Levinas's ethic of first principle<sup>6</sup> of

belonging-being and sustaining our humanity, is the same as sustaining our dignity, our divinity—reminding us of the sacred world of the infinity of existence; thus humanity is ultimately floating in, trusting in, the spirit, energy, and grace of cosmic love.

This ethic of love and caring, become first principles for facing and sustaining the infinity of our profession. If we follow this ethical demand nursing has a critical role in moving humanity toward the omega point, ever closer to God and the mysterious sacred circle of living, trusting, loving, being, and dying.

I conclude with a Teilhard de Chardin quote:

Love in all its subtleties is nothing more, and nothing less, than the more or less direct trace marked on the heart . . . This is the ray of light which will help us to see more clearly . . . <sup>15(p265)</sup>

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