

Florence Nightingale

A Talk Delivered by Blessed Hanna Chrzanowska in 1971

Let's start with the most important facts. During the Crimean War, Florence Nightingale lowered the mortality rate in British military hospitals from 42% to 2%; and the school of nursing which she established in London was the first of its kind anywhere in the world, putting nursing onto a new trajectory.

These two facts, from the Crimea and London, are so exceptional that they demand an explanation of the background and context in which they occurred. Above all, they require a spotlight on the person herself.

Florence Nightingale was born 12 May 1820 in Florence, Italy, into a wealthy, English aristocratic family.

There exists a watercolour from 1839 in which, sitting under cloudy skies on a tall carved chair, on a terrace against a backdrop of trees and a long winding road, nineteen-year-old Florence is hunched over a piece of black and orange embroidery. She is wearing a pink dress with white collar and puffy sleeves. One glimpses her slim white-stockinged feet in black slippers, her delicate features, small mouth, high forehead, and her smooth dark hair parted in the middle with a braid pinned high on her head. Next to her stands her older sister Parthenope in a yellow gown looking straight at the viewer. It's a pity that Florence, called Flo at home, does not show us her eyes. If we could see them, might we be able to read in them some indication of her future?

There is a hint of it, perhaps, in that Florence has wrapped around her a large striped apron, presumably for household chores. One recalls words written in a letter 54 years later: *fondness of household tasks best prepares one for the great attachment to life in a hospital*. But this pleasing water-colour is simply a typical scene characteristic of the life of well-born young ladies.

Flo enjoyed life and travelled extensively. She received an excellent education, at home of course, far beyond the norm for English ladies at that time. She spoke French, German and Italian, and knew Latin and Greek well. It was said of her that she was mad about music and loved the fine arts. On the surface she was a typical woman about to be married and, what's more, she was pretty.

We do not know why, at the age of sixteen, there arose in the psyche of this girl the urge to work, and in particular organised work. Let's be specific: *The first idea which I remember and also the last was about nursing*. Did she in childhood have some particular experience which shaped such desires? When Flo was still very young, her mother would send her to the local village on the family estate with gifts for the sick -- to which Flo always added some flowers. She must have been greatly

concerned about the fate of her wards, since during her many travels around England and abroad she always visited hospitals and -- let's not forget -- the so-called districts of "*ignorance and misery*". She could not free her mind from the memory of such places, considering them a social disgrace. She wrote: *A world like that is not the world envisaged by God.*

At the age of 25, she made her decision to work in a hospital as a nurse, indeed to try to organise nursing in new ways. Her parents protested vehemently. Let's not be so surprised but look for a moment at those contemporary hospitals and their staff working flat out to care for the sick. At St Thomas' Hospital in London, where Miss Nightingale would initiate her reforms, the best evidence for the need to reform can be found in the regulations. Here is an excerpt:

It is forbidden to throw bones or rags from the windows. Neither nurses nor anyone else can wash underwear in the toilets. Under no circumstances can nurses allow patients into their rooms. Nurses who disobey their superiors or who neglect the sick, or who quarrel and fight amongst themselves, or those who get drunk, will be dismissed.

Florence wanted to get into hospitals precisely because they were so terrible, but her parents and her entire social circle refused even to hear about it. At that time, women did not educate themselves to enter a profession, let alone mix with brutal, sordid and repulsive drunkards. To become a nurse – that was the scandal!

To drive these unfortunate dreams out of her pretty head, her parents sent Flo on yet another trip. However, their determined daughter used the occasion to her own ends, that is, to familiarise herself with the work of hospital nursing sisterhoods, groups which operated to a much higher standard than elsewhere in England. In moments of discouragement, when her faith in the fulfilment of her dreams faltered, she would reach deep down into her nature to another source of enrichment: her love of beauty. Judging from her travel letters, she had quite a literary talent, but she had no intention of profiting from it. She would say: *...that is not service. It is better to live a beautiful life than to describe it.*

By the end of the trip she managed to achieve at least one thing: she became acquainted with the work of pastor Fleidner in Kaiserwerth, Germany, a great social reformer. In addition, she saw the house and activities of the Protestant sisters, the so-called "deaconesses", who ran the hospital and were involved in various community activities.

She returned to England, where her parents had not changed their attitude. Interestingly, while Florence's ambitions were immutable – in spite of her great love for them, which was reciprocated – neither did she change her mind. She knew deep down that marriage was not for her. Finally, under pressure from their daughter, a crack appeared in the wall of parental opposition – for the first time. They allowed her to return to her beloved Kaiserwerth, this time for several months. To be honest

her parents thought that the extremely hard work in the hospital and the severe regime would discourage her in the end, but of course quite the opposite happened. Hard work on behalf of the patients not only confirmed in Florence her intentions, but also incited her passion and developed her sense of criticism. This was because the level of nursing care at Kaiserwerth did not come up to her high expectations, a situation arising not so much from her experiences there as from her creative intuition.

Put simply, she had the idea of establishing a school for nurses; but her parents' stubbornness persisted. Only after several more years was she allowed – incredibly – to take over the directorship of an institution for sick women, which she did, although with some hesitation. The institution in question had an unpalatable quality, being exclusively for ladies from the higher ranks of society. Prior to taking on this position, she went to Paris to familiarise herself with the work of the Daughters of Charity in hospitals and other institutions; from this time onward, she held their work in high regard. While working as director, she demonstrated her energy and talent for reforming, her breadth of mind -- and a rather authoritarian streak as well. She threatened to resign unless an article in the statute concerning acceptance solely of women of Anglican faith (to which she also belonged) were changed. This article was subsequently dropped. She thoroughly altered and improved nutrition; and thanks to her organisational skills, she ensured better medical care. And there was one more novel improvement: she not only ensured that cured patients were correctly discharged, so as to facilitate taking in new patients who required hospitalisation, but she concerned herself with the fate of patients once they left the institution. In this she was the forerunner of medical social workers. When Florence left the institution for a period to nurse the sick in a cholera epidemic, we no longer hear of any opposition from her parents. They obviously realised they had lost the fight.

Undoubtedly their patriotism did not allow them to protest when Florence took the great decision to go to the Crimea to help save soldiers. The war broke out in 1854, when England and France, on the side of Turkey, declared war on Russia. One of the war correspondents alarmed the English at home with descriptions of the terrible conditions in Crimean hospitals: *Soldiers are dying without any help and no-one is making the slightest effort to save them. France has sent many Sisters of Charity to care for the sick and dying. Will we allow France to get the better of us on the field of sacrifice and service?*

In England, the idea that women could nurse soldiers at war was unheard of. Yet two people had just such an idea at the same time – the Minister of War, Sidney Herbert (1st Baron Herbert of Lea) and Florence Nightingale. Each simultaneously wrote to the other, he suggesting to her an expedition to the Crimea, she offering her services in just such an endeavour. And here her innovative positive thinking became evident when she set him a condition, that she alone would be responsible for her personnel, for the hiring and firing of nurses and for determining their duties.

In the space of a week she mobilized 38 volunteers, both religious nursing sisters and lay women; and on 21 October 1854, Florence and her volunteers left England. She had not much faith in assurances that she would find sufficient hospital supplies in the Crimea, but using funds obtained through the generosity of private individuals, she was able to take her own supplies with her. On 4 November, Florence and her so-called 'English gang' arrived in Constantinople to start work in the city's suburb known as Scutari. They began just as a new wave of 2365 sick and wounded soldiers arrived, amongst them 120 ill with cholera. What she encountered far exceeded in sheer awfulness the reports of war correspondents. Under the barracks windows, near the military hospital, were open latrines. In the huge wards there were rotting floorboards, everything was dirty and infested, the beds shoved one right up against another, with pallets here and there on the ground. Bed linen, towels, soap, utensils, shirts were non-existent or in desperately short supply. Soldiers lay in their uniforms, which were stiff from blood and filth. There were scarcely any bandages or medicines. Above all, no one took responsibility for this state of affairs; instead, there was complete denial, with Army officers informing their superiors that everything was all right.

As soon as she arrived, Florence focused her efforts and those of her group towards improving sanitation, immediately ordering, for example, 300 scrubbing brushes. She dampened the conceited spirit of one nurse with the words, '*the strongest of you will stand by the wash-tub.*' She bought supplies of soap, towels and utensils. She undertook to improve soldiers' nutrition, which until then had been as dire as everything else in that hell.

She organised a laundry service, since prior to her arrival few items were ever washed, and those few washed in cold water only. She rounded up soldiers' wives to join in the work, since it was then common for wives to follow the camp of their fighting men-folk. She wrote: '*...now I am cook, quartermaster, cleaner of toilets and washer-woman.*'

She fortunately had funds at her disposal--money offered by the British public; had this not been available, all Florence's efforts would have been in vain, the more so given the antagonistic attitude of the British camp authorities. English officers seemed not able to accept the presence of working women in the camp. Even more telling was the antipathy of the military physicians, made worse because of Florence's personal contact and influence with the Minister of War and her huge influence with the British government. Army officials in Scutari told doctors and orderlies: '*The least you have to do with Miss Nightingale, the better.*' At last, some months after her arrival, relations with the military began to improve when officers realised that this "intruder" never used her influence for personal gain; that Florence adhered to the principle of absolute conformity to the instructions of hospital physicians.

Let us not suppose that this 'English gang' comprised only English helpers; of the 38, only sixteen were English. Florence was concerned not only with their professional competence, but also their moral standing. Those she considered inappropriate she dismissed, and when uncertain she kept them under her personal supervision. She demanded hard work and a methodical and disciplined work ethic—always necessary for a high-standard of nursing, and even more so in such extreme conditions. Yet she clearly loved her nurses and was capable of tender feeling towards them, though she could be hard and remorseless in the face of transgression. Florence would not put up with the 'pretend sacrifice' of self-denial by the more self-regarding nurses. She would say: *'My aim is not to make the life of nurses miserable but to ensure the best nursing care for the wounded.'* New nurses kept arriving until, at the war's end, there were 125. It must be admitted that the nurses would never have managed, had it not been for the help of the orderlies, who were also under Florence's control. They idolised her and she cared for them in a special way. Thanks to Florence the order was given to improve their working conditions.

Fighting for the good of her patients, Florence grappled with the greatest enemy of all – bureaucracy. She was made to wait three weeks for a delivery of shirts, and for six weeks for lemons, needed to fight scurvy—this when the fruit was already stored in a nearby warehouse. In such situations, Florence was perfectly capable of ignoring rules. On one occasion, she even instructed orderlies to break open a door to get at much needed supplies.

There exists an etching which shows a carriage being drawn by galloping horses, on one of which rides a soldier; and one can make out the silhouette of Florence Nightingale inside that carriage. Once the situation in the hospital in Scutari was sufficiently under control, Florence could sometimes be glimpsed in just such a scene. Indefatigable and insatiable for more work, she would set out to inspect other military hospitals in the Crimea. She did not always travel by carriage; sometimes she went on horseback, at other times on foot. On one occasion, she again had to put up a fight, this time with an army chief physician who manifestly wanted her out of the Crimea, and tried to force the issue by depriving her of food rations.

It's hard to imagine how she had so much energy. Many physicians died, as well as nine of her best nurses. Inevitably, Florence herself fell ill, but as soon as she was back to some semblance of health, and despite her continued weakness, she returned to work—not just in English and allied army hospitals, but in Turkish ones as well. Again, we see her as a trailblazer, this time for the Red Cross, and her importance in this respect was acknowledged by the creator that institution, Henry Dunant.

In the summer of 1856, four months after the conclusion of the war, Florence returned to England, using a false name to avoid attention. She already had a foretaste of the problems caused by fame during her illness in the Crimea. There, not

only would the soldiers in hospital call out to her; crowds would gather in Scutari just to get sight of her. Such was her fame that Queen Victoria ordered daily briefings concerning the state of her health.

In the archives of the Canadian Nursing Association there is a photograph of Florence taken after her return from the Crimea. Made at the wish of Queen Victoria, Florence Nightingale was 36 when the photograph was taken. Again, she sits on a carved high-backed chair; she is wearing a capacious, floor-length dress, almost a crinoline, and on her head a cap with dangling ties. Her face is gaunt, eyes downcast; her whole posture seemingly testifying to extreme exhaustion. We are reminded of her words, "I am not indifferent to genuine sympathy, but it pains me to experience the fuss around my name." But it wasn't the fame and the overrating of her achievements, as she saw it, but the extremely difficult conditions which had worn her down. The painfully slow progress, together with the need to aim ever higher... that is the setting in which she developed and became so abundantly successful.

Always aiming higher, because Florence Nightingale believed that her huge success in Scutari was but a transient episode, a beginning. Her Crimean experiences proved the need to carry out fundamental changes at military hospitals in time of war and even in peacetime. Thanks to her accomplishments, a special commission was created to address the issue. Florence was not an official member, however, for the simple reason that she was a woman. But she did direct proceedings from a distance. When matters stalled, she would threaten to publish her report from Scutari, and that was effective. She won her case, but only after writing an eight-hundred-page memorandum.

And now came the most important hour for us nurses. Florence turned to her greatest ambition--the establishment of a school of nursing. She was not satisfied by her successes in the military hospitals, quite the opposite. She remembered her mistakes, and the mistakes of those working with her. But now she had at her disposal an enormous amount of money, the donations made by a grateful public in her honour – the famous Nightingale Fund.

One might imagine that from this point Florence would have a smooth ride to her objective, the reform of nursing. But that was not the case. One section of the public, namely those from the higher spheres of society, decided to protest. They thought that such reforms would not succeed and were, indeed, unnecessary. After all, they claimed, hospital work is so boring and so dreadful that it inevitably leads to drunkenness and dissolute behaviour. Why would one introduce cultured ladies from good homes into this arena for women of ill repute – for was this not, after all, what Florence Nightingale wanted to do? Florence admitted many years later that she had understood the hesitations of mothers who loved their daughters and wanted what was best for them, but she couldn't help but feel that such a position was unfair if it made it more difficult for hospitals to be improved.

What was more astonishing was the attitude of doctors, of whom only five out of 173 (based in London) signed up to contribute to the Nightingale Fund. Mainly, they were unsupportive because of a specific principle of the reforms-- that all aspects of nursing were to be the responsibility of the director of nursing. "*No physician shall have the authority to punish any nurse; it shall be the responsibility solely of the director of nursing to address and correct any negligence on the part of her staff.*" On the other hand, the document contained an important clarification to this point. "...*it is crucial that nurses unquestioningly obey physicians with respect to all matters pertaining to the patient.*" But the troubled doctors were not convinced, choosing to ignore the self-evident fact of her great success at Scutari.

There was reluctance also with regards to the training of nurses. One doctor's professed opinion illustrates the problem: "*The position of a nurse is nothing more nor less that of a house-maid...*"

Happily, Florence Nightingale overcame the opposition to her reforms, and on 4 June 1860 she opened the famous school of nursing attached to St Thomas' Hospital in London. The choice of hospital was not arbitrary, for in that hospital was a team of health workers who understood the need for nursing reform. Pre-eminent among them was the director, Miss Sarah Elizabeth Wardroper, who had already introduced beneficial changes where she worked. For example, she had energetically fought against drunkenness among workers. Nightingale entrusted to her the directorship of the school, since she was unable to do this work herself, her health having been permanently weakened by the illness she had suffered in the Crimea.

To this day, the appointment of a nurse as the school of nursing director has become the norm at nursing schools and helps keep separate the two professions of medicine and of nursing.

Conditions at St Thomas' Hospital fostered the success of the reforms in important areas: providing the school with a favourable climate for the holistic development of students; teaching students to become not just skilled nurses, but also women of the highest moral standing. The fact that the directorship was entrusted to Miss Wardroper did not mean that Florence Nightingale was side-lined-- quite the opposite, as she was constantly overseeing developments at the school.

Candidates had to be between the ages of 25 and 35 – not younger. The idea was to promote the development of more mature women, capable of satisfying the new requirements for nursing the sick. Initial training lasted a year, later extended to four years. In the beginning, there were few theoretical lectures and no textbooks. Practical sessions took place at the bedside, and a guiding principal of the reform was that the nurse be responsible for the total care of the patient. Florence Nightingale, who at Kaiserwerth once scrubbed floors and cleaned door-nobs, did not suggest such activities for her students. She wanted nurses to spend a maximum

amount time with patients. Students and already trained nurses worked hard, governed by strict regulations both in the nurses' home and at the hospital.

Increasingly, alumni of the school found work in new hospitals, always in groups, never alone; and wherever such a group went, the atmosphere in that hospital improved – peace reigned, hygiene levels rose, and the quality of patient care soared. Schools of nursing of the same format as the original were soon attached to more hospitals. While Florence Nightingale encouraged healthy competition among them, she made sure that staff from her own school did not lord it over the others. Over the years, when the nursing reforms had spread over the whole of England, St Thomas' Hospital (whose origins date back to the 12th century) was rebuilt. Attached to the renovated hospital was the famous nurses' home – The Nightingale Home and Training School for Nurses.

Professor Władysław Szenajch, who died a few years ago, was an excellent paediatrician and author of the book *Three Nurses*. In it, he evaluates Florence Nightingale's work as follows: "The Nightingale Reforms stipulated only inviolate rules, (i) always working for the benefit of mankind, and (2) for the progress of medicine. What we all now expect from the field of nursing, the content and higher levels of knowledge... these are different in today's schools than in the times of Nightingale. But the goals are the same, and here I quote the reformer herself, *'the acquisition of knowledge, the proof of which is established through exams; and the development of moral character which cannot be assessed by examinations.'*"

Florence Nightingale was not one of those who think education ends with the awarding of a certificate, which is why she was against the idea of diplomas. She wanted nurses constantly to continue their education, learn new methods, demonstrate ever better skills. She placed a huge emphasis on moral development, on true and deeply felt love of the profession.

For her strength of character was as important as the acquiring of knowledge. She defended her position valiantly; above all she did not want nursing to become solely a skill or just a livelihood. Thanks to her concepts of nursing and to the alumni of her nursing school, brought up in this spirit, nursing in England became a highly honourable profession.

Nightingale's extraordinary influence has continued right up to our own time, and there is no sign of it diminishing; the daringly innovative quality of her ideas have been commented upon more than once. From among her many literary works let us focus for a moment on her *Notes on Hospitals*, about the organisation of hospitals and their physical structure, with specific advice concerning hygiene. Many of her points are today considered to be obvious, having contributed to a health-care revolution, though unfortunately not all are universally upheld. When she first turned to nursing hospitals were, in her own words, mere *'boxes for the storing of the sick. No-one asked the question whether the hospital itself was doing actual harm.'* Concern about the state of hospitals in her time took into account the true cause of

so much disease: the grave lack of hygienic conditions found in villages and towns. From early childhood, these conditions were to her like an festering wound.

That '*we should care for the healthy*', as she put it, is now axiomatic for social medicine and health-care, which is why she put such emphasis on hygiene in nurses' education. Indeed, Nightingale wanted nurses to be 'health-missionaries'. Her principles concerning personal health and hygiene education were based on the need to understand domestic conditions and social custom. Otherwise she said, all efforts would be in vain. '*We must take care to talk with them but not at them...*,' and she developed her teaching plan for nurses accordingly.

So, what didn't she work on? She certainly worked on improving institutions for the poor; drew attention to the benefits of occupational therapy; and took an active interest in fighting prostitution. Using the Nightingale Fund, she founded midwifery schools. She was interested in the living conditions of the working classes, and she participated in the political life of the country as a member of the Liberal Party. She always took the side of the down-trodden. She refused to accept the status quo in India; she considered it the responsibility of the British to lead the country out of poverty, disease and hunger, and upon completing these tasks to grant it independence. In 1863, she made a donation to a fund for wounded Polish insurrectionists.

So, what was Florence Nightingale like as a person? Just from this short account of her life we are struck by her incredible willpower. Constantly struggling with adversities sharpened that will; it gave her unyielding self-control and strength of character. We might wonder if one not possessing these qualities, being less domineering and firm could achieve the same results? In the photograph she is about forty years old, and we don't see much that's gentle about her. Her huge eyes look into the distance as if she's searching for answers to unknown questions. In certain stages of her life she was unapproachable, and she even wrote that she never allowed herself to be side-tracked by personal whim. Always pushing her frail capabilities to the limit, she demanded the same dedication from others, even from her great friend Sidney Herbert, who was ill, and whom she positively forced to make similar exertions.

In fact, she did have a gentle side, for example in her relations with the nurses in Scutari, and with the wounded soldiers. In old age, having realised so many of her dreams, she became increasingly gentle and considerate, especially with the young. When she retired from public life, she returned to her second love after nursing, to literature and philosophy. She died on 13 August 1910 at the age of ninety.

Professor Szenajch's book is out of print, although the Polish Nurses Association is hoping to get it reprinted; in it are several passages from Florence Nightingale's work, *Notes on Nursing*. Let us consider of few of them, for they are still relevant today. The intrinsic nature of disease does not change. There will always be a need for good nursing, irrespective of medical progress.

- ❖ Too many believe that to administer medication is to do something, in fact everything, whilst to supply fresh air, warmth, and cleanliness is insignificant. I respond that for many diseases we do not know the exact medicine required or what treatment is needed, but no-one can dispute the positive effects on disease of tender nursing care.
- ❖ If [the nurse] allows her patients to remain unwashed, or to stay dressed in clothing saturated with perspiration or other excretions, she is hampering the natural process of healing.
- ❖ A good nurse will always make the beds of her patients herself, mindful of the importance of sleeping in a well-made bed.
- ❖ Never allow a patient to be woken up, intentionally or accidentally. This is a *sine qua non* of all good nursing.
- ❖ Unnecessary noise amounts to a cruel absence of care whether inflicted on the sick or the healthy. A noisy nurse is every patient's nightmare...Walking on tip-toe, working in the room too slowly, these too are harmful. A firm, light, quick step, a steady quick hand, are what is needed.
- ❖ The effect on ill-health of beautiful objects, a variety of objects, and especially those of brilliant colour is scarcely appreciated enough...
- ❖ One should not deprive patients of reasonable hope. But I deplore idle talk, giving futile hope to patients just to cheer them up.

Florence Nightingale also commented extensively on the need for good observation skills during the patient's stay in hospital. In conclusion, I offer one last quotation: "... *I would say that, if a nurse refuses to do something for a patient, solely because she considers it outside her remit, I would say that that person does not have a vocation for nursing. I have witnessed senior surgical nurses, invaluable workers, scrubbing floors. That is a pointless waste of their energies, but let's be honest, those women had a true calling. Above all, a nurse should always help the patient and only secondarily ask herself 'is doing such-and-such part of my job'.*

Florence Nightingale became such a role model of her era, that for us mere mortals, her standards seem unattainable. But we must not let unsound thinking taint our amazement. Yes, she came from a privileged background; she had an excellent education; she travelled extensively; and she had the support of powerful people and a lot of money at hand. Let's face it, she was quite exceptional. But we must never forget the difficulties which she had to overcome and the fights she went on to win because she gave of herself always and absolutely as much as she could.

