

The "Reflections" column features human interest stories about life-changing experiences with patients or other nursing school experiences. Send your query letter to nsna@nsna.org att: Managing editor.

Holding on to the Moment

by Linda Honan Pellico, PhD, APRN; Melinda M. Bridgman, MFA; and Leah Nero, BA.

For a myriad of reasons, college graduates are choosing advanced practice nursing; many are seeking a second career; others are fulfilling a lifelong dream that was waylaid for a variety of reasons. The result is that programs specifically designed for non-nurse college graduates to enter specialty practice have expanded exponentially.

In 1974, Yale School of Nursing opened its doors to non-nurse college graduates who desired specialty practice. On the first day of school, students are welcomed to nursing, introduced to leaders, and challenged to embrace this year of transformation. It is important to understand that they should not abandon their old profession; instead they add nursing to it—the nurse scientist and nurse-artist adds far more vibrancy to our profession. Students read the words of Margaret Mead who in 1954, called nursing the profession that protects the vulnerable (Mead, 1954). Mead proposed that in our busy culture, most other professions had lost the opportunity to witness both birth and death. Nursing as a profession witnesses these moments and in that way is vestige to basic, universal experiences. She called upon nurses to “Skillfully and imaginably work with your hands and your humanity providing sensitive, intelligent understanding of human need (Mead, 1954, p 1002). And that is exactly what we do. We use our hands to check pulsations of vessels and organs, feel moisture, temperature, texture and turgor. We will use our hands to give injections, place catheters, change dressings, and apply ice. Our hands will simply touch the arm, the brow, the leg. Our hands will witness birth and death, pain and injustice. They will sooth, caress, push and pull and these experiences will cause individuals to transform into a nurse.

The idea of preserving the moment of transformation into a nurse lead to the idea of casting students’ hands—the nursing students’ hands that are striving to learn the secrets of the human body, the skillful applications of

therapy and the artistry of nursing practice. This way the hands are preserved in time as students go on to heal and cure and care.

Melinda M. Bridgman, an artist who combines her passion for art with the desire to heal, helped the students do this working with simple supplies of plaster bandages, lubrication and water. She called upon the nursing students to look at their hands—hands that possess the power to caress a loved one, soothe a fevered brow, heal, bless and lift things up. Hands with an equal ability to smash, break, and wound. They have the power to dig in the soil, plant seeds, cook meals, dress wounds, make music and art, weave, and write. They can reach forward in a greeting or dismissal. They can draw people to us, or push them away. The artist called upon the students to delight in their hands and challenged them to consider what they will do with them as an instrument of their unique gift to the world, to humankind and to their God or higher power. Thus, began the day of casting.

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Reflection of a Student: Hand Casting

by Leah Nero

When I chose to cast my hand, I decided to create a form of the back of my hand—fingers slightly curled, the way I might reach out to clasp someone’s hand. I chose this position because this is the perspective I see, it is the view of myself rubbing an ill person’s edematous arm, or feeling their furrowed brow for telltale clammy skin. I chose my right hand, my dominant one, putting my best hand forward.

I thought of the expression for when a place or a person is particularly etched in our mind: “I know it like the back of my hand.” I have watched these hands with wonder, as they have aged and grasped and let go, as they have reached out to the new and waved goodbye alike. I have seen these hands go from a girl’s, to a young woman’s (vain with polish), and now they are nearly my mother’s, as I first remember them, reaching for me. I have marveled that they are both so common and known to me, and so ephemeral—how what we know and who we are can shift so gradually until we have transcended, again and again. I remember my grandmother’s hands, so vividly, and wonder if one day I might unknowingly wake up with those hands. I wonder if it will be like knowing her again, even in her absence.

The feeling of having my hands wrapped in cool, wet plaster was soothing. It made me feel grounded, calm within my skin, as if casting oneself is a way of marking, I’m here today. The plasters forming guard felt secure and connected. I became assured that all my sinews had finally met in the middle somewhere. It reminded me of a yoga class, where our final meditation was “I inhabit my littlest toe.” There was a whole landscape to our physical and emotional planes that we were habitually neglecting. During the hand casting, I took deep breaths, and I inhabited my littlest finger. It wasn’t too enthralling there, but it was tranquil. For one hour of the fall semester, we deviated from the well-traveled path of frantic intellectual pursuit. We took the mind-body equivalent of the scenic route—a quiet escape from inhabiting a crowded mind.

I have not yet painted my cast “hand,” and I’m reluctant to do so. I don’t want it to really pass for my hand, (my hand does all its own stunts.) I don’t want to assign it a color, or a level of gloss. I like it scratchy, a little undone, unfinished. It both espouses the elementary idea of my sincerest intentions, and leaves me room to grow, to transcend. I’m a little unfinished you see, sometimes I unravel a bit at the edges, or get shaky in areas of transition, but all and all I am here, reaching out and held together. ☺