



Just Doing What We Do

BY GENEVIÈVE M. CLAVREUL, RN, PHD

IT WAS AN EXPERIENCE EARLY IN MY nursing career that taught me how much our actions affect the lives of those we care for. Many years ago, while still an LPN, I was out at Gage Park in Topeka, Kansas, having a picnic with my mother and four children. As we were driving home through this rather large park, a woman suddenly threw herself in front of my station wagon, forcing me to stop. I got out of the car wondering what could possess someone to throw herself into traffic, even very slow-moving park traffic.

As she grabbed my arm, a torrent of words assailed me as she explained that

her mother was having a heart attack and needed help immediately. You must remember that in the 1960s there were no cell phones, and pay phones were few and far between, making summoning help an often-slow process.

At the scene, I was able to revive the mother while the daughter drove to locate a pay phone to summon medical help. Once the ambulance arrived (no paramedics back then either), I relinquished my "patient" into their hands. I returned to my car, gave my kids a brief report on what had happened, thanked them for being so good while their mom had been away, and we returned home.

Months passed and the incident in the park faded from memory, until one day when there was a knock on the door. I opened it to find the woman from the park who had so frantically enlisted me to help her mother. I invited her in and we sat down to chat. She thanked me again for my help, and told me that she had spent a desperate 10 minutes trying to stop passing cars to no avail. When she spotted my station wagon and saw it full of children in the back and two women in the front, she felt sure we'd stop and took the risk of throwing herself in front of our car.

She then revealed that she knew I was a nurse and that my husband was in Vietnam. I was curious how she knew this since I had left the scene without providing my name. She gave a shy smile and informed me that she had managed to write down my license plate number. When she returned home that day, she asked her husband, who had connections with the local fire dept, to track down the stranger who had saved her mother's life.

She had not felt her brief thank you at the scene was enough. She needed to find me, and tell me in person what my help that fateful day in the park had meant to her and her family.

Most nurses at some point in their career experience the highly charged and emotional thanks of a patient or family member for doing what we have been trained to do—be a nurse. However, when this intense gratitude comes, it often has a profound effect on the nurse.

Our work can be difficult, exhausting, thankless—and any other negative label you can think of, if you read some accounts concerning the state of nursing. However, our work also brings with it rewards and meaningful experiences too numerous to count and categorize. Even the most stressful of shifts can present you with moments when as a nurse you realize you have played a role that will have a significant outcome. There are also moments when we are the ones who benefit from the expertise, care and compassion of other nurses. We have a “fraternal-like” profession where we take care of our own.

I must say that my family has been fortunate with our health. When my children were young, outside the common childhood illnesses, that one broken wrist, a case of tonsillitis, and three times when stitches were needed, our family never faced a crisis that caused the need for emergency hospitalization. So, I have mostly been on the “giving” end of the care. But fate has a way of turning the tables, and one night, I found myself riding in the ambulance as my mother was being rushed to the hospital.

My eldest had awakened me in the middle of the night concerned that her grandmother seemed unwell. As I entered my mother's room I recognized the signs of a cardiac event and called the operator immediately (no 911 back in the Dark Ages). When we arrived in the emergency room of the army base hospital where my family received our routine care, my mother crashed. They were

able to revive and stabilize her, then wheeled her to a room where I joined her.

Word must have spread on the floor that one of their new admits was the mother of an RN because it wasn't long before nurses from the various units came by to check in on her—and on me. Quiet questions assured me that they “had my back.” After asking about my children, someone volunteered to drive to my home so the kids would have an adult there to help them get ready for school. I soon got calls from the nurses I worked with at my hospital, and in particular, from the PICU unit where I was head nurse, offering to volunteer to cover my shift for the next couple of days so I could focus on caring for my mother. I could only surmise that the nurses at Martin Army Hospital had called the nurses at my place of employment to let them know that one of our own was in need.

As my mother regained consciousness she made clear to me that no further resuscitation efforts should be used. She understood that she had suffered a massive massive heart attack and the damage was irreparable. She and I shared the French philosophy that quality of life is more important than quantity, and she felt she had lived a full life. My mother lived through the Spanish Flu and polio epidemics, two World Wars, had seen her two sons interred in work camps, buried four husbands, lived through German-occupied Paris, grieved when General Charles de Gaulle died, and outlived most of her siblings. Now she said it was time for her to go. She was tired and wanted nothing more than to rest. Her only demand was that I agreed to ship her body back to France to be buried.

In the end, the greatest gift that my fellow nurses gave was understanding and respecting my mother's final wishes. The nurses on duty that night conveyed my mother's decision to the physician in charge, and then quietly left the nurses station so she could pass on.

That night I experienced the compassion and caring that is the hallmark of our profession. I was shown firsthand why so many of our patients—even after we are no longer providing care for them—feel such poignant appreciation. It brought home to me that experience so many years before in Topeka when a woman went to extraordinary lengths to find me to say thank you in person.

In closing, to all the nurses who were on duty the night my mother died at Martin Army Hospital, and to all my nursing cohorts from my days at Columbus Medical Center—I have never forgotten the care, compassion and support given to my mother, family and me at a time we so desperately needed it. Thank you once again for “just doing what we do.” Your kindness has never been forgotten. **WN**



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