

3

LIVING A CARITAS CONSCIOUSNESS: A PHILOSOPHY FOR OUR EVERYDAY PRACTICES AS NURSE EDUCATORS

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Lisa shares her caritas journey, and how she reclaimed the joy of teaching by learning and reimagining new possibilities in nursing education. In the Caritas Coach Education Program® (CCEP), Lisa discovered that her intentional and conscious relationship with herself, and her transpersonal relationships with others, revitalized her vision as a compassionate, loving, accepting, and collaborative educator.

LISA'S CARITAS JOURNEY

“The transpersonal caring model incorporates soul care—fostering ongoing self-growth, spiritual growth and healing for the wounded healer.”
(Watson, 1999, p. 180)

In 2004, I graduated from the University of Alberta, Canada, with my PhD in nursing. Excited and determined to carve out my career as a new nurse educator and researcher, I returned home to Nova Scotia to take up an academic position at Dalhousie University School of Nursing. With a passionate commitment to the cultivation of scholarship that equally valued research, teaching, and clinical practice, I embodied my academic trajectory with purpose and enthusiasm for all that was possible in my new role.

As the years went on and institutional constraints—including the academy's emphasis of research over teaching and of grant capture and publication over education—became burdensome, I found myself disillusioned. I questioned my decision to continue as a nurse academic. This disillusionment soon became obvious due to my changing disposition toward those around me—including, regrettably, the students. Negative teaching evaluations soon reflected this change in me.

Despite the pain and self-doubt I experienced while reading these evaluations, they became a transformative tool for change. I realized I had to either leave my academic life and find an alternative profession or reclaim joy and reimagine possibilities beyond my current situation. After much self-reflection and inner dialogue, I chose joy, I chose love, and I chose forgiveness (Watson, 2008)—forgiveness of self, of others, and of a system that was often relentless and unforgiving.

Perhaps I was already channeling a caritas consciousness—one embodied in the philosophy of Caring Science developed by world-renowned nurse theorist Dr. Jean Watson (2008). As Watson (2005) reminds us:

When we are so oriented toward control, domination, with a sense of rational knowing that we are responsible for making things happen; the concept of surrendering is foreign to us and our ego world of operation. Nevertheless, it often is only through surrendering, in letting go of ego—sense of control and our efforts to make something happen, that we witness new possibilities unfolding in front of us. (p. 118)

While the language of love, joy, and forgiveness is easily dismissed in academic settings, this was the very language that inspired me on my new and transformative journey toward being and becoming caritas (Watson, 2008).

Through the Caritas CoachSM program, I discovered how to cultivate caritas literacy by living the 10 Caritas Processes. Grounded in the philosophy of Caring Science (Goldberg, 2015; Watson, 2008), this experiential and scholarly journey revitalized my academic vision by locating me in a caritas consciousness—one that embodies a reflexive, compassionate, and politically dynamic pedagogy for our scholarship as nurse educators (Goldberg, Rosenberg, & Watson, 2017).

While there are numerous definitions for pedagogy, common to most is the view that it provides a theoretical framework and pragmatic application to inform teaching and learning practices—that is, interactions, judgments, strategies, and interventions.

TOWARD BEING AND BECOMING CARITAS

As my journey toward being and becoming caritas began, I found myself searching for ways to more deeply embody my role as an educator and mentor to engage collaboratively with students. Reflecting on that time, I realize I was attempting to reclaim my heart as a

teacher—not only for myself, but also for the students with whom I was privileged to collaborate (Palmer, 2007).

Recognizing that my negative student evaluations were an opportunity for change, my initial search took me to the university's Centre for Learning and Teaching (CLT). I was privileged to begin a collegial relationship with Dr. Suzanne Le-May Sheffield, the director of CLT. Through our many dynamic conversations across a continuum of learning and teaching, pedagogical philosophies, and diversity, I soon came to understand the central role compassion plays in pedagogy where politicization is an overarching goal. In other words, as a teacher committed to an ontological approach to nursing as a politicized practice, compassion and love are necessary if the political is to be embraced by students as an everyday act (Goldberg, 2015; Watson, 2008). Perhaps hooks (2000) captures this best:

...we accept that true love is rooted in recognition and acceptance, that love combines acknowledgment, care, responsibility, commitment, and knowledge, we understand there can be no love without justice. (p. 104)

Upon my recognition that compassion and love were necessary for students to understand how to cultivate a more politicized practice including, but not limited to, the relevance of social justice, health equity, and the advancement of underrepresented and underserved communities, I continued my journey toward caritas—one in which I more deeply committed to understanding the embodiment of the 10 Caritas Processes and how they could be lived on a daily basis as a Caritas Coach.

THE CARITAS COACH EDUCATION PROGRAM

In the spring of 2014, I began the CCEP, a transformative journey over a 6-month period through the Watson Caring Science Institute

(WCSI) in Boulder, Colorado. Surrounded by the majestic beauty of Boulder, which sits at the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, I embarked on a quest through on-site retreats, distance learning, scholarly reading and writing, and one-on-one mentorship with an exceptional WCSI faculty member, Dr. Lynne Wagner. This fostered an understanding of Caring Science through a form of caritas literacy grounded in the 10 Caritas Processes. This experiential and philosophical understanding illuminated how to inhabit the role of a Caritas Coach as a living, breathing extension of the self (Goldberg, 2015).

THE 10 CARITAS PROCESSES

Being and becoming a Caritas Coach is grounded in the 10 Caritas Processes. Collectively, these processes provide a framework that engages the practitioner in caritas literacy that can be applied in professional and personal practices.

Beginning with the reflexive self, the 10 Caritas Processes invite the practitioner to engage in a deep understanding of the self, before cultivating trusting and authentic relationships with others. Through the application of these processes—rooted in loving kindness, transparency, the development of a genuine commitment to teaching and learning, and the ability to cultivate a spiritual practice (including a belief in magic and miracles)—the practitioner cultivates caritas literacy (Watson, 2008). Thus, the 10 Caritas Processes collectively provide an action-oriented approach to guide practitioners (educator, clinician, administrator, and researcher) while cultivating an authentic, loving, spiritual, and transpersonal relationship with self, other, and the broader community (Goldberg, 2015; Watson, 2008).

Embodying one's role as a Caritas Coach can begin only when one moves beyond the ego-self (Goldberg, 2015; Watson, 2008). Thus it is only in the abandonment of ego that transpersonal caring can begin—that the practitioner (educator) in that moment can authentically begin to understand the inner world and storied

life of the other (student). Watson (2010) eloquently characterizes transpersonal caring as an

...intersubjective, human-to-human relationship, which encompasses two individuals in a given moment, but simultaneously transcends the two, connecting to other dimensions of being and a deeper/higher consciousness that accesses the universal field and planes of inner wisdom: the human spirit. (p. 115)

Thus, transpersonal caring in the context of education suggests an opportunity on the part of the educator to be fully present with the student, providing the educator an authentic and rare opportunity to stay with the other's point of reference (Watson, 2010). In so doing, a new moment in time and space is co-created, transcending the experience of the one to the experience of the two together—educator and learner, teacher and student (Sitzman & Watson, 2013; Watson, 2010).

CARITAS LITERACY

As one learns to embody a caritas consciousness through the application of the 10 Caritas Processes—including an understanding of transpersonal caring (in which the educator authentically focuses on the student with a fullness of attention through concern, meaning, and love [Sitzman & Watson, 2013])—the ongoing cultivation of a unique way of being in the world is required. This results in caring literacy (Watson, 2008). As beautifully articulated by Watson (2008), this literacy includes

...an evolved and continually evolving emotional heart intelligence, consciousness and intentionality and level of sensitivity and efficacy, followed by a continuing lifelong process and journey of self-growth and self-awareness. Such an

awakening of one's being and abilities cultivates skills and awareness of holding, conveying, and practicing communicating thoughts of caring, loving-kindness, equanimity, and so on as part of one's professional Being. (p. 23)

This description suggests the nature of this work is ongoing and forever in process. As a Caritas Coach, understanding how these practices are cultivated professionally can assist practitioners in recognizing the lived and action-oriented nature of this work. For example, the practitioner does not simply engage with the environment “to make significant changes in ways of Being/doing/knowing” (Watson, 2008, p. 26). Rather, the practitioner is considered to *be* the environment in which the change is taking place. This becomes an essential ingredient for the Caritas Coach who becomes a caritas educator.

In becoming the environment that heals, caritas educators are invited to share in the profound influences they have on the spaces and places they inhabit (Watson, 2008). This results from their self-reflexive and highly cultivated awareness regarding their own energy field(s) and the ways in which this can radiate intentionality and consciousness (Watson, 2005; Watson, 2008). This may positively or negatively influence educational spaces, including those with students and faculty.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The integration of caring literacy into my own teaching and learning practices while promoting an embodied commitment to dwell with the experiences of others (Watson, 2008) is foundational to my transformative success in my teaching-learning relationships with students as a Caritas Coach. In what follows, I provide specific examples of how this is lived in my everyday practices in the context of my teaching.

CARING SCIENCE PEDAGOGY

Promoting a scholarly and critically stimulating environment for student engagement is essential to advancing excellence in future students at both the undergraduate and graduate level. I thus work to co-create a reflexive, compassionate, and politicized approach to my teaching and learning by using a pedagogical framework grounded in Caring Science. This organically aligns with feminist, queer, and phenomenological theories (Ahmed, 2006; Goldberg et al., 2017; Goldberg, 2015; Goldberg, Harbin, & Campbell, 2011; Goldberg, Ryan, & Sawchyn, 2009; Merleau-Ponty, 1965; Watson, 2008; Young, 2005). In other words, because Caring Science is epistemologically pluralistic, ontologically holistic, and ethically inclusive, it has the capacity to align with a diverse set of philosophical frameworks (Hills & Watson, 2011; Watson, 2008).

Collectively, these philosophies guide my educational pedagogy and reflect the following:

- Students are expert in their own storied experiences and provide legitimate forms of knowledge.
- Students and educators alike are positioned, albeit often unknowingly, in unforgiving systems plagued by a historical legacy of institutional discrimination (racism, sexism, homophobia, etc.). This reflects the starting point for the stories they tell and the experiences they live.
- As a self-reflexive educator (Goldberg, 2015), I aim to cultivate authentic, reciprocal, trusting, and compassionate relationships with students, faculty, and others within my academic community (Hills & Watson, 2011; Watson, 2008).
- By integrating the aforementioned within a Caring Science pedagogy, I invite self-reflexivity with students, thus potentiating understanding in what it means to be a compassionate, politically astute, and ethically sensitive clinician in the broadest sense in today's healthcare system (Goldberg, 2015).

CREATING A SPACE

Creating a space that is open, safe, relational, and respectful for all students is vital to optimizing learning (Hills & Watson, 2011). Few can blossom in educational environments that are unsupportive. Recently, I have engaged in new approaches that are positioned within the “dimensions of caring literacy” (Watson, 2008, p. 25) when collaborating with students. For example, at the onset of a clinical practicum, I now invite students to engage in a discussion of learning and teaching styles, including my own. This has enabled students to reflect more deeply on how they learn best and in turn how I can best support them in their clinical learning. This has allowed me to cultivate a more mindful caring consciousness (Watson, 2008) in my teaching and learning practices, in addition to understanding the diverse challenges many students face in the context of their learning.

A learning space that connotes healing, trust, and authenticity with and for students can be created through a variety of methods and can be consistently aligned within a pedagogy grounded in Caring Science (Hills & Watson, 2011; Watson, 2008). Drawing on my daily practices as a Caritas Coach, I have been inspired to integrate my personal and professional practices into the graduate nursing philosophy course I redesigned and currently teach. The 3-hour seminar, which is grounded in Caring Science, introduces students to diverse theories in nursing and philosophy. Currently it commences with a meditation, a circle formation, and a weekly ritual of tea. As Okakura (1919) so poetically reminds us:

Teaism is a cult founded on the adoration of the beautiful among the sordid facts of everyday existence. It inculcates purity and harmony, the mystery of mutual charity, the romanticism of the social order. It is essentially a worship of the imperfect, as it is a tender attempt to accomplish something possible in this impossible thing we know as life. (pp. 3–4)

The ritual of tea sharing is new to students. After all, the standard graduate class does not traditionally involve the professor arriving with a tea trolley and numerous pots of flavored teas. Although the teas may vary from week to week, the outcome is always the same: robust, inspirational, and lively discussion. The simple gesture of introducing tea to the classroom space as a weekly experience unites the class and creates a relaxed and trusting environment for philosophical and experiential conversation. As one student wrote in the signed evaluative comments from the student ratings of instruction carried out by the University Centre for Learning and Teaching:

Lisa...has a very calming presence and began each class with not only pots of tea but also an allotted amount of time for us all to go around and share our thoughts based on the week's readings/theme and how they related to our practice areas...She was available outside of class and very prompt in returning course communication...It was great to learn from her recent journey in Caring Science as well and learn from the guest speakers she invited to class—all of whom were wonderful. (n. p.)

These comments were reflective of the class evaluations. The tea ritual assisted in creating a learning environment in which trust, safety, and relationships flourished. As such, it has become a standard feature of the course.

THE ACT OF LISTENING

Active listening that has been collaboratively informed by constructive feedback from students is essential to understanding their experiential frame of reference (Watson, 2008). Hills and Watson (2011) suggest

...listening is the most important process in critical caring dialogue, and it is at the heart of an

emancipatory relational curriculum. Without effective listening, dialogue is reduced to mere words. We can begin to engage in the crucial caring dialogue only through understanding another's meaning. (p. 88)

The act of listening provides another example of how to cultivate Caring Science pedagogy by living one's caritas literacy through the application of the 10 Caritas Processes. Further, "empathic listening requires not only that we hear what is being said but also that we respond in ways that demonstrate that we understood another's meaning" (Hills & Watson, 2011, p. 89). In addition to active and empathic listening, I make myself readily available to students via email, and mindfully respond to correspondence within 24 hours. I have an open door policy for office hours and am always delighted to see students in person, via appointment or by chance. Engaging with students in this way promotes their confidence and trust in my communication abilities as an educator. Finally, I am quick to learn names, and I work diligently to commit them to memory. I also consider eye contact as appropriate to culture and circumstance (Watson, 2008). To know the name of the other connotes familiarity, creates trust, and fosters engagement.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

My caritas journey has profoundly evolved since my initial visit to CLT. Through my Caritas Coach training, my approach as an educator, researcher, and scholar has evolved in ways I never imagined possible. Understanding the necessary connection between compassion and politics through self-reflexivity within a Caring Science pedagogy for nursing is perhaps one of my greatest discoveries. It feeds my soul and fosters a reclaimed generosity in my everyday practices. Perhaps most importantly, I have returned to the heart of my teaching (Palmer, 2007) with renewed joy for all that is possible, much as I did upon arriving at the university in 2004.

I have imperfect days when my caritas consciousness doesn't rise to the level of generosity, compassion, or forgiveness I expect—not only for students but also for myself. Still, I have a renewed ability to approach the classroom with politics and compassion for all that is possible in the nurses of tomorrow. For as hooks (1994) so powerfully writes:

The academy is not a paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility, we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we begin to move beyond the boundaries, to transgress. (p. 2007)

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3 LIVING A CARITAS CONSCIOUSNESS

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