



Re-membering OUR Heritage

CASSANDRA

RADICAL FEMINIST NURSES NETWORK

CASSANDRA: A REPORT OF BEGINNINGS

by Gretchen LaGodna, Hagographer

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There are times at which events, circumstances and people come together in unique and unexpected ways and something significant and exciting emerges. Such was the case leading to the creation of Cassandra: Radical Feminist Nurses Network. The 1982 ANA convention in Washington, DC, drawing nurses from all parts of the country, was the scene for much more than formal approved programs and meetings. During the convention concerns about the attenuated impact of feminist issues on nursing and the health care system were constantly being shared and discussed by small informal groups of nurses. The need to extend and nurture this network beyond individual communication resulted in a called informal gathering on June 30, 1982.

June 30th was the date on which time ran out for the ratification of the ERA. It seemed an especially appropriate date to mark the creation of a new vehicle for the preservation and growth of feminist ideals. Of the twenty-five people with strong commitment and interest in forming such a group, twelve were able to gather together on that date. Six states were represented from the East to the West Coast.

The immediate concerns of those present included how to create and develop a group that would truly provide an open forum for feminist nurses from all walks of life and how to avoid the usual male-oriented hierarchy and rigidity of most national organizations. Descriptive language and its influence could not be ignored. We discovered quickly how entrenched power-oriented and militaristic terms are in our own vocabularies and professional culture - terms such as "officer," "board," "organization." In Cassandra, we will make a concentrated effort to re-name and thus re-define the nature of what we do and how we do it from a feminist perspective.

In the course of this initial gathering, consensus was reached on a number of long-range goals. The first of these was the establishment of a national network for women in nursing who embrace a feminist philosophy. The need for an identified network providing information, connections, communication and support is especially critical in a system which works to keep us separated and out of touch.

Another goal was the development of a strong voice through which feminist nurses can take public stands - and be heard - on issues of importance to nursing practice, education and research and health care in general. We simply cannot afford to allow our ideas and opinions on issues to continue to be distorted, compromised or buried as they have been systematically in the past.

The sharing and passing on of skills was also identified as important. Unique skills are recognized in individuals in the development of any group, and Cassandra is no exception. Means to teach and pass on skills must be developed to insure continued growth and strength. A related goal was that of preserving and passing on written materials on women and health. Many significant works have never been published or have been relegated to an "out-of-print" status, thus rendering them invisible and useless. Without access to our herstory, our vision is limited.

The support of nursing research employing a feminist approach and exploring new dimensions of women's health was identified as a strong need.

The last major goal was that of education without social censorship and bias. Education regarding women and health is desperately needed by nurses, the public, educational institutions and service agencies. We hope to develop means to influence this process.

At the June 30th gathering many ideas were shared in terms of the best ways to begin to implement these goals. This newsletter represents the first step. We hope the newsletter will be a primary vehicle for sharing ideas, soliciting feedback, encouraging the development of local gatherings, locating and reviewing little known literature, identifying relevant issues, and sharing information.

Other future steps could include national or regional conferences, the development of a speakers bureau, the development of educational material (including course outlines, bibliographies), the publishing of unpublished works, and the establishment of a feminist nursing journal.

WHAT'S IN OUR NAME???

by Peggy Chinn

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The name CASSANDRA came to be selected after a group of us had been discussing Florence Nightingale's life and her essay titled Cassandra. When we initially thought of naming our group after this essay, in part to commemorate Florence Nightingale, we began to have some reservations about the name because of its symbolic meaning in Greek mythology. We would like to share with you various meanings of this name from the perspective of what is contained in Nightingale's essay and the circumstances under which she wrote the essay, as well as from the perspective of the myths surrounding the name.

Nightingale wrote the essay Cassandra during the brief period of time between her training at Kaiserworth and her service in the Crimean war. She had finally achieved her goal of going to a training school that would prepare her to practice nursing, but then experienced tremendous despair over not being able to actually put her training into practice in the way that she would have liked. The essay is sub-titled by the Feminist Press "An angry outcry against the forced idleness of Victorian women." The essay begins with an oblique reference to the mythologic Cassandra. Nightingale speaks of one who comes to wander alone in the bitterness of life, aware of the suffering of life, having awakened to evil that others cannot and will not see. Yet this one has no power to discover the remedy for it, and is denied the companionship of others. She then states the major theme of her essay: "Why have women passion, intellect, moral activity - these three - and a place in society where no one of the three can be exercised?" Her essay builds from here to examine in some detail her view of women's passion, intellect, and moral activity, and the state of affairs that prevents these capacities from being expressed in any meaningful way.

Reading the essay is a difficult undertaking. The language is sometimes awkward and the writing style is no longer familiar to us today. It is startling and painful to realize that the words Nightingale wrote are brilliant in their insight, and no less applicable to women today than they were when they were written. Her choice of the title Cassandra reflects not only her knowledge of Greek mythology, but also the symbolic meaning of her despair in not being able to be heard, and in not knowing a remedy for the situation.

The Greek myths that involve the mortal goddess Cassandra are varied in their details, but all carry the same theme - a woman who possessed the gift of prophesy. The most well known (and recent) version of the myth is that Cassandra was courted by the god Apollo, and in his attempt to win her affection he gave her the gift of prophesy. When she would not sleep with him, he cursed her with never being heard or believed. Another version with earlier origins relates that Cassandra was left overnight at the shrine of Delphi as a very young child, and when her mother returned in the morning, she found the child surrounded by sacred serpents who were licking the child's ears, which is how she gained the gift of prophesy. In this version of the myth, there is no mention of Cassandra being cursed with disbelief.

Our reservations about the mythological symbolism of the name CASSANDRA came from our greater familiarity with the Apollo version of the myth. We are all too acutely aware of the fact that nursing's voice is not heard, and more basically that women's voices are not heard in this world. But we know that although myths are very powerful, myths can be re-created. We have retained the name thus far with a firm commitment to be aware of the myths and to re-create the myths by what we do through this gathering of women who are feminist nurses.

The other part of our name, RADICAL FEMINIST NURSES NETWORK, is meant to better define who we are. The term "Radical" has generated almost as much discussion and controversy as the name Cassandra. We have retained this term because of its basic or primary meaning - getting

to the root. We are committed to discover the underlying root of our circumstances in nursing, based on feminist theory and thought. The meaning of the term is beautifully explained by Mary Daly in her book Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism, where she also speaks of re-making myths - of discovering our own being "whose science/wisdom is of womankind."

Some women have felt that the term "radical" would "turn off" many women in nursing who consider themselves feminists but do not like the connotation of the term "radical." But others feel that being woman-identified and feminist is indeed radical, and thus even though it is in a sense redundant to say "radical feminist" the clarity that comes with both terms is still needed. Also, there is the very important consideration that many nurses have felt totally alienated from the traditions and ways of nursing as we know them today, and the handmaiden image of nursing is so alien to feminist sensibilities. Many creative radical feminist nurses have simply left nursing. Many nurses who are feminists at the core of their being have no sense of community within nursing, and we hope that Cassandra will help us find one another. Radical women, rather than being turned off by the term radical, will find the term the key to discovering that there are outside-the-mainstream nurses who share a firm commitment to feminist thinking and being.

The term "radical feminist" also has some specific meanings to various women who have claimed the term as their own. Some women tend to equate "radical feminist" with "lesbian;" others feel that radical implies a left or socialist point of view. I know of one woman who prefers to think of herself as a feminist radical - conveying yet another sense of meaning. In any event, we know that these terms will evoke a wide range of meanings for those who hear them. Kathleen MacPherson has summarized four major points of view that have evolved in feminist theory in an article titled "Feminist Methods: A New Paradigm for Nursing Research" that will be published in the January, 1983 issue of Advances in Nursing Science. One of these points of view is that of "radical feminist," and Kathleen's description of this point of view is very consistent with our intent in using the term "radical feminist" in our name. She says that this view assumes "no preconceived solutions and is perpetually in process and in self-analysis of this process." What distinguishes this view from others is an insistence that the oppression of women is fundamental and that women's oppression exists in all types of economic systems. Our early discussions reflected our conviction that the oppression of women is at the root of our situation in nursing, and it is this meaning that we intend to convey in the phrase "radical feminist." At the same time we are committed to active work in related areas of oppression - racism, classism, heterosexism, and countless other "isms" that oppress all of us, regardless of whether we find ourselves the oppressor or the oppressed.

We decided to use the term "network" partly because it seemed to place a finishing touch on the name, and partly because the term conveys an image of what we envision ourselves to be all about. Denise Connors found a perfect description of the symbolic meaning of the term: "Network is symbolic of a complex relationship beyond a mere time-space sequence, unlimited relationship; a structure formed of the visible and invisible; it is also unity. . ." (An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Traditional Symbols by J.C. Cooper). Since we are attempting to use language that clearly reflects our full intent we feel that this term will have a very positive meaning for us, and will help us to avoid hierarchical and bureaucratic terms such as "organization."

Consistent with radical feminism, we see ourselves as having no pre-conceived solutions and as being in the process of analyzing and defining who we are. We urge all of you who are interested in joining this process to respond to these ideas and share your thoughts with us.



WHAT'S IN OUR LOGO

by Emily Culpepper
(designer of the logo)

The CASSANDRA logo combines many potent symbols to express visually the power of nurses asserting their knowledge. This includes both the truth about the many unhealthy practices of traditional medicine and women's orientation toward genuine healing - which often first led them to hope nursing would be a channel for this wisdom.



The CASSANDRA logo draws on the basic women's symbol to represent the female tradition that animates nursing. The arms of the women's symbol have been shaped into a labrys, which is a symbol of independent female power from ancient Crete, now adopted by many modern feminists.

The labrys is especially associated with Amazons and is therefore very fitting to depict the independent, pro-woman stance that inspires CASSANDRA. It is also a weapon which I see in this case as signifying the fact that nurses speaking the truth about medicine and healing is a powerful weapon in our fight against patriarchal oppression.



The snakes entwined around the woman's symbol/labrys have multiple associations. In ancient gynocentric Greece, women healers and Goddess-priestesses often handled snakes in rituals as a sign of their power and authority.

Contrary to Freudian ideas, this did not mean taking up a phallus. Rather, snakes, because of their ability to shed their skins, were long standing symbols of the powers of regeneration and healing. As patriarchy rose to power, many ancient symbols associated with women were appropriated by the new male rulers.



The caduceus became associated with Apollo and redescribed as a representation of male healing power.

Thus, the CASSANDRA logo visually looks into the deep background (Daly: *Gyn/Ecology*, pp. 2-3) of the caduceus and takes back this symbol of women's heritage of healing power. I was especially excited to create this aspect of the design because it exemplifies our growing feminist awareness that as women asserting our power today, we are also tapping and reclaiming ancient depths of power. It is this double-edged gynergy (double-edged like the labrys; gynergy is a word I created to mean 'female energy') which will help insure that CASSANDRA will be heard today. Feminists know that unlike the patriarchal story in which Apollo cursed the prophetess Cassandra with never being heard or believed, today CASSANDRA IS being heard because women are hearing each other.

Finally, the logo curves the circle of the women's symbol into a crescent moon. This depicts the beginning of CASSANDRA's name, thereby intimately entwining her meaning with the multiple associations of the logo. The crescent moon reminds us of the many phases and spiraling changes which are the rhythms of living. We work for the decrease of patriarchal power simultaneously while working for the increase of women's power and the liberation of our sex. The moon's phases also present a model for regeneration, and it is one that places death (the dark moon) within an ongoing process of living and change. Healing arts based on such a biophilic (see *Gyn/Ecology*, p. 10) orientation will be and are very different from the death-obsessed techniques of contemporary medical, drug and surgical practices. It happens that a C makes a waning crescent, which can be seen as signaling the waning of patriarchy, but primarily the crescent moon stands for all of her phases and the life pulses and rhythms they represent and magnify.

Having discussed so many meanings merged in one logo, let me say that I don't think the energy of this logo depends on knowing all these symbolic referents. I believe knowledge of these connections may enhance one's view of it. They are the thoughts and feelings about CASSANDRA that played in my imagination as I sought to create a logo for Cassandra. My hope is that this symbol has an energy that speaks for itself and to a woman's deep Self. If this logo connotes a forceful and proud women's energy, that will convey some of the truths that CASSANDRA was created to speak.

THE RADICAL ROOTS OF NURSING

by Denise Connors

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Awake, ye women, all ye that sleep, awake!

-Florence Nightingale

In answer to Nightingale's call it is crucial that we awaken and re-member the significance of our own history. As with all of women's history, the real story of nursing has been largely lost to us either by erasure, distortion, the enforced silencing of our fore Sisters, or by the process of reducing our experience to a series of lifeless, boring "facts." The legacy that has been passed on to us is often a misrepresentation - a one-sided depiction of nursing as extremely conservative.

The history of our more radical and prophetic fore Sisters has often been distorted when not entirely erased. For example, Florence Nightingale (1820-1910), a woman of incredible vision, genius and action has been maligned, misunderstood and misrepresented in mainstream as well as feminist writing. The remarkable scope of her lifetime achievements has been forgotten while a mere caricature of her has been kept alive.

Although Florence Nightingale's thinking was complex and not always consistent, she was indeed a radical in many ways. Her life was "marked by a considerable departure from the usual or traditional." (Merriam-Webster). She vehemently rejected the traditional role of the upperclass Victorian woman as a passive, dependent, frivolous object. She was radical also in the sense that she was "disposed to make extreme changes in existing views, habits, conditions [and] institutions." (Merriam-Webster). In fact, Nightingale's revolutionary vision had a transformative impact on health, sanitation, nursing, hospital construction and administration and social and political reform. Radical means "going to the root or origin." Nightingale traced the etiology of female oppression to the fact that society prevented women from exercising their passion, intellect and moral activity. She insightfully analyzed the timeshed involved in the endless interruptions of women's lives making it "impossible to pursue the current of one's thought." She also deeply understood the spiritshed of women's lives which she described as "consumed by ennui as by a cancer."

Although Nightingale's diagnosis was to a large extent radical and accurate she considered herself incapable of effecting a cure. In Cassandra (written in 1852) we find that she experienced herself as prematurely awake to the plight of women and therefore forced to "wander out in silence and solitude" with "no power to discover the remedy for it." Since she believed that she was powerless to change women's situation she failed to identify politically with her own sex. Instead she escaped from women's sphere into the world of the male ruling class, becoming divided, a woman severed from her Self and other women. Not recognizing the potential power and energy inherent in bonding with women, she choose instead to work with and through men. In her attempt to fit herself into the male world, she consciously struggled to purge herself of personal feeling during much of her life, to become a "detached, almost disembodied force" (Stone). As she understood the conditions of her time, this was the price she had to pay for gaining access to the world of male power and action.

Nightingale faced essentially the same dilemma that still haunts many women today. Women have been deluded into believing that they are forced to choose between the passive and stifling male defined "feminine" role and the seemingly more powerful and interesting "masculine" role. What is obscured by these two poles of the patriarchal paradigm is that both "choices" arise from a male worldview and neither affirms the richness and diversity of women's lived experience. Either choice involves women becoming alienated from their true Selves. Florence Nightingale clearly understood the impossibility of accepting the "feminine" role only to become trapped in the "masculine" role. She came to see the world through a distorted lens - one that only reflected male experience and man-made reality - a lens that was opaque to her experience as a woman.

Ignorant of a tradition of knowledge rooted in women's experience, Nightingale was unable to think back through her foresters. Claiming to be "brutally indifferent to the wrongs or the rights of my sex" she was alienated from the thinking women of her own time. As Mary Daly noted in Beyond God the Father "only women hearing each other can create a counterworld to the prevailing sense of reality." Although Nightingale made radical changes within the system, she seemed destined to resign herself to the basic ideology and structure of patriarchy. She had been warned against becoming "too radical, skeptical and querical." Had she lived in a slightly later era perhaps she would have been able to disregard this warning and heartily concord with the advice given by Lavinia Lloyd Dock to Alice Paul:

"Pay no attention to criticism. Go right ahead with your splendid and daring resourcefulness..." We can only regret that Nightingale did not dare to go further. Had she become a feminist she could have advanced the cause of women and nursing by light years.

In 1903, seven years before Nightingale's death, Lavinia Lloyd Dock (1858-1956), one of our prominent foresisters, urged nurses to confront their predicament. As M. Adelaide Nutting pointed out, Dock was the "most noble, ... most largely helpful of women, a student, a scholar, in many ways the greatest spirit that has ever moved in our midst." Dock, not satisfied with superficial solutions, advocated a feminist approach. The process she suggested involved transcending women's socialized passivity, powerlessness and dependence on male approval. She called for nurses to begin to take creative action, to develop their own power bases, to bond together and form supportive networks with the feminist movement and the movement for women's suffrage. Most significantly, she urged nurses to confront and overcome their subservience to male domination. Unfortunately Dock was another prophetic voice crying in the wilderness - her words and example went largely unheeded.

This is not to say that nursing has not had a rich history of courageous and daring women. Those in the Nursing Hall of Fame such as Nutting, Wald, Breckinridge and Sanger as well as countless unnamed nurses, each in her own way, creatively carved out her own existence and in the process alleviated many of the oppressive conditions of women's lives. They were women who refused to resign themselves to the status quo.

While acknowledging the legacy of our more daring and visionary foresisters we must also confront the deep stream of conservatism running throughout nursing. This is evident in the fact that we have often given our loyalties and allegiances to those whose vested interests were/are in direct conflict with our goal to become more autonomous, independent and self-directed.

Recognizing that unreal loyalties have been lethal and that false allegiances have drained our energies we must begin to envision viable solutions. As Peggy wrote "For the remainder of this century the most worthy goal that nurses can select is that of arousing their passion for a kind of political activism that will make a difference in their own lives and in the life of our society." (Advances in Nursing Science). By re-claiming and re-membering our own history, by creating and affirming our own reality, by truly hearing one another, we will be empowered to radically transform the past, present and future of nursing. This is the radical feminist challenge as well as its hope.

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