

**The Enchantment of the Nursing Soul:  
A Vision of the Future**

## **Introduction**

The word “enchantment” is derived from the French word “chanter”, to sing. The association of song or music with the soul dates back to the origins of humanity where, it is said, music was the first language. Early Greek philosophers observed the link, noting that music and the human soul were seen as aspects of the eternal (James, 1993). Pythagoras argued that the universe itself was musical after constructing universal principles and translating them into musical scales. The tone, rhythm, sound, vibrations and energies of music are manifestations of the Universal music (Khan, 1996). Plato spoke of the “singing soul” which brings to mind images of the ethereal as well as deep connection to our interior music or the rhythms of our own bodies and ways of being. Hafiz (in Khan, 1996), a Persian poet, referred to the soul itself as song.

Most nurses today have lived in a time where the notion of the soul has been almost completely absent from our understanding of who we are, what we know and what we do. In an age of materialism, reductionism and intellectualization, we have become unconscious of the deeper, **soulful nature of our practice** – to the sense of meaning in our work, to the experience of being **connected to both the ethereal and the interior music of our ways of being and ways of knowing.**

As we cast our eyes to the future and to the many paths that lay before us, can a seemingly antiquated idea of the soul have relevance for nursing? In this paper, it will be argued that nursing, like humanity in general, are at a critical point in our evolution. It is a point of choosing among many alternatives, the most desirable future for nursing and for humanity. By exploring the broader landscapes of alternative global, health care and nursing futures, it will be **argued that a path to a vibrant and robust future for nursing, and one that ensures the preservation of our sacred covenant with people, is the path of the enchantment of the nursing soul. This path will enable the nursing soul to sing once more.**

## **A View From the Future**

The future of nursing is inextricably woven into the future of humanity, the planet and universe. Drawing on the field of futures studies, it is possible to set out alternative scenarios that provide the foundations upon which we can critique the present and entertain the choices that lay before us. Set against the backdrop of alternative global futures, the present and futures of nursing can be envisioned. The enchantment of the nursing soul as a vision of a desired nursing future will be posited as a vision that is socially congruent and significant.

## On Humanity’s Evolution

As remarkable as it seems, Earth, our planetary home has existed for more than 5,000,000,000 years. It has borne witness to the beginnings of humanity that many argue may have been as far back as 40,000 years (Swimme, 1996). We, who live today, are simply singular notes playing a few refrains in the grand symphony of the unfolding universe. This is not to diminish the importance of our own individual music, but rather to underscore the magnificence and majesty of our great history.

Since the beginning of modern civilization, humanity and the planet have evolved through several remarkable periods. Each era has been unique in terms of its organization and structuring of society, as well as in the basic world-views or dominant values, beliefs, perceptions and expectations held by members of society. We have evolved through nomadic, agrarian, agricultural, feudal, pre-industrial and industrial eras. It is thought that in the present we are participants in a dramatic epoch as we move into a post-industrial era (Swimme and Berry, 1992; Toffler and Toffler, 1995). We cannot know precisely what this new era will be like, but there is little disagreement that the future will be radically different from the past or the present. We are at a critical juncture in our evolutionary journey, possibly the most critical period since the beginning of time.

Like it or not, we are both participants in and creators of a new era for all humanity. We may choose to ignore, deny or resist the inevitable transformation and our participation therein, but none of our attempts to hold fast to the present and its comforting familiarity will impede this evolutionary change.

If we accept the premise that we are in the throes of change, perhaps dramatic change as we move into a new era, how can we explore the possibilities that stand before us? Futurists claim that it is impossible to know, with crystal-ball accuracy, what the future will look like because the future is neither predictable nor pre-determined. However, it is possible to use specific methods to construct images of the future, foster dialogue about their desirability and stimulate critical reflection on the assumptions embedded in the images. The ultimate aim of the study of the future is to help people think and act more wisely so that our actions today advance us toward a more thoughtful tomorrow (Hancock and Bezold, 1994). If we explore some dominant images of the future, we may better understand our present day experiences, more critically consider our decisions and choices, and we may more creatively imagine the path to a vibrant future.

### The Techno-liberalist Future

Wager (1995) suggests that one of the dominant images of the future is what he describes as the techno-liberalist future. Techno-liberalism arises out of the industrial era paradigm that emphasizes empiricism, rationalism, objectivism and individualism. Adherents to this view

believe technology as well as corporate, managerial and political systems will yield growth and prosperity in a material and economic sense. Subscribers to this image may be considered struck by “techno-lust” or the unquestioning belief that technology will solve every problem and be responsible for the achievement of a grand future.

The techno-liberalist view is evident globally, but also in health care where corporate and political pressures are being applied to “manage” and “measure” effective care. Effective care, from this point of view is defined in terms of systems efficiencies.

### Nursing in the Context of Alternative Futures Scenarios

For more than one hundred and fifty years, nursing has demonstrated its unique and crucial contributions to the well-being of societies. At this point along modern nursing’s evolutionary journey, it is safe to say we have achieved much greatness and yet, we, like humanity generally, are in throes of rather stormy waters. We are, as Achterberg (199X) noted, “at a double threshold of danger and opportunity: the paradoxical twins born of crisis” (?).

Individually and collectively, nurses are living the paradoxical struggles of our time; of a time in which personal, professional and social paradigms are colliding. Of course, the crisis of paradigms is necessary for the reconstruction of a new future. However, in the meantime we wallow in the push-pull of the colliding tides. It is difficult to view this wallowing in a positive light; to see it not as a reflection of the unraveling of a profession, but as a reflection of our journey toward a new understanding, a new epistemology and, most importantly, as Watson (1999) has noted, a new ontology.

On the one hand, the past several decades have seen advances in nursing science, theory development and research. Nurses have shown their intellectual acumen and have proven themselves as scientists, scholars and researchers. There have been remarkable increases in the numbers of nurses continuing their education. More and different nursing roles have been and continue to emerge. Nurses have risen to demands for measurement, cost-consciousness and, the proverbial, ‘evidence based practice’. We have shown our technological prowess, our adaptability and our outstanding ability to manage and massage chaotic organizations so patients can be cared for. We have done it all. Or, have we?

### **Theoretical and Philosophical Ideas of the Soul**

For centuries, people have written about the soul, and yet, in modern times, the soul has been very much omitted from our ways of thinking and being, except in religious discourse. It may be argued that the soul's omission in the modern psyche is a consequence of two major historical and philosophical issues. First, is the issue of empirical-rational thinking that has dominated the modern worldview for the past three hundred years. Modern conceptions of soul have been shaped by the views of Descartes, Copernicus and others who are said to be the "fathers" of the 17<sup>th</sup> century "new science". This scientific perspective gave way to a mechanistic, reductionistic and materialistic view of the universe, nature and human beings. From this point of view, the soul was perplexing. It could not be seen as matter and therefore could not be reduced or measured in order to prove its truth or validity. Consequently, as Swinburne (1997) suggests, the soul was considered to be an un-natural phenomenon. If it existed at all, it stood outside of nature or human beings, "perched precariously on the edge of matter in a strange conjunction with its body"(p.7). The introduction of the natural science paradigm dislodged the soul from its prior centrality in terms of people's understanding of life, humanity and the universe.

The second issue pertaining to the omission of the soul in modern thinking has to do with the soul's feminine heritage. In ancient times, according to Egyptian and Hebrew writing, the soul was simply taken for granted. People were viewed as souls living within a communion of other souls (Swinburne, 1997). Early references to the soul were feminine such as *peuma*, *anima* and *alma*. (REFS) Wolfe (1996) notes that the term soul stems from the German word "seele", a feminine noun used in the same way as the Indian "shakti", meaning ultimate feminine reality. He further suggests that the soul is often associated with the feminine because the soul is related to the mystical, to creativity, Eros, emotion, nature and nurturance. These same attributes are discussed in relation to the Chinese feminine principle of Yin, the opposite of Yang, the masculine principle (Watson, 1999). The feminine attributes of soul would be considered antithetical to the Cartesian worldview resulting in, at the very least, its inconsequential status in terms of its contribution to an understanding of knowledge, truth and reality.

Most nurses today have been strongly steeped in the Cartesian tradition, although we are trying to emancipate ourselves from its confines. It is not a wonder then that the soul has not played a prominent role in our conceptualizations of human beings, including ourselves as nurses. Even when the soul is added into our vocabulary it is often added in a hyphenated way: mind-body-soul. This hyphenated structure is still a form of soft dualism (Swinburne, 1997). In order to bring the soul back into a place of centrality in our ways of thinking and being, it is necessary to explore some theistic and secular meanings of the soul.

## **Music of the Enchanted Nursing Soul**

The path to enchantment begins with the recovery of the nursing soul, which is to say that there is a need to bring the soul back into the nursing vocabulary, ways of thinking and ways of being. One of the ways to do this is through a process of what Fenn and Capps (1995) call “remystification” which calls upon us to acknowledge and treasure the unquantifiable, immeasurable, mysterious nature of life, health, healing and nursing. This path, in the Platonic sense, will enable us to hear and feel the Universal and interior music letting the nursing soul sing once more.

### Rhythm of Soul-to-soul Communion

The enchantment of the nursing soul requires a reconceptualization of human beings including nurses themselves. In the tradition of ancient views, we must start by seeing ourselves, and all others as souls. From this perspective, our ways of thinking, our actions, emotion and bodies are expressions of soul. When nurses engage with patients, it is through soul-to-soul communion. Although it is not technically possible to see another’s soul, it is possible to experience the soul of another in an engulfing way. Patients share the soul of the nurses just as nurses share the souls of patients. Soul-to-soul communion is “part of the vital flow of life that surrounds and sustains us” (Swinburne, 1997, xiii). It is through this communion that we may access what can be described as something Higher, the Universal or World Soul.

### *Receiving the Unknowable Other*

In soul-to-soul communion, it is the goal of the nurse to receive the soul of the other. Yet, truly receiving the other to ‘know’ that soul begins with an acceptance that the ‘other’ is ultimately unknowable (Gafni, 2001).

- Affirmation of Not-Knowing
- The Presence of Silence

### Rhythm of Inspiration

Inspiration is derived from the word inspire, to breath in. Breath as life force is commonly associated with the soul. The enchanted nursing soul is an inspired soul. Hart (2000) discusses inspiration as a specific, nonrational process of knowing akin to Plato’s notion of anamnesis or the soul’s remembrance of truth. “Inspiration is the poet in the process of learning, the prophet beholding the voice of God, the artist hearing the Muse, and the “ordinary” person becoming, if only for a moment, extraordinary” (p.33)

### Rhythm of Calling to Service

The notion of 'calling to service' takes on specific meaning when viewed from the perspective of soul. Many nurses describe a sense of being 'called' to the profession. Some say they knew from childhood that they would become nurses. Others point to a moment of clarity when they knew they had been called to nursing. Smith (2000) described that moment when, as a student, she entered the NICU for the first time. She cast her eyes upon the preterm infant lying placidly in the incubator with tubes and lines protruding from every angle. In that moment she said realized with absolute clarity that she had been given the gifts of compassion, caring and affection and that she had been called to use those gifts in the service of nursing.

From the perspective of soul, service may be viewed as a way of knowing. Deikman (in Hart, Nelson and Puhakka, 2000) argues that service is a way of knowing that is different from conventional epistemologies. Service is a way of knowing a deep connection with a larger reality and greater purpose. Hillman (19XX) posits the idea of the 'soul's code'. He argues that embedded within our soul is our destiny or calling. Like Shamans and healers throughout time, nurses' sense of calling can and should be treasured as a gift of the soul.

### Rhythm of the Ordinary

The enchanted nursing soul has an affinity for what Moore (1992) called the vernacular; for the ordinary, little details of everydayness, for there is sacredness in the everyday and the extraordinary in the ordinary.

### Rhythm of Wisdom

### Rhythm of Unbounded Knowing

The nursing soul knows no spatial or temporal boundaries.

### **Conclusion**

"The whole is greater, more open-ended, and more creative than we can ever hope to discover or decipher. And it is this greater whole that enlivens and energizes us toward a different and more creative future" (O'Murchu, 1997).