

# Jo Ann Ashley: Nursing's Voice for Empowerment

Our very history can be described as a power struggle, the struggle to obtain proper education though opposed by more powerful groups, the struggle to throw off the burden of oppression imposed by those groups, the struggle for the freedom to practice without numerous and professionally extraneous restraints and restrictions...{we} have struggled with the need to convince others of the value of nursing and its place in the health care scheme (Ashley, J.A. 1997).

Few voices have moved the consciousness of nurses as much as that of the late Dr. Jo Ann Ashley, RN. Feminist scholar, nursing historian and educator, Dr. Ashley spoke with a passion about the problems in health care and the power of nursing to bring about change. She shouted a wake-up call to other nurses to recognize their power, unite and in political action. Best known for her 1976 book, *Hospitals, Paternalism and the Role of the Nurse*, Dr. Ashley led the charge for social change. Her feminist critique of the long standing oppression of nurses through the system of hospital diploma education and subservient service touched a collective nerve in nursing. Writing in the 1970's, in an era when nurses were still fired for not wearing their caps, and nurses stood up and gave their seats in the nurses' station to the physicians, her message shook nursing loose from the passivity of oppression. The empowerment and politicalization of nursing was stirred by the ferment of Dr. Ashley's ideas.

A prolific writer and public speaker, Dr. Ashley wrote more than seventy papers and three hundred poems before her death from breast cancer at age 41. A selection of these papers have recently been edited by Karen Wolf and released by the NLN Press (1997). Susan Reverby, professor of Womens Studies Wellesley College writes in the foreword to this collection "Ashley's passion and anger were prophetic. For many nurses, {Ashley} made it possible...to think about feminist critiques of health care and nursing, to question the authority of physicians and hospital managements, to find a way to explain their experiences." Ashley's ability

to connect with the experiences of nurses, to hear and use their stories to weave a collective understanding was central to her work.

Despite the wide interest of staff nurses, her feminist-marxist critique angered many nurses, particularly those in management and leadership positions. They wrestled with her charges of their complicity with the perpetrators of oppression. Ashley, undaunted by their hostility continued to press her vision of revolutionary change that encompassed a liberation of nursing management and nursing staff. Ashley (1997, pp 100) called for:

- nurses to be recognized and supported as professionals on par with physicians,
- nurses to be active participants in health policy at the institutional level as well as in all levels of government,
- nurses to be recognized for their education and differentially rewarded,
- nursing research to be adequately supported and financed; and
- the employment of nursing best prepared to be directors of nursing with pay comparable to the chief of medicine and surgery.

Ashley repeatedly called on nurses to unite for collective action. Participation in professional associations was an essential means of exercising power according to Ashley. Not afraid to practice what she preached, Ashley was a founding member of nursing's first political action committee N-CAP, and a strong supporter of groups such as Nurses NOW.

As a historian, Ashley noted that the power of nursing had long been subjugated to the interests of medicine and hospitals. Liberating nursing meant taking risks, and developing professional practice separate from medicine. She held to the belief that nursing offered the public what it needed, a caring and holistic approach to health, instead of a disease and cure focus. Critical of excess medical care and the growing problem of iatrogenesis, Ashley urged nurs-

ing to take a leadership role in calling for a new health order. Far ahead of her time, her vision of health care reform was based on community based preventative care, consumer empowerment and professional accountability.

Dr. Ashley was realistic about the challenges that nursing faced if it were to build a social movement for health. Freeing nursing from the paternalistic chains of oppression would mean rejecting a long accepted set of cultural value, practices and symbols. Oppression is not the result of external force alone, but rather a mind set, cultivated in our educational and work settings. According to Ashley nurses are "double" socialized into subordination, first as women and again in nursing education. Ashley told her audiences "use your minds to set you free." She called upon the nursing profession to create rebels, arguing for the need for "rebels in our midst-rebels who have the insightful knowledge, vision and a cause, rebels with the inner courage to fight for it openly" (1997,p.50)

Some twenty years after this call the nursing profession is threatened by the growing corporatization in health care. Dr. Ashley's passionate call for nursing action is a continuing source of inspiration and moral grounding. Now more than ever, we need nurses who will fearlessly and repeatedly raise questions about their place in society, about our social institutions, and about what the public needs to achieve health.

## References:

Ashley, J.A. (1976). *Hospitals, Paternalism and the Role of the Nurse*. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University Press.

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By- Karen Anne Wolf

Synopsis - Few voices have moved the consciousness of nurses as much as that of the late DR. Jo Ann Ashley, R.N. Feminist scholar, nursing historian and educators, Dr. Ashley spoke with a passion about the problems in health care and the power of nursing to bring about change.