Are We Still Eating Our Young? Myth or Reality

I remember my first years as a real nurse like it was yesterday. In the ‘70s, we heard a lot about how “nurses eat their young,” but we all laughed it off and moved forward in our new careers. Recently I reflected on those days, transported back in time when a nurse asked me, “How did you survive being eaten by older nurses when you first got started?”

Apparently we are still gobbling up our young, much like the wildlife television video depicting a lion eating its cub, to the distress of the lioness. It was appalling. How could this happen? Apparently it is still a reality and now called horizontal violence (McKenna, Smith, Poole, & Coverdale, 2003).

As I travel through my memories, I vividly recall several instances where I was the main course. However, I was fortunate. While many nurses had me targeted for supper, just as many provided support and watched my back. The balance of the good, bad, and the ugly made my early nursing years palatable, so to speak.

Survival Secrets

Some attribute the secret of survival to personal resilience or hardiness of spirit. No doubt, this is a factor. But in my case, it took a village. I had the good fortune of working with senior nurses who helped a fledgling get started in nursing, for the love of the profession. They had heart; they cared. I did not realize it then, but they took the time to position me for success and supported me when I was not as successful. They demonstrated to this young nurse what it meant to care, what it meant to be a nurse.

Nursing certainly is not for the meek. I have seen many nurses who have survived by other means, such as coming to work with their armor on or learning to protect their turf at all costs against real or imagined invaders. What was the cost of these maneuvers? I choose to believe that we have a choice. Our behavior as individual nurses is a reflection of our collective growth as a profession, including the way we mentor our next generation of nurses. We can do better.

We are family, however dysfunctional we may be at times as nurses and as human beings.

Writing Our Legacy

The nurse of the 21st century has more challenges than ever. I would wager that even Florence Nightingale would be amazed. The speed at which health care is changing, and the technological demands that accompany such change, is nothing less than supersonic. Nurses work in exceedingly stressful environments to care for patients with high acuity and complex needs. Yet the work gets done and patients receive care, not unlike those before us. Nurses continue to respond to society’s expectation by stepping up to the plate. Without a doubt, it is an exciting time to be a nurse!

My fellow older nurses, this is a call to arms. Our new colleagues need us. Let’s stop eating our young and dispel that myth. It is time to move on. Remember, today’s nurses will care for us in the not-so-distant future. Let’s rewrite the legacy to one of caring and compassion toward our colleagues, and show our generosity of spirit.

Reference