

# The Lady with the Lamp

By Bernie Schnippert

**T**hey called her ‘the lady with the lamp’. Her real name was Florence Nightingale (1820–1910), perhaps history’s most famous and beloved nurse.

Born to wealth and privilege as a daughter to an upper-class British family, she forsook the comforts of her pedigree to become a humble nurse who served the ill with such skill and devotion that her very name is a synonym for these virtues.

Florence gained the nickname ‘the lady with the lamp’ as the result of her loving service to the British wounded of the Crimean war. She was said to be seen in the dark of night, when all others were asleep, moving from wounded soldier to wounded soldier to give them aid and comfort, carrying a lamp so she could see them, and they could see her.

Choosing service over the comforts of inherited status and wealth, Florence felt a calling from God: ‘God called me in the morning and asked me, “Would I do good for Him, for Him alone without the reputation.”’<sup>1</sup>

Ironically, her willingness to do good ‘without the reputation’ resulted in her attainment of the highest of reputations.

I should know. I was visited personally by ‘the lady with the lamp’. That’s right. I have met Florence Nightingale.

‘What?’ you say, ‘You could not possibly have met Florence Nightingale. She died in 1910, almost 100 years ago’.

‘Ah’, I respond, ‘but wait until you hear my story. Once you hear my story, which I shall now relate, you can decide for yourself the truth of my testimony. You may just find that not only have I met Florence Nightingale, but you have as well’.

I met Florence Nightingale about two years ago. The place of our meeting was a hospital in Portland, Oregon, called the Oregon Health and Science University Hospital, where I was a patient. I had undergone surgery a day or two before to remove a cancerous tumour in my small intestine, along with my gall bladder. Although I knew at the time that I had, and have, other tumours in my liver that cannot be removed, the mission of this particular surgery was only to remove the small intestine tumour, and it was a success. Therefore I was in a hospital room recovering my strength.

At the time of Florence’s visit, I was only a few days into my recuperation. I was hooked up to numerous intravenous fluid delivery devices, including one which kept me hydrated and



*This famous statue of Florence Nightingale stands in Waterloo Place, Westminster, London, England, just off The Mall.*

another that delivered a strong pain medicine that I needed because of the 30 cm long abdominal incision that could be quite painful if I moved. I was very weak, was not allowed to eat, and worse, I was allergic to the pain medicine and so did not use it unless the pain was unbearable, which sometimes it was.

Part of the regimen of recovery, among other things, is to have a nurse—more accurately, a CNA or certified nursing assistant—come by your bed from time to time, day and night, take your blood pressure, take your temperature, and perform a few other duties associated with collection and analysis of a certain unnamed body fluid. (The patients, including me, find this humbling. The nurses, strangely, seem to think nothing of it.)

It was somewhat unpleasant to be visited by these nurses, because they would disrupt you if you were reading or sleeping, force a thermometer into your mouth and a pressure cuff onto your arm, proceed to take the readings, and usually not bother very much with small talk. They just interrupted you, did their job, and walked away. It was especially bad at night because sometimes—although not often—I actually fell asleep, and I resented being awakened by them for this seemingly meaningless routine.

Furthermore, it was especially unpleasant to be visited by one particular nurse for a couple of reasons. First, she obviously smoked a lot, and she always smelled very strongly of tobacco smoke, an odour that I did not like even when I was feeling well, and especially found downright repellent when I was weak, hadn't eaten, had a sensitive stomach, and was in pain.

Second, she was unusually rough about her chores. She would grab my arm violently and tug it to the side

of the bed, jam on the pressure cuff, push the thermometer into my mouth, pump the cuff so hard I thought my arm would fall off, take the reading, pull off the cuff and pull out the thermometer, and then basically throw my arm back onto the bed, not caring where it landed.

As I said, I especially dreaded the visits of this nurse, until that is, one night I will never forget. This particular night I was wide awake and very cold. I was having 'goose bumps' from being so cold, and I was shivering. I was extremely fatigued, in pain, and had a great deal of anxiety from being so cold, but also being hot at the same time: I had a fever! Then, in the middle of my suffering, the dreaded nurse's assistant appeared and went through her usual ritual—roughly, seemingly uncaringly, smelling of tobacco, and not speaking a single word.

In spite of my dislike of her, my suffering spurred me to tell her that I was cold and to ask meekly if she would get me an extra blanket. She left my bedside without comment of any kind, without even acknowledging my request. I thought I had been ignored, only to find her appearing back beside me in a few minutes with a couple of blankets fresh from being cleaned, and piping warm, either from being just taken freshly from a dryer, or from some heater they might use just for the purpose of warming the blankets.

She proceeded, again, without comment or fanfare of any kind, to carefully place a blanket over my feet and up towards my neck with almost military precision. I say 'towards my neck', instead of 'to my neck', because I am very tall and the blankets are short, so they did not reach all the way to my neck—a phenomenon that might seem humorous to some people but that bothered me greatly, since a person with cancer

who is ill and has a fever has no sense of humour. At least, I don't. No matter. She noticed the difference between my height and the length of the blanket, and took the second one, placing it at my neck 'towards my feet', so that the two blankets together reached from neck to toe and overlapped in the middle.

The warmth of the two blankets began to chase away my coldness, but they were not enough.

So, she again left silently and returned with more blankets, also steaming warm, and again silently, neatly, and I dare say lovingly, layered one upon another and back again—tucking the sides carefully under me—so that, in the end, I lay cocooned snugly, warmly, and peacefully beneath a layer of hot, freshly laundered blankets, looking like a living mummy with only my head poking out of the pile so I could breathe. Underneath this pile of loving kindness I found warmth, peace, and sleep. The nurse's assistant left without a word and silently resumed her rounds.

In the morning, I awoke without a fever, but bathed in a puddle of my own perspiration, so that all the blankets, bed coverings, and my hospital gown were soaked with sweat, and had to be replaced. That night had been a turning point in my recovery, and I longed to tell her how much she had helped me in my time of need, but she had finished her scheduled hours for the week and I never saw her again.

I also could not, and cannot, remember her name. Since I could not remember her name, I feared that I could never find her to thank her. Then it hit me. I realised that I knew her after all.

I realised that, whatever her real name, for about 20 minutes two years ago, in a hospital room, in the middle of the night, I was visited by 'the lady with the lamp'. The lamp that lit her way, and mine, was not one of wax or oil, but rather the light that lights any person who serves the needy, the

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sick, the lame, the blind, and the poor anytime they perform such an act.

Whether she was a Christian, I do not know. This I do know, however: all acts of kindness come ultimately from God, no matter who delivers them at any particular moment, be they monk or madman. The biblical writer James says, 'Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows'.<sup>2</sup> The light she brought in her person shone brightly on me for a moment. It enlightened me, refreshed me, comforted me, and like a true lamp, it warmed me when I needed it most.

I decided that, whatever this nurse's assistant's real name was, at that

time, for about 20 minutes, she was Florence Nightingale. At least she was to me.

Jesus said, '...whatever you did [i.e. some good deed] for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me'.<sup>3</sup> It is good to hear Jesus speak on behalf of people, like me, who have been helped.

But those who have been helped sometimes want to personally thank the Florence Nightingales who serve them. Perhaps they do not know the helper's real name. Perhaps they forget, or maybe never see them again. Perhaps when they are helped they cannot speak or communicate, for they are ill, or even unconscious.

It has dawned on me that I might, by

telling my story, not only give thanks to my Florence Nightingale, but represent, humbly, everyone who has had a Florence Nightingale of their own. So, for myself and all others who have felt the love and kindness of another person whom they have never been able to thank, I say, 'Thank you, Florence Nightingale, wherever—and whoever—you are'.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Michael D. Calabria, *Florence Nightingale in Egypt and Greece: Her Diary and "Visions"* (State University of New York, 1996), p. 45.

<sup>2</sup> James 1:17. (New International Version)

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 25:40 (NIV).

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