

ROOTED IN MY WHY: A STORY OF NURSING, IDENTITY, AND INTEGRITY

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A few weeks ago, my colleague told me about this invitation to write about the concept of purpose in healthcare. I ignored it at first — too many tasks, too little time. But even as I moved on with my days, the question lingered quietly in the back of my mind. What would I write if I let myself pause long enough to answer? I didn't open a blank document right away. Still, the story began anyway, unfolding softly. And today, I find myself ready to start. I'm inviting you into that story — the one that's been forming, slowly and unexpectedly, since the moment I chose not to respond.

I am a nurse and currently a Faculty Lecturer at a school of nursing. Reflecting on my professional life, I realize that a consistent pursuit of purpose has shaped it. Whether at the bedside, in the community, or classrooms, my actions are guided by a clear sense (or need) for meaning and contribution. My most recent full-time clinical role was at a community health center. I was doing home visits for families welcoming a baby into their lives. Despite the struggles and hardships of life, it was generally a setting filled with great joy. It was in that role — entering people's homes, holding space for their stories, and walking alongside them through significant life transitions — that my understanding of purpose deepened. These experiences weren't just clinical duties; they were human moments that reaffirmed why I chose this profession in the first place.

When I was 17, I recall flipping through the pages of a college program guide without necessarily knowing what was to come next. I was trying to figure out what to do with my life. I remember feeling discouraged. Most of the programs left me uninspired and bored. They felt abstract and theoretical, and I couldn't connect with them. But when I stumbled upon the nursing program description, something shifted. Nursing combines various disciplines — including biology, psychology, pharmacology, and social sciences. More importantly, it brought them together to support others. The profession promised a way to do, to act, to care. And that's what I was looking for: not just a subject to study, but a path to walk — a contribution to make.

From the very beginning, I had a clear understanding of the population I wanted to work with: children and their families. I was told to start with adults, to follow the more "traditional" path, but I listened to my instincts instead. I knew where my passion lay. After graduating, I began working with pediatric populations in a hospital setting. I later moved to community nursing, where I supported infants, school-aged children, adolescents, and their families. I never worked with adults in my nursing career — not because I didn't value that work, but because I knew that wasn't where my strengths as an individual and a professional were. I had a unique connection to younger populations and families, and I wanted to build on that strength.

To me, purpose isn't just about what I can accomplish; it's about what I bring to the table — my values, my identity, and my capacity to be present with others. It is connected to how I perceive the world and how I choose to engage with it. That's why community nursing became such a meaningful chapter of my life. During home visits, I was welcomed into people's private spaces. I worked with families from all over the world, many of whom were navigating the complexities of immigration and integration into a different society. These encounters were rooted in trust, reciprocity, and relationships. There's something incredibly humbling about being a guest in someone's home. In those moments, I wasn't the one in control. I wasn't directing the narrative. I was there to listen and support. That was my role — and that's what made the work so rich. Community nursing gave me time. Time to foster genuine relationships, to witness growth — even slowly — and to offer care that was responsive and personalized. I didn't need to lead the story; I just needed to hold space for it. That, to me, is what nursing is truly about.

The transition into teaching nursing meant I had to redefine my professional identity, which was both exciting and challenging. I was comfortable in my clinician's role, and now, I was moving toward the unknown — I was stepping into academia. My first year was full of questions. I felt somewhat lost, still doing the work, but something was missing. It took me time to realize that I was once again searching for my "why." I never moved without it. And I lost it for a brief moment. I lost it because I was navigating a new space I wasn't used to — one intensely focused on performance. In trying so hard to meet expectations and prove myself, I became consumed with checking boxes and doing things just to get them done. And that wasn't me. Slowly, I began to feel sad and lonely. For me, work is not just what I do — it's a reflection

of who I am. I've always believed I must bring my whole, authentic self into the spaces I inhabit. When that connection is lost, so is the joy, the clarity, the why that guides me.

Eventually, I found it again. I began engaging in initiatives related to social justice and equity, and I brought this perspective into the classroom. Purpose, in the context of social justice and equity work, is not a luxury — it's a necessity. And this social justice lens was always part of who I was, but it became clearer to me later in life. This suggests that a sense of purpose evolves and grows in ways that can seem unclear, but clarity is never far away. My goal is to shape a generation of nurses who not only understand clinical tasks but also reflect critically on the systems in which they work. I want learners to see themselves as advocates — as change-makers. Teaching is more than sharing knowledge; it is an opportunity to build awareness, nurture compassion, and cultivate courage. The nursing profession is evolving, and it's finally placing greater emphasis on equity, inclusion, and justice. As an educator, I have a responsibility to reflect that evolution in how I teach, what I prioritize, and how I support learners.

This brings me to a different chapter of my life: I decided to return to school to pursue a master's degree in education. I had just started teaching, and I wanted to feel more confident in my role, understand the foundations of pedagogy, and develop my own teaching identity. I always told myself that I would never pursue a graduate degree just for the sake of having one. I needed to care deeply about what I was learning and see how I could apply it meaningfully in my work. My academic journey took an unexpected turn when a professor shared a profound insight with me. She said, "When you follow a course-based path, you're learning through someone else's lens — your professor's. But when you take on a thesis, that's your chance to bring your voice, values, and perspective to the table." This conversation was a turning point for me. It empowered me to make space for my ideas and lived experiences. I decided to write a thesis, confident in the value of my voice.

My research focused on a topic that is deeply important to me: anti-Black racism in nursing education. I also made the deliberate choice to include art as part of my project. I had always been drawn to art, but growing up, I wasn't encouraged to explore it. One of my professors, seeing my interest in art, invited me to reconnect with that part of myself, and I did. I used collage artwork as a method of data collection (Fig. 1 & Fig. 2). It was a transformative process. Today, I bring the same transformative method into my teaching (again, thank you to my teachers). I use collage with nursing students to help them reflect on who they are, what they value, and how those inner truths shape the kind of nurses they want to become. This exercise is a powerful tool for fostering a sense of identity and belonging in the nursing profession. Ultimately, it fosters a stronger sense of purpose in nursing.

In reconnecting with my why, I am also fortunate to participate in a community-based project centered on anti-Black racism in nursing education. This initiative allowed me to engage meaningfully with Black

community members in my local area. The goal is not just to consult — but to truly collaborate — working alongside them to imagine and shape a nursing education that is more inclusive and responsive. It is a powerful learning experience. Through the academic world, I came to understand the depth of relationship-building, the time it takes, and the value it brings. These moments taught me to move away from transactional approaches and toward fostering genuine, reciprocal connections. The impact of that kind of engagement is not only long-lasting but also transformative for the profession.

Over time, I also learned the importance of pausing. Earlier in my career, I didn't always take time to reflect. I kept going, driven by instinct, which is not a bad thing; we need to trust it. But now I know how valuable it is to stop, to assess, to reconnect with my core values. Every now and then, I need to ask myself: Am I aligned? Is my work still rooted in meaning? Am I contributing in a way that reflects who I am and what I stand for? The times I didn't pause, I found myself confused, chasing goals that weren't mine. I became focused on performing, on proving my effectiveness, on showing I was worthy. And while these things aren't inherently wrong, they can't be my driving force. As a human being, I am already worthy. Reading the book *Rest Is Resistance* by Tricia Hersey reminded me of this truth — that just by existing, we are worthy of everything. We don't need to earn rest, or dignity, or love. We carry that worth within us, regardless of output. I've also come to realize that different realities can coexist. I can live my values and be effective. I can show up with excellence without abandoning my true self. Capitalist values — constant production, competition, external validation — cannot be what defines me. I move with love. With compassion. With justice. With respect. That is the rhythm I choose. That is the compass I return to.

As a Black woman in a profession that has long overlooked the contributions of Black nurses, I also think deeply about positionality. We are only beginning to uncover and acknowledge the legacy of Black nurses in Canada and around the world. I carry that legacy with pride and a sense of responsibility. I know that the doors I walk through today were opened by the efforts and sacrifices of other Black nurses who refused to be invisible and who fought for dignity, equity, and recognition. For me, honoring that legacy means staying true to my values. I don't take it lightly. Those nurses didn't fight for nothing. They fought because they believed in their mission. They knew that their voices, their care, and their presence mattered. And that's why I can't approach my work passively. I show up with intention — because I owe it to them and myself.

Purpose, as I've come to understand it, is a dynamic force. For me, it evolves as I grow, but it always pulls me toward integrity. It helps me navigate uncertainty, embrace challenges, and remain grounded in my values. It gives my journey meaning. I know that wherever I go next in my career, this will remain constant: I will always seek to act with purpose. Whether I'm at the bedside or in a classroom, I will continue to ask: Why am I doing this? Who am I doing it for? And how can I do it with integrity? That is what sustains me. That is what drives me. And that is what I hope to pass on to the nurses of tomorrow. ■

Figures



Figure 1: Collage from My Master's Research-Je suis/I am

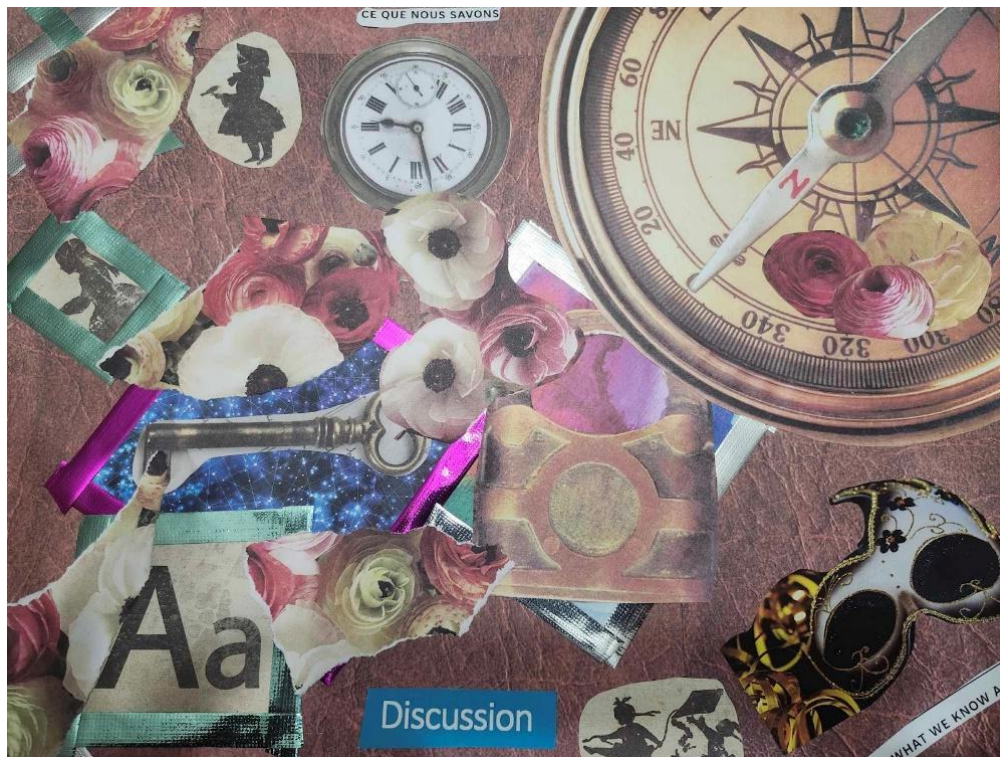


Figure 2: Collage from My Master's Research- A la recherche/Searching for

Biographical Note

Anne-Laurie Beaubrun holds a Bachelor's degree in Nursing from the University of Sherbrooke and a Master's degree in Education from the University of Ottawa. Her clinical experience encompasses pediatric care and community health. Since 2018, she has been a Faculty Lecturer at the Ingram School of Nursing, McGill University, where she teaches in both the on-campus and online undergraduate programs. Her academic and professional interests include perinatal and family health, community nursing, and social justice. Anne-Laurie is actively engaged with the Ingram School of Nursing's Office of Social Accountability, collaborating with community partners to enhance the curriculum and support nursing practices rooted in social justice.