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On Purpose

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Introduction

How are we all feeling today? Ready to learn – On Purpose?

Like most of us, I'm full of contradictions. My friends would describe me as down-to-earth, prone to asking big, unanswerable questions, and willing to go deep and get philosophical.

While I strive to be grounded and authentic, it's time for my final "state of the union" address, and I've got a short time to share what I have learned with you. So, buckle up (my beautiful buttercups); we are going to dig into some complexities.

Our world is complicated. It's all about being present and curious, and this is how we transform our practice. On Purpose.

As AACN president, I've traveled from Maine to Miami, from Kansas City to Chicago, and from Seattle to San Diego. You, the AACN members, have been the absolute highlight!

The stories you shared with me expanded my view of our profession. AACN represents nurses from all walks of life and perspectives, and today, we come together in community.

It's how we come together to lift each other up that impresses me most. This year, I witnessed multiple AACN chapters host student nurse ambassadors to build professional relationships and support successful entry into practice.

Part 1: Polarity & Relationships

While the world has been described as increasingly polarized, and maybe it feels that way sometimes on social media, this hasn't been my experience. Between conversations with you and countless ride-share drivers I've met on my travels, I've experienced something different.

For all our differences, we find more common ground when we actually speak to each other, and discover that

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we exist along a continuum, no matter our individual perspectives.

When we remember we're part of something bigger, we find there's so much more we can do together than we can alone.

In my experience, polarity works across a continuum. All things in balance, not in opposition. For me, being On Purpose is being curious about the other side of the story, about the nature of our polarities.

For our most polarizing issues, there are sides. Most likely, there are many perspectives along a complete spectrum, and there is a unifying path forward if we care enough about each other to find consensus. There is a sweet spot, right there in the center, where opposing gravitational lines cross, where we can come together.

I practice as a clinical nurse educator at Harborview Medical Center in Seattle, a level I trauma Center serving Washington, Alaska, Montana and Idaho, with a mission to care for underserved populations in our community. I've stayed there since I was a new nurse because I believe in that mission. But during COVID, watching so many of us show up despite fear and exhaustion, I started wondering: Is it the mission that matters most, or is it the individuals behind it, each with their own personal why? We need to feel valued as individuals to sustain the work and achieve the mission. It's OK to put on your own oxygen mask first.

A mission is nothing without the people. Individual intention, why we show up and an organization's mission are on a continuum of service.

Good intentions are not enough, and effective action will require collaboration. If organizational mission and personal intention are on opposite ends of the spectrum, then shared purpose is our relational sweet spot. It is only through shared purpose and relationships that we can harness our collective power. Living our shared purpose will always be more meaningful than a mission statement.

A more authentic, inclusive conversation allows for a spectrum of experiences. Including other perspectives amplifies our impact.

In a polarized world, advocacy sometimes looks like telling others what to do or the right way to do it; that's very critical care nurse in a certain light.

AACN strategic advocacy is effective, because we are committed to building relationships and inviting others to the table. Through inquiry, we can understand alternative perspectives. While having a strong voice is important, diplomacy, with a balance of advocacy and inquiry, is the true path to sustainable change through consensus building. Diplomacy is the relational strategy, our sweet spot, for creating positive change.

Our healthcare work environment was created for humans by humans. While technology will continue to advance our practice in yet-unimagined ways, our core nursing value of human dignity and relationships is something we can continue to leverage for a better future.

As nurses, we constantly balance our desire to maintain relationships with our pursuit of shared knowledge. It can make us hesitate to speak up when there is a lack of psychological safety on the team. In a recent study co-sponsored by AACN, with over 5,000 clinicians, only 32% of us report speaking up in crucial moments.

I know there were times when I could have spoken up and didn't, and times when I did, but I could have done so in a better way that was more sensitive to my teammates' perspectives. I keep coming back and trying to get the balance right.

Patients need us to collaborate and use our shared knowledge for effective decision-making. This is what it means to work on a team with purpose, to care for others, to walk them through the process of illness, of recovery, through the beginnings and endings of life.

In every shift worked, in each encounter, we commit to practicing the art of nursing. It is a balance we each

hold daily, and some days are harder than others. It's easy to say that we don't like polarity; it's more difficult, yet essential, that we respond with diplomacy and purpose. On Purpose.

When we truly achieve consensus, everyone wins. Sustainable growth is nurtured by our collaboration. And so the world changes.

Part II: Collective Incremental Change

Taking part in something bigger than yourself is both humbling and inspiring.

The legend goes that the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses, the largest specialty nursing organization in the world, started as a conversation among nurses at a kitchen table. In 1969, AACN was founded by nurses, for nurses, with only 150 members, because we needed a community and a source of specialty knowledge and standards. We have grown. More than 50 years later, with 135,000 acute, progressive and critical care nurse members, our strength is in our numbers and our diversity. We are a community of exceptional nurses.

How empowering does it feel to be here with 6,000 other nurses today?

We are here because nurses before us invested in an idea, a glimmer that grew into a spark and then a flame through collaboration and incremental growth over decades. Each of us is an essential part of this community, and we have the power to shift the direction of our profession.

Here's another story of incremental change. In the early aughts, a small group of AACN leaders met to discuss strategies to address the looming nursing shortage. Sound familiar? There was growing evidence that unhealthy work environments contribute to ineffective delivery of care, and conflict and stress among healthcare workers. Getting to the root cause of why nurses stay in or leave the profession got us to the idea of focusing on the work environment.

In response, the evidence-based "AACN Standards for Establishing and Sustaining Healthy Work Environments" was first published in 2005 (and revised in 2016). The standards include Skilled Communication, True Collaboration, Effective Decision-Making, Appropriate Staffing, Meaningful Recognition and Authentic Leadership. This is the healthy environment where nurses can find purpose in their practice and where patients receive the care they need.

It was nearly a decade from idea inception to the development of a survey tool to measure change.

Now, 20 years later, the published HWE standards serve as the foundation for countless other studies and publications. What was once just an idea is beginning to coalesce into the mountain of evidence required to support systemic change.

This gives fuel to my persistence. It isn't necessarily about seeing instant results, but about investing in values that you believe in, On Purpose, to drive a collective incremental shift that slowly builds momentum until it is a movement.

The past five years have seen the release of "AACN Standards for Appropriate Staffing in Adult Critical Care and Progressive Care," and now pediatric critical care. AACN's collaborative partnerships have led The Joint Commission to identify staffing as a National Performance Goal. That's worth repeating, isn't it? The first time staffing has been incorporated so prominently by a healthcare regulator.

The results of our sixth national research study on the health of the work environment will be presented at this conference.

AACN has organized a Healthy Work Environment National Collaborative with 135 interdisciplinary hospital-based teams working to implement the standards.

In collaboration with funding partners such as Johnson & Johnson, AACN launched 80 AACN Clinical Scene

Investigator (CSI) teams in 2025, another 80 in 2026, and 80 more are planned for next year. These teams are focused on improving the health of their work environments as the lever to achieving better outcomes for patients, nurses and organizations.

My early leadership lessons on the power of collective action come from my experience as a bedside nurse in AACN CSI Academy, where I was empowered to lead a practice improvement project in my unit. As a CSI nurse, I embraced shared leadership principles, and these lessons have been my bedrock as the first CSI nurse to become AACN president. The power of CSI is the power of the frontline; it's having project leaders embedded in the culture. It's about collective, grassroots incremental change.

From one stone cast in the water, the ripples grow. What we do today has the potential to create ripples far into the future. Each action matters, no matter how small. It is to act. On Purpose.

Part III: Glimmers of Joy

Each day, I rise with purpose. My dog's wet kisses; my spouse making coffee. Most mornings are built around simple comforts that are the foundation of my self-care. Optimism is easy when things are simple.

Yet no matter my positive intent, the complex hospital environment can overtake me like an ocean storm. Everything is urgent, the pace, the demands, and as nurses we finish our day by listing everything we haven't accomplished. It's difficult to find joy and satisfaction in the middle of a storm.

When lives are on the line, it's easy to live in fear of not being enough. Our moments of public recognition are often too few and far between to be our only source of resilience. Part of my personal survival strategy includes finding glimmers of joy to celebrate in the middle of routine chaos.

During the early months of the pandemic shutdown, I was serving as one of the first COVID-operations nurses at my hospital, an innovative rapid response role to triage operational and clinical care issues. Despite my training and dedication, teaching nurses to reuse their masks wasn't something I was fully prepared for.

While I absolutely made use of the employee emergency services and professional counseling, it was my peer nurses who walked with me and offered me understanding when I needed it most.

At the end of each day, I would take long walks with my dog to decompress. Seeing spring flowers bloom was familiar and grounding. Those conversations of mutual support and long walks were the moments of joy that got me through. It's about the small things, especially when things get hard.

To create more opportunities for joy we can be intentional about engaging in learning, being a champion of specialty skills and knowledge, and supporting our colleagues to do the same.

It isn't about toxic positivity or about being blind to the problems we face. Because of what I have learned about the power of incremental change, I cannot help but believe that every contribution matters. Once you see it, you can't un-see it. Glimmers of joy. Seeing how we are connected and seeing glimmers of positive change becomes a life skill.

AACN and HWE both started as a glimmer of an idea. It is through sharing our passion that transformation occurs.

Conclusion: On Purpose

As nurses, our professional integrity and our commitment to care create a bond of trust between our community and us. Nurses have ranked as the number one most trusted and ethical profession for 24 consecutive years, according to Gallup polling.

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What I find so fantastically powerful is that this trust is built one relationship at a time. The individuals being surveyed have trust in nurses because of their lived experiences. Trust in nurses is something that we built without ever planning it or organizing it. Their trust in us is built on relationships. Individual caring relationships and experiences, each of us bringing our unique gifts to our practice.

Each flower I collected represents a nurse who supported me on my journey of continual growth. I couldn't do it without you.

I have such gratitude for all the nurses who have so positively impacted my own life.

If it weren't for Pat, I might not have had the courage to take my CCRN exam.

I follow in the footsteps of Debbie, who has walked this path before me with grace and humility that I aspire to emulate.

Thank you, Terry and Jennifer, my biggest cheerleaders. Tonka and Sara, I cannot wait to see what comes next.

For Olena, who tells me stories about the nurses working to save lives in Ukraine, whether the power is on or off.

For Ali, an Iranian-American nurse, who helps me understand what it means to feel the pull of many identities.

In memory of Alex, a nurse who asked the question, "Are you OK?"

Inclusion of diverse perspectives is key to a holistic understanding of what it means to be a professional nurse, and what it means to be human and to belong.

I look at what we have accomplished as a profession and as an organization over the past several decades, and I believe that what we do today is part of a powerful transformative shift.

Follow the Path: Be Present and Be Curious to Transform Our Practice, to Inspire a Shift We Must Allow Space and Be Intentional for Daily Joy. Imagine what we will do together when we Act On Purpose!