

President-elect's Keynote

Starting Now

NTI 2022

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Stories.

We've been talking about stories since we got here Monday morning. Why? Because stories help preserve our experiences, giving shape to how we remember them. Stories are how we can share our experience with others.

The COVID era has touched literally every individual across the globe. It's been impossible to escape. Both because the virus is so contagious and because of the profound human toll. COVID's impact continues to affect us through the chaos it has unleashed in every part of our lives. We're lucky something like this doesn't happen very often. In fact, it never really has before. At least not in our lifetimes. We've been changed forever by experiences we can't ignore.

Crafting our experiences into stories is such a powerful way to make sense of them. Even when we choose to keep some stories to ourselves. Let's compare notes about these past few days. I really didn't know what to expect. But I looked forward to being here because, personally, I needed NTI's energy so much. For me, it has delivered. How about you?

It started on Monday when we reflected on the events of the last two years. And all that each of us carries from them. Then, Beth compelled us to remember that this is a time of healing and using our strength for transformation. Yesterday, Jade gifted us another reminder, as she stimulated our senses with the beauty of music. She helped us accept that our purpose, and our power, and our passion all need to align. Then she nudged us with the challenge that we need to pick a date to personally transform. Throughout both days, the Dear World stories and photographs – our stories and photographs – transported us from then to now. Starting during Monday's SuperSession and continuing in the Dear World exhibit. So many stories.

What makes a story relatable? It could be the power of storytelling as a recording of history we can learn from and act upon. And that could be because of how stories usually take shape. Let's unpack that idea. The educator in me thought we could even check out some graphs. Stories generally follow a narrative arc called Freytag's pyramid. Here's what it looks like.



The pyramid has five stages. And we can look at each one quickly. They'll seem familiar because they represent how our stories usually roll. Even the ones we don't intentionally frame this way.

Exposition. Here's where we set the stage. What's the story about? Who's in it? Where did it happen? What's the situation? We also might create a mood. For example, "The unit hadn't been this quiet in weeks," or "Between staffing and our census, we knew things would probably go sideways."

Rising Action. This is the key trigger that puts things in motion. For example, "Our most experienced nurse had to leave because their child got sick at school, and most of the other nurses were recent grads just off orientation."

Climax. This is where the first two stages converge. "We'd just finished report when the trauma team activation happened, and we got a patient for our only empty bed."

Falling Action. This is called "what goes up, must come down." It's when we'd talk about how we supported the new grad who found themselves in the middle of their first resuscitation. Their first ever.

Wrap-up. Sometimes it's called the resolution. This might be the most important part because it's where one exhales and, changed by the experience, is able to move forward. That new grad shared with their team how much their support inspired new self-confidence.

Do any of you relate to that story? If you think about it, many of our stories have a similar flow. Can I tell you one of my stories? Preparing for today, I remembered a very dark experience from when I was a new charge nurse. It was a time when I asked myself, "Why did I become a nurse? What was I thinking? Am I really cut out for this?" We've all had times like this, haven't we?

Here's the story. A toddler needed an urgent and painful procedure. It was the middle of the night, so we couldn't send the child to the OR like we usually would. And the physician insisted we do the procedure right away. Our protocol required a respiratory therapist to be present anytime we gave moderate sedation. And one wasn't available. Our team advocated for the child. We suggested waiting just a little more time so the child could be comfortable. But we weren't successful. So we witnessed them experience excruciating pain.

Not only was the child and their family traumatized, we were devastated. I felt like I failed the patient. Their family. My team. And myself.

Driving home, I was numb. I tried to process what had happened, while I half listened to my carefully curated "in my feelings" playlist. Then I took one of those post night shift naps that in no way left me feeling rested. I got to work the next evening, and one of our senior nurse leaders was waiting to talk to me. OK, I figured. This is where my job ends. But it didn't. Because this person knew just how to coach me back into the light.

First, she made sure I was OK. She supported me and validated my feelings. Then she threw me a curve that changed my entire career. She asked, "If you could change anything about the way things went down last night, what would it be?" Wait! What? There I was, the victim of a policy gone bad and my own lack of confidence. And there she was, empowering me to help find a way to make patient care better.

I paused to gather my thoughts. Then I suggested how we could change the policy to everyone's benefit. Now, making the change took a little doing, but it happened. All because someone recognized that my moral injury had paralyzed me, and they helped me start to get past it. Some days, that memory is still raw for me. Yet I realize how much I learned from it. Most of all, it taught me what writer James Sherman says: "You can't go back and make a brand-new start, but you can start right now and make a brand-new ending." That's such an important lesson for us.

Starting now. As we try to sort out our COVID experiences without letting them paralyze us. It might feel like we've been wandering inside a dark cave for the past two years. But Monday's video reminded us it's actually a tunnel. And we are on our way out of it. The truth is that every one of us has experienced life-changing events. Personal ones and professional ones. If we stop to think about it, the only reason we're all here today is because we managed to catch our breath — probably more than once — and chose to start again.

The trouble is, it's easy — and maybe a little naïve — to say "Get over it. Move on. Start now." Easy to say. But so much harder to do. Singer, songwriter and activist Joan Baez says it so well. "Action is the antidote to despair." What does this mean for us? Especially when, on top of the challenges the pandemic created, we're facing challenges that were already there. I'm thinking of ones like staffing, inequitable compensation and — the one that wraps around everything — unhealthy work environments.

For us it means, as Socrates said, that the secret to change is to focus all our energy not on fighting the old, but on building the new. And not to be outdone by Socrates, as a lifelong Disney movie fanatic, when I feel a bit lost or hope seems gone, I think about what Anna says in Frozen II. When she's alone in that dark cave. And Olaf has flurried away. And she thinks her sister, Elsa, is dead. She says, "You are lost, hope is gone. But you must go on and do the next right thing. I won't look too far ahead. It's too much for me to take. But break it down to this next breath, this next step. This next choice is one that I can make."

Rebooting ourselves for a new AACN year, we will start now with renewed hope. Because hope transforms. We will find the pockets of hope within the grief. Let's start to repair the broken pieces with gold. Creating something stronger, more beautiful than before. We can break new ground. And, along the way, let's be prepared to ruffle some feathers. We will do this together. We are not alone. And we will do it starting now.

STARTING NOW. This is our theme for the upcoming year.

Some stories are the stuff of fiction and fairy tales. Others — like our own — chronicle harsh realities and the history we want to learn from.

On Monday, Beth reminded us about AACN's advocacy related to the pandemic. But before then, AACN as an organization was deep into advancing advocacy about what matters most to us and our patients — working in healthy and supportive environments with appropriate staffing. Not only does this work continue, starting now it must take on greater urgency, which the pandemic has accelerated.

What does greater urgency mean? Greater urgency means acting on the recommendations proposed a few weeks ago by the Nurse Staffing Think Tank. Beth told us about this on Monday. But have you seen the aggressive timelines? Six months to investigate minimum staffing levels. And 12 months to develop safe staffing standards.

What else does greater urgency mean? It means each and every character in AACN's continuing story must become a bold and relentless advocate for doing the next right thing. Where do we advocate? Everywhere. In our communities. In public forums and more private ones. In social media and traditional media. With our family, neighbors and friends.

And, you know, sometimes we need to advocate most among ourselves. It's easy to forget that advocacy means to speak for, to support, to stand up for. Those are hallmarks of skilled communication and true collaboration. We'll always need them, no matter how appropriately staffed we are. Or how healthy our work environment is.

When all is said and done, we advocate. We advocate because we are committed to deliver safe and ethical care to patients and their families. We advocate for ourselves, because sacrificing our own well-being benefits no one. And we advocate with pride – pride that we chose nursing and nursing chose us.

The story of the future of nursing and healthcare is unknown. There will be great victories and also great challenges. The next chapter of our own story will be written. And we're the ones to write it.

STARTING NOW.

Thank you.