President-Elect's Keynote

I want to begin this morning by asking a question: Have you ever listened to a child ask why?

Nearly 13 years ago, I helped my sister, Dana, with her 3-year-old son, Noah, after the birth of their new daughter, Kate. He and I spent a rainy summer afternoon watching “Monsters Inc.,” and for two torturous hours I fielded his questions. “Why did Mike make that funny noise? Why is that monster so mean? Why, Aunt CeeCee? Why?” It was so painful.

But here’s the thing: Children learn by asking WHY. They use it to make sense of things.
It seems to me that asking why has become a lost art for us adults. And now I wonder: Have we stopped asking why? Somewhere along the line, as grownups, have we become intimidated — or perhaps even irritated — by it? Have we become overwhelmed by not knowing why? Have we forgotten how to use it as a tool to accomplish our goals: as a compass, as an anchor, as a voice about things that matter?

So, I have a WHY question for you. Why did you become a nurse?

Many of us can pinpoint the memory or the reason that resulted in why we became nurses. I knew from the time I was about 5. I would sit at this little play desk at my grandmother's house and watch "Ben Casey" and write down "nurse's notes" while I watched intently. My grandmother made me a little World War II-styled nurse's cap and put her Red Cross pin on it for me to wear. I was fascinated by the stories and the people in them. As the years went on, I read all the Cherry Ames books. I watched "Medical Center," "Marcus Welby, M.D.,” “Emergency” and “M*A*S*H.” Even in those early days, I was intrigued with the extreme situations a person’s body could endure and the intensity of it all.

So why did I become a nurse? I became a nurse because I was fascinated by how the human body works, and I wanted to have the knowledge and skills to make very sick people well again.

We all have our reasons for becoming nurses and, in particular, critical care nurses. Maybe we wanted to help people in extreme situations, or were fascinated by physiology, or wanted to use breakthrough technology to support the human body. Maybe nursing simply allowed a lifestyle that accommodated our other interests.

The reason you became a nurse is the source of the passion that fuels your work — work that can be so energizing and intrinsically rewarding that it is a joy in and of itself. A paycheck is a necessity in life, sure. But isn’t the work and what it brings the real reward? Passionate work is fundamental to who you are, because you use your inherent gifts. If you are an artist, you see things of beauty everywhere you look. If you are an engineer, you see structure and form in every building you see.

The work seems hard to outsiders, but it actually comes easily to you. When engaged in passionate work, you lose your sense of time. It just flies by.

And probably best of all: When you use your passions and gifts, you bring your best self to the service of others.

And why is this important?

In his book “Start with Why,” Simon Sinek says people are inspired to take action and be a part of something bigger than themselves when they understand the WHY of what they’re doing. When they see how it connects to their own core purposes and beliefs.

When I think about it, WHY is the strategy we use throughout our days and shifts. Why does my patient with a cerebral hemorrhage have this respiratory pattern? Why does this patient who had both kidneys avulsed in a high-speed car crash have this wacky high cardiac output and low SVR? Why should I stick my neck out and have this crucial conversation with a colleague?

WHY makes us slow down and ask the right questions so we come up with the right answers. I believe that our everyday WHYs are really pursuits of everyday excellence: Does this foley need to stay in? Do we need this central line? Why is certification important to my practice?

Asking why helps when things are perfect and going smoothly. It especially helps us be resilient during the bleakest of times.

Viktor Frankl was an Austrian psychiatrist imprisoned in Auschwitz during World War II. In his book, “Man’s Search for Meaning,” he described how he was on his way one day to work in the prison camp, wondering if he should trade his last cigarette for a bowl of soup. He then realized how trivial and meaningless his life had become, and that in order to survive this horrendous situation, he had to find some greater purpose. His solution was to imagine himself when the war was over, giving a lecture on the psychology of the concentration camp because it was important to help people understand what he and his fellow prisoners had been through.

Frankl survived the prison camp and went on to become a world-renowned psychiatrist and a prolific writer. In his bleakest and darkest moment, he used WHY to create purpose for himself and was able to make his present reality manageable, survivable.
In this light, we build bridges from our present-day challenges to a better future for healthcare. Why would I, an individual nurse, join that committee? Why should we as a unit work relentlessly to create Healthy Work Environments? Why should I/you/we even try to make things better when healthcare has so many challenges?

WHY can be our guide and inspiration for moving forward.

Let’s step away from healthcare for a moment. This reminds me of the Impressionist painters of the late 19th century in France. Monet, Degas, Van Gogh and the others were trained in classical art. But they felt trapped by the artistic rules of the day. Every year, painters from all over France submitted their finest canvases to be judged and displayed at the prestigious Paris Salon. But their paintings were considered shocking and were refused entry into the exhibition.

They became the laughingstock of the European art world. So what did they do?

In 1874, they pooled their passions and resources and put on their own darn show. At first, the critics were skeptical and wrote scathing reviews. In a relatively short time, however, they shifted their views and came to not only accept but praise the new Impressionist style.

And the world followed suit. Those individuals who had been marginalized became sought-after artists and teachers. The Rebels became The Masters, because they believed in, fought for, and created a world grounded in their WHYs.

In today’s healthcare, nurses are The Masters overcoming obstacles to accomplish what’s important. We are practicing our art and passionately using our gifts whenever we resuscitate a patient or relieve someone’s pain. Whenever we teach a new orientee. Whenever we become part of a larger group and relentlessly use our bold voices to overcome barriers. Barriers like inappropriate staffing, impractical regulations and dysfunctional EHRs.

But you say to me: “There’s too much to do! The obstacles are too many! I’m just one person! All I wanted was 10 minutes to sit with my patient. To think. And I didn’t even get five.”

I hear you, and understand your frustrations. In fact, I have the same ones.

And I say to you: “Never underestimate the power of five minutes.” Five minutes — while not as much as we need — goes much further than we think. It can mean everything to your patient and their family.

I know in my heart this is true. Here’s why.

A year and a half ago, my 86-year-old mother suddenly became ill. Mostly blind from macular degeneration, she lost the remainder of her vision, had new onset confusion, generalized weakness and incapacitating wrist and knee pain. She couldn’t even walk.

My parents live in the mountains of Wyoming, and my 85-year-old dad had to call on neighbors to help him take her to Cheyenne Regional Medical Center, a 90-minute drive away.

Luckily, I just happened to be at an AACN meeting in Boulder, Colorado, so I was able to rent a car and drive two hours to the hospital in the middle of the night. I was sleep deprived and devastated to see how sick my mother was. The diagnosis revealed nothing imminently critical but was still very serious. And I was suddenly in the position of being a vulnerable family member trying to navigate an unfamiliar healthcare system. All these years of helping patients and families come to grips with critical illness and injury did nothing — absolutely nothing — to prepare me for what it felt like to be on the other side.

I watched the nurses carefully — you know I did! You know how it gives you a major case of heartburn when a patient’s family member is a critical care nurse, right? You say to yourself, “OK … here we go!” So, I watched these nurses do all of the right things ... scan her ID band before they gave meds, ask about her pain level EVERY time they interacted with her, give bedside report. This was awesome. All these things made me trust that my mother was in a safe place, getting good care.

But you know what made the most difference to me in those two long weeks? The three nurses who sat down to learn about who she was and ask about her home in the mountains. Who talked with me and asked me how I was doing. Who asked how my dad was holding up.
I know their colleagues worked hard to do the right thing and get their work done safely and efficiently. But those three nurses became my LIFE LINE. I hoped to hear them answer when I called on the phone. I watched for them to come on shift.

These three took five minutes — which they probably didn’t have — to connect. With my mom. With me. They probably didn’t think it was enough, but I am telling you it meant everything to this tried-and-true, blood-and-guts trauma critical care nurse, who happened to be a daughter. I could see and feel their WHY, and it profoundly impacted me.

So yes … we should always strive for more. We should maintain our promise as nurses to provide the best care possible, despite all obstacles in our way. And in the meantime, we can’t ever forget our WHY — be it talking to patients, or mastering hemodynamics, or conducting research. Because our WHYs are exactly what our patients, our colleagues, our healthcare systems depend on.

WHY. Such a simple, three-letter word. And yet so powerful!

WHY is really our professional and personal compass.

Why we became nurses.

Why we go to work each day.

Why we come to NTI.

It’s obvious to me that we nurses faithfully use why as our guide. And that is what inspired our theme for the coming year: GUIDED BY WHY.

It’s fair for you to ask, “OK, Schulman — why ‘Guided by Why’?”

Well, I know for me there have been times when my Why was crystal clear. At other times, my Why was challenged. And sometimes it was even hard to find.

So, as I step into this role as AACN’s 48th president, I invite you to join me in reconnecting with our Why. When we do this, we reaffirm our core purpose and have a guiding beacon for what we can — what we must — do to ensure that every patient gets the excellent care they deserve. And that every nurse has the tools and the skills they need to provide that care.

I love this three-letter word WHY. There’s energy in it. And courage. And endless possibility.

I am so excited and honored to share this year with you. Guided by Why, we will make our optimal contribution to patients and families during the most vulnerable times in their lives.

“Why?” you ask. Because, as our AACN mission reminds us, nothing less is acceptable.

Thank you!