Nursing and the unpresentable

The story is told of something Heraclitus said to some strangers who wanted to come visit him. Having arrived, they saw him warming himself at a stove. Surprised, they stood there in consternation—above all because he encouraged them, the astounded ones, and called to them to come in, with the words, ‘For here too, the gods are present.’ (Heidegger, 1967/1998, pp. 269, 270)

The story attributed to Aristotle goes on to say that the foreign visitors are disappointed and perplexed with their first glimpse of the philosopher’s abode. Contrary to all their expectations of a well renowned thinker (hoping to see him thinking) these visitors find Heraclitus not even baking bread in the stove but merely warming himself. ‘The vision of a shivering thinker offers little of interest’ (p. 270) to those who are not entranced with a picture similar to what they can find in their own homes, but rather, with the grandiose idea of catching this learned scholar at the very moment of thinking. Yet realizing their disappointment, Heraclitus invites them to come close to the stove where even there, the thinking ‘gods’ are present.

Why does this story come to mind when introducing a series of papers from our recent 2003 Biennial International Philosophy in the Nurse’s World conference in Banff, Alberta, Canada?1 Here we see a philosopher philosophizing in his familiar world, the kitchen, while revealing his chilling body to his admirers. In the world of nursing and its practices nursing too comes to presence through the nurses’ often vulnerable bodies and sometimes in very messy circumstances, and at the conference we grappled with complex nursing and life situations that while in the midst of us, were not easy to lay down in philosophical tenets or to grasp in philosophical terms. Instead we had to progress backwards to the beginning to see how the conference themes came about and this took us back to the body.

At our conference in 2001, the theme of the conference was ‘Rethinking Mind and Body in Nursing’. Here the rich discussions following each of the papers showed our struggle to bring the body more into view. Towards the end of each discussion, we found we were consistently led towards something quite unnameable. On the last morning of the conference, it seemed clear that we were butting up against politics, against ethics, against ideas that might be called ineffable. and so with an appeal to philosophical thought to help us understand these ineffable elements of the body, of the flesh, we came to the themes of this 2003 conference, ‘Philosophy, Ethics and Politics’. It gives one pause to think that what led us so strongly to ethics, to politics, to philosophy is the discussion of the body. It seems that the flesh raised these integral themes, turned our attention toward them.

So much of what happened shortly after our 2001 conference, previous to and during the 2003 conference has been unnameable or in a sense unthinkable: the horrors of September 11, the lead up to and the recent war in Iraq, the worsening HIV/AIDS epidemic in Africa, the economic crisis and subsequent

1These biennial conferences are convened by the Institute for Philosophical Nursing Research at the University of Alberta Faculty of Nursing.
strife in many countries in Latin America, the plight of our nurses who continuously experience yet another health care restructuring momentum, and much more. To say that these events left us bereft is an understatement. They left us with the lingering conviction that we must search for ways to address and bring these unthinkable things into our discourse, into our philosophizing, into our thinking, into our acting.

How do we evoke in our philosophical discussions these unspeakable acts that defy any representations to make them more palatable and too, prevent any comforting means to be applied to them? Here we invoke Lyotard’s (1979/1989) notion of the unpresentable as a way to be able to address these appalling world events yet also perhaps an urgent appeal to humanity, a call? The unpresentable to Lyotard are those things that are not easily presented or actually sometimes even present within the discourse. Often the unpresentable is excluded or is an ineffable thing, difficult to bring to words. Lyotard writes that these excluded things are often unpresentable in terms of the existing rules of the discourse; or they are the things about a discourse or an entity that are difficult to show, to bring to words, to language; or they are horrific unspeakable things such as the holocaust.

We might then ask, how is nursing situated to address the unpresentable? We can never really present what nursing is because much of what nursing does lies in the realm of the unpresentable. These world events bring the realities of the unpresentable into our midst in a way that reminds us that nurses are always already there. Nurses always stand in the presence of the unpresentable that the flesh evokes so immediately. Consider suffering; nursing stands immediately before being and suffering in a way that Levinas describes as ‘an absence of all refuge’ (Levinas, 1947/1979, p. 69) from which neither the patient nor the nurse can retreat. In fact the real nature of suffering only comes into view through the nurse’s very present engagement with the immediacy of another. Nurses are exposed to suffering in a way that our philosophizing is not. This very existence of the unpresentable in nursing and in these local and global events demands that we continue to develop new modalities of thinking and showing nursing in our discourse.

We need to make a space in our philosophizing for the interruptions that catch nurses in practice unawares. Nursing as a living originary thing cannot remain in the mode of the presentable alone as the originary actually finds itself in the unpresentable. We must insert the unpresentable into our tradition to both acknowledge the sometimes concealed realities of nursing practices and further develop the discourse as many of the authors at the 2001 and 2003 conferences did. And we will continue to meet together to bring forward ‘the unpresentable in presentation itself’ (Lyotard, 1979/1989, p. 81).

Coming back to the body, certainly the flesh does not stand outside the present moment, it roots us in it. Heraclitus is unable to hide his shivering body. The nurse nurses in and through her body as the flesh consistently inserts itself in the moment no matter the manner of our pursuits. And at the conference the speakers also exposed their bodies, their understandings, their questions of nursing, and their scholarly thinking to conference participants through their embodied engagement with philosophical thought. In a way, the flesh brings us back to the unpresentable and calls us to reconstitute it as a present entity. Yet are these themes of ethics and politics emanating from the flesh presentable?

Through the 2003 conference we were able to create a space to address the unpresentable from various view points: world events and their effects on nursing, nursing as theorized and as practised, how politics impinge on our practices, the great need for ethical knowing, the existing pressures that inhere in nursing education, and the effects of marginalization on health care practices among others. This conference embodying philosophy, ethics and politics invited us to gather together and in the midst of the presentable and unpresentable, ask hard questions. The speakers’ insights, each invoking in their own way, a philosophical analysis of their topic led to a rich undertaking of philosophical development. As Heraclitus did with the strangers, the authors of the papers in this issue of the journal invite us also to come close to the stove and be warm and very
present as they evoke the philosophical discussions and re-collect the events and concerns that brought many papers to fruition.

Heraclitus calls to the visitors to come in, in fact as he encourages them to come in where they do not want to go, he assures them that thinking is present even there. Perhaps like Heraclitus’s chilling flesh calling the strangers to the stove, nursing philosophy conferences such as this summon us as well to keep flesh-ing out the unpresentable. In the 2005 Philosophy in the Nurses’ World conference we will continue to do this in the light of political philosophy and in the process push these themes further. We will do it by gathering together and opening the philosophical discourse, casting as wide a net as possible and most importantly staying in touch with the places where nursing happens.

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References