

# **Florence Nightingale**

**by Suzanne M. Regan**

## **Personal Reflection**

When the name Florence Nightingale is spoken the vision of a savior dedicated to the salvation of ill comes to mind. I expected a similar discovery. Nightingale was a much more complex creature. She fought the typical Victorian ideal for women in Britain in the mid 1800s. By rebuffing marriage and family she immediately stood out; especially since she was from an upper class family. Her spiritual calling played an enormous part of her life. Between her unique education and God; Nightingale filled an unprecedented void in the medical field. Her fortitude and unwavering dedication to her own ideals and calling allowed her freedoms unique for women in the Victorian time. She backed her ideas with documentation and positive statistics. With the royal family to support her she was able to achieve positive changes and elevate the practice of nursing. It is truly amazing to see her discoveries still in practice today.

## **Biography**

In 1910 England and the world lost a woman who changed the field of nursing forever. Florence Nightingale passed away at the age of ninety in London, England. Nightingale changed health care by elevating and feminizing the field. Florence Nightingale was born on May 12, 1820 while her parents were on a two year honeymoon in Florence, Italy. Her sister, Parthenope was born a year earlier in Naples. Her parents, Fanny and William Nightingale, were extremely wealthy. Her mother was outgoing and charming and her father very intelligent. He attended Cambridge University and valued a good education. Florence was welcomed into a world of privilege, but one that had limitations for women. Victorian women in England could not vote, attend universities, or earn a living wage. When they married they became the property of their husbands and had no say over their children. As "feme covert", a British woman could own nothing. Anything inherited or earned went to her husband. A woman depended on men whether it be her father, husband, brother, or uncle to see to her financial sustenance. Florence was educated

far beyond women of her era especially in mathematics and statistics. A combination of factors enabled Florence Nightingale to pursue nursing and make timeless changes in the field which included being a daughter of privilege and wealth, a spiritual calling, an education far beyond the average woman in the 19th century, the opportunity to travel to war torn Crimea, and connections to the royal family.

Wealth gave the Nightingale family luxuries not known by typical families in mid-nineteenth century England. Flo was raised in the English countryside where her father owned two estates; Lea Hurst in Derbyshire and her mother's favorite, Embley in Hampshire. Following the purchase of Embley the Nightingales threw themselves into the the London social scene. A multitude of prominent guests wined and dined at the Nightingale estate in Embley placing young Florence in the company of political figures and elite royalty from 19th century England. In addition to an education from her father, Florence and her sister, Parthenope frequently traveled. Fanny Nightingale had also traveled with her family as a child and believed in the enlightenment travel provided. Florence's father, WEN Nightingale believed in a complete education for his girls and this included the experience of different people, cultures, and places.

February 7, 1837 was a critical turning point in young Florence's life. She believed she heard the voice of God calling her to service. Following this episode of mysticism, Florence became convinced God needed her for His service, but she remained baffled as to the exact job she was requested to do. Florence experienced much confusion and distress regarding her service to God. She traveled to Egypt and Greece in 1850 and engaged in spiritual discussions and thought as she traveled up the Nile. One entry detailed her determination, "Today I am 30-the age Christ began his mission. Now no more childish things, no more vain things, no more love, no more marriage. Now, Lord, let me only think of Thy will, what Thou wilt me to do-O Lord, Thy will, Thy will." (1) She continued, "Resolved to devote 1/4 of hour 3 times a day to finding out what was the will of God for me". (2) Florence exhibited a firm desire to devote her life to God and her spiritual calling allowed her an unwavering focus for her work despite restrictions for women and her parent's adamant objections.

Despite protest from her family and their anger at her refusal to several marriage proposals, the Nightingales allowed Florence to travel with friends overseas. This trip changed her life. The Nightingale's close friends, the Bracebridges, traveled with Florence to Egypt and Greece. During their holiday the Bracebridges noticed disturbing changes in Florence. She was depressed because she had not discovered her true calling. The Bracebridges ended their holiday in Germany. They took Nightingale to Kaiserwerth understanding her passion for the institution despite her family's disapproval. With her new resolve Florence returned to Britain determined to practice nursing despite the strict objections of her parents. Florence was able to train for her work in nursing with a three month stint at Kaiserwerth in Germany.

Nightingale's life dramatically changed when Britain entered into a war with Russia in Crimea. Her request to tend to injured soldiers while Britain fought in the Crimean War became the decisive turning part in her career. It was while she served in Crimea that she was able to fully recognize her calling. It started when Russia began a search for a warm water port and advanced on areas east of the Black Sea. Great Britain and France joined with Turkey in negotiations which ultimately failed and Britain and its allies declared war on Russia in March of 1854. The conditions for wounded soldiers became abhorrent from lack of supplies, personnel to care for them and filthy conditions. Since the recent invention of the telegraph Britain was able to receive newspaper accounts of the atrocities in Scutari at the hospitals for British soldiers. Sanitation conditions developed into a deadly situation for the men with sewage pipes draining above sea level and winds blowing gases back into the hospital. In addition sewage pipes filled up and backed onto the hospital floors where men walked without shoes. Following negative reports to Britain, Florence contacted her longtime friend, Sidney Herbert, secretary of war. They planned a method by which Nightingale and a team traveled to Crimea to care for the soldiers. This became possible and even stamped with approval from her family because it was "national" work and thereby for the good of all of Britain.(3) Florence and her team of thirty-eight nurses left for Crimea on October 21, 1854. It was during her 18 months of service that Florence became the famed "Lady with a Lamp" Nightingale set about making changes with a swift

determination despite resistance from the military doctors and bureaucrats. Obstacles were no challenge for Nightingale. She examined conditions inadequate for the British soldiers. Nightingale observed unhygienic conditions, over crowding, and poor diets. She was able to use her mathematical background and education charting the progress of the soldiers' recovery. Statistics were applied by Florence showing cause and effect. The common soldier appreciated Nightingales contribution, but the military hierarchy turned on these women they believed were too independent. They withheld supplies so Florence paid for them with her own funds. The rate of death among British soldiers in Scutari began to fall dramatically. In 1956 Nightingale was appointed General Superintendent of the Female Nursing Establishment. While reflecting on her Scutari experience Nightingale sadly commented, " In all our corridors, I think we have not an average of three limbs (arms and legs) per man."(4)

Florence returned home to England with accolades from all. She became a national hero. Sadly, Nightingale also came back very ill and took immediately to bed. Despite her sickness, she was able to communicate from her bed. Reform was a key part to the continuity of nursing and improvement of overall patient care. Nightingale remained uncertain of what her next step would be. Queen Victoria and Prince Albert became very strong advocates and listened to her reports regarding her concern for the care of the ill. Nightingale through her extensive record keeping presented exact accounts of medical treatment. She focused on details often overlooked by physicians. Diet and hygiene were recognized for perhaps the first time with a connection to mortality rates among soldiers. With Nightingale's popularity and connection to the royal family patient care became a priority.

Florence Nightingale used the skills she created during the Crimean War and applied them to nursing in her homeland, England. Despite her failing health she worked diligently writing and applying her knowledge advocating improvements for the ill patients in London. Without the support of individuals in high places she would not have been as successful. Nightingale wrote Notes on Hospitals and Notes on Matters Affecting the Health, Efficiency, and Hospital Administration of the British Army Founded Chiefly on the Experience of the

Late War. Nightingale continued to educate the public regarding the connection between statistics and scientific thinking in the nursing field. In 1860 the Nightingale School for Nurses was founded with the goal of elevating of the career of nursing. It was a strict program with a demanding schedule for the students. The school operated to train primarily women in the field of nursing.

Despite her failing health, Nightingale lived a long life, but spent most of her time bedridden. It was never diagnosed accurately, but Nightingale's illness was possibly bacteria related or post traumatic stress syndrome from the war. Despite her delicate condition, Nightingale remained close to her sister, Parthenope and Sidney Herbert. Her work continued from her bed. She treasured her friends. Conditions for the poor and human suffering in India left Nightingale frustrated. She remained respected and adored by Great Britain even into her later years. In 1907 Nightingale was awarded the Order of Merit. (5) No other woman had received this significant award. On August 13, 1910 at the age of 90 Florence Nightingale passed away.

Florence Nightingale's legacy continues to this day. She raised the nursing field to an elite status. Nursing is a respected field due to the early work of England's heroine. Her application of statistics and hygiene continue in practice with health care workers today. Without the connections Nightingale had and her wealthy family her work in nursing and achievements would not have transpired. Despite her arrival into the world at a time in which women were limited; Nightingale utilized her skills to the highest and remains a woman of unequalled status in the field of nursing.

1. Michael D. Calabria, Florence Nightingale in Egypt and Greece. Her Diary and "Visions" (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 60.
2. Michael D. Calabria, Florence Nightingale in Egypt and Greece. Her Diary and "Visions" (Albany: Sate University of New York Press, 1997), 64.
3. Colleen A. Hobbs, Florence Nightingale (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997), 55.
4. Kay Barnham, Florence Nightingale. The Lady of the Lamp (Austin: Raintree Steck-Vaughn Publishers, 2003), 22.
5. Colleen A. Hobbs, Florence Nightingale (New York: twayne Publishers, 1997), xiv.

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## **Timeline**

1792: Mary Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Woman was published.

May 12, 1820: William and Frances Nightingale's second daughter was born in Florence, Italy.

February 7, 1837: Florence Nightingale hears from God with her first calling. God requested her help.

September 8, 1837: Florence and her family departed for Europe for several months on a holiday.

1839: Nightingale was presented as a debutante at Court of Saint James.

1845: Florence begs her parents to allow her to work as a nurse at the Salisbury Infirmary, but they denied her request.

1849-1850: Florence traveled with family friends, Robert and Selina Bracebridge, to Egypt and Greece which concluded with a two week stopover at Kaiserwerth.

November 4, 1854: Nightingale and her team of thirty-eight nurses arrive at Scutari.

April 29, 1856: The Crimean War is over.

July 28, 1856: Nightingale leaves Scutari very ill.(Crimean Fever)

1856-57: She works in London with Royal Commission on Health of the Army.

1858: Publishes Notes on Matters Affecting the Health, Efficiency, and Hospital Administration of the British Army and Subsidiary Notes as to the Introduction of Female Nursing into Military Hospitals in Peace and War.

June 24, 1860: The Nightingale Training School opens.

1865: University of Zurich admitted first woman.

1869: Sophia Jex-Blake enters medical school in Edinburgh.

January 10, 1874: Father-William Nightingale dies.

February 2, 1880: Mother-Frances Nightingale dies.

May 1890: Sister-Parthenope dies.

1907: Nightingale is awarded the Order of Merit.

August 13, 1910: Florence Nightingale dies in London, England.

August 1914: World War I began.