CHAPTER 12

Transformative Pilgrimage Learning and the Big Questions in the COVID-19 Era—Love, Death, and Legacy: Implications for Lifelong Learning and Nursing Education

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It is Fall 2020. Our worlds have been turned upside down by COVID-19, and as educators, we have moved to teaching over Zoom. We are aging and seasoned academics (both well into our 60s), and think not only of what is useful to our students, many of whom also have clinical responsibilities as health care workers, but our age and COVID-19 together also make us think more about the Big Questions of life: love, death,

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and legacy. These questions have largely been ignored in transformative learning as conceptualized by Mezirow (1991) and those who draw on his work as contributed in the 2012 *Handbook of Transformative Learning* (Taylor & Cranton, 2012). We have been teaching in academia for 20–30 years, after earlier careers—Libby (Tisdell) in pastoral ministry, and Ann (Swartz), in Army nursing. How does transformative learning offer insight to our ongoing life's work within and beyond higher education, and how can the notion of transformative pilgrimage learning offer insight to transformative learning theory and practice for educators, health care providers, and our students? This is the purpose of this chapter: to explore the notion of Transformative Pilgrimage Learning (TPL) and what it means in the COVID-19 era for dealing with a few of life's great challenges: love, death, and legacy. Libby has explored TPL as related to these Big Questions (Tisdell, 2020a), elsewhere; but here we do so in the context of our relationship and in the COVID-19 era. Writing this chapter together is a developmental "spiraling back" and moving forward in our pilgrimage relationship.

In order to set the context, first, we begin by discussing some of our background related to the notion of TPL and provide some general information about how it connects to our lives and to teaching of adults, primarily health professionals, in higher education. There is a collaborative element that is autoethnographic (Blalock & Akehi, 2017). Second, we discuss how TPL connects to our responsibility as educators, and to the BIG questions of life—particularly love, death, and legacy. Finally, we offer some tentative conclusions.

Transformative Pilgrimage Learning: Background Context and Components

It's July 2009. I've arrived in Ireland for my sabbatical, leaving the US and my 89-year- old father in ill health. I'm a little worried about going but he pushed me forward. I've had many discussions with Ann and her daughter, Mira, about pilgrimage, and Mira's fascination with Croagh Patrick, and her study of pilgrimage as a master's project. She's such an inspiration! They invite me to join them at the beginning of my sabbatical to do the 22-mile pilgrimage journey from Ballintubber Abbey in County Mayo on to the sacred mountain Croagh Patrick on Reek Sunday. I'm honored to be invited: I meet them at Galway Airport.—Libby Tisdell

> Our first collective activity as trio is boot shopping, because I have just 'lost my sole' in the Irish wilderness, scouting our upcoming pilgrimage. Mira and I are five years into a relationship with the holy mountain site that began when it beckoned to her from afar and we made our first trip together. The mountain has called her back for two summers of archaeology and research, and now engages her brother, Alec, as her hiking companion. We bid him farewell and join Libby for our special, first time engagement with the long ancient pilgrimage at Lammas, the Tochar Phadraig. This is just the beginning of our few weeks of women's journey to sacred sites from all historical eras, guided by Mira's folklore and anthropology knowledge discussed in her thesis about pilgrimage and identity construction (Johnson, 2011). It is also flamed by my love of history and Libby's study of spirituality. We are on an adventure. I have no idea that exactly one year hence I will be diagnosed with breast cancer, and this pilgrimage experience will take on additional meaning as rehearsal in perseverance. "Think like a goat," I tell myself as the rain beats against me under dark skies and I lose my footing in the muddy scree of the steep climb.—Ann Swartz

We begin with these little vignettes as part of the background story of pilgrimage and transformative pilgrimage learning (TPL), because this is where the concept of TPL began. Spirituality is a significant part of each of our lives, and for both of us as educators it was difficult to think about our own experiences of transformative learning simply as the process of dealing with a disorienting dilemma and ultimately critically reflecting on our assumptions and coming into a transformed worldview as Mezirow (1991) describes. Indeed, most of our deepest transformative experiences had also been significant spiritual experiences. We pondered and discussed Robert Kegan's (2000) key question often cited in transformative learning discussions: "What form transforms?" Disorienting dilemmas certainly have the power to transform, but those that had a spiritual (and often embodied) component were the most transforming. Pilgrimages are such experiences, as we learned when the two of us, with Mira leading the way, performed the Croagh Patrick pilgrimage. We wrote about our experiences together and presented a paper on it at the Adult Education Research Conference the following year (Johnson et al., 2010).

In the years since then we continued discussions of the connection of spirituality to teaching and learning, and edited a sourcebook together on wisdom (Tisdell & Swartz, 2011) which was an extension of these discussions, though we didn't tie it to pilgrimage. Writing and editing

together was a helpful distraction during Ann's cancer treatment. The book focused on wisdom's connections to spirituality and culture, integrating perspectives on adult embodied learning. Having a decade of our independent experiences built on pilgrimage, we are grateful to spiral back together to discuss them and how they inform our theorizing of TPL.

A Deeper Understandings of Pilgrimage with Age and Experience

Life always happens as we age, and the more we age, the more encounters there are for potential transformative learning experiences, some welcome and some not. We discuss our independent journey with these that eventually sowed the seeds for what we discuss as TPL.

Libby Tisdell

The Croagh Patrick pilgrimage was particularly powerful for me not only because of being of Irish-Catholic descent, but also because it set the context for how I dealt with my father's death four months later. In fact it is nearly impossible for me to think of the Croagh Patrick journey without thinking of my dad and his death, and how he lived much of his life as pilgrimage. So, in the aftermath of a divorce late in 2011, I wanted to walk my way into a new sense of being and decided to walk the 500-mile pilgrimage journey of the Camino de Santiago from St. Jean Pied de Ports in the South of France across Spain to Santiago. Taking inspiration from the memories of Croagh Patrick and guided by one of my favorite secular texts, *We Make the Road by Walking* (Horton & Freire, 1990), and one of my favorite sacred texts—the 7th beatitude of Jesus (Matthew 5:9) "Blessed are the peace-makers," which more literally means (according to Douglas-Klotz, 1990) "Blessed are they who plant peace in every step"—off I went. I dedicated myself to trying to do just that.

I have discussed in detail elsewhere what I learned from this nearly 6-week pilgrimage undertaken in the summer of 2012 (Tisdell, 2017). Of the most significant was how to deal with pain, from meditating on the phrase from the Gospel story of Jesus healing the paralytic "pick up your mat and walk" until it became manageable by walking through it to the other side. This meditation on pain helped me further understand embodied learning and its potential connection in some instances to spirituality. Second was the mystery of light and shadow, and how the sunflowers, as heliotropes turn their faces toward the light. Third was the power of meditative walking itself, which helped me realize that while I

had spent a lot of time thinking about the nature of wisdom I hadn't spent much time contemplating the wisdom of nature.

There were many lessons I learned on the Camino, including the power of group singing and daily ritual to help me greater attune to the sacred. The overall effect of these learnings is that I am still metaphorically walking the Camino, because through these pilgrimage learning experiences, I have come to see the possibility of living life as pilgrimage (see Tisdell, 2020a for further discussion). As a result of such experiences, not the least of which is walking the journey to the edge of the veil in 2014 with a close friend who died of cancer, in the past year I have come full circle and did a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education working as a hospital chaplain, work that I will continue to do into my retirement. All of these experiences have ultimately to do with love, death, and legacy.

Ann Swartz

Love, legacy, and death infuse my decision to co-author this chapter. I want to honor my daughter, respect my dissertation advisor/colleague, and adhere to strict boundaries because Mira is not here. She sacrificed the opportunity to present her young scholarship in Portugal to care for me during chemotherapy. So many cords are tied to my notions of pilgrimage. The significant frame that I carried forward from *Tochar Phadraig* was the embodied experience that allowed me to transcend time and space to the place where I resonated with ancestors. I had always wondered why my Pennsylvania colonial ancestors, Catholic, Presbyterian, and Quaker had left such a beautiful place, and the places that came before. Pilgrimage offered a way to explore my question. Just like the environmental educators whose transformation Kovan and Dirkx (2003) described, the experience "called me awake." Since our first Croagh Patrick climb in 2004, we have returned as growing family. The spirit of pilgrimage continues to guide family travel. Past, present, and future, we make our legacy together.

The years that followed our 2009 pilgrimage were defined by my cancer treatment, my father's decline and death, my mother's constant caring, and my children's gifts and sacrifices in support of all of us. Throughout, my parents continued taking care of their community, the land, sharing their wisdom. With my brothers and their families, all of us lived a climb as rigorous, and as marked with sacred moments as the Croagh Patrick path. I cherish the suppers when neither my father nor I could eat, following our afternoons of reading history together, discussing

Thomas Jefferson's Bible, exchanging family stories, and watching old westerns. Just as he and his faith had always shown us how to live, he also taught us how to die. He knew how to identify what truly matters, big questions if you will; how to discern his sacred. When he died, all aspects of my life were open for questioning. I eliminated, for at least one year, everything that didn't contribute meaningfully to my life. I wanted physical movement and new ways to bring healing. My spiritual practice became very private without formal religion.

My learning: The land is wise. If we listen, self-awareness can grow. Trust intuition and when met with resistance, move on. That is not your econiche. Self-awareness helps us know how to care for others, human and other-than-human. Sometimes there is no light to turn to. We must learn to love the dark and create light by making connections that allow movement to continue.

The Components of Transformative Pilgrimage Learning

So what is it that we mean by TPL, and how is it distinct from transformative learning? As has been discussed in detail elsewhere (Tisdell, 2017, 2020a, b), TPL is a more specific form of transformative learning in that it has to do with literal pilgrimage with its particular components, namely the sense of sacred place, the sense of movement, and its connection to the body, and to the spiritual world that is often deeply rooted to or brings us back to nature. Many aspects of these have been hinted at above. Other authors have noted similar aspects of pilgrimage (Cousineau, 1998; Morinis, 1992) writing that pilgrimage has both physical and spiritual components, and/or that the embodied dimension of pilgrimage is key to the learning and cannot be separated from the spiritual; indeed, as Scriven (2014) notes "pilgrimage is a transformative event" (p. 252).

In considering how TPL connects with the transformative learning world as Mezirow (1991) originally conceptualized, we can draw some parallels and differences between Mezirow's conceptualization of transformative learning and Cousineau's discussion of pilgrimage (See, Tisdell, 2017 for detail). Mezirow (1991) specifically focuses on learning and notes 10 phases of transformative learning. Cousineau (1998) does not focus on learning, but rather on spiritual pilgrimage in light of seven stages, namely: the longing (to move into a new way of being); the call (listening to one's inner longing to make a change); the departure (the preparation and actual leaving); the pilgrim's way (the journey itself); the

labyrinth (following one's inner journey as well as the outward walk or movement); the arrival (at a particular physical place); and the coming home (the return and the sense of integration.).

Cousineau (1998) describes these stages literally but there are metaphorical parallels in the parenthetical remarks above. It becomes clear that there are aspects to these stages that are parallel to Mezirow's (1991) 10 phases but Cousineau's have more of a spiritual twist. The call and longing are somewhat parallel to the disorienting dilemma, whereas Mezirow's "planning a course of action" is akin to the departure stage. Mezirow's "trying on new roles" perhaps is parallel to Cousineau's pilgrim way and labyrinth stages. Finally Cousineau's coming home and its integration is akin to Mezirow's transformed perspective. Most significantly in clarifying the difference, there is no sense of spirituality in Mezirow's conception of transformative learning, which is central to Cousineau's understanding of pilgrimage, as is the notion of physical movement. In sum, Mezirow's focus is learning; by contrast, the focus of pilgrimage is the spiritual dimension as connected to (physical) movement, embodiment, and nature.

The spiritual dimension is particularly evident in Cousineau's discussion of the labyrinth stage, which may have implications for the notion of TPL as connected to an overall perspective of "life as pilgrimage." Cousineau merges this idea of movement on the physical pilgrimage itself with the inner journey of one's soul. He likens this to having a sense of "following an invisible thread" and quotes Artress: "for by following an invisible thread we connect to the Source, the Sacred" (p. 150). One does not necessarily have to engage in a serious physical pilgrimage to a sacred site to cultivate a sense of life as pilgrimage. But having done so makes it even more possible. Further, such experiences practiced often and taken together sometimes help people feel like they are "following the invisible thread" of their life journey back to the Sacred Source. This indeed is part of what makes it possible to live life as pilgrimage.

Ann's contribution to the scholarship of transformative learning through pilgrimage was our original presentation (Johnson, et al., 2010) where she noted the salience of transformative learning's planetary thread (Selby in O'Sullivan, 2001) to explain her experience. This has not changed. Coming now to consideration of Libby's recent scholarship, she notes the difference between her own familial experience of pilgrimage grounded in repeated connection with a place, and Libby's extended

experience walking alone, but with others, a specific well-known path at a turning point in her life. These differences may be meaningful.

Bringing her historical ancestral perspective to analysis of the two modes described above, transformative learning and TPL, Ann points out the need to merge the literature of the genealogies supporting each model. This understanding of lineage becomes important for building new theoretical connections to transformative learning literature, for instance, to healthcare disciplines. Mezirow's transformative learning arguably arose from complex systems thinking about change (Swartz & Sprow, 2010), while Cousineau's phases reflect the anthropological scholarship of mythic transformation (Campbell, 1949) and liminality in ritual process (Turner, 1969) born from van Gennep's (1909) study of rites of passage. The richness of this lineage should not be lost. As Cousineau (1998) provides an expansive coverage of pilgrimage in multiple cultures and religions, the appeal to Libby is clear. Cousineau is harmonious with work on spirituality and culture in transformative learning (Charaniya, 2012; Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003). A primary implication of TPL for transformative learning might be to dig deeply into its theoretical and philosophical ancestry, then turn to its own edges and notice the richness.

Libby has documented her ideas about living life as pilgrimage and the meaning of this for life's big questions (Tisdell, 2020a, b). Ann's companion view resonates with life dedicated to health professions practice. If life is viewed as pilgrimage, a type of hero's journey (Campbell, 1949) in one giant arc of leaving home to pursue an ideal, then perhaps the period of professional activity, within discipline, is a great period of liminality, with shifts in and out of varying degrees of creative productivity. Re-entry and reintegration phase constitutes legacy, what our transformed form has to offer the community, and is obligated to now share. Within the larger arc there are shorter enactments of ritual, at intervals, and at major rites of passage when we find ourselves intersecting with death, an inevitable and predictably unpredictable life process, and love, a choice we make or do not make, over and over again. Both big issues involve major change; both are inevitably embodied actions and experiences of transformation. Pilgrimage is useful framework because at its core, pilgrimage is rooted in the sacred.

TPL and Responsibility in the Covid-19 Era

> Through a slowly emerging network of connections that arose by living into pilgrimage, I have found a nature attentive community where I understand myself as very broadly practicing community health nursing. More specifically, I carry the intention to promote health, and if my licensed skills are needed I share them. As an invited young Elder, I have been exposed to their decolonization work and my understanding of working with youth is being transformed as I function with a group of women Elders during COVID-19, on Zoom, facilitating grief, using story and ritual to foster movement through our shared hero's journey. We are a multi-ethnic international group with an underlying appreciation for the sacred. It is a treasure to experience the unique wisdom of each woman and appreciate how we weave our threads together to form the basket of wisdom that can hold the youth. My nursing students share similar griefs of lost ceremonies and wondering what comes next, and we work together to remember the wisdom of their Elders, share the music that helps us persevere, and encourage each other to get outside and move. At this point in time, this is my professional and community legacy. This is where I meet my responsibility.—Ann Swartz
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> In being committed to living life as pilgrimage, I begin each day with a heart rhythm meditation practice. Since the beginning of COVID-19 in March I've been leading these meditations over Zoom for my Unitarian Church three times per week; after all if I'm going to engage in such a practice, I might as well do it with others. It's now mid-October, and I always ask what folks want to focus on at the beginning. This morning someone said "more sanity for the world during the next few weeks" (during the election season), and we meditate on what it might mean to breathe into "God-consciousness/higher self-consciousness." I focus on imagining the Lifeforce of "God consciousness" to flow through us like Living Water— of inspiration and sanity. I'm reminded of the beautiful fall colors and the autumn sun on the waters of the creek from my walk with the dogs early this morning. I focus on the magic of my own breath, and also ponder George Floyd's last words of "I can't breathe." What is my legacy? What is my responsibility?—Libby Tisdell

These vignettes focus on the sense of responsibility we feel in trying to live life as pilgrimage in the COVID-19 era. This affects how each of us view teaching in our respective disciplines of lifelong learning and adult education (Libby) and nursing (Ann) and how we live our lives. Hence, we return again to speaking in different voices.

TPL and Responsible Practice in Lifelong Learning and Adult Education (Libby)

The roots of the field of Lifelong Learning and Adult Education are to a large extent in working for social justice, which is why the book *We Make the Road by Walking* (Horton & Freire, 1990) is so significant to me. Further, as one who is committed to living life as pilgrimage and engages in a daily meditation practice focused on heart and breath, what should my response be when the world witnessed the senseless killing of a black man whose last words are "I can't breathe"? What is my responsibility? Surely it's greater than to simply keep meditating; rather it's meditation that leads to action.

Creating an Engaged Classroom Community

Last summer I was teaching a graduate class of 15 students, "Mindfulness and Meditation, Embodied Learning, and Health" over Zoom (due to COVID-19). Race, gender, and class are dealt with to some extent in all my classes; as such there were readings dealing with cultural humility (Velott & Sprow Forte, 2019), race, and mindfulness. George Floyd was killed two days before the particular session on cultural humility. The question in many people's minds is what should our response be to these overt and unnecessary acts of racism and murder? That was the crux of our discussion in my class that night where we talked about these issues of cultural humility and the potential connection between meditation and working toward racial justice (King, 2018; Magee, 2019). One of the three Black students was crying during the discussion, but was grateful that this was a part of the readings for the course, and commented on the serendipitous nature of these readings on that particular day. This particular group of students from different political persuasions, most from the health and medical professions, over the next couple of months developed a bond like I have experienced only occasionally in a classroom, as we created and engaged in a teaching/learning community together. We named the elephant in the room—the elephant of racism. We also opened our hearts and breathed into it as we meditated together; it created a special bond, and individuals took action in different ways.

Some students would say the class was transformative as they engaged in multiple ways of knowing even over Zoom, and they took what they learned into their clinical and educational practice. Creating meditative

space that also deals with the difficult issues of racism and social justice is and was part of my action. Sawatsky (2017) discusses such actions of naming hard things as learning to "dance with elephants." I see it as my responsibility as an educator at this time in history to be an elephant dancer, to help students name the elephant, and to draw on multiple ways of knowing as they live their way into taking action and dancing with the elephant. I learned so much with them and from them, about the power of engaging multiple ways of knowing, including meditation, that helps give people courage to deal with difficult subjects. This is my responsibility in living life as pilgrimage: to dance with more elephants!

Lifelong Learning, Love, Death, and Legacy

The field of Lifelong Learning and Adult Education is not just about what happens in classrooms. Most transformative learning experiences happen while we are living our lives, not while we are in classrooms. My experiences of TPL have given me the courage to take what I have learned from trying to intentionally live my life as pilgrimage in the past decade and to bring some of those learnings into the classroom, or at the bedside as a chaplain, or to nonformal education settings. Many of these experiences have been about love, and death, and the intermingling of the two, though these are topics that have been little dealt with in transformative learning, but have been so present in our narratives above.

People keep asking me when I'm retiring. I think about it but I totally love my students and I don't think of them as students but rather as co-learners on the journey. I learn so much from them as I have from Ann and Mira and so many others. From Ann I've learned not only about TPL, but also about complexity science, and about trauma and embodied learning, which ultimately paved the way for healing from some of my own trauma through Yoga and meditation. I have supervised more than 50 dissertations in my academic career, and many have to do with transformative learning, and I've forged important relationships with many of these amazing lifelong learners. This is part of my legacy, but it's not all of it. I've learned much from sitting at the bedside of dying family members, friends, and patients in my chaplaincy. I've learned so much from love in its varied forms—from friends, lovers, and loves lost. And I've learned so much more from falling in love again and having the magic of the legacy of unexpected grandchildren. This too is legacy. But quite literally at the heart of it all is trying to create greater heart capacity, to be able to dance

with more elephants, hold more love, more pain, and more suffering, and to have the courage to take action that leads to greater justice, and further TPL. For me, key to cultivating such learning is meditation on heart and breath, creating sacred rituals, spending time in nature, and continuing to walk my way into a new sense of being. This is how I see trying to live life as pilgrimage; surely it has a place in the field of Lifelong Learning and Adult Education.

TPL and Responsible Practice in Nursing Education (Ann)

Earning my terminal degree in Adult Education resonated with a personal desire to educate nurses for action in their independent function as advocates rather than more traditional emphasis on our dependent functions. My doctoral education grounded the Clinical Action Pedagogy (Swartz, 2012) that guides my teaching. From simple to complex, using embodied learning to compare subjective and objective views of body, nurses coming into being are supported. Cultural humility and appreciation of differences are a thread throughout the primarily clinical program. Teaching for self-awareness brings this thread to life. Our local nursing curriculum delivery has been purposely shaped as rite of passage, therefore understandable as pilgrimage. Students, faculty, and staff together, we are building a legacy, creating the next generation of nurses who will care for our people.

Creating an Engaged Classroom Community

By design, I teach each cohort in every semester. Every class begins with embodied engagement, then check-in to identify issues and offer each other support. When COVID-19 arrived in spring 2020, we were half-way through the program and had learned in my classes through simulation about pandemics and interpersonal violence as public health issues with connections to disparities. As we went virtual, we continued with disaster simulations, community health education, and a family scrapbook project that is always transformative. This year it was especially so as our cohorts now include international medical graduates and have become very ethnically diverse. The sense of radical jump to a higher level of being seen and heard was palpable. In summer, we were together for mental health nursing and found it useful to reflect on dynamics of past pandemics such as denial, then seeking answers and attributing

blame, abandonment of patients, abandonment of family members, and forgetting lessons learned (Eghigian, 2020; Knoll, 2020). We shared our ongoing community assessments and individual actions. Many students recognized media distortions and presented their personal actions to teach their networks, especially the most vulnerable, evidence-based self-care and how to access care. We validated each other's efforts at this local level to mitigate any sense of helplessness. This was a useful vessel for holding all of us when the violence began. A few students shared anti-racism resources from a professional association. I shared the way my extended inter-racial family was intensifying and sharing our research into slave ancestry with its centuries of secrets, and how this emotional work felt like a way to build resilience in our younger generations who thought they had no story. That choice to love, past divorces for many of us, reinforced our capability and intention to survive.

What was striking to me about "I can't breathe" was the way it became so broadly meaningful to so many people at exactly the time that all of us could no longer breathe without thinking about breathing. The most natural of automatic bodily actions, necessary for life, now requiring thoughtful prevention in order that the necessary not become deadly. We talked about this in class, and about the basic human fear of being confined, trapped. Concurrently, what emerged among students was a mighty sense of need to return to the clinical setting, no matter what. They were bored and impatient with virtual clinical. Faculty proved much more reticent and set the stage for some conflict fueled by the death, violence, and uncertainties in our outside world as they tugged very close to home.

I was reminded of the transformative journey of my dissertation research, begun 15 years ago and mentored by Libby, studying nurses learning through fear and trauma. Fear is exactly what we had to teach with and through, in summer 2020, in the most exquisite time for becoming a nurse. We discerned the location of our sacred by looking to nursing's past, and those who were able and willing took students back to the hospital in any way we could arrange. As nurses we need connection and courage to transcend fear of our own death; to choose to love strangers who do not always appreciate us, and love the human race that sometimes seems unlovable; to walk among dangers with no promise of happy ending, just because it needs to be done, we can do it, and we would appreciate if someone took that walk for us. It is easy to understand this journey as pilgrimage.

Nursing Education, Love, Death, and Legacy

Although Registered Nurses (RNs) may trace our long history back to ancient healers, we know that "modern" nursing arose from hospitals, armed conflict, and the transformative embrace of germ theory. Nursing's big questions are well documented: professional autonomy, working conditions, relationships with other health professionals, appropriate knowledge for licensure, gender, class, and race (Baer et al., 2001). These workplace factors when perceived beyond one's control are the source of burnout. An enduring nursing response is to infuse our work with ritual. Without a sacred element, our actions might be mere routines. In *Nurses' Work: The Sacred and the Profane*, inspired by van Gennep (1909) and Turner (1969), nursing scholar Wolf (1988) described her ethnographic study of an inpatient nursing unit. The sacred rituals that allowed nurses to negotiate the profane realities of their responsibilities were post-mortem care, medication administration, medical aseptic practices, and change-of-shift reporting. Any experienced RN reads this list with a smile of recognition and a tug at the heart.

People might assume nurses are comfortable with death and dying. I made that assumption until I began to teach. I learned from my students that many nurses are uncomfortable with death and lifeless bodies, despite rituals. On my first day of work as an 18-year-old nurse's aide, I was assigned to care for a woman as she died. No instructions, no one checking in; a traditional nursing hero's journey without the rite of passage. I did what came to mind, what I would have wanted someone to do for me. I looked in her eyes when they were open, held her hand, and read her the 23rd psalm, many times. Without talking, I knew her. I was so grateful for the familiar verses that calmed both of us. Her kind eyes helped me through her death. I had discerned what was my sacred at that time.

Continually throughout every nursing career, there are questions: Why do I want to do this? What do I have to offer? Why am I exposing myself so deeply to others' illness, sadness, trauma, families, grief, joy, loss, and triumphs? The answer is usually some form of love, of a decision to commit to ongoing connection, presence, engagement, and action no matter what. That is the decision of love, with its many attendant emotions, both positive and negative. Nurses do what they do because they can, it has to be done, they love helping people, they love the puzzle and challenge, because they are called. If sacred were not deeply

embedded in the profound connections with human life that are nursing practice, the profanities of the experience could engulf. In their classic essay, *Nursing as Metaphor*, Fagin and Diers (1983) explain discomfort often arises in social settings in the presence of a nurse, because we know people and bodies so intimately and are present and involved during life's most basic rites of passage. We hold each other and our stories that cannot be told.

A satisfied and fulfilling career in nursing is transformative pilgrimage. We make the journey and are changed forever. A big question about legacy for nursing education today, in the era of COVID-19, is how do we maintain our sacred cord to our past? How do we move forward with our students, with the courage nurses have always mustered, in a world that seems, to some, much more dangerous than the one in which they trained and practiced? The students are teaching us about courage and how to nurse in the twenty-first century. What wisdom do we have to offer? Where are the commitments of our love decisions placed, and where do we stand in relation to our own deaths? Can we be the unselfish Elders who hold while listening and inviting the youthful voices to speak? Can we dream the future with them?

Conclusion

Life brings major changes that can transform us, particularly if we engage thoughtfully with others to make meaning rather than reacting automatically. Must we wait for the catastrophic? Is it only life's huge decisions that matter enough to transform us? A clear message from pilgrimage experience is that we can choose the long, unpredictable journey of transformation, personally and pedagogically. While the previous assumptions learned from family and culture may be barriers to personal transformation and action for good of the whole, (Mezirow, 1991), sometimes those assumptions fuel our finest fires, when fed with intention and openness to the sacred present in the world around us. We must be wise enough to discern our sacred.

So what does all this mean, and what conclusions can we draw about TPL and transformative learning? To be sure, most of the people that we know are most changed by what Mezirow called "epochal" transformative learning experiences, experiences of love and death that change our fundamental sense of identity. Literal pilgrimage experiences have done that, in that they helped us know how strong we really are and what we

are made of, and have implications for lifelong learning. So have significant experiences of walking the journey of death with those we deeply love, or those we connect deeply with in their final days or hours of life when we have had the courage to stay in spite of our fear. Such experiences allow us to stay in spite of fear in other difficult conversations, where we learn to dance with the elephant in the room and encourage our students, mentors, and mentees to do the same. It's by blending head with deep heart, to spend time seeking the wisdom of nature at work as our bodies tread lightly on the earth, and remembering to breathe deeply, and to help free others who cry out "I can't breathe." This is part of the task of lifelong learning and of nursing us all back to life in the COVID-19 era. And it's also to claim important sacred rituals of well-being, such as turning our faces toward the sun like the heliotropic sunflowers do, or learning to make fire in the dark, while contemplating the mystery of light in shadow, not with embarrassment, but with sacred knowing that we can offer as options to our students and other lifelong learners. Indeed, this is part of our legacy, and we offer it with deep gratitude and deep love. While our formal teaching careers will end, all of us are always teaching and learning from each other, whether we know it or not. Living life as pilgrimage means that we try to do so with intention and celebrate it with glory and gratitude.

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