

The Night Fairy and the Mama Bear

Category: Nursing

written by Pamela Adelstein | January 21, 2026

My seventh-grade social studies teacher posed a question: “Which professions are the most important?” We know-it-all adolescents shouted “Doctor!” “Lawyer!” “Accountant!” My teacher’s answer is seared into my memory: “Farmers, parents, teachers, nurses.” I was dumbfounded; my world paradigm shifted.

Why nurses? Medical care would collapse without nurses. I saw this as a medical resident when hospital nurses went on strike for better working conditions. Today, I see this at my clinic when we are short-staffed nurses. Which begs the question: If nurses are so essential, why are they so underpaid – and overworked?

A friend, also a physician, visited her hospitalized elderly relative recently. Her relative received better care on units where the patient-to-nurse ratio was smaller. When nurses carried a larger patient load, my friend noted, “The nurses did the best they could given the demands pulling at them.” My friend spent time at her loved one’s bedside to “advocate” for their needs. Patients without visitors risk getting less care and staff face time. What are the human and financial costs of this setup? Is it any wonder that there is a nursing shortage?

As a female medical student in the 1990s, and then as a new attending physician, patients often called me “Nurse.” When I corrected them, they apologized, as though being a nurse is a bad thing – or less worthy than being a physician. This is not so.

Nurses helped save my life several months ago when I was hospitalized with a vicious, out-of-the blue infection. The physicians dismissed my physical complaints as medication side effects, but the nurse in-training took seriously my concern that the infection was spreading. At midnight she helped get me transferred by ambulance from our local hospital to the ICU of a larger hospital in Boston. By simply listening, she provided invaluable care.

My two favorite ICU nurses had opposite personalities. The night nurse got me settled when I arrived, calmed my terror, and gave me hope. She was a magical fairy who lit up the surreal darkness of night. The day nurse was wise, witty, and missed nothing. She kept me laughing and feeling safe. She was a Mama Bear Nurse. When I recall these nurses, my heart swells and my eyes tear. I plan to visit the ICU to thank them in person, though words aren’t adequate to convey the depth of my gratitude. Their kindness is seared into my soul; they literally changed my life.

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