

# The Epithet

Category: Telling the Truth

written by Joan Greland-Goldstein | March 2, 2019

She appeared suddenly in the doorway and hissed, "You're very rude!"

With her words echoing around the darkened room, the evening nurse stomped off the ward as I went back to assessing my patient.

It was 1966. As a third-year nursing student assigned to the night shift, I shared responsibility for a twenty-bed unit with a nurse's aide. The evening nurse and I had just finished the two time-honored traditions that occurred with the change of shifts: patient report and counting narcotics.

When I had reported for work that night, the evening nurse was a stranger to me; I surmised she was a temp. The first thing I noticed was her stained, wrinkled uniform and her brown hair trailing out of the bun on top of her head. Her report was disorganized and incomplete. She lost track of where she was, and some of her words were slurred. I was sure something was wrong with her and speculated it might involve drugs.

When I took a dislike to someone—which happened way too frequently—I became stiff and unsmiling and refused to make eye contact. That's how we went through report: she bumbling, me coldly demanding more information.

The situation went from bad to worse when the narcotics count was off on several sedatives. I was on the phone in a flash to my supervising instructor, despite the evening nurse's objections. When my instructor came, I explained what was going on and left the two of them to figure it out while I started my rounds.

Things were resolved, and the evening nurse left, stopping to hurl her epithet at me. My instructor never told me what transpired between them and never validated my suspicions about the drug use.

I've long forgotten the nurse's name and face, but her words—*You're so rude*—never left me. Accepting them as true, I took them to heart. One of my life's goals has been to learn how not to be rude to people. Although I regret to say I've not fully achieved my goal, I've seen much improvement over the years. Every little step along the path has felt like a victory over the label that a stranger gave me many years ago.

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