

Follow the Lady with the Lamp

— Dr. Bina Roy

THERE are times in our lives, both for individuals and groups, when we reach certain milestones and pause a while to take note of the distance that has been covered and the road ahead. One such milestone is the occasion when we receive the diplomas or degrees after completion of a special course of study after which we may not meet together again as the same group sharing the same associations and experience, joys and sorrows. It is a parting of ways for a group of newly trained nurses who, we hope have become lifelong friends, will find their way into the world with all its promises and all its problems, and pursue their individual and lonely ways to professional and personal achievements. In this longest and most important venture of life this friendship will remain as the light and support adding to your joys and giving comfort through your sorrows. May this precious gift of life, **FRIENDSHIP** be yours in all its richness!

On such occasions normally questions which seek to find answers to the problems of identity are asked: "Where do we come from? Where do we go? What are we aiming at? What should we try to do—in the normal course of life and when we face unforeseen problems?" My mind goes back to the life of a woman whose biography I read long years ago. She was Florence Nightingale who acquired fame as "The Lady with the Lamp." Figuratively, she lit the first lamp of a professional service which set the worthy traditions of your profession. One quality that made her different from the rest of her society and at times was that she was a herald of revolt in an age marked by many barriers of conventions both in thought and conduct. India is not the only place where the nursing profession has had to struggle against many social conventions. The life of Florence Nightingale exemplifies the struggle even in Europe through which the

profession had to overcome the barriers of convention. To summarize the familiar story, with a single-handed effort helped by selected group of religious nursing order, she performed what is recognized officially as a near miracle in changing the conditions of the war-hospitals in Crimea. It was not a moment of sudden and sentimental decision which led to this achievement. At the age of 16 she became conscious of a call from God which gradually manifested itself of a compelling desire to help the sick, as is recorded in her diary. It took her many years of patient waiting, listening to the "inner voice" of her conscience, talking and arguing with the family and friends until the need of dedicated nurses in a difficult situation gave her the opportunity that was fraught with unusual challenge with hopes, difficulties and dangers. Her hour had come.

The single lamp which she lighted to visit the afflicted in one dismal hospital has now spread all over the world, by your sorority, linking the services in a chain of lights across the globe. But the process has not been smooth and easy. There were storms everywhere which threatened to extinguish the gentle flame and the challenge of your profession is that the lamp should give light during the dark hours of life but not generate heat that scorches.

In India we consider ourselves as a religious people. But in the spirit of true religion mankind all over the world has been in search of the meaning of life in the West as well as in the East. In the West, the process developed by establishing the relationship between God and Man as Father and Son, and that, therefore, all men are worthy of being saved. In the East, each man (i.e., each Soul) is a being and is in essence part of the Divine pervading the Universe; therefore, there is a place for each in the Universe. Both the East and the West are recognizing today

that individual welfare, if uncontrolled, will lead to inevitable clashes.

We pride ourselves that we are a 'secular State.' The concept of a 'secular state' does not mean denial of religion but elimination of prejudices in matters of Eternal life and recognition of values which survive the everlasting passage of time. When troubled by problems in these matters, turn to your worthy example of Florence Nightingale again who understood these fundamentals. She remained sensitive to her "inner voice" and not only overcame the orthodoxy of religion and social conventions but went far beyond that. I refer now to her interest in lands and people beyond her own—and including India—where she found a lack of professional attitude in dealing with many situations.

The British authorities in India found her advice of immense value regarding not only army hospitals and problems of sanitation but also her keen insight in the related problem of land tenure, irrigation and water works, famine, protection of riots against moneylenders and zamindars. She developed the lack of accurate information when needed to understand a problem fully, for she was sensitive to the needs of a total situation rather than a few scattered items and statistical information. I quote two examples:

(i) A letter to the Editor in Illustrated Land News on 31 May 1899 which read as follows:

"The Indian plot thickens; and a fire is lighted which, God be thanked, all the efforts of the world will not be able to put out. We are now going to redeem our promises to fulfil our responsibilities to India. We English have to learn a new language to India. Her day has come."

(ii) A letter Florence Nightingale wrote to the Council of the Bengal Social Science Association in 1870 when she was elected an honorary member in recognition of her work in India even though she never visited this country.

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