

*Response-Ability and the New Graduate*  
*Ohlone College Nursing Pinning Ceremony Speech*  
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I feel very close to this class because we have shared a final semester together and because we are both graduating in the same week. I graduated this past Sunday with my PhD, and I feel very honored to be here tonight and to share your graduation tomorrow. What a week of victorious celebration!!! In pondering what to talk about tonight, I decided to share some of the questions and revelations that continue to intrigue me as a new graduate.

Most of these questions and revelations come from a graduation speech that was never delivered at a graduation. These questions were actually brought up in class by one of my favorite teachers, Angana Chatterji, back in 2001, and have continued to live with me ever since. While Angana is not a nurse, she is a social activist who by the age of 34 had worked with over 1300 villages in India to preserve forests that affect the lives and health of 50 million people. Since she had devoted her life to helping the oppressed, she was curious about how the graduates from my school would use the responsibility of their education. As she reminded us, education is a privilege that unfortunately continues to remain unavailable to many people in the world. In her viewpoint, the educated had a responsibility to advocate for those less fortunate, not because the educated were superior in any way, but because those who are less fortunate often have to devote all their efforts to survival, with little free time or energy to spare to improve their situation.

As I listened to Angana back then, something in me immediately leaped for joy, but at the same time my head screamed “No, no, no!” I definitely was not a candidate for sainthood as I promptly threw a temper tantrum for several weeks. The thought of adding any more responsibility to my already overly-responsible life was just too much to bear. At the time I was a new Intensive Care Nurse who had just completed my orientation, and I was literally driving to work every day in fear of the harm I might cause if I did not live up to my new responsibilities adequately enough. I also felt worn out from a lifetime

of guilt and heaviness that seemed go hand-in-hand with the concept of responsibility. I was tired of feeling guilty because I live in a rich country, tired of serving because it is the “right thing” to do, tired of volunteering to ease my conscience or for an ulterior motive of beefing up my resume, tired of worrying how much child labor went into making the clothes and tools I use or whom I might be harming with every decision I made.

In a desperate maneuver, I tried to use my profession to get off the hook. “Surely Angana’s comments don’t apply to nurses”, I reasoned. “After all, nursing is a noble profession. Nurses serve the oppressed in their work, they care for the homeless, the poor, the victimized, they serve as patient advocates...the public votes our profession to be the most trusted year after year. As nurses we are socialized to be responsible, responsibility is our middle name.” And yet no matter how hard I tried to rationalize my exemption, I felt that I was missing something. That leap of joy I felt in response to Angana’s comments intrigued me. Where was that coming from? Was there an entirely different meaning to responsibility that I was missing somehow? I wanted to feel more of that joy.

As my temper tantrum wore off, I allowed myself to play with the word responsibility in new ways. Determined to discover its secrets, I sang it in the shower, told my dog all about it, and wrote it over and over again on an imaginary blackboard in my mind. Gradually I discovered that the word responsibility is actually composed of two words: response and ability. Or flipping the words around: ability to respond. Ah Hah! Every graduation is a celebration of a person’s growth in new response- abilities!!! And with new abilities to respond, comes new forms of power that one did not have before, a new capacity to be a different kind of presence and to perform new service in the world.

Of course the people around you intuitively know this. That’s why they ask new graduates questions like, “Where are you going to work?”, “What are your future plans?”, or in my case- “What are you going to do with your degree?” On the surface it looks like they are curious about whether they will see you again or whether they will be working with you at the same hospital...but on a much deeper level they are really asking- “What are your new abilities to respond? How are you going to use them? Are you going to use them? On the surface it may look as if you are all graduating with the same response-abilities. You have all taken the same tests, practiced similar skills, you plan to take the

boards and I assume, plan to get hired as a registered nurse. However, once the parties and celebration are over, when the pace of life has slowed down a little bit more and you have a chance to catch your breath...I invite you to ask yourselves: "What are YOUR, unique, individual new abilities to respond? How has this program changed you as a person? What are your personal new wings of power that can only get stronger if they are stretched and used?"

I too will be asking myself this same question this summer with a new twist. This time I have decided to use joy as my guide for discovering my new response abilities associated with my new degree. Over the years I have discovered that I don't like to receive help from people who are running on empty, who feel that service is a chore, or who give from guilt or feelings of superiority. The price feels too high for all parties concerned. On the other hand, I will drive an hour and a half to see my dentist because he passionately loves his work and gives from a place of overflowing abundance. While I may not know for sure what my new response abilities will entail yet, I do feel very excited about my new compass of joy for discovering them!

Thank you for sharing this journey with me. I have appreciated this opportunity to share my thoughts with you. May we all discover many, many new response- abilities!