

Margaret  
Cuninggim  
Women's Center

## Nursing: An undervalued profession

*Katharyn A. May, D.N.Sc, RN, is Associate Professor and Chair, Department of Family and Health Systems Nursing.*

Professional nurses encounter the question frequently: "you're so intelligent -- why didn't you become a doctor?" The assumption is clear: nursing is a good "second choice," but only for those who couldn't cut it in medical school.

Those in academic nursing encounter a slightly different version of the question. Report your occupation as "university professor," and you'll see interest and a hint of respect from others, probably because women are rare in that line of work. However, explain that your field is nursing, and you'll see unmistakable signs of downwardly-adjusted expectations ("oh, she's just a nurse!"). Even in our own health care world, there is resistance to using the salutation "Dr." when a nurse holds a doctorate, in the form of policies against the use of the salutation with "non-physician personnel". Somehow, as a member of the largest professional group in health care, I have never thought of myself as "non-physician personnel."

### Female-predominant helping professions

Like other female-predominant helping professions, nursing is undervalued, both in terms of respect and compensation. Its image is a combination of Cherry Ames and "Bimbos in White" (the latest version being "The Nightingales" on network television). While the stereotype is the young single female whose actions are directed by physicians' orders, and who leaves nursing upon marrying (you guessed it!) a physician, the reality is a woman in her late 30s with two to

four years of college education, practicing on the strength of her own professional license, married (not to a physician) with at least one child living at home.

The problem of nursing's image is now more than cosmetic in the midst of the most serious nursing shortage in modern history. Nurses are not leaving nursing; 92% of the 1.5 million licensed registered nurses are employed in nursing. Rather, applications to nursing schools are declining at a time when the demand for nurses is increasing exponentially in today's high-technology, labor-intensive hospitals.

### Shortage of nurses

Hospitals with insufficient nurses to provide safe care are closing beds or denying admissions. The average vacancy rate in positions nationwide has doubled since 1985; 16% of nursing positions remain unfilled in 1989, and vacancies are expected to continue increasing.

Incentives such as loans and

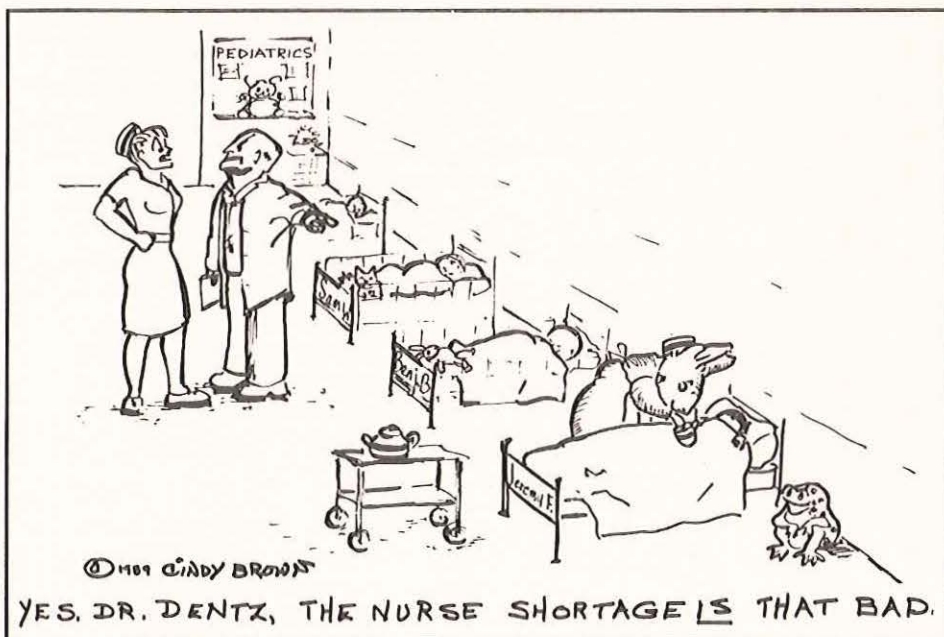
subsidies for nursing education and improved salaries and working conditions have worked to attract people into nursing in past shortages. Many doubt these incentives will work today.

### Respect and remuneration

Feminists have fought for greater respect and remuneration for female-predominant helping professions. However, theirs is not a strong voice. The countervailing message is a form of careerism which values only work that demands competition, confers status and offers the prospect of significant monetary reward. In 1987, for the first time, more college women first year students said they were interested in becoming physicians than nurses; the majority of college first year students also regarded earning a high salary as their most important life goal.

Ironically, market forces which would tend to raise nursing salaries in a time of shortage are slow to counteract strong pressures to control health care costs. Although salaries for nurses with collegiate preparation are improving, they usually lag behind starting pay for teachers and social workers, and the salary compression in nursing is

(continued page two)



## Nursing (from page one)

often worse. Starting salaries for registered nurses in many parts of the country average \$20-\$25,000 a year, and nurses "top out" with 5-7 years of experience in the \$35,000 to \$39,000 range. In areas where the shortage is most severe and cost of living is very high (such as New York and California), or where hospital administrations are enlightened, salaries for the most experienced nurses top out at \$40-\$50,000.

Resistance to increasing educational requirements for nurses is also intensifying. Again, the comparison with teaching or social work is enlightening: The minimum educational level required for these fields is the baccalaureate degree, and increasingly graduate education is necessary. However, when organized nursing proposed legislation requiring the baccalaureate as necessary for entry into professional nursing practice, the powerful medical-industrial complex opposed these initiatives, claiming it would exacerbate the shortage. The double standard is obvious: pharmacists, physicians, psychologists and even veterinarians must be educated at the post-baccalaureate level, but not nurses who care for human lives 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Like much of "women's work," nursing has a deceptive appearance of "common-sense" or "instinct" about it. What nurses do and why any intelligent person would want to do it, remains unclear to many. However, the liabilities -- low pay and public regard, salary compression, poor working conditions -- are pretty obvious.

Suzanne Gordon in an article for the *Boston Globe* called this "the crisis in caring." She writes: "America's traditional ambivalence toward altruism, its devaluation of the

meaning of human relationships, and its emphasis on competitive individualism and self-reliance have created a situation in which care giving is an endangered activity and care givers are an endangered species. . . . American women have taken advantage of new-found freedom to work in nontraditional jobs and have, in the process, begun to share society's typical antipathy for 'women's work.'"

Gordon's assertion has the ring of truth about it, at least for those of us in "women's work." After responding to the question yet again, a graduate student of mine lamented: "if women choose not to join us, I wish I knew they were cheering us on." We do, indeed. ■

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*"There will never be complete equality until women themselves help to make laws and elect lawmakers."*

Susan B. Anthony

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## It's your health

Beth Colvin Huff, RN, MSN  
Department of OB/GYN

Travel can be an exhilarating way to experience the world but can become a nightmare if illness or injury occurs. Planning ahead for a healthy trip can save time, money and frustration.

**Before trip** -- Discuss special medical problems (diabetes, heart, or circulation conditions) with your physician. Adjusting medication routines or arranging for in-flight supplemental oxygen may be necessary. Get all prescription medicines refilled and keep a separate list of the generic names of these drugs in case your medicine bag is lost.

Immunization should be current against measles, tetanus, and polio. Check with the state health department for immunizations required in countries outside North America.

Some insurance carriers (including Medicare) do not cover medical expenses outside this country. Be sure you understand the limits of coverage you have; purchasing short term travelers coverage through your insurance agent may be wise.

Special meals can be ordered from the airline at least 24 hours in advance. Lighter vegetarian meals on long flights may decrease the "sluggish" feeling that also comes with inactivity.

**In Flight** -- Due to the low humidity in pressurized cabins, dehydration can cause discomfort in the eyes, mouth, and sinuses. Alcohol and caffeine cause further dehydration, so avoid the wine and colas and drink lots of water and juices. On flights over two hours in length, walking and stretching may avoid muscle cramps and swollen ankles. Rotate feet at the ankles, flex and extend the feet and stretch the legs by straightening the knee whenever possible. Try to sleep (if you can) to minimize fatigue when you arrive.

**On Arrival** -- Get outside in the daylight, exercise and get accommodated to the local time as quickly as you can. If you do have a serious illness or injury, get in touch with the nearest U.S. embassy or consulate to provide you with names of hospitals, physicians and other service agencies.

*Have a great trip and send me a postcard!* ■

Families headed by women are five times more likely than male-headed families to be poor and suffer

from nutritional deficiencies; yet foundations gave only 16 grants totalling \$1.3 million in 1987 for hunger and nutrition programs for women.



Nearly one-third of foundations reported no grants specifically identified for projects for women and girls.

*The Women's Foundation  
Summer 1989*

**Correction:** Due to a printing error last month, the byline was omitted for the lead article, "Second Annual Cuninggim Lecture Features Janet L. Norwood." The writer for that article is Elaine Goleski, Project Manager, Library Annex. The editor regrets the omission.

# Speaking of women . . .

Joanne Lamphere Beckham,  
Assistant Director Alumni and  
Development Communications

Marillyn Craig, librarian at the Jean and Alexander Heard Central Library, is the recipient of the Mary Jane Werthan award. Craig received the 1989 award on November 8, preceding the Margaret Cuninggim Lecture. The award is given annually by the Margaret Cuninggim Women's Center in recognition of outstanding contributions toward furthering opportunities for women at Vanderbilt. It was established last year in honor of Mary Jane Werthan, the first woman to be elected a member of the Vanderbilt Board of Trust.

Craig was nominated for her work in developing a women's studies guide to library resources and for issuing a monthly list of library acquisitions. A modest woman who shuns the spotlight, Craig shares the credit for developing this unique list with "faculty members and librarians who have built the Heard Library's women's studies collection over the past decade."

"Women's Studies: Selected Sources" is the title of the original annotated, subject-arranged guide to reference and reference-type material in the library, originally issued in conjunction with Women's Week in March 1980. Since then Craig has made several major revisions: the current bibliography includes about 600 titles.

In the fall of 1985, Elisabeth Perry, then chair of the Women's Studies Committee, suggested to Craig, the librarian responsible for women's studies collection development in the Central Library, that a list be compiled of recent acquisitions in women's studies. "Women's Studies: Selected List of Acquisitions Received During the Month by the Central Library," with acquisitions of other libraries occasionally listed, has been issued by Craig since January 1986. This list contains an average of 60 titles divided into such categories as abortion, economic conditions, history, and literature. It is mailed every month to about 65 faculty

members, staff, and students. They include members of the Women's Studies Committee, faculty members who teach women's studies courses, members of the Middle Tennessee Women's Studies Association, the women's center, and others who request it.

Craig has been a librarian at the Central Library since graduating from Peabody with an M.L.S. degree in 1968. Prior to attending graduate school, she taught in public schools in Connecticut, Texas, and her home state, Florida. A member of the American, Tennessee, and Southeastern Library Associations, Craig has also served on the executive board of the Vanderbilt Women's Faculty Organization. Her present responsibilities include building and evaluat-



photo by Lesley Collins

Nancy Ransom presents Mary Jane Werthan award to Marillyn Craig

ing the reference, sociology, and women's studies collections; conducting library instruction sessions; and providing specialized and general reference service.

Anyone interested in receiving the women's studies monthly list should send their name and campus address to Marillyn Craig, Collection Development, Central Library. ■

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Headlines of newspaper clippings from  
the women's center bulletin board.

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Japan, a Man's World, Is Starting to Confront  
Sexual Harassment -- *The New York Times*

*U.S. crowds uphold abortion rights:  
150,000 turn out for rally in D.C. -- Miami Herald*

Women's pay gap smaller, official says  
-- *Nashville Banner*

Women, minorities barely represented among  
top owners (of businesses)  
--*The Nashville Banner*

When It Comes to Child Care, French Have a Lesson  
for U.S. -- *The New York Times*

To read these articles, come by the women's center.

# News quotes

**Sex bias pervades Massachusetts court system.** An almost three-year study of the Massachusetts courts, conducted by a 51-member group of judges, lawyers, and scholars concluded that systematic discrimination against women pervades the court system.

The study found that bias manifested itself in several ways, including difficulty in obtaining legal help in family conflicts, especially in divorce proceedings, poor treatment of prisoners, and offensive paternalistic comments and behavior by male lawyers and judges. These findings are similar to those reported by recent studies in New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, Maryland, and Nevada.

The study, which was released this summer, made more than 100 recommendations and urged the creation of a permanent commission to carry out the proposals and monitor their effectiveness. Recommendations included devoting more resources to representing women in family cases, making the judicial system more sensitive to the victims of rape and to the various types of rape situations, and recruiting women for jobs in the court system.

*Eleanor Smeal Report*  
September 18, 1989

**Twenty-seventh woman takes seat in U.S. House of Representatives.** The recent election and swearing-in of Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL) brings to 27 the number of women in the U.S. House. This is an all-time high. Along with the two women Senators, this means that women now hold 5.4 percent of the seats in the U.S. Congress -- still nothing to write home about. Ros-Lehtinen is anti-abortion.

Representative Ros-Lehtinen, who was born in Cuba, won a bitterly contested special election for the seat held by the late Claude Pepper since 1962.

*Eleanor Smeal Report*  
September 18, 1989

## Job rights for mothers-to-be.

Did you know that the United States is the only industrialized nation other than South Africa that does not have a *national* maternity- or parental-leave policy?

Although several states have maternity-leave laws, the only national guideline for working mothers-to-be is the Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978. This act requires that pregnant women be considered temporarily disabled and that leave policies for their pregnancies follow the company policy for temporarily disabled employees. Unfortunately, only about 40 percent of today's companies even offer temporary disability benefits, so many women are left to fend for themselves when it comes to protecting their jobs while pregnant.

A possible solution to this problem is a measure currently being considered in Congress, called the Family and Medical Leave Act. It would provide employees with 10 weeks of unpaid, job-protected leave over a 24 month period for the birth or adoption of a child or to care for a seriously ill child or parent. For personal health reasons, an employee would be guaranteed 15 weeks leave over a 12 month period.

## What the law now provides.

At this time, however, the following are the only rights guaranteed to women by federal law:

• An employer cannot refuse to hire a pregnant woman who is physically able to perform her job.

• An employee cannot be fired simply because she is pregnant.

• After the birth, an employer cannot prohibit a woman from returning to work *sooner* than the company policy dictates.

• All women are entitled to Pregnancy Discrimination Act protection, regardless of marital status.

• Pregnancy-related conditions must be covered by health insurance (if available) in the same manner as any other medical condition.

*Good Housekeeping,*  
November 1989

## Dr. Norwood speaks at Second Annual Margaret Cuninggim Lecture, November 8

Even though women earn an average of 72 percent of what men make, the pay gap is getting smaller, says a U.S. Labor Department official.

Janet Norwood, commissioner of the Bureau of Labor Statistics, spoke at Vanderbilt's Underwood Auditorium Wednesday.

"The (pay) gap between men and women who work full time is narrowing," she said. "And women are behaving more like men all the time."

She said men and women aged 16-24 earn almost the same wages, but conceded that most wage earners in that age group are in low paying, entry-level positions.

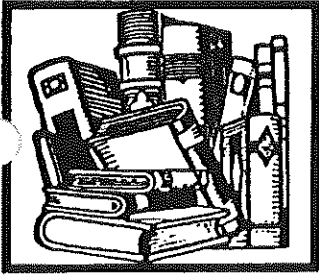
"Women earn over 90 percent of what men in the younger age group earn," Norwood said. "If the trend continues, that age cohort may set the standard for more equal treatment in the future."

*Nashville Banner,*  
November 9, 1989

## *The Vanderbilt Review,*

the University's annual literary magazine, is now accepting submissions for publication in the 1989-90 edition. Works of poetry, short stories, short fiction, dramatic plays, and photos and art from Vanderbilt students, faculty, staff, and alumni/alumna are requested. Jill Allyson Oberdas, Editor-in-Chief, says the magazine is especially interested in poetry, short stories, and fiction pieces written by women with themes concerning women.

All entries must be typed and sent to Box 7016-B no later than December 22, 1989. For more information you may contact the editor at 421-6626.



## In the library

Naomi E. Heiser  
Women's center librarian

### On Lies, Secrets, and Silence

Within the context of a liberal arts debate, it is often instructive, if not necessary, to add different voices than might usually be heard. The viewpoint from a representative of a marginalized sector of society can often reveal a reality that would not be available elsewhere. By adding the voice of Adrienne Rich to our current dialog, "Truth, Truth-telling and Lying" we can therefore move toward a greater inclusion of difference, toward enhancing the range of meaning that this debate is generating.

Although *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* appeared more than a decade ago, Rich's observations are remarkably fresh. In her introduction she explains that she has evolved from and through the "women I have been" and would no doubt make that claim about her work since then. An example of her timelessness is her comment on abortion: "I think it is no accident that for all the issues our movement has been addressing, abortion has become the most visible and emotionally charged of all our efforts to speak for ourselves and to defend our own lives." What she has included in this volume are essays which are "still to some degree useable: that is, part of the effort to define a female consciousness which is political, aesthetic, and erotic, and which refuses to be included or contained in the culture of passivity."

#### Lesbian political identity

It may sound curious to label Adrienne Rich as marginal since she

is one of the foremost feminists of the twentieth century. However, because her philosophy is consciously informed by a *lesbian/feminist* political identity, her ideas about "truth" and "lying" do come from a viewpoint that is, for the most part, not accepted by our society at large. She says, for example, that "[w]omen's love for women has been represented almost entirely through silence and lies. The institution of heterosexuality has forced the lesbian to dissemble, or be labeled a pervert, a criminal, a sick or dangerous woman, etc., etc. The lesbian, then, has often been forced to lie, like the prostitute or married woman." By connecting the oppression of lesbian and heterosexual women, Rich illustrates the pervasiveness of power relations within a patriarchy. Her discussions of racism, and the struggles that women of color and white women face and have faced because of conflicting loyalties to race and/or sex also address the meaning of power and the ways it is institutionalized.

For Rich, the meaning of truth encompasses much more than simple conscious choice not to lie. Lying can take the forms of "willful ignorance, reductiveness, caricature, distortion, trivialization..." any conscious or unconscious deformation of reality. Importantly, the withholding of information, especially that which would lead to the empowerment of a person or group, is a dishonorable act. "Whatever is unnamed, undepicted in images, whatever is omitted from biography, censored in collections of letters, whatever is misnamed as something else, made difficult-to-come-by...this will become, not merely unspoken, but unspeakable."

#### Fear of truth

The reasons for not telling the truth are many and complex. In an essay entitled "Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying(1975)," Rich examines the relations between women and how truth or dishonesty affect them. She sees that women are often afraid of what the truth may bring: pain, the disfavor of others, an encounter with "the void" in ourselves -- the "emptiness" that comes from not having established a core of identity or meaning in our lives. The liar is therefore "afraid that her own truths are not good enough." The

liar is also afraid of the "heightened complexity" that truth will bring to any situation: "Lies are usually attempts to make everything simpler -- for the liar -- than it really is, or ought to be."

Symbol and image are powerful media for the process of defining reality. The extent to which they are manipulated by various agents reveals the existence of political agendas and the enormous amount of power that is at stake in the dissemination and consumption of images. Rich feels that the image of "woman," when defined by others, is particularly harmful. "We have been expected to lie with our bodies: to bleach, redden, unkink or curl our hair, pluck eyebrows, shave armpits, wear padding in various places or

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*The liar is "afraid  
that her own truths  
are not good  
enough." A. Rich*

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lace ourselves...wear clothes that emphasized our helplessness."

#### Truth as obligation

Because the effects of lying and silence have been destructive to the well-being of women, Rich advocates embracing a conscious code of honor. We have an obligation to "question everything. To remember what it has been forbidden even to mention. To come together telling our stories, to look afresh at and then to describe for ourselves..." This would most importantly include empowering the (relatively) powerless by making relevant information available, whether that means "naming" for the first time or reopening stifled archives. Rich believes that through choosing truth, it is our duty to see that "the meaning of our love for women is what we have constantly to expand."

*On Lies, Secrets and Silence* is available in the women's center library, as are Boorstin's *The Image*, and Bok's *Lying*. ■

# Announcements et cetera

**Wild Women Don't Have the Blues: The Women, the Music, and the Legacy**, a film that shows how the economic and social transformation of African-American life early in this century gave birth to the blues. It recaptures the lives and times of Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Ida Cox, Alberta Hunter, and other legendary women who made the blues a vital part of American culture. The film compiles for the first time dozens of rare, classic renditions of the early blues.

Come by the Bishop Joseph Johnson Black Cultural Center on Monday afternoon, December 4 at 3:00 p.m. to see and discuss this film which teaches moving lessons about race, gender, and class. Co-sponsored by the Black Cultural Center and the Margaret Cuninggim Women's Center.

**New Employees Brown Bag Lunch** will be held on Tuesday, December 5 from noon until 1:00 p.m. at the women's center. All recently hired Vanderbilt employees are invited. Anyone who would like to know more about the women's center is welcome. Bring your lunch. Hot and cold drinks will be provided.

**The Margaret Cuninggim Women's Center Advisory Board** will meet on Wednesday, December 6 at 4:15 p.m. in Carmichael Towers East, room 208. Chair Christine Kreyling presiding.

**Book Group** will meet on Monday, December 11, 5:15 p.m. until 6:15 p.m. at the women's center to discuss *Parallel Lives: Five Victorian Marriages* by Phyllis Rose. Kathleen Kitzmiller will facilitate the discussion. New members are welcome. Light refreshments.

**Students for Choice** will meet on Wednesday, December 6, at 7:00 p.m. in Mr. Hebbs, Carmichael Towers East. New officers will be elected. For more information call the co-chairs, Catherine Scallan at 343-7834 or Paige Baker at 383-5946.

**Vaginal Births After Cesarean Encouraged.** For a free pamphlet about vaginal birth after cesarean, send a self-addressed, stamped, business-size envelope to the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, Resource Center, Department P, P.O. Box 21474, Washington, D.C. 20009-0974.

## Divorce After Forty Survey

The National Center for Women and Retirement Research is conducting a survey of women whose marriages ended in divorce when they were between the ages of 40 and 65. This research project seeks to understand how divorce after forty effects women financially, emotionally, socially, and physically and how women cope with this experience and build new lives for themselves. The information gathered from these surveys will be used to design materials and programs to help other women through the divorce transition and assist them in creating a positive new life and a secure future.

If your marriage ended between your fortieth and your sixty-fifth birthdays and you are willing to fill out a confidential survey form, please call the National Center toll-free at 800-426-7386.

*The Network News,*  
September/October 1989



Edited by JUDITH T. HELFER

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