

President's Keynote

Courage to Soar

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INTRODUCTION

Hello NTI!

Thank you, Mom, for that lovely introduction!

I love you!

Welcome to New Orleans! Don't you just love this city?

This city so exemplifies our theme, "**Courage to Soar.**"

Hurricane Katrina brought once-in-a-generation flooding and damage. Yet this city and its citizens found the strength to rise up. To build back their neighborhoods, their homes and their vibrant culture.

They displayed such a spirit of celebration and resilience. This beautiful city of vibrant Mardi Gras festivities, colorful King Cakes and joyful second-line processions shows us what can be achieved when we look ahead to sunnier days and new opportunities.

How many of you were at NTI last year?

Last year, I took a risk on the NTI stage when I shared my personal story of vulnerability, of doubt, of reinvention, of surviving and thriving and emerging better and stronger.

Since then, I've been blown away by how our theme touched so many of you.

How the message – vulnerability is not weakness – resonated and landed. How it stirred you to connect with me and share how you recognized and owned the Courage to Soar in your own lives.

WHAT WE FOUND ON THE OTHER SIDE OF COURAGE

As I traveled the country, virtually and in person, meeting AACN chapter members and a community of bold, brilliant nurses, you gifted me with your own stories and what you discovered on the other side of courage. Let me give you some examples.

Juliet Wilson from AACN's Palm Beach County Chapter sent me a Courage to Soar poem! It's brave to share something so intimate. One couplet reads: "Stay committed; fight for something bigger than you/Do something amazing and bring others with you." A great reminder for us to lead from where we are and lift others.

Bonnette Webb, an AACN ambassador and chapter advisor from West Palm Beach, Florida, fulfilled a promise to her Papa. She brought him to America from the Philippines so she could care for him when he got old.



At the time, Bonnette was a single mom of two struggling to make ends meet. She's been a nurse since 1994. She told me, "I'm a nurse who believes you need to be vulnerable and intentional to have the Courage to Soar."

Brittany Stutzman, from the West Michigan Chapter, shared that she boldly advocated for her paraplegic patient who was vented and sedated. She encouraged the intensivist to perform a spontaneous airway test, working against norms to move her patient closer to waking, actively participating in PT/OT, interacting with family and eventually extubation. She admitted, "I feel a little vulnerable sharing this because celebrating ourselves isn't always comfortable."

And yet, courage starts with vulnerability.

VULNERABILITY IS NOT WEAKNESS

For so long, leaders who are vulnerable have been seen as weak. They're flawed.

But here's a hard truth: Leaders who refuse to show vulnerability aren't strong — they're fragile.

As a leader in any situation, pretending to have all the answers breeds distrust and limits team innovation.

I've discovered that real leadership is being able to say, "I don't know, but let's figure it out together."

Brené Brown's research shows that teams thrive when leaders embrace uncertainty. Not when they pretend to be infallible. Why? Because it creates psychological safety. It makes space for creativity, collaboration and real problem-solving.

For me, and in the examples I just gave of our fellow AACN nurses, we see vulnerability as a starting point for the courage to uncover a new path, to discover a fresh opportunity.

So, how do you reframe vulnerability as strength?

Here are three steps I use:

First, **turn failure into fuel**. After a setback, I ask, What did I learn that will make me stronger? What can I do to avoid, or at least minimize, failure in the future? Fear of failure is a powerful paralyzing agent, isn't it? I adjust my viewpoint to see fear as fleeting and failure as success fuel.

Next, **own your gaps**. What does that mean? It's about self-awareness and ownership of your strengths and weaknesses – about honest acknowledgment of the gaps in your skills, knowledge or experience. It's about actively working to close those gaps. I try to admit when I don't have the answer. It invites others to step up, contribute and sharpen their own skill set.

Third, **encourage risk-taking**. We try to avoid risks when caring for patients. But we need to think differently to advance our practice and enhance outcomes. We need to encourage bold ideas and praise effort, not just perfect execution.

Bottom line: The future belongs to those who embrace empathy, vulnerability and belonging. Not as soft skills, or survival skills, but as thriving skills.

THE POWER OF EMPATHY AND BELONGING

Let's take a closer look at empathy.

Empathy is more than a soft skill — it's a competitive advantage. Empathy means understanding how others experience the world.

It means truly grasping and even experiencing another person's emotions. Empathy requires an open mind and active listening to establish a genuine connection with that person.

For years, healthcare institutions have made efficiency a priority over connection. It turns out that efficiency is no longer a human advantage. AI works faster and doesn't experience burnout.

Empathy remains a distinctly human skill.

Let me share four ways we can become more empathetic:

1. **Ditch Performative Listening:** Stop nodding along while thinking of the next thing you need to do. Pay attention. Ask deeper questions. Listen to understand.
2. **See the Person, Not Just the Work:** When you interact with colleagues, offer support, not assumptions.
3. **Acknowledge Pain:** Do you feel pressure to be a fixer? Sometimes, the most powerful thing you can say is, "I see you. I hear you. You're not alone."
4. **Belonging Is Essential:** Remember Maslow's hierarchy of human needs? Belonging is only surpassed by physical and safety needs.

SELF-ADVOCACY AND SUPPORTING OTHERS

Seeing, hearing and supporting others is the gateway to advocacy. And advocacy is at the core of nursing and the backbone of AACN's job as a national organization.

As nurses, we ensure patients and families receive the care, respect and resources they need and deserve. Advocating includes speaking up for them when they can't express their needs. Advocacy is about ensuring ethical treatment and full access to care are available for all.

Yet even while we advocate for patients, we must also advocate for ourselves and our peers. Achieving a balance between supporting others and advocating for ourselves is crucial to sustain a fulfilling and long-lasting career in nursing.

Over the last 13 months, we've published AACN standards for appropriate staffing in adult critical care and adult progressive care. We can support our fellow nurses by providing professional development opportunities, implementing healthy work environments and appropriate staffing, and achieving safe conditions free from workplace violence.

As we advocate for peers and patients, we must also stand up for ourselves by seeking work-life harmony, recognizing personal boundaries and preventing burnout. Asserting the need for professional growth, fair compensation and leadership opportunities. Engaging in professional organizations and policy discussions to influence healthcare practices.

By integrating patient, peer and self-advocacy, we can create a culture of empowerment within the healthcare system. This allows us as nurses to sustain our passion, maintain well-being and continue making meaningful contributions to patient care.

MENTORSHIP MATTERS

A critical aspect of strengthening nursing is to mentor and champion each other.

A great leader's legacy isn't their own success — it's the success of those they mentor, champion and empower. The best leaders see potential in people before they see it in themselves. That's why leaders also need mentors and champions.

Experienced nurses play a vital role in guiding, supporting and inspiring newer nurses. Mentorship fosters confidence, professional growth and resilience. It supports new-to-practice nurses as they transition smoothly into their roles while avoiding burnout.

Champions in nursing are equally important.

Champions are leaders who advocate for their peers and elevate the profession. They serve as role models, push for improvements across the system, and create supportive environments. They ensure that nurses at all levels and from all backgrounds have advancement opportunities. This is how we grow stronger teams, improve care and enjoy greater job satisfaction.

Hospitals and other healthcare institutions need to invest in formal mentorship programs. Programs that pair seasoned professionals with newcomers can foster skill development, emotional support and professional guidance.

By doing this, health systems can ensure that the next generation of nurses is ready to meet future challenges.

Nurses at **every** stage of their careers are the heart and soul of healthcare in communities everywhere.

THE VALUE OF NURSING

Now, listen to this.

Last year, a national blueprint proposed new principles to measure what nurses do. It pointed out how nearly 34 million people receive care from acute and critical care nurses every year. 34. Million.

You touch so many lives every day. You create healing environments. You prevent complications. You build relationships with patients and families. And you do it with purpose.

What you contribute to patient education and transitions of care helps reduce hospital readmissions and promotes long-term health outcomes.

And yet, as nurses we often struggle with system barriers that devalue our work.

We'll say it again and say it until we're heard: Nurses are an investment, not a line item in the budget!

Line item thinking is what leads to inadequate staffing, rigid institutional policies and less professional autonomy.

Nurses are frequently burdened with administrative tasks that detract from direct patient care and diminish job satisfaction and patient outcomes.

Nursing is more than a profession. Nursing is a fundamental component of healthcare delivery.

Recognizing the value of nursing and investing in nurses leads to sustainable, high-quality healthcare systems.

All of this will take courage.

Courage to enact the systemic changes we need to ensure nurses are empowered, respected, adequately supported and compensated to continue our essential role in transforming patient care.

WHAT WILL YOU DO NEXT

What will we find on the other side of courage?

I found the gift of being your AACN president. A gift I can never begin to repay.

But I can promise to keep advocating for our profession, nurses, patients and our community.

I can promise to continue being a mentor.

I can promise to continue being courageous and vulnerable in the eyes of adversity.

And I will never forget the amazing gift of being your leader this past year.

Now, what will you find on the other side of courage?

An opportunity to grow, learn, evolve, advocate?

Will you start a new path or a new role? Face a new challenge?

You've been courageous before.

Call on that courage to examine issues like unsupportive work cultures, workplace violence, bullying, moral distress and impostor syndrome.

Maya Angelou said, "Do the best you can until you know better. Then, when you know better, do better."

So, now that you know better ... what will you do next?

Courage is the theme of my life. I know you're courageous too, leading with wisdom and seeking to continue learning. I think the musician Pink said it best: "That's all I know so far."

Thank you!