

## President-elect's Keynote

# On Purpose

NTI 2025

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## INTRODUCTION

Even though I dreamed of this moment, it seems both surreal and unreal.

I'm amazed and humbled to be here on this stage, and proud to be your AACN president-elect.

We all have a unique origin story of how we found our way to where we are. Here's mine ...

## ARTIST OF NURSING

Our family farm was down a long, gravel road. I walked barefoot everywhere, climbed trees, swam in creeks and danced naked in the summer rain.

I went to a small school, in a small town, with one yellow flashing traffic light and no gas station. A pass-through place where time stood still.

No one I know would describe me as shy. But in that small school, in that small town, I learned to be shy about sharing myself.

Let's just say I was ... different.

Sensitive.

Awkward. So ... socially awkward.

A little lonely in the wilderness. Searching for connection ... but not knowing how to connect with others.

My sense of place, of being rooted to the earth, valuing my environment, craving community (despite being a legit introvert) and my earnest search for purpose began here.

In second grade, I wrote a letter to my future self.



Dear Me,

I never hope to work in a hospital.  
Mabe I'll do art.  
I'd never teach school.  
I mite work on a farm.  
I want to be bunny on easter.

From Rebekah Jean Marsh  
in 2nd grad.

It was a time capsule message and, yes, when I opened it, I was ... a nurse!

Dear Me,

So, today, I work in a hospital.

I am an artist.

I believe that to teach is to learn, and I am a student of life.

I live in the city, but I find hours of solace in my container garden.

I want to be the Easter Bunny. (I admit, this still sounds fun.)

I didn't always know that I was meant to be a nurse.

My path has followed the contours of living, and the years I spent finding my way to nursing were not a detour. I was searching for both a way to make a difference and personal stability. I was seeking purpose and practicality.

Things change. People change. Let there be room for change and wonder. That spirit of inquiry is the foundation of empathy for others, and an opening for art and beauty and purpose in our work.

That is the one true thing here: I am an artist with every fiber of my being. I have studied art. I do art on paper. I do art as a nurse.

Deciding to be an artist was the beginning of unmasking myself. Embracing feeling different, being neurodivergent.

The myth of the suffering artist proved false for me; I'm more inspired by joy. And healthcare benefits. Turning 30 and not having healthcare benefits can be a motivator for life change.

My inspiration came after a long shift at the bar – bartending prepared me for a nursing career more than anything else I have done. While watching late-night TV, I saw a Johnson & Johnson commercial recruiting people like me to the nursing profession.



For those of you who don't remember, let me describe it. A nurse, in pristine scrubs, standing attentive and poised at the bedside, and an alert, well-rested patient in a clean bed and spacious room. I felt a sense of caring, purpose and human connection.

This I could do.

This looked like art.

### ACT 1: FIND IT

On my first day as a nurse, I was told, "New grads don't belong in this clinical space."

When I asked a question, they replied, "You don't know that already?"

When I cried on a shift, I was asked, "Is this the path for you?"

Perhaps I was too sensitive and not everyone is cut out for this.

In a profession defined by its caring, was I too caring?

I almost walked away from nursing. Maybe my second-grade self was right: This hospital world was not for me.

But I stuck it out. I proved them wrong.

To survive, I put on the mask of an ICU nurse. The mask we sometimes wear to do the important but difficult work we do. It's also a mask I've worked to remove so I could be the kind of nurse I've always imagined I could be.

It's a mask of false courage, a construct to put others at ease and to keep my tender heart safe. To guard against the very burnout the mask came to represent.

This is one way we acquire unhealthy coping behaviors. And then we teach these behaviors to others.

It's time to break that cycle.

Burnout. Mindfulness. Resilience.

How many of you just got turned off by my choice of words? Because someone used one or all of those words in a way that you found to be inadequate, inappropriate, smug, or worse, gaslighting. Sometimes we don't know how to begin the conversation, or it's just easier not to talk about it.

At the root, that's part of the issue. And if we focus on the issue, I say nurses need evidence and skills that better prepare them for the clinical world not shown in that J&J commercial. I didn't have these skills when I was a new nurse. I learned by trial and error.

Now, I'm a nurse educator and honestly still a student, motivated to speak plainly about the issues and not get lost in the words, so that we can learn together.

With human lives in the balance, moral distress is a terrible but expected professional risk, even within an ethical and well-resourced practice. All the more reason for us to normalize our profession's need for advanced clinical, professional and personal skills.

Moral distress is not human frailty, not personal failure. It is a sign of caring.



We all came here today by a different path, bringing our unique experiences and our humanity to the profession. We can simultaneously elevate nursing care through evidence-based standards and bring it to life through the art of individualized caring practice.

It isn't about having a superpower or being born to be a nurse. Artists are not necessarily gifted with innate talents but undertake a practice that is meant to last a lifetime. It isn't about faking it until you make it; practice it until you become it.

And when we or our colleagues need support, we talk openly and factually about burnout, mindfulness and personal resilience strategies.

## ACT II: OWN IT

Nursing demands that we be flexible learners with advanced critical thinking skills.

As Eleanor Roosevelt said, "Be confident, not certain."

In a sense, that's how I ended up here, on this stage. I strive to grow.

AACN has been my professional home since I became CCRN certified. That was my gateway into a wider world of nursing practice.

How many of you are certified?

Congratulations!

Maintaining my CCRN certification for over a decade remains one of my proudest accomplishments as a nurse.

I'm certified, because another certified nurse, my clinical nurse specialist, Dr. Patricia Blissitt, encouraged me.



Certification represents not only my advanced specialty knowledge; it connects me to my community of specialty nurses.

I did not get here alone. Pat convinced me to teach my first lecture. And it was Pat who helped me complete the AACN Clinical Scene Investigator (CSI) Academy application.

I am proud to be the first AACN president-elect to be a CSI Academy alum! If earning my CCRN sparked a growing curiosity about national specialty standards, CSI Academy showed me what to do with my curiosity to help improve the delivery of care on my unit.

The optimal way to drive change from the bedside is to give nurses autonomy over their practice. This just makes sense; it just makes sense. AND it improves outcomes and saves money.

We have endless opportunities to be open to questions. To examine the reasons we do what we do and understand the why. That's what we call practice improvement. Evidence-based practice. Nursing research. The foundation of nursing autonomy. How we shape and transform healthcare.

In the years since my foundational leadership training as a CSI nurse, I have become passionate about coaching clinical staff nurses to lead the changes they wish to see in their practice.

AACN connects me with other nurses engaged in continual learning. Here we are together today. That electric feeling of being in a room full of nurses who are curious.

I may have joined AACN for certification and stayed for the educational content, but I am passionate about my AACN community because we learn and grow together. I have seen the power and magic in this community, from certification to CSI to NTI and networking.

I found purpose in volunteering for AACN.

### **ACT III: GROW IT**

I was so excited when I was elected to the AACN Board of Directors. Like I was elected-the-Easter-Bunny excited. It was the spring of 2020. Do you remember the spring of 2020?

Before I even started my term, I had a personal crash. A little global pandemic crash. Moral distress I could not resolve. Burnout, that word again; but let's be real.

At the end of many days, and sometimes at the start, I wasn't sure nursing was still a good decision. I didn't feel like a leader of nurses, and certainly not one worthy of the AACN Board of Directors. Impostor syndrome.

I share my pandemic story knowing we all have a story. We all had something going on. If you were a nurse, if you were human, you had something going on. Still, we measured ourselves against the experiences of others and decided some had it better or worse. I could be describing a global pandemic or just another shift. And, because we know how to advocate for our patients better than for ourselves, maybe we swallow our feelings or we explode.

I did a little of both.

It felt like I was drowning. That kind of vulnerability doesn't feel like a strength. I am still processing that experience. By sharing, maybe there is something that can be learned from it.





I have wondered whether I can ask for help before falling down the rabbit hole and crying myself to sleep. Can I be authentically vulnerable when it really counts and not just when things are going well? Is it even possible to stand before you and share my fears and still have your confidence?

I'm in the middle of it. The experiment is running right now. I'll let you know how it turns out.

We learn. We grow. We get better.

### ON PURPOSE

My godfather, Wendell Berry, is an amazing poet and environmental activist. He says, "It is not from ourselves that we will learn to be better than we are."

I didn't get here alone. And I can't go where I'm headed alone.

The peer support I receive from my colleagues is an essential balance to the daily challenges we face in healthcare. We can't wait for big celebrations that are too few and far between. This is why I love education, because I get to create small moments of shared learning and joy.

Isn't that why we all gather here together at NTI? To learn and share and seek the catalyst that will revitalize our nursing practice. We find intentional joy through collaborative pursuit of practice improvement.

Through the wisdom and examples of others we find our best selves.

Others help us carve our path and follow it.

In community, we can inspire a shift in culture, a transformation of practice that will build the healthcare system we envision, driven by the needs of patients and families where acute and critical care nurses make their optimal contribution.

Cynicism is easy, filled with judgment and fear. Creativity is about choosing curiosity over fear. To be authentic leaders we need to foster and maintain the healthiest work environments.

It starts with each of us claiming and owning our potential to design the future that nurses and patients deserve. To stop projecting our past experiences on the future workforce and make space for them to join us at the table. We cannot shape the future of nursing alone.

We are nurses. We are leaders. But we are also artists and architects and gardeners.

We are building the future. Together.

Together, we grow it ... On Purpose.

Join me in a year of intentional practice, as we center on the AACN theme: On Purpose.

On Purpose, we can take the joy we cultivate at NTI and continue to spread that joy with our colleagues, patients and families.

Thank you!