

President's Message

What's in a Story? Looking Back to Move Forward



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For those who do not know me well, know that story telling is a strong part of who I am. From my perspective, stories honor not only a moment in time but also the people involved. Stories help us contextualize and emotionally connect to an experience outside of ourselves. As we go through life, we know that some stories bring us joy, while others caused us pain. It is the experience of this range of emotions, particularly through personal retellings, that is so important to build our character, heal our scars, and create meaningful human connections. Even when an experience is shared, the story from each person's perspective may be markedly different. Telling stories and reflecting on them helps us travel beyond the facts or historical data. They allow us to consider the human condition—the range of emotions and experiences that connect us all—so that we all may be more empathetic and compassionate.

The Story, the Storyteller, and the Listener

From a more scientific perspective, we know stories are a powerful way to convey a message because they are able to elicit emotional responses. A recent article talked about this in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic ([Renken, 2020](#)). Stories can make our palms sweat or our heart race. They also affect neural pathways in our brain and how we relate to each other. Neuroscientists found that brain waves of an individual listening to a story can synchronize with that of the person telling the story ([Stephens, Sibert, Hasson, 2010](#)). Moreover, when the story was told verbally through shared communication, the listener's comprehension was heightened ([Stephens, Sibert, Hasson, 2010](#)).

The role of the story, the storyteller, and the listener are inherently intertwined. Stories make up all aspects

of our lives— professionally and personally. Who tells the story can be just as powerful as the story itself. While a dynamic and authentic storyteller can convey emotion whether they experienced the event or not, it is much easier to tell a story when you have walked the walk yourself. *Lived experience* matters in storytelling. As was noted in the [Renken article \(2020\)](#), how personally connected the storyteller is can make the difference between a story coming across as a lecture or a personal truth. This significantly impacts the listener's ability to change beliefs or perspectives— authenticity matters.

The Academy's Story

As we prepare for our 50th Anniversary in 2023, it is incredibly important that we reflect on the Academy's collective story. It is more than outlining the key dates and events; it is also the experiences of Fellows who helped build the organization and invested in it. We must reflect on how decisions that caused pain in the moment have reverberated into the future. We must also reflect on how innovation, collaboration, and dedication ushered in milestones of success for the organization and in turn the public's health. We need to acknowledge the range of experiences across our Fellowship in order to be authentic.

Some of this work has been captured in various historical documents since the Academy's inception. In 1985, Rosemary McCarthy wrote, the *History of the American Academy of Nursing: 1973-1982*. This retelling discusses how the Academy was formed through the American Nurses Association's House of Delegates and the original visioning of the Academy as an "institution of learning (p. 4)." It detailed the methodology for selecting a Fellow of the Academy and how many Fellows could be inducted. Also included in the document are important statements that were adopted such as the Academy's 1977 statement on *Nurses in Primary Care*. Much of this version of our history consisted of actions, dates, and, importantly, names. That is what resonated to me the most because many of them I knew—some of whom I knew personally. Immediately, an emotional connection came through because of my experiences with these nursing powerhouses.

In 1998, for the Academy's silver Anniversary, the *American Academy of Nursing's 25th Anniversary—Raising the Standard: The Role of AAN Transforming the Nursing*

Profession was published. This document included photos from our past— pictures of the Board of Directors posed, seated and standing, as well as action shots of nurses transforming care. This document brought to the forefront the critical role the Academy played in developing the Magnet Hospital Study. As the history states, it was a “...benchmark for the Academy in many ways. The report demonstrated that nurses could exercise their right to study their own domain and control their own territory (p.16).” Since then, the Magnet designation has been one of the nursing profession’s most acclaimed recognitions. I wonder to myself if the leaders of this study could have imagined the impact it would have almost 40 years later. I am sure there are many rich stories underlining this major accomplishment.

In 2004, Joan Shaver, Academy President at the time, wrote *AAN Organizational Age and Stage: Reflections*, which was published in *Nursing Outlook*. It reflected on the organization’s 30-year history, the development of the Council for the Advancement of Nursing Science, the organization’s media awards, and partnership with the John A. Hartford Foundation for Building Academic Geriatric Nursing Capacity. What I found so insightful about Dr. Shaver’s commentary was her reflection on the incubation stage of the organization and the continual journey “toward optimal mature actualization (p. 4).” Her last statement is one that has been embodied by Academy past presidents over the years, “Let us stay focused on ensuring that the AAN stays in a state of mature, productive adulthood for many decades to come and like the theme of our 30th Anniversary program, make sure that it lives well into its 90s at the least (p.4).” Reading these words, I wonder what the Board of Directors was feeling, what decisions they were debating, and how the Fellows responded. I’m sure many of their thoughts related to the organization’s sustainability—something we continue to reflect on during Board discussions today.

Looking Back to Move Forward

As the President who will preside over the organization’s 50th anniversary, I would like to extend Dr. Shaver’s prediction to the organization’s 100th year. From my perspective, the Academy has been continually moving toward mature actualization. As a storyteller, I will also focus on how we understand and assess the Academy’s organizational growth. It is

beyond the numbers of Fellows inducted or statistics surrounding our demographics. Growth is about expanding opportunities, welcoming new voices, and celebrating our collective successes. Capturing the oral histories and the moments that brought joy as well as pain will be powerfully important to envisioning our future. We will have to reconcile with the decisions that created structural barriers and those that impacted Fellows’ sense of belonging, or lack thereof. This will take time, energy, and intention. Because the history of the Academy, the story of the Academy, is not that of one person but of many. Acknowledging the variety of stories of within our Fellowship will help us build a truly diverse and inclusive space well into the future. It is my hope that these stories will also show us how similar the emotions each of us experienced in our journey towards Fellowship have been.

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FURTHER READING

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