

**Victorian Reform and Revolt:
The Life of Florence Nightingale**
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In 1818 William Edward Shore Nightingale (known as WEN) and Frances Smith (known as Fanny) married in a small, English ceremony. Their marriage represented the continuing union among a persecuted, stalwart minority of Dissenting Protestants in England. They were known as Socinians, Rational Christians, and Unitarians, individuals who believed in education and abolition, questioned everything, held anti-Trinitarian beliefs, and was as despised by the Church of England as the Catholics.

The Nightingales and Shores had long Dissenting Protestant roots, as did the Smiths. In fact, Fanny's father, William Smith, was the only Unitarian in Parliament. A contemporary noted of Smith "A middle class Dissenter, owing his fortune to trade, bearing the plebian name of Smith, and, worst of all, a Unitarian, needed some courage to enter the House at all."¹ Gill goes on to note that Unitarians were the "most reviled sect within the small, reviled community of English Protestant Dissenters."² Smith successfully introduced the Unitarian Act of 1812, which made it legal to preach anti-Trinitarian beliefs for the first time in England's history. Given all this, Gill notes that Unitarian families were loyal to one another, and intermarried (like Nightingale and Smith), and that their faith was a "spur, not a hobble."³

Although not practicing Unitarians, WEN and Fanny were educated, well traveled, monied, and full of reformist Dissenting values. It is no surprise that their second daughter, Florence, rocked her family and the world by refusing to marry, defying the British government and military in her attempts to improve nursing and aid the lives of soldiers, and when she was exhausted and fed up, living like a recluse for almost twenty years.

Struggling mightily against all Victorian female role models and even, in part, her own conscious, Florence refused to sit at home and play second to any husband while her intellect and organizational skills ran rings around all her contemporaries. She believed women had the right to work like men, but she refused to work for women's suffrage. By today's standards her faith was puritanically aesthetic and Christian. However, Florence Nightingale approached nursing and military medical reform with the reformist zeal of her Dissenting fore-bearers, especially Grandfather Smith. In this way, she was much like another brilliant contemporary American Unitarian woman, Margaret Fuller, more intelligent than most men she knew, equally competent, and wholly unable to find her place in a Victorian world where women were supposed to stay at home, and men were to conduct all public business. Like Fuller, she chose another route, and like Fuller, her private and familial consequences were high and never fully resolved.

I have always been fascinated by the Unitarian ability to educate our children right out of our faith and mainstream society. In this way Florence Nightingale was similar to Ralph Waldo Emerson. Florence's father, WEN, took the unusual step of

¹ Lady Stephen quoted in *The Nightingales*: by Gillian Gill (), 19.

² Gill, 14.

³ Gill, 14.

educating both his daughters, Parthenope and Florence, at home. Born in Italy in 1819 and 1820 respectively (and Florence was born in Florence), both girls were bright, but Florence excelled at languages (she fluently spoke, read, or wrote six languages), philosophy, and mathematics. As Gillian Gill notes in her fascinating new history, *Nightingales: The Extraordinary Upbringing and Curious Life of Florence Nightingale*, “In pursuit of knowledge Florence was remorseless. She was brilliant, she was focused, she was competitive, and she identified learning, correctly, as an avenue of power.”⁴

As she grew older, thanks to her father’s education, Florence could intellectually hold her own with any man, any Lord, any officer, any professor, any salon hostess, anybody anywhere, and she regularly did. Due to her family’s money and social connections, as well as her own career, she ultimately met or interacted with some of the most fascinating and influential individuals of her day.

Long before her fame in Crimea as the Lady of the Lamp, Ada Byron Lovelace wrote this tribute to Florence

I saw her pass, and paused to think!
 She moves as one on whom to gaze
 With calm and holy thoughts, that link
 The soul to God in prayer and praise.
 She walks as if on heaven’s brink,
 Unscathed thro’ life’s entangled maze . . .
 Her grave, but large and lucid eye
 Unites a boundless depth of feeling
 With Truth’s own bright transparency,
 Her singleness of heart revealing;
 But still her spirit’s history
 From light and curious gaze concealing.⁵

From her mother, Fanny, Florence acquired her managerial skill and religious fervor, also probably her charismatic personality. Fanny set about “reforming” the young Florence when she was only seven years old because she thought Florence was self-absorbed and unkind, spoiled. She appointed a severe governess, for whom Florence never forgave her parents (and in that special way that children have, she made them pay for this thirty years later). As Gill points out, Florence was not truly spoiled or unkind. She was a girl blessed and burdened with the Victorian disposition and talents of a boy or man. As a man Florence would have gone to Parliament and shone, as a woman she chafed and struggled and twisted round, trying in vain to be a good daughter, family member and female caretaker, while channeling her tremendous talent and ambition, always sensing that she was falling short.

Fanny was a devout Bible reader and so were her girls. In the vein of Unitarianism as a “spur rather than a hobble,” remember that our Unitarian fore-bearers were both Biblically well versed and full of religious and reformist values. They weren’t evangelical, but they were driven to self-improvement and service. This is an unspoken message that Florence embraced with relish. She went even farther though. In 1837, at

⁴ Gill, 129.

⁵ Quoted in Gill, 156.

the age of seventeen, unbeknownst to anyone, she experienced a mystical vision and heard the voice of God calling to her.

As Gill notes, at the time “Nightingale had next to no knowledge of the mystic tradition. The two major religious cultures that shaped Nightingale – enlightenment Unitarianism and . . . Anglicanism – were both almost peculiarly alien to mysticism.” At the same time Nightingale was hearing God’s voice, Emerson was leading the Transcendental movement in America, experiencing God in nature. But Nightingale’s mystical experience, although linked to similar Transcendental reform movements and reform through character (Transcendentalism as religious and social reform) was not about evolving theology. It reads much more like St. John of the Cross or Teresa d’Avila, an individual moved and tormented by mystical visions, driven to serve, but not fully knowing how. (In fact, in later years, Nightingale flirted with Catholicism, to her mother’s horror.)

In an 1842 letter to her prim and puritanical Aunt Hannah, Nightingale writes “There is no pure thought in me . . . All that I do is poisoned by the fear that I am not doing it in simplicity and godly sincerity.”⁶ These are private thoughts and fears that Nightingale expressed throughout her life. She could never reconcile her ambition and service. Instead she remained wracked with questions about her personal motivations and confounded by her own ambition, instead of celebrating her gifts and the good they created for thousands of English men and women (and seeing this gift as perhaps God’s plan).

In this way she is very much like a Victorian woman and a Unitarian. As a Victorian man she would have been encouraged and had more self-confidence. But as a Victorian woman, educated as she was, she was guilty about leaving home and seeking glory. In addition, the Unitarian “spur of faith” even today also often comes with a layer of guilt, never enough done, never done just the right way, never time to rest, someone needs help, there is more work to do. We are often, even today, more like our Puritan ancestors than we would like to admit.

And like Unitarian children most everywhere and in every age, Florence looked down on her parent’s wealth and comfort. According to Gill, in Florence’s eyes her father was an “amiable failure. Flo would have liked him to work a seventy-hour week running a manufactory or go into Parliament and campaign for labor reforms . . . Moreover, Florence preached poverty while taking affluence for granted.”⁷ I’m sure your children never tell you that you have sold out as a capitalist while using the \$100,000 you set aside for their college education.

Nightingale was burdened in Victorian England by both her gender, and family circumstances. Like a good Jane Austen novel, the Nightingale money was entailed away from the women of the family. Florence’s father, WEN, had surprisingly inherited the Nightingale money, but at his death, the money they had enjoyed would not remain with Fanny and the girls, but go to another male relative. So WEN and Fanny worried when they had no sons. They worried even more when neither of their daughters married and had children, preferably grandsons. Parthenope was frail, often ill and not attractive. Although she desperately wanted to marry and live the role of a traditional female Victorian and have children, she had no suitors. Ironically, her younger sister, Florence,

⁶ Gill, 182.

⁷ Gill, 255.

who surpassed her at everything including beauty and charm, refused two excellent offers of marriage before she was thirty.

WEN, Fanny, Parthenope, and Florence were in an uproar and at an impasse. There were no boys anywhere, Fanny was a checkmated Mama, Parthenope was often ill and needed to be nursed but wanted to be married, and Florence wanted to break free and become a nurse. As Gill notes, Nightingale's idea of nursing was based on an ethic of public service.⁸ Since her childhood she had enjoyed nursing people from the small communities around the numerous Nightingale homes.

Her family was shocked. In the 1840's most nurses were camp followers, alcoholics, and prostitutes. No matter the Nightingale family sense of reform, this was NOT a vocation for a well-bred gentlewoman. So, in the 1840's everyone in the Nightingale household was mad and everyone was trapped.

Nightingale was also deeply troubled by her evocative dream life. She never wrote the contents of her dreams, but they distressed her deeply. Gill speculates that they were some combination of ambition, sexual fantasy, and day-dreaming (as it is for most of us). Whatever, the case, they tormented Nightingale. While on a trip to Greece and Egypt in 1850, while deeply depressed, she wrote of her dreams "Oh heavenly fire, purify me – free me from this slavery." She described her dreams as the "murderer of thought."⁹ It was while in the throws of a deepening depression, traveling abroad, and burdened by her dreams, that Nightingale again heard the voice of God.

February 1850 Nightingale wrote in her journal "Luxor before breakfast. Long morning by myself at old Kourna. Sat on steps of Portico moving with the shadow of the sun & looking at that (to me) priceless view. God spoke to me again." Gill notes that two things saved Nightingale; first her traveling companions Selina and Charles Bracebridge defied WEN and Fanny and stopped for several weeks in Germany so that Florence could visit several hospitals. Second, she adopted an orphaned owl she found at the Acropolis. I mention this second event because it does seem extraordinary to me. For centuries owls have been the symbols of wisdom, sight, second sight, psychic knowledge and gods. It's no coincidence that Harry Potter has an owl. Florence loved this owl and there are several sketches by many people of her with this owl.

Finally, in 1852 her family relented and Florence was allowed to take work as a superintendent at a London hospital, the Institution for Ill Gentlewomen. After years of self study (like a good Unitarian) on medicine, health, and hospital administration, Florence proved herself an immediate genius at her work. She had a few rules; against prevailing medical opinion, no leeches, everything must be clean, clean, clean, everyone must be fed, and people of all faiths must be admitted and served, without evangelism from staff and with visits from the clergy of their choice. For her day she was hygienically, medically, and religiously enlightened. For a devout and mystic Christian, she was also extremely open-minded.

She proved herself unflappable and indispensable during the London cholera epidemic of 1854, which caught the attention of the British government, drowning in a sea of bad publicity and a terrible military health crisis with the British army then entrenched in the impossible Crimean War. Florence Nightingale, with money, education, multiple social and Parliamentary contacts, was personally asked to recruit and

⁸ Gill, 192.

⁹ Gill, 245.

lead a party of 38 reputable nurses to the British Army hospital in Turkey. International affairs had done what Florence could not, and the rest, is history. With the needs of England on the line, her family relented and sent their daughter into a war zone as a newly deputized superintendent nurse. Florence took the opportunity given her and ran it for all it was worth. She recruited Catholic and Anglican sisters as well as lay nurses, and with four days notice, armed with government and personal money, in the fall of 1854, chaperoned by the Bracebridges, she left for Turkey.

The Crimean War was unnecessary and a terrible mistake. In the winter of 1854 the British Army floundered under a Russian winter (when will people learn?). Cholera, fever, diarrhea, frostbite, lice, hunger, and filth decimated the British troops. At the British Hospital in Turkey food was irregularly delivered, there was no laundry system (consider diarrhea with no laundry system), just 20 chamber pots, no cleaning crew, few hospital beds, and sponges were used to clean one patient, then the next, then the next, passing infection on and on. Gill explains that soldiers that arrived at the hospital “usually had nothing but the shirts on their backs, heaving with lice.”¹⁰ Nine out of ten patients were medical (struggling with illness, not injury). Less than one year into the war, ¼ of the British Army was sick and dying.¹¹

Nightingale arrives. The army officers don’t want her there; the doctors refuse to use or listen to her, people wonder if she and her nurses are prostitutes, and believe she is a spy for the government. Florence was in her element. She loved a challenge and she took it head on, waiting until the doctors were desperate with new patients and asked for her help. She started a laundry facility, a small kitchen, gave each patient a private bowl and silverware, told her nurses to use one sponge for each patient, cleaned each man as he came in, recruited workers, and had the floors and walls cleaned. Most important, no one was going to mistake her or her staff for anything other than professional nurses. They wore bulky, gray flannel uniforms with ugly caps. One of her most efficient nurses, Mrs. Lawfield said

I came out Ma’am prepared to submit to everything – to be put upon in every way – but there are some things, Ma’am, one can’t submit to – There is caps, Ma’am, that suits one face, and some that suits another’s, and if I’d known, Ma’am, about the caps, great as was my desire to come out to nurse . . . I wouldn’t have come Ma’am.

She was amazing and the British soldiers loved her. She was calm. She was a lady. She wrote their dying letters. At night when everyone was asleep she walked the four-mile of wards with a lamp, and became “The Lady with the Lamp.” She treated the soldiers regardless of rank, with the sickest cases first (which was unheard of). She refused to let her nurses proselytize (although the Catholics and Anglicans regularly fought amongst one another and often refused to speak to each another). She managed everything else, but Florence was not able to manage female inter-staff conflict. One wounded soldier wrote home of her

¹⁰ Gill, 341.

¹¹Gill, 315-335.

What a comfort it was to see her pass even. She would speak to one, and nod and smile to as many more; but she could not do it all you know. We lay there by hundreds; but we could kiss her shadow as it fell and lay our heads on the pillow again content.¹²

What a comfort to the soldiers and their worried families. Miss Nightingale was there. She saved thousands of lives and helped revolutionize the male dominated British Army. Florence had found her calling, which evolved from mere nursing to medical military reform.

In 1855, while in Turkey, Florence became seriously ill with a high fever. She eventually recovered, but it is possible that at this time she contracted brucellosis, an intracellular parasite that may have led to the chronic pain and fatigue she faced for almost two decades. In the summer of 1856, with the war concluded, Nightingale returned home. She was thirty-six years old

She had become an international hero who craved solitude and continued medical reform. Queen Victoria asked her to lead a royal commission on military health reform, which she did. In a male dominated era, Florence was the “chief strategist, chief statistician, chief correspondent, and chief worker.”¹³ She published volumes on medical health conditions that permanently improved the health of British soldiers. Between 1858 to 1872, she exercised tremendous power all from her bedroom.

In 1857, a year after returning from Turkey, not surprisingly she seems to have had a nervous breakdown and fallen seriously ill again. She recovered enough to continue her reform work, but remained ill, depressed, in pain, and convinced she would die early. She retired to her room, ate alone, slept alone, refused to see her parents or sister for eight years, and eventually other close relatives as well. She rarely took visitors and faded from public view, although her reform work continued unabated. Her family, although unable to see her, paid for everything she needed.

In the 1870's she recovered enough to reluctantly nurse her mother through her final illness, then preceded to shock everyone, including herself, by living to the age of 90. She died in 1910.

Many have speculated that Nightingale imagined her post war illness and then used the sympathy of those around her to get her reform work done. In part this is probably true. The Victorian era is full of women who acquired real or imagined illnesses that kept them bedridden. She was also, I suspect legitimately, terribly, physically ill.

All her life Nightingale was guilt-ridden by her recognition of and drive for power, not a woman's traditional power, but a man's power – the public world of politics and public policy. She achieved tremendous things in a man's world, but never reconciled her ambitions and achievements with what a woman was supposed to be doing (being a dutiful daughter, getting married, and raising children). She was not the first or last woman, to, in great misery, use a woman's revenge, of illness as power, and find her then in even greater misery. The irony is that her Florence's sister Parthenope, who lived a frail life always second to her sister, finally married in her late thirties, and although she

¹²Gill, 352.

¹³Gill, 417.

continued to have poor health and was unable to bear children, led a very long, active, social, happy life as a beloved step-mother until her death..

I do think Florence was miserable from her inability to find joy in her extraordinary talents and successes, which is the tragedy of her life. Her sense of service was too repressive and sacrificial, demanded too much of her body and spirit and joy. This self-sacrifice would have been her temptation whether she was born 175 years ago or today. Her sense of calling included too much deprivation and self-denial, not enough celebration, rest, silliness, and satisfaction. For me she is a model of how well intentioned, talented, serious, reform-minded people (like Unitarians) should not do social justice work.

Last night, before I finished this sermon, I suddenly had a chance to go to a very nice restaurant. I thought about Florence, and this unfinished sermon, then put on my shiniest, pointiest shoes, went to a fantastic restaurant with my husband and had a great time. I kept thinking, "Florence would not approve." But, by the time Florence was my age, she was a recluse.

Parthenope once told a friend "Florence had the greatest 'natural intense love of God' of anyone she had every known but that Florence did not care at all for individuals, only for the whole race of God's creatures."¹⁴ Florence Nightingale was an extraordinary humanitarian, but she was hard on her family and friends. She was devout and faithful to God, but not nearly as good to herself. She was brilliant and saved thousands of lives in a time when women didn't even legally have rights to their own children. She is so Unitarian it almost hurts; intelligent, bull-headed, educated, misunderstood, fair, compassionate, dedicated, isolated, hard on herself, hard on others. I just wish I could say that I read about a period in her life when she was happy and proud. She certainly deserves to have been, as do we all. I wish for her, just once, that she could have thought, said, believed, "I am who I am and this is my gift from God and this is good, and I am proud and I am free. I don't have to fight anyone anymore, even myself. I am a child of God and I am good, I am loved, and I am free."

¹⁴ Gill, 294.