

At the origin of modern nursing: Florence Nightingale (1820-1910) versus Ellen Gould White (1827-1915)

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Abstract: Aim of this short article is to put in light the connections between the similarities and differences between the theories of Florence Nightingale (1820-1910) and those of Ellen Gould White (1827-1915): the first is known around the world because she is considered the founder of modern nursing. Ellen Gould White, on the other hand, is especially familiar with the Seventh-day Adventist Church, of which she was a prominent member. These two women never met or corresponded with one another, yet their writings about health have strong similarities.

Keywords: History of Nursing, Ellen Gould White, Florence Nightingale, Spiritualism, Healthcare, History of Hygiene

Ellen Gould White

Ellen Gould White (1827-1915), Seventh-day Adventist prophet and author, was born in 1827 near Gorham, Maine, United States of America. When she was nine, Ellen had a serious accident and was forced to interrupt her formal education.

In 1844 she began experiencing what she claimed were visions.

After having married Pastor James Springer White (d.1881), a minister of the Christian Connection and an Adventist adherent, Ellen played a key role in forming the Seventh-Day Adventist Church and in developing its evangelistic outreach.

After the Whites moved to Battle Creek, Michigan, in 1855, that city became the centre of

Adventist activity.

In 1866 Ellen helped start the Western Health Reform Institute in Battle Creek; later, as the Battle Creek Sanitarium, it became famous for its work in the field of diet and health food and was the model for many other institutions.

The early sixties are dedicated to the founding of new churches, the organisation of conferences, writing, travel and personal work.

The culminating moment of this period was the organisation of the Seventh-day Adventist General Conference in May 1863.

The vision of June 6, 1863, had the merit of arousing interest in the health reform on the part of the leaders of the new ecclesiastical organisation.

A health education program was developed in the following months, as the topic of health was seen as an integral part of the Seventh-day Adventist Church message.

A first step in this direction was the publication of six pamphlets, each of which contained 64 pages, entitled *Health, or How to Live*, written by James and Ellen White. An article by Ellen White was included in each booklet¹.

Her influence led directly to the organisation of Adventist day schools in Australia, and to the establishment of Avondale College and the Sydney Sanitarium (later the Sydney Adventist Hospital) at Wahroonga.

As soon as the formative work of the Avondale School began with some success, in 1892, a missionary project in the health sector was demanded with increasing intensity in Australia.

She worked for the movement in the U.S.A. and in Europe from 1885-88 and in Australia, where she remained from 1891 until her return to America in 1900.

A prolific writer, she published more than ninety books and the research centre named after her at Avondale College preserves more than 60,000 pages of her unpublished typescript. Through her emphasis on the combination of religion, health and education, Ellen Gould White played a formative role in the Church's identity, although her authority as a prophet within the Church was debated.

She had also guided the development of the Church's administrative structure in Australia and encouraged the manufacture of health foods by the Adventist-owned Sanitarium Health Food Co. Ellen White died on 16 July 1915.

Ellen Gould White's theory of health and disease

In her book *Ministry of healing*, Ellen provides a mature look at the principles of healthful living, taking as an example the ministry of Jesus: "*During His ministry, Jesus devoted more time to healing the sick than to preaching. His miracles testified to the truth of His words, that He came not to destroy, but to save.*" (White Ellen Gould 1905)⁶

Ellen was deeply persuaded that Jesus' example had to be followed by every Christian. In the seventh chapter of her book, Ellen argues that there must be a great collaboration between man and God: "*In the ministry of healing, the physician is to be a co-worker with Christ [...]. Christ is the true head of the medical profession. The chief Physician, He is at the side of every God-fearing practitioner who works to relieve human suffering. While the physician uses nature's remedies for physical disease, he should point his patients to Him who can relieve the maladies of both the soul and the body. That which physicians can only aid in doing, Christ accomplishes. They endeavour to assist nature's work of healing; Christ Himself is the healer. The physician seeks to preserve life; Christ imparts life.*" (White Ellen Gould 1865: 112)¹.

Starting from the reading of the Gospels, Ellen argued that God offers numerous occasions to the doctor to remind his patients of God's promises, referring to the healings He performed and the words He used to convey the message of salvation.

From the reading of this publication, one can deduce the themes that place the figure of Ellen Gould White in the context of the dawn of assistance.

Let us not forget that Ellen Gould White was a contemporary of Florence Nightingale (1820-1910), to whom the foundation of modern nursing can be traced.

In the writings of these two women, who lived in the second half of the 19th century, there are numerous points of tangency, which allow us to set up a unitary discourse from the historical point of view, beyond cultural differences.

Both these women wrote about health reform at a time when the people of Great Britain and the United States showed a beginning interest in health.

Their thoughts and principles coincided with the scientific and intellectual awakening of the nineteenth century, and with changes in the roles of women that were taking place.

At the middle of the 19 century, in fact, hygiene was the subject of debate in the scientific world.

In many other European countries, the development of hygiene and epidemiology turned into the foundation of public health services, and it resulted in the promulgation of dedicated legislation and in the foundation of scientific societies.

This public health process was possible thanks to a widespread hygienist movement supported by the works of Pasteur (1822-1895), which paved the way for the birth of microbiology and provided the explanation of the role played by microorganisms in the emergence and development of disease in humans and animals.

The concept of “Hygiene”, between the end of the 19 century and the beginning of the 20 century, did not indicate, in fact, only the set of individual and public prevention rules against diseases but had a broader value, including a genuine “lifestyle”².

These vicissitudes and the principles that they promoted provided the incentive for the development of nursing schools.

The similarities also emerge when the commitment at the political level is evaluated: while Florence Nightingale encouraged the English to reform their health habits, Ellen G. White campaigned for similar reforms in the United States.

Each was a prolific writer, yet neither envisioned to be involved in practical nursing education, directly or indirectly, when she began writing.

The presence of God is fundamental in the works of Ellen Gould White, who is considered a prophetess: also, Florence Nightingale claimed to have received a “call” from God, who had directed her choices.

A great moral impulse supported both: surrounded by difficult situations, they transposed the health care commitment into a more general social rehabilitation, through a training path.

Both founded schools and educational centres, identifying in cultural growth the means to reach also the moral good and the physical good.

A primary difference in their curriculums, however, was the spiritual component.

No evidence was found regarding the specifics of a spiritual component in the Nightingale program, whereas in the Battle Creek program, correspondence from students suggests.

They were involved with doing Christian help work, performing personal Bible study, attending religious meetings, giving testimonies,

and conversing with patients about spiritual subjects.

On the other hand, both gave great importance to the formative aspect on the part of the doctor and on the part of the nurse:

“The true physician is an educator. He recognises his responsibility, not only to the sick who are under his direct care, but also to the community in which he lives [...]. Education in health principles was never more needed than now. Notwithstanding the wonderful progress in so many lines relating to the comforts and conveniences of life, even to sanitary matters and to the treatment of disease, the decline in physical vigor and power of endurance is alarming [...]. Many transgress the laws of health through ignorance, and they need instruction.” (White Ellen Gould 1865: 125-126)¹.

From Ellen’s point of view, “Disease is an effort of nature to free the system from conditions that result from a violation of the laws of health. In case of sickness, the cause should be ascertained. Unhealthful conditions should be changed, wrong habits corrected. Then nature is to be assisted in her effort to expel impurities and to re-establish right conditions in the system.” (White Ellen Gould 1865: 126)¹.

Ellen Gould White believed in the healing power of nature, and she insisted in a particular way on the theme of prevention through training and information.

Ellen’s suggestions recall the principles expressed by Florence Nightingale in her sanitary revolution:

“Pure air, sunlight, abstemiousness, rest, exercise, proper diet, the use of water, trust in divine power—these are the true remedies.” (White Ellen Gould 1865; 127)¹.

The general population did not understand the relationship between disease, sanitation, ventilation, nutrition, and care of oneself.

In the chapter dedicated to the care of the sick (White Ellen Gould 1865: Chap. 15), there is a solid reference to what must be the characters of the nurse: *“Those who minister to the sick should understand the importance of careful attention to the laws of health [...]. Those who care for the sick should give special attention to diet, cleanliness, fresh air, and exercise¹.”*

From these words, we deduce that within a few decades, the principles set out by Florence Nightingale had been assimilated in a geographically distant context. (Nightingale Florence 1860)³.

It seems that the role of nurse has been

assimilated and brought back to those principles that Florence Nightingale had theorised³.

“To afford the patient the most favourable conditions for recovery, the room he occupies should be large, light, and cheerful, with opportunity for thorough ventilation [...] every possible effort should be made to arrange the sickroom so that a current of fresh air can pass through it night and day.” keeping the temperature constant and distributing an adequate diet. (White Ellen Gould 1865: 220)¹.

If people needed care beyond that which the family could provide, the sick were cared for principally at home, by uneducated women who were little more than maids.

The commitment of Florence Nightingale was directed against this lack of professionalism.

An entire paragraph is dedicated by Ellen Gould White to the figure of the nurse, who must meet certain requirements: *“Nurses, and all who have to do with the sickroom, should be cheerful, calm, and self-possessed. All hurry, excitement, or confusion should be avoided. Doors should be opened and shut with care, and the whole household be kept quiet. In cases of fever, special care is needed when the crisis comes and the fever is passing away. Then constant watching is often necessary. Ignorance, forgetfulness, and recklessness have caused the death of many who might have lived had they received proper care from judicious, thoughtful nurses.”* (White Ellen Gould 1865: 221-222)¹.

Chapter 20 is dedicated to hygiene, understood as a transversal discipline which involves the entire lifestyle.

The knowledge of elementary physiology (circulatory and respiratory systems) and the reference to dietary principles based on vegetarianism were the cornerstones of Ellen Gould White’s preaching. (White Ellen Gould 1865: Chap. 20)¹.

Fascinating is the section dedicated to the ventilation and sunlight, which is very reminiscent of what Florence Nightingale wrote⁴.

The importance of the location of hospitals and the prominence of light, ventilation, and heat are the cornerstones of Florence Nightingale’s theory.

Respect for scrupulous personal hygiene is fundamental: Ellen refers to some biblical passages, which postulate the concept of purity and the belief that illness is a divine punishment.

Florence Nightingale, in turn, never believed in the idea of contagion, arguing that physical contamination was determined by moral contamination and lack of respect for correct behaviour.

Conclusions

The success of both women depended on their philosophical and family backgrounds and their social acceptance.

In their settings, points of affinity and distance are detected. Still, the central professionalism of the nurse is pivotal in both, as well as the respect for hygiene rules, the importance of a training course, and the support for preventive medicine.

In particular, Ellen Gould White believed that hospitals should care for the whole patient, facing disease and illness as well, giving space to the patient’s spiritual care and to what we call today “health literacy”, teaching patients about their conditions⁶.

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