


# Florence Nightingale: Discernment as trusting experience



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Discernment is a fundamental dimension of growth in the spiritual life in which the person or community analyses their experience in order to sense the call of God in their life's trajectory. Florence Nightingale (1820–1910), the founder of modern nursing during her service in the Crimean War, discerned her call through a series of religious experiences beginning when she was 17. Her sense of vocation was met by vehement opposition from her family and others, but with the help various of spiritual advisers she was able to discern that God was calling her to serve others as a nurse when nursing was a despised occupation for women of her social class. After her return from the War, she lived a life of seclusion in order to write and organise the principles of nursing for the British Medical Service. This article presents the various dimensions of Nightingale's vocational discernment and analyses them in reference to the feminist discernment principle of trusting one's experience.

## Introduction

The narrative of Florence Nightingale's life, the founder of modern nursing, demonstrates the interconnection of discerning the Spirit of God in one's life and acting on that discernment through courageous agency. This article analyses the various 'calls' she experienced through the feminist perspective of trusting one's experience.

Known in history as the 'Lady with the Lamp' of the Crimean War in the 1850s, she was born in Florence, Italy (hence her name), on 12 May 1820. Her parents, William and Fanny, were very wealthy with the money and leisure to travel throughout Europe. She had one sibling, her elder sister Parthenope.

Educated first by governesses at home and then by her father who had a Cambridge degree, Florence proved to be an eager and brilliant student, with a special aptitude for languages and mathematics and later for the new science of statistics. Living a life of luxury in upper-class British society which included much travel in the 19th century bored Florence. She was intelligent and lively, but her family's lifestyle gave her few outlets for her intelligence and creativity.

## The first call

But her life began to change on 07 February 1837 when she experienced the first of her calls. She was 17 and in her private notes she wrote, 'God spoke to me and called me to His service' (Bostridge 2009:54). This was a dramatic experience which was to shape her life. Reflecting much later in life she spoke of her early sense of inner guidance: 'The thoughts and feelings that I have now I can remember since I was 6 years old ... the first thought I can remember, and the last, was nursing work' (Hartil 1996:16). As it took Florence a number of years to realise that this was the way she was called to serve God, this early memory may have emerged out of the 'nursing' she did to pets and her dolls.

There were to be three other experiences of this call from God: in 1853, before going to her first post at the Hospital for Poor Gentlewomen in Harley Street in London; in 1854, before she went to the Crimea; and in 1861, after the death of her colleague and friend Sidney Herbert (Hartil 1996:16).<sup>1</sup>

What could this call possibly mean to a young woman whose options for service were severely restricted to 'doing good' to the poor of the parish – taking them food, nursing them and teaching children in the village school? What followed was 14 years of struggle: 5 years in which she

<sup>1</sup>This list is from a private note Nightingale made in 1874. The listing of her calls is not always consistent; what is clear is that she experienced God calling her in distinct ways at a number of different times during her life.

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gradually sensed that the call was to nursing and then 9 years more of conflict with her family in order to follow her call. In 1839, 2 years after this call, Florence was distraught. Why had God not spoken again? She realised that she was taking too much pleasure in balls and operas, in being admired and in enjoying people's admiration. In a private note, she wrote that 'to make herself worthy to be God's servant, the first temptation to be overcome was "the desire to shine in society"' (Woodham-Smith 1951:62).<sup>2</sup>

Florence found refuge in 'dreaming' – filling her mind with fantasies in order to escape the utter boredom of her life. This became an addiction and she made constant resolutions to 'tear the sin out' and 'stamp it out' (Woodham-Smith 1951:32), but always failed. She devoted the 7th of each month – the anniversary of her call – to a detailed self-examination. This was not unique to Florence. Various 19th century manuals of advice to middle-class women described their desires to 'escape everything like practical and everyday duty' (Bostridge 2009:103). The energy of a young and intelligent upper-class woman like Florence had no outlet beyond the family and the parish.

The dreaming also led to periods of depression when she felt that her life was not worth living. She was filled with guilt that she had not answered God's call, but she did not know what it meant concretely. Her feelings of depression and despair were not helped by the advice given in books such as Sarah Ellis' *The Daughters of England: Their Position in Society, Character and Responsibilities* of the mid-1840s. Ellis told women such as Florence that 'They should be content with their inferiority to men, put up with their want of power and, most importantly, remember that they were part of a family' (Bostridge 2009:178).

Her family expected her to marry and Florence had a number of eager suitors. In 1849, she carefully analysed the proposal of Richard Monckton Milnes who had been courting her for seven years:

I have an intellectual nature which requires satisfaction, & that would find it in him. I have a passional nature which requires satisfaction, & that would find it in him. I have a moral and active nature that requires satisfaction, & that would not find it in his life. (Bostridge 2009:126–127)

Having closed this door firmly, the only option left to her by 19th century social norms was to remain with her parents until their deaths. But Florence found these strictures unbearable and spoke often of how her family life was a kind of prison. In a private note written in 1849, after she said 'no' to Milnes, she wrote, 'I must do something for women' (Bostridge 2009:177).

## Discernment of her call: Nursing

Gradually, Florence began to sense that God's call was to be lived out in nursing. Florence's first experiences of nursing

<sup>2</sup>In the convention of the day, Mrs. Woodham-Smith wrote under her husband's name. Her own name was Blanche.

were the kind which young women of her social station were commonly asked to do: taking care of family members, neighbours and the poor of the parish. But Florence had in mind something different – nursing in a hospital. This desire met with horror from her parents, sister and family members. In Florence's day, the wealthy were nursed at home by their family members and neighbours; the poor suffered in their rude dwellings and were also nursed at home. The hospitals in the mid-19th century were for the 'deserving poor' who needed letters of introduction from hospital subscribers in order to be treated free of charge.

Nurses had only rudimentary training and were from the lower social classes – one of the reasons for the Nightingales' vehement resistance to her plans. Any mention of nursing by Florence caused violent tantrums by her sister Parthenope and total opposition from the other members of her family.

In England, 1842 was a year of great suffering, part of the era later known as 'the hungry forties'. There was starvation in both the towns and the villages, and the poor and sick overflowed the workhouses and hospitals. Florence wrote in a private note:

My mind is absorbed with the idea of the sufferings of man, it besets me behind and after...all that poets sing of the glories of this world seem to me untrue. All the people I see are eaten up with care or poverty or disease. (Woodham-Smith 1951:41)

During 1843 when the family went to their Lea Hurst residence, Florence spent much time visiting the poor and sick in the cottages near their estate. Although her mother had often done this work, she was annoyed at Florence's demands for more food, clothes and medicines for those in need.

At this time, she became close friends with Miss Hannah Nicholson, called Aunt Hannah by the Nightingales. Their conversations were very nourishing for Florence, but she gradually recognised that her approach was very different than Aunt Hannah's. Florence was already sensing that union with God was bound up with action and service, but Hannah 'believed that once Florence's soul was one with God she would be reconciled to the state of life to which it had pleased Him to call her' (Woodham-Smith 1951:43).

In 1844, she asked Samuel Gridley Howe, an American who with his wife Julia Ward Howe (who was later to write 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic') was on honeymoon in Europe, about her call to be a nurse:

Dr. Howe, do you think it would be unsuitable and unbecoming for a young Englishwoman to devote herself to works of charity in hospitals as Catholic sisters do? Do you think it would be a dreadful thing? (Bostridge 2009:85)

He replied:

My dear Miss Florence, it would be unusual, and in England whatever is unusual is apt to be thought unsuitable; but I say to you, go forward if you have a vocation for that way of life; act up

to your inspiration, and you will find that there is never anything unbecoming or unladylike in doing your duty for the good of others. Choose, go on with it wherever it leads you, and God be with you. (Bostridge 2009:85–86)

As her sense of her call developed, she realised that she needed training in nursing. In the 1840s, opportunities for this training were extremely limited. Florence learned of the Salisbury Infirmary which was located near the Nightingale's Embley estate. She now tried to convince her family to allow her to go there for 3 months and thought that because the doctor in charge, Dr. Fowler, was a friend of the family, they might agree. The reaction was predictable: an uproar of anger from her family. The Salisbury plan was abandoned.

Meanwhile, Florence began to study what materials existed on public health. The British government had begun to publish Blue Books on the condition of the poor. The report on the 'Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Classes' was published in 1842. One wonders how Florence, who was totally financially dependent on her father, managed to procure these books. As her day was totally taken up with family duties, she rose before dawn and read and summarised the reports, laying the foundation for her later work after she returned from the Crimea on sanitary reform in the British Army.

Florence persisted in her determination to learn to nurse. She had learned of the initiative of the Lutheran pastor Theodore Fliedner and his wife Friederike in Kaiserworth near Dusseldorf in Germany. In 1833, they had opened an asylum for women released from prison. This expanded to include a school, an orphan hospital and a 100-bed hospital. The nursing was done by deaconesses, who were trained nurses and lived in community.

In 1850, while travelling in Europe with her friends Charles and Selina Bracebridge, she was able to spend 2 weeks at Kaiserworth. Her family knew nothing of this. Although she was suffering from depression as they travelled to Berlin, her spirits began to revive, especially when she met a woman who had trained at Kaiserworth. When she arrived there, she wrote:

I could hardly believe I was there – with the feeling with which a pilgrim first looks upon the Kedron...I felt queer, but the courage which falls into my shoes in a London drawing room rises on an occasion like this, I felt so sure it was God's work. (Webb 2002:79)

She spent 2 weeks there, learning as much as she could. The life of the deaconesses appealed to her and she wondered if a similar way of life could be established for women in England, both those who were educated and those of the lower class.

When she returned home, her family was furious when they learned she had been at Kaiserworth, and they demanded that she become Parthe's 'slave', totally devoted to her every minute of every day for 6 months. Parthe's constant illnesses and outbursts had weakened her so much that a

3-month treatment at a spa in Carlsbad, Germany, was prescribed for her. Florence was to accompany her and she managed to win permission to spend the 3 months at Kaiserworth.

She wore the uniform of the deaconesses and joined in their communal life. New members were required to write an account of their spiritual journey and Florence wrote:

God has led me by ways which I have not known. He has never cast me off for all I have done against Him. What I owe Him I can never tell in these few minutes, but I can bless Him now for bringing me here. (Webb 2002:85)

She observed operations (which included the use of the then very new use of chloroform) and made copious notes on the administrative procedures of the hospital. The Kaiserworth experience was extremely valuable for Florence's future.

In 1853, she visited hospitals in Paris and observed their organisation. She spent a brief time with the Sisters of Charity, but her original plan – to live with them as a postulant for a while in order to see how a religious order functioned – was thwarted by family emergencies and she had to return to England.

But the defences of her family were finally beginning to crack. Her Aunt Mai and Selina Bracebridge told her mother Fanny that some kind of compromise had to be reached with Florence to allow her the independence she needed to open a small hospital. In a letter to Aunt Mai in 1852, Mrs. Bracebridge wrote: 'Ever since I have known Flo's strong desire to form an Institution, I have always discouraged the idea'. However, she had now come:

to the conviction that nothing on earth will change it – that she will never be happy with herself, or able to make her family happy ... in her present mode of life – tenderly as she loves them. (Bostridge 2009:182)

Eventually, her parents yielded and her father gave her a yearly allowance of £500, about £39 000 or R762 000 in current figures.

Florence was now free to follow what she was experiencing as God's call to nurse. Slowly, she had acquired the training she needed, and so when she was asked to take over the administration of the Anglican Institution for the Care of Sick Gentlewomen in Distressed Circumstances in London, she was ready. The 'distressed gentlewomen' were governesses who were no longer needed by the families for whom they worked and had no other resources. Florence did not nurse but totally reorganised the hospital and oversaw its move to Harley Street, soon to be the centre of medical practice in London.

Then followed 2 years (1854–1856) in British hospitals in Scutari and the Crimea where her initiatives made her famous and led to major reforms in British military nursing, sanitation and the organisation of hospitals.

## The inner depths of her call

Florence's call on 07 February 1837 set the direction for her life as a radical openness to the leading of God in her experiences. There were to be other equally profound experiences which deepened this call, but throughout her life she commemorated this date as the central event of her life.

Her religious background was a mix of Unitarianism (which was focused on 'deeds not creeds') and the established Church of England. William, her father, was a Unitarian and her mother Fanny was also a Unitarian, later became a member of the Church of England for social reasons. Florence was baptised an Anglican and also entered in the births register of Protestant Dissenters. Her mother instructed her in the Bible and the family went to services at the local parish church. Florence remained nominally an Anglican although after she returned from the Crimea she ceased to attend church services.

She was attracted to Roman Catholicism especially because the religious orders such as the Sisters of Charity and the Sisters of Mercy were competent nurses. But her Unitarian background insisted on personal freedom in religious thought (which she did not observe in Catholic teaching), and therefore, she was not a potential convert. She had an ecumenical attitude towards Christianity, finding truth and nourishment in many sources.

In 1848, while in Rome, she made a 10-day retreat at the Sacré Coeur, the convent of the Religious of the Sacred Heart. She was guided in prayer and parts of the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius by one of the sisters, Laure de St. Colombe, whom Florence called the 'Madre'. Madre took Florence's questions seriously about how she should serve God and the difficulties she had with her family and told her:

It is no good separating yourself from people to try and do the will of God. That is not the way to gain his blessing. What does it matter even if we are with people who make us desperate. So long as we are doing God's will, it doesn't matter at all. (Bostridge 2009:120)

At the end of the retreat, Florence wrote of the dialogue she had with the Madre:

MADRE: Did not God speak to you during the retreat? Did he not ask you anything?

FLORENCE: He asked me to surrender my will.

MADRE: And to whom?

FLORENCE: To all that is upon the earth.

MADRE: He calls you to a very high degree of perfection. Take care. If you will resist you will be very guilty. (Bostridge 2009:121)

Florence and Madre never met again and they rarely corresponded. But the Madre's guidance and her willingness to take Florence's sense of call seriously were to remain a very significant turning point in her life. In later notes, she refers to this experience and the call to sacrifice her own will.

During 1849 and 1850, Florence travelled to Egypt and Greece with the Bracebridges. As a privileged woman of the English upper class, Florence experienced profound culture shock in Egypt, and some of her comments about the people she saw were full of racism and cultural disdain. She wondered how they could tolerate living in such dirt and poverty. But as the trip continued, she began to feel more positive and wrote that 'Egypt is beginning to speak a language to me' (Nightingale 2003:270).

She wrote voluminous letters home to her family, filled with details about her travels. But, it is in her diary that we learn that this trip was not a pleasure trip but a time of self-examination and reflection on her call. She was plagued by her 'dreaming', falling into 'trances' even in the midst of visiting temples and other sites. Her first call had occurred 12 years ago and she still had not been able to respond. Her emotional turmoil made it very difficult for her to relax and enjoy all these new experiences:

Instead it confirmed Florence's sense of her own hopelessness, pushing her to the edge of breakdown, as she confronted the difficulty of reconciling duty to family and home with the idea of service to God, and struggled with the distressing possibility that after all these years of waiting, that special destiny, ordained by God, might not be hers after all. (Bostridge 2009:133)

During 21 January 1850 – 28 January 1850, while they were at Philae, Florence had a series of profound experiences which she termed her 'Passion Week'. She visited the temple of Isis, who had resurrected her husband Osiris. Florence found the images of death and resurrection in Egyptian religion to resonate with the Passion and Resurrection of Christ. The 'dreaming' returned and she was frustrated that it interrupted her prayer and reflection. On 27 January 1850, she wrote that she 'took my crucifix up before breakfast to lay it in the sacred dust of the Chamber of Osiris. Prayers' (Webb 2002:67). Something very profound had occurred in the depth of her being.

While she travelled in Egypt, Florence continued to experience a deepening of her call even as she struggled with what it really meant. On 22 February 1850, while in Thebes, she wrote, 'God spoke to me again' (Nightingale 2003:403). On 28 February 1850, she experienced the nearness of her Madre: 'God called me with my madre's words' (Nightingale 2003:408).

On 07 March 1850, she had an experience which echoed the convictions of her retreat. She wrote: 'God called me in the morning & asked me "Would I do good for Him, for Him without the reputation"' (Nightingale 2003:409). On 09 March 1850, she wrote: 'Settled the question with God ...' (Nightingale 2003:409). But it wasn't really settled, for she continued to wrestle with the Madre's words: 'Can you give up the reputation – suffering much and saying little? They cried to me' (Nightingale 2003:422). During the next few days, her turmoil continued. She described standing at the door of the boat and looking at the stars as she:

tried to think only of God's will & that everything is desirable only as He is in it or not in it – only as it brings us nearer or farther from Him. He is speaking to us often just when something untoward happens. (p. 422)

On 15 March 1850, it appears that she was healed of her 'dreaming' and the power it held over her: 'God has delivered me from the great offence and the constant murderer of all my thoughts' (Nightingale 2003:422). As they neared Alexandria, Florence wrote on 01 April 1850:

Not able to go out, but wished God to have it all His own way. I like him to do exactly as He likes, without even telling me the reason why. (p. 464)

On the way back to England, Florence visited Kaiserworth for the first time and began to sense how her call to God's service might be realised.

A few days before her 32nd birthday, she once again experienced God's call. On 07 May 1852, she sensed that God was calling her to be a 'saviour' to the poor. Florence 'saw herself as a saviour – someone "called up" from the crowd of history for a special purpose at a special time' (Webb 2002:232). Her model was Christ, who also renounced family and friends in order to fulfil his mission. This meant saving people from the social and moral errors of her time, which included upper-class women's virtual imprisonment in family life. The lifestyle she adopted after she returned from the Crimea was based on this sense of call that all of her strength and gifts were to be used for the good of others.

On this birthday, she experienced a profound sense of well-being and wrote, 'I have come into possession of myself' (Woodham-Smith 1951:75). She had been to Kaiserworth and soon she would go to Harley Street and from there to the Crimea. Her inner sense of call – the object of such violent opposition from her family – gave her the determination to respond to God no matter the difficulties.

## The Crimea

In the popular imagination, Florence Nightingale's whole life was spent in the Crimea. But she was actually there less than 2 years. She had been at the Harley Street Hospital a little over a year when international events changed her life forever. On 20 September 1854, British and French troops landed on the Crimean Peninsula in order to defend their trade routes to India from the Russians. For the first time, a war involving Britain was reported directly from the battlefield by a war correspondent for the *Times*, William Howard Russell. Beginning on 09 October 1854, he described the trauma and suffering of the British troops who had no adequate medical care. His dispatches brought the war home to the British public in a way that had never happened before and people became very angry and distressed.

As she read Russell's reports, Florence began to consider organising a group of nurses to go to the Crimea. She wrote to Sidney Herbert, the Secretary for War, offering to go to the

Crimea and their letters crossed. His letter dated 15 October 1854 asked her if she would go to the East and take some nurses with her. Herbert selected her not only because she had some nursing training but also because her family had important social and political connections. On 21 October 1854, she and a hastily assembled and motley group of 38 nurses left London and arrived at the Barrack Hospital in Scutari on 04 November 1854. The women with her included Catholic sisters and Anglican sisters who were trained nurses and other women with little nursing experience.

Herbert did not want medically trained women in the Crimea, but women who could do whatever was needed – cooking, washing, cleaning and comforting the sick and wounded. But when Florence and her nurses arrived, it was made clear that they were not wanted and so they spent the first few weeks crowded into one room basically doing nothing. Soon thousands of wounded and dying soldiers were shipped into the Hospital. Chaos overwhelmed the medical staff and finally Florence and her nurses were allowed to begin their work.

Florence did nurse some of the most severely wounded soldiers and she also made the rounds at night with her lamp to see that all was as well as it could be. But she had been primarily sent by Herbert to "superintend the whole thing" with plenary authority over all the nurses and full assistance and cooperation from the medical staff' (Webb 2002:124–125). When the organisation of the Hospital collapsed, her natural administrative gifts shone and it was Florence who ordered food and supplies, instituted basic sanitary procedures, reformed the kitchen and cooking, reorganised the wards and provided recreation for the soldiers who were recovering. Her genius for hospital organisation saved thousands of lives.

Her service in the Crimea can be divided into two parts. First was the frightful emergency during the winter of 1854–1855 when Florence reorganised the hospital and averted its total collapse. The second period began in the spring of 1855 and ended with her return to England in the summer of 1856. While the first was filled with horrible physical emergencies, the second overflowed with the jealousy of the army officials, extreme interpersonal difficulties and much internal strife. She felt miserable, depressed and obsessed with a sense of failure.

In a letter written after about 6 months, she described her sense of God's call to her in the Crimea:

I am in sympathy with God, fulfilling the promise I came into the world for. What the disappointments of the conclusion of these six months are no one can tell. But I am not dead, but alive. (Cook 1913:255–256)

## After the Crimea: A life of hard work

When Florence returned to England in 1856, she was ill and tired. She had contracted Crimean fever, later named as brucellosis, the result of eating contaminated goats milk and

cheese. She suffered from this disease for more than 30 years. But her ill health did not impede her work, and from her bedside and sofa, she wrote huge reports and books about how to reform the British Army Medical Service and nursing as a profession.

Webb describes Nightingale as a 'tireless hermit, somewhat like Queen Victoria after Albert died' (2002:152). Although she was often very ill, she was able to produce voluminous reports which detailed plans for the reform of the British Army Medical Service in England and India, reams of statistics on every aspect of the army's medical situation, reform of the medical services of the workhouses for the poor, social reforms in India and a healthier design for hospitals.

When she was not planning the army medical reforms, Florence was engaged in shaping plans for modern nursing. The Nightingale Training School for Nurses was opened in 1860 at St. Thomas's Hospital in London, and she kept a very close eye on its development and that of the 'Nightingale' approach in other schools and hospitals. Her *Notes on Nursing* was also published in 1860 and was the first manual on practical nursing in the home. Her focus was not on disease but how to keep the family healthy.

In order to live this life of service, to devote herself to the 'work' which she felt was her vocation, she adapted 'the only cloistering option she had as a Victorian woman – invalidism' (Webb 2002:165). While she was often truly ill and at times in the late 1850s felt she was near death, her health gradually improved. In her essay *Cassandra*, she had described the difference between men's and women's work. Men's work is always so important that they can never be interrupted, but women's work is considered to be of such little value that it can be interrupted at any time. Women can only work in 'odd moments' and Florence remarks with great irony: 'Can we fancy Michael Angelo running up and putting a touch to his Sistine ceiling at "odd moments"?' (Nightingale 1994:110).

Nightingale's (1993) complaint is clear:

Is man's time more valuable than woman's? Or is the difference between man and woman this, that woman has confessedly nothing to do? Women are never supposed to have any occupation of sufficient importance *not* to be interrupted ... and women themselves have accepted this ... They have accustomed themselves to consider intellectual occupation as a merely selfish amusement, which it is their 'duty' to give up for every trifle more selfish than themselves. (pp. 211–212)

She adopted not only the lifestyle of an invalid which gave her the privacy to write, but also the male model of an office. She made appointments to see persons one at a time and thus was able to control her life, communicating with Sidney Herbert and other colleagues by notes and memos. People usually respected her privacy and did not want to be responsible for making her condition worse. Although she worked very hard in her self-chosen cloister until the diminishment of ageing, especially a gradual blindness, limited her, she gradually

faded from public consciousness. When she died at the age of 90 on 13 August 1910, many people were surprised to learn that she had lived such a long life.

## Her religious experience

An Irish priest in the Crimea said of her, 'Miss Nightingale belongs to a sect that is unfortunately very rare in these days, the sect of the Good Samaritan' (Webb 2002:131). She saw the churches as stumbling blocks to the creation of God's reign on earth and insisted that for her, 'church' was the experience of friendship and sharing with her friends Benjamin Jowett, Mother Mary Clare and others.

Florence's theology and spirituality were based on God's active presence in the world. Life was not about passive suffering, enduring hardship until death came as a welcome release. It 'was about discovering the laws of God in the universe in order to *change* the world and bring about God's reign on *Earth*' (Webb 2002:135). Her approach was similar to what is now termed 'reading the signs of the times', of observing and analysing the contemporary context in order to respond with transformative praxis. The unfolding tragedy in the Crimea led to her sense of call to find some nurses and go there to assist the suffering soldiers. The needs of the British army medical service, the poor in the workhouses, the lack of training for nurses, and the effects of the Industrial Revolution on the urban poor were all significant 'signs' that demanded an active response from her.

19th century England was still stratified in distinct classes which seemed immutable. Florence (Nightingale 1993) challenged this with her radical theology of active seeking of God's call:

It is a radical mistake fatal to all progress to say that we are to remain in the position 'in which God has placed us'. The very object of all the teaching which we have from God is that we may *find out* the 'calling' to which we are called. He leaves *us* to find it out. (p. 78)

In her translations and studies of the Christian mystics (which were never published) which she worked on in the early 1870s, she was most interested in active saints: Catherine of Siena (1347–1380) who worked for peace and for church reform, Catherine of Genoa (1447–1510) and her work in the hospitals of her day, and Teresa of Avila (1515–1582), a reformer of the Carmelite order with John of the Cross.

Florence spent her life living out the clear calls to God's service which began when she was 17. It was the desire of her heart to do God's will, but often did not feel that she was doing so. In 1865, she wrote to Mother Mary Clare who had served with her in the Crimea and with whom she continued a life-long friendship:

The greatest blessing is to know & feel, as you say, that one is doing his will. I never am in full possession of this feeling tho' I have nothing left at all in this world, except to do His will. But I have not deserved that He should give me this feeling which is the greatest strength of all. (Webb 2002:177)

Feminist theology begins with one's experience and from this flows reflection and action. Florence did exactly that and thus for her seeking and doing of God's will begin with what a person was experiencing and doing. She was wary of the Ignatian 'particular examen' because it appeared to concentrate on God's will, not practical action. Nightingale (1993) wrote:

It is a positive fact that to be thinking too much of God's will prevents one from doing His will; that to be thinking of the action itself prescribed by His will, and of that only, is the way to do His will in real work. (p. 43)

She immersed herself in the problems of her day and through action felt confident that she was doing God's will. The fact that she was a woman in a society only gradually beginning to acknowledge women's dignity and gifts<sup>3</sup> added to the striking significance of her work. Having suffered so much when young because her family did not assist her to follow God's call, she 'saw hope in the model of the Spirit within *all*' (Webb 2002:120), a perspective which had the power to lead to changes in the family, religion and society so that women could contribute fully with their diverse gifts.

Although her friend Benjamin Jowett was of great help to her in her work (he read the draft of *Suggestions for Thought* and helped edit it), he was wary of her use of her own experience and advised her to omit it because it would lessen 'the weight of what is said' (Webb 2002:260). He was afraid that the narrative of her experience would distract people from her message; in fact, her experience made her real as an author, as she was writing of what she truly knew.

## Nightingale's praxis of discernment

This narrative of Florence Nightingale's life, her calls to God's service and how she lived them out, contains a dynamic discernment praxis based on the Spirit's living presence within each person.

Prayer is essential to discernment, but she was impatient with much of public prayer such as the *Book of Common Prayer* which she found repetitious and boring, asking God for the same things day after day. Likewise, she saw intercessory prayer as a form of trying to persuade God to do one's will and she said 'God had better not exist at all, than be employed in this way; the one in persuading, the other in being persuaded' (Nightingale 1993:61).

In contrast, true prayer was communion with God in the Spirit, and this could happen anywhere, anytime, as she had learned in her travels in Egypt, or sitting in a garden or

3. When the women's suffrage movement began in England in the 1860s, she was initially ambivalent about it because she felt that there were other more urgent issues to be settled in favour of women, for example, women's inheritance rights and equal pay for women workers, which could be changed by legislation in Parliament. But she did sign three petitions to Parliament for women's suffrage in 1866, 1867 and 1868. She did not live to see women's suffrage enacted in Britain. British women over 30 were given the right to vote in 1918 with some restrictions, for example, having a university degree; it was extended to all women in 1928. Bostridge (2009) comments that: Fundamentally, the language of rights was not a part of Florence's vocabulary, and she relied instead on more traditional concepts like duty, the desire to serve and the idea of a calling (p. 375).

gazing at beautiful works of art. She (Nightingale 1993) is confident of God's presence in her being:

I could not understand God, if He were to speak to me. But the Holy Spirit, the Divine in me, tells me what I am to do. I am conscious of a voice that I can hear, telling me more truth and good than I *am*. As I rise to *be* more truly and more rightly, this voice is ever beyond and above me, calling to more and more good. But you have to invent what it says. We believe that each man has his Holy Ghost; that is, the best part of himself inspired by God. But whether it is I who speak, or whether it is God speaking to me, I do not know. (pp. 61–62)

And yet, there is the hesitation – 'I do not know'. Within her, there was a knowing and an unknowing. She began with her own experience and a confidence that as God has spoken to her many times since she was 17, the divine presence would not desert her. But she also recognised the complexity of the human psyche and that our own thoughts and feelings can both be the way we experience God, and also can deceive us. In her writings, she insists that the response to the Spirit in a person must be action to make the reign of God visible in the world. Union with God must lead to action, not withdrawal from the world.

The privileged locus of finding God in herself was the many experiences of her call. In her writings, we find several summaries of these experiences.

This is the word of the Lord unto thee, London, May 07, 1867. It is thirty years since I called thee until my service. Embley, February 07, 1837. It is fifteen years today since I called thee to the perfection of my service (to be a saviour). Tapton, Please check with the original source.

May 7, 1852. How hast thou answered? What opportunities have I not give thee since then? I entered thee at Harley Street August 12, 1853 – Scutari, November 4, 1854 – with Sidney Herbert, July 28, 1867. I have seen his face – the crown of glory inseparably united with the crown of thorns giving forth the same light Three times he has called me. Once to his service, February 7, 1837; once to be a deliverer, May 7, 1852; once to the Cross, June 8, 1865. (Webb 2002:172–173)

When she was in her 80s, her private notes begin to hint at a sense of the completeness of her life and what is truly essential. In 1896, at the time of the death of her brother-in-law, Sir Harry Verney, she wrote, 'Love is stronger than death, therefore give us love' and a few days later, 'Presence of God, as if there were none but Him and I in the world' (Nightingale 2003:111).

## Conclusion

The remarkable life of Florence Nightingale is a narrative of constant discernment of God's call in her life. As a young woman, frustrated by the lifestyle of luxury which she lived as an obedient 19th century daughter, she experienced God's call to her suddenly in the midst of ordinary life. This initial call to God's service shaped her whole life. Other experiences of call followed, but this one was the call remembered and celebrated each year for the rest of her life.

The circumstances of her day – the ‘signs of her times’ – provided the matrix for the living out of her call: the Crimean War, the condition of the British Medical Service, the need to provide professional nursing education. Her writings reveal that she continued to ask if she was doing the will of God in all that she did. The focus was always on praxis – an active service – not a theory of call.

Central to her religious perspective was her insight that all are led by the Spirit and that therefore the presence of the Spirit could be trusted to lead one in ways of service in order that the reign of God might be made real. As Dossey comments, ‘She is a powerful guide on how to deepen our inner life by exploring our own spiritual awareness in the face of change’ (1994:416).

Nightingale did not directly write about discernment, but her life demonstrates that it is in the experiences of life that God’s call can be found. Her long life of 90 years bears clear testimony to her faithfulness to her initial call and her willingness to shape her life according to its imperative.

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