

Annie Calavan - The Long and Winding Road: Coming Full Circle

Kate Pugnoli
March 21, 2017



Annie Calavan, in blue, flanked by CNA students

Ministries come in many forms – and not all who attend a seminary are destined to go on to become church pastors. For alumna Annie Calavan her two years at UTS informed her original calling – as someone pursuing the healing profession of nursing.

While many UTS alumni have fond memories of UTS – for Annie Calavan, UTS and Barrytown have great significance in her life as a place for new beginnings and the jumping off point to return to her vocation of nursing. Originally from West Grinstead, England, Annie received a nursing degree from St. Bartholomew’s Hospital in London years before coming to the USA where she met and joined the Unification Movement. She attended introductory seminars at the Barrytown Training Center. In 1985 she again found herself at Barrytown - this time as a UTS graduate student. Another significant landmark in her life occurred while living there: she began her married life with Robert Calavan, who was also studying at UTS. The first two years of their marriage were spent together in Barrytown.



Annie Calavan

During those two years Annie said she felt for the first time that she could follow her heart and pursue her dream of contributing to the world through the nursing. While at UTS she wrote a paper about spirituality and nursing. “I really struggled through it – I sometimes felt that I was just writing nonsense, but Dr. Scott, my professor, loved my paper and gave me an “A”. My time at UTS allowed me to think about how I could bring the healing heart into nursing which is always a challenge and a dilemma because of the many tasks involved with caring for the practical needs of patients along with all the paperwork. As a student at UTS this became a deep topic and very personal.”

While some UTS students spent their weekends in NYC enjoying the cultural offerings of the Big Apple, Annie, having passed her board certification in nursing in New York City, spent many her time working at nearby hospitals in upstate New York. Annie said, “It was a great way to work in the community in Rhinebeck and to really serve the local population.” Even though the staff at the nursing agency where she employed knew she was a full-time graduate student she would often get calls to come in because she was well-liked and competent. Despite her long hours nursing on the weekends, Annie laughs, “I somehow managed to get my homework done - occasionally while doing overnight shifts where I might be sitting with someone all night.”

Years after graduating from UTS, Calavan settled in northern California with her husband Robert. Together they have raised three children, two boys and a girl to adulthood while Annie continued to pursue her vocation as a nurse. “At UTS I realized I liked public speaking and I liked teaching – and now after many years of nursing I am actually a teacher!” Her work at a skilled nursing facility near her home in Valley Springs, prepared Calavan to instruct students studying to become CNA’s (certified nursing assistants.)

“I feel very lucky working here in a small town. There is a real family feeling and I am very connected to people in the local community.” Some of her students even attended the same local high school as her sons. “Sometimes I am teaching practical tasks; the students have to master certain skills – but every day you have to find ways to refresh your heart; nurses have a big workload and the potential for burnout is high.”

One aspect of her current nursing curriculum is educating her nurses about World Religions. For example, she attunes students to the dietary issues for someone who is a Buddhist or a Muslim, and raises their awareness of different practices after death based on the patient's religious orientation. Sometimes the work is as simple as training students to be respectful of the patient's sacred objects – for example, moving a Bible off the bedside table to avoid it getting wet.



Annie Calavan standing 2nd from right with fellow nurses at St. Bartholomew's Hospital in London

Another part of the curriculum is on Death and Dying. “We do not teach our personal religion, but there are universal spiritual principles that I address. If have a patient who is passing – there are ways to be sensitive and to honor that person. For some patients that is acknowledging their belief that their family and ancestors are awaiting them. At the end of life patients might see deceased family members appear before them – the medical books may state these are hallucinations, but it is important to recognize and validate the patients' beliefs about these types of experiences. “

Everyday Annie begins with a guided visualization with her students. “I introduce some spiritual practices and ideas for self-care as well as other stress-relief tips. Having compassion for ourselves first and forgiving ourselves for our limitations helps us to have compassion for our fellow students, staff and of course, our residential patients.”

Most importantly, she stresses the humble position of a nurse as one who serves. She tells her students, “You need to take a humble, serving position – that is how God is working through you. Keep your heart tender and be humble; you may care for a king or for a homeless person – but you always have to have the right heart.”

After nearly 40 years in the nursing field, and as she turns the corner on her 6th decade, Annie reflects, “I treasured my time at UTS; I am grateful for the opportunity to have been in such a beautiful place and to have had a chance to reflect on my future. It was a time to consider my personal destiny and now I am very grateful, happy and I love my work!”