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Strike a woman, you strike a rock: A tribute to (two) nurses

'How very little can be done under the spirit of fear.'[1]
'If a nurse declines to do this because it was not her business, I should say that nursing was not her calling.'
– Florence Nightingale[2]

South Africa recently lost a valiant woman, who was a nurse. The above quotations, attributed to Florence Nightingale, the founder of the nursing profession, might equally well have been uttered by Ma Albertina Sisulu.

Reading the histories of the two women,[3,4] one born in 1820, the other a century later in 1918, one finds several intriguing parallels.

Each made up her mind not to marry, deciding to become a working professional instead. Florence Nightingale never married, while Albertina married the political activist Walter Sisulu.

Nightingale trained as a nurse in Germany in 1844, and on her return to London was appointed resident lady superintendent of a hospital for invalid women in Harley Street.

Sisulu, forced to abandon her plans to be a teacher because she needed to provide for her younger siblings and would earn during her training, decided to train as a nurse at Johannesburg's Non-European Hospital in 1940. She started work in Johannesburg as a midwife in 1946, going on to become, in the words of the Democratic Nursing Organisation of South Africa (DENOSA)'s tribute to her (see below), 'the benchmark of what nursing and leadership should be'.[5]

Nightingale was appointed by the British war minister to lead a team of 38 nurses to staff the barrack hospital in Scutari during the Crimean war (1853 - 1856). For the first time in history England's daily papers had carried news, and photographs, from the battlefront,[6] highlighting the horrific conditions faced by British troops who were dying of their wounds and disease (typhus, cholera and dysentery) – 73% of soldiers from eight regiments had died in the first six months of the war.

Although both women were reluctant politicians, Nightingale actively campaigned for reform of the practice of nursing in Britain and Sisulu eventually signed up as an active participant in the African National Congress (ANC).

On her return from the Crimea in 1856, Nightingale sought an audience with Queen Victoria and Prince Albert at Balmoral with the aim of informing them about 'everything that affects our present military hospital system and the reforms that are needed'. Having taken the trouble to learn the science of statistics from William Farr (the father of medical statistics), she had become 'a passionate statistician'[7] – 'To understand God's thoughts one must study statistics ... the measure of his purpose'[8] – and inventor of the pie diagram! (To avoid losing the Queen's attention when showing her complex statistical tables reflecting how military personnel had died, where and why, Nightingale illustrated the situation with a series of pie diagrams.) The Queen was duly persuaded and ordered the establishment of a Royal Commission to investigate the quality of nursing in military hospitals at home and abroad. The upshot was the establishment of an army medical college at Chatham in 1859 and of the first military hospital at Woolwich, London, in 1861.

Nightingale went on to found the Nightingale Training School for Nurses at St Thomas's Hospital and soon after to instigate the district system of nursing in Britain. She wrote *Notes on Nursing* (the original of which, with later editions, is available through Google Books[2]), which served as a curriculum for her nursing school and the other schools that followed.

Sisulu initially attended political meetings only to support her husband Walter, but joined the ANC Women's League and participated in the launch of the Freedom Charter in 1955. She was the only woman present at the birth of the ANC Youth League and went on to become national co-president of the United Democratic Front at its inception in 1983 and a member of Parliament in 1994, before finally retiring in 1998.

Sisulu's most significant contribution to her profession as a practising nurse-midwife was the pivotal role she played in the formation of DENOSA, under which umbrella nurses became unified and organised nationally; DENOSA became a full member of the International Council of Nurses in 1997.

Nightingale came to be called 'a business-like Saint', 'the heroine of the Nation' and 'the friend of all the world'. Statues of the 'Lady with the Lamp' adorn many a hospital. Ma Sisulu was among five nurses recognised by DENOSA for contributions to the nursing profession globally at the International Council of Nurses congress held in Durban in 2009. On her recent death, Justice Minister Jeff Radebe wrote in tribute: 'Like a baobab tree, you gave us shade in South Africa that we can some day get our freedom.'[9] A statue of Albertina and Walter Sisulu stands in the Diagonal Street precinct of Johannesburg.

These nurses lived long, full, contributory lives: Florence Nightingale died at age 88 and Albertina Sisulu at 92. With their shared characteristics of unflagging energy, persistence, resilience and tenacity, both overcame severe obstacles to realise their ambitions. Justifiably, these remarkable women will be continue to be remembered by their grateful nations.



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Guest Editor

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