

# AN OPTIMIST'S GUIDE FOR CULTIVATING CIVILITY AMONG ACADEMIC NURSES

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Nurse educators yearn to teach in zestful workplaces where faculty and administrators work and play well together. Even when their interactions with professional colleagues are stressful, many still believe that zestful academic workplaces are possible. How can educators bridge the gap when a zestful ideal becomes a stressful reality? Since some report that the quality of their professional relationships differentiates stressful from zestful workplaces, relationships are a good place to start. The findings from an emerging body of social and biological research concur that human beings are a nurturing species wired for relationship. Interpersonal neurobiologists are finding that relational tending and mending are every much a part of the human response to stress as fight or flight. Given scientific support for the transformative power of connected relationships, this article poses and seeks to answer a single question. What if nurse educators, instead of fighting or fleeing when under stress, tended to and mended their professional relationships? (Index words: Academic incivility; Civility; Scholarship; Faculty development) *J Prof Nurs* 26:325–331, 2010. © 2010 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Nurse educators must reject the notion that workplaces as positive places are just rhetoric or impossible dreams [Glass \(2007\)](#).

**W**HAT IS YOUR greatest on-the-job challenge? If it is your relationships with faculty and administrative colleagues, you are not alone. Only 5% of the 350 nurse educators attending the 2008 Nurse Educator Conference in the Rockies in Breckenridge, CO, considered theirs a zestful workplace in which “faculty and administrators work and play well together.” As the taboo against talking about academic incivility is being lifted ([Heinrich, 2006a](#)), nurse educators and administrators are opening up about stressful interactions with professional colleagues and asking for help. When asked to write about an experience with a colleague and/or administrator that was stealing their joy, 150 of the Breckenridge participants submitted stories along with their permission to present and publish them ([Heinrich,](#)

[2008a](#))—stories that ended with a question, explicit or implicit. What's the best way to deal with a colleague who talks about me behind my back? What can I as an administrator do about one of my faculty who is always negative? How should I handle it when my boss puts me down in front of students?

Even with questions as troublesome as these, nurse educators still believe that zestful academic workplaces are possible. After studying 53 faculty participants at nine universities in four countries, [Glass \(2007\)](#) concluded that “career resilient” nurse academics are optimists who hold onto their passion for nursing and their hope that positive workplaces are possible even in competitive, publish-or-perish university cultures (p. 129). A recent study found practitioners to be similarly resilient ([Glass, 2009](#)).

Linking self-reflection with resiliency, visionaries in nursing are recognizing the potential of personal growth work to transform the crises in our profession, including incivility. To return nursing to the “most caring, respected and unified” of health care professions, [Clark \(2002\)](#) encouraged nurses to undertake the “processes of reflection and owning responsibility versus projecting and blaming others and ourselves...” (p. 23). [Pesut](#)

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(2004) called for nurses who are dismayed about nursing's future to renew the profession by undertaking "...inner work supporting personal growth that is manifested in outer service" (p. 24).

To enhance optimistic nurse educators' career resiliency and restore civility to nursing education, this article shows readers how to slow down the action in their busy lives to assess and address joy-stealing interactions. After a brief background, stories from those 150 Breckenridge educators introduce eight, "Slo-Mo" strategies for mending and tending to professional relationships that have implications for changing the way we relate to our colleagues and educate our students.

## Background

In 2005, I was invited to speak about faculty-faculty incivility with an audience of 1,400 nurse educators gathered at the National League for Nursing (NLN) Educator Summit. Because so little was written on the topic, I asked the audience to write about a time when a faculty colleague, administrator, or subordinate said or did something that left them or a coworker feeling disrespected, devalued, or dismissed. In exchange for submitting their free writes, and 261 did, I promised to share their stories with other nurse educators in presentations and publications (Heinrich, 2006a). One storyteller's use of the term *joy stealing* was so apt that I began to refer to all uncivil interactions between faculty and administrative colleagues as joy stealing. Joy stealing refers to "...experiences with students, colleagues, staff and administrators that rob nurse educators of their zest, clarity, productivity, feelings of worth and desire for more connection" (Heinrich, 2007a, p. 38).

Beyond draining zest, it became clear that joy-stealing interactions could be stressful enough for educators to consider resigning their faculty positions (Feldman, 2001). Of those who did resign, some took other faculty positions, whereas others abandoned nursing education altogether (Heinrich, 2006b, 2006c; Glass 2001a; Glass, 2001b). Indeed, Allen (2008) reports that job dissatisfaction, stress, and burnout are exacerbating an already serious faculty shortage. In Clark's (2008) sample of 194 respondents from across the country, faculty attributed their job-related stress to demanding workloads, high turnover, juggling multiple roles, and *exposure to incivility*. Incivility is "the commission or omission of words or deeds, either overtly or subtly, that intentionally or unintentionally results in psychological distress to another" (Luparell, under review).

There is no question that educators' relationships with colleagues and administrators can be stressful. Only 5% or 83 of the educators in that NLN 2005 Summit audience reported teaching in *zestful work places*, where administrators and faculty work and play well together (Heinrich, 2006b). After interviewing nurse educators in Australia, England, New Zealand, and the United States from 1999 to 2004, Glass (2007) concluded that the culture in nursing schools "was often very hostile and soul destroying" (p. 121) and identified competitiveness,

lack of support, and bullying that included physical violence by faculty colleagues as contributing factors (Glass, 2003a; 2003b, 2003c).

Conversely, connected relationships with faculty and administrative colleagues can turn nurse educators' stress to zest (Heinrich, 2007a, 2007b). By speaking with supportive colleagues about stressful interactions, nurse educators with "career resilience" moved beyond vulnerability to an empowered stance that allowed them to "reframe and become hopeful about their workplaces" (Glass, 2007, p. 131). Glass and Davis' (2004) research suggests that hope, optimism, and resilience are critical to nurse educators' professional satisfaction, emotional well-being, and professional outcomes.

Outside of nursing, there is empirical evidence that supports the power of relational connections among colleagues. Drawing on research and case studies, Rath (2006) found that people with a "best friend at work" are seven times as likely to be engaged in their jobs. His findings suggest that a regular focus on what each person is contributing to the friendship is common to all "essential friendships." Jean Baker Miller and the psychological researchers at Wellesley Center for Women's Research have found that zest, the ability to take action in the relationship and other situations, increased knowledge of oneself and others, feelings of self-worth, productivity, and a desire for more connections are outcomes of "connected relationships" (Wellesley Centers for Women, 2005).

A "consilience" (Wilson, 1998) of social and biological studies transcends the purely psychological to describe an "affiliative neurocircuitry" (Cozolino, 2006) that confirms humans are hardwired for relational connection (Banks & Jordan, 2007). In fact, Shelley Taylor (2002), a psychologist and expert on stress, described how this new science is expanding our understanding of the human stress response. Whereas the original research was conducted with men, researchers discovered that women in their studies seek out support from others when under stress. Offering Americans' outreach to New Yorkers in the aftermath of 9/11 as but one example, Taylor (2002) suggested that our response to stress is as much about what she calls "tending and befriending" (p. 34) as it is about fight or flight.

Looking through a relational lens, these findings pose a provocative question. What if nurse educators, instead of fighting or fleeing when under stress, reached out to faculty and administrative colleagues? Although educators cannot do away with stress altogether, it is possible they can diminish the number of stressful interactions in their work lives by tending to and mending professional relationships. Tending activities involve "...attracting, maintaining and nurturing relationships with others across the lifespan" (Taylor, 2002, p. 12). Clark and Carnosso (2008) described the process of mending relational disconnects when they defined civility as "...an authentic respect for others during encounters of disagreement or controversy. It involves time, presence, and a willingness to engage in genuine discourse with the intention to seek common ground" (p. 13).

Beyond the time and the willingness to find common ground, relational tending and mending are actions grounded in reflection. This explains why some of the evidence-based, reflective steps that prepare nurses to present and publish (Heinrich, 2008a) have been shown effective in dealing with stressful interactions with professional colleagues.

### Assess Joy-Stealing Interactions

Because it can be difficult for educators to recognize that a situation is stealing their joy, the first two SLO MO strategies deal with raising awareness.

#### SLO MO Strategy 1. Establish a Zest Baseline

To be aware of “dis-ease” (Glass, 2007) in their professional relationships, nurse educators must establish a baseline. This baseline event can be thought of as a “golden moment” (Clark, personal communication, 2007): a zestful interaction that leaves those involved glowing with a sense of well-being. Let me give you an example. My golden moment is the story of a position that began in 1980 when I joined a faculty of six in a small, private university with an RN-completion program. Bev, the chairperson, was a *laissez-faire* leader who hired competent people and left them free to do what they did best. As colleagues, we respected one another and enjoyed being together whether it was for a faculty meeting or a party. Life balance was a shared value. Bev arrived at the office at 9:30 a.m. after seeing her young son off to school and left at 2:00 p.m. to greet him at the bus. Like Bev, the rest of us did our jobs well and had plenty of energy left for personal and professional pursuits outside of work. In addition to my faculty position, for example, I maintained a 20-hour private practice as a psychotherapist.

My golden moment position lasted until 1983. When plotted on a 10-point Zest Scale (0 = *no zest*; 10 = *breathless with zest*), golden moment interactions score a zest quotient (ZQ) of 10/10. My ZQ during those 3 years was a 10+. To establish your zest baseline, recall a golden moment interaction, whether it lasted a few moments or for the life of a job, in which you felt validated and energized. If the incident you recalled is truly a golden moment, your ZQ is 10/10.

#### SLO MO Strategy 2. Measure the Zest–Stress Gap

Now that you have established your zest baseline, you are ready to measure gaps between zestful and stressful interactions. Call to mind an interaction with a colleague, staff member, or administrator that is stealing your joy now or one that stole your joy in the past. Notice how the mere thought of this interaction can drain your zest. Assign a number to this joy-stealing scenario: Your ZQ = \_\_\_ / 10. If your ZQ is a score less than 10, consider this stress–zest gap a warning that you are in joy-stealing territory.

Em's story, the name given to the Breckenridge participant who shared this joy-stealing incident, illus-

trates the gap between a golden moment and a joy-stealing interaction:

I was a new faculty (experience × 23 years at other universities), I was working hard and loving it. A colleague I'll call Claire told me that I was setting ‘unrealistic expectations for the rest of the faculty’ and that I ‘needed to stop working so much and being so available to students.’

Like so many of these stories, Em's golden moment is cut short by an interaction that steals her joy. When “working hard and loving it,” Em's ZQ was a 10/10; following her interaction with Claire, Em's ZQ fell to a 3/10. Numerical proof of a zest–stress gap can serve as an affirmation that Em's exchange with Claire is stealing her joy.

#### SLO MO Strategy 3. Set a Still Point

A stop in the action for dancers, a still point is a pause to calm nurse educators (Heinrich, 2008a). Feeling shaken after her interchange with Claire, Em's still point strategy is walking herself and a yellow pad over to the campus café for a cup of tea. By setting a still point, educators slow themselves down long enough to reflect on an interaction that's stealing their joy. A short list of educators' favorite still point strategies includes the following: gazing at the image of a beloved vacation spot on the screen saver of their computers, holding the rock from a special beach walk, inhaling and exhaling deep and cleansing breathes, listening to a song from a CD that inspires, or lighting a candle.

When you are having trouble settling down after a distressing interaction, make your still point a physical activity like taking the dog for a walk or working out at the gym. As you contemplate which still point strategy to choose, keep these three tips in mind: keep it simple, make it quick, and do it every time you want to reflect on a situation that is stealing your joy.

#### SLO MO Strategy 4. Shift Perspective From Victim to Observer

It is easy to feel like a victim when your zest is being drained by a joy-stealing interaction. When Em finds herself making up arguments in her head to counter Claire's observation, she knows she's feeling defensive. To shift her perspective, Em writes down the sequence of events as they unfolded between her and Claire without taking sides. The act of writing moves Em from victim to observer, thereby giving her the emotional distance required to establish directionality and figure out who is playing what role.

**Establish Directionality.** Joy stealing can be top-down, bottom-up, or horizontal (Lipshez-Shapiro, 2008; Glass, 2003c). Administrator-to-faculty joy stealing is top-down (↓); faculty-to-administrator joy stealing is bottom-up (↑); and faculty-to-faculty or administrator-to-administrator joy stealing is horizontal (↔). Because they are faculty colleagues, Em knows that the directionality of her joy-stealing interaction with Claire

is horizontal. Now it is your turn. As you consider your own stressful interaction, is the directionality of the joy-stealing  $\Downarrow$ ,  $\Uparrow$ , or  $\Leftrightarrow$ ?

**Assign Roles.** Adapted from antibullying programs in middle and high schools (Lipshez-Shapiro, 2008), there are four roles in joy-stealing situations: target, joy stealer, bystander, and ally. The target is the one whose joy is stolen; the joy stealer is the tormentor; the bystander watches and does not intervene; and the ally moves into action with the intent of protecting the target. In Em's story, she is playing the role of target, whereas Claire plays the role of joy stealer; there is no mention of bystanders or allies.

With this in mind, identify the role enacted by each person involved in your joy-stealing interaction. Who is playing the target, the joy stealer, the bystander, the ally?

### SLO MO Strategy 5. Self-reflect

When standing in the shoes of the observer, it is easier to admit without self-judgment that you have played all four roles during the course of your academic career. Taking this insight one step further, honest self-reflection requires asking a tough question, "What's my part in this joy-stealing game?" When Em reflects on her interaction with Claire, her next "write" (Trichter-Metcalf & Simon, 2002) is a narrative:

I realize now that I may have inadvertently made Claire feel "left out" in my enthusiasm for getting back to the classroom after years of being an administrator. Sometimes my passion takes me over and I can get going so fast that I forget to bring someone like Claire along with me. So all she sees is my back as I speed ahead with my plans. When I do this, as others in my life have told me, the other person can feel left behind.

Owning aspects of our personality that we would rather keep hidden is not easy. In fact, Daniel Pesut (2004) calls this courageous inner work "facing your shadow" (p. 24).

Take a moment to reflect on the part you are playing in your joy-stealing interaction. As your compassion for yourself as a joy stealer deepens, you may find your compassion deepening for the colleague who is stealing your joy.

### SLO MO Strategy 6. Seek Out a Resonator

When a stressful interaction is the wound, connecting with a resonator can be the salve. Beyond being supportive, a resonator is a special person who "...calls us to our true selves, reminding us and reflecting to us our deepest possibility, asking the difficult questions and encouraging us to take action" (Andersen & Hopkins, 1991, p. 209). Among others, family members, significant others, friends, faculty or administrative colleagues, clergy, life coaches, and therapists can all be resonators. When Em asks herself who can serve as her resonator, she is at a loss. There is no one at her small school she feels comfortable approaching because everyone knows everyone else. After deciding to speak with a professional

outside of her academic circle, Em is not sure whether to consult a therapist or a life coach.

According to Katharine White, a nurse with a mental health background who is a life coach, the best way for Em to make this choice depends upon her response to the joy-stealing interaction. If Em's upset is not affecting her daily functioning and motivating her to address the joy-stealing situation, then coaching is a good choice. If, on the other hand, Em is having symptoms that preclude her from moving forward, therapy can help her regain her emotional equilibrium. This is especially true when the current joy-stealing event revives painful memories. It is not uncommon for targets of joy-stealing games to report symptoms of posttraumatic stress syndrome, including depression, anxiety, flashbacks, obsessive thoughts and ruminations, and eating and/or sleeping disorders that impede everyday functioning on and off the job.

Although therapists help clients to clear emotional constraints from the past for a healthier present, coaches help clients take action to solve problems for future success (White, 2003). Not necessarily an either-or choice, therapy can precede coaching or proceed simultaneously with therapist and coach each working with a client toward a mutually agreed upon outcome. In her case, Em decides on coaching because her joy-stealing interaction is recent rather than long-standing, her daily functioning is not impaired, and she would like some expert help in developing an action plan. To locate a life coach, Em visits the Web sites for two large coaching organizations with referral mechanisms that match clients and coaches through an RFP process. These two organizations are The International Coach Federation ([www.coachfederation.org](http://www.coachfederation.org)) and Coachville.com ([www.coachville.com](http://www.coachville.com)).

If you are not sure which option to choose, be patient. Just recognizing you need a resonator has a way of calling that person into your life. Stay on the lookout over the next couple of days or weeks. You may find that your resonator is someone you have just met or someone you have known for years. Whereas this section described six SLO MO strategies for stepping away from the drain of the drama by assessing the joy-stealing interaction, the next section describes two SLO MO strategies for addressing joy stealing when mending a relational disconnect.

## Addressing Joy-Stealing Games

*After* assessing and *before* addressing a joy-stealing situation, it is important to consider three possible responses to joy stealing—mending, fighting, or fleeing (Heinrich, 2009). In discussing these options with her life coach, Em decides to try mending as a first step.

### SLO MO Strategy 7. Mend Relational Disconnects

After a systematic assessment and reviewing her options with her resonator, Em feels confident enough to schedule an hour to speak with Claire privately. Em opens by saying that she has been feeling a tension between them. She is hoping that by talking things out, they can create a new relationship. In reflecting on

Claire's comment about "showing up the faculty by being so available to the students," Em wonders if she is doing something in their relationship that she has done in other relationships. If, in Em's enthusiasm for being back in the classroom, she is going so fast and making so many plans with students that Claire is feeling left behind. Asking if Claire has been feeling something like this, Claire admits to feeling "less popular" with students. During the ensuing dialogue, Em shares that Claire's comments left her feeling devalued. In the process, they recognize that each of them feels devalued by the other.

Admittedly, this is a best-case scenario. As you consider mending relational disconnects, go for best-case scenarios. Be sure to address colleagues directly, voice optimism about outcome, and take responsibility for your part in a joy-stealing situation.

### SLO MO Strategy 8. Tend to Professional Relationships

When Em asks if Claire is open to pressing the reset button on their relationship, Claire says she is open to trying. She is just not sure where to begin. Em suggests a four-step process that she has found helpful in developing collaborative relationships—share wishes, express hesitations and reservations, negotiate a contract, and create a covenant. When Claire agrees to give it a go, they set aside an hour to meet in a private, neutral setting where they will be free from interruptions.

Prior to their first meeting, Em and Claire each make two lists. One of wishes for and one of hesitations and reservations about their new coteaching relationship. In expressing their wishes, they are delighted to find they share a desire for a respectful collaboration. Because speaking hesitations aloud can be intimidating, Em goes first. After sharing her concern that Claire will say something in a way that hurts Em's feelings; Claire says she fears that Em will turn the students against her. When each responds by trying to find ways to protect the other's vulnerability, it is a turning point in their relationship. Honesty deepens their bond. Based on this experience, Em and Claire agree to meet a second time to weave their wishes, fears, and concerns into a written agreement.

During their next meeting, they negotiate a contract that is an agreement about "who does what when" in coteaching their course and create a covenant that specifies how they will treat one another (Heinrich, 2009). In their covenant, they agree to the following: express our appreciation for one another's gifts and contributions when we are together and when we are with students; assume best intentions always; and ask for clarification when something leaves either of us feeling devalued. When a covenant allows for mending of relational disconnects as they arise, it leaves partners feeling safe. After finalizing their contract and covenant, Em writes up the document with an addendum that reads, "This agreement may be re-negotiated PRN." Signed by both and dated, this contract and covenant will serve as a touchstone for their relationship going forward.

Whether you are tending to a newly mended relationship or initiating a new collaboration, how does the idea of sharing wish lists, expressing hesitations and reservations, negotiating a contract, and creating a covenant sound? If you are still not convinced that this works in real life, the next section describes how three optimists cultivate civil relationships with colleagues and students alike.

### Implications for Nurse Educators

Dr. Cynthia (Cindy) Clark, Dr. Susan Luparell, and I agree that the theme common to our respective research on academic incivility can be summed up in a single sentence. Cultivating civil relationships requires truth telling, transparency, and tending to relationships (Heinrich, Clark, & Luparell, 2008). *Truth telling* takes the form of sharing wishes as well as hesitations and reservations; *transparency* involves negotiating a contract; and *tending to relationships* is creating a covenant. Each example below, drawn from our lived experiences, includes an invitation:

1. **Cultivate Civil Relationships With Colleagues.** In early 2006, Cindy, Susan, and I had been sharing our challenges related to researching incivility during monthly phone for several months. Using the three Ts, we shared our wishes and fears/concerns and wrote up a contract and covenant to form a mutually beneficial partnership. In our contract, we committed to fostering each other's scholarly endeavors and to collaborating on scholarly projects/products. From then on, our covenant committed us to being "bone honest." True to our covenant, we have negotiated touchy issues such as what's "yours, mine, and ours" when it came to scholarly work (Heinrich, Clark, & Luparell, 2008). Mending our relational disconnects over time has only strengthened our bond (Heinrich, 2009).  
Try it for yourself. The next time you embark on a collaborative venture—be it coteaching, committee work, or a scholarly undertaking—ask if your colleague(s) are open to sharing their wish lists, expressing hesitations and reservations, negotiating a contract, and creating a covenant to keep your collaboration productive and pleasurable.
2. **Cultivate Civil Relationships With Your Faculty Group.** Several years ago, Susan's faculty group at Montana State University negotiated an agreement about how they would treat one another. Along with their campus director, Sue Raph, they review and revise their agreement at the first faculty meeting of each academic year. Yearly agreements include "recognizing professional boundaries with students" and specify that faculty "eliminate all nonverbal communications or conversations with students that are

destructive to faculty colleagues” and “refer students with complaints to faculty involved without discussion.” Beyond nursing, Cindy was part of a multidisciplinary team at Boise State University, whose purpose was to develop a “Statement of Shared Values” to guide the campus community in cultivating a culture of civility.

Imagine what would happen if your faculty group set aside time at your next retreat to share lists of wishes, express hesitations and reservations, negotiate a contract, and create a covenant for interactions with each other and with students.

3. Cultivate Civil Relationships With Students. Although their styles differ, both Susan and Cindy address civility on the first day of class by sharing their philosophy of teaching and using their syllabus as a jumping off point for dialogue. Susan shares how her philosophy of teaching influences course design, assignments, and decision making. After reviewing a statement in her syllabus that reads, “It is expected that you will: Treat your colleagues, the agency staff, and the faculty with respect,” Susan relies on her discussion with students to communicate two-way messages about civility that will guide their interactions for the rest of the semester (Luparell, 2007). For example, Susan trusts that students want her feedback to achieve their goals, and students trust that her sole motive in giving feedback is to help them achieve their goals.

Cindy's teaching philosophy and the Boise State “Statement of Shared Values” published in her syllabus serve as a catalyst for a dialogue with students about the importance of working together to cultivate a civil academic milieu. After sharing examples from other groups' agreements about how to keep discourse thought provoking and respectful, Cindy and students cocreate the norms for their teaching–learning environment, for example, speak one at a time; ask for clarification—do not personalize (Clark, 2009). Written statements of shared values for each course permit Cindy to hold students responsible for meeting this agreement in the event of “slippage” during the semester.

Consider telling the truth, being transparent, and tending to relationships with students in theory and/or clinical courses by sharing a syllabus that opens a dialogue about civility. Distribute a written version of your agreed upon contract/covenant to be used as a touchstone for the rest of the semester.

### Conclusion

What if nurse educators, instead of fleeing or fighting when under stress, mended and tended to their professional relationships? When optimistic nurse edu-

cators slow down the action in their busy lives to assess joy-stealing interactions, mend the disconnects in current professional relationships, and tend to new relationships from the outset, they boost the zest in academic workplaces and teaching–learning environments. In so doing, they have the potential to transform nursing education one collaboration, one faculty group, and one course of students at a time (Heinrich, 2008b). If you yearn for this kind of a future for yourself, for your colleagues, for your students, and for our profession, consider yourself an optimist.

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