**“Why Nursing Voices are Essential to Today’s Democracy”**

By Chahat Sharma, RN

As a young girl, I was enamoured with the idea of changing the world; the world seems unfair, and I want to help fix it. So *naturally*, I became drawn to pursuing a career in nursing. Through my undergraduate studies, I understood that global change can only be created through local efforts. Seemingly small efforts across the map, rippling together to make big waves, is how systems change. We know our systems were designed to be inequitable, perhaps even *feel* it each time we interact with our patients and the system. Each day, round-the-clock, nurses contribute their mind, body and soul to do great work, help others and make an impact. So why does it still feel like that better world is hopelessly out of reach? In fact, at the time I write this article, it feels like we are back-pedalling as a society on track to repeat some of our worst mistakes. I write this letter to all nurses, making a case for why our civic engagement is required in our communities in this current time. Your specific passions, skills and talents are needed.

Inequitable systems benefit from overlooking the voices of those who witness the ground realities, those caught up in the “messy” work. Much of the time, nurses are overworked, undervalued and exhausted from the physical, mental and emotional toll of our jobs. Outside of work – particularly for shift-workers – our basic needs and responsibilities may consume most of our time and energy. Sometimes there is nothing left to give to anyone or anything else; let alone the draining idea of dealing with current politic and news cycles. If the last 10 years have taught me anything, staying silent and leaving it to the politicians doesn’t serve us. It may protect our peace in the moment, but long-term it has caused harm to ourselves and those we care about.

The exhaustion is worsened through social media algorithms, where content being fed to us furthers our sense of fear, anxiety and mistrust. The resulting overwhelm has driven our society to a point where politics is an off-limits discussion, unless we know the other person already holds similar views. There seem to be two sides that have split so far apart, we no longer trust each other and can no longer extend good faith; striving for positive change is a waste of time. However, “Humankind: A Hopeful History” by Rutger Bregman offered me a new perspective on hopelessness. He offers many cases throughout history to show that as human beings we are naturally cooperative, even when on opposing sides, for our collective benefit. Though in current times, our trust has been eroded and finding ways to re-establish trust is the key.

So, agreeing on some shared values, goals and finding that common ground is the painstaking work ahead of us. Upon that common ground, through meaningful collaboration, we can mutually chip away at the fear and anxiety that drives folks to acts of hatred, prejudice and violence. From that point, we can shift our focus to the systems of power driving policies that are not in our shared best interest. From that point, we can demand real change in numbers and strength that cannot be ignored. Fostering meaningful contact with those who are different from us become opportunities to understand one another a little better. Who knows this better than a nurse?

Nurses are living archives of these kinds of interactions - we spend time with people who may be different from us in several ways, stepping into a shared vulnerable space and a mutual goal, often leaving with a new perspective and appreciation of our shared values. These interactions shape us and our views as professionals but more importantly as people. That is why it’s imperative for nursing voices to be amplified across communities – especially at this time. It is not about erasing our identities and saying we are one – it is recognizing that despite our differences – no matter how many there may be – common goals and values must exist. Centering that, the sum of all our perspectives and life experiences can hold value in finding sustainable solutions that will collectively improve our lives. But our exhaustion and absence from these spaces outside of work is being taken for granted – misinformation and mistrust in the system have led to near eradicated diseases re-emerging and our most vulnerable dying needlessly. Advocacy and evidence-based practice are key parts of our role as nurses, and when trust in the healthcare system is at an all-time low, our voices need to be louder, and our presence must be stronger.

So how can we become more engaged within our democracy (without burning out any further)?

1. *Figure out what you care about!* Women’s health, Rural and remote communities access to healthcare, Indigenous health, mental health? What issue makes you angry enough to channel into action?
2. *Set boundaries with social media and news.* Instead, find time in your week to learn more about the issues you care about, the way our government systems work and the good work already being done that you can contribute to.
3. *Keep showing up in your community, outside of work*. Pay attention to the conversations people are having around you. Find opportunities to establish common ground, then offer evidence and resources to confront misinformation.
4. *Find a group out there that shares your passion and use your voices to fight for change together.* Join a professional organization, like the RNAO, and sign up for an interest group to stay updated on advocacy efforts.
5. *Use your voice.* Set aside a certain amount of time each week or month to write letters to your local councillors, MPPs and MPs to exercise your voice as an informed member of your community. The RNAO has action alerts sent out that make it easy to send to local politicians on your behalf.
6. *Do not take your vote for granted!* Make an action plan in advance to get you and the people you care about to the polls. Understand your democratic rights as an employee on voting day, engage with union leadership to make a plan and gather support. If something might come up on election day that will prevent you from voting, plan to vote on an advance polling day or request a mail-in ballot.

Pick any one of these things, that you would be able to incorporate into your current lifestyle without too much hassle. The purpose is to fight against our apathy and hopelessness through action. For each of us to find a small way to consistently show up in a way that matters to us and take ownership of our values and expertise to advocate for better community outcomes. And who knows, we may end up changing the world after all.