JOSEPHINE A. DOLAN: NURSE AND HISTORIAN

There have been many interesting moments in Josephine A. Dolan’s life, any one of which could serve as the starting point for telling her story. But perhaps it is best to select the one moment that radically changed her and her life.

Looking back on that moment from the vantage point of five decades after the event, Jo is bittersweetly nostalgic as she describes how she was transformed from a carefree adolescent to a serious woman. Only a crisis could have wrought such a change, the critical moment for Jo was her father’s sudden death.

Jo was the second child and daughter of three children born to Thomas Joseph Dolan (1882-1931) and Josephine A. Tynan Dolan (1880-1972). Her older sister, Mary, (1911-1982) was already a student at Emmanuel College in Boston and her younger brother, Thomas (1922- ), who years later, would graduate from the University of Rhode Island, was expected to carry on the family name and aspirations. Jo was the middle child who only had to be in this warm family. By the time she was born in 1913, the family was two generations away from its Irish immigrant founders, Ryan from Tipperary and Dolan from County Leitrim. The Dolans settled in Providence, Rhode Island. The Ryans arrived in Quebec in 1841, and later migrated to Dedham, Massachusetts. Though well educated in classical Greek and Latin, and financially comfortable, they found his new country a hostile place. People of Irish extraction were not welcomed. In spite of these difficulties, the family endured and prospered.

Ancestors on her mother’s side, notably Jo’s grandfather and granduncle, were soldiers during the Civil War. Indeed some of the blood shed during the bloodiest of America’s wars, was shed by her granduncle, Tom Tynan. His remains were left with those of his fellow victims at Gettysburg.

The family recalls stories of another grand uncle, John Ryan, associating with the nineteenth century’s Transcendentalists, that distinguished group of philosophers who founded the Brook Farm movement. The Dolan family cherishes mementos from leading Transcendentalist, Ralph Waldo Emerson. The Irish family was not yet fully integrated into the established American culture, but their Irishness no longer barred them from civil discourse.

All this was inconsequential to the adolescent Josephine Dolan. For she simply enjoyed her life unaware of the struggles of previous generations that made such enjoyment possible. All this changed in January of her senior year when her father returned home at 10:00 in the morning. He was very sick. The physician and the three colleagues, called for consultation, looked at the sick man. Such was the state of medical science at the time that there was nothing they could do. What is more, they could not even diagnose what was wrong.

A nurse was hired to care for Jo’s father. She remembers with deep gratitude how that nurse cared for him. Her comfort measures were carefully thought out. The dichotomy between the hopelessness of medicine and the helpfulness of nursing was apparent in sharp contrast. The nurse kept her patient comfortable, and this in turn, eased the terrible pain of the family as they helplessly kept their watch. At six o’clock that night, Mr. Dolan died.

It was as if Jo had been thrown out of paradise. She changed from the frivolous teenager to a serious young woman. The course of her life changed too. She graduated from St. Mary’s High School in Lawrence a few months later. She did not follow her sister, Mary, to Emmanuel College as had been
expected she would. Instead, that fall she enrolled at St. John’s Hospital School of Nursing in neighboring Lowell. There she discovered that nursing education was primarily service to the hospital. Indeed so exhausted did the young student become that her mother was advised to take her home and “build her up.” Tuberculosis was a prevalent disease in those days, and it was not unheard of that overworked students succumbed to it. It was also a disease that carried with it a stigma. Jo remembers how the director of the school told her mother that she did not want x-rays so no information would appear on Jo’s record. Thankfully she did not have the affliction.

Jo had a three month leave from the School. When she returned, she made up these three months in providing service to the hospital. “In essence I was an employee of the hospital,” she says, remembering that her three year nursing program was more service than scholarship. Three months in the central supply room and a three month tour of night duty were ordinary assignments, as was giving anesthesia to little patients having their tonsils and adenoids removed. Jo does not recall that she was taught any theory to direct this practice. Rather she did what she was told to do. Such was the state of nursing education in pre-World War II days.

The licensure examination that evaluated the education was equally primitive. The candidates were examined over two days: on the first day they were tested on theory. This written test was followed the next day by an oral exam. Physicians held up instruments and the examinee identified them. If the aspiring nurse passed this evaluation, she was given a license by the Board of Registration in Nursing. In Massachusetts, where Jo earned her RN, that license was signed by physicians.

Following her graduation and success in the licensure exam, Jo enrolled at Boston College’s Intown School. There she was assigned to Eleanor Sullivan, RN, Ph.D., a nurse who had many years of experience teaching in schools and nursing. She had earned the doctorate in 1938. Her dissertation, THE ETHICAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS IN THE IDEOLOGY OF MODERN NURSING, delved deeper into the concern that had ever been at the center of her work. Her career was a series of firsts. Such was her reputation that when Massachusetts created a supervisor over all its nursing schools, Dr. Sullivan was chosen.

Jo was fortunate in her counselor. She proceeded with the course of studies, reading Shakespeare, learning about the special music that was poetry and grappling with the intricacies of dialectics. All this was a far cry from the physical labor that had been her nursing education. Jo easily made the transition. She not only enjoyed the courses, she excelled.

Dr. Sullivan was a wise mentor. When the new nursing department opened at the Boston University’s School of Education, she advised Jo to transfer. There it was felt Jo would get the benefit of a faculty most of whom had graduate preparation in nursing from Columbia University’s Teacher’s College. Jo followed the advice, matriculated at Boston University and was given 41 “blanket credits” for her three year diploma program. At BU Jo was taught by another nurse who was piling up a series of firsts. This was Mary Maher, a graduate of the Rhode Island Hospital School of Nursing, with a certificate from Simmons College, and a baccalaureate degree from Teacher’s College. She taught public health nursing, and oversaw the student teaching practicum at the Massachusetts General Hospital. She followed Dr. Sullivan as leader at the Board of Registration in Nursing. Later in her career she would be founding dean at the Boston College School of Nursing and the University of Massachusetts nursing program at Amherst.
Jo was fortunate to be entering nursing during a time of renewal. Public attention was on the profession and it was attracting bright young women to the work. If Jo knew first hand how “uneducating” many schools of nursing were, she was also part of the solution to the problem. She and her classmates at Boston University were being prepared as teachers of nursing, and they were guided to seek positions in collegiate schools as they completed their course of studies. Accordingly, Jo sought and accepted a position at the University of Connecticut (UConn) in Storrs.

Nursing education was then on an eleven month schedule. The first semester was spent on campus; the second and the summer months were spent in the clinical setting. Those who recall nursing’s move into academia will remember how many programs grafted the three year diploma program onto the four year college program. Many college students who majored in nursing spent five calendar years to earn a baccalaureate that their non nursing campus mates earned in four academic years. The faculty also had a longer academic year than their university colleagues, without equality in financial compensation. It would take a few years before nursing was brought into agreement with the rest of the academic world.

Nursing’s difficulties on campus were simple when compared with their troubles in hospitals. Hospitals responded to the new “bachelor’s” student nurse with alarm. This new kind of student of nursing had a different style from their hospital trained sisters. Customs varied, too, so the conflicts that happened were inevitable. They seem silly in retrospect, yet at the time, these were issues of major proportions. Jo helped students to hold their ground when their refusal to stand back and allow all others to enter an elevator before them was met with horror. She helped them, too, to refuse to stand at attention clasping charts when supervisors and physicians came onto the ward. Of course the behavior caused problems, and the deviant students were reported to the university for not obeying the unwritten rules. Jo, too, became the focus of the hospital’s director of nursing’s daily calls to UConn Dean of Nursing, Carolyn Ladd Widmer. Change was difficult, but it did occur.

Dean Widmer stood by her change agent faculty, she even cheered her on. She also threw an incredible opportunity Jo’s way when she assigned her to teach the history of nursing. Such was the flux of those years that faculty were often asked to take on unknown areas. Dean Widmer supported Jo in this change too. Widmer’s grandfather, Cyrus Hamlin, provided a source of inspiration. After he graduated from Bowdoin College and Bangor Theological Seminary he left his native Maine in 1838 and became a missionary to Turkey. He was well established there when sixteen years later, the Crimean War began. He and his mission sold bread and laundry services to the British Army. He wrote of the hospital’s disorder, “disorder, filth and suffering” and then of Florence Nightingale’s arrival. He says, “She was a quiet, self-possessed, interesting, intelligent lady, evidently wholly absorbed in her work.” In her grandfather, the Dean at UConn was a living link with modern nursing's beginning.

This and some primary source materials were Jo’s beginning. Within a short time but with much work, she made herself and her course indispensable. Not only did nursing students enroll in the course, but their counterparts from history and pharmacy did so as well. Jo was fortunate in the recognition she received at the University. She became even more of a celebrity when the history department invited Dr. William Shyrock to visit the campus. The renowned medical historian accepted the invitation and requested that the nurse-historian, Jo Dolan, be invited to the dinner held in his honor.

Shyrock acclaimed Jo’s revision in 1958 of Minnie Goodnow’s HISTORY OF NURSING. He said it made his history no longer necessary. W.B. Saunders had chosen Jo for this work only after much scrutiny. They were rewarded in their choice. The other competing nursing history text at that point,
was that written by Sr. Charles Marie Frank. After congratulating Jo on the revision, she told her she would retire from revising her nursing history, FOUNDATIONS OF NURSING.

Certainly Jo had created a whole new work for herself when she accepted the dean’s assignment. She studied this new field, taking all the history courses at UConn that she could. She found mentors, among whom Mary Roberts and Anne Austin were the most notable. Miss Austin’s own beginnings reached back to American nursing’s founding leaders. She knew Mary Adelaide Nutting, Lavinia Dock, and Isabel Stewart, and told Jo many anecdotes, as well as helped her with historical source material. Years later, in 1985, Jo’s tribute to Miss Austin was published in the Journal of Nursing History’s first issue.

Jo served on committees with Mary Roberts, editor of the American Journal of Nursing, and author of American Nursing, published at mid-century. Martha Rogers, Edith Patten Lewis, and Jo became the youngest member of the National Historical Source Materials Committee that the National League for Nursing established. Martha Rogers chaired the group. Other members were Isabel Stewart, Stella Goostray, Anne Austin, Alma Gault, Eleanor Lee, Esther Read, Elizabeth Soule, Inez Haynes and Minnie Walton were members ex officio.

These were busy years as nursing revitalized the profession and its education. Jo continued to teach her courses at UConn and to revise her book during this time. (Jo has revised her book, NURSING IN SOCIETY, seven times—one edition has been translated into Japanese). Then she participated in the Intercollegiate Conference on the relationship of the humanities to nursing held in 1968 at Lenox, Massachusetts. She chose Boston College professor of American History, Thomas O’Connor, to speak of history’s message for nursing and place it within an historical context. Jo told the conferees of nursing’s long tradition of caring for sick persons, and for safeguarding health.

Three years earlier in 1965, Jo was sought by schools of nursing in the St. Paul and Minneapolis, Minnesota area to teach her nursing history course. The challenge this time was to organize her materials and visual aids. This was the ordinary part of teaching and easily managed. What was new was that this course would be taught on television. It required that Jo travel to the Twin Cities each week. Every Thursday afternoon after what was already a full week’s work at UConn, she flew out of Bradley airport, arriving at Minnesota later that night. She taped all day Friday and Saturday morning. She then returned to Connecticut to prepare for another week’s work.

Traveling became more and more a part of her life; for her work and for enjoyment. Sometimes the boundary between work and enjoyment collapsed as when she traveled with UConn’s Fine Arts Faculty and toured the museums of Europe. There she searched out paintings that featured nursing’s story. She educated her university colleagues so that even when she was not with them, they made sure to look with a nursing historian’s eye. Often they brought back slides for Jo’s growing collection of nursing history in the arts.