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Nearly 40 years ago, a naive, shy, petrified, excited 18 year old teetotal, innocent graduate from a North Shore girls' high school was dropped off at the nurses' home of her training hospital to begin a career which would span nearly four decades and include every emotion imaginable. I was that young woman, embarking on the rollercoaster ride of my life and it is the emotional side of my career which will always have the most profound effect on me. It has been an amazing and wonderous journey down a road with so many forks, from that first night when I sat alone in my tiny new room, too frightened to go out and join the other new student nurses giggling in the corridor, to the person I have become today.

There are so many things I will never forget. Like my first day on the ward when at seven a.m., bright eyed and bushy tailed, I asked the senior nurse what I should do. When she replied that I was to take an elderly man into the shower and help him undress and shower, my first thought was Oh my God, I've never seen a naked adult man before! Well at about 80 years of age it wasn't exactly what I'd expected and I did shower him and return him to his freshly made bed with a great sense of pride in my new skills. Of course pride always comes before a fall and fall I did a few weeks later.

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After sponging an unconscious patient I was overcome with a wave of nausea, probably caused by the overconsumption of alcohol the night before, yes I was no longer teetotal, when I sat in the still full washbowl of water I had carefully placed on a chair whilst making the bed. The water came up like a geyser, with full force, engulfing me and filling me with deep embarrassment. The charge sister sent me back to my room to change and compose myself. From pride to humility in one very wet, fell swoop.

I managed to somehow survive my training despite many more hiccups, to finally become a “sister” and wear the much coveted white shoes. My first job was in a neonatal and paediatric intensive care unit. I was both nervous and excited at this next step in my career and am forever grateful for the guidance and friendship shown to me by some of the experienced nurses there. It was quite confronting at such a young age to see sick and dying babies and children but incredibly rewarding when they survived above all odds. Of course, as always in nursing, there were those who thrived on “eating their young” and eaten I did get many times but I always managed to survive to see another day. It was with a mix of humour and terror several years later when cuddling my young son in a hospital bed in the middle of the night I was woken by voices next to us.

I opened my eyes to see my nemesis from those days receiving handover from the night nurse. My first thought was “Is this a nightmare?” It wasn’t and as she moved on to the next patient I began to see the funny side.

At the end of the year I decided to realise my lifelong dream to travel. So, with not much money, an overstuffed backpack and brimming with enthusiasm and trepidation, I set off alone for the adventure of my life. Days after my arrival in London, I moved into a shared flat and secured a job through a nursing agency looking after wealthy, elderly Londoners in their own homes. This was a real education and was at times enjoyable and others difficult but allowed me to save money for my travels. A few months later I was getting ready to go home from a nightshift looking after an old man in his flat, when his wife came and warned me to be careful when leaving their home, as there were lots of reporters outside. They believed that one of the girls in the next flat was about to become engaged to Prince Charles. Sure enough it was indeed the beautiful Lady Dianna Spencer and their engagement was announced a few days later.

After travelling in Europe for a few months, I found a job as a nurse in a children’s holiday camp in South Wales. This was by far the most fun nursing job I have ever had. It was during that time that I had two of the most defining moments of my life.

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One evening, whilst sitting in the casualty department of the local hospital with yet another asthmatic child who had been sent to camp in cold, wet Wales, I saw a sign pointing down the corridor to the Labour Ward. We then heard screaming, followed by the wondrous first cry of a newborn baby. With tears in my eyes I decided there and then that I was going to become a midwife.

The other, more personal, defining moment happened after a night at the local village pub, during which I had spent time chatting to one of my co-workers, an English man. Without going into too much detail, he moved into my tent, the accommodation generously supplied by our employer, and we are about to celebrate our 32nd wedding anniversary and the marriage of the first of our three children.

We returned to Australia and I got a job in the one hospital where I can truly say that the nurses did not eat their young. Unfortunately, my next job, my first outside Sydney, was the opposite and I did not stay long. Luckily, I found a position on a Surgical Ward in another hospital, where I stayed for the next nine years. It was a fun time, working with many wonderful and inspiring nurses. We had lots of laughs and a few tears. It was here that I learnt the true meaning of being a nurse. From detecting and acting on the signs of deteriorating patients, without the benefit of coloured

charts, I might add, to sitting with a dying patient, to cleaning up all manner of body fluids and much more.

During those years I had my own personal battles, both with infertility and cancer and the support of my colleagues, family and the wonderful nurses who looked after me undoubtedly helped me through the dark times. I came through all this alive, healthy and with two beautiful sons and a gorgeous daughter, who we were lucky enough to adopt as babies. It was then that I was finally able to realise my dream to become a midwife. University study was a new and foreign concept to me but one which I embraced with enthusiasm, happy at long last to be studying midwifery.

I will always remember the first birth I witnessed. The mother had the same name as me and it was the day my grandmother died. I think it was meant to be. To say that the tears were flowing was an understatement. The mother was a young single girl with a troubled life, who I was overwhelmingly happy to meet years later when she was studying first nursing and then midwifery. She told me she was married with more children and I felt immensely proud of her. I soon learnt that as a midwife I would be subject to not only a whole new range of emotions but also a whole new range of body fluids. I still remember the first time I got a bra full of liquor. Or when in the middle of the night in Labour Ward an enormous Tongan woman birthed an

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equally enormous and very smelly poo, followed by a beautiful, lustily crying baby, which I helped her birth whilst holding back an overwhelming urge to vomit. Oh the wonders of birth!

My years as a midwife have elicited a full range of emotions from delirious happiness, to immense sadness and just about everything in between. Nothing will ever beat the joy of placing a newborn baby on its mother's chest and witnessing the love of a mother for her child. On the down side, it doesn't always work out well and sometimes things happen which are beyond our control.

I will never get used to caring for a family whose baby is stillborn. Sharing their immense grief whilst remaining professional is something I will always struggle with.

We have had more than our share of distressing incidents of late and I have learnt some very important lessons. Asking for help is a sign of strength, not weakness. If we don't care for ourselves we can't care for our families and patients. Nurses and midwives are like a giant family. We sometimes disagree and fall out with each other but when it boils down to it, our unique shared experiences and our ability to work together as a team, to laugh together and to cry together are the best coping mechanism we have.

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I have seen many changes in my profession over the years, some good and some not so good. Nursing has allowed me to travel the world, raise my family and hopefully make a difference in the lives of the people I have cared for. I firmly believe that if I, as that innocent 18 year old, had known what was in store for me in my career, I would still have made the same choice. There have been things I would rather not have experienced but there have been many more things I would not have missed out on for the world.