

President-elect's Keynote

Courage to Soar

NTI 2024
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INTRODUCTION

Hello everybody! What an amazing week!

My daughter, Quinn, is here! She's 9. She keeps me centered. She reminds me of what's important. And she often says to me, in the words of Taylor Swiffer (sorry Quinn, you know that's what I call her!) all things can be shaken off! Quinn is so brave.

Quinn got me thinking about how I should frame this conversation.

In the past, my predecessors have waited until the end of their address to announce AACN's new theme and reveal the theme art with lots of fanfare. So, why wait until the end to unveil the new theme, when it's meant to be the heartbeat of our conversation? Why not ignite our time together right from the start?

Tradition has its place. But innovation propels us forward. So, let's shake things up today. Try something bold and different.

Let's make every moment we have together this morning an opportunity to embrace change. Let's set the tone. Ignite the passion. And pave the way for what promises to be an extraordinary year together.

So, without further ado, I proudly present our new theme for the coming year.

Are you ready?

Our theme is "Courage to Soar."

Let's talk about courage for a minute.

Courage has been and continues to be the theme of my life.

COURAGE

When Adam Grant, an organizational psychologist, posted [this timeline on his Instagram feed](#), I said, "That's me! That's my life!"

I learned about courage by watching my mom, a single mother who reinvented herself. By watching my brother, who refused to let his deafness define him. I learned about it from my daughter, Quinn, who I believe is a brave boss. And from so many people around me over the years. Many of you are here today.





I learned about courage by trying new things. Like becoming a flight nurse even though I have motion sickness and I'm afraid of heights.

True story.

I learned about courage by standing onstage in front of audiences that seem to get bigger and bigger every time.

So, we have a theme: Courage to Soar.

Now how about some theme art?

Nope. That comes later. This was just a teaser.

First, let's explore the challenge and the gift of courage a little more.

It takes courage for AACN to be AACN. It takes courage to be a nurse. Maybe even more, it takes courage to be ourselves.

It takes so much courage to keep showing up. Doesn't it? Every hour. Every day.

Yet it made me wonder: What would it look like if we didn't show up? No AACN. No nurses. No us.

Let's sit with that for a minute.

No AACN. No nurses. No me. No you.

A DAY WITHOUT AACN

Let's imagine a day without AACN.

For starters, this would mean a day without advocacy. And being an advocate takes so much courage. But what does advocacy really mean? And who should do it?

Simply put, for me advocacy means recommending or speaking in support of something or someone.

Now *who* should advocate? Of course, individuals like you and me. But a lot of advocacy requires the power of numbers and influence that only a professional organization can bring to the table.

Many times AACN advocates as a single association. But many more times we do it in a spirit of true collaboration. Like when we join the 64 associations of the Nursing Community Coalition to advocate on issues that matter most to nurses and their patients.

A day without AACN means all of this advocacy is gone.

For me, a day without AACN is a day without a bold voice that champions patient-centered care.

After all, what is our vision? It's to create "a healthcare system driven by the needs of patients and families, where we make our optimal contribution as acute and critical care nurses."



A day without AACN means a day without healthy work environment standards, which prioritize our safety and well-being. A day when employers aren't challenged to remove the toxicity that injures us and our workplaces.

It means a day without "AACN Standards for Appropriate Staffing in Adult Critical Care," released last month.

If you haven't seen them yet, they're a game changer!

The new staffing standards require direct care nurses to be involved in all aspects of staffing. They require a clinical leader – *who does not have a patient assignment* – to use an accurate workload measurement tool in making assignments.

And employers need to support a healthy work environment. They have to start by assuming a 1:2 nurse-to-patient ratio. *Then* adjust it according to actual patient needs.

A day without AACN means a day without vocal support for painfully urgent issues, such as workplace violence, bullying and moral distress.

It means a day without certification. So the scope of practice and appropriate licensure for bedside and advanced practice nurses won't be advanced.

It's also a day without the Beacon Award for Excellence. A day without the AACN Procedure Manual, which is the gold standard for clinicians.

It's a day without the new competence framework, the orientation pathway and our e-learning resources. And without the knowledge assessment tool. If you haven't seen it, the tool fills the void of the discontinued BKAT website.

It takes enormous courage to be AACN. To be the voice and influence behind three-quarters of a million acute and critical care nurses. To stand up and advocate for our needs. To speak alone and in partnership with other healthcare organizations.

A day without AACN means a day without so many things we take for granted, because "that's just what AACN does."

A DAY WITHOUT NURSES

But even a day *with* AACN would be meaningless, if it's a day without nurses. Because AACN is a community of nurses. It's as simple as that.

Less than 10 years before the first NTI, Virginia Henderson, a nurse thinker at Yale, published her well-known definition of nursing.

Henderson said our unique function as nurses is to assist the individual, sick or well, in performing those activities that contribute to health or its recovery (or to a peaceful death).

Activities the individual would perform unaided, if they had the strength, will or knowledge required. Nurses should assist them so they can gain independence as rapidly as possible.

Isn't that what nursing still looks like? And it all goes away in a day without nurses.



It's a day when no one champions competent and compassionate patient-centered care. When no one advocates for patients' and families' needs. Their preferences. Their rights.

When no one guides families who want – and **need** – to be present during difficult times, such as invasive procedures and CPR.

It's a day without anyone to guide interdisciplinary collaboration that responds to patient needs comprehensively. Without people who advocate for system-wide changes when they're needed and who maintain continuity of care, when the members of interprofessional teams rotate in and out.

A day without nurses means no one to ask the tough moral and ethical questions that ensure the wishes and values of patients, families and caregivers are respected and supported.

That's not all. It's a day without role models, coaches and mentors. Nurses whose care, experience and evidence-based guidance support both new and seasoned nurses faced with new challenges.

It's a day without a supportive work culture, where nurses feel empowered to advocate for patients' needs and for each other. A day without being meaningfully recognized. A day where individual contributions and achievements are not celebrated. A day absent of the reaffirming words of caring colleagues.

A day without nurses means nobody is promoting inclusivity and equity in our practice. People who are marginalized stay in the margins. Even though we *know* that an equitable, diverse and inclusive work environment makes it a safer, healthier place to work.

A DAY WITHOUT YOU

Now, what about us? What would a day look like without you? Without me.

I honestly think that's the toughest one, because it hits closest to home.

Did you ever tell someone that you're a person who happens to be a nurse? Not a nurse who happens to be a person.

Our individual humanity is what we uniquely bring to our patients and their families, and to one another.

So a day without **you** is a day where – because of your absence – someone might not have the friend, the mentor, the coach, the confidant, the ally they needed.

It's a day without *your* unique knowledge, skills and abilities.

Do colleagues turn to you because you have the gift of supporting end-of-life care? Or the skill to find hidden veins? Or the tact and diplomacy that brings order when there's chaos?

Who will guide the eager new nurse, the terrified medical student, the overconfident resident?

Who will show others what they'll find on the other side of courage? Because you've been scared just as many times as they have.

A day without even one of us is a day without what each of us has learned. We learned it from the joys and the scars of our personal journeys.



I think of the nurse whose mother showed her every day what courage looks like and how to manifest it.

I think of the nurse whose first trip out of the house as a baby was to the welfare office. She grew up eating government cheese and drinking powdered milk. Sometimes her mother didn't eat so the children could.

I think of the nurse who longed to have a child at any cost. She had seven rounds of IVF so that one day someone would call her Mommy.

I think of the nurse who said, "No more" when she put aside the guilt of being a healthcare professional who was keeping herself in an abusive relationship.

I think of the nurse who never had mentors early in her career. Now she dedicates her life to being the mentor she never had.

Each of these could be a different nurse. But they're not. These are all the experiences of the same nurse. One who has the courage to stand before you – authentic and vulnerable – as AACN's incoming president.

Yes. You heard right. These are all experiences from my own life.

Maybe Brené Brown got it right. Vulnerability just might be our greatest measure of courage.

I want you to know the messiness of who I am. I want you to know where I've been and what I bring as we walk side by side, supporting each other with our individual courage during this coming year's journey.

COURAGE TO SOAR

If you're up for it I'd like to suggest some homework for all of us to take on between today and a year from now when we see each other at NTI 2025 in New Orleans.

Let's ask ourselves three questions:

- When was a time I did something that seemed courageous to me? (It doesn't matter when or where.) I could have been at 9 or 29 or 49.
- Why did I think that was courageous?
- What's stopping me now from doing things that require courage?

If we answer these questions honestly I know we'll discover hidden sources of courage we might have forgotten or overlooked.

I'm confident that, with this renewed courage, we'll find our lives gradually soaring from gray to living color.

With Courage to Soar as our call to action and this beautiful image to inspire us, three things are clear to me:

- That a day – even an hour – without AACN, without nurses and without each of us changes the face of healthcare for the worse.
- That it's not just big things that require us to have courage.
- That's because – here's the third thing – courage looks different for each one of us.

And, together we have the Courage to Soar.