

# A healing touch

MARY JOHNSON '60  
APPLIES A HOLISTIC  
APPROACH TO  
NURSING, TO HELP  
PEOPLE ACTIVELY  
PARTICIPATE IN  
THEIR OWN HEAL-  
ING PROCESS.



BY JAN SHAW-FLAMM

PHOTOGRAPH BY  
BILL KELLEY

THE WOMAN WAS 40 YEARS OLD AND PREGNANT WITH QUADRUPLETS; by any standards, the pregnancy was high risk. As an R.N., Mary Buntrock Johnson '60, professor emerita of nursing, had often cared for patients dealing with frightening situations, but this time was different. The patient was her daughter, Molly Johnson Magnani '84, and those four tiny babies were her grandchildren. Fortunately, Johnson's career path had prepared her to support her family through this intensely stressful situation.

Johnson, a self-described "Army brat," lived with her parents, "Bunt" and Pete Buntrock, in tense, post-World War II Germany for about three years, until she was 13 years old. Her older brother Bob was attending Marquette University and had enlisted in the Navy. "When I look back and think about my interest in healing and in touch," says Johnson, "I think about those years. We lived only 60 miles from the Russian zone; there were many blackouts and a lot of fear. I remember having to come to terms with that fear, and one of the ways was reaching out to friends and animals."

The family ended up in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, for Johnson's last three years of high school. When she visited St. Olaf for a choral festival, she was favorably impressed. "I have always been interested in music but I didn't think that was exactly what I wanted to pursue," she says. "But I found out St. Olaf had a nursing program, and in those days they had an ROTC program for Army nurses, so I joined up." A busy nursing major, Johnson still found time to sing with the Manitou Singers and the Chapel Choir.

Soon after graduation, she married Paul Johnson, and Lieutenant Mary Johnson became a nurse at Fort Meade, Maryland, where she and her colleagues treated a number of soldiers injured in the Vietnam War as it unfolded in Laos. Many patients had suffered terrible burns and could barely be touched, but because of their durable Army boots, their feet were often relatively unscathed. "So I began foot massage," says Johnson, "and I realized the importance of that touch." This firsthand experience spurred Johnson's interest in what would later become known as "healing touch." [CONTINUED]



Mary Buntrock Johnson '60  
with grandchildren (L-R)  
Haley, Carver and Madison.

After several years of nursing at Fort Meade and later Union Memorial Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland, the Johnsons moved to Minnetonka, Minnesota, where she devoted more than a decade to caring for their three children, Molly, Dan and Ben, and the horses, dogs and cats on their hobby farm. When their youngest entered first grade, Johnson began working on her master's degree at the University of Minnesota. She also became interested in the work of New York University Professor Delores Krieger, who had done her doctoral research on "therapeutic touch," a method (derived from the religious practice of laying on of hands) that uses the hands to direct human energies to help or heal someone who is ill.

Johnson read Krieger's research while she was a master's student. She found herself unable to argue against it, even though she was assigned to critique the research. Scientifically and emotionally, the work simply made sense. "Krieger found that people who received therapeutic touch had a significant increase in their hemoglobin level. Part of me is very scientific, and I like to have lots of rationale for why and what I do, and this really intrigued me. Most people would say, 'Oh, this feels good, my pain is so much better, my anxiety is down,' and this is wonderful, but it's all very subjective data. This was objective data. So I went for a long weekend, sat at the feet of Delores Krieger and learned therapeutic touch."

By 1977, Johnson had earned her MSN. In 1978 she began teaching at St. Olaf and also working an occasional summer as an oncology nurse at Metropolitan Medical Center and at Abbott Northwestern Hospital in Minneapolis, where she provided healing touch to patients who requested it. In 1980, while still teaching, she entered a Ph.D. program at the University of Minnesota. For her, it was an exciting but conflicted time. Nursing is evidence based, but Johnson felt drawn to explore the still suspect practice of holistic nursing, including healing touch, in her dissertation.

While driving to class at the university, Johnson had a strong sense that her late father, a no-nonsense Army man, would want her to take the risk. She came up with a way to explore holistic nursing, including healing touch, using "diffusion theory" as a framework to describe the process by which an innovation — the holistic paradigm of health — is communicated over time to members of a social system such as the nursing profession. The theory helped Johnson identify the essential characteristics of holistic nursing as it was "diffusing" into the profession of nursing. She has never regretted it. In explaining holistic nursing, Johnson posits some key ideas that came out of her doctoral research:

- *Holistic nursing is a philosophy, an approach to one's nursing practice. No matter what skills, tasks or therapies are required, it's bringing mindfulness and intention into everything you do professionally.*
- *The holistic nurse focuses on the whole person — physically, psychologically, socio-culturally, developmentally and spiritually — and recognizes a person's ability to influence her or his own healing process.*
- *Illness is not necessarily negative. It can invite a person to pause and reflect on what is ultimately important and help one to live more deeply every day.*
- *Holistic nurses often practice a variety of complementary therapies that allow people to participate in their own healing process.*

By the time she was awarded her Ph.D. in 1988, Johnson was a full-time, tenured professor at St. Olaf, teaching courses in medical-surgical nursing as well as nursing leadership and management. Propelled to continue learning, Johnson earned certification in holistic nursing in 1997 and certification in healing touch in 2000.

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— MARY JOHNSON '60

"Healing," says Johnson, "is very different from curing. It's more of a coming into 'right relationship' in your life to what's important to you, of living with radical aliveness and enthusiasm." Healing touch has a spiritual component, she explains, describing the practice in a manner that one might describe prayer. She doesn't see healing touch as religious, necessarily, but Johnson does hold a deep respect for the religious beliefs of her patients and honors those beliefs in her work.

**Music, as needed** 🌿

IN A STROKE OF GOOD FORTUNE, Johnson was on sabbatical leave during the time of her daughter's quadruplet pregnancy. (The Magnanis already were parents of a son, Dylan, then 8.) "When Molly found out she was pregnant with quadruplets, she almost didn't even want to hope because she couldn't imagine this working out," says Johnson. "I asked, 'Are you bonding with each one, Molly?' She said, 'I don't dare bond, Mom. If I lose these babies, I'll be devastated.' So I bonded with them."

Refusing the impersonal practice of identifying them as Quads A, B, C and D, Johnson called the fetuses Peace, Love, Joy and Hope and provided healing touch as her daughter grew with her precious babies. At 24 weeks gestation, the family celebrated — the babies now had a chance, albeit a slim one, of survival. Their hope was immediately threatened when labor began and Magnani was hurried off to the hospital.

All available medical knowledge was brought to bear in keeping the tiny beings in the uterus where they had the best chance for survival, but circumstances were not promising. Love moved into the birth canal, effectively holding the other babies in place for another week, at a stage when every day in utero means a greater chance of survival. Then, sadly, Love was born, destined to survive for only a few hours. But the other news was good: On November 21, 2001, three premature but viable babies were born — Haley, Madison and Carver, two daughters and a son. Johnson announced her intentions to the NICU (Neonatal Intensive Care Unit) staff: "I'm doing healing touch on these babies every day. Do you have a problem with that?"

The only sounds in the NICU were the beeps, hisses and bells from the machines monitoring the infants. "I asked the nurse, 'Why no lullabies?'" says Johnson. "'Oh,' she replied, 'premature babies need absolute quiet — no noise.' But when you graduate from St. Olaf, you know how important music is. I brought my CD player in the next day, determined to get this straightened out.

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**HEALING TOUCH** [from page 20]

The head nurse was not moved by my argument. She gave me the research on the effect of noise on premature infants."

But Johnson knew some of the literature indicated that music had a *positive* effect on the tiny patients. "Molly and I decided to talk to the CEO of the hospital, as well as to the NICU doctors, about our sincere belief that music — Mozart, lullabies and the St. Olaf Choir, to name a few — would be most helpful to our babies. They agreed and a 'music prn' order — *music, as needed* — was written." Johnson is convinced that it helped create a healing environment.

"I did healing touch on them every day," she says. "Of course, they were hooked up to machines that measure everything, and I noticed that their oxygen saturation would go up, and their blood pressure and pulse would go down. The nurses said after I treated them, they were so calm and quiet." It meant four months of daily trips to the hospital, but Johnson says, "Healing touch is very self-sustaining work. There is a reciprocity that gives me more energy, too." Today the babies are healthy, lively 4-year-olds.

When a friend provided healing touch in connection with Johnson's recent hip surgery, she gratefully experienced the benefits herself. "Healing touch makes your caring tangible," says Johnson. "It's a special way of being with people. You learn to meditate and center yourself, to focus on that person's highest good." To the suggestion that she sounded more like a Buddhist than an ELCA Lutheran, Johnson smiles. "St. Olaf has always been very open to my talking about holistic nursing and healing touch in my lectures," she says.

**GOING DEEPER**

Although millions of Americans employ some kind of complementary or alternative therapies, one of the sticking points for some healthcare professionals is the question of empirical, or provable, evidence that these therapies are effective. Researchers have explored healing touch with a variety of results, but Johnson cautions that one of the tenets of healing touch is "not getting invested in the outcome." Nevertheless, she is currently involved in a research project at Woodwinds Health Campus, a holistic hospital in Woodbury, Minnesota, exploring the dimensions of a healing environ-

ment from a nursing perspective.

Johnson is a volunteer provider and board member of Pathways in south Minneapolis, a nonprofit health crisis resource center serving some 650 people each year in more than 10,000 visits. Pathways offers healing touch, emotional support, meditation, imagery and more. In response to surveys and interviews by the center, participants often report improved outlook on life, increased energy, better control of symptoms, less pain, enhanced communication skills and deepening of spiritual beliefs.

Erin Forsythe '06 worked with Johnson on a senior project titled "Integrating Complementary Therapies with Western Medicine" for her individual major in health psychology. Forsythe spent about 30 hours at Pathways observing and participating in yoga classes, mindful meditation, hypnotherapy and other alternative and complementary therapies.

"Mary Johnson is one of my heroes," says Forsythe, a nursing major. "She has such a clear-minded and open way of communicating with people. Many of her students agree that she's inspirational in helping them find their own sense of compassion in nursing. One of the reasons I came to St. Olaf is because we are taught to take into account the mind, body and spirit in

our clinical experiences."

In 2004, Johnson's colleagues and students in the Minnesota Association of Colleges of Nursing named Johnson their Nurse Educator of the Year. Although officially retired from teaching, Johnson remains a popular guest speaker at St. Olaf. She is nationally known for her work in holistic nursing, her workshops, her articles and chapters in professional journals and books, and, among readers of *Lutheran Women Today*, for her column, "Self Care Today." She is writing a book about her experience with her premature grandchildren, entitled *Lessons in Being: From Those Born Too Soon*.

Johnson has been part of the St. Olaf nursing program through most of its 50-year history. Among all the accomplishments, she is especially proud of one thing: "In a hospital, you often see nurses enter a room and go first to the computer that is monitoring the patient. At St. Olaf, our students are taught to focus on one person, not a list of things to do. They know how to focus on the therapeutic relationship."

That is the enduring legacy of Professor Mary Johnson. 🙏

**Jan Shaw-Flamm** is a Twin Cities-based freelance writer.

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