Finding Time to Think

It is October, a time when most faculty and students are well into their fall courses. Summer, and especially summer break (if there is such a thing in nursing education), is now a distant memory and many faculty and students are now looking forward to the upcoming holidays for the next opportunity to step away from work and study to spend time with family, catch up on household projects, travel, or even to vacation. Graduate nursing students are likely to continue work on their dissertations and scholarly projects. Most junior, tenure-track faculty will continue their efforts in scholarship and service to ensure they are prepared for the tenure and promotion process. Other faculty, by the nature of their administrative responsibilities or ongoing research projects, will continue working nearly uninterrupted over these holiday break periods so as not to miss important deadlines or fall behind in preparations for the next book, manuscript, grant proposal, or accreditation report. Faculty holding clinical roles in addition to their faculty positions often continue their clinical practice throughout the year, with no discernable time away from their clinical practice settings. Sound familiar?

Layered onto all of the productivity described above is the continuous stream of e-mail and other notifications that must be read, filed, answered, deleted, or otherwise handled—in a timely manner—no matter the time of year and regardless of whether one is on campus or on the other side of the globe. Have you noticed how many professionals handle e-mail while waiting in airports, at restaurants, outside conference meeting rooms, and even during those long faculty meetings filled with intense discussion about the level on Bloom’s taxonomy at which a new course objective should be written? And all the busyness noted above is just about our work alone, and does not include all the other family and community responsibilities common to working adults.

A question that rises from the flames of day-to-day academic work is this: When do we find time to think? And by this, I do not mean time to think about our next meeting, an upcoming deadline, or even time to think about how to integrate innovative teaching strategies into a new course. I mean time for the deep disciplinary reflection and analysis that was central to the professoriate—and to the development of all academic fields of study—just 50 years ago. This is the type of thinking often accompanied or stimulated by reading scholarly books or articles. Quiet. Reflective. Deep. Undisturbed.

As I have spoken to colleagues near and far about how they find time to think (as I’ve described above), the usual refrain is some version of, “Who has time for that?” Yet, my question is a serious one, based on deeper concerns eloquently described by Geman and Geman (2016) about the nature and rate of scientific progress, parameters which appear to be headed in the wrong direction. Geman and Geman suggested that a time traveler traveling 50 years forward from 1915 would have been astonished by the progress that has been made when arriving in 1965, such as invention of the transistor and discovery of both DNA and nuclear energy. Someone traveling 50 years into the future from 1965 to 2015 would surely be impressed by our further technological advances, but there have been noticeably fewer “big” discoveries and technological leaps forward in the last 50 years than in the 50 years prior to 1965. Have all the big discoveries already been made, or has modernity created so many distractions and interruptions that the kind of deep thinking needed for big discoveries is no longer possible?

Geman and Geman (2016) suggested that both technology and the changing work environment of academics have played a part in the slowed pace of major advances in complex fields such as biology, cognition, and the health sciences. Although we are more distracted now than ever, the work faculty do has also changed, in significant ways. In addition to the acclaim that successful grant applications provide, the reward system for faculty now often prizes reputation and publication rate over the impact that fewer but higher quality studies and their reports have on the field. In nascent modern professional fields such as nursing, and especially within the subfield of nursing education, the quality of our scholarship has never been more important for the development of our science, the education of our students, and the nursing care provided to individuals and the community. How do we manage the competing priorities of the “must do more with less” mindset with that of the “must find time to think” mindset?

Alas, I do not have the answer. I do know that time is a resource we all must manage and as a community of scholars, we seem due for an examination of the structures and processes, largely of our own creation, that have pushed out our
time to think—and which likely contribute to the high rates of burnout among faculty (Flynn & Ironside, 2018; Yedidia, Chou, Brownlee, Flynn, & Tanner, 2014). Can we really have time to think if we join every project that comes our way? Will we have more time to think if we agree to chair another university committee? If we agree to develop a new elective course on a current hot topic? Likely not.

Perhaps somewhat paradoxically, I suggest it would be a wise investment of time if, over the coming break periods, we all examined our daily and weekly activities in an effort to find just 4 hours of time to think. (I think 8 to 12 hours per week is closer to ideal, but we have to start somewhere!) Creating these 4 hours to think may be as simple as removing an optional recurring meeting from our calendars to create a block of time for thinking. Or, it may mean condensing our required work activities into fewer days to create a block of time, perhaps at the week’s beginning or end, during which we can spend time thinking. With the solutions as numerous as the causes, the question for readers is this: How do you find time to think?

References