



Courier

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Spotlight on Dorothy D. Nayer, MA, RN, Interview with her daughter, Louise Nayer

By Diane J. Mancino



Dorothy Daubert Nayer, MA, RN, served as assistant to the director of the National Nursing Accrediting Service, New York, NY; and as assistant executive secretary, American Nurses Association, New York, NY, where she worked with the

Educational Administrator, Consultants and Teachers Section and the Institutional Nursing Service Administrators Section. In addition, she was Associate Editor of the *American Journal of Nursing* and a frequent contributor to the *London Nursing Times*. Dorothy, and her husband, Hank, were victims of a horrific gas explosion that caused severe pain and disfigurement and nearly took their lives. I was only acquainted with Dorothy and although I did not know her well, she left a lasting impression on me and many others who knew her. Dorothy's courage, fortified by her nursing career, is captured in *Burned: A Memoir*. Unfortunately we do not know the details of her nursing education at TC. If any of our readers knew Dorothy when she studied at TC, please share your memories by writing to me.

Editor: Do you know what led Dorothy to a career in nursing?

My mother came from a family of people who served others. There were many social workers in her family tree (her biological father for one—whom she didn't see after she was nine years old) and her adoptive father who was a minister. He was a kind and compassionate person. He and my grandmother worked in a soup kitchen in Harlem where they served "wayward men." My grandmother, also, was a suffragette. She believed that women could make a contribution outside the home, and I'm sure she encouraged my mother to find a profession, even at a time when many women solely took care of children and the home. My mother was an excellent student and very determined to succeed in whatever she did.

She was also an endlessly curious person who loved learning. I know working in the nursing field fed this desire to be a life-long learner. It is no surprise, then, that my mother would decide to go into nursing.

Editor: Dorothy Nayer was a nurse journalist extraordinaire. Did she ever talk about how her career journey led to writing and eventually holding editorial positions with the American Journal of Nursing and the Nursing Times?

My mother wrote some of the original position papers for the American Nurses Association. She also took endless notes at meetings. She wrote clearly with excellent use of grammar and was recognized for her natural writing talents by many people over the years. She loved to read, and many of my childhood memories are of both my parents reading all evening. This love of reading enhanced her writing. She also found she could make a difference in her writing. One of the most poignant pieces she wrote for *The American Journal of Nursing* was about how to care for burn patients. She used her own experience as a burn survivor. The piece moves back and forth seamlessly between her own grueling experience, both physically and emotionally, and how nurses can best deal with the physical burns and with the emotional pain of being disfigured. At one point in the article she says, "If a patient wants to cry, let her cry. If she wants to be silent, let her be silent." My mother was not one for sentimentality, yet her writing spoke about important issues in a clear and direct way—easy for anyone to understand. I know she was extremely proud of her *Nursing Times* articles. I remember her visiting a hospital in London where patients never had to ask for medication and were always offered medication during the day. She talked about this a lot. She wanted to help humanize patient care.

Editor: Dorothy graduated with a Master of Arts in Nursing degree from Teachers College Columbia University. How did she describe her experiences at TC, who mentored her there and what it was like when she was a graduate student there?

I really cannot answer to this question except to say that she was most proud of her time at Teacher's College. She spent her life continuing to be involved with TC through meetings and contacts with the women she had met there.

Editor: One of the appointments held by Dorothy was the ANA Appointed consultant to the National Student Nurses Association (NSNA) from 1974-1978. Did Dorothy ever reflect on her time with NSNA student leaders? Did this appointment give Dorothy opportunities to pass along her patient, nurse, and student advocacy interests to nursing student leaders? If so, how?

My mother talked endlessly about her involvement with student nurses. Even after she retired from the AJN she helped many nurses with their theses and dissertations. I know she was a great role model for many young women at the time. She was a visionary and really wanted to change the field of nursing. She was instrumental in the fight for Baccalaureate programs, yet she was understanding of those who believed in diploma schools. Mainly she believed nurses should be allowed to use their brains—that they should not be treated as "handmaidens to doctors." She advocated for good patient care and would often talk about how people working with patients needed to pay attention to what patients needed. For example, she talked about how a water glass might just be out of reach and no one had noticed. From her own hospitalizations (37 operations on her face and hands) she became extremely empathetic to what patients had to go through. She praised the nurse that made time in her busy morning to make sure she could hold my mother's hand and walk with her down the hallway to the operating room. My mother said, "She never asked if I wanted her to be there. She was just there." She attempted, throughout her life, to advocate for patient care and to pass on her wisdom to student nurses.

Editor: In your opinion, what would you say was her greatest passion—in nursing and in life?

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Spotlight on Dorothy D. Nayer

(Continued from front cover)

Of course my mother was passionate about her family—my father, sister and me and our families (three grandchildren). She also kept up with our extended family and with her friends. She put pictures of babies she had never met near her bed. She loved hearing about people and their families. She also loved animals—and had a picture of Farouk, her beloved dog, right near her bed. In that way, she loved life. She kept friends for over fifty years and always cared about how they were doing. Of course she was also passionate about nursing—and worked throughout her life to elevate nurses to be seen as competent professionals. She believed in higher education and in constant learning. I'm not sure there is one passion I can think of—but perhaps it was to be a kind and compassionate person, to always continue to learn and to fight for a better world.

Editor: How did your mother deal with the terrible burns she received in a gas explosion in 1954?

When I was four and my sister six, my parents went down to light a basement pilot light in a summer rental cottage in Cape Cod, Massachusetts. Gas had been leaking for hours from a faulty valve. My mother lit a match and the basement exploded. My parents were both badly burned, but my mother was burned worse—with third degree burns over her face and hands. My memoir deals with this accident in detail, but I believe my mother was not going to let this stop her from all she had accomplished by that time in her life—a thriving career and a wonderful family life. After a few terrible years, she went back to work—even traveled widely with a disfigured face—and resumed family life. Though all of us had residual scars from “the accident” as our family called it, my mother’s strength—her determination that my father return to work—that my sister and I return to a “normal” life—was a tribute to her great strength. She continued to make enormous contributions to the field of nursing after the accident—and her own experience led her to be a great advocate for patient care. She lived to be 91 years old.



Editor: Sharing your lived experience through this book took courage and conviction. Beautifully written, it is a story that inspires hope and offers insightful guidance for caregivers, parents, burn victims, and healthcare professionals.

Before I wrote *Burned: A Memoir*, I had dealt with the material through poetry. In my second book of poetry, I have a section called “The Accident.” Though our family rarely discussed the accident, it was, of course the main material of my life since I was only four when my world was shattered. I had to write the story. When I was 42, with two daughters four and six, just like my mother at the time of the accident, I began having severe panic attacks—an “anniversary reaction” to the trauma. I was also writing the story in prose as I wanted to really understand what happened and its effect on the four of us and on our lives in general. I did research, conducted interviews with family members and dealt with my feelings which at times overwhelmed me. It was a painful process but since I love to write, and I loved the challenge of moving from poetry to prose, I persisted for over twelve years—working with three different agents until I found the right one and the right publishing house. I had tremendous support—from my family, friends, counselors, and even hypnotists to help me deal with this material. I knew I had to go through the fire and look at the material in depth. I'm so glad I did. My readers have included a broad base—people in book clubs, burn survivors, those who have suffered from panic attacks, of course family, friends and so many people who have written to me about how they liked the writing and that my story helped them and gave them courage. This journey has been difficult yet ultimately healing. I'm thrilled to have the story out in the world. *Burned*, in the end, is about resilience in the face of tragedy. ☺

About the Author of *Burned: A Memoir*

Louise Nayer has lived in San Francisco for more than 30 years as an educator and writer. She teaches English composition, literature and creative writing full-time at City College of San Francisco. She is the coauthor of the nonfiction book, *How to Bury a Goldfish*. Louise has also taught poetry workshops in nursing homes and elementary schools, and published two books of poetry. For the past 10 years she has been writing her new book, *Burned: A Memoir*, now published by Atlas and Co. To find out more, visit www.louisenayer.com.

