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How did Diana learn to become the ‘Queen of Hearts’ for the marginalised and unloved? Nurse Helen Cowan says she has met nurses and carers who shared her endless empathy born out of personal suffering.

In the controversial Channel 4 documentary, “Diana: In her own words”, the Princess was portrayed as somebody more comfortable sitting on the bed of a patient with HIV than being in the Palace; one paralysed girl cherishes a private meeting with the Princess, feeling a true sense of warmth, empathy and affection. Diana wanted to be the Queen of people’s hearts, rather than the Queen of this country.

Diana acknowledges that not fitting in at the Palace helped her to find an affinity with those who struggled to fit into society; the low sense of self-worth created in her marriage gave her a true empathy for the marginalised and unloved. Throughout my nursing career, I have met nurses and carers like Diana: people so transformed by personal disappointment, illness and tragedy that they are able to model true compassion and empathy to those they are caring for, really walking for a while in the patient’s shoes.

**Empathy born out of adversity**

I remember Veronica, whose husband was murdered during a trip back home to Africa, yet she continued to nurse on a cancer ward; Kelly spent the mornings caring for her severely disabled teenage son and worked the late shift on a neurosurgical ward. Rachel faced her own battle with cancer, yet returned to working as a carer for older people as soon as she was well enough; Karl works in the care home having recovered from a debilitating stroke; Andrea gave birth to a stillborn child and now works as a district nurse, visiting families in the community.

Mental and physical healing are of course the first priority before returning to work; compassion fatigue and a recurrence of physical symptoms are very real threats after trauma. To this end, Princes William and Harry have followed in their mother’s footsteps, overcoming prejudice and judgement surrounding mental health in their work with Heads Together. They want to shine a spotlight on the power of conversation when it comes to mental matters.

For some, anxiety and depression will understandably make a return to work impossible; for others, trials have

enabled them to provide care at a much deeper level.

**My own story**

Diana never fitted in at the Palace; I didn't fit in at University. Clumsy in conversation, hopeless at romance and unable to excel in sport, I sought refuge in my studies – and didn't get a First class degree. The other students agonised over which of the leading financial institutions to work for upon graduation; I couldn't think of anything worse. Instead, I became a nurse and know that my college days served to increase my sensitivity towards those who might not be natural winners – something that none of us feel when forced to spend time in a hospital bed, thus helping me in my role as a nurse.

I also help people to come to terms with loss, whether temporarily due to an acute illness, or for the long-term because of permanent disability or a chronic condition. My husband has a life-long disability, and I know that this has allowed me to empathise with, and advocate for, patients and families facing a similar loss. We are also childless, and I know that my empty arms have enabled me to redirect the comfort and care that I would have bestowed on a child to a patient in equal need of consolation. Andrea Leadsom may have questioned Theresa May's ability to lead the country as a childless woman: as a nurse, my contribution has been the richer because of my circumstances (my twin sister has three small children and acknowledges that her caring reserves and my arms are empty in equal measure).

**Giving and receiving**

As Diana battled bulimia, low self-worth and anxiety, she acknowledges the help received from the HIV patients that she was supposedly ministering to, as they restored a sense of self-worth and identity to her.

I quit nursing for a few months in 2015 and missed it terribly. Suffering from anxiety and insomnia, I returned to the front-line and am daily humbled by the support that the patients give me, without even knowing it. A calling of my name, a squeeze of my hand, a whispered thank you or a concern that I may be getting tired are precious reminders of the human need, one for another.

As a child, I grew up near Althorp, now Diana's final resting place. Her father the late Earl Spencer would often greet me and my twin sister in the gift shop. I never met Diana herself, but through her words and deeds she has taught me the transforming power of trials and the strength that can be shaped from weakness.

Her brother the Earl Spencer has set up the Diana Award in her name to recognise others who have been inspired to 'walk in her shoes' (the name of the exhibition at Althorp this summer). Twenty years on from her death, the Earl is celebrating the positive legacy that resulted from her personal struggles. Countless others have similar stories to share.

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