

Create the Future Through Renewal: Twenty Years of Inspiration and Action in Professional Nursing

Daniel J. Pesut, PhD, RN, FAAN

Emeritus Professor University of Minnesota and Indiana University Schools of Nursing
Emeritus, Katherine R. and C. Walton Lillehei Chair in Nursing Leadership

Past President, Sigma Theta Tau International Honor Society of Nursing (2003-2005)

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Abstract

Twenty years ago, the call to "Create the Future through Renewal" invited nurses worldwide to embrace creative thinking, reflective practice, and intentional self-renewal as essential elements of professional excellence. This article revisits that foundational call in light of two decades of experience, examining how renewal has evolved from an aspirational concept to an urgent professional imperative. Drawing from contemporary scholarship in reflective practice, moral resilience, workforce well-being, and anticipatory leadership, this article offers both retrospective wisdom and prospective guidance for nursing's next generation. The expanded Renewal Ecosystem framework integrates six interdependent domains—Spirit and Purpose, Self, Scholarship, Service, Systems, and Society—providing nurses with a comprehensive structure for sustainable professional flourishing amid unprecedented complexity. Practical applications demonstrate how renewal principles translate into actionable strategies for individual practitioners, educational programs, healthcare organizations, and professional associations. The article concludes with a renewed call to action, inviting today's nurses to create futures characterized by wisdom, compassion, justice, and hope.

Introduction: From Call to Action

In November 2003, during the Sigma Theta Tau International biennial convention, I issued a presidential call to action: "Create the Future through Renewal." That call emerged from observing a troubling pattern—nurses increasingly trapped in conversations of regret rather than hope, overwhelmed by complexity, and disconnected from the joy and meaning that originally drew them to the profession. The call invited nurses to reclaim their creative capacities, engage in deliberate self-renewal, and transform professional practice through reflective attention to six essential areas: self, service, scholarship, science, society, and spirit.

Two decades later, that call resonates with even greater urgency. The intervening years have brought unprecedented challenges—pandemic trauma, workforce crises, moral injury, technological disruption, climate change, and widening inequities—all demanding that nurses develop extraordinary capacities for resilience, wisdom, and anticipatory action. What began as an aspirational invitation has become a professional necessity.

This article reflects on twenty years of lived experience with renewal principles, integrates contemporary scholarship, and offers an expanded framework for creating sustainable futures in nursing. It speaks to multiple audiences—individual nurses seeking meaning and resilience, educators shaping the next generation, leaders transforming organizational culture, and professional associations advancing the discipline. The goal is both retrospective wisdom and prospective action: to honor what we have learned while charting pathways forward.

The Original Call to Renewal: Context and Content

Historical Context

The 2003 call emerged during a period of significant transition in healthcare and nursing. The nursing shortage was intensifying, evidence-based practice was reshaping clinical decision-making, technology was transforming care delivery, and globalization was connecting nurses across borders in unprecedented ways. Yet amid these macro-level changes, individual nurses were experiencing a crisis of meaning and purpose.

Drawing on the work of self-renewal scholar Frederic Hudson (1999), the original call identified five forces that diminish hope and confidence as people age: becoming trapped in yesterday's decisions, betrayal by unfulfilled expectations, destabilization of protective social systems, information overload, and bewilderment in the face of complex change. These forces were evident throughout nursing, manifesting as cynicism, burnout, horizontal violence, and exodus from the profession.

Six Domains of Renewal

The original framework proposed six interdependent areas requiring attention:

- **Renewal through attention to *self*** emphasized inner work, consciousness development, and clarification of values, gifts, and intentions. It recognized that service flows from wholeness, and that nurses cannot sustainably care for others without caring for themselves.
- **Renewal through attention to *service***-connected meaningful work with the pursuit of the "good life" "living in the place you belong, with the people you love, doing the right work, on purpose (Leider & Shapiro, 2002). It positioned service as both contribution and source of personal fulfillment.
- **Renewal through attention to *scholarship*** championed reflective practice as a metacognitive process essential for learning from experience. It built on Schön's (1983) concept of the reflective practitioner and positioned mindfulness as integral to clinical reasoning and professional growth.
- **Renewal through attention to *science*** emphasized knowledge development, dissemination, and use as the foundation for evidence-based practice. It called for distinguishing between performance expectations based on knowledge-service rather than image-role.
- **Renewal through attention to *society*** addressed global nursing development, valuing diversity while maintaining unity, and creating knowledge resources accessible worldwide. The Arista conferences (2001-2003) demonstrated remarkable convergence in nursing needs across continents.
- **Renewal through attention to *spirit*** recognized that organizational transformation requires raising collective spirit through vision, storytelling, structure, comfort during transitions, and revival after loss (Owen, 2000). It acknowledged that renewal is about meaning, hope, and shared purpose.

Twenty Years Later: Evolution and Integration

What We Have Learned

The past two decades have validated the foundational insights of the original call while revealing new dimensions of complexity. Several key learnings have emerged:

Renewal Is Not Optional—It Is Essential

What began as an aspirational practice has become a survival necessity. The cumulative impact of workplace trauma, moral distress, and systemic dysfunction has made renewal not a luxury but a prerequisite for professional sustainability. Research on moral resilience (Rushton, 2018), compassion fatigue (Figley, 2002), and workforce retention demonstrates that organizations and individuals that fail to prioritize renewal pay enormous costs in terms of turnover, quality, safety, and human suffering.

Renewal Requires Structural Support

Individual practices of self-care and reflection, while valuable, are insufficient without systemic changes that create psychologically safe environments, adequate staffing, decision-making autonomy, and cultures of learning. The original call's emphasis on personal responsibility has been balanced by recognition that renewal requires organizational architecture—policies, practices, resources, and leadership commitments that enable rather than merely exhort.

Reflective Practice Has Matured

The scholarship of reflective practice has evolved significantly since 2003. Structured approaches like Johns' Model of Structured Reflection (2017), Gibbs' (1988) Reflective Cycle, narrative pedagogy, digital journaling, and arts-based methods have provided practical tools for translating experience into wisdom. Research demonstrates that reflective capacity correlates with clinical judgment, ethical sensitivity, adaptability, and professional satisfaction (Horton-Deutsch & Sherwood, 2017; 2023).

Moral Resilience Connects to Renewal

Cynda Rushton's groundbreaking work on moral resilience (2018) has provided language and frameworks for understanding how nurses maintain integrity amid ethically complex situations. Moral resilience, the capacity to sustain or restore integrity in response to moral adversity—directly relates to renewal practices of reflection, meaning-making, connection, and purposeful action. This scholarship bridges individual experience with systemic conditions, showing that resilience is both personal capacity and organizational responsibility.

Foresight and Anticipatory Leadership Are Critical

The original call emphasized creative thinking and futures orientation. Twenty years later, the field of foresight has matured into a discipline with methods like scenario planning, horizon scanning, and futures literacy (Miller, 2018). Anticipatory leadership—the capacity to recognize emerging patterns, imagine alternative futures, and act with intentionality—has become essential for navigating unprecedented complexity. Renewal and foresight are complementary capacities: renewal enables presence and clarity, while foresight channels that clarity toward purposeful action.

Contemporary Challenges Requiring Renewal

Today's nurses face challenges that would have seemed unimaginable in 2003:

- **Pandemic aftermath:** COVID-19 exposed systemic fragilities and inflicted collective trauma that continues to reverberate through workforce retention, mental health, and professional identity.
- **Moral injury at scale:** Persistent conditions of understaffing, inadequate resources, and impossible choices have moved beyond moral distress to moral injury—deep wounds to professional conscience and identity.
- **Technology acceleration:** Electronic health records, artificial intelligence, telehealth, and digital surveillance have transformed practice at a pace that outstrips adaptation, creating both opportunities and burdens.
- **Widening inequities:** Social determinants of health have become increasingly recognized even as disparities deepen, creating ethical tensions between individualized care and systemic justice.
- **Climate crisis:** Environmental degradation now directly affects health outcomes while challenging healthcare's own substantial carbon footprint, demanding new forms of ecological awareness and advocacy.
- **Polarization and erosion of trust:** Professional authority and scientific expertise face unprecedented challenges from misinformation, politicization, and declining institutional confidence.

These challenges demand not simply more of the same approaches but transformed ways of being, thinking, and acting. They require renewal at every level—personal, professional, organizational, and systemic.

The Renewal Ecosystem: An Expanded Framework

The original six domains remain valid, but twenty years of experience suggests they function not as separate categories but as an integrated ecosystem. The *Renewal Ecosystem* framework reconceptualizes these domains as interdependent elements that mutually reinforce one another. At the center lies Spirit and Purpose, the animating force that gives meaning to all other domains. Surrounding this core are five interconnected spheres:

Domain	Core Questions	Renewal Practices
Spirit & Purpose	What gives my work meaning? What legacy am I creating? How do I contribute to flourishing?	Clarify calling and vocation; practice gratitude; create meaning-making rituals; engage in spiritual practices; connect with sources of transcendence
Self	Who am I becoming? What sustains my wholeness? How do I cultivate presence and authenticity?	Develop self-awareness through reflection; establish boundaries; practice self-compassion; pursue personal growth; maintain physical and mental health
Scholarship	How do I learn from experience? What wisdom emerges from practice? How do I integrate knowing, doing, and being?	Engage in structured reflection; participate in learning communities; document and share practice insights; pursue continuing education; mentor others
Service	How do I contribute to others' well-being? Where is my service most needed? How do I balance giving and receiving?	Provide compassionate care; contribute to professional community; advocate for vulnerable populations; lead improvement initiatives; practice ethical stewardship
Systems	How do organizational structures support or hinder flourishing? Where can I influence systemic change? What collective capacities must we build?	Transform workplace cultures; advocate for staffing and resources; implement evidence-based practices; develop leadership capacities; build resilient teams
Society	What future are we creating? How do we address inequity and injustice? What planetary responsibilities do we carry?	Engage in policy advocacy; address social determinants of health; promote health equity; support environmental sustainability; participate in global nursing initiatives

Table 1. The Renewal Ecosystem Framework: Domains, Questions, and Practices

Practical Applications: From Theory to Action

The Renewal Ecosystem provides both diagnostic tool and action framework. This section translates renewal principles into concrete strategies across multiple contexts.

Individual Practice: Personal Renewal Plans

Individual nurses can use the ecosystem framework to create personalized renewal plans. Begin by conducting a renewal audit:

- **Spirit and Purpose:** What originally called you to nursing? What moments in practice feel most meaningful? What legacy do you wish to create?
- **Self:** What practices sustain your wholeness? Where do you need better boundaries? What aspects of yourself need attention?
- **Scholarship:** How do you learn from experience? What reflective practices might deepen your wisdom? What communities support your growth?
- **Service:** Where is your contribution most valuable? What service brings you energy rather than drains it? How might you diversify your modes of contribution?
- **Systems:** What organizational conditions support or hinder your flourishing? Where might you have influence? What systemic changes would make the greatest difference?
- **Society:** What larger purposes connect to your work? How might you engage with issues of equity, justice, or sustainability? What communities or causes call to you?

Following the audit, identify 2-3 specific practices in domains needing attention. Start small, build consistently, and reassess quarterly. The key is sustainable integration rather than heroic but unsustainable efforts.

Educational Applications: Preparing Renewal-Ready Practitioners

Nursing education bears responsibility for preparing graduates who possess not only clinical competence but also renewal capacity. This requires curricular integration across multiple dimensions:

Reflective Practice as Core Competency

Rather than treating reflection as an occasional assignment, embed structured reflective practices throughout the curriculum. Introduce frameworks like Johns' Model of Structured Reflection, Gibbs' Reflective Cycle, or narrative inquiry early and scaffold complexity across the program. Create communities of reflective practice where students share insights and learn from one another's experiences. Use digital portfolios to document growth over time.

Professional Identity Formation

Explicitly address professional identity formation as a developmental journey rather than assuming it happens automatically. Help students articulate their emerging sense of calling, values, and purpose. Introduce concepts of moral resilience early and provide tools for navigating ethical complexity. Create opportunities for students to engage with exemplars who model integrated practice.

Foresight and Anticipatory Competencies

Prepare students for a rapidly changing professional landscape by developing foresight capacities. Teach scenario planning, futures thinking, and systems awareness. Help students recognize patterns, anticipate consequences, and imagine alternatives. Connect these skills to both clinical decision-making and career development.

Wellness as Professional Responsibility

Frame self-care not as individual indulgence but as professional obligation. Students who learn early that sustainable practice requires attention to their own wholeness are better equipped for long careers. Provide practical tools for stress management, boundary-setting, and maintaining work-life integration. Model these practices visibly rather than simply advocating for them.

Organizational Applications: Creating Renewal-Ready Cultures

Healthcare organizations that take renewal seriously create structural conditions enabling rather than merely hoping for individual resilience. Key strategies include:

Establishing Psychological Safety

Create environments where nurses can speak truth about challenges, errors, and moral concerns without fear of retribution. Psychological safety requires consistent leadership behaviors—listening deeply, responding non-defensively, addressing concerns transparently, and rewarding honesty even when the news is difficult (Edmondson, 2018).

Implementing Structured Reflective Practices

Integrate regular opportunities for reflection into workflow rather than treating it as optional or off-hours activity. Options include Schwartz Rounds for ethical case discussion, debriefing protocols following challenging events, reflective practice groups, and dedicated time for professional development. These practices must be protected, scheduled, and valued rather than squeezed into already-impossible workloads.

Addressing Moral Distress Systemically

Rather than treating moral distress solely as an individual problem requiring resilience, address the organizational and systemic conditions that generate it. Conduct moral distress assessments, identify recurring sources of ethical conflict, and implement changes that reduce unnecessary suffering. Establish ethics consultation services and moral community supports.

Investing in Leadership Development

Develop leaders at all levels who understand renewal principles and can create conditions for others' flourishing. This requires moving beyond technical management skills to include emotional intelligence, systems thinking, ethical discernment, and capacity to hold space for difficult conversations. Leadership development should be continuous, developmental, and available to frontline staff as well as formal leaders.

Ensuring Adequate Resources and Staffing

No amount of individual resilience or organizational programming can compensate for chronically inadequate staffing and resources. Renewal requires realistic workloads, sufficient time for patient care, access to necessary supplies and equipment, and organizational slack that allows for learning, innovation, and recovery from unexpected demands.

Professional Association Applications: Advancing the Discipline

Professional associations play unique roles in supporting renewal across the nursing community. Strategic actions include:

Convening Communities of Practice

Create forums—both virtual and in-person—where nurses can connect around shared interests, challenges, and aspirations. These communities provide intellectual stimulation, emotional

support, and practical resources. They counter the isolation many nurses experience and remind members they belong to something larger than their immediate work context.

Developing Accessible Resources

Provide evidence-based tools, toolkits, and educational programs that members can immediately apply. Focus on practical applications rather than solely theoretical frameworks. Make resources accessible in terms of both cost and format, recognizing the diversity of members' contexts and constraints.

Advancing Policy and Advocacy

Engage in policy work that creates systemic conditions for renewal—safe staffing legislation, workplace violence prevention, mental health support, continuing education requirements, and research funding. Professional associations have unique credibility and reach to influence policy at organizational, state, national, and international levels.

Recognizing and Celebrating Excellence

Awards, recognition programs, and public celebration of nursing accomplishments provide both inspiration and role models. These practices counter narratives of decline and deficit by highlighting what is possible when nurses have the support and opportunity to excel. Recognition also makes visible the diversity of ways nurses contribute to health and healing.

A Renewed Call to Action for the Next Generation

Twenty years after the original call, I issue a renewed invitation to create the future through renewal. This call recognizes both the wisdom gained and the urgency intensified. It honors the past while reaching toward possibility. And it addresses multiple audiences with specific challenges:

To Individual Nurses

You are not broken. The systems are broken. Your exhaustion, cynicism, and grief are rational responses to irrational conditions. Renewal is not about working harder or becoming more resilient to unsustainable demands. It is about reclaiming your humanity, reconnecting with meaning, and finding ways to sustain yourself within and despite challenging circumstances. Seek communities that nourish rather than deplete you. Practice reflection as a form of self-respect. Set boundaries as acts of professional integrity. Remember that sustainable service flows from wholeness, not from endless self-sacrifice.

To Educators

You are preparing nurses for a future we cannot fully imagine. This requires moving beyond technical competence to cultivate adaptive capacities—reflection, ethical discernment, systems thinking, anticipatory awareness, and moral courage. Make space in crowded curricula for students to develop professional identity and discover their unique calling. Model the integration you wish to see rather than simply teaching about it. Create learning environments that honor students' humanity while preparing them for complex practice. Remember that sustainable careers begin with sustainable preparation.

To Leaders

You have both opportunity and obligation. Individual resilience programs cannot compensate for toxic cultures, inadequate staffing, or moral jeopardy. Create structural conditions that enable flourishing rather than merely expecting heroic endurance. This requires courage to

challenge accepted practices, wisdom to see beyond short-term metrics, and commitment to invest in what makes sustainable practice possible. The measure of leadership is not how much productivity you extract but how much human potential you enable.

To Healthcare Organizations

Your greatest asset is your people. When nurses burn out, leave the profession, or merely endure rather than engage, everyone loses—patients, organizations, communities, and nursing itself. Renewal-ready cultures require investment in staffing, support for professional development, psychological safety, meaningful work, and organizational slack. These are not luxuries but prerequisites for quality, safety, and sustainability. Organizations that understand this will thrive; those that do not will continue to hemorrhage talent and compromise care.

To Professional Associations

You represent nursing's collective voice and conscience. Use that voice to advance policies that create conditions for renewal, to develop resources that support members' flourishing, to convene communities that counter isolation, and to celebrate excellence that inspires. Remember that your power comes not from your size but from your clarity of purpose and your willingness to speak truth even when inconvenient. Lead with both love for the profession and righteous anger at conditions that diminish it.

To the Next Generation

You inherit both crisis and opportunity. The challenges are real and profound. Yet you also inherit extraordinary wisdom, evolving tools, and expanding possibilities. Do not accept as inevitable the dysfunctions you encounter. Question, challenge, and create alternatives. Bring fresh eyes to old problems. Connect across boundaries that previous generations accepted as fixed. Use technology wisely rather than letting it use you. Remember that every generation must renew the profession for its time. Your time has come.

Conclusion: Renewal as Professional Covenant

In 1922, six students at Indiana University School of Nursing created an honor society dedicated to recognizing academic excellence while fostering scholarly community. They chose the Greek letters Sigma Theta Tau—representing "Love, Courage, Honor"—as their founding values. One hundred years later, that organization has grown to serve over 540,000 members worldwide. Yet its fundamental purpose remains unchanged: to nurture the spirit of nursing through knowledge, learning, and service.

The call to renewal honors that legacy. It recognizes that nursing's greatest contributions flow not from technique alone but from the integration of competence with compassion, knowledge with wisdom, and service with spirit. Renewal is how we sustain that integration across careers, contexts, and generations.

Twenty years of experience with renewal principles demonstrates their enduring relevance. The specific challenges change—today's pandemic, workforce crisis, and climate emergency were unimaginable in 2003—but the underlying dynamics remain constant. Human beings require meaning to sustain effort. Complex practice demands reflective capacity. Sustainable service flows from wholeness rather than depletion. And transformation requires both inner work and structural change.

The Renewal Ecosystem framework offers both map and method. It identifies interdependent domains requiring attention while respecting that each individual and organization must

discover their own pathways. It validates personal practice while insisting on systemic change. It honors nursing's heritage while reaching toward emergent futures.

Most importantly, the renewal perspective reframes challenges as invitations. Rather than being overwhelmed by complexity, we can develop adaptive capacities. Rather than being defeated by dysfunction, we can create alternatives. Rather than accepting decline as inevitable, we can choose generativity. Rather than enduring alone, we can build communities of practice and purpose.

This is the covenant of professional renewal: we will care for ourselves so we can care for others; we will learn from experience so we can serve with wisdom; we will build communities that sustain the spirit of nursing; and we will create futures worthy of our shared calling. It is a covenant renewed with each generation, adapted to each context, and honored through daily practice.

The work continues. The conversation advances. The future awaits our creation. May we meet this moment with love, courage, and honor—the founding values that inspired Sigma Theta Tau and continue to inspire nursing's evolution. May we create the future through renewal, together.

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