

## Sisu: A Finnish Word Captures the Fortitude of Frontline Nurses

By Barbara Mackoff, EdD

I can see the banner atop the Space Needle from my desk at home. It reads, "We got this, Seattle." While I am grateful that my city is no longer the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic, my thoughts turn to my former home and colleagues in Manhattan who now live in the eye of this dark storm. I contacted a number of nurse leaders and frontline nurses at Manhattan's Lenox Hill Hospital and asked each of them to describe how they are able to maintain a constancy of care—when they are running on empty.

Their stories are gallant and gutsy examples of Sisu: a Finnish word defined as the extraordinary courage and determination that surfaces only in the response to adversity, suffering and hardship. The word is 500 years old but was brought back into Finland's vocabulary by the perseverance of Finnish soldiers who fought in the punishing cold of the 1939 Winter War. They defied the powerful forces of the Soviet army's invasion and preserved Finland's independence.

Since then, Sisu has become a key element in Finnish culture and is also thought to be a universal capacity we all share. At the core of Sisu is the idea that, in each of us, there is more strength than meets the eye. For example, Erin Dean who detailed her evenings in the intensive care unit.

**"Every night, when I take the elevator up to my floor, I call upon an inner strength to get me through one more night. I became a nurse to help. I never believed it would require a special courage, but now I know that is true. It's not just me, the whole team, the whole floor; the whole hospital is calling upon a unique type of fortitude that allows us to get the job done."**

Dean describes how this "horrifying disease has allowed me to witness acts of love on a scale I would not have imagined." She recalls a loving long married couple—each with a deadly prognosis—in beds on separate floors. She ferried the wife in a wheelchair to her husband's side so that they could die together. By the time Erin returned to her station, the wife's bed had been assigned to another patient.

"No time to be sad." Dean said. "I had another patient to care for. As nurses, we have all developed the ability to compartmentalize illness and death, but not at this extreme, unprecedented level. We are drawing upon a heretofore untouched well of strength and determination. There is no end in sight. I am sure we will continue to be tested above and beyond. But I know we will do it and we will do it together."

I discovered the notion of Sisu, when I worked on a Fulbright grant with nurse leaders at Helsinki University Hospital. Here I encountered the research of psychologist Emilia Lahti, Finland's foremost authority on Sisu. Her studies of Sisu as embodied fortitude have carried this concept into the world outside her country.

*Supported by an unrestricted educational grant from the Johnson & Johnson Foundation*

Lahti's research, details three key elements of Sisu. First, Sisu allows us to move beyond a prior view of our mental and physical capacities. Sisu is also an action mindset that allows us to face up to fears, extend ourselves in moments of suffering, and to take action in the most daunting circumstances. And finally, Sisu is a second wind that allows us to draw upon a previously hidden untapped sources of power and strength.

These three elements sing in the example of Lenox Hill frontline nurse Emily Fawcett, who described working her fifth 13-hour shift in a row. "I am both completely physically exhausted and mentally drained. I could probably sit here and complain about how my feet are swollen and throbbing, how I have a headache from the tight mask, how I have cried three times today already or how I miss my family. But, I am choosing not to. And this is why: Today I had the honor and privilege to 'send off' a Navy Veteran—to give him the goodbye that he deserved.

**"It was at this moment I had to call on my inner strength and courage. It no longer mattered that I was exhausted, that I had not eaten lunch that I had charting to do. All that mattered was this patient and his family. They were my strength, my courage. If they could be strong is this moment, so could I."**

Fawcett described her team jumping into action. They called the family in, gathered hospital workers who were veterans, got the music ready. "We all gowned up, the family said their goodbyes. We played the Star Spangled Banner and we all gave him his final salute. He passed away shortly after. It was beautiful and it is this moment that will carry me into my next shift."

I contacted Emilia Lahti, to share some stories and to ask her to apply her research about Sisu as a lens to view the exceptional responses of frontline healthcare workers. In our lively dialogue, Lahti, called Sisu "the friendly darkness of adversity."

She elaborated, "The Sisu these nurses describe has appeared in a moment of extreme adversity; it is invoked by an experience that calls them to stretch and expand." Lahti considers Sisu to be the next gear beyond fortitude. It begins where grit and perseverance end—a deeper reserve of power within all of us. "Sisu is our ability to channel a moment and open the pathway to a latent existing strength that resides within us," she said.

The COVID virus is such a moment, explained Lahti. "We are witnessing a global expression of Sisu. We see nurses and healthcare providers digging to reach layers of strength they did not know existed. They are stepping into their previously unrepresented strength"

In Lahti's view, Sisu can also be brought into expression in groups where a team of people becomes a united field of force in pursuit of solving a situation that seems impossible and unsolvable.

On example: Lenox Hill ICU Nurse Joseph Proce described his second wind, powered by the combined strength of this team. "At the beginning of the shift, I felt defeated. Like I ran out of fumes and now had to push the car from the back while no one was steering.

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I had just seen four patients in a row and was recovering from that and felt like there was no way I could handle three more ICU patients that were not stable.

**“But through teamwork, camaraderie, and hard work we were able to do something special. And I absolutely couldn't have done it on my own. It's a privilege to be a nurse, now more than ever; and I am confident that our team is more than capable of seeing this through if we work together.”**

Consider a final example of defiant bravery. ICU nurse Rose May Coma reveals Sisu as an action mindset that allows her to face her fears, extend herself in moments of suffering and take action in the most daunting circumstances—even with no guarantee of success.

“Today was my first day at work really dealing with a COVID unit. I was not ready!!! It felt like the zombie apocalypse. At times it feels as if I am at war, even though last I checked, I am a civilian. Today it is hard to picture the light at the end of the tunnel. If we keep up with the pace of infected patients being hospitalized requiring ICU care, we will run out of masks, gloves, gowns, ventilators, medications.”

And then, she addressed the virus directly saying,

**“That’s okay, Corona, I was not ready today. But tomorrow is another day. Scoreboard: CORONA: 1 ME: 0. I’m made of tougher stuff than you. Corona, You won’t get me again. Enjoy your win; I’m in it in for the long haul. I will dig deep, deeper than I ever needed to. I will do it for my family, your family, my brothers and sisters at the frontline, for me, for humanity. ”**

More than one hundred years ago, William James wondered, “What keeps our lights burning and our hearts hoping during the dark night of the soul?” When I listen to the stories of these valiant nurses, I hear eloquent answers. I can only express wonder and gratitude for the Sisu that allows them to meet this unthinkable moment.