FOR 17 YEARS in a row, nurses have received the highest public rating in the Gallup survey on honesty and ethics. The public’s trust in us is a source of professional pride.

A closer look at the 2018 report shows that of the 1,025 adult respondents, 28% rated nurses “very high,” 56% “high,” and 15% “average.” Nurses received a “low” rating from 2% of respondents. This 2% is a splinter of a thorn in our laurel, but it warrants reflection and consideration from a quality improvement perspective. No matter how small, a negative rating, when examined in the right context, will keep us in check, lest we become too cheeky. Here we examine the concept of trust as a social construct, a nursing asset, and as ballast to keep the nurse and the patient steady when treading shaky healthcare ground.

Is it about trust and ethics or is it about caring?
The Gallup poll is intended to appraise public opinion of honesty and ethical standards in a variety of professions. However, how these key terms are defined or whether respondents understand them is unclear. A 1995 academic definition from Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman describes trust as a person’s willingness to be vulnerable to another person’s actions based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the person who is trusting. We can discern from this definition that risk (or its elimination) is both the object and the subject of a trusting nurse-patient relationship. Patients rely on nurses to act in their best interests.

What is the respondent thinking when asked: “Please tell me how you would rate the honesty and ethical standards of people in these different fields (very high, high, average, low, or very low).” Is the respondent thinking about the time a nurse expertly gave an honest explanation of neutropenic precautions while setting the pump accurately to deliver chemotherapy? Or was the respondent thinking of the time he or she saw a nurse shopping online at the nurses’ station while a chorus of call bells were buzzing unanswered? A study by Hall and colleagues about trust in physicians noted that when patients reported a loss of trust, they typically were referring to trust at a broader system level, rather than trust in a specific physician they knew. By extrapolation, we can assume that when the public rates nurses as trustworthy and ethical, they’re not thinking of a specific nurse but expressing a global trust in nursing values. The nurse shopping online at work can relax. Or maybe not.

Although patients may not be thinking of a specific nurse when they put their trust in us as a profession, indi-
Trust is considered one of nursing’s intangible assets with the potential to positively influence healthcare outcomes.