



**North American Association of Christians in Social Work (NACSW)**  
PO Box 121; Botsford, CT 06404 \*\*\* Phone/Fax (tollfree): 888.426.4712  
Email: [info@nacsww.org](mailto:info@nacsww.org) \*\*\* Website: <http://www.nacsww.org>

*"A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work"*

## **THE CREATIVE INNER VOICE: THE PERSONAL BENEFITS OF JOURNAL WRITING FOR MINISTRY AND HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS**

**Dorothea Epple**

**Presented at:  
NACSW Convention 2006  
October, 2006  
Philadelphia, PA**

**ABSTRACT** – Journal writing can be a creative adjunct to psychotherapy as well as a meditative deepening process. Journal writing can also be a method of spiritual and meditative deepening for individuals who work in ministry or the helping professions. The Creative Inner Voice is a qualitative study of the experiences of journal writers who used the Ira Progoff (1992) Journal for eight years or longer. The central findings of this research are that the experience of the participants can be identified in the following three categories: therapeutic experience; meditative experience; and a transformative experience, in which the use of the journal methodology was owned, integrated with another theory and transformed. This article will focus on a select aspect of the findings related to the spiritual, Professional and personal growth of individuals who work in the helping professions or ministry.

**KEYWORDS:** Journal or Diary Writing, Narrative, Qualitative, Interpretive Interactionism, Ethnography, Epiphany.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Journal writing is part of a personal growth and creative process. Numerous people have used a journal process as a springboard to facilitate and enhance personal growth, creativity and develop professional selves. Thousands of journals are available in libraries and bookstores, ranging from the Quakers and Calvinists in seventeenth-century England (George Fox and John Wesley) to contemporary writers (Steinbeck, Tolstoy, George Sand, Nin), philosophers (Darwin, Thoreau, Kierkegaard), religious figures (Pope John, Thomas Merton, St. Augustine), and Psychotherapists (Freud, Jung, Deutsch, Horney, Milner). This article will provide an overview of the Ira Progoff (1992) journal techniques and process, describe a qualitative study of the experiences of journal writers who used the Ira Progoff Journal for eight years or longer, present the central findings of this research, and focus on a select aspect of the findings related to the spiritual, professional and personal growth of individuals who work in the helping professions or ministry.

## **JOURNAL WRITING TECHNIQUES**

The Progoff (1992) journal process is a structured method of journal writing for personal and spiritual growth, developed by Ira Progoff, a holistic depth psychologist in New York City, who studied with C. G. Jung. The Progoff process is a dynamic way to record one's life rather than the traditional diary, which tends to be static. The journal becomes a continual confrontation of oneself in the midst of one's own life.

The journal workbook is a loose leaf binder with dividers. The four main sections of the workbook are the Life Time Dimension, the Dialogue Dimension, the Depth Dimension and the Meaning Dimension. Each of these dimensions is divided into several

subsections. There is also a section for a traditional daily log and for a period log. One would record historical date in the Life Time Dimension, relational aspects of life in the Dialogue Dimension, symbolic dreams and images in the Depth Dimension and the meaning of inner experiences and spiritual aspects in the Meaning Dimension. Each of the Dimensions of the journal has subsections with numerous techniques that allow a window into one's life.

Progoff created the journal process to help individuals become in touch with that dynamic aspect or potential of what their life is trying to become. Each of us has within a seed of potential that has not yet realized its fulfillment. Progoff uses the image of the acorn having the potential to become an oak tree. The journal helps individuals become in tune with this potential within. Progoff believes there is a specific process working at the depth of a person. This process can be evoked with the use of a journal. Recordings in a journal can preserve the process and become an image or mirror of the movement and potential (Progoff, 1992).

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Paradigm for Inquiry**

Qualitative methods were chosen to explore the process, meaning and subjective understanding of participants' experiences with the Progoff journal. Qualitative methods provide depth and detail by preserving the individual's story through direct quotation. The qualitative design in this study includes an integration of Narrative Methodology (Bruner, 1986; Polkinghorn, 1988; Riessman, 1988, 1993; Schwandt, 1997), Ethnographic methods (Van Maanen, 1988; Denzin, 1997), and Interpretive Interactionism (Denzin 1989).

## **Participants**

Fourteen participants were interviewed. Vignettes, in the participants' own voices, demonstrate epiphanies, metaphors and themes, as they emerge in the holding environment of the journal writing. This article will focus specifically on the personal growth of individuals who work in the helping professions and ministry including a parish priest, a monk, and a hospital Chaplin. The participants were asked to describe their experience of the journal over time and how it affected their life. The participants were allowed to let their stories unfold in a semi-structured interview while the researcher was witness to the detailed description of their experience. The interviews were transcribed. All participants read the transcription and made corrections on any errors of their spoken word. The participants read the analyzed portion of their own data to provide a second member check to assure the accuracy of the spoken word.

## **Data Analysis**

The data was analyzed using Denzin's (1989) Interpretive Interactionism and Freeman's (1993) four phases of epiphanies, embedded in the developmental process of change in an individual life. Each epiphany is illustrated in the narrative by exploring the "recognition" of a disjunction between one's life and one's potential, "distanciation" or separation of oneself from the disjunction, "articulation" of the old self and the new self being projected in the future and "appropriation" or transforming the new knowledge into action.

## **Results**

The central findings of this research are that the experience of the participants can be identified in the following three categories: therapeutic experience; meditative

experience; and a transformative experience, in which the use of the journal methodology was owned, integrated with another theory and transformed.

## **THE JOURNAL AS MEDITATIVE DEEPENING**

Following are select aspects of the findings related to the spiritual, professional and personal growth of individuals who work in the helping professions and ministry.

### **James**

“The natural component of journaling for one who is spiritually attuned allows them with grace to have a deeper vision.”

James is a 65-year-old German Irish Catholic Parish Priest. He earned a Masters degree in Education and a Doctorate in Ministry. James began writing a journal, with no specific structure or method, at the age of 23. He was introduced to the Progoff journal 30 years ago at a workshop given by Ira Progoff. James wrote on a daily basis each evening for 30 years, using loose leaf paper and the three ring Progoff binder. “It was a discipline for me every night as a spiritual examination. I would just write. There would be no grammar or spelling corrections.” The sections of the journal most utilized by James included Daily Log, Dialogue With Events, Dialogue With Persons and the Dream sections. James would share the journal with his spiritual director, who would confirm the themes that were present in the writing.

James describes the journal as having an indirect effect on major life changes rather than a direct or abrupt change. He speaks to how the journal kept a cumulative process moving within him:

The journal is much more of a cumulative flowing process than a zap for me. For example, I think I am always writing my sermons or homilies or reflections. It is not until I sit down and focus on the window I want to look out

do I see what is there, but it has been coming there for a long time. Most of my life is more indirect than direct focusing from the journal. Eventually it gels, so to speak. . . . It is like cooking. There are ten pots going and I have my eye on one but it is still happening in the others. It is becoming cognizant of the one through focus. Journaling helps me by collecting and fermenting the pots.

James refers to an awareness that is not yet conscious, but flowing and cumulative, while waiting for him to focus so that it can express its fullness. This description is similar to Progoff's description of the inner movement of life. Progoff (1992) describes the "inner movement of experience" resulting from the mini-processes of one's life, as recorded in the journal, which build a momentum and feed into the larger process of life-generating awareness, that provides the energy that carries life toward meaningful unfolding.

James further elaborates and describes a gradual epiphany that originated in junior high but did not emerge into conscious awareness until he wrote a dialogue in his journal.

I wrote a dialogue with celibacy after reading a book by Willa Cather, "Death Comes to the Archbishop." I became aware of how one can be a very loving person as a celibate person. That awareness was probably present to me when I first read the book in my junior year of high school. I wasn't aware of the impact until many years later on how it unconsciously had been a piece in my formation and openness to embracing a celibate lifestyle. I think one of the things the journal does is to retrieve impact moments that are not noted in awareness. All of a sudden you are at a point where you see that this is an impact moment. It was experienced years back but it gave a direction or a support to a choice.

In this vignette James describes an unconscious epiphany that occurred in his junior year of high school regarding openness to embracing a celibate lifestyle, following the reading of a book by Willa Cather. This epiphany, even though unconscious at the time, allowed for a disjunction and a distancing between secular values and the values of celibacy in a religious life. It was not until the dialogue with celibacy in the journal

many years later that James was able to articulate, or clarify, this epiphany, bringing to awareness that one “can be a very loving person as a celibate person.” The unconscious epiphany in high school, which supported a life direction, was now made conscious in the journal, allowing for the epiphany to meet its final phase of appropriation.

The journal has provided a space for James to reflect on all the moments of his life, both positive and negative, and find a sense of calm and peacefulness within:

I think the inner movement, for me, is a growing sense of calm and peacefulness in my life. It is the ability to look at my life and accept all the moments as part and necessary and not to put a value on them, but see them as part of the flow, a stepping stone to a greater gestalt.

James speaks here to the successes and failures of life as each having meaning and being necessary for the “greater gestalt” of one’s ongoing experience. The journal provides the opportunity to find the larger meaning and the message in the moments of life. James’s statement reminds me of Erickson’s (1965), “It is the acceptance of one’s one and only life cycle as something that had to be and that, by necessity, permitted of no substitutions” (p. 268). The triumphs and disappointments of life reflected upon in the journal found a balance and a deeper meaning, bringing a sense of integrity. James also speaks to the issues of grace and a deeper vision of the moments of life that can be observed in the journal writing:

I believe grace builds on nature. I think the natural component of journaling for one who is spiritually attuned allows them, with grace, to have a deeper vision. The grace experience can have a deeper insight brought about by the influence of the Divine in our lives becoming us. The journal process would provide discipline and structure that, if one wants to use it, those moments happen quicker, whereas other moments are unstructured and spontaneous.

James seems to be saying that the journal provides structure to the happenings in one’s life, giving the opportunity for awareness of the grace-filled moments. Without

such structure, spontaneous moments of the Divine may be missed. This inner reality of the Divine, through grace-filled personal moments, brings deeper meaning of the mystery of truth beyond doctrine.

### **Michael**

“It is a way of making contact with strengths or powers within in my self which I may tend to habitually overlook or minimize.”

Michael is a 64-year-old Irish American Roman Catholic Monk. He has earned a Masters Degree in Theology and facilitated many retreats. He first began journal writing at the age of 40 and has utilized the Progoff Journal off and on for 25 years. Michael began by telling me of his early use of the journal:

Just looking at the workbook with all the various divisions became almost a maze . . . The part of the journal that I have personally found most helpful for myself, and I have used it in relation to other people, too, is the inner dialogue. That I find to be very beneficial. I have used it when facilitating retreats and with others in directive retreats. . . . I found the little books that Progoff has of meditations to be very powerful. The imagery that he uses is the kind of imagery that is very vivid and also gripping enough that you really enter into it. He uses in his meditations the imagery of going down to find the living well of water that ties in with the gospels. The spring of living waters that comes up in the heart of true belief triggers a lot for me and it resonates.

Michael is referring her to The Well and The Cathedral (1997). The books of Isaiah and Numbers refer to water springing from the rock in the desert. The Samaritan Woman in the New Testament refers specifically to the ‘living water’ at Jacob’s well. The series of eight meditations in this book take one into the well of personal experience and then moves one deeper, to a level of memory that is more than personal. In the meditations, one encounters lives of other persons in other times and places. The

meditations allow history to speak on many levels, depending on the personal sensitivity of the listener. A paradox occurs with the meditations in that, as one moves inward into one's own personal life, one becomes more connected to the wholeness of the universe. Michael found these meditations to resonate with Scripture and to connect, for him, the Old and New Testaments. There is a natural flow from working with imagery that resonates within to the Inner Wisdom Dialogue section of the journal. The Inner Wisdom Dialogue establishes contact, through written dialogue, with individuals who personify truth or wisdom to the journal writer. Dialogue with the inner wisdom figures becomes a means to contact this deep and direct knowing of the wisdom figure. Progoff distinguishes between personal wisdom figures, people one knows, and transpersonal wisdom figures, which belong to history and the universe. Thomas Merton became both a personally known wisdom figure and a transpersonal wisdom figure for Michael. He states:

I use inner dialogue writing for a person who has a particularly powerful resonance for my self and, in trying to ascertain what that resonance is so that it doesn't just remain in that other person, but I can really tap into that, it is something in my self as well. It is a way of making contact with strengths or powers within myself, which I may tend to habitually overlook or minimize . . . The main person I dialogued with was Merton because he was very much a wisdom figure for me. I began to see him not just as someone outside of myself. He became a wisdom figure to me because he resonates with something within my self. Without this, he would just remain exterior. In general, his traits that resonate with me are his humanity, his openness to life, his love of people.

Dialogue writing with the transpersonal depth of Thomas Merton established, for Michael, a relationship to Merton's wisdom and the corresponding depth of wisdom in him self. The epiphany for Michael, in his dialogues with Merton, was that he came to realize the qualities that he resonated with Merton were also qualities within him self.

Journal dialogues with wisdom figures facilitate and develop a deeper identification with the wisdom figure. The dialogue and imagery help to personalize the wisdom figure and appropriate the values and wisdom to become part of one self.

### **Marie**

“In the journal I can put things down that I would not dare speak or even think . . . It gives me peace and closure . . . I see it as grace.”

Marie is a 57-year-old Roman Catholic of Lithuanian background. She has earned a Bachelor Degree in Elementary Education and is currently working on her Masters Thesis in Pastoral Ministry. She has been employed as a hospital chaplain for the past 8 years. Prior employment includes 16 years as a childcare worker in a state mental health facility and several years as an elementary education teacher. Marie began writing in a journal at the age of 16. She has used the Progoff method for eight years. Marie told me of her early experiences with the Progoff Journal:

My spiritual director is a journal leader. I thought it would be useful to attend the workshop to integrate her ideas. She saw it as valuable for my spiritual direction. . . . My normal day-to-day use of the journal is one time per week in conjunction with prayer. I put down what I think is the fruit of my prayer.

Marie is present to patients, families, and staff in ‘horrific’ situations in her role as a hospital Chaplain in a major trauma center. The combination of chalk art, prayer, and journal writing helps Marie process her own experiences and secondary trauma. Marie finds, as a Chaplain, that “what keeps us in the game or sends us packing” has to do with “how we process all the horrible things we see, the great tragedies, the traumas, the senseless things.” Marie gives an example:

This happened four years ago when I had the emergency room pager. I happened to be the Chaplain for several infant deaths over a period of three weeks. There

was an infant, less than six months old, that came to the hospital . . . The CPR was unsuccessful. It was a tragedy for all. The time came when it was time for the parents to leave. They had been holding the baby and didn't want to leave the baby alone until the coroner came. I went up to them and said, "Would you like me to hold the baby until the nurse comes?" because they couldn't hear the word coroner yet. There was a sigh of relief. I took the baby and held her. They kissed the baby goodbye. Everyone felt safe leaving with the baby in my arms. As I was holding the baby, I was overcome with emotion because I didn't want to leave her either. Thankfully, maybe within fifteen minutes, the coroner came with the nurse to prepare the baby. . . . The next day . . . I began working with the chalk; mostly reds and blacks. Then I switched to lighter colors. These are not art works. Then I began journaling. I wound up praying what I was writing. What I found myself doing was imagining myself taking this baby and handing her over to Jesus. In my journal, in my mind and in my prayer, I handed her to Jesus. . . . Then, I was at peace.

Just as the couple placed the baby in Marie's arms, Marie placed the baby in Jesus' arms. Each gave their pain to the care of another. Marie has found art, prayer and journal writing a sacred ritual of letting go of the secondary trauma she experiences as a Chaplain. The chalk art becomes a way to embody her pain. The imagery and prayer become a way of letting go and being able to 'hand them over to the Lord.'" The journal becomes a way of making real the letting go process, as it can be seen on paper in black and white. Art, imagery, prayer, and journal writing provide, both literally and figuratively, a means to let go of experiences that become overpowering.

## **DISCUSSION**

The meditative process in the journal became a means to deepen and enrich the already established faith and religious practices of these individuals. The journal became a narrative means for documenting their meditative practices. James found the journal to be a place to organize and retrieve meditative reflections and bring awareness for spiritual growth. The journal also became a process to provide a deeper vision of the Divine. The journal process allowed an opportunity for awareness from the written word

of the grace filled moments in life. Michael found the imagery in the meditation books to resonate with the gospels, deepening his connections with scripture and allowing him to identify with his wisdom figure. This provided awareness of strengths within that he may otherwise have minimized. Marie was able to utilize the journal with art and prayer to process the tragedies that she would witness in a major trauma center of a hospital as the Chaplain. The journal provides a path for meditative deepening, discernment of values, a means to clarify one's own truth, to integrate connective and disconnective life experiences and a place to find wisdom within.

## ***REFERENCES***

- Bruner, E.M. (1986). Ethnography as narrative. In V. W. Turner & E.M. Bruner (Eds.). The anthropology of experience. (pp. 29-42). Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Denzin, N.K. (1989a). Interpretive biography. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Denzin, N.K. (1989b). Interpretive interactionism. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Denzin, N.K. (1997). Interpretive ethnography. London: Sage.
- Dorff, F. (1998). Simply soul stirring: Writing as a meditative practice. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.
- Freeman, M. (1993). Rewriting the self. New York: Routledge.
- Freud, S. (1919). Letter to Dr. Hermine von Hug-Helmuth. S.E. 14:341. (Original work published 1915.)
- Freud, S. (1935). An autobiographical study. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Freud, S. (1965). The interpretation of dreams. New York: Avon Books.
- Horney, Karen. (1980). The adolescent diaries of Karen Horney. New York: Basic Books.
- Hymer, S. (1991). The diary as therapy: the diary as adjunct to therapy. Psychotherapy in Private Practice, 9(4), 13-30.

- Jung, C.G. (1965). Memories, dreams, reflections. New York: Vintage Books.
- Kegan, R. (1980). Religious dimensions. In J. Fowler & S. Vergole (Eds.), Toward moral and religious maturity. International Conference on moral and religious development. Moriston, NJ: Silver Bercllett.
- Kegan, R. (1982). The evolving self. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Kegan, R. (1994). In over our heads: The mental demands of modern life. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Milner, J. (1981). A life of one's own. Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher.
- Pennebaker, J.W. (1990). Opening up: The healing power of expressing emotions. New York: Guilford Press.
- Polkinghorne, D. (1983). Methodology for the human sciences. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Polkinghorne, D. (1988). Narrative knowing and the human sciences. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Progoff, I. (1992). At a journal workshop. Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, Inc.
- Riessman, C.K. (1993). Narrative analysis. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Riessman, C.K. (1994) Qualitative studies in social work research. London: Sage.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). Basics of qualitative research. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Van Maanen, J.V. (1988). Tales of the field; On writing ethnography. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Winnicott, D. W. (1951). Transitional objects and transitional phenomena (pp. 229-242). Collected papers. Madison: International University Press.
- Winnicott, D. W. (1958). The capacity to be alone. (pp. 29-36). Collected papers. Madison: International Universities Press.
- Winnicott, D. W. (1962). The aims of psychoanalytical treatment (pp. 166-170) Collected papers. Madison: International Universities Press.
- Winnicott, D. W. (1971). Playing and reality. London: Routledge.

Winnicott, D. W. (1992). Through pediatrics to psycho-analysis. Collected papers. New York: Brunner Mazel.

Winnicott, D. W. (1996). The maturational processes and the facilitating environment, Collected papers. Madison: International Universities Press.