
Threads of reflection and the patterns they weave

by *Pip Hardy and Liz Redfern (1997)*

Introduction

This paper brings together a variety of threads from our thoughts and personal experiences of reflective practice that emphasised for us the need to look beyond the immediate insights that reflection can bring.

Neither of the authors would consider themselves to be experts in reflective practice.

However we wanted to contribute to the debate created by the international conference and we believe our thoughts are worth consideration. Our contribution is as much about transforming ourselves, as transforming nursing (or any other professional group for that matter). In fact, we believe we have to transform ourselves before we are able to transform other aspects of our lives.

We understand transformation to be the process of changing from what we are to what we might become – in other words, to reach our greatest potential. (The Sufis refer to this transformative process as ‘that which transpires behind which appears). Transformation happens through experiences which often ‘embody hope, fear, joy and even despair. Our thinking may become confused and disjointed, while at the same time expansive. We may create whole new patterns of understanding from this seemingly mental chaos. When we undergo such experiences our values change.’

One of the means of transformation is through reflection. Reflection in turn can be promoted by structured journal writing; this kind of writing may be made easier through the use of computers and computer software. This is of course, not a necessary aspect of reflection, but modern technology can simplify some processes.

In writing this chapter there were several messages that we wanted to get across – they are the basic premises from which we have tried to work. Whether we have been successful is for you to judge.

The basic premises are these.

- Reflection is a pointless activity if we don't learn from it.
- One of the outcomes of that learning is to identify recurring patterns of behaviour.
- Patterns of behaviour can control our lives if we don't seek to identify and understand them. Until we can do this, it is difficult to make a transformative leap.

A useful way of identifying those patterns is through the use of a structured journal.

There has been a great deal of theoretical writing about reflection. This is all well and good – however, all the knowledge in the world about the benefits of reflection are of little use unless we can actually become more reflective practitioners. As with most difficult things, this requires practice. Our aim in writing has been to contribute to moving the theory into practice in the hope of offering some tools to help people in their quest for transformation through reflection.

In unravelling some of these premises, we relied heavily on several sources:

- the work of Ira Progoff
- our experience of psycho-spiritual models of counselling & therapy
- what we understand about reflective practice
- a software programme called ‘If Monks Had Macs’.

We are all aware that nurses are being encouraged for many reasons to reflect and write about their experiences of reflection using structures such as those developed by Johns (1994) and others. The influences and imperatives on nurses to reflect are numerous, but include:

- reflective diaries as part of educational programmes
- reflection as part of clinical supervision
- reflection as part of the profiling process
- reflection as part of an overall trend towards nursing becoming a profession.

All this reflection is only of some value if we are able to learn from it. We believe that the nursing profession will soon have to acknowledge that much of the reflective activity taking place with little structure or support represents a wasted opportunity to learn and to grow.

Even with the proper use of critical incident technique and models of structured reflection, the participant (particularly if working alone) is often encouraged to identify the immediate changes which can be made to practice, rather than to look for the bigger picture and longer term benefits. Whilst these short-term insights can be, in themselves, very useful, they can often represent a larger pattern of personal or professional behaviour which, if addressed, can bring about transformation and profound change. That transformation is firstly within the individual, but it ultimately affects all

those with whom the individual comes into contact, that is, all those within their social or family system.

Transformation is, of course, a theme of this book and the conference from which it sprang. According to Whitmore (1991), transformation implies evolution from a negative state to a positive outcome, which provides a qualitative leap to a more profound change. We believe it is very difficult to make that transformative leap unless we can identify and understand the patterns of behaviour which so often control our lives.

In attempting to identify and understand, it is often necessary to unravel the threads – rather like unpicking the seams of a dress (or a quilt) to discover how it was made.

In the film *How to make an American Quilt*, each of the squares sewn by the women in the quilting circle had meaning, initially, only for the individual. Despite the attempts to establish pattern and order by imposing a theme – for them it was 'Where does love reside?' - it was possible initially for each woman only to consider her own experience. Only through persistent adherence to the theme, but also through the willingness of each woman to share her experience with the others, did it become possible to weave together the threads of their individual lives into the pattern which, in the end, formed the completed quilt.

Of course we are only working with one life at a time – our own – but the complexity of the patterns depends partly on our relationships with others. Our ability to unravel the various strands, to see the warp and weft of our lives, to notice the strength of the seams, to unpick where necessary, and restitch where appropriate will determine our ability to learn from our experiences and feed this knowledge back into the rest of our lives, and of course our nursing practice.

So how can we use reflections and reflective writing to identify our patterns of behaviour? There are several possibilities.

The 19th century American philosopher, writer and businessman, Thoreau, was a master of this process. During his time at Walden Pond, he meticulously kept a journal of his experiences, thoughts, feelings and ideas. Then, when he wanted to write a poem or an essay on, say, moonlight, he painstakingly went through all his journal entries and tore out all those related to the subject of moonlight. This may seem unnecessarily destructive, but the result was that he could trace the development of a particular 'thread' over some time and begin to see the patterns that were created with other threads.

Those practitioners fortunate enough to have access to expert individual or group facilitation will

doubtless be encouraged to identify and understand the threads [those strands which weave through our lives, connecting up all the various feelings, thoughts, activities which shape us] that return time and time again to their reflections. But if you don't have the benefit of an external facilitator what can you do? This is where we believe Progoff's method of a structured journal can make a contribution.

We will now explore how we can use Progoff's structured journal process to retrieve the gems of our experience by identifying the threads running through our practice and using those threads to stitch together what may appear to be unconnected events into a pattern.

The use of a journal for revitalising the self was pioneered by an American psychologist called Ira Progoff. He originally developed his theories by contrasting the journals of hundreds of individuals whose attainments in life led to them being labeled 'creative', with equal numbers of individuals who were so trapped and overwhelmed by life that they might be labeled 'neurotic'. Progoff found that neurotic people were obsessed by the content of their lives, while creative individuals viewed that content as the raw material that they were shaping. The structured journal helps us to go beyond an obsession with the details of your life to the spirit within that can shape that content.

So, Progoff is offering us two useful tools:

- a way of structuring a journal
- a way of tapping into our creativity.

Let's look in a little more detail at these two points.

Structuring a journal

Progoff's approach differs somewhat from Thoreau's in that he encourages us to create a structure before writing. In this way his ideas concur with those of Buzan and Kelly who recognised that it is difficult to learn anything new without a structure or framework into which the new knowledge can fit. Most of us have experience of coming across a completely new area – perhaps gardens or cooking or homeopathy, astrophysics or literature or chemistry. Without some kind of broad framework and vocabulary, we are completely lost, unable to make sense of any of the information we are receiving. Progoff's approach to structured journal keeping encourages the development of this framework to help us see both the patterns and the individual threads.

If you decide to start a structured journal, you will need to decide what you are hoping to achieve. If you are following a course, you could weave these threads in with your personal development plan or personal learning objectives. Your sections or 'threads' would reflect the particular needs of your programme, or the aim you have identified for your

journal. Or you could devise a journal that would help you tap into your creativity - or all three of these.

For example, Meg is a neuro-surgical nurse. She is following an MSc programme in advanced nursing. She hopes that the degree will improve her practice and also make her more creative. Equally, she feels that she needs to be more creative in order to work on an advanced degree course. She will also be required to demonstrate reflective practice. She feels that this is not something to be relegated only to work but should form part of all aspects of her life. She therefore decides to set up a structured journal with these headings:

- study habits/learning strategies
- work/practice
- ideas for her thesis
- insights from reflection (and how they're carried forward)
- how I work with others
- personal relationships
- transfer of learning from personal life to work life (and vice versa)
- decisions
- pressures and stresses – and coping strategies.

Within this broad framework, which could apply to almost anybody, her own particular themes and patterns will gradually begin to emerge. As she begins to be aware of the overall patterns, so the more intricate details will also be illuminated.

Positioning yourself in the present

Before she can usefully begin her structured diary-keeping, (Progoff would argue) she must begin the work by drawing her life into focus. So her first entries need to be about where she is now. She needs to think about inner and outer influences. Progoff calls this initial work 'positioning yourself in the present'

To draw our lives into focus and position ourselves in the present we must begin with NOW this point. However, now is not only about this instant. It can be an elastic period, stretching back to a particular event which may have influenced where we are at this point in our lives, e.g. a new job or the ending of an old one, a house move, the start of a new relationship (or the ending of an old one). It can go back as far as it needs to go 'in order to include as much of the past as is still active in the present'.

The following framework of questions suggested by Progoff may be helpful in this context:

- Where am I now in my life?
- What is this present period in my life?

- What events mark it off?
- How far back does it reach?
- What have been the main characteristics of this recent period?

When working in this way, it is helpful to hold ourselves in a condition of openness to thoughts and images. This probably means finding a time and a space where it is possible to be silent and uninterrupted. The first images and thoughts which appear may be the most valuable. Try not to judge or censor. Trust your inner voice. The patterns will emerge later. Write about it. This is the beginning of the creative process and the start of (spiritual) growth: the ability to recognise and see clearly without judging or criticising.

Having discovered how we have arrived at NOW, (recorded in what Progoff calls the period log) it is essential not to lose this new knowledge. Progoff suggests that a daily log can help to maintain contact with these insights derived from the 'past' via the periodic log and relate them to the events of everyday (connections between inside and outside). The daily log is also a continuous source of material to feed the themes that we have identified.

A good way to start your daily log is to identify what was unique about each day. This removes us from the potentially stifling need to record all the mundane events of a day, and encourages us to make links with what is special. Progoff agrees with Walker that it is best that we write spontaneously in the log, remembering that when writing we are not composing an essay, but recording the unedited expressions of our inner experience. We shouldn't pay attention to our style of writing as the daily log 'is not an exercise in literature; it is an exercise in our lives'.

Progoff's method of maintaining a structured journal is time consuming and complex.

He suggests the journal should have 25 colour coded sections which include the period and daily log as well as sections for recording dreams; process meditations; dialogues with society our body and significant events.(and many more). His reasons for maintaining a structured journal are very different from the one we are suggesting. We would suggest that having identified the themes you want to explore through your journal, you use these to design your sections.

On the other hand, you may prefer to adopt Thoreau's approach and write first, attempting to find structure later. 100 years ago, this would certainly have meant tearing up pages, rewriting and rewriting again. Now, with the benefit of personal computers and good software, we can achieve the same ends much more easily.

Brian Thomas in 'If Monks Had Macs', designed an interactive CD which encourages personal reflection and creativity, and outlines another possible way of using a journal to enhance the learning process.

He suggests writing as you normally do (or perhaps in the way Progoff suggests). Then, after some days or months, when you want to trace the development of a particular project you have been working on, you instruct the software to find all the references to this project – it can search for one or several key words or phrases. It then extracts all the information relating to that project and this can be read in isolation from the rest of the journal. So, for example, when we began working on this chapter, we included our thoughts, ideas, hopes – and, problems as well, in a regular journal.

We also wrote about other aspects of our lives. For most people, the different parts of life are not so discrete – we bring to work our problems and joys from home and all our experiences from the past and then we feed back into our lives the new things we learn at work, the ways we conduct our relationships and so on.

At various stages, it was possible to pull out the thoughts about the chapter, even if they were entangled with other things. This means that it is possible to follow our trains of thought – as we work on another project, or read a book, it may stimulate thoughts on reflection or reflective writing and we noted them down. It would be hard, looking through our journal, to find all these references. But if we are to be truly creative, we need to make use of this space and the mind's ability to leap from one thing to another, making connections, weaving together the various threads of our lives. Such a computer program makes it incredibly easy to capture this process and also to extract for more public consumption those parts of our journals we wish to share without sacrificing the need for privacy in other areas.

The ability to learn from reflection demands our commitment to extract new knowledge and skills from the situations in which we find ourselves. But we must also be prepared to feed back into those experiences what we learn and know from other parts of our lives. In this way our personal knowledge is a continually growing and changing thing.

We talk about the importance of reflection but now we need to involve ourselves in the process. To begin with, it is possible to learn only by looking back at what happened perhaps days or even weeks or months ago. With some time between us and the event, we can see it more dispassionately – but also we see it through the lens of memory and other experiences. In other words, we may not see it completely clearly, but rather clouded by intervening hopes, fears, anxieties and so on. Learning by reflection should have the ultimate aim of enabling us to be fully present in the moment of the event – both engaged and at the same time able to observe what is happening, drawing in information which enables us to respond in the most appropriate way, rather than simply reacting to a series of stimuli.

This 'reflection in action' takes a good deal of practice. It is rather like establishing a therapeutic alliance with yourself. According to the psychosynthesis model of counseling, the development of 'bi-focal vision' (the ability to hold two ideas at once about the client) is one of the most effective tools a counsellor can use. The counsellor perceives the client as a Being who has a purpose in life, with challenges and obstacles to meet in order to fulfil that purpose. The counsellor will actively maintain the attitude that this client is unique, with her own creative potential and capacity to create meaning in her life. She trusts that ultimately the client has all the answers needed within, and her task is to evoke that inner knowing. In this way the counsellor validates the client's human integrity and perceives her as more than just a problem to be solved.

One of the best ways of evoking that inner knowing for ourselves is by writing. Pulling out the threads, examining them, seeing how they are interwoven with each other, where the breaks come, where the strongest patterns are, can not only enhance our professional practice, but enable us to become more creative in the process. We can then become not only reflective practitioners, but creative ones as well, seeing new possibilities in existing situations, and able to respond appropriately with knowledge drawn from wisdom and experience.

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