

The Intensive Journal Process: A Path to Self Discovery

An Interview with Ira Progoff by Kathy Juline

A comprehensive look at the extraordinary approach to self-discovery that has helped thousands of people to express their fullest potential.

Interviewer: You have been widely recognized as a pioneer in developing the principles of depth psychology, and in particular, holistic depth psychology as opposed to traditional mainstream psychological thought. Tell us what your philosophy of psychology is and why you call yourself a holistic depth psychologist.

Progoff: One of the goals of psychology is to help individuals to live and unfold the potentials of their being in terms of the wholeness of their inner nature rather than a partial or fragmented aspect of their outer lives. I refer to my own work as holistic depth psychology. Holistic suggests the qualitative evolution of people that takes place when all of their experiences come together. As this integration occurs, there is an improvement in the quality of people's lives in that the process of becoming who they truly are deepens. Integration results in greater creativity and spiritual growth.

Personal and spiritual development also comes about through working at an inner level, at one's depths, by which I mean a level below our outer consciousness....the word depth is important too.

The focus of my work has been to provide methods which will enable people to work continuously in their lives. It gives an inner perspective to guide them through transitions, evoking creative potentials and drawing forth new sparks of Spirit as they move toward becoming whole persons. After formulating my theories of personal development as an author and psychotherapist for many years, I developed the *Intensive Journal* process in the mid-1960s to provide a structured way for people to work continuously to become whole persons.

Interviewer: How did you become interested in spirituality in your overall philosophy of depth psychology?

Progoff: In the early 1950s, I concluded that if I could identify the concepts that were the final conclusions of the great persons in the history of depth psychology, I would then have a starting point for my methods. I realized that in the history of depth psychology, these persons - namely, Freud, Adler, Jung, and Rank - had gone through several changes in their point of view from the time they began their work to the time they died.

I found that Freud, for example, while he had been the originator of several of the main concepts of depth psychology, had ended his life with a very negative view of what he had achieved. Another seminal psychologist, Alfred Adler, concluded that man is always reaching for connection with the eternal and that, although depth psychology began as a protest against religion, the net result has been for it to reaffirm man's experience of himself as a spiritual being.

Otto Rank experienced a similar turnaround. After beginning in psychoanalysis as a secretary to Sigmund Freud, he rejected the point of view of his spiritual father, Freud, concluding finally that we experience the reality of life "beyond psychology."

Similarly, C. G. Jung began as a psychiatrist wedded, as Freud had been, to a materialist point of view. But the great transformation through which Jung passed in 1913 changed that. He emerged from it as the spokesperson of a new spirituality which radically altered his original point of view. This spiritual point of view which Jung reached became the basis of my further studies.

Interviewer: How did your studies with Jung influence the development of the *Intensive Journal* method?

Progoff: My studies with Jung had a major impact upon the development of the *Intensive Journal* process. The tremendous value of Jung's work is that he developed specific methods for understanding the reality that lies beneath the conscious level. Jung's concepts grew out of his deep concern for the spiritual problems of our time. When I began my work in psychology, Jung's views in psychology were not popular and were in fact ridiculed. Freud's theories of psychoanalysis comprised the prevailing view point in the profession. I knew that this emphasis upon pathology and diagnosis could only lead to a dead end and great disappointment in terms of helping people develop their lives. Rather, I thought that Jung's broad and deep view of life and his belief in the inner capacities of persons to develop had a great deal of validity and would become the more accepted approach.

The *Intensive Journal* method seeks to fulfill on a practical level a main goal toward which Jung was moving as he

worked on his conception of the potential of individuals to develop over time. I realized that a valid method must enable individuals to position themselves in the movement of their lives. The method would have to be open-ended in scope so people would be free to unfold and express their latent potentials.

Interviewer: *The Intensive Journal* process is widely recognized as a highly effective tool for self-development, an approach that Joseph Campbell called "one of the great inventions of our times." Would you describe the process?

Progoff: The *Intensive Journal* process combines one of the oldest methods of self-exploration - keeping a diary - with a new, highly structured format that enables journal-keepers to get to know themselves on ever-deeper levels. The *Intensive Journal* Workbook is a large three-ring notebook filled with paper and divided into four dimensions of human experience Life/Time, Dialogue, Depth and Meaning. Each of these dimensions is divided into several subsections.

Some of these subsections are used to write our factual recapitulation of the events of our lives as well as dreams and images. Others are for stimulating insights and creative activity.

In the Life/Time Dimension, we enter data about the qualitatively important events that reflect the inner continuity of our life history. In the sections of the Dialogue Dimension, we enter into a dialogue relationship with each of the aspects of our lives such as personal relationships, work, body, society or events. The Depth Dimension has to do with those aspects of our lives that are symbolic such as dreams and images. The Meaning Dimension consists of experiences in which a person finds connection to a larger than personal reality. I will discuss in detail more about the Workbook sections as we go on.

Interviewer: Why did you develop the *Intensive Journal* process?

Progoff: In the 1950s and 1960s, I was a practicing psychotherapist in New York City. The people who came to see me were trying to grow and improve their lives in various ways by resolving important matters and realizing new possibilities.

I studied how people go through the process of working out the various aspects of their lives, through their peaks and valleys, their pain and anguish, and how they ultimately make their decisions. Also, while serving as Director of the Institute for Research in Depth Psychology at the graduate school of Drew University, I studied the lives of creative persons throughout history to find out what had been involved in their creativity. The *Intensive Journal* process is designed to serve simply as a flexible means of making objective the organic process by which the growth of personality proceeds. It is an instrument for mirroring these inner processes, for extending them and for establishing a continuing relationship with them. These processes are very elusive because they take place behind the mind and are experienced at a deeper than conscious level.

Yet they are also the key to each person's growth. I developed the *Intensive Journal* Workbook to provide a specific tool for individuals to use to get direct and defined access to this process so they could work with it constructively.

Interviewer: What are some of the benefits of working with this process?

Progoff: It helps us to see the movement of our life history as a whole, from the vantage point of the present moment. It also helps us to position ourselves between the past and the future so we can support the unfoldment of new potentials in our life. On a practical level, it offers us a way to clarify personal relationships, address career concerns, face transitions, meet change, overcome blockages, deal with past hurts and present difficulties, gain new insights, and integrate our life experiences.

Interviewer: Why is the *Intensive Journal* process more effective than a traditional approach to keeping a journal or diary?

Progoff: A private journal can certainly be an essential instrument for promoting personal growth, but there are situations in which it becomes a static exercise of merely keeping a record of events or feelings. When journal keeping is not related to the larger development of one's life as a whole, it lacks a sustaining principle. Often it is resorted to when a person has a particular goal in mind, such as finding a new career path or establishing a specific love relationship, but when the goal is achieved, the journal falls into disuse and the continuity of the life context as a whole is lost. No overall integration or self-exploration results.

Interviewer: Why did you make the *Intensive Journal* process such a structured method?

Progoff: Writing in the *Intensive Journal* Workbook is an active process. It is the structure that makes possible Journal Feedback, which is what I have added to the typical journal process. Journal Feedback is the way the *Intensive Journal* process reaches out to work with material we have in one section to stimulate experiences in

another section. ...in the subsection of Dialogue with Persons, a woman in the course of writing a dialogue script with her husband may mention her husband's love of drinking. In the *Intensive Journal* way, this material will be used as a "Feedback lead" to start a subsection in Dialogue with Events, Situations, and Circumstances, and will evoke, among other things, a discussion of the possibilities of alcoholism. These dialogues come from the unconscious without self-conscious controls. In this way, we get fresh material as one thing leads to another and yields further awareness.

Interviewer: Do you consider the *Intensive Journal* process to be a significant tool for spiritual growth?

Progoff: Yes, absolutely. This process is a modern approach to spirituality without dogma. In my book, *At a Journal Workshop*, I compare it to entering a sanctuary, because it provides a safe haven from the pressures of the outside world where we can quietly assess our relationship to life. Working with the process enriches our inner life immeasurably, helping us to stay in touch with that underlying reality which is our personal source of meaning and strength. In fact, assisting us to establish contact with that deep reality is one of its main purposes.

Although many people presently feel they do not have the capacity for spiritual experience, the *Intensive Journal* process can help....When we reflect on our inner experiences and list and describe them in writing, the writing itself tends to add to the experience. We find ourselves to be more in contact than we originally suppose...one experience leads to another.

Interviewer: The Interviewer teaches that we have the power to change our lives through changing our thinking. Is the *Intensive Journal* process a tool for applying that principle?

Progoff: Definitely. The *Intensive Journal* process is a practical way of getting in touch on a deeper level with beliefs and patterns of thinking that may be hidden from our conscious awareness. Once we know what they are, we can take steps to eliminate or alter the ones that limit us.

Interviewer: The Interviewer also teaches the importance of working with positive ideas. How can the *Intensive Journal* method help people to live in accordance with this principle?

Progoff: The creative process in people's lives takes time to unfold before they can truly realize their potential and know what their lives are trying to become. Before that occurs, people experience cycles of hope and anxiety, success and failure, confidence and uneasiness.

A well-known truth is that the darkest moment is before the dawn. I think that has to do with the way new integrations are formed. They cannot be formed until there is an emptying out and the emptying out does not happen easily. With regard to taking a positive or affirmative stance, we should not eliminate the time of emptiness....there would be no history of the inner life if it were not for the times of the dark night of the soul. If one is affirmative about it, it's not a dark night. That is the paradox.

The Journal provides an instrument that helps people to maintain perspective as they move from the valley of anxiety until they reach the upward phase of the cycle. They learn from these cycles of experience so their awarenesses are enlarged and new capacities are realized. They work through their cycles of experience to realize their fullest potential.

Interviewer: So the process helps us to recreate our lives anew and express ourselves more authentically?

Progoff: Yes. The revealing of something new and greater is a very important result of the process. Ideas, opportunities, and talents we previously may not have been aware of begin to emerge. Since the *Intensive Journal* process asks us to include the fullness of facts of our life - all of them, not just what we have labeled as "positive" - it helps us to achieve integration. And this results in enhanced creativity. One of the main indications of the strength of creativity in individual is the degree to which they have brought themselves into connection with the multiple and interrelated movement of all aspects of their lives. Through the *Intensive Journal* process we are led to view painful experiences in a new light and we discover that they were not so negative after all but rather strengthening and empowering. That is an important step in spiritual development - the embracing of our wholeness.

Interviewer: Earlier you referred to the "dimensions of experience." What do you mean by that?

Progoff: The dimensions are separate realms of human experience, each with a unique content and its characteristic ways of expression. For example, the Life/Time Dimension deals with the obvious, outer level of experience. It includes all those phenomena that form our personal life history. All of the four main Dimensions sections are broken down into several more defined areas of focus, subsections which I call "mini-processes," and in the case of the Life/Time Dimension, these include the Life History Log, Steppingstones, Intersections: Roads

Taken and Not Taken, and Now: The Open Moment. A particularly interesting one to work with is Steppingstones, in which people are asked to list ten or twelve high points in their life - whatever occurs to them spontaneously. From this exercise they get a sense of the thread of continuity that's moving through their life.

Interviewer: Is the *Steppingstones* portion of the *Intensive Journal* process a good starting point?

Progoff: Yes, and it's usually one of the first exercises we do, because it does give a good overall perspective on what the important events in our life have been. It's helpful to bring to mind as much of our autobiographical material as we can at the outset. Then as we continue to work in the Time/Life section, we progressively reconstruct our life histories, a segment at a time. The Steppingstones list gives us a generalized outline of our life movement, and when we reenter those Steppingstone periods, describing and exploring their contents, we find that events fit together in a way that not only gives us a clearer perspective but generates an energy that carries us forward and shapes our future.

Interviewer: What do the other main sections of the Workbook entail?

Progoff: The Depth Dimension is the section in which we explore the realm of human reality that speaks in symbolic terms. It deals with the aspects of experience that are primarily non-conscious as they are happening but which are guided in their unfoldment by an underlying intelligence. To bring these elusive parts of ourselves up from the depths, where they are unconscious, to the surface, where they can be integrated and expressed into our life, requires a means of capturing them. To provide this means, there are five mini-processes in the Depth Dimension section of the Workbook - Dream Log, Dream Enlargements, The Twilight Imagery Log, Imagery Extensions, and Inner Wisdom Dialogue. The exercises applicable to this particular section of the workbook have a special capacity to activate sources of energy which can cause powerful effects in our life.

Interviewer: Could you say more about that?

Progoff: What we discover as we work with this section is that there are levels of awareness beneath the surface of our consciousness which hold the key both to the problems and the potentialities of our life. Certain dreams carry the seed-nature of a person, and through working with them on a consistent basis, recording and enlarging upon them, we generate a flow of new thoughts, ideas, insights, intuitions, and awarenesses. One of the most valuable gifts we receive from our dreams is the guidance they give us as to which areas of our life we need to reexamine.

Interviewer: Could you tell us more about the other main sections?

Progoff: One is the Dialogue Dimension, which has the special function of opening the channels for internal communication and of providing a means by which inner contact can be maintained among the various parts of our life.. When we enter into a dialogue with all of these parts, we experience inner harmony rather than feeling fragmented. Having begun by recording and exploring much of our life history, it's time for us to deepen our relationship with the important aspects of our life and let them speak to us. For each subsection, or mini-process, we start with a focus statement, writing down what is or was positive or negative about our relationship with that aspect of our life, how it got to where it is and what our hopes are for it. The various mini-processes we work with in this section are Dialogue with Persons, Dialogue with Works, Dialogue with Society, Dialogue with the Body, and Dialogue with Events, Situations and Circumstances.

In dialoguing with each of these areas, we approach it as if we were a person. For example, in a dialogue with bills you've been avoiding paying, they may respond, "You don't want to pay us because you want to be a kid and have Daddy pay the bills."

Interviewer: What is the fourth section?:

Progoff: That is the Meaning Dimension. This section has the function of connecting the individuals in a society according to beliefs. These beliefs tend to be about fundamentals of life, the values and ultimate concerns that motivate people. When they feel connected by common social symbols, people are strengthened in their sense of being supported in life. If there is no such experience present, they are subject to alienation.

These connective symbols are experienced on an unconscious level and must be personally experienced in order to be valid for the person. It is important for the individual to have such a symbol in order to be free from the anxieties of being separated and having no source to depend upon.

In modern times, alienation has been identified as one of the primary causes of anxiety. The answer to it depends upon an individual having a subjective experience of his or her unconscious. In the *Intensive Journal* process, we call forth these previously unconscious experiences and look at them closely for the good they can bring to us.

We function best as human beings when we are connected to something greater than ourselves. So in

the *Intensive Journal* process, we make it a point to review the history of our connective experiences. We are seeking to draw out the strength from them and to discover the unconscious symbols that are meaningful to us. The Meaning Dimension section includes a subsection called Gatherings in which we seek to recall for ourselves as many of these experiences as we can. Thus, in a historical way, by the use of "twilight memory," we bring back memories of connective experience that have an importance in our lives.

Interviewer: This process appears to have many individual parts and a rather intricate methodology. How does one learn it?

Progoff: My experience with the *Intensive Journal* process over a period of many years suggests that the most effective way to begin its use is by attending an *Intensive Journal* workshop. There are two main benefits to this. One is the opportunity to draw the present situation of your life into focus by working privately in your own *Intensive Journal* Workbook. Secondly, at the workshop, participants appreciate the support and energy they obtain from others also working quietly in their own lives. The third benefit, of course, is the opportunity to learn the numerous techniques of the *Intensive Journal* process, including the Feedback method, which enables you to use the Workbook on your own as a tool for personal and spiritual growth.

...*Intensive Journal* process is not really intricate. It corresponds to the contents of our lives and therefore it makes the whole task of working out what our lives are trying to become a lot simpler.

Interviewer: Would you say more about the Feedback method?:

Progoff: Sure. In the structure of the *Intensive Journal* Workbook one basic distinction is that between the Log sections and the Feedback sections. The Log sections are where we record the factual data of our lives. The Feedback sections, on the other hand, are where we carry out the active exercises that generate the energy which result in transformation. Actually, the feedback effects that occur in the use of the *Intensive Journal* method take place on several levels.

A basic one is the feedback that is achieved simply by writing down a nonjudgmental record of the inner and outer events of our life. In addition, there is the feedback that results from reading these entries either silently to ourselves or aloud to the group. Then with the passage of time a further form of feedback becomes possible. After we have accumulated enough of them we can read back to ourselves the entries we have made in the various sections over a period of time. This experience offers a valuable means of maintaining a perspective on our lives in the midst of movement and change. So the Journal Feedback exercises draw upon the raw data of our everyday experience to help carry our life toward meaningful unfoldment.

Interviewer: You have indicated that the *Intensive Journal* process helps bring to our awareness unconscious memories. Could you say more about how that happens?

Progoff: Yes. It's much like the stream-of-consciousness approach that psychoanalysis uses to evoke repressed or forgotten feelings and desires. In a state of surrender, they are more available. They well up from an underground stream. That is why meditation is an important part of the *Intensive Journal* process. It gives us an opportunity to open up to that deep well within us. Letting go and letting God is really the essence of the process. All of us are living out certain patterns, and we need to discover what these patterns are in order to fulfill our true purpose in life.

Interviewer: Are there specific ways to contact that deep well?

Progoff: The key lies in the atmosphere that is established. As we enter into the depths of the well through employing the techniques of Entrance Meditation, a quality of stillness is established from which new ideas, images and awareness are activated and fed into the individuals' creative capacities.

Interviewer: Do you believe the *Intensive Journal* process would be an effective tool for drug addicts and other similar groups of people to use in overcoming their problem, and perhaps changing their beliefs about themselves?

Progoff: Yes, I do. It would offer them a method they could use to get a sense of where they are in their life and what their life is trying to be. I have the feeling that most people who become chemically dependent are looking for something, and usually they don't even know what it is. They have a spiritual hunger.

They're looking for something that can help them fulfill, and express themselves, and very often they have no idea what that means of expression might be. When many people work on fulfilling their true life purpose, our society improves. Individuals become more well-rounded and accepting of others. They also become more interested in others developing as persons and seeing them as having a life. The dialogue exercises can help people establish this relationship with other persons in their own lives as well as in other societies. In this way, the *Intensive Journal* process fosters love and brotherhood, and also helps people deal with problems such as

addiction.

Interviewer: What is the best time in a person's life to attend an *Intensive Journal* workshop?

Progoff: Anytime is fine, but I like to tell people that the process is particularly valuable during a time of transition. Often that may mean a period of difficulty in someone's life. But the process is valuable too when someone is wrestling with a decision or seeking to expand in his or her expression of life.

Interviewer: Do you have to be interested in writing to work effectively in the *Intensive Journal Workbook*?

Progoff: No. Not at all. People from all walks of life can use this program. After a short while, people get experience in working in the *Intensive Journal Workbook*. In fact, we have had people benefit greatly who had little education. Writing is only essential for the reason that individuals read what they wrote and then work to develop it further through the Feedback techniques.

Interviewer: Do immediate changes result from using the *Intensive Journal* process, or might it take a long period of time before any changes started to manifest?

Progoff: That depends on whether the person believes that change can occur quickly and how willing he or she is to let them occur. A good exercise in this regard is to work with the subsection called Roads Taken and Not Taken. Through getting more clear someone may find things opening up right away. One woman who took the workshop realized she wanted to be a pianist and she very quickly developed her piano-playing ability, a road she had not taken in the past. She believed it could happen that quickly.

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