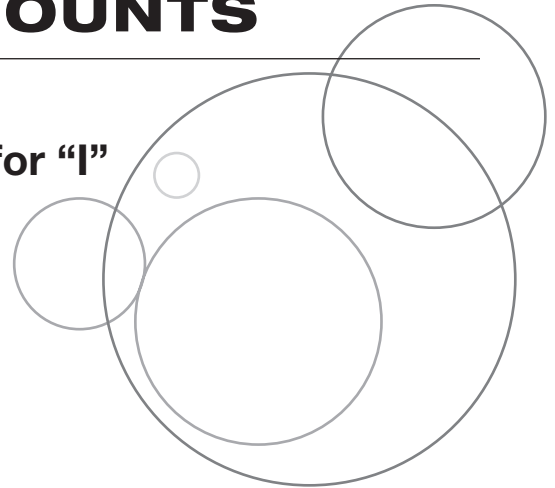


PERSONAL ACCOUNTS

Journaling: Creating Space for “I”

Jennell P. Charles, PhD, RN



As nurses engaged in a caring profession, it is critical that we learn not only to care for others but also to care for ourselves. To care effectively for ourselves, we must create the space and time in which to do this. Journaling is one tool that scholars offer as a way to create this space. Although there is no clear consensus about the best techniques for journaling, there is evidence that journaling, as a reflective, meditative activity, can promote creativity, self-awareness, and personal development.

The title of this article, of course, reflects terrible English. It should read “Creating Space for Me.” But that does not have the curb appeal of the acronym CSI. Perhaps “crime scene investigation” is a very fitting term for the state of affairs in nursing today. Consumers and health care practitioners are worried about nursing workforce shortages and nurse recruitment and retention. Schools of nursing are turning away potential students because of a shortage of faculty. The mean age of nurses is 48 years; many nurses and faculty members will retire in the next 10 to 15 years (Porter O’Grady, 2010). Those who remain in nursing must learn to provide high-quality care with fewer resources for patients at higher acuity levels than in previous years. These practice conditions create head-spinning, explosive situations of high stress and burnout. One result is that some nurses simply leave nursing *before* retiring.

Given this dire reality, how do we maintain a sense of commitment and caring for our patients and our profession? Scholar (2010) writes that most nurses are type E personalities, doing everything for everyone but themselves. As a result, nurses frequently experience “compassion fatigue,” which Scholar defines as overcaring to the point of burnout. Richardson (2009) remarks that overgiving often reflects a need that is not being met, a void not being filled; recognizing these needs and changing one’s lifestyle to address them are critical to staying healthy and staying in nursing.

In her book *Notes on Nursing*, Florence Nightingale (1860/2007) wrote that the nurse’s work is to put patients in the best possible condition for nature to act on them. The symptoms of disease were simply the body’s attempt to heal itself. Nurses’ jobs were to reshape the patient’s environment so that the natural, transformative processes of the body could reclaim a state of health. It is perhaps time for nurses to do the same for ourselves, but therein lies a challenge: how do we



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slow down long enough to identify our own needs for care and compassion and find ways to address those needs?

Journaling is mentioned often in the nursing literature. Frequently, journaling is paired with “reflective activity,” in which nurses reflect on their own practice and behaviors. Billings and Kowalski (2006) remark that reflection is critical in promoting safe patient care and commitment to the nursing profession. They advocate for journaling as an effective strategy that promotes reflective practice when educators link journal assignments with specific learning outcomes or desired competencies. Lauterbach and Hentz (2005) suggest that journaling is the application of the concept of reflection, which they describe as a dynamic human process, a “bending back of attention to self, experience, education and care” (p. 31). Through journaling, self-awareness and self-understanding are enhanced and become a means of caring for oneself as well as creating a heightened sense of responsibility in caring for others.

However, scholars debate what constitutes appropriate techniques for a rich journaling experience. Most nurse educators who advocate journaling offer structures and guidelines for these experiences, frameworks for measuring outcomes, and grading techniques to capture the essence of the experience for students. Some nurse educators suggest that these structures and grading approaches constrain students’ abilities to be reflective; instead, they promote an approach in which minimal guidelines are given and no attempts are made to evaluate the entries. Yonge and Myrick (2005) refer to these challenges as the “shadows and corners” of journaling and raise ethical concerns about journaling assignments. They worry that these assignments create vulnerability for students and that faculty review may increase student anxiety and violate students’ rights to privacy.

Neither is it completely clear what outcomes can be expected from engaging in journaling activities. Blake’s (2005) review of the literature on journaling identified multiple learning outcomes, including discovering meaning in discrete events, making connections between experiences and classroom learning, instilling the values of the profession, gaining perspective, developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills, developing affective skills, improving writing skills, and caring for self. Epp’s (2008) review of the literature on the value of journaling in undergraduate nursing education, however, finds little evidence to support reflection for the purpose of “learning from practice for practice” (p. 1379). Other nurse scholars concluded that the use of journals to promote reflection resulted in entries that were largely “time-consuming, repetitive and of superficial descriptive content, leading to boredom for those using them” (Mackintosh, 1998, p. 555).

In spite of mixed reviews in the literature, journaling has been used in clinical nursing courses to enhance critical thinking skills and connect theory to practice (Ruthman et al., 2004; Van Horn & Freed, 2008) and to support the professional development and lifelong learning of undergraduate and graduate nursing students (Daroszewski, Kinser, & Lloyd, 2004; Harris, 2005; Lepp, Zorn, & Dickson, 2005; Wilson & Grams, 2007). Research has also documented journaling’s effectiveness with experienced nurses in promoting expert practice and continued professional development (Banks-Wallace, 2008; Jasper, 1999; Kuiper, 2004).

Whether one believes in the remarkable effects of journaling or fails to see its value, there is a strong consensus that journaling can be challenging. For those of us who are busy taking care of everything for everyone else, journaling can be an

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annoying hump in our asphalted, interstate-paced day. Thus, for many individuals there is little staying power in journaling.

Approximately 15 years ago, I met Julia Cameron in the pages of her book *The Artist's Way* (Cameron, 1992). Cameron describes her book as a tool for achieving a higher plane of creativity. A recovering alcoholic and self-described blocked writer, she began to hold creativity workshops for a variety of professionals—writers, actors, artists, lawyers, and teachers. According to Cameron, we are all artists with the innate ability to create. For many different reasons, often unknowable, we block this creativity, and in the process our lives flatten, lose energy and color, and, for some, spiral down into a meaningless existence. One means to recapturing this creative force is to engage in what Cameron describes as “an apparently pointless process I call the morning pages” (p. 10). The morning pages are “meant to be, simply, the act of moving the hand across the pages and writing down *whatever* comes to mind. Nothing is too petty, too silly, too stupid, or too weird to be included” (p. 10). The rhythmic act of writing becomes a meditative act, allowing us to discover “our own identity, our right place in the scheme of the universe” (p. 14). By using the pages to create a place to dump our unhappiness and worries, we enable ourselves to create new space to tune in to our inner creative voices.

Any meditative act such as writing Cameron's morning pages can help capture images and details we miss when we are embroiled in the messiness and exhaustion of life. Art and creativity, Cameron writes, are born in attention to details. The artist's brain is reached through rhythm—through rhyme and not reason. By paying attention to detail, we enhance our capacity to be creating artists. Nightingale exhorted nurses to be astute observers; according to Nightingale, those who fail at observation should find a profession other than nursing, no matter how caring they may be (Nightingale, 1860/2007).

Throughout the centuries, nursing has been referred to as both an art and a science—a partnership between the logic and reasoning capability of left-brain functions and the emotions and instincts of right-brain functions. It has never been clear to me exactly what being both an artist and a scientist looks like, nor how one achieves both of those well. In many professions, leaning decisively in one direction or the other may be very effective and create an optimal imbalance. Perhaps even closer to the truth, the scientist and the artist are one and the same; for either to be effective, one must nurture both left- and right-brain activities.

Over the past several years, Daniel Goleman, a Harvard-trained psychologist and journalist, has spent considerable time studying the neuroscience of emotional intelligence—a skill affected by both left-brain and right-brain activity. The enhancement of emotions is largely a right-brain activity; the calming and management of emotions is generally performed by the prefrontal, left-brain cortex. The effective awareness and control of one's emotions constitutes emotional intelligence; those with highly developed emotional intelligence are extremely effective and successful in their chosen careers (Goleman, 1995). Goleman's research further demonstrates that meditation serves to enhance left-brain activity, thus enabling greater control over one's emotions. Individuals who have developed skills in meditation also demonstrate a high level of emotional intelligence.

To nurture ourselves, we must first value ourselves—that we indeed are worthy of a nurse's compassion. Second, we must recognize that to nurture ourselves, we must create space and time for doing just that. The rhythmic movement of the hand writing across the page can create time for meditation and space to focus our attention on our own needs and understand our own emotions. When journaling,

we may discover new insights about ourselves and our experiences and be able to connect these insights with previously learned knowledge. We may find a place to dump the trash of our jealousies and resentment, which frequently block our ability to attend to our needs and the needs of others. We may find the opportunity to articulate our worries and fears. Or we may only experience frustration and boredom. But by journaling, by creating the space for “I,” we give ourselves a chance to experience it all.

Cameron’s only requirement for effective journaling is to journal. Forget the how-tos. As you journal, you will figure out what works best for you. For journaling to be an effective creative and nurturing tool for you, it must be unique to you—owned solely by you. It is your first new creation.

I wish all of us a good day journaling.

To nurture ourselves, we must first value ourselves—that we indeed are worthy of a nurse’s compassion.

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