THE WAY OF THE JOURNAL

By Robert Blair Kaiser

Last year, thousands of Americans with no literary pretensions started producing stories of surpassing interest that will probably never be published, or read by their best friends. They were writing their own, often eye-popping, tear-evoking journals, under the direction of a tieless, tireless New York psychologist named Ira Progoff.

They wrote these journals in 392 workshops sponsored by colleges and universities across the land, by branches of the armed forces, by army hospitals and women's prisons, by groups of artists, priests, poets, business people, and engineers; they didn't enroll in them because they felt they needed therapy, but because they wanted to put their lives in perspective and find in them some deeper meaning.

The *Intensive Journal* method comes from everywhere—and from nowhere, except the synthesizing mind of Ira Progoff. Because he is a psychologist who studied under Carl Gustav Jung and is one of the founders of the Association for Humanistic Psychology, people have a mistaken notion that he is either a therapist or the newest in a long line of gurus— like Abraham Maslow, Fritz Perls, and Werner Erhard—who helped people "actualize" themselves.

"Wrong," says Felix Morrow. . . "It's hard to get a handle on Ira. He's an original. He's not a therapist and he's not in the human potential movement. But if you're looking to see what 'line' he's in, I think you'd have to say he follows Martin Buber and Paul Tillich."

Ira Progoff has the same vision and the same thrust: he is now very much like a philosopher-theologian himself, interested not only in helping people find meaning in their lives but also in making the world a gentler place. Progoff may never write anything as deep as Buber's I and Thou or as broad as Tillich's Systematic Theology. But he may be doing something even more important: working out a method that will help people find ultimate meaning, both for themselves and for others. That method is the *Intensive Journal* system, which many believe is a unique tool that contemporary men and women can use to make tangible the most elusive, most subjective parts of themselves—those subtle "intimations of truth" that give direction to their lives.

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Progoff likes to use a metaphor that many find helpful. He says that there's an underground stream of images and recollections within each of us. The stream is nothing more or less than our interior life. When we enter it, we ride it to a place where *it* wants to go. He says this is not a discursive method, not analytic: "There's no neat wrap-up; you don't end up with 'insight.' It's *an event,* and when it's happened, your life is different."

All of this may sound rather mystical. But then the mysticism gets terribly concrete, because everyone at a Journal workshop ends up with a workbook weighing several pounds, full of stories and recollections and often surprising new insights about the most fascinating mystery of all: themselves and their relation to the world around them. To produce a Journal, however, Progoff is quick to point out, "You don't need to be a mystic. All you need is a life. Almost anyone can do it."

Progoff states: "Poverty is not simply the lack of money. Ultimately, it is a person's lack of feeling for the reality of his own inner being." Perhaps this is one reason for the popularity of Progoff's *Intensive Journal* method today: people feel poor and alone and devoid of ultimate meaning in their lives. In the Journal workshops, they have found a way to remedy that.

But how? I didn't quite understand until I had gone to a Journal workshop myself. Father Lewis Cox, a tall, placid New York Jesuit who is one of 95 consultants trained by Progoff and authorized to give the workshops, got us started at 8:00 P.M. on a Friday by passing out loose-leaf notebooks filled with blank, lined paper and a series of 21 colored dividers. He invited us to enter the interior worlds of our own memories and imaginations, opening our "exploration" by helping create some preliminary moments of meditative silence. Then he invited us to answer the question for ourselves, "Where are you now in your life?"

Father Cox said the answer might not, probably would not, come in the form of a judgment or as an answer in a college quiz. We might have an image—see a picture of ourselves on a bumpy plane ride or hear the strains of a favorite symphony. Whatever it was, the point was not to merely *think* about it. We were to write it down and refrain from making any judgements about whether the images we recorded were good or bad. It was all right, Father Cox said, soothingly and assuringly. We would return to it later.

So far, there had been hardly any conversation, hardly any noise. At one point, I had looked around the room and seen a few dozen heads bobbing over a few dozen notebooks, a few dozen ball-point pens gliding away. A lot of intensity and then, when the evening ended, a collective exhaling of breath and blinking of eyes. I thought I noticed tears streaming down the cheeks of an elderly man with a gray beard.

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At the Journal weekend, there was hardly any interplay among the members of the workshop. We'd chat a bit at coffee breaks or at lunch, and that was it. There were none of the social pressures I'd experienced in any number of encounter groups, and therefore, no play acting was necessary. Furthermore, since I knew no one was going to see or hear what I was writing, I felt a sense of perfect freedom. Several times Father Cox drew a session to a close by issuing an open invitation to the group: would anyone care to read what he or she had just written? Some accepted his invitation, some didn't. It didn't seem to matter. Father Cox said that reading aloud was for the reader's benefit, not the group's. Even so, I couldn't help feeling good about the feelings, often of joy, that were evident in the notebooks of others.

After my own Journal workshop, I was all too aware that I'd only just begun to scratch the surface of the Journal process. There were a good many sections of the Journal that Father Cox hadn't even told us about. I found that I was in the first of three stages: a *Life Context* Workshop. I could go on to a *Depth Contact* Workshop and then, finally, to a *Journal Feedback* Workshop; in these, I would get a chance to work with, among other things, my own dreams.

I thought I might attend further workshops. However, I also realized that I could work on alone and at my own pace, using Progoff's major guide: At a Journal Workshop.

Anaïs Nin, a diarist who logged an estimated 150,000 pages before her death in 1977, reviewed At a Journal Workshop in 1975 and noted that Progoff had found a way to help people toward intimacy, intimacy with themselves, intimacy with others. She then remarked:

"The lack of intimacy with one's self, and consequently with others, is what created the loneliest and most alienated people in the world. Progoff ultimately proves that the process of growth in a human being, the process out of which a person emerges, is essentially an inward process."

And where does that lead? Progoff's answer is commonplace: it leads to meaning and to truth. But when you ask "Whose meaning? Whose truth?" Progoff answers: "Your own . . . To the reality of your own inner being."

The reality of your inner being. If *that* is what Progoff is about, he is a braver man than his quiet, unassuming, professorial demeanor suggests. He tends to agree that he's not selling 1981's hottest product. "In Freud's Victorian age," he says, "the awful secret that nobody wanted to talk about was sex. Today, the awful secret is spirituality. People today will discuss anything but their inner life." The wonder is that Progoff has gotten thousands to start working on (if not actually talking about) precisely that—and, moreover, in the hard-driving hurly-burly of the United States today, where men and women are lucky simply to keep the body alive, never mind the soul. Some sociologists of religion claim that a majority of Americans have rejected the very notion of spirituality as something pious and impractical and all-too-dependent on unreal dogmas committed to memory long ago by their local priests, ministers, and rabbis and handed on to the faithful in the form of slogans that were sappy and of categories that did not contain.

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Nevertheless, Progoff has gotten precisely those secularized Americans involved in a search for meaning. He's done it because, though he has a reverence and a respect for all the great thinkers and all the great religions, he has recognized that this is a time when autonomous men and women need to find their own meaning. "It is," says Progoff, "a difficult time, because the old answers don't respond to the new questions. It is also a time of opportunity, because now we have to work out new ways of dealing with ourselves, with others."

In brief, Progoff seems to have secularized spirituality. How has he done it? His immediate answer is: "*I* don't do it. The people who come into the workshops do it—for themselves." He quotes Karl Rahner, the German Jesuit theologian: "The theological problem today is the art of drawing religion out of a man, not pumping it into him. The art is to help men become what they really are."

Progoff, of course, quotes a good many men and women who come from traditions quite different from Rahner's. He is rather proud that his theory of human personality and human creativity has come from a long line of thinkers stretching back into history: Lao Tse, Buddha, Augustine, St. Francis of Assisi, Feodor Dostoevsky, Jan Christian Smuts, Henri Bergson, Carl Gustav Jung, D. T. Suzuki, Martin Buber. The amazing thing is that this disparate bunch end up saying pretty much the same thing to Progoff. "I am not so original," he says. "I am a synthesizer."

A Thomist philosopher would explain the process, in part, by citing the notions of Aristotle and Aquinas on potency and act, final and efficient causality. You plant an acorn and you get an oak. You plant a tomato seed and get a tomato plant. But what do you get when you plant a human seed? Nothing so identical as oaks to oaks or tomatoes to tomatoes. In what direction does a human life go? Says Progoff: "We're limited, in part, by our own culture. Gautama Buddha couldn't become a Francis of Assisi. But aside from that, we all have free will. We can become pretty much what we want to."

Dialogue House Associates

Headquarters for the *Intensive Journal* Program

23400 Mercantile Rd - Suite 2, Beachwood, OH 44122-5948

216-342-5170 / 800-221-5844 FAX: 216-342-5168

info@intensivejournal.org www.intensivejournal.org