



# *Speaking and Listening: Entering Into Dialogue With Your Life*

*by Carolyn Kelley Williams*

“If we can bring this unique way of expression to awareness and live in harmony with it, we will experience the dynamic flow of life-energies, the integration of disparities, and the sense of inner direction and authenticity that Campbell would call our bliss.”

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“Follow your bliss,” is the now-famous answer to a question we ask with frustrations and times of feeling stalled in our lives, even when we’re too busy to ask it consciously: How can I live the life I was meant to live? And most of us have no difficulty attributing the quote about following your bliss to Joseph Campbell.

“Enter into dialogue with your life; ask your life what it is seeking to become.” The name Ira Progoff may not spring immediately to your mind as the source of the second quote, but if you discover Progoff’s work, you will discover a simple but powerful journal-writing method that will indeed allow you to enter into dialogue with your life; you will have a means of speaking and listening as you evoke answers from your life about what it is seeking to become.

Campbell and Progoff both suggest that each of us comes into the world with a unique way inherent within us to express our gifts and potentials through our works and relationships. If we can bring this unique way of expression to awareness and live in harmony with it, we will experience the dynamic flow of life-energies, the integration of disparities, and the sense of inner direction and authenticity that Campbell would call our bliss.

This concept of the person implies that something in us knows more than we consciously realize about what we should be doing, and is, in a way, separate from the self that thinks it’s running things, has goals, and is defined by the expectations of family and friends, teachers, society, and by our experience. This other aspect of the self knows where and what our bliss is, but is hidden from our conscious minds. It leaves clues, however, if only we pay attention to them: yearnings, dreams, the body’s wisdom, strange appetites and inexplicable fascinations with a place, a painting, a film, a person, a period in history, even a resistance to work imposed upon us by circumstances.

But paying attention to the clues, working with our dreams, following the lead of our intuition, understanding the necessity of our mis-steps and wrong turns, our stalls and confusions and losses, hearing the body’s wisdom—or

even thinking of the body as a source of wisdom, is daunting. How do we find the time and the quiet for such listening? How do we find the wisdom for such understanding? How do we hold on to images as ephemeral as smoke?

Campbell didn't spell out a specific, step-by-step program for discovering what your life is seeking to become, but Progoff did. Ira Progoff created a practical elegant method to enter into dialogue with your life and gain access to its wisdom, to understand the meaning of its symbolic language, and to form an ongoing relationship with it in which you not only speak to it of your conscious plans and desires, but you listen to its goals and intentions for you; you invite it to speak to you of its inherent possibilities. Campbell called Progoff's method "one of the great inventions of our time." Who is Ira Progoff and what is his method? A colleague, friend, and neighbor of Campbell's, who lived in New York City's Greenwich Village, Dr. Ira Progoff is a psychotherapist and scholar whose teachings and writings draw upon the world literature of philosophy, social science, history, psychology, anthropology, art, and myth. Progoff's book, *Jung's Psychology and its Social Meaning* (1953) so interested Dr. C.G. Jung that the world-renowned depth psychologist invited Progoff to Switzerland to study with him as a Bollingen fellow. Progoff also studied with the Zen master D.T. Suzuki, and these two teachers were important influences in the evolution of Progoff's thinking.

In the 1960s, Progoff began to create an integrated method of working with imagery, meditation, and inner process in a structured psychological workbook, which he introduced to groups of people in workshops. He named this way of working in the loose-leaf workbook with colored page dividers the *Intensive Journal™* method. Since 1966, many thousands of people worldwide have attended *Intensive Journal* workshops lasting anywhere from a few hours to a week, but mostly 12-hour weekend retreats, to learn how to work in the 26-some sections of the workbook and subsequently to work on their own.

Progoff believed in the value and importance of entering into dialogue with life that he named the organization administering the workshop program Dialogue House. "The evoking of the person must be done in a very realistic way, drawing forth, truly nurturing, what a person's life is," said Progoff, "When I consider how shall we look for what it is to be a person, I think in terms of dialogue."

Dialogue, for Progoff, can be understood in three ways:

1. as a fundamental way of relating to the world, understanding that everything—persons, businesses, relationships, creative works, social organizations, events, ideas, nations—everything has a beginning, a growth and development, and an ending, that is, a life history; by implication, it can be treated as a person, and we are able to enter into dialogue with it.
2. as a dialogue relationship with our own life, so we speak not only our conscious intentions, but also allow our life to speak out of its deepest nature about the outer expression of its potentials, through our works and relationships, choices and affiliations.
3. as the process of writing dialogue scripts in a specific way, in various sections of the *Intensive Journal* workbook, with persons, works, the body, with events, with society, and with the wisdom figures that put us in touch with our inner sources of knowing.

These dialogue scripts, according to Progoff, are different from many other dialogues because they are written, not from the place of ordinary consciousness where we live our daily lives committed to certain beliefs and convictions, and have the same arguments with existence again and again. "It is not sufficient to do any particular kind of psychological exercise if you do it from the top of your head," Progoff said. "You have to be able to establish an atmosphere when you work, really work, in your life history, so that you work from a level of yourself that is not where your surface consciousness is, but where you can come to a deeper place." This deeper place is a twilight range of

awareness in a meditative atmosphere created by the simple process of attending to your breathing and quieting your conscious mind through the use of certain neutral images, so that the two essential inner persons of the dialogue can speak and listen to one another. This twilight awareness opens into a vast store of understanding, wisdom, deep knowing, surprising insights and intuitions. The technique is easily learned and grows increasingly powerful and effective with use in *Intensive Journal* workshops, which are widely available in the United States and abroad through Dialogue House ([www.intensivejournal.org](http://www.intensivejournal.org)), or after reading Progoff's basic text, *At a Journal Workshop* (available from Dialogue House) where the technique is explained. Anyone who knows the basics of meditation will find it a normal application of that process. The meditation is a mediation between the deeper, twilight level and the conscious level where, looking through your eyelashes, you write the dialogue script.

You begin the dialogue process by writing a brief history of the other person, drawing together the major milestones or markers, which Progoff called "steppingstones", in the life of the person, the work, the body, the event, or the social group with which the dialogue will be done.

For example, writing the steppingstones of a work – any outer activity that has inner meaning – you would, in a few phrases, make a list summarizing how and when the work began, what idea or inspiration or suggestion brought the work into being, what events helped it continue, what difficulties it encountered, what variations and compromises it had to make, whether there were long pauses when the work was at a standstill, what took place during those seemingly silent times, and how the work has proceeded in the recent period. The steppingstones are written in the voice of the work, not in your own voice. The steppingstones of a novel, spoken in the voice of the novel, might be:

I began when a friend suggested to Kelley that she write fiction; Kelley began to protect time to work on me; I amazed her with my fabulous characters and their adventures; as Kelley created me, I created her; when she began writing part three, she realized she needed more wisdom; she stopped writing for more than a year, and I waited; after another two years she was able to finish the first draft; now I am waiting again; Kelley needs to develop me further but is uncertain how to proceed.

Writing the steppingstones in this way allows you to "walk in the other person's shoes," as Progoff put it. Then, in a paragraph or two, you describe and summarize: the present situation of the relationship.

Having taken these steps, you're ready to sit quietly for a few moments, focusing on your breathing and perhaps listening to one of the *Entrance Meditation*™ readings, the readings that Progoff has written for the purpose, so as to establish the atmosphere of depth where realizations and new awareness can come through the dialogue script itself. Oftentimes, the other person in the dialogue may say something you didn't know you knew. You may find yourself saying, "I didn't realize you felt that way." Or the work will tell you the next step you need to take to move it forward and you'll realize with surprise and a surge of new energy that it is exactly right, although you didn't realize it before. Where you were uncertain, you now have a clarity of purpose and direction.

With this dialogue process, Progoff has provided a means of gaining access to our inner resources of wisdom, a place to record and then read back and behold the unfolding of our life, which no one has lived before and so proceeds in its own way. Of course, you can learn from others which roads have led them to disaster, which rocks have dashed their boats to bits, and that's helpful; but as you work in the *Intensive Journal* workbook, your life is able to offer its guidance for your unique journey and to speak its own truths.

Progoff liked to use the metaphor of the seed to describe how potentials wait within us for the time and opportunity to be expressed and lived out in the world. The acorn, if it dreamed, would dream

of the oak tree. In working with the *Intensive Journal* process, you learn to look for life energies and potentials waiting for expression as the oak tree waits in the acorn. You learn to look for those seed potentials not only in your dreams, but also at the crossroads of your life, the decision points where you made a certain decision, perhaps about a career, leaving behind a talent for teaching or writing, for a satisfying relationship or for playing the cello, and you discover how those unlived potentials might find expression and be lived out now, in new ways. You use the sections of the *Intensive Journal* workbook to look at your life from various perspectives, but you always ask, "To what in my life is this drawing my attention?...What is my life asking of me?... What is it seeking to become?"

Coming back to these questions again and again as you work, over time you begin to see patterns in the cycles and seasons, the ebb and flow of energies, and to recognize a purposeful movement, a direction. Your life speaks to you from the pages. And, if you are faithful to the process, it will speak to you of your bliss.

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The following article is adapted from "Speaking and Listening: Entering Into Dialogue With Your Life," by Carolyn Kelley Williams, which was previously published in the Transitions Bookstore Newsletter in 2006. "Intensive Journal" and "Entrance Meditation" are trademarks of Jon Progoff and are used under license by Dialogue House.

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