# Remembrance of things past through writing: Esthetic patterns of knowing in nursing

The writing process offers a valuable medium for informing esthetic knowing in nursing. First, characteristics of esthetic patterns of knowing in nursing are described. Esthetic knowing in world literature is then illustrated through the writings of Proust. Next, composition theories and research are used to identify ways in which writing can shape esthetic knowing. Finally, the author presents implications for the use of writing to foster esthetic patterns of knowing in nursing. Key words: esthetic knowing, qualitative research, writing

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We do not believe in the beauty of life because we do not remember it, but if perchance we smell an old fragrance, we feel elated; likewise we think we no longer love the dead, but this is because we do not remember them; if once again we see an old glove, we dissolve in tears, upheld by a grace or a flower stalk of remembrance.

-Marcel Proust1(p162)

In her classic article on fundamental patterns of knowing in nursing, Carper<sup>2</sup> described how the conceptualization of a field of inquiry determines both the type of knowledge sought and the organization, testing, and application of that knowledge. In the 16 years since the publication of Carper's article, the fundamental patterns of empirical, ethical, personal, and esthetic knowing have been reflected in nursing literature. Exploration of these fundamental

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patterns of knowing has shaped today's conceptualization of nursing, a profession seen by society as increasingly competent and confident, with a sound scientific basis, a strong moral tradition, and a growing understanding of the power of personal knowledge that nurses share in the care of their patients.

Within this conceptualization of nursing, however, esthetic ways of knowing are only dimly reflected. The literature acknowledges the importance of the "art" of nursing, as well as the science, but much more is written about "doing good science" than about seeking new understandings through esthetic ways of knowing. In today's highly technical and complex health care environment, it is important to return to the concept of the esthetic patterns of knowing that inform the art of nursing.

This article proposes that the writing process serves as a unique method for enhancing esthetic ways of knowing in nursing. Esthetic knowing is the "direct, nonmediated perception of significant relationships and wholes rather than separate, discrete parts."3(p77) Research in composition indicates that the process of writing can be a powerful force for evoking details of significant memories.4-6 Writing involves our hand, eye, and brain in sorting through the images of the past to project new images, and new understandings, on paper. As we write and rewrite our unique perceptions of nursing, we refine, revise, and reshape our view of ourselves and our world.4

How, then, can writing be used to foster such esthetic patterns of knowing in nursing? To answer this question, the author discusses characteristics of esthetic patterns of knowing in nursing, illustrates esthetic patterns of knowing in literature through the writings of French writer Marcel Proust, presents theories and research in composition related to use of writing to shape esthetic knowing, and identifies implications for the use of writing to foster esthetic patterns of knowing in nursing.

# ESTHETIC PATTERNS OF KNOWING IN NURSING

Each of the classic ways of knowing outlined by Carper<sup>2,3</sup>—empirical, ethical, personal, and esthetic—has differing purposes and characteristics. Yet each pattern is interrelated and interdependent. Esthetic knowledge is often identified with the art of nursing. It embodies a unique pattern of knowing that offers enrichment to our understanding of nursing experience that is not accessible through other ways of knowing. A definition of esthetics relating it directly to sensation<sup>7</sup> is congruent with Carper's delineation of esthetic knowing as perception, which goes beyond mere recognition, in garnering details and scattered particulars into a synthesized whole. The perceived experience is often specific and unique, rather than exemplary.

Esthetic knowledge often involves a creative, imaginative process of discovery, which includes such actions as engaging, interpreting, and envisioning.8 Although we often couple nursing science with empirical knowledge, it is important to recognize that creative imagination is needed for discovery in science. Characteristics of esthetic knowledge, such as creativity, discovery, fluidity, openness, appreciation, expressivity, and imagination, are critical in nursing science.

The "art-act" is one means of expression of esthetic knowledge.<sup>3,8,9</sup> The art-act of

writing is expressive, rather than merely factual or descriptive. The esthetic experience resists being described in discursive language, but rather finds its own, unique sense of form, structure, and articulation to form a whole. It is a language of experience, perceptions, and sensibilities, characterized by balance, rhythm, articulation, and proportion. Outcomes of esthetic knowledge relate to experiencing a holistic unity of structure, form, and design that transforms actions into unified and meaningful esthetic particulars. The process of writing helps us recapture important subjective experiences in nursing as we reflect intuitively on these experiences, creating insights and interpretations that promote esthetic ways of knowing.8

Carper<sup>2</sup> noted that perhaps a self-conscious reluctance has hindered nursing from extending the term "knowledge" to those aspects of knowing that are not the result of empirical investigation. Also, the elusive character of esthetic knowledge has made its study difficult for nurses. Yet this pattern of knowing offers a bridge to experiences long extant in nursing traditions. To gain a clearer perspective of the power of esthetic knowing, an exploration of its application in world literature is valuable.

# ESTHETIC PATTERNS OF KNOWING IN LITERATURE

Important characteristics of esthetic patterns of knowing are found in world literature. Master storytellers invite us to experience with them the creation and appreciation of particular, unique expressions of imagined possibilities. Literature does not merely describe, it expresses, so that our subjective acquaintance with the text provides us with the direct feeling of experience.

Marcel Proust, one of the greatest novelists of the 20th century, exemplifies the beauty and power of esthetic ways of knowing in his seven-volume work Remembrance of Things Past, 10 which reflects "that invisible substance called time."11(p684) Proust, the son of a distinguished physician, searched for knowledge not in science, but in art. During the 14 years when he created his work of art, he struggled with how to retrieve experiences embedded in time: "Every day I attach less and less importance to the intellect. Every day I realize more that it is only by other means that a writer can regain something of our impressions, reach, that is, a particle of himself, the only material of art. What the intellect restores to us under the name of the past is not the past."11(p688)

For Proust, the past embodied a world of involuntary memory that welled up from the self in a force beyond his understanding.<sup>12</sup> In a famous passage from *Remembrance of Things Past*, we experience how the simple act of dipping a piece of cake (tea biscuit, or *madeleine*) in a cup of tea awakens the narrator's senses, providing a bridge between the past and the present and allowing him to recapture the world of his childhood:

Mechanically, weary after a dull day with the prospect of a depressing morrow, I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of cake. No sooner had the warm liquid, and the crumbs with it, touched my palate than a shudder ran through my whole body, and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary changes that were taking place. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, but individual, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indiffer-

ent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory—this new sensation having had the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me, it was myself. I had ceased now to feel mediocre, accidental, moral. Whence could it have come to me, this all-powerful joy?... In that moment all the flowers in our garden and in M. Swann's park, and the water lilies on the Vivonne and the good folk of the village and their little dwellings and the parish church... taking their proper shapes and growing solid sprang into being, town and gardens alike, from my cup of tea. 11(pp688-689)

This experience was a revelation for Proust; the sudden manifestation of meaning revealed to him the depths of the self, a meaning he then used to recreate a world inaccessible to the conscious intellect. Proust believed that there is a certain distance between authors and their subject matter, a distance that must be bridged by memory, reflection, and understanding. This realization implies the need for a type of knowledge that cannot be gained through objective observation or analytical thinking.

In a poignant passage of Remembrance of Things Past, the narrator illustrates again how an everyday experience involving the senses can serve as a bridge between memory and understanding. The death of the narrator's grandmother had not, up to this time, greatly disturbed the conduct of his life, which was focused more on romantic distractions. But one night the narrator

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feels vaguely ill, and as he bends down to unbutton his boots, he is suddenly shaken with a violent realization:

But no sooner had I touched the topmost button than my heart swelled, filled with an unknown, a divine presence. I shook with sobs; tears streamed from my eyes.... I had just perceived in my memory, bending over my weariness, the tender, preoccupied, sad face of my grandmother... of whom... I now recaptured, in an involuntary act of recollection, the living reality. 13(p237)

This was not a mystical experience, for we are not led to believe that the grandmother is alive with the narrator in the room. For Proust, the "living reality" is the realization of the finality of the grandmother's death, the knowledge of her total absence.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the experience yields a new self-knowledge.

For Proust, esthetic knowing conveyed a specific kind of truth:

An hour is not merely an hour. It is a vase filled with perfumes, sounds, plans and climates. What we call reality is a certain relationship between these sensations and the memories which surround us at the same time. . . . Truth will begin only when the writer . . . establishes their relationship . . . and encloses them in the necessary rings of a beautiful style. 15(p63)

It is this unique self-knowledge gained from the esthetic experience that Proust describes so vividly. He used art to recapture Time through his writing by allowing experience to flow through involuntary memory. Proustian understandings come not from objective observations, suggestions, or descriptions, but from rediscovery of significant experiences. Proust found this inward knowledge not through concentrated effort, but through the esthetic sensibility of discernment. Thus, Proust beautifully ex-

emplifies the power of esthetic knowledge that arises from reflection, helping us to recapture a taste for the understanding that comes from remembrance of things past.

# SHAPING ESTHETIC KNOWING IN NURSING THROUGH WRITING

A stylist such as Proust illustrates the esthetic nature of writing itself, where the beauty of the work is in and between the words. For those of us lacking this genius of expression, however, the writing process still relates closely to esthetic knowing, since that process is closely fused with reflection.<sup>17</sup> Writing can serve as a "Proustian trigger" to evoke memories that lead to new understandings: As the madeleine for Proust awakened his senses to remembrances from a forgotten world, the writing process can serve to evoke for us discoveries lying dormant in our nursing traditions. The writer moves back and forth between reflection and writing, writing and reflection, reshaping initial ideas into new meanings that may surprise even the writer.18 It is this sense of discovery, facilitated by the writing process, that is important in esthetic knowing.

## Research and theories in composition

A comprehensive review of research on composition indicates that for many years, the primary focus was on the written product, rather than the writing process. 19,20 In the late 1960s, researchers in composition began to analyze what occurs when writers write and to formulate theories of the writing process to explain how writing informs thinking. 21,22 This focus on the process of writing has led to new understandings about how writing may enhance discovery of knowledge.

In a classic study integrating research from biology and physiology, Emig<sup>23</sup> theorized that the writing process involves a cycle of reinforcement and feedback between the hand, eye, and brain. As the writer, pen in hand, reflects and writes, a recursive process begins between the hand, eye, and brain that helps to connect experiences of the past, present, and future to create meaning. The hand, whether with pencil, pen, typewriter, or word processor, is an integral part of the act of writing. It serves to move the writer from a passive, inactive state to an active engagement with reflection and writing. The eye presents images to the brain in a particular form and sequence, both before and during writing and in revision of writing. Finally, the brain integrates important components of the writing process, such as perception, motor ability, linguistic competence, and cognition. Specialized functions and interdependence of the two brain hemispheres appear to allow us to structure parts of a whole, even if the whole does not yet exist.5

Rico<sup>5</sup> described the writing process as involving specific components: clusters of nucleus words, internal pattern awareness, and a trial web. The trial web forms a design or perception of pattern and meaning in the writing. The cluster of words is in the external world, accessible to the senses, but the process of pattern awareness occurs in the right hemisphere, inaccessible to the logic of the left hemisphere. As one writes and revises, the trial web metamorphoses into new shapes with increasingly sharp detail. It is this recursive process integrating hand, eye, and brain and moving between trial web, writing, and revision that helps elaborate the relationship between language and thought that leads to discovery.

# **Expressive and poetic writing**

Writing can serve as a Proustian trigger for esthetic knowing, but do all types of writing serve this function equally? Writing can be classified into three types: transactional, expressive, and poetic.24 Transactional writing uses clear, conventional, concise prose to inform, persuade, or instruct an audience. Most writing in school and work is of this type. Expressive writing is self-expressive or close to the self. This type of writing reveals the speaker, gives voice to the writer's thoughts, and is often written to oneself, such as in diaries and journals, or in personal letters. Poetic writing, often referred to as creative writing, functions as art. Works of the imagination such as fiction, poetry, drama, and song are examples of poetic writing.

Transactional writing is constrained by specific content and form and often promotes closure rather than exploration and discovery. Proust indicated this in the following passage:

The literature that is satisfied merely to "describe things," to furnish a miserable listing of their lines and surfaces, is, notwithstanding its pretensions to realism, the farthest removed from reality, the one that most impoverishes and saddens us, even though it speak of nought but glory and greatness, for it sharply cuts off all communication of our present self with the past, the essence of which the objects preserve, and with the future, in which they stimulate us to enjoy the past again. 15(p59)

To use writing as a bridge to esthetic knowing, it is not transactional writing, but expressive and poetic writing, that offers unique possibilities. Britton et al<sup>25</sup> believed that expressive writing is closest to "inner speech" and the thinking process itself, a

way to try out and come to terms with new ideas. Heidegger<sup>26</sup> viewed poetry as the highest form of thinking.

Both expressive writing and poetry are effective in relation to esthetic patterns of knowing, for they both move the writer toward reflection and an openness to sensibilities. As we write, we are affected by the smells, sounds, and tastes of the past, so that we shape our writing with the rhythms and images that belonged to those events.27 This type of writing can provide a bridge between our past and our consciousness. Writing about memories, examining and reexamining the meaning of life events, can release powers of the mind to imagine new possibilities.4 A variety of forms of expressive writing and poetry can be used to foster esthetic patterns of knowing in nursing, including narratives, journals, letters, fiction, and poetry.

## Written narratives

Proust used narratives to shape esthetic knowing through his remembrance of things past. In nursing and in other disciplines, narratives are receiving increasing emphasis as a mode of inquiry for reflections on experiences past. <sup>28-34</sup> The phenomenologic approach to interviewing, in which participants are asked to relate a critical incident in their lives or an exemplar from their nursing practice, can call forth profound experiences. <sup>28,35</sup> In fact, without narratives we can-

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not articulate and understand ourselves.<sup>36</sup> These stories, often from the distant past, seem to flow from the individual with unexpected emotion and are rich with contextual details.

Although most nursing literature discusses the oral narrative, use of the written narrative offers a unique bridge for reflections on the past. The writing of narratives is not merely a literary method to make a text more dramatic or interesting; the narratives themselves are examples of practical theorizing, and they function as experiential cases for reflection. A written narrative of nursing experience creates a hybrid textual form that combines the power of philosophic inquiry with the power of literary or poetic language, helping us particularize "the abstracting tendency of theoretical discourse,"17(p121) pulling us in to reflect on meanings embedded in concrete experience.

## **Journals**

The personal nature of journal writing offers a rich resource for esthetic knowing as the writer recaptures and shapes past experiences through reflection. Phenomenologists such as Husserl and Heidegger informed their phenomenologic understanding of time through the journal entries of Saint Augustine.17 Journals may be used by nurse clinicians, educators, and researchers to think aloud on paper about exemplars from their practice, aspects of teaching, or ideas for inquiry in research. An interesting aspect of journal writing by students is that the personal nature of the journal precludes the need for teacher review and critique, thus stimulating creative thinking for students without increasing the "paper load" on faculty. This author found that when students were assigned to write at least three times each week in a journal, but were not required to submit the writing for faculty review, they rated the assignment as an extremely valuable esthetic experience, commenting that they enjoyed "having permission" to be creative.

#### Letters

As one reads Proust's letters, as well as letters from such famous people as Benjamin Franklin or Charles Darwin, the esthetic power of letters is evident. Letters written to friends, family, or hypothetical audiences can be used to foster esthetic knowing in nursing. For example, writing to a nurse from the 19th century stimulates the writer to imagine the sights and sounds of nursing in that era. Writing to a hypothetical patient about coping with a chronic illness may help a nursing student vicariously experience the patient's illness experience. This helps to capture the sense of empathy that Carper<sup>2</sup> identified as an important mode of esthetic knowing.

#### **Fiction**

Sandelowski<sup>34</sup> pointed out that the distinction between truth and fiction is artificial in that life narratives may change from one telling to another. Empirical validation of "truth" makes no sense in esthetic knowing. Rather than truth, the writer (or reader) searches for meaning or understanding in the written experience. Thus, fiction is an exciting writing form for nurses to explore. Melosh<sup>37</sup> noted that nurses have overlooked revelations contained in fiction about nurses and have been too ready to view their reflection in literature through a tarnished mirror. She suggested that by approaching the nurse in fiction as a metaphorical statement, rather than a less-than-accurate replica, we can use the lens of fiction to refract and transform our images of the profession.

## Poetry

Most of us readily classify ourselves as novices in writing poetry. Yet the esthetic pleasures and insights that can come from writing and reading poetry offer unexplored paths of knowing for nurses. This author found that nursing students who were asked to write short poems and read them to each other were amazed at the beauty and insight of the writing. Should any of us doubt our ability to seek this special way of knowing, Keats has an answer for us:

Who alive can say, "Thou are no Poet—may'st not tell thy dreams"? Since every man whose soul is not a clod Hath visions, and would speak, if he had lov'd, And been well nurtured in his mother tongue.

-John Keats<sup>38(p227)</sup>

# Example of expressive writing

To illustrate the value of expressive writing in enhancing esthetic knowing in nursing, one narrative is provided here, written by a young nurse after reflecting on an important incident from her nursing practice:

Crystal, at 8 years, had suffered from the effects of neuroblastoma for several years. The tumor had left her paralyzed from the neck down. Before her illness, Crystal was a high-spirited little girl who loved to dance, run, and jump, although I only had the opportunity to see the way she danced in her eyes; they were a most powerful pair of dark black eyes.

She was admitted to our pediatric unit with a life expectancy of only a couple of weeks. In essence, her body was dead, although her spirit was stronger than I had ever seen in anybody. She did not express a fear of dying; we talked about heaven and how she would not feel any more pain.

I became very close to Crystal and her mother. Crystal's pain had become excruciating, and it was painful for all of us to watch her suffer. I could tell that Crystal was ready to die, but for some reason she was hanging on. One night I sensed something different as Crystal's mother and I talked. "Why does she have to suffer like this for so long?" she asked. It had become clear to me long before that Crystal needed to know her mother would be ox when she died, but Crystal's mother had not been ready. That night I sat on the bedside with Crystal's mother for over an hour. After sitting with her, I said softly, "Have you given Crystal permission to go to heaven?" She gave me a look of knowing. We cried together and then she asked me if I would stay in the room with her when she talked to Crystal. I'll never forget her powerful words. "You're going to see a light soon, and I want you to run toward the light as fast as you can. I want you to go; you'll hear my voice pushing you toward the light. There you will be in heaven, and you will finally be dancing and running and jumpina."

Crystal died peacefully a few hours later. Her mom turned to me and said, "How did you know?"

In reflecting on this experience, I realize that I have grown to know the familiarity in this phenomenon where children hang on until their parents are ready, and I have helped many families go through the experience. I still am not sure "how I know," because timing in these situations is of the essence. I just know.

This narrative reflects a special knowing that is not from the intellect but from the senses. The esthetic quality of this nurse's knowing is evident in the way she has integrated her perceptions of the experience, gathering scattered details into a whole, helping the reader experience with the writer the power of esthetic knowing. Some of the most profound esthetic experiences of nurses—witnessing a birth, comforting a sufferer, giving courage to someone dying—can never be known through the limitations imposed by "scientific" inquiry and transactional writing.

# Esthetic knowing through writing in qualitative nursing research

In qualitative research, the interrelationship between writing and reflection is powerful. For scholars such as Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty, the activities of researching and reflecting, reading and writing were indistinguishable.<sup>17</sup> Phenomenologic nursing research is an example of one type of qualitative research in which the process of writing serves an integral role. For a phenomenologic researcher, writing itself is inquiry. The writing process involves researchers in a reflection and thoughtfulness that shape the way they listen as the things of the world speak to them.

This attentiveness to conveying research interpretations through writing requires a sensitivity to subtle undertones of language, to the way language speaks when it allows the experiences themselves to speak. The style, as well as the content, of written descriptions of qualitative nursing studies is critical to understanding meanings embedded in the research. Use of stylistic devices such as the metaphor and attention to the influence of silence in the writing can help to capture sometimes vague, disconnected perceptions of human experience and transform them into coherent wholes. The metaphor offers a unique form of language for creating meaning in the qualitative research text, as its rhetorical form helps to convey

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shadowy ideas that are difficult to describe.<sup>17</sup> The metaphor is a medium for perception and understanding—a unique Proustian trigger that helps us crystalize shadows of the past.

Silence is also an integral aspect of the composition of a qualitative research description. Van Manen<sup>17</sup> noted that silence is not merely the absence of language, but rather is the truth that lies just beyond the words, on the other side of language. Through writing and rewriting, the researcher attempts to create a quality in the writing that leaves certain meanings unsaid, so that the silence of spaces may create a meaning that transcends words.

# USING WRITING TO FOSTER ESTHETIC PATTERNS OF KNOWING IN NURSING

It only requires a moment of reflection to realize that most writing of nurse clinicians, educators, and researchers is of the transactional state. Research by Britton et al25 found that expressive writing accounted for only 6% of writing by children in British schools, and poetic writing accounted for only 18% of the sample; there was little evidence of expressive and poetic writing outside of English classes. Most of us, no doubt, have had a similar lack of exposure to these types of writing both as children and adults, and expressive and poetic writing are not integral parts of our professional lives. Yet the potential for using these types of writing for fostering esthetic patterns of knowing in nursing needs to be explored.

Van Manen stated that "to write is to measure our thoughtfulness."<sup>39(p238)</sup> His description of five characteristics of the writing process illustrates how writing can exercise

our ability to "see" esthetic patterns in our experiences:

- Writing tends to separate us from what we know at the same time that it unites us more closely with what we know, helping us to measure the depth of our experiences.
- Writing distances us from lived experiences while allowing us to discover subjective experiences through reflection.
- 3. Writing tends to move us away from particulars of a context toward a more universal sphere as the written text assumes a life of its own.
- 4. Writing helps us abstract from an experience we try to describe, while at the same time helping to concretize our understanding of the world.
- 5. Writing objectifies thought into print and subjectifies our understanding of a phenomenon that engages us.

The process of expressive and poetic writing, through reflection, gives shape to shadowy past experiences, creating a written product that transforms those experiences into new configurations. To foster this form of thoughtfulness in nursing, the following strategies are suggested:

- Expressive and poetic writing should be incorporated into nursing curricula to stimulate esthetic inquiry.
- The reflective nature of the writing

- process, such as writing one's "memories" in a research journal, can serve as a bridge to new inquiries and understandings of nursing traditions.
- Interdisciplinary approaches to esthetic knowing can be explored through writing in an effort to identify common understandings between health professionals.
- Esthetic patterns of knowing should be integrated with empirical, ethical, and personal patterns of knowing in nursing research.
- Stylistic aspects of language, such as metaphor and poetry, can be explored to evoke thought and enhance meaning in textual representation of qualitative research.

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The desire to build a strong scientific knowledgebase for nursing should not obscure the more elusive esthetic underpinnings. The writing process offers a valuable medium for esthetic knowing, as the hand, eye, and brain together create meaning: "For most writers the act of putting words on paper is not the recording of discovery, but the very act of exploration itself." As we continue to explore esthetic patterns of knowing in nursing, writing serves as a unique bridge to remembrance of things past.

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