

When being professional means becoming myself: towards integrity and presence in practice

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*The true professional is one
who does not obscure grace
with illusions of technical prowess,
the true professional is one
who strips away all illusions to reveal*

*a reliable truth
a reliable truth in which
the human heart can rest.*

Margaret Wheatley
The True Professional
(2009)

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to elaborate the inner qualities of integrity and presence in professional practice. It is offered as a contribution to the growing body of literature that shifts the emphasis in professional development from the transfer of skills and knowledge to the transformation of practice. Professional education has been viewed as the acquisition of the knowledge and skills required to address the presenting problems of daily practice. It has been assumed that the answers to these problems can be identified, codified and passed on to others, resulting in a kind of professionalism by protocol. But, as Dreyfus & Dreyfus (2005) have pointed out, there is a qualitative shift in the practice of experts when compared to novices and beginners. The expert evidences a deliberative skill that does not rely on the application of protocols but on extensive case by case experience. Indeed professionalism may be understood as the quality of practice that is evident at the very moment when protocols no longer apply (Coles 2002).

Professional practice is not a simple concept as Kemmis (2006) has shown. The thesis contributes to this field by suggesting that professionalism is acquired through prolonged inquiry into the contingencies of quotidian practice and that this shapes the inner qualities the practitioner brings to their practice. It is offered as a first person inquiry (Reason 2001) that probes fractals of my own professional practice over a five year period. In telling my personal story, I give an account of an emergent methodology that engages with action research and narrative inquiry. A narrative mode of knowing (Bruner 1986) notices the complex, many sided and sometimes conflicting stories of professional life resulting, not in a set of propositional claims, but in an account that provides the reader with the imaginal space to enter the process and participate, with me, in making sense of professional practice.

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To Wanda, wife, musician, and homemaker. This has been our shared performance. Without her patient encouragement and support this journey could not have been undertaken, and certainly not completed. She has often said she has played second fiddle to a book. Now that the "book" has been written, perhaps I can give her more of my attention.

This story finds its unexpected climax in death. And yet, even in death there is the promise of new beginnings, particularly in the birth of our first grandchild, Ava Grace, whose arrival blessed the closing stages of this journey.