Invited Guest Editorial:

Nursing as Interpretation

Graham McCaffrey

The two papers that correspond to this editorial were written by graduate students in a hermeneutic research class in the Faculty of Nursing at the University of Calgary. The class is one locus of the account of applied hermeneutics that has developed through the Canadian Hermeneutic Institute, the Journal of Applied Hermeneutics, and the book *Conducting hermeneutic research: From philosophy to practice* (Moules, McCaffrey, Field & Laing, 2015). The course is open to both master's and doctoral students and is interdisciplinary, attracting students mainly from nursing, education, and counselling psychology, and occasionally from other disciplines including sociology, kinesiology, social work, and engineering. We teach about the philosophical background of hermeneutics, with a focus on Gadamer, and then how concepts can be applied to the conduct of research. What brings the course to life, however, is the range of backgrounds and interests of the students that invariably create a culture of stimulating discussion as they – and the instructors – discover new ideas about their own interests through the encounters with cross cutting themes arriving from unexpected places.

The first assignment given to students is to write a paper on the topic of, **"**Nursing…counselling psychology … education… is an interpretive practice," which is intended to help students to start putting together hermeneutic philosophy with their lived experience of, and expertise in, the practice of their own discipline and profession. The following two papers were both written in response to the question, by students in the Master of Nursing program at the University of Calgary. Both lead authors are nurses working in practice, and so each of them is intimately involved in a highly localized world of professional knowledge and application, as is evident from their writing. The settings are quite different, mental health outreach nursing for Whitney

Corresponding Author:
Graham McCaffrey, RN, PhD
Email: gpmccaff@ucalgary.ca

Turcato and neonatal transport nursing for Jaime Caswell, yet they each succeed in showing the deeply interpretive nature of their work. If there is one concept that most comes to mind to me in reading their papers, it is *phronesis* or practical wisdom. Each author presents a phenomenological description of an event in practice, capturing thought processes, actions, and the dynamic network of relationships in which practice is formed. These are not only descriptions of *phronesis*, but reports from inside events of *phronesis*, that vividly convey the nuanced and rapid way expert judgments of subtle human interactions come about in combination with the precise, and therapeutic application of technical knowledge.

Whitney Turcato's paper begins with a nurse being woken by a call from a client in the small hours. What happens next is a dialogue in which, as she goes on to explain, she already knows a good deal about the person on the end of the line and is able to interpret his words and formulate her own in the light of that knowledge. Possibilities for hermeneutic work present themselves immediately, in dialogue as the means of understanding, in language freighted with meanings beyond and beneath the overt definitions of words, and in the question of reception raised by the irruption of the other into the nurse's night. Gadamer, Kearney, and Caputo, to name but three, are ready and waiting to provide ways into understanding what goes in the exchange. One of the aspects of the paper that struck me most forcefully on first reading, and on subsequent readings, is the use of humour. It is a good portrayal of the humour that passes between mental health nurses, as I know from my own practice, smoothly incorporated into the style of the narrative sections of the paper. The humour has something of the absurd, of laughing at human folly but not at any particular person; it has a bonding function between the nurses, and is underwritten by care and sensitivity towards the situation of the client. Humour in mental health nursing is one of many potential theses that are seeded in the paper – if I were to continue along that path, I would start with Gadamer's discussion of play, then maybe read some Beckett…

Jaime Caswell demonstrates a similar gift for the phenomenological narrative. She takes the reader quickly into a working day in her lifeworld as a neonatal transport nurse. Sections of her paper read as good nursing drama, giving out just enough information to the uninitiated to follow the action without slowing it down. Within and beyond her narrative, there emerge problems embedded in everyday practices: the question of how to balance scientific knowledge and sensitivity to parents' powerful feelings, the diplomacy of being the big city nurse in a smaller centre, all of this perceived, considered, and acted upon against the clock. Towards the end of the paper, Jaime shows us the image of the nurse handing the baby to the mother, and deftly plays with the literal and metaphorical senses of "handing over." With this sensitivity to words, she introduces a mobilizing image, which again might be the seed of a potential thesis. In class, following Jaime discussing this image, we found ourselves echoing the idea of handing-over in different contexts, involuntarily using the gesture of hands together, palms raised, offering up and passing on. Thus, ideas are passed from practice to practice, person to person, and our horizons of understanding ripple and shift as new possibilities come into view. The purpose of the assignment is simply to have students reflect on their own area of practice, and to begin to explore the interpretability of the familiar. These two papers are fine examples of practitioners discovering for themselves, and for us as readers, the proliferative meanings hidden in everyday practices.

References

Moules, N.J., McCaffrey, G., Field, J.C., & Laing, C.M. (2015). *Conducting hermeneutic research: From philosophy to practice*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.