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INVITED REFLECTION

Searching for the Divine: An Autoethnographic Account of Religious/Spiritual and Academic Influences on the Journey to Professor¹

E. James Baesler

Abstract: This autoethnographic account chronicles my academic and religious/spiritual path to becoming a professor of Communication. Spiritual influences and significant life events related to prayer, education, teaching, and research serve as sign posts marking the way. The journey begins with a child scientist experimenting with life—and an adolescent discovering the joy of reading through an illness. The journey continues with a crisis in undergraduate years followed by indoctrination stories of graduate school. Securing and retaining an academic position in Communication reveals the complexities of negotiating research and teaching in higher education. After tenure and promotion, a concurrent spiritual awakening begins a two decade “prayer research journey.” Finally, the journey continues with the most recent transition, moving from a social science research orientation to a new methodological orientation toward scholarship called autoethnography. Questions for meditation and reflection periodically punctuate the journey as a way to engage with the reader and facilitate reflection for life praxis.

Keywords: *professor, communication, spirituality, prayer, research, teaching, autoethnography, social science*

Orienting Toward the Journey to Professor

Where does the motivation to become a professor come from? And, how is the search for the divine part of that journey? I would like to address these questions by narrating several stories that point to three cardinal directions: past, present, and future. I also pose questions to engage the reader in their own academic-life journey. In looking to the *past*, I have come to understand that the path of ordinary everyday life contains hidden treasures that the lens of memory helps us identify and harvest in the movement backward through time (O’Donohue, 1998). From where I *presently* stand, my eyes and ears are captivated by the SONG of life,² especially the beauty and wonder of my students (Palmer, 1998) and the creativity and hardships of scholarship. When I look to the *future*, I envision a path of possibilities that, with grace and courage, I follow for as long as God gives me the strength to travel (Merton, 1961). My prayer for you, whether

¹ This paper is based on two sources, both presented at the meeting of the *Religious Communication Association* at Las Vegas, NV in November, 2015: (1) a paper entitled, *Searching for the Divine: One Professor’s Journey*, and (2) a keynote address entitled, *Discerning and Enacting the Work of the Spirit*.

² SONG is an acronym I developed for teaching a course in listening called “Listening to the SONG of life.” The letters in the acronym SONG stand for the words self, others, nature, and God (or more broadly, the divine). See Baesler (2015a) for complete description.

E. James Baesler, Ph.D., is Full Professor of Communication in the Department of Communication and Theatre Arts at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia. He earned his B.A. (1983) and M.A. from San Jose State University (1985), and Ph.D. (1991) from University of Arizona. His research spans from nonverbal communication and social influence to religious and spiritual communication over a 30 year period. More recent work includes several autoethnographies on teaching/learning listening, peace, and research methods. His published work includes *Theoretical Explorations and Empirical Investigations of Communication and Prayer*, and scholarly articles in a variety of academic journals.

a professor, instructor, and/or student, is that you are able to resonate with some of the moments along my journey to becoming a professor; and, more importantly, that you take time to consider the past, present, and future trajectory of your own academic-life journey. As you travel along the journey with me, I offer periodic questions for meditation and prayer in the hopes that these resting places might be ones of insight and potential growth. So let us begin to walk the path together, starting with a story that happened 48 years ago.

A Penchant for Experimenting

The year is 1967; the place is Sunnyvale, California; the setting is Sister Barbra Jean's second grade classroom. I face a small group of classmates and struggle to read aloud a short story about a "scientist." I do not recall any of the details of that story, but I do remember the fascination I felt with the idea of the word "scientist." About a week later, I am re-telling the story of the scientist to my elder cousin "Tiger" who says, "Jimmy...YOU are a scientist!" That simple declaration validated my identity as a budding scientist. Looking back to childhood, I see myself as a scientist experimenting with all kinds of things: chemical, electrical, mechanical, and social. Three snippets illustrate this penchant for experimenting as a youngster: gathering items from Dad's garage shelf to build a spaceship, digging a tunnel leading to my underground laboratory, and trying to hypnotize my sister to be nice to me. There are other stories of people that called forth more than the scientist in me during these early years. There are elders and mentors that called forth the teacher, the writer, and the caretaker. These grace filled affirmations can become moments when we recognize the divine spirit speaking through other people to call forth our gifts and talents, bringing out the best in us for the service of humanity.

Can you recall the context, and perhaps the words, of a time when a teacher, coach, parent, relative, neighbor, friend, or stranger affirmed something positive within you?

How did this calling forth of something good within you influence your life, and the lives of others?

The Unexpected Gift of a Childhood Illness

My growing scientific curiosity to experiment with life often bumped up against the rigid structure of the Catholic grade school that I attended during the late 1960's. My grades were only average and I did not like school or find any joy in learning. That all changed in seventh grade when I contracted *mononucleosis* (the kissing disease). I remember uncontrollable coughing spells, falling to the ground hacking. Doctor ordered no school for three months, lots of rest, and no running around. To give me something to do besides homework, Mom purchased three paperback books from *Payless* department store for me to read during my convalescence: Ryback's (1971) *The High Adventure of Eric Ryback* (an 18 year olds solo backpacking journey from Canada to Mexico), Seton's (1901) *Lives of the Hunted* (a fictional account of the lives of personified animals), and Von Daniken's (1974) *Chariots of the Gods Unsolved Mysteries* (an introduction to theories and evidence related to extra-terrestrials). These books radically altered the trajectory of my life. Ryback (1971) taught me about journeying, perseverance, hardship, and setting goals. His backpacking journey paralleled my academic journey in many ways. Seton affirmed my enjoyment of nature and connection with animals which only recently became part of the content of a listening course that I teach. Von Daniken (1974) introduced me to ancient civilizations, a global perspective, and the possibility of relating

to non-human beings which led me on a personal quest to seek the divine. Even more important than the inspiration and direction that these particular books provided is the unexpected gift of that illness. Reading opened the door to knowledge...to exploring and experimenting in landscapes outside of school. Reading and responding to ideas in books introduced me to many teachers that continue to provoke my curiosity, empower me to envision and create, and invigorate and sustain my academic life.³ I sometimes wonder how life would be different if Mom did not give that sick kid three paperback books.

When you reflect on your early schooling, what were your attitudes toward reading and learning?

Were there particular books that held special significance for your identity?

Can you recall a childhood illness that marked your life in a positive way?

Dropping In and Dropping Out of College

Neither mom nor dad had been to college at the time I graduated high school in 1978. They were simple, tough, hard-working Dakotans. Mom raised on a farm, and dad raised in a one street brick-making town a few miles away. I was the first in my family to attend college so I did not receive much guidance when I signed up for my first semester of classes at San Jose State University in California. I commuted an hour and a half by bus to the urban university where, for my first semester, I took a five-credit course in analytic geometry and calculus at 7:30 in the morning five days a week, introduction to philosophy, and beginning boxing. I passed math because I was good at memorizing and copying, but I had no passion for it. I enjoyed Plato's *Republic* (Cornford, 1951), but I could not see how I would make a living philosophizing. And the beginning boxing class turned out to be a training camp for college wrestlers run by a former Marine drill instructor. I felt lost in college, so I sought the counsel of my father who encouraged me to major in business. After a year and a half of slugging through accounting, computer programming, business law, and marketing, I dropped out of school. I felt like I was becoming something that was not the "real me." I became clinically depressed, received counseling, and worked at a temporary job agency driving cars for *Avis*, moving furniture at *IBM*, unboxing misaligned labels at a soap factory, and throwing plastic bags filled with hypodermic needles and bloodied bandages into *Good Samaritan's* hospital's furnace. If these part time jobs represent the nonacademic life of the real world, I wanted to go back to school.

Return to College

During those early turbulent college years, I was concurrently searching for the divine. I attended a young adult group affiliated with a Jesuit parish, and when I became leader of that group, I embarked on a cross country road trip with Sister Beverly Dunn to attend a week-long retreat for young adult leaders at a Benedictine monastery in Wisconsin. Here I received inspiration and confirmation to pursue my dream of young adult ministry. Since there was no prescribed educational path for young adult ministers at the

³ I developed a habit over the years of recording the title and author of a book, along with a brief note of why I want to read the book, on index cards. These cards are placed in a shoebox during the school year. In early May, I review these index cards and choose the top 10 books. I order these books two weeks before the spring semester ends, and then enjoy my love for reading all summer. I developed this system for economic reasons. I could easily overspend my book budget if I bought books whenever the impulse moved me. I also use this system for practical reasons. I cannot read everything I want to. This system encourages me to intentionally choose, to discern wheat from chaff, and to read what my heart needs to hear.

time, Grace McGinnis, a social worker and activist, advised me to seek a humanities-based Bachelor's degree, and then obtain a "Marriage and Family Life" Master's degree to establish my credentials as a young adult minister. I took the advice, but I could not find a Bachelor's degree that encompassed the kinds of humanities courses I was interested in. Consequently, I developed an innovative undergraduate degree (in the student handbook, the ability to create your own degree was ambiguously described in a small paragraph entitled, "Special Major") called "Human Relations and Communication Studies" which included a diverse array of courses like: Existentialism, Death, Dying, and Religion, Sociology of the Family, Psychology of Adolescence, and several Communication courses. My joy for learning returned, partly because I was fulfilling a dream, and partly because the content of the coursework fascinated me. From my Communication professors, I learned the methods of social science, from my Psychology professors I was introduced to topics like personality development, motivation, and aging, from my Sociology professors, I learned about classical theories of social function and structure. One Philosophy professor, Peter Kostenbaum, left a profound impact on my ideas about freedom, anxiety, and death, and one professor in Religious Studies, Richard Keady, a former Trappist monk, left an indelible impression on my views of death, dying, and religion. I am deeply indebted to all of my professors for providing me with an understanding of the social sciences and the humanities. This foundation provided openings for short term work in young adult ministry and my eventual long term career as professor.

Before the final year of my undergraduate education, I spent a summer as a "bookman," selling educational and religious books door-to-door. A small group of us traveled in a "Volkswagen Bug" from California to Nashville for a week of sales training, and then traveled to our sales territory in Sacramento, California. Commitment to a rigorous daily routine was part of the bookman work ethic: up at 6am (I can still hear the "dee dee dee DIT" of my battery-operated alarm clock), travel to sales territory (walked at first, biked later, and hitch hiked after I crashed my bike), knock on first door by 8am, sell books until 9:30pm, hike back home, eat dinner, complete paperwork, and sleep on the garage floor of our landlady's home by 11 p.m. That is thirteen and a half hours of selling, six days a week, all summer. I lived off of the down payments that I convinced people to provide me in exchange for the promise that I would bring them the books that they ordered at the end of the summer. Selling books door-to-door was a feast or famine lifestyle. There were days when my food fare was carrots, crackers, and water; other days were more luxurious with tuna, cheese, eggs, and water. On the book field, I developed several character strengths that remain with me today albeit in a modified form: the tenacious workaholic schedule became a focused and committed work ethic, the overly optimistic attitude became a positive but realistic attitude, and the sense of financial and familial independence became a faith that acknowledges my interdependence with others, and my need for divine grace.

During the last semester of my undergraduate career, Cal Hylton (one of my Communication professors) enticed me to teach a section of public speaking after graduation on the condition that I enroll in the Master's program in Communication. Not having a full time paid position as a young adult minister, I accepted his offer. During my graduate education at San Jose State University, I underwent a six month Ignatian discernment process, meeting weekly with a priest and praying daily, to determine if I should marry or enter the priesthood. We discerned that my growing

relationship with Mary Elizabeth was more central in my life than my call to the priesthood. Three semesters later in the summer of 1985, while preparing to defend my thesis on the “verbal and nonverbal correlates of credibility,” Cal was there again, this time guiding me into the PhD program at the University of Arizona, Tucson.

I remember feeling discouraged when discussing the stark economic reality of the graduate position in Tucson with my future bride Mary Elizabeth in the sunroom of my parent’s house. According to my calculations, we would be living at the poverty line for several years. Undaunted by the news, Mary Elizabeth said something that left me feeling encouraged and loved. Her unshakeable belief in my goodness, and in our *anum cara* relationship (O’Donohue, 1998), became a faithful fountain of love where I learned to drink deeply throughout our married life.

That was the busiest summer of my life. I defended my thesis at the end of May and wrapped up revisions in June. We married in July, visited Mom in the hospital with Leukemia in full wedding regalia, and traveled to Bethel Island for a week’s honeymoon. In August, we packed what little we owned (we both were living with our parents at the time), rented a U-Haul, and with the 67’ Nova in tow, moved to Tucson, Arizona. By September, we called 22F home, a one bedroom apartment in the married housing complex about 30 minutes from campus by bus. Married life began with me starting the PhD program in Communication, and Mary Elizabeth beginning the Teacher Education program. It was an emotionally intense period of life: exciting, terrifying, exhilarating, and exhausting.

I was fortunate to receive research and teaching assistantships for four of my five years at the University of Arizona where Michael and Judee Burgoon were stars in the field of Communication in the mid 1980’s. They were major influences in my academic training as a social scientist and teacher. I served as teaching assistant for both of them, and was a member of Judee Burgoon’s research team for four years. Since that time, I have broadened my epistemological assumptions to include phenomenological and interpretive approaches to knowing. This intellectual broadening led to the discovery and use of qualitative methodological approaches in my research, including content analysis and autoethnography.⁴ Judee Burgoon became my dissertation director for a project that reflected my twin interests in stories and statistics as persuasive forms of evidence (Baesler, 1991; Baesler & Burgoon, 1994).

In the doctoral phase of my life, I became a workaholic. The work ethic and overly optimistic attitude of the book field served me well during the previous Master’s program when I had a strong family support structure; but, these same attitudes revealed a dark side when pushed to the extreme in the context of a five-year doctoral program with no familial support other than my new bride. To compound matters, I was less focused on spiritual and personal relationships, and more driven by the need to succeed, to prove to my father, wife’s parents, wife, and myself that I was a “man,” a good provider, someone they could trust and count on. The sad truth was that a large part of me was afraid of failing. To compensate for this fear of failure, I set up a rigorous routine reminiscent of the book field work ethic: up at 6 a.m., take the 7 a.m. bus to campus, work (classes, research assistantship, teaching, and homework/grading) until 9pm, and

⁴ Many of my research papers on prayer involve content analysis (e.g., Baesler, 2003, 2005, 2012a). My first published autoethnography is entitled, *The Prayer Life of a Professor* (Baesler, 2009). My second attempt at autoethnography, *Listening to the SONG of Life* (Baesler, 2015a), was presented as a conference paper.

then arrive home on the 10pm bus with Mary Elizabeth waiting for me at the bus stop. Her steadfast love and faithfulness sustained me for much of the journey, but one can only live with such a schedule for a limited time before compromising one's physical, mental, and spiritual health. Consequently, I became *very* ill near the end of my program, and after several months recovery, I vowed to live a more balanced life. Since that brush with death, I have used prayer to provide me with a better sense of balance in my routines. Giving our life energy to meaningful work is important, but so are the life-giving activities of play (e.g., art, music, dance, poetry, yoga, sports), enjoying close personal relationships, and experiencing the peace and love that accompanies living a spiritual life.

What kinds of influences, human and/or divine, set you on the path to higher education?

How did you discern what to major in?

What kinds of nonacademic experiences shaped your college experience?

If you attended graduate school, what influences were involved in the transition from undergraduate to graduate education?

What kind of a human being did you become as a result of your educational experiences?

Cross Country: Tucson to Norfolk

The transition from earning the PhD to securing a tenure-track position was influenced by a connection, and eventual friendship, with colleague Tom Socha. When I flew to Norfolk, Virginia to interview for the tenure-track position at Old Dominion University during the summer of 1990, Tom Socha met me at the airport. A gracious host and persuasive talker, Tom toured me throughout the Hampton Roads area, introduced me to key faculty, invited me to attend Holy Family Church, and provided me with the comforts of home in the guest room of his apartment. On the evening of the second day of my interview, during a faculty party, the department head offered me the job. I called my wife Mary Elizabeth and, after talking and praying, we decided to accept the offer. Eventually, I would learn that Tom and I shared social science world views, a Catholic upbringing, and privileged white male status. We were both married with no children, and at the time, we were both untenured faculty in an undergraduate department of Communication and Theatre Arts. These common bonds helped me feel at home, both academically and spiritually. Twenty-five years later, I am a full professor of Communication at Old Dominion University, still married, and Tom is still a good friend, gracious host, and persuasive talker.

What significant events accompanied the geographical moves that marked your educational transitions?

How did relationships with specific people and/or the divine influence your decisions about education and employment?

Life as a Faculty Member: Teaching

Teaching as a new untenured assistant professor had unexpected surprises. I had been trained to be a social scientist and not a teacher. My education in pedagogy did not involve any formal coursework. Instead, I learned about teaching by observing how my major professors taught, and then modeled these behaviors in the courses that I taught as a teaching assistant. I expected that my practical experience during my doctoral studies as instructor of record for four different undergraduate courses, and assisting with two graduate level courses, would be more than adequate to meet the challenges of an undergraduate degree program in Communication at Old Dominion University, but my expectations were negatively violated.

After my first year of teaching, the Dean called me into his office on the 9th floor, reviewed specific negative student evaluations about my teaching, and gave me an ultimatum: improve teaching or get another job. I tackled the teaching challenge like most things in life—by systematic research (e.g. Vangelisti & Daly, 1998), dialogue with my wife Mary Elizabeth, and experimentation. The dialogues with Mary Elizabeth were particularly helpful in integrating what I read in the teaching literature with her insights from teaching first grade in the public-school system. Simple things like how to make a lesson plan with a behavioral objective, list of materials, activity, and method of assessment proved invaluable. I implemented new teaching strategies the following semester. In time, my teaching evolved into a more relaxed, interactive, and compassionate style with expectations that aligned better with our largely grade-oriented, working class, commuter students.

Later, I would reinvent myself as a teacher a second time inspired by the ideas of: Palmer's (1998) communal truth seeking, Rogers's (1979) radical view of personal freedom and learning, Godin's (2003) challenge to create a purple cow (something remarkable), Godin's (n.d.) dream manifesto on education, and McCarthy's (2003) peace perspective. This new orientation toward teaching developed over the course of a decade by reading, experimentation, and prayer. The work of the Spirit on my heart revealed that these newfound teaching ideas represented a call to action. In time, this action led to the creation of four new courses: (1) Nonviolent Communication and Peace (see Baesler & Lauricella, 2013), (2) Love as Communication across the Lifespan, (3) A "purple cow" version of Introduction to Research Methods⁵, and (4) Listening to the SONG of Life (Baesler, 2015a).

How has your teaching evolved from graduate school to a faculty position at an institution of higher education?

How would you describe your current attitudes toward teaching (roles of student and teacher in and outside the classroom), learning (e.g., lecture, discussion, experiential learning, role-playing), assessment and grades; and, what sources influenced these teaching attitudes (specific books, relationships, events)?

How do your religious/spiritual/philosophical beliefs influence the way you teach/learn?

Life as a Faculty Member: Research

Trusting the Spirit. Publish or perish is a resounding mantra for most untenured Assistant Professors, and it was no different at Old Dominion University's undergraduate department of Communication and Theatre Arts in the early 1990's. The Dean made it clear that I had five years to demonstrate a programmatic research record of publication at the national level, or else I would be given a one year terminal teaching contract. With the grace of prayer, I recognized a cross roads: return to the familiar path of workaholic, or venture onto a new path. In consultation with my wife Mary Elizabeth (as I did with all important matters), we decided to trust the Spirit for guidance and inspiration. I set my work hours to 40 a week, and vowed to live a more balanced life that included family, play, and spirituality. A new baby and chronic family illness

⁵ According to Godin, a "purple cow" idea/project is something "truly remarkable." The expression "purple cow" comes from the visual image of seeing a purple cow in a field of black and white Holsteins—it would be an amazing and remarkable sight. Applied to teaching, I reconstructed the undergraduate research methods class into a "purple cow dream project" class. In this purple cow version of research methods, students envision a life dream and use communication research methods to realize part of their dream during the course. For further details, see my teaching blog on the "purple cow of research methods" for the first semester that I taught the course (Baesler, 2013).

complicated matters, but I trusted the Spirit's lead in my research activities by praying: praying before bringing research to colleagues at conventions for feedback, praying before sending revisions of manuscripts to academic journals, praying when revising manuscripts based on reviewer feedback, and finally praying to let go and trust that the research would eventually find a home.

What kind of work ethic embodies your scholarship?

How do you manage the tensions between personal care for self (body, mind, and spirit), cultivating personal relationships (family and friends), teaching, scholarship, and service?

Social Influence and Pro Social Research. My prayers were answered. My first academic publications reflect the social influence theme of my training in social science at the University of Arizona (Burgoon & Baesler, 1991; Burgoon, Walter, & Baesler, 1992; Baesler & Burgoon, 1994). In a few years, my publications reflect more pro social themes: communication and disabilities (Baesler 1995a), religious orientation and persuasion (Baesler, 1994), and measuring the persuasiveness of moral messages using Fisher's narrative coherence and fidelity (Baesler 1995b). The movement from social influence to pro social research topics foreshadows the transition from pro social to spiritual research topics described in the next section. After five years of research as an Assistant Professor, just before the time my tenure file was submitted, I began feeling stirrings, and eventually waves, of a spiritual transformation that would radically redirect the path of my life and academic scholarship.

For those that have been through the tenure process...

How has your scholarship evolved from pre to post tenure years?

Has the status of tenure provided a sense of freedom to pursue new and/or different scholarship opportunities?

For those on the tenure track path...

How does your religion/spirituality impact your scholarship decisions, especially the choice of topics that you invest in?

For those in academy that are not in a tenure related position...

Can you envision ways to engage in scholarship, perhaps with others, that might fulfill some creative need?

Spiritual Awakening and Transition to Prayer Research. New life growing in the womb of my wife in the early 1990's paralleled the new life growing inside of me in the outward practice of praying every morning. Prayer became the place where a "tree of life" grew within me.⁶ The fruits from this prayer tree provided nourishment for a spiritual awakening. Spiritual retreats, both individual and in small groups, provided further direction and discernment for my personal spiritual life that eventually overflowed into my scholarship. I began praying twice daily instead of once, engaging in silent solo retreats three times a year instead of once a year. My journal writing became more frequent and intensive, and I discovered the inner comfort, security, and joy of

⁶ The image of the "tree of life" stretches far back into my memory. My favorite boyhood place was nesting in the branches of an almond tree. I courted my wife on a two person swing that hung from the branches of a massive oak tree in the front yard of her parent's home. The sacred tree of life is also an image for contemplative practices (see: <http://www.onbeing.org/blog/the-tree-of-contemplative-practices/7343>). Many religions hold the "tree of life" as a central image for their beliefs and practices (from the Jewish/Christian/Islamic garden of Eden tree to the great peace tree in the mythic story of Deganawidah narrated by Houston, 1995). I planted and tend plum, apple, peach, apricot, chestnut, pecan, hazelnut, and almond trees; we also have pine, maple, magnolia, and mimosa trees on the property we call "Trinity Pines." Trees are alive, life-giving, and sacred to me.

repeating a spiritual mantra. Among the many people that influenced me during this time of spiritual renewal were: Trappist Monk Thomas Merton, Spiritual teacher Easwaran Eknath, Buddhist Monk Thich Nhat Hanh, Benedictine Monks Thomas Keating and William Meninger, Medical Doctor Herbert Benson, Philosopher Ken Wilber, Psychologist Ira Progoff, Anglican Priest Matthew Fox, and Franciscan priest Richard Rhor. These spiritual role models look at me each day (in the form of thumb sized photos on a poster that hangs near my desk at home), and when I look at them, I feel grateful for their inspiration and presence in my life.

In the midst of this spiritual awakening, I gradually came to *know deep down in my being that I was “called to do prayer research.”* The sense of being called to the work of prayer as my vocation (both personally and professionally) was internally strong, and outside confirmation of this spiritual call came in many forms including: spiritual direction, encouragement from my department chair and colleagues at Old Dominion University, invitations to speak on prayer from a number of different groups in the Hampton Roads area, and affirmation from reviewers that the prayer research was “good enough” to publish in academic journals.

At the beginning of the prayer research journey, I had to decide what to do about the other research projects that I had invested in. My wife, Mary Elizabeth, narrated a story about a famous preacher who gave up a traveling career to be with his family. The preacher’s son, now a father, realized and appreciated what his father had given up in order to be fully engaged in his own life while growing up. Similarly, there are times in our lives when we need to “fish or cut bait”—to keep doing what we are doing, or cut the bait off the line, pack up, and try a new fishing hole. We (my wife and I) decided to cut the line and fish elsewhere. This meant laying aside my current research projects, including several nearly completed projects on social influence, a painful but necessary part of moving forward on the academic journey. These projects still sit in a cardboard box in my office as a reminder that new ventures often require giving up old ones. As I began surveying the landscape of empirical literature on prayer research in Communication, I felt confused by the lack of the usual signposts that accompany most fields of scholarship—where were the prayer theories, research, pedagogy, and practices? I began to realize that prayer research was a largely uncharted territory in the field of Communication in the mid 1990’s.

Does your scholarship reflect your heart’s desire, your deepest passion, your true path?

If yes, what religious/spiritual resources might support your scholarship?

If no, what obstacles stand in the way, and how might religion/spirituality assist you in finding, deepening, and/or moving forward on your scholarly path?

Prayer Research Journey. I entered the forest of prayer research, creating a path as I traveled, in the private library of the *Well Retreat Center*. Well past midnight, I reviewed book after book on prayer, scribbling definitions of prayer on pieces of notebook paper, trying to understand what prayer was. I discovered that most Christian books on prayer define prayer, explicitly or implicitly, using one or more concepts from the field of Communication. I eventually culled 50 definitions of prayer, and defined prayer as “spiritual communication with God.” I further argued that prayer is part of a human-Divine interpersonal relationship, one that parallels some aspects of human-human communication *and* one that is uniquely different from human-human interpersonal communication. I use the phrase *radically divine communications* (e.g., contemplative prayer) to describe this later type of receptive prayer. These insights, along

with others that legitimized the study of prayer as a communication phenomenon, are reported in my first publication on prayer (Baesler, 1997).

The debut publication on prayer ends by suggesting that communication scholars interested in prayer research should build a model/theory of prayer. I follow my own advice by taking up the challenge of building a model of prayer (Baesler, 1999). I review 20 centuries of Christian prayer typologies (sampling three ancient and three modern typologies) that demonstrate clear *prayer progressions* (a sequence of two or more prayers that represent spiritual development/evolution). Using the idea of prayer progressions, and Dubin's (1978) *Theory Building* as conceptual frameworks, I construct the *Interpersonal Christian Prayer Model*. The model begins with God's invitation to pray, elaborates on types of interpersonal prayer communications, organizes these prayers into clusters (active and receptive), and suggests that there are transitional variables that facilitate the movement from one prayer cluster to another. The piece concludes with 12 research questions derived from the model. The first research question reads: How do believers recognize and describe God's invitation to prayer via the events in their life and/or their internal experiences? A clue to answering this question came from Gandhi's words (cited in Easwaran, 1997, p. 17): "The mantram becomes one's staff of life, and carries one through every ordeal."

True to Gandhi's words, the mantram did become my daily bread, and has carried me through many ordeals. For those not familiar with mantram prayer, I know of no better description than Easwaran's (1977, p. 17):

The mantram is the living symbol of the profoundest reality that the human being can conceive of, the highest power that we can respond to and love. When we repeat the mantram in our mind, we are reminding ourselves of this supreme reality enshrined in our hearts...it will strengthen our will, heal the old divisions...and give us access to deeper resources of strength, patience, and love, to work for the benefit of all.

I began researching a specific type of mantram called the prayer of the *Holy Name* (the repetition of a name of God). I use the finding that there are more similarities than differences in the method and function of the prayer of the Holy Name across three different religious traditions as a rationale to expand the Interpersonal Christian Prayer Model. This expansion led to the creation of the *Relational Prayer Theory*, a theory of prayer that embraces multiple religious/spiritual traditions. In attempting to publish this piece, the editor had difficulty finding a second reviewer given the specialized nature of the topic. Synchronistically, the second reviewer appeared at a centering prayer workshop I attended led by internationally known mystic, writer, and priest Thomas Keating. At the end of the workshop, I waited patiently in the front pew of an old Church in Charlottesville as about 20 people lined up to speak with Keating. I observed him completely absorbed in each interaction, greeting people with a wide warm smile, listening attentively, and speaking in soft tones. His spiritual presence seemed to emanate light and love. I was last in line. In those precious few moments, I felt heard and loved. I asked if he would review my Holy Name research project, and he agreed. When the editor received the review from Keating, I had little difficulty finishing minor edits, and soon saw the work in print (Baesler, 2001).

While completing the prayer of the Holy Name project, I was also collecting survey data to answer other research questions derived from the original prayer model (now theory) dealing with age, prayer, and relationship with God. Using snowball

samples, I collected several waves of data over the course of two years to test the relationship between frequency of active (e.g., prayers of petition, thanksgiving, confession) and receptive prayers (e.g., contemplative, meditative, centering) and relationship with God (measured as closeness, import, and significance). Next, I developed a more sophisticated measure for relationship with God from items based on measures of relational communication. Results suggest a two-factor model (cognitive and affective) for relationship with God which correlated positively with active and receptive types of prayer. Other relationships between age, frequency of prayer, affect, mysticism, and relational intimacy with God are described in a path model (Baesler, 2002).

Creating the path model to describe relationships between variables in the Relational Prayer Theory required some additional library research. It was the beginning of summer, spring semester grades were complete, and I was browsing the stacks of Old Dominion's library for an article that I could not access on-line. Peering from the opposite side of the book stacks was psychology professor Val Derlega. He asked me how my research was going and I told him about my new line of research on prayer. He replied (paraphrasing): Fascinating! I have a data set of mothers with HIV that talk about prayer, and I have no idea what to do with the data. Val is an atheist and was naturally puzzled by prayer responses to open ended interview questions that were not designed to solicit information about prayer. I said to Val, "let me have a look at that data!"

In the coming months, Val Derlega and I completed a content analysis of the transcripts of mothers with HIV that talked about prayer. We explained our results by expanding Derlega's HIV model of interpersonal relationships to include a spiritual component. We found that mothers with HIV use both active and receptive prayers, posited by my Relational Prayer Theory, to cope with their medical condition. For the majority of mothers that used prayer as a form of positive religious/spiritual coping, surprisingly they did not often use petitionary prayers for personal healing. The majority of mother's prayers centered around coping with the everyday stresses of daily life like: having enough energy to get up in the morning, completing household chores, dealing with financial concerns, and praying for their children (Baesler, Derlega, Winstead, & Barbee, 2003).

Thus far on the prayer research journey, two of my five publications appeared in the *Journal of Communication and Religion*. When attempting to publish a third article on prayer in the *Journal of Communication and Religion*, one of the two reviewers, and the editor, suggested I consider writing a book on prayer instead of publishing another journal article. At first I was outraged that this was considered a legitimate reason for not publishing the article, but after praying about it, I discerned that there was merit to their suggestion. I did feel a need to pull together my five publications on prayer, my current prayer projects, and expand on my ideas for future prayer research. There simply was not enough space to accomplish these goals in a traditional academic journal article. It was time to write a book on prayer.

My ideas for writing an academic book on prayer percolated for several months before I felt a sense of fullness that needed emptying. The experience was somewhat like watching the flow of water from a kitchen faucet slowly rise in a cup, and then begin to overflow. I did not want to lose the precious liquid of ideas; I needed a larger container. The feeling of "beginning to overflow" occurred in an odd context, suggesting that the muse of inspiration is not confined to times when we are typing on a computer in our

habitual writing environment. I was sitting at a small table inside the Tiger Martial Arts dojo waiting for my oldest son to finish his karate lesson. I grabbed a pencil and piece of scrap paper and jotted down an outline for the table of contents of a book. *In less than five minutes*, I was looking at the skeletal outline of a seven chapter book. Like water flowing, I felt the Spirit flowing through me and onto the paper. These inspired chapter headings, and their organization as a table of contents, did not change during the two years that I was immersed in writing the book. In the months ahead, the daily disciplined hours of writing was not as difficult as the task of finding a publisher. When I pitched the idea for an academic book on prayer in early 2002, almost every publisher I contacted was less than enthusiastic about venturing into “new territory” of prayer research where the probability of a financial return on investment was uncertain. Eventually, I found Edwin Mellen Press, a mid-range publisher of academic books targeted for research libraries. Of the two publications options offered to me by the associates at Edwin Mellen, I opted to keep the book in print for 20 years with no royalties (the other option was royalties with no guarantee to keep the book in print). My goal was not to accumulate wealth, but to build a knowledge base that others in the academic community could access and benefit from.

The content of the book represents revisions of my previous journal publications on prayer as well as new content not previously published (Baesler, 2003). One of these new chapters was a survey of undergraduate academic courses on prayer in the United States. This work culminates in a syllabus that anyone interested in teaching prayer could adapt to a university setting. Another new chapter describes directions for future prayer research, including: relational dimensions of prayer, image of God and prayer, functions and contexts of prayer, developmental nature of prayer, health and healing, interdisciplinary study of prayer, and measurement issues in prayer research. Two of these ideas for future prayer research, the function of prayer in health and healing (Baesler, 2008) and prayer in different communication contexts (Baesler & Ladd, 2009), are reported as journal publications in the sections that follow.

Writing the book on prayer shifted my scholarly perspective from developing and testing a theory of prayer to the consideration of how prayer research might benefit others. As I considered the data that demonstrated how prayer helped mothers with HIV cope with their everyday life, I began wondering how prayer might function beyond coping to *problem solving and decision making*. Specifically, I wondered how prayer functions in the discernment process of spiritual direction.

The decision-making process in Ignatian spiritual direction that I experienced in my mid-twenties (see previous section, *Return to College*), and my reading about the role of the spiritual director in guiding an individual’s prayer life, led to researching the role of prayer in the process of providing spiritual direction. After reviewing the literature, I sought out experts that were “certified” to practice spiritual direction. With the assistance of several spiritual directors, including Gerald May of the Shalom Institute, I surveyed a small convenience sample of certified spiritual directors. A content analysis of these surveys revealed that the director’s private prayers, the directee’s private prayers, and the conjoint public prayer between the director and directee, all play important roles in the process (before, during, and after) of providing spiritual direction (Baesler, 2005).

I returned from the topic of prayer in spiritual direction to the theme of prayer and health/healing as suggested in the future research section of my 2003 book on communication and prayer. My readings on prayer suggested that interdisciplinary

collaboration between communication, psychology, and sociology was possible, and that one way to explore interdisciplinary collaboration was to focus on the topic of prayer and holistic health in an interpersonal context. I use Ken Wilber's (2007) idea of AQAL (all quadrants, all levels), a matrix of individual/collective and inner/outer spheres, to organize the contributions of multiple disciplines engaged in prayer research. An innovative part of this piece is a series of convenience sample interviews I conducted with academics from 12 different disciplines over the course of one year, asking them to describe the content and methods that their discipline might utilize to investigate the relationship between prayer and health (Baesler, 2008).

I wanted to further explore the role of prayer in holistic health beyond the interpersonal context proposed in the previous study. In the next study, I teamed up with my psychology colleague Kevin Ladd in South Bend, Indiana, and we developed a measure to examine prayer in the private, interpersonal, small (e.g., family) and large group (e.g., corporate worship) contexts for three health domains (physical, psychological, and spiritual). In our convenience snowball sample of college and non-college individuals aged 18-65, we found that correlations were *strongest* for prayer contexts and spiritual health, *moderate* for prayer contexts and mental health, and *modest* for prayer contexts and physical health. While we did not have the kind of controls that a clinical trial might have (e.g., randomized double blind experimental study), we did find a pattern of statistically significant correlations suggesting a positive relationship between different prayer contexts and particular health domains (Baesler & Ladd, 2009).

At this stage of the prayer research journey, I turned from *looking outward* toward the prayer lives of others to *looking inward* at my own prayer life, reflecting on how my personal prayer life influenced my teaching as a professor of communication. Goodall's (1996) autoethnographic account of divine signs in community, and Coles's (1990) ethnographic work on children's spiritual lives inspired me to consider the connections between my personal prayer life and my professional life. Unlike my previous social scientific research on prayer, Goodall and Coles provided me with a sense of credibility and legitimacy to tell *my personal and professional story of prayer*. I titled my autoethnography *The Prayer Life of a Professor*. After presenting my paper to the Spiritual Communication division of the National Communication Association, one of the audience members, Katherine Hendrix, invited me to submit the piece for consideration in a special issue of a journal on teaching and learning where it was eventually published (Baesler, 2009).

The following year at the Southern States Communication Association Convention, I saw a presentation by Terry Lindvall that reviewed prayer in various Hollywood films. Upon returning home, Terry and I met at his office at Virginia Wesleyan College in Virginia Beach to discuss *how we learn to pray*. We certainly learn from our parents/caretakers, but we also (perhaps) learn how to pray by watching people pray in films, and more broadly, by watching people pray in a variety of media. I had guest lectured on the topic of "sources for learning to pray," including media and personal relationships, for a graduate class in Family Communication at nearby Regent University in Virginia Beach. These ideas led to the expansion of the Relational Prayer Theory to include mediated and interpersonal sources of learning how to pray both privately and in public. We tested these ideas through survey research, and published the piece in a regional peer reviewed communication journal sponsored by the Southern States Communication Association (Baesler, Lindvall, & Lauricella, 2011). This was the first research study based on the Relational Prayer Theory published in a non-

religious/spiritual mainstream academic communication journal.

My psychology colleague Val Derlega visited me again, but this time he had a data set on African-American men with HIV who were incarcerated. With this combination of stressors (HIV, incarceration, and minority status), we wondered if these individuals might use religion/spirituality (especially prayer) to cope with their stressors in this unique situation. A review of the literature on measures for religious/spiritual coping enabled us to develop a new measure for religious/spiritual coping which we applied to the transcripts of interviews with this specialized group. Our hunches were confirmed. This unique set of stressors did yield several forms of religious/spiritual coping, including prayer, for the majority of participants in the study (Baesler, Derlega, & Lolley, 2012).

Having completed 12 research projects on prayer, I felt the need to summarize and take stock. I reviewed the research I had completed, and saw interconnections to disciplines other than communication, namely psychology, sociology, and medicine. I wanted to introduce communication scholars to the rich multidisciplinary nature of prayer research, to focus on significant agendas for prayer research from all of these disciplines, and to provide communication scholars with a sense of the future possibilities of prayer research. I review publication rates for 50+ years of prayer research in these four academic disciplines, citing exemplars from each discipline to provide communication scholars with a sense of the overall research landscape, culminating in a description of potentially fruitful ideas for future prayer research (Baesler, 2012a).

During the prayer research journey, I noticed how other disciplines showcased their prayer research in an edited volume or special issue of a journal. With the encouragement of Tom Socha, my colleague at Old Dominion, I developed the idea of guest editing a special issue on prayer for the *Journal of Communication and Religion*. Calvin Troup, the editor of the journal at that time, provided some sagely advice, and gave me permission to pursue the idea of guest editing a special issue on prayer. I used my personal and professional networks to survey the interest and availability of scholars to write about prayer as a communication phenomenon from a variety of disciplines. Ultimately, the special issue represents three communication scholars, two sociologists, and one psychologist. They wrote on a variety of prayer topics: reviewing prayer across the lifespan, reviewing prayer and health, prayer and forgiveness, interpersonal communication and prayer, and prophetic prayer. I felt a heartfelt satisfaction in coordinating this special issue on prayer because I was able to introduce prayer scholarship to a specialized audience in communication that are interested in “religious communication,” and I was able to help advance the prayer scholarship of others (Baesler, 2012b).

Two years before guest editing the special issue on prayer for the *Journal of Communication and Religion*, through the comments of a graduate student at a convention, I realized that nearly all the research I completed on the Relational Prayer theory was limited to face-to-face communication. While mulling over this limitation, Yi-Fan Chen, a colleague just down the hall from my office at Old Dominion University, paid me a visit and asked if I was interested in conducting some research on *digital* prayer. After many discussions, focus groups, surveys, and conference presentations, we gathered all of our research and published a piece on digital petitionary prayer (Baesler & Chen, 2013). One of our findings showed that frequency of petitionary prayers were highest for mobile phone (phone or texting), midrange for Facebook (posting or e-mailing), and

lowest for traditional e-mail (e.g. G-mail). This is one of the first publications that I am aware of describing the landscape of digital prayers of petition for spiritual/social support across different media platforms.

How would you describe your scholarship journey...What are the significant turning points...What are the significant stories that make up your scholarly life journey?

What kinds of partnerships have you created with your scholarship...How have you involved others in your research agenda?

Who has benefited from your scholarship...What practical significance does your scholarship have for the sphere of everyday life?

From Prayer to Peace to Listening Research. Along with prayer research, the topic of peace became a growing interest in my teaching that eventually inspired a project with my Canadian colleague Sharon Lauricella who also taught peace courses at the undergraduate level. The primary purpose of our research project was to develop a valid and reliable assessment measure for peace instruction across intrapersonal, interpersonal, small and large group, and global communication contexts. A minor part of the project explored the relationship between peace and prayer, finding that people of peace are also frequently people of prayer. We published the research in a multicultural and interdisciplinary journal sponsored by the Peace Education Commission (Baesler & Lauricella, 2013).

A second area of research that stemmed from my interest in “prayer as listening” began with the development and teaching of an undergraduate course on listening. Toward the end of the first semester that I was teaching the listening class, my colleague Tom Socha e-mailed me from the National Communication Association in Chicago saying [paraphrasing]: the International Listening Association is meeting in Virginia Beach this year (only 40 minutes from campus), and they are extending their deadline for papers...since you’re teaching a class in listening this fall, why don’t you consider submitting a paper! With about two months before the deadline, I began to write. Initially, I wanted to use some data from a survey that I conducted in the listening class, but the Human Subjects Committee would not accept a post data collection proposal. The social scientist inside of me was stumped, but I began to write anyway based on my memories from teaching the course. As I wrote, a story began to take shape. The autoethnography entitled, *Listening to the SONG of Life*, was presented to the International Listening Association the following spring semester (Baesler, 2015a). During the conference, I received positive feedback on the meditation component of the paper. In reflecting on this feedback, I realized how meditation could be applied to many types of courses. This insight provided the momentum to expand the mediation component of the listening paper for an instructional piece on “meditation in the classroom” that was published in *Listening Education* (Baesler, 2015b).

How might you describe the relationship between your scholarship and religion/spirituality or ethics/values?

What kinds of teaching activities and experiments in your classes might be reframed as opportunities for scholarship?

Is there a new course you created that you could describe in story form...a story that might include: personal motives for creating the course, a description of the structure and content of the course, memories of the first time teaching the course, including reactions of students and colleagues?

Conclusion: Doors

“Where do we go from here?” is a question I often ask at the end of a research project. Typically, I answer this question by providing specific suggestions for future research. This time, instead of offering research projects, I offer the research metaphor of “doors.” For me, the door to research based on a social scientific orientation is closing, and the door to research based on an autoethnographic orientation⁷ is opening. Just behind the social science doorway lays a scroll (a six by three-foot length of butcher paper) filled with prayer research ideas that I have been accumulating the past 15 plus years. There are well over 100 ideas for prayer research projects.⁸ These projects are enough to keep me engaged in research for the rest of my life; however, the stark reality is that I will not be able to complete them within my lifetime.

I could probably do more prayer research in the summer time, but I consciously chose to spend my summers “playing” with my wife and two sons. I rationalize this choice as my “early retirement years.” For three-fourths of the year I work my 40-45 hours a week while trying to live a balanced life, then for one-fourth of the year, I play with my family. For example, my 11-year-old and I play elaborate real life (not electronic) role play games, my 24 year old and I take leisurely philosophizing walks, while my wife and I talk, snuggle, and engage in experimenting with sustainability projects; and, there is family time at the dinner table, outdoor adventures, and making music and dancing together. For myself, I love to read, journal, pray and meditate, design mandalas, play wind and string instruments, tend a food forest on the property, try new recipes, and write haikus. There is some guilt attached to the time I spend playing in the summer

⁷ I have come to understand autoethnographic scholarship (see also readings listed later in the conclusion section) as a story with a narrative arc that: (1) is rooted in some meaningful and significant life experience of the author and some “other” (e.g., a person, group, organization, or spiritual entity), (2) connects with a stream of ideas (e.g., previous literature, a history of ideas, or more traditional scholarship as theory/research), (3) engages the reader in a way that allows them to re/consider their own values and behavior, providing insight and avenues for potential praxis, (4) accents our humanness by descriptions and explanations that are engaging, provocative, emotional, and grounded in body, mind, and spirit, and (5) rates high on what Walter Fisher calls narrative coherence (hangs together) and fidelity (rings true to everyday life) (Baesler, 1995b).

⁸ Some of these projects are discussed in my book (Baesler, 2003) and my review of prayer research through 2010 (Baesler, 2012a). Other projects are described in my “prayer resources” document, a kind of annotated bibliography of prayer resources/research that I discontinued in 2008. Other project topics/titles I have written on a “prayer scroll.” Additional prayer research projects that I have in various stages of completion are as follows:

- 1) *Nonverbal Characteristics of Prayer*. What does a prayerful voice sound like? A prayerful face look like? A prayer place feel like? These and other nonverbal aspects of prayer are content analyzed based on survey data from snowball samples of college students and those people they know over 35 years of age,
- 2) *Digital Prayer*. Develop, monitor, and content analyze data from two on-line prayer projects: tweeting prayer strengths and blogging prayer metaphors. Knowing our prayer strengths and metaphors may be a way to cultivate a deeper prayer life,
- 3) *Wisdom of the Ages*. This project will gather advice on the types, functions, and methods of prayer from elders over the age of 70. There is a wealth of knowledge literally dying with the elderly. I hope to recover some of this prayer wisdom and pass on their legacy of prayer to the next generation,
- 4) *Exploring Prayer*. Based on the experience of participants in a prayer workshops and retreats, this would be a user-friendly guide to exploring different types of prayer methods. Different guides could be created for different religious/spiritual traditions,
- 5) *Prayer Profile Instrument*. Develop a valid and reliable comprehensive prayer profile for individuals and spiritual directors. A short version of the prayer profile could be used for researchers and those in the psychiatric and medical fields, and
- 6) *Prayer Dictionary and Encyclopedia*. Create an on-line prayer dictionary, and a comprehensive prayer encyclopedia, that addresses prayer in major religious/spiritual traditions.

because I know I could be completing more scholarly research. But, as my undergraduate philosophy professor Peter Kostenbaum taught: guilt can be good because it means you made a choice. When I pray about the situation, I have no regrets about intentionally choosing to spend summers with my family or having a reasonable work schedule during the year. However, I am concerned about my mortality, about not being able to finish all those prayer research projects.

I was expressing this concern about my mortality preventing me from completing all those research projects several years ago to Kyle Williams, an undergraduate student who was taking an independent studies course on the geography of prayer with me. Kyle wisely remarked [paraphrased]: You don't have to do it all Dr. B...you can orchestrate the prayer research...others will follow and eventually carry out the work. I felt a burdened lifted. I did not have to do it all! But, I could not just close the door on all of those projects. I felt compelled to orchestrate, to *spread the word* about prayer research before opening wide the door to autoethnographic research. Thus began my attempts to spread the word about prayer research to others in the field of Communication.

At the Southern Communication Association Convention in 2010, I delivered a plenary session entitled, *Opening the Mind, Engaging the Body, and Igniting the Spirit: Prayer as Religious/Spiritual Communication* (Baesler, 2010). My purpose was to spread the word about prayer research, informing and hopefully inspiring communication scholars to consider engaging in prayer research. Two years later, a publication in *Communication Review* (Baesler, 2012a) also aims at spreading the word about prayer research, reviewing prayer research for scholars in communication and pointing them to several possibilities for future prayer research. The following year, in an effort to further spread the word about prayer research, I coordinated a series of essays on prayer as guest editor for the *Journal of Communication and Religion* (Baesler, 2013). My last endeavor to spread the word about prayer research will be to translate the *prayer scrolls* (the 100+ prayer research ideas) into a digital format like a blog or website where others can view, comment, ask questions, and contribute their own ideas to a growing body of prayer literature.

From the beginning of the prayer research journey until now, nearing the end of the journey, I felt somewhat like John the Baptist in the Christian scriptures of the New Testament, a voice calling out in the wilderness, preparing the way for someone who is to come, waiting for others to hear and take up the call of prayer research. Thus far, I do not see many scholars in Communication answering the call to engage in prayer research. Traveling the path of prayer research in the field of Communication, without a critical mass of prayer research scholars to dialogue with, is an often lonely path. I also feel disappointment in not having developed an active legacy of young scholars interested in carrying on the work of prayer research, especially in my own department.⁹ How does one live with isolation and disappointment in one's scholarship? I find some

⁹ Notable exceptions are: Colleagues Sharon Lauricella and Terry Lindvall, who have co-authored prayer related research with me (Baesler, Lindvall, & Lauricella, 2011), and at the time of this writing doctoral candidate Jenni Sigler, who has used Relational Prayer Theory as a springboard for her own research on "Direct Divine Communication" (Sigler, 2014, 2015a, 2015b). Our own department's Master's program entitled, *Lifespan and Digital Communication*, with over 20 theses and projects going into its fourth year, does not show a trend for graduate students interested in prayer research. None of the students have expressed an interest in prayer related research, or even religious/spiritual research, with the exception of one thesis where *religious coping* was minor sub-component of the overall thesis.

consolation and hope in the knowledge that my job is not to harvest the fruits of my labors. Instead, my primary job is to plant seeds, sometimes tend the sprouts, less often, enjoy the fragrance of the flowers blooming, and on rare occasions, to delight in the taste of succulent fruit. Perhaps the body of prayer research in the field of Communication that I have contributed to will be discovered anew by another generation someday...and in the Spirit's time, I pray that a garden of Eden may flourish.

How do you typically end your research studies...with suggestions for future research...with links to method, theory, and/or praxis, with doorways?

How do you negotiate "endings" in your own scholarship, particularly in areas of research that you are no longer (or less) active in?

In what ways do you connect your research to other scholars, and to nonacademic audiences?

How might you cultivate the next generation of graduate students and young scholars to carry forward the type of scholarship that is closest to your heart?

From where you stand now, in view of your own mortality, are there specific research projects that you feel destined to complete before you die?

Closing a Door. After I complete the translation of the prayer scrolls to a digital format, I see myself moving away from (but not completely closing) the door to social scientific research while moving through the door of autoethnographic research. Strangely, my leaving the door to social scientific prayer research parallels in time the closing of the doors at the Well Retreat Center (The Well). It was at the Well that I experienced a spiritual awakening some 20 years ago. It was also in the library of the Well that I began the prayer research journey. My relationship with the Well, and the people there, continued in the form of 35 retreats during the past 17 years (1996-2013). The Well closed its doors by order of the bishop on dubious charges in 2013 (another story where we lost the fight to save the Well). Looking back through a partially closed doorway, I see my first retreat at the Well in 1996. Shortly thereafter, my first prayer publication came out in 1997. Still looking back through the door, I see many retreats and publications on prayer that followed in the years from 1997-2012. As the doors of the Well closed in 2013, and I went on my final retreat at the Well, my last prayer piece was published (Baesler, 2013). I interpret the closing of the Well as a sign to begin closing the door to social science, and begin moving through the door to autoethnography. I have kept a spiritual journal for all 35 retreats at the Well. Perhaps it is time to harvest these experiences and weave them into a story to help others remember the Well, consider the spiritual grace that retreats can bring, and reveal the connection between living a spiritual life and engaging in meaningful scholarship.

Opening a Door. Where will I go from here? How will entering the door of autoethnographic research influence my identity and scholarship? I had already stepped into the autoethnographic doorway several years ago when I read Goodall's (1996) *Divine Signs* and Coles's (1990) *Spiritual Life of Children*. These writers gave me the courage to write my first autoethnography, *The Prayer Life of a Professor* (Baesler, 2005). Only recently have I written a second autoethnography, describing my experience of teaching a new kind of listening course entitled, *Listening to the SONG of Life* (Baesler, 2015a). This past summer, I returned to Goodall (2000), reading his newer book, *Writing the New Ethnography* which led to reading a series of other authors and books related to autoethnography: Bochner's (2014) *Coming to Narrative*, Ellis' (2004) *The Ethnographic I*, Pelias' (2004) *Methodology of the Heart*, and Holman, Adams, and Ellis' (2013) *Handbook of Autoethnography*. These resources inspired me to continue walking the autoethnographic

path on my 2017 Sabbatical, writing several autoethnographies focused on teaching: *Listening to the Divine Song within the Greater Song of Life, I'd Rather Teach Peace: An Autoethnographic Account of Teaching the Nonviolent Communication and Peace Class*, and *Teaching Students How to Make Their Dreams Come True: An Autoethnography of Developing and Teaching the Dream Research Methods Class*.

As I read and write about autoethnography and look back in time, I see various influences that eventually led me to finding the door of autoethnographic scholarship. In early childhood, I loved stories about fairy tales of leprechauns, magicians, knights, and dragons. In later childhood, I read Aesop's fables and classic tales like Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn. In teen years, I was fascinated by Sherlock Holmes' detective cases, and stories about the lives of real people like John Muir, Gandhi, and the lives of the Saints (e.g., Thomas Aquinas, Francis of Assisi, Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Avila, and Therese of Lisieux). During my undergraduate years, I found that the personal stories told by my teachers, and not so much the theories and research, is what I remember, and what influenced me the most. In graduate school, my dissertation topic reflected my twin interests of *stories* and statistics. Later, as Assistant Professor, I would try to understand the persuasiveness of stories through the lens of Fisher's narrative paradigm and publish a piece that measures the constructs of narrative coherence and fidelity (Baesler, 1995b). As Associate Professor, I wrote my first autoethnography about the prayer life of a professor. Now as Full Professor, it seems natural to invest more energy in writing autoethnographic stories rather than collecting more student based survey data and running statistics to test hypotheses that I have already reasoned to be true by the logic of theory. The metamorphosis from social scientist to story teller also parallels the life of one of my heroes, priest-sociologist Andrew Greeley, who added novel writing about God's love in human relationships to a successful career as a sociologist. Greeley (2015) continued to write novels into his 80's (see Greeley's website for the breath of his writings). Entering my mid 50's, I see signs that it is time to start harvesting some of my life experiences (O'Donohue, 1998), and one way to do that is to continue writing stories in the form of autoethnographic scholarship that is: rooted in my personal experience and the lives of others, connects with a stream of ideas in scholarship and/or the life-world, engages readers in a way that facilitates reflection and praxis, and grounds the story in the human mystery of the interconnections between mind, body, and spirit. My hope is that this present autoethnography embodies these standards. My prayer is that in time, with the grace of the Spirit, we shall see this, and similar autoethnographic scholarship, bear fruit in the lives of our students, colleagues, and communities.

In what ways has the primary method you use to conduct scholarship evolved or changed over time, and to what degree have you embraced these changes and/or sought other methods in the pursuit of scholarship?

How does your worldview, and identity as a person, influence your methodological choices for inquiry?

If you chose to harvest some of your life experiences through the method of autoethnography, what topics might you write about?

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