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LISTENING TO THE DIVINE SONG WITHIN THE GREATER SONG OF LIFE

E. James Baesler

WHY I TEACH LISTENING TO THE DIVINE SONG

This autoethnography narrates how I came to teach *listening to the divine song* as part of an undergraduate listening course called *Listening to the SONG of Life*.¹ Before I describe two personal stories that explain why I teach listening to the divine, a brief introduction to my interpretation of the autoethnographic method is in order.

Autoethnography, as used in this story, is grounded in the assumptions that language is a primary medium by which we are conscious, understand the world, and communicate our learnings to others in *stories*,² and that *signs* in the teacher-student relationship serve as entry points to a myriad of ways that reflect and enhance meanings in the ongoing story of life.³ For me, autoethnography is a personal and emotionally engaging story about meaningful events in the author's life (auto) that connects with the story of others (a relationship, group, community, organization, and/or culture)(ethnography) within a conceptual framework, theory, and/or stream of ideas for some particular purpose. In the field of Communication, autoethnographies function in a variety of ways such as consciousness raising, political praxis, teaching/learning.⁴

TASTING DEATH, CLINGING TO LIFE, AND TEACHING

What does it feel like to taste death? Have you ever felt like you were dying? Not a fleeting fearful moment, but an extended period of time when you knew: this is it, I'm going to die. I felt like that when I woke up suddenly at 4 am last July. My journal records, "I feel weird ... like I'm losing consciousness ... oh my God, my body is shutting down, I'm going to die!"

The feeling of dying is not completely foreign to me. For readers that have lived over a half century like myself, you probably are familiar with the *brush of death*. But this morning at 4 am does not feel like a brush with death that eventually passes. The feeling is more like permanently losing consciousness. Perhaps you are familiar with the uncomfortable tingling sensation creeping over the top of your head when you give blood on an empty stomach. When this happened to me, the Red Cross phlebotomist asked, "Are you okay? Your face is turning blue." I wonder if I am turning blue again? I feel terrified. I face the question ... am I dying?

Eventually, I find myself in bed at the emergency room hooked up to an I.V. I look at my wife sitting across the foot of the bed and whisper, "I don't want to leave you. I want to live." She smiles with quiet confidence and whispers back, "It's o.k., you can let go ... I love you." My face feels wet with tears, and I mumble a short prayer, "Okay, if this is my time, I'm letting go." A few minutes later, I realize, "I'm still here. I'm feeling 'a little' better." Was it the intravenous fluids? The prayer? Maybe both of them have me hoping? I realize that I've been given a great gift: to taste death and be given another chance at life.

Now, I cling to life. Since that time last summer, I've experienced two more mild *fading out* episodes, and during these times, I find great comfort in clinging to a rosary which was given to me by my great grandmother, Elizabeth Fleck. My Mother and I visited Great Grandma Fleck in the nursing home once each year during our annual, family summer vacation trips to North Dakota. At that time, Great Grandma Fleck was an elder in her late eighties, spry and filled with divine energy, and I felt loved when she pulled me in for a close hug during our visits. Did she know she was dying when, in her nineties, she placed a precious, maroon colored rosary in my hands and clutched both her hands around mine? She looked intently in my eyes, perhaps hoping that I, a middle-aged teenager, would begin to understand the magnitude of such a gift. I treasure her memory by gazing at a black and white photo that I keep near my writing desk. In the photo, I sit comfortably in the lap of Great Grandma. My Mother stands behind me at my right side with one hand on my shoulder as if to guide me, and my Grandmother stands next to my Mother as another support figure. When I gaze at the photo, I intuitively know that the divine, maternal love coming from these three women flowed into, nurtured, and protected me as I grew up. Even now, looking at the photo as I write these words, I feel this divine flow of love and am ever so grateful.

I fell asleep fingering Great Grandmother's maroon colored beads while I audibly mouthed the prayers, "Hail Mary full of grace ... Our Father who art in heaven ... Glory be to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit ..." When I awoke some hours later, I felt better ... I was not dead, but alive! I pray this rosary every time someone in my close circle of personal relationships dies; and now, I pray the rosary for myself when I feel like I'm dying. I cling to the rosary

as a life-line to the divine, a way to listen to the divine speak through the prayers as I make my way around the circle of beads ... it is a *life* rosary, a *death* rosary, and a *resurrection* rosary.

For reflection, consider what spiritual object(s) connects you with the divine?² Ric Masten narrates a poem about a blacksmith⁵ who, in his final days, is taken to the hospital and struggles with the nurses over a hammer that he clutches with both big hands—the nurses finally give up and let him keep it. He dies with the hammer in his hands next to his heart. The blacksmith's hammer and my story of the rosary raise profound questions for us all: What do we cling to in life?³ and what will we cling to in death?

Tasting death and praying the rosary when I feel like I'm dying realigns my priorities and inspires positive change in my life and in my teaching. This *vitality of death* is something I intellectually understood over thirty years ago from a college course in Existentialism taught by Peter Kostenbaum, but it is my experience in approaching death that gives heart to my intellectual understanding and renews my life. It is from this place of the heart that authentic and life-enhancing changes take root. Part of these life changes includes my academic life, specifically what and how I teach.

What and how I teach changed dramatically over the last thirty years. Looking back through the hour glass I time, I discern definite stages in my teaching. I began as a graduate student teaching lower level Communication courses. After my first semester teaching as an Assistant professor, I vividly recall being told by the Dean to “clean up my teaching” or else! This encounter with the Dean set me on a course to improve my teaching by reading scholarly literature in communication education, modeling master teachers like my wife who is a first-grade teacher, and simply caring more about my students. Another shift in my teaching occurred within the last ten years as I developed four new courses: one on love, a second on nonviolence and peace, a third on listening to the SONG of life, and forth called the “purple cow of research methods.”⁶ These four new courses are representative of a new way of teaching for me that is influenced by my spiritual awakening,⁷ and by inspirational authors.⁸

Death tells me that life is a precious gift, and that what I teach should be life-enhancing. Teaching/learning about *listening to the divine* is not an academic exercise for me; it is a matter of life and death. In the story of my losing consciousness at 4 am, I experienced listening to the divine through the awareness of my body failing, journaling, my son and wife's compassionate words, and the joy in realizing I was not dead but alive. In the story of my Great Grandmother's rosary, I experienced listening to the divine through the comforting repetition of the prayers.

As a teacher and a person of faith, I believe that listening to the divine through experiential activities can be moments of grace for both student and teacher. Such divine experiences cannot be standardized into a set of vocabulary words to memorize for a test. Rather, such experiences are to be cherished,

affirmed, and explored through journal writing and dialogue. Death brought me to the place of wanting to invest my remaining life energy in teaching students how to listen to the divine song within the greater SONG of life.

LISTENING TO THE DIVINE SONG AS PART OF LISTENING TO THE GREATER SONG OF LIFE

In this section, I introduce the *Listening to the SONG of Life* course and its learning goals to provide the reader with a frame of reference for understanding the part of the course called *listening to the divine song*.

I taught the course *Listening to the SONG of Life* for the first time in the fall of 2014 because there was no listening course in the Department of Communication and Theatre Arts offered at my home institution. SONG is an acronym that stands for four interrelated contexts in the life-world: Self (S), Others (O), Nature (N), and God (G) or the divine. I use the term *divine* rather than *God* when I teach students how to listen to the divine song in life because some students have negative conditioning associated with the word *God*. The term *divine* opens up more possibilities for discussing a broader range of religious/spiritual ideas in the classroom. However, I don't use the *D* for *divine* in the acronym SOND because it does not sound rhetorically as pleasing as using the *G* for *God* in the acronym SONG. Hence, the course is entitled "Listening to the SONG (*not* SOND) of Life.

Using a musical metaphor, my intention is for students to learn how to listen to and harmonize with the instruments playing in each of the four verses of the SONG. For example, I hope the SONG of life listening course inspires students to do the following: develop a sense of centered presence (Self), empathetically ride the waves of energy emanating from others (Others), open their senses to the beauty and wonder of nature (Nature), and name and connect with the divine in their lives (God).

In the course *Listening to the SONG of Life*, we begin the semester with theories of listening (cognitive, behavioral, and relational)⁹ and listening research.¹⁰ We then proceed through the SONG of life one letter/verse at a time, from the *S* representing listening to self to the *G* that stands for listening to God or the divine. For each of the four listening contexts, one critical pedagogical goal is to *engage students* in a variety of listening practices (in- and outside of class) to increase their self-awareness of listening strengths/weaknesses, reflect on ways to improve their listening, and experiment with the practices in daily life. In addition, for home study each week, students choose from a list of resources related to one of the listening contexts in the SONG of life and are asked to *explore* the resource(s), *record* what they have learned in their learning journals, and *share* these learnings in small groups the following class period. To assist students in preparing for class, several criteria, posed as questions, are used to guide their exploration and journal writing. Some of the questions

for reflection include the following: Why did you choose this particular resource to review? What did you learn from meditating on this resource? What kinds of questions emerged during your learning, and how did you attempt to answer one of them? and What emotional states best describes your learning experiences and why?

Organizationally, the semester long listening course is a sixteen-week *SONG of life* with each *verse* of the *SONG* representing one of the four listening contexts. The self and other verses are covered in the first half of the term. In the middle of the term, there is a *refrain* for the *SONG* consisting of a midterm journal assessment, student learning poems, and individual student conferences. There are no standardized tests in the course as these forms of evaluation are detrimental to experiential learning;¹¹ rather, I use alternative forms of assessment more conducive to experiential learning like journals, poems, and conferences. Listening to the divine song consists of a three-week unit near the end of the term before the final journal assessments, poems, and student conferences.

The rationale for the organizational format of the course is embedded in a visual image of the *SONG* of life. Imagine the listening contexts as four circles arranged like the rings of a dart board. The inner circle represents listening to the self. As this self-awareness is developed, it becomes easier to listen to *others* in the circle that surrounds the *self*. The circle of *other* expands to include non-human *others* in the natural world. Finally, the circle of the nature expands to include the fourth circle of listening to the divine. The divine circle surrounds, permeates, and binds the others listening contexts together. The remainder of this essay is devoted to describing and explaining this divine circle of listening.

LISTENING TO THE DIVINE SONG IN THE CLASSROOM

My purpose in narrating this part of the story is to provide readers with a sense of what it means to be in the classroom with the students listening to the divine song, to inspire teachers to incorporate some of these ideas in their own listening course, and to cultivate a greater capacity to listen to the divine song in our academic and personal lives. To accomplish these goals, each class activity is (1) Introduced with a personal story, (2) Described from the viewpoint of a student in the class, (3) Explained to an instructor who intends to adapt the activity into their listening course, and (4) Concluded with reflection questions to deepen our understanding of listening to the divine song of life. For student descriptions (item two above), I attempt to reconstruct some of the student voices in the class by paraphrasing their words based on my class notes and memories of conversations with students in and outside of class. These student recreations are necessarily biased because they represent only a single viewpoint in the classroom. That viewpoint is embodied in the personal and professional values of the instructor of the course who happens to be a married,

middle-aged, white male, who is also a father, a religious/spiritual person, and a full professor of Communication at a mid-Atlantic urban university. While my attempts to recreate student voices may not accurately represent all of the viewpoints of students in the class, I do hope they convey a sense of what it means to *be* in the classroom with the students.

MEDITATION: THE OPEN WAY

As a nineteen-year old college student living with my parents in San Jose, California, in the late 1970's, I withdrew my savings of \$500.00 to travel across country in a Toyota with a Dominican Sister to a Benedictine monastery in Wisconsin. We ate dried figs and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches as our main food source, and slept in the open air at campsites (or in the car when it rained) to save money on the trek. We arrived for this one-week, national gathering of young adult ministers to learn how to better serve our respective young adult communities. The monastery was an ancient structure surrounded by woodlands teeming with a variety of flora and fauna in the summertime. On the second day, after our evening session ended, I wandered the halls of the monastery and discovered a private library. I felt a strong divine presence walking among the multitude of authors who had written these spiritual books. Perusing the shelves, I discovered one particular book that influenced profoundly my ideas about meditation called *The Open Way*.¹² The book lit the lamp of meditation within, leading to a lifelong interest in meditation. Recently, I used parts of the book in developing a method to teach meditation in the classroom.¹³

In the following section, a student recounts how they experience learning about meditation on the first day of the listening class. Rushing through the doorway of room 3068 at exactly 7:10 pm, I glanced at the tall, bearded professor, dressed in black jeans and a long sleeve shirt, methodically writing the word "MEDITATION" in big blue letters on the white board. He faced the class and introduced himself as "Dr. B" and asked us to, "Turn off our digital world, and tune in to our inner world" by meditating with him for a few minutes. Having never meditated before, this seemed like an odd way to begin a three-hour night class, but I was mildly curious, so I continued to listen:

Take a few deep breaths ... relax ... let go of your day up to this point ... close your eyes if you wish ... gently hold the word 'meditation' at your center for a few minutes. Welcome all thoughts associated with the word 'meditation' as opportunities for creative reflection ... If your mind goes too far astray (for example, you find yourself standing in front of the snack machine at break time, trying to decide between baked barbeque chips and a snicker's bar), then say to yourself, 'oh, I've drifted from my center, I will now go back to my center,' and silently repeat the word 'meditation.' I will announce when to bring the meditation to a close in a few minutes.

Afterwards, he invited us to share something about our meditation experience with the class. About three or four of my classmates eventually spoke up, saying things like: “That was the first time I ever meditated,” “It was relaxing,” and “How do I get my mind to stop wandering?” For each comment or question, I noticed Dr. B. affirming and thanking the student for their contribution. I also noticed a shift in the classroom atmosphere since we began some fifteen minutes ago. Looking around the room, almost everyone appeared more relaxed and attentive. Perhaps they were as curious as I was about this strange professor that began the first day of the semester with classroom meditation.

I introduce this meditation as a listening practice for several reasons. First, the meditation helps students transition from their often-busy day to the learning context of the classroom. In slowing down, breathing deeper, and relaxing, students are more receptive to new ideas, including listening to the divine. Second, meditating on a specific word or phrase helps students cultivate their attention, focus, and ability to reflect on *one thing* for a short period of time. This ability to *hold something at one’s center* can translate to other listening activities, especially in the listening to the divine part of the course when centering prayer and passage meditation are introduced. Finally, meditating and discussing *one topic* at the beginning of class creates some degree of familiarity and sometimes curiosity about the topic, serving as a bridge to the topic when it is covered later in the evening.

For reflection, how might you facilitate the transition from a student’s out of class life to beginning your class in a way that students feel centered, comfortable, and ready to learn? How might you assist students in reflecting more deeply about particular course concepts using nontraditional methods of instruction like meditation? Under what conditions do you find individuals in your non-academic life most willing to dialogue? How could you intentionally create the conditions for such a dialogic atmosphere in your classroom?

NAMING THE DIVINE

How I came to name the divine as father, mother, and son began on Sunday mornings as a child, kneeling in church and gazing at the life size crucifix above the center of the altar with statues of St. Joseph and Mother Mary in alcoves on either side of the main altar. Below the crucifix, centered and at heart level with the priest standing behind the altar, is a golden colored tabernacle that houses the holy hosts. These images of the divine are etched in my memory ... the divine son suffering, the divine father providing, the divine mother giving life, and the divine intermingling with the human through the consummation of the holy hosts. As I grew up, I came to know and experience the divine in other ways. For example, through family I experience divine love. Through other people I feel a divine connection (e.g., ancestors and saints) and

divine compassion (e.g., the poor, homeless, and sick). I also experience the divine through the natural world: climbing trees, petting animals, feeling sunshine, breathing fresh cool air, smelling the sea, and gazing at stars. Similarly, all of us have experiences that shape our understanding of the divine.

In the following section I describe, from the student's point of view, how I facilitate the following: (1) Reflecting on the many faces of the divine in the major world religions, (2) Naming the divine based on students' life experiences, and (3) How to connect with, and listen to, the divine using the *Daily Spiritual Experiences Scale*.¹⁴ The instructions for the scale ask individuals to rate how often they have particular kinds of spiritual experiences each day on a scale of 1 = Never to 6 = Many times a day. Examples of some of the items include: (1) "I am spiritually touched by the beauty of creation," (2) "I experience a connection to all life," (3) "I feel God's love for me directly" (the instructions make it clear that if the term "God" is uncomfortable for some individuals, then they can "substitute another word that calls to mind the divine or holy for you."), and (4) "I feel thankful for my blessings."

We (students) just finished the section of the course on listening to nature, and we were beginning the last section of the course called *listening to the divine*. I was a bit nervous about this part of the course since I didn't really know if I believed in God or any other form of organized religion for that matter. Our meditation word for the day was *divine*. I just couldn't think of anything meaningful related to the word divine.

After the meditation, some classmates shared their ideas about the divine, and then Dr. B. suggested, "Let's take some time to consider what other *religions* name as divine." We gave him a bunch of names, and he wrote them on the white board: God, Goddess, Father, Son, Holy Spirit, Allah, Shakti, Creator, Spirit, Adoni, Jehovah, Yahweh ... I didn't believe in any of them. Dr. B. continued, "So we see that different religions have many ways to name the divine. What about those people that do not affiliate with an organized religion, but still consider themselves *spiritual*. What names might they use for the divine?" We came up with Divine Light, the Force, Energy, Higher Self, and Mother Nature. These names seemed closer to what I believed as divine, but I still wasn't sure. Dr. B. added, "Still others may not consider themselves *religious* or *spiritual* (e.g., agnostic or atheistic), but even these folks have ideals in life, values, ethics, and/or a philosophy that they live by. Perhaps one of these ideals they might name as sacred, holy, or what I would call *divine*, for example, Love, Truth, Beauty, Harmony ... I was starting to get a better idea of what Dr. B. means by *divine*. All of us, religious, spiritual, agnostic, atheist, or whatever, have some ideals in life, and the best and highest of those ideals are divine for us. Dr. B. wraps it up:

Notice that the *name* we choose for the divine serves as a symbol, a place holder, reminding us of the highest possible good we can imagine. The reali-

ty behind the name is what we are attempting to listen to and connect with. To begin our journey, let's ask ourselves a few questions about our idea of the divine based on Underwood's *Daily Spiritual Experiences Scale*.

After we filled out the scale, we talked more as a class, and I realized that the divine can be experienced in myself, others, and nature. I think I'm finally getting it: the divine is experienced through the SONG of life!

Naming the divine positions students to better connect with the divine. By introducing the term *divine* as the highest ideal that an individual can conceive of, a sense of inclusiveness and diversity pervades the class. I want to respect and embrace those that self-identify as religious, spiritual, agnostic, atheist, and *other*. As each student begins to name their ideas about the divine, I remind them that it is okay to keep their naming of the divine confidential. They can share their name for the divine or not, as they see fit. I do not ask students to share their divine name in class, although some choose to do so during our discussions. In the three times I've taught the listening course over the last three years, I have yet to meet a student that could not name at least one thing that they value in life, something that is *sacred* or *holy* for them. Once students name their idea of the divine, I introduce methods to connect with and listen to the divine. In the following sections, I will cover three of these methods of listening to the divine: discerning consolations/desolations, sacred reading as *lectio divina*, and praying in color. In addition to these three methods, there are many other methods for listening and connecting with the divine that I introduce in the course through the home study resources, and through class activities/discussions such as (1) Dancing the five rhythms,¹⁵ (2) Chanting,¹⁶ (3) Centering prayer,¹⁷ and (4) Passage meditation.¹⁸

For reflection, travel back in time to childhood and teenage years, and query yourself: what kinds of images and names for the divine did you experience through parents/caregivers, relatives, teachers, friends, books, television, radio, movies, social media, art, dance, concerts, and religious/spiritual services? How have these experiences of the divine influenced your present ideas about the divine? How do you currently name the divine as the highest possible ideal that you can conceive of? What methods do you use daily, weekly, or otherwise, to listen to and connect with your idea of the divine?

CONSOLATIONS AND DESOLATIONS

I struggled to discern the voice of the divine in my early twenties, feeling the pull toward both marriage and priesthood. In my spiritual tradition, one cannot embrace both vocations simultaneously. I sought counsel with the parish priest, Father George, who suggested a thirty-day discernment process known as an Ignatian retreat. I had not the time or funds for such an endeavor, so he asked if I would consider a six-month version of the retreat where I

met with him once a week for spiritual direction (a process by which one individual journeys with another to help them listen the voice of the divine through prayer and dialogue to interpret divine signs in the individual's life and to assist in the discovery of divine action for a particular situation and/or to discern a vocation for life¹⁹). The price was right—free—and I was willing to invest extended time in prayer and reflection every day for six months, along with weekly, one-hour meetings, to discern my vocation. At the end of six months, we discerned that the divine was calling me to the vocation of marriage, and two years later Father George presided at our wedding.

Part of the Ignatian discernment process is learning to listen to the movement of the divine spirit, especially moments of consolation and desolation. *Consolations* are moments where we sense the goodness in life, and *desolations* are the seemingly bad times in life (e.g., when we fall short of personal expectations, and when we experience suffering). These moments may be associated with specific events, feelings, thoughts, dreams, or intuitions. Saint Ignatius of Loyola originally developed the spiritual exercises that have been taught by the Jesuit religious order in the Catholic Church for hundreds of years. For my six-month discernment process, I used *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*.²⁰ Since that time, the best resource I've found on Ignatian spirituality is *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything*.²¹ For specific instructions on listening for consolations and desolations of the divine spirit, I direct students to *Sleeping with Bread*.²²

To introduce students to listening to the divine through moments of consolation and desolation, I recount a story about St. Ignatius that might sound like this from a student's point of view: Today, after we meditated and bounced around some ideas about the words *consolation* and *desolation*, the professor pulled up a chair to the middle of the classroom and began telling us a story about some guy called Saint Ignatius:

Ignatius of Loyola is a saint in the Catholic tradition that lived during the time of the middle ages. He was a soldier when his leg was permanently injured by a cannon ball in battle. During his long convalescence, he read a book on the lives of the saints. Inspired by their lives, he gave up the life of a soldier and dedicated his life to God. After many years of soul searching and traveling, a vision for his life became clear and he eventually founded a religious order called the Society of Jesus (or Jesuits) with a small company of friends. From humble beginnings, he would write ideas that were later collected into *The Spiritual Exercises*. One cornerstone of the spiritual exercises is cultivating the capacity to listen to the divine or, in Ignatius' language, the ability to *discern* the movement of the Spirit. For us, that means being able to listen to the divine through moments of consolation and desolation. I draw on this tradition to invite you to listen to the divine in your life, to sense how the experiences in your everyday life are consoling (e.g., blessings, thanksgivings, gratitudes²³) and desolating (e.g., difficulties, hardships, disap-

pointments, sufferings). Since this is an evening class, I invite you to go over your day, considering the morning, afternoon, and evening periods. Try to identify at least one thing you are grateful for (a consolation) and at least one thing that you wish you could have improved (a desolation) for each of the three time periods.

After about five minutes of reviewing my day, the professor asked everyone to meet in small groups and share one consolation and one desolation, and then discuss how we felt about the process. After about ten minutes, each group shared something with the class. Most groups talked about their consolations, but one group asked a hard question: “What do you do when you have discerned a terrifying desolation? How is that part of the divine?” Dr. B. responded, “Desolations are opportunities for growth, and often growth can be challenging and/or painful.” He also talked about Carl Jung’s idea of making friends with our *shadow*. I like the idea of looking back over the day and finding the good stuff, but I’m not so sure about purposely looking for bad stuff. Sometimes at night before I go to sleep, bad stuff just pops up, so it would be good to have a way to deal with that. Maybe I need to spend more time trying to make friends with my shadow?

There are several ways to ritualize the practice of listening to the divine by discerning consolations and desolations. For instance, at the end of the day before sleep, one might reflect on and name one consolation and one desolation for each of the three main periods of the day (morning, afternoon, and evening) as suggested in the previous student activity. Alternatively, one could divide the day into three hour increments (e.g., 6–9 am, 9–12 pm, 12–3 pm, and so forth). Or, if a more intensive discernment experience is desired, one could perform an hour by hour review (e.g., 6–7 am, 7–8 am, and so on).

In addition to ritualizing the practice, I encourage students to record the specific behaviors that elicit feeling of consolation and/or desolation in a journal. To process these journal writings, I recommend students review their journal entries at the end of each week and focus on one consolation or desolation, exploring it with further meditation and/or journaling.²⁴ When providing advice to students on integrating the desolations of their shadow side into their personality, some caution needs to be communicated. I’m not a trained therapist, so the advice I provide for *shadow work* is mainly referencing credible sources for working with the shadow side of our personality. I use *Inner Work*²⁵ to explain Jung’s concept of *shadow* and how to make friends with our shadow. In simplistic terms, the shadow is the repressed and often negatively perceived part of ourselves that needs to be integrated into our personality. Another resource for shadow work is *Integral Life Practice*.²⁶ For students experiencing particularly troubling thoughts, images, and/or sensations because of listening to the divine speak through their shadow, I suggest that they follow up with campus counseling services and/or a religious/spiritual elder in their faith tradition.

For reflection, what method do you use to listen to and discern the good and the bad, the true and the false, the consolations and the desolations in your life? How does your image/naming of the divine influence your ability to clearly observe the consolations and desolations in your life? Do you regularly “count your blessings/gratitudes/consolations?” If not, how might you incorporate such a practice into your life? What current desolation represents a shadow in your life, and how might you integrate this shadow into your personality and relationships in a more holistic way?

LISTENING TO THE DIVINE THROUGH *LECTIO DIVINA*

The Man at the Well changed my life. Standing not more than five feet tall, snowy haired and wrinkled, with dancing eyes beneath black framed glasses, Monsignor Chet Michael was a dynamo of divine energy. I met the *man at the Well* Retreat Center. As a priest and retreat director in his eighties, he described the workings of the Holy Spirit to a group of about twenty-five of us, sitting in a circle in the great room at the Well. His teachings and counsel during that weekend mark a high point on my spiritual journey. One of the important spiritual practices he shared during the retreat was how to listen to the divine through *lectio divina*. Developed by monks in the middle ages, *lectio divina* is a method of divine reading applied to sacred scripture. Monsignor taught this method as the *Four R's*: Read, Reflect, Respond, and Rest. The “Four R’s” in Monsignor Michael’s method of teaching *lectio divina* are sometimes taught using their traditional language: *lectio, meditatio, oratio, and contemplation*.²⁷ For a practical guide to the method of *lectio divina*, I recommend *Too Deep for Words*.²⁸

In this section, a student describes the experience of learning how to listen to the divine using Monsignor Michael’s method of *lectio divina*. “This evening,” the professor said, “We are going to listen to the divine through sacred reading.” After sipping some herbal tea that smelled like candied peppermints, he continued:

This special type of reading is called *lectio divina* or sacred reading. It’s different than the way you read a textbook or the way you might scan a social media site. This method of reading applies specifically to divinely inspired texts like those of the major world religions, for example, Christianity’s *New Testament*, the Jewish *Torah*, the Muslim *Qu’ran*, the Hindu *Vedas* and the Buddhist *Dhammapada*. I realize that each of these religious/spiritual faiths have a number of other sacred texts. The naming of these particular texts is meant to be illustrative not exhaustive. You can also use this method for any text, like poems, literature, or musical lyrics, that you believe are divinely inspired.

I’m not a particularly religious person, so I’m not sure how I’m going to do this *lectio* thing. My first problem is that I can’t think of any sacred text that I

really want to read. I used to know some poems by heart in grade school, but I've long forgotten those, and I don't think any of them were divinely inspired anyway. My train of thought is interrupted by Dr. B. writing on the white board in red letters: "The 4 R's of *Lectio Divina*." Under this title, one beneath the other, he wrote four capital "R's. Next to the first "R" he added the letters "ead": *Read*. Then he said:

There are four "R's" to the method of *lectio*. The first is *Read*. We read a short section (a few lines or paragraph) of a text that we believe to be divinely inspired. We read s l o w l y, as if we are a connoisseur sipping a fine wine, savoring the flavor. As we read, when we discover something that tastes good, we stay with it in the second step by *Reflecting* on the meaning of the text. Metaphorically, we let the wine swish around in our mouth, enjoying the taste until there is no more taste (meaning) to be savored. After considering the meanings of the text (e.g., literal and symbolic), we ask ourselves: what *Response* does this passage require of me. That is, what action am I being called to? Once we commit to a concrete resolution, we *Rest* with the passage, not trying to do anything in particular ... just be. If we have more time, we return to the passage to find another tasty sip of wine and make our way through the four steps again. In just a moment, we will have a chance to practice the four "R's" of *lectio*, but first, are there any questions?

To provide students with experience in using the method of *lectio divina*, I project on the classroom screen a divinely inspired poem from the book *Prayers for a Thousand Years*.²⁹ Part of the poem reads:

May we listen to one another in openness and mercy.
May we listen to plants and animals in wonder and respect.
May we listen to our own hearts in love and forgiveness.
May we listen to God [the divine] in quietness and awe.

Notice that the poem contains all the elements of listening to the SONG of life: self, ("our own hearts"), others ("one another"), nature ("plants and animals"), and God or the divine ("God"). I allot three minutes for students to engage in each of the four R's of *lectio divina* (twelve minutes total). At the end of each segment, I invite students to "bring to a close" that step and record something if they need to before proceeding to the next step. After concluding the fourth *Resting* step, we discuss the process and what we have learned. One student remarked, "That went by way too fast ... I don't feel like I had enough time ... I didn't even get past the first stanza in the poem." I replied, "It is okay if you don't finish the poem. Remember, the purpose is to listen for the divine nudge, to find something that speaks to you. Once you've found something, you *savor it* before moving on." As for the time pressure, I encourage students to experiment with the method outside of class when they can allot at least twen-

ty to thirty minutes for the practice, and then compare the extended time outside of class with the more compressed time in class. Which conditions optimize the ability to listen and connect with the divine and why?

Another student playfully remarked, “This is deep. You can really get a lot out of a few words. We should read our textbooks this way.” Another student countered, “No way. It would take way too long, and those college books aren’t divinely inspired anyway!” I could only smile in agreement. Overall, students are uniformly surprised at how a short phrase from a sacred text can be the gateway to divine vistas, meanings, and insights for positive change in their daily life.

For reflection, consider performing an age regression experiment. What kinds of books, poems, or musical lyrics did you hold as sacred as a child ... adolescent ... young adult ... middle aged adult ... older adult? When you compare sacred writings across your lifespan, do you notice any theme that ties the different stages of your life together? In contrast, how have your views about sacred writings evolved over time, that is, how are they unique or different for each stage of life? Finally, if you were to pick a sacred passage for practicing *lectio divina* sometime within the next week, what passage would you choose to read, reflect, respond, and rest in ... why this one?

FROM OM TO MANDALAS TO PRAYING IN COLOR³⁰

Many years ago, I was blessed to have an Indian student named Malik (not his real name) in my *Introduction to Public Speaking* course. As with most public speaking courses, there are a number of speeches, and for his demonstration speech, Malik taught us how to meditate by drawing the Sanskrit lettering for *Om*³¹ while silently chanting the sound of *Om*.³² Soothing instrumental Indian music, harmonium drones, sitar, and *tabla* beats, played in the background while he passed out white sheets of paper. He demonstrated how to draw the beautiful Sanskrit pattern representing the sound of *Om* on the white board. He then instructed us to silently chant *Om* while slowly drawing the five-part *Om* pattern on our paper. When our drawing was complete, he suggested we retrace the *Om* form, or visually retrace it with our eyes as we continued the silent chant. After about three minutes, he explained the meaning of the word *Om* and concluded his speech by challenging us to meditate by chanting and drawing a colored *Om* outside of class. Malik’s presentation inspired me to develop a devotional practice of listening to the divine by drawing colorful mandalas. In Tibetan Buddhism, the mandala is a method for “gaining wisdom and compassion and generally is depicted as a tightly balanced, geometric composition wherein deities reside.”³³ In my personal mandala practice, I set a prayerful intention, imagine that I am co-creating with the divine, and let the colored markers flow into a mandala pattern. In the hundreds of mandala’s I’ve co-created, no two are the same. *Praying in color* is

similar to the colored mandala practice inspired by my Indian student's drawing of *Om*.

In the following section, a student in the listening class describes learning how to listen to the divine by praying in color. We meditated on the phrase *Tree of Life* at the beginning of class this evening. My classmates and I shared reflections about the tree of life: the cycle of life that a tree goes through each year, how the tree roots, trunk, limbs, branches, and leaves are all part of a living system, and how trees stand tall like a living being. Afterward, Dr. B. showed us the *Contemplative Tree of Life*³⁴ and talked about the branches representing different ways to listen to the divine through contemplative practices. The contemplative practices³⁵ we experienced tonight left me feeling somewhat sleepy as we move into the last hour of class at 9 pm, but when Dr. B. started passing out card stock paper and crayons, I felt my energy level perk up a bit. He began:

We will introduce one more way to listen to the divine tonight called *praying in color*. First let's watch a short video clip from Sybil Mac Beth to introduce the idea of praying in color. On the video, you'll notice that she doesn't like to pray in a formal way, but she does enjoy doodling.³⁶ Apparently, while doodling one day, she wrote the name of a sick friend inside of her doodle, and then continued making doodles and coloring around the name. Afterward, she realized that she was praying for the person as she doodled. She was praying in color!

When we finished watching the video, Dr. B. quipped, "Let's have some fun and 'doodle around' while listening to the divine." To begin praying in color, the professor suggested we write our name or symbol for the divine in the center of the page, draw a circle around it, and add our name and the name(s) of anyone else we would like to connect with the divine on the paper. After positioning the names on the paper, he suggested we let the divine inspire us to add other artwork (e.g., shapes, landscapes, animals, other symbols, and colors). After about 5 minutes, the professor asked us to wrap up our drawings, but we all protested: "We need more time to doodle!" He gave us another five minutes, and then we shared our pictures in small groups. I was really impressed with the artwork of my group members. Their designs were so beautiful. In hearing the stories behind the designs, I could see how we were listening to the divine as we prayed in color.

Students genuinely enjoy listening to the divine when *praying in color*. They become like little children in a *free school* kindergarten, creating whatever is on their mind and heart. Some of the completed colored pictures look like artwork that could be in a gallery. Other pictures, like mine, are more modest, but still beautiful. When we discuss the process of praying in color, students generally report that they don't feel like they are praying in a formal way, but they do feel like the experience is *prayerful*. This suggests to me that listening

to the divine in prayer is not limited to traditional formal prayers like petition, thanksgiving, or praise, but that prayer as listening to the divine is a much broader idea. There are many other traditional and nontraditional forms of prayer. For example, twenty-one forms of prayer are listed in *Prayer*,³⁷ including prayers of examen, tears, covenant, adoration, rest, healing, and radical prayer. *Prayer as listening to the divine* can also be expressed in a variety of art forms including: coloring, drawing, painting, sculpting, whittling, pottery, dancing, singing, Ikebana (Japanese flower arrangement), and writing poetry. Moreover, in the field of Communication, prayer as listening to the divine is explained in the Direct Divine Communication Model.³⁸

For reflection, what kinds of creative art do you enjoy? If you do not regularly engage in any type of artwork, consider the list of arts forms for listening to the divine in the previous section, and consider making some space in your life to experiment with listening to the divine through art sometime this week. For those engaged in creative art, what kind of intention might you add, before or during your creative artistic expression, that reframes the activity as listening to the divine? How does adding an intention change your experience of creating art? For example, do you feel a closer connection with the divine, perhaps a sense of co-creating with the divine? How might you translate your personal experience of listening to the divine through creating art into the classroom context of listening to the divine?

CONCLUSION

Approaching death led me to the place of immense joy and deep satisfaction in teaching the course *Listening to the SONG of Life* to undergraduate students. Throughout the SONG, students learn to cultivate the abilities to listen to (1) *Self*, discovering their personal motivations, beliefs, and dreams, (2) *Others*, nonjudgmentally observing and empathizing with other's feelings and needs, (3) *Nature*, exploring the beauty and wonders of the natural world, and (4) *God (the divine)*, naming our highest ideal(s) as divine, and developing a relationship with the divine through experiential listening practices.

In this autoethnography, I narrate stories about learning to listen to the divine song as part of the course *Listening to the SONG of Life*. These stories are organized as five in-class experiential activities. In the first activity, we listen to the divine through *meditation*, allowing us to hold a word/phrase at our center, nonjudgmentally letting the creative possibilities unfold. Second, we listen to our highest ideals, hopes, and dreams, and *name* them as divine. Third, we listen to our *consolations and desolations* at the end of the day, awakening ourselves to divine blessings, and learning to make friends with our shadow side. Fourth, we listen to sacred texts through *lectio divina*, taking in the nourishment and committing ourselves to pro-social action. Fifth, we listen to the divine by *praying in color*, visualizing and creating connections between ourselves, others,

and the divine in a creative art form. Meditating with a purpose, naming the divine, reflecting on consolations/desolations, using *lectio divina*, and praying in color are all pathways to listen more intentionally and deeply to the divine. In addition, there are many other resources for connecting with the divine.³⁹

I hope this autoethnographic story of listening to the divine song as part of the greater SONG of life provides teachers with ideas for how to incorporate one or more parts of the listening activities into their own classes. May these pathways of listening to the divine inspire teachers of listening to develop a greater capacity to listen to the divine song in their own life so that they can teach from a divine center, igniting and enkindling the divine flame in the lives of their students. And may our ability to listen to the divine song lead the way to a greater sense of purpose in listening to ourselves, a more compassionate and caring listening disposition toward others, a wondrous and respectful listening to the natural world of earth, plants, and animals, and a renewed sense of our connection and understanding of what it means to be part of the divine mystery of all life.

NOTES

¹ For complete autoethnography about the entire *SONG of Life* listening course, see E. James Baesler, "Listening to the SONG of Life: An Autoethnographic Account of Teaching an Undergraduate Listening Course" (manuscript under review, 2017).

² Robert Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990).

³ H. L. Goodall, Jr., *Divine Signs: Connecting Spirit to Community* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996).

⁴ Carol Ellis, *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography* (Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 2004); Ronald Pelias, *A Methodology of the Heart: Evoking Academic and Daily Life* (New York: Alta Mira, 2004); Heewon Chang and Drick Boyd, eds., *Spirituality in Higher Education: Autoethnographies* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2011); Arthur Bochner, *Coming to Narrative: A Personal History of Paradigm Change in the Human Sciences* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2014).

⁵ See Ric Masten's poem "Blacksmith" in his book *Let it be a Dance: Words and One-liners* (Carmel, CA: Carmel Publishing, 2001), 97.

⁶ E. James Baesler, "Lesson 1: READ FIRST: Purple Cow Comm Research Methods, Traditional Academic Research Culture, Syllabus, Re-wiring the Brain for Positivity," *Purple Cow Research Methods Lesson Plans*, September 9, 2013, <http://purplecowresmethods.blogspot.com/2013/09/normal-0-false-false-false-en-us-x-none.html>.

⁷ E. James Baesler, "Prayer Life of a Professor," *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, no. 120 (2009): 9-16.

⁸ Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998); Jane Vella, *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach: The Power of Dialogue in Educating Adults* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002); Seth Godin's *Stop Stealing Dreams* is available online at <http://www.sethgodin.com/sg/docs/StopStealingDreamsSCREEN.pdf>.

⁹ Laura Janusik, "Listening Pedagogy: Where do We go from Here?" in *Listening and Human Communication in the 21st Century*, ed. Andrew Wolvin (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010): 193-224.

¹⁰ Laura Janusik, Lynn Fullenkamp, and Lauren Partese, "Listening Facts with References," *International Listening Association*, accessed December 19, 2016, <http://d1025403.site.myhosting.com/files.listen.org/Facts.htm>.

¹¹ *Ibid.* See also Alfie Kohn, "The Case against Grades" in *De-testing + De-grading Schools: Authentic Alternatives to Accountability and Standardization*, eds. Joe Bower and P. L. Thomas (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), 143-153; Joe Bower, "Reduced to Numbers," in *De-testing + De-grading Schools: Authentic Alternatives to Accountability and Standardization*, eds. Joe Bower and P. L. Thomas (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), 154-168.

¹² Gerald May, *The Open Way: A Meditation Handbook* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977).

- ¹³ E. James Baesler, "Meditation in the Classroom: Cultivating Attention and Insight," *Listening Education* 6, no. 1 (2015): 8-15.
- ¹⁴ Lynn Underwood, *Spiritual Connection in Daily Life: Sixteen Little Questions that Can Make a Big Difference* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2013), 218-219.
- ¹⁵ Gabrielle Roth, *Sweat Your Prayers: Movement as Spiritual Practice* (New York: Tarcher Press, 1998).
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- ¹⁸ Eknath Easwaran, *Meditation: A Simple Eight Point Program for Translating Spiritual Ideals into Daily Life* (Tomas, CA: Niligri Press, 1993).
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- ²⁰ David Fleming, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius: A Literal Translation and a Contemporary Reading* (Chestnut Hill, MA: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1978).
- ²¹ James Martin, *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything: A Spirituality for Real Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010).
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- ²⁴ For journaling, I recommend three sources: (1) Ira Progoff, *At a Journal Workshop: Writing to Access the Power of the Unconscious and Evoke Creative Ability* (Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1992); (2) Louise De Salvo, *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling our Stories Transforms our Lives* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999); and (3) James Pennebaker, *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions* (New York: Guilford Press, 1990).
- ²⁵ Robert Johnson, *Inner Work: Using Dreams and Active Imagination for Personal Growth* (New York: Harper Collins, 1986).
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- ²⁷ E. James Baesler, "A Model of Interpersonal Christian Prayer," *Journal of Communication and Religion*, 22 (1999): 40-64.
- ²⁸ Thelma Hall, *Too Deep for Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1988).
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- ³⁰ Sybil Mac Beth, *Praying in Color: Drawing a New Path to God* (Brewster, MS: Paraclete Press, 2007).
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