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E. James Baesler

Old Dominion University, jbaesler@odu.edu

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Listening to the SONG of Life:
An Autoethnographic Account of Teaching an Undergraduate Listening Course

E. James Baesler

Old Dominion University

Norfolk, VA 23529

jbaesler@odu.edu

757.683.4866

Author Notes:

(1) The author gratefully acknowledges the life experiences and sharing of students in the first undergraduate listening course at Old Dominion University—and the sample of students that assisted in validating the reconstructed student voices which comprise the heart of this story.

(2) A previous version of this manuscript was presented in 2015 at the *International Listening Association*, Virginia Beach, VA.

Abstract

A new approach to teaching the listening course at the undergraduate level provides opportunities for students to experience the *SONG of life*. SONG is an acronym for listening to the whole of life in the contexts of Self (e.g., discerning inner wisdom), Others (e.g., connecting with feelings and needs), Nature (beholding the beauty of nature), and God (e.g., discovering and connecting with the divine). A rationale and description of the new listening course is provided followed by a chronological autoethnographic account of teaching/learning the *SONG of life* using the four contexts as verses of the SONG with twenty undergraduate students during the fall semester of 2014. Ideas for future research address validity issues and assessment of student learning.

Keywords: listening, teaching, learning, autoethnography, SONG of life

Listening to the SONG of Life

There was no undergraduate listening course in the Department of Communication and Theatre Arts at an eastern U.S. university of higher education during the 24 years that I have been a faculty member; and, I knew we needed one. This is the story of one teachers attempt to fill that need. The story is an autoethnographic account of how I conceived, created, and taught “listening to the SONG of life.”

I developed and taught the first undergraduate listening course at my home institution during the fall semester of 2014. The flyer for this new topics course depicted a pink conch shell on a sandy Caribbean beach with the following phrases written in big bold letters: “Discern inner wisdom, Connect with feelings and needs, Behold the beauty of nature, and Discover the deep divine in all...Listen with Dr. [name omitted] this Fall in Communication 495: Listening to Self, Others, Nature, and the Divine.” The *SONG of Life* is an acronym that represents listening to the whole of life in the contexts of Self (discern inner wisdom), Others (connect with feelings and needs), Nature (behold the beauty of nature), and God (the divine)(discover the deep divine in all).¹ In the next sections, I: (a) demonstrate the need for this new type of listening course by briefly reviewing literature in listening pedagogy, (b) develop specific learning goals for the course, and (c) discuss one method of assessment for “listening to the SONG of life.”

A review of listening pedagogy indicates that my home institution is typical of many institutions of higher education in the U.S. that relegate the teaching of listening to a “listening unit” in an undergraduate survey or interpersonal communication course (Janusik, 2002; Ifert Johnson & Long, 2008). Data from 1995

(Wacker & Hawkins) show that only 5 per cent of 800 institutions examined had a 72
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specific listening course. Ten years later, two convenience samples of institutions of higher education in the U.S. (n 's = 36, 20), report an improvement in the number of listening courses in that just less than half of the institutions (39 % and 45%, respectively) surveyed have an entire course devoted to listening (Janusik, 2005; Fitch-Hauser, 2005). While a decade has passed since these two research studies, my limited personal network of colleagues indicates *that there is still a considerable gap in the development of listening curricula in many communication departments in the U.S.*² Why is there such a gap in the development of listening curricula when most communication educators would probably agree with arguments supporting the necessity of developing a listening course(s) in the undergraduate curriculum (see Janusik, 2002 for arguments in support of listening pedagogy)? There are probably many reasons for the gap in the development of listening curricula such as: lack of faculty that specialize in listening pedagogy, high faculty workloads, lack of institutional funding for the development of new listening courses, competing curricular agendas, and so forth.

For those U.S. institutions of higher education that have at least one listening course in the undergraduate curriculum, many of these courses are centered on learning about listening knowledge and skills in a traditional lecture-discussion format (Worthington, 2005). Knowing about listening knowledge and skills is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for a comprehensive listening education. The missing component in most listening courses is, "...*how to teach listening so that students could not only comprehend, but also apply effective listening skills*" (Janusik, 2010, p. 202). Simply put: *Knowing about* listening is experientially distinct from *engaging in* listening. For example, defining the concept of empathy, and listing steps for displaying empathy, is a phenomenologically different experience than empathizing

with a real person in a face to face dialogue. The lack of emphasis on engagement in many listening courses is a shortcoming I address in this autoethnography by suggesting an alternative *approach that teaches students to listen to the SONG of life*.

The acronym SONG stands for the first letter in each of the following words: Self, Others, Nature, and God.³ SONG represents four conceptually distinct but related contexts of the life-world. I developed this acronym from a number of sources: (a) research in the peace literature (Baesler & Lauricella, 2013) emphasizing intrapersonal (Self), and interpersonal/group (Others) peace-making, (b) contexts from the theistic spiritual outcome survey (Richards & Bergin, 2005) measuring three types of love: Self, Others, and God, and (c) a system's perspective (Von Bertalanffy, 1969) of relationships which, for the SONG of life, I interpret to mean four interrelated ways of being in the world, each higher level subsuming the previous level(s) in a manner similar to the holarchical networks of communication described by Wilber (2006).

My intention is for students to discover and cultivate their listening skills by exploring the four interrelated contexts in SONG, for example: attending to their true self (Self), empathizing with others (Others), experiencing the wonders of nature (Nature), and discovering divine interconnections (God or the divine). Course learning goals are described on the first page of the syllabus (a complete copy of the syllabus is available from the Author upon request):

This course introduces students to Listening to the SONG (Self, Others, Nature, God/Divine) of Life through: a) Practices in exploring and developing listening competencies, b) Theoretical perspectives and models of listening, and c) Research

about listening. All three areas—practice, theory, and research—are applicable across the contexts of Self, Others, Nature, and the Divine.

For *theoretical* models of listening, we review cognitive (Bostrom, 1990), behavioral (Brownell, 2006), and relational (Pecchioni & Halone, 2000) models. For *research* about listening, we use Janusik’s (n.d.) on-line document that organizes listening research claims and evidence for fifteen different listening categories (e.g., meaning, memory, leadership, barriers, styles, and so forth). For the listening *practices*, experiential learning activities are the primary mode of inquiry. To increase their self-awareness of their listening strengths/weaknesses, students engage in a variety of listening practices (in and outside of class) and then design, execute, and reflect on ways to improve their listening competencies in each of the four listening domains of self, others, nature, and the divine. Traditional listening theories and research are “tested in mini-experiments” and findings are recorded in “learning journals.” In addition, for “home study” each week, students are presented with a list of resources related to one of the listening contexts in the SONG of life and asked to *explore* the resources, *record* what they have learned in their learning journals, and *share* these learnings in small groups the following class period. To assist students in home study, the following criteria, posed as questions, are used to guide their journal writing:

1) What areas among the course resources for the week interested you the most and why?

2) What did you meditate on, and what insights/learnings resulted from your meditation?

3) What questions popped up, and what answer did you find for one of the questions?

4) What experiential learning activity did you engage in this week; what did you learn?

5) What kinds of feelings did your learning experiences elicit this week and why?

6) Anything else you want to share...?

After describing the learning goals, and the use of a journal as a method of assessment, the end of this section of the syllabus reads:

I encourage you to be open to new experiences in listening to yourself, others, nature, and the divine—this allows for the possibility of growth, life, and cultivating new sensory awareness, attitudes, and actions related to listening in your everyday life...you may be surprised at what you uncover/discover in the course of our 16 weeks together.

The semester long listening course is organized as a sixteen-week *SONG of life*. The SONG is divided into four *verses*: listening to self, others, nature, and the divine. In the middle of the SONG there is a *refrain*, consisting of a midterm journal assessment, recitation of and listening to student learning poems, and individual student conferences. Likewise, there is a *refrain* at the end of the SONG: an end of term journal assessment, poem, and conference.

The Story of Listening to the SONG of Life ⁴

Two Decades of Planting Seeds

Two stories from pre- and post-tenure time periods illustrate the idea of *planting seeds* that eventually led to the development of the SONG of life listening course.

Pre-tenure, I found myself on a rugged mountainous stretch of interstate, bouncing in the driver's seat of an old U-Haul truck, moving across the country with

my wife from Tucson, Arizona to Norfolk, Virginia to begin my academic career at Old Dominion University. About a year later, I navigated winding mountainous roadways from the driver's seat of a 1976 Chevy Nova. With navigational assistance from my wife, we found our campsite among the sweet-smelling woodlands of pine, oak, and maple. Looking across the campsite at my wife's growing abdomen, ripe from the *seed we planted* six months ago, I was reminded of a *seed I had planted* before we began the trip. Reaching into the bottom of my backpack, I felt for the seed, a small paperback book. Lifting the book through the soil of other articles in my backpack, I read the title above the Sanskrit writing that decorated the front cover, *The mantram handbook* (Easwaren, 1997). I began reflectively reading about mantram prayer for the first time. Little did I know how this simple prayer would help me *listen* to, and cope with, the stresses of tenure, fatherhood, marriage, and illness through the next two decades. I imagine the mantram seed planted as an acorn on that campout, and I visualize the tree now, inside of me, like the child inside of my wife, well rooted, steadily growing, maturing into something mysterious that would eventually lead me to teaching the SONG of life.

Moving from the pre-tenure years to my immediate post tenure year, another significant *seed was planted* on a Sunday afternoon after a church service. A wise elder in the community announced that she would be showing a video after the service about a local retreat center. I had not been on a retreat since high school days about fifteen years prior, and I was intrigued by the possibility of exploring my adult spirituality on retreat. I was the only one out of over 200 people that showed up after the service to watch a somewhat fuzzy VHS tape play for five minutes on a small television screen set atop a mobile cart near the corner of an otherwise unoccupied room. The video describes a retreat center on ten acres positioned

beside a small lake in [name of place] County. Over time I would discover more riches in nature at the retreat center than the video could show: trees of oak, pine, walnut, mimosa...a variety of birds—geese, robin, chickadee, sparrow...flowers in abundance—rose, dandelion, tulip, peppermint...different kinds of animals—ground squirrel, brown patched rabbit, white tailed deer...and insects--sky blue dragonfly, monarch butterfly, and garden spider. The video also showed the inside of the hermitages that I would eventually stay at. Rough wooden walls surround a bed, chair and table, and bathroom—austere but adequate. The main retreat center is set up with self-serving meals in a kitchen area for solo retreatants like me as well as larger spaces to accommodate groups. There was a private library of religious/spiritual books and tapes that appealed to me, and a small chapel. Inside the chapel, a brightly colored stained-glass mural of the retreat center rests against one wall opposite of a bible and three chairs on the other side. In the center stands an oak colored wooden altar with a white candle sitting on top that lights up a small tabernacle. I made it a ritual to visit the chapel at the beginning and end of each retreat, and over the years, this space became a quiet oasis of refreshment for me where I listened to the SONG of life.

This *seed* in the unusual form of an elderly woman showing a five-minute video of a retreat center led to me journeying on solo and group spiritual retreats at *The Well Retreat Center [The Well]* over thirty times in the next twenty years. Over the course of years, through *listening* in silence and meditation at [place] retreat center and at home, all of life, especially in nature, began to speak to me in a new way. Other *seeds* planted at the *The Well* sprouted and eventually produced fruit in the form of academic research and publications. For example, on one retreat, well past midnight in the private library of the *The Well*, I discovered the many books on

prayer that would eventually lead to a new line of academic research on prayer that has sustained me for over twenty years. I envision my retreats at the *The Well* as nourishing a *Tree of Life* with different kinds of fruit on its branches—some love fruit is for family, other creative inspirational fruit is for academics, and one particular kind of fruit, perhaps a pomegranate with its many ruby red seeds, developed into the course that I call “listening to the SONG of life.”

These two stories, the pre-tenure mantram story and the post-tenure retreat story, mark a twenty-year period of spiritual renewal, resulting in many changes in my personal and professional lives (see Baesler, 2009 for details). Looking back over the last 20 years since that post-tenure transition period, I see the SONG of life as a gestalt, with different *figures* of the SONG standing against the *foreground* of life. I came to a deeper understanding of myself (SONG as Self) by listening to my feelings, needs, and experiences through a special kind of journaling (see Progoff, 1975). I discovered and incorporated the nonviolent communication teachings of Rosenberg (2005), in particular empathizing with others (SONG as Other), which later folded into the content of a peace class that I have taught for several years. My connection with nature was further revitalized four summers ago when I imagined, and began creating, an edible food forest (Hemenway, 2009). I started climbing trees and digging holes again—my two favorite non-academic activities as a boy growing in Sunnyvale, California. With the help of permaculture teachers like Hemenway, and Fukuoka (1978), I found a new appreciation of, and connection with, trees, earth, and the many wonders of nature (SONG as Nature). Lastly, the growth in my personal prayer life with God (SONG as God) translated into a professional passion for prayer research (Baesler, 2012a). When I finally decided to teach the listening class, these four contexts of my life-world converged into a gestalt that I dubbed “listening to the

SONG of life.” This two-decade gestation period finally gave birth to the SONG of life which became the organizing framework and foundation for the SONG of life listening course.

Birth Pangs

To paraphrase my dissertation director Judee K. Burgoon, when a door closes, look for an open window, and jump! The door to teaching my proposed graduate level class in listening, with a heavy emphasis on theory and research, began closing two weeks before the beginning of the semester when my department chair informed me that the class was cancelled due to insufficient enrollment. Looking for an open window, I jumped! I secured permission from my department chair to offer the course at the *undergraduate level*. That meant revamping the entire class in less than two weeks. This time pressure provided the creative inspiration needed to change the course emphasis from a graduate theory and research course to an undergraduate course that centers on experiential activities. Within one week of advertising the undergraduate listening class, the enrollment increased, and the new undergraduate listening class was officially born.

Narrating the SONG: Assumptions, Description, and Elaboration

In the following sections, I provide the reader with a sense of what it means to BE in the sixteen-week undergraduate “listening to the SONG of life” class. *I describe and elaborate on listening activities associated with each verse of the SONG of life, and on what I learned from students in class discussions.* The descriptions and elaborations that make up the story of my experience of the SONG of life in the classroom are marked by several assumptions/qualifications. First, the story is necessarily incomplete because it represents the single viewpoint of one instructor (there were 20 other student viewpoints in the classroom). That is, the story is based

on my selection of the most important/meaningful activities and learnings. Second, the story is partly based on memories of conversations with students in and outside of class during the term. As I began writing the story only a few days after the last class meeting, there are probably many kinds of memorial distortions operative in the selection and narration of classroom events and discussions (Baesler, 1991). Third, I acknowledge times when I've felt the inspiration of the Creative Spirit in writing the story, a more mysterious and intuitive kind of influence that I cannot fully explain. Finally, the story is rooted in my worldview/standpoint as full professor of Communication trained in social science, aligned with the interspiritual mystical tradition (Teasdale, 2001), and imbued with my life-experiences as a middle-aged, Caucasian, husband and father.

The story would be more complete if I could include the voices of students that journeyed with me during the semester, but due to complications with the human subjects committee, I am not ethically able to include excerpts from student journal writings and poems. However, I do have my personal memory and class notes. Using these resources, I reconstruct student voices by paraphrasing their words. As a partial validation of these reconstructed student voices, I obtained human subject's approval to survey former students from the listening course. I invited students via electronic mail to rate an amalgamation of six student excerpts from the present autoethnography. Twenty-five percent (5 of 20) of students completed the survey. In 93 percent of the cases, student excerpts were rated as "consistent with my experience in the class" rather than one of the other choices provided: "partially consistent," "not consistent," or "no recollection of this statement." This evidence suggests that at least some of the reconstructed student voices in this autoethnography align with the experience of students from the course and are not

simply memory distortions based on instructor bias. *Ultimately, my purpose in narrating this story is to provide readers with teachings, learnings, and insights that may benefit those interested in incorporating one or more verses of the SONG of life into their teaching-research-service.*

SONG as meditation. It is Thursday evening, almost 7pm, and students begin to file in for the once a week listening class that begins at 7:10 and ends at 9:50. Some students notice the word *LISTEN* printed in big bold blue letters on the whiteboard. “Welcome, I’m Dr. B...I invite you to ‘drop out’ of your digital world for a few minutes, and ‘drop in’ to your inner world by meditating with me.” Some preliminary instructions on meditation are given (for detailed classroom meditation instructions see Baesler, 2015a), and the whole class sits quietly, holding the word *LISTEN* at their center for a few minutes. Softly I speak, “It’s time to bring your mediation to a close...slowly open your eyes...take a deep breath...stretch if you like...I invite you to share something from your mediation with the class.” Hesitantly, one student raises their hand and speaks...eventually, others join in: “That was the first time I’ve been able to relax all day”, “I’ve never meditated before”, “My thoughts kept jumping around”, and “I wondered what you meant by ‘listen,’ like, maybe that’s the whole point, we need to listen more.” All responses are affirmed and encouraged.

The pattern of meditating on a word/phrase at the beginning of class followed by an invitation to dialogue and listen serves multiple purposes. First, meditation assists students in transitioning from an often full and stressful day to a more relaxed and open classroom learning environment. Second, the skill of focusing and attending to *one thing* transfers to other listening skills such as developing a sense of centered presence, and empathically connecting with a communication partner.

Third, meditating on a word/phrase creates a sense of wonder and curiosity for some

students, preparing them for class activities and discussion. Finally, sharing meditation experiences provides intellectual fuel for the often unexpected and rewarding dialogues about listening to the SONG of life.

SONG of the self: Silence and solitude. What does it mean to “listen below the noise”? I asked students during our second week of class. Students easily identified with the term “noise,” but the entire phrase “listening below the noise” was more difficult to grasp. Students were quick to enumerate external noises—traffic outside of the building, chatter of talk from the hallway, the hum of the projector in the classroom. Students also considered how social media can be *noise*: “I feel like I have to respond to every text right when they get it,” “I need to update my Facebook status at least once a week,” “I have to see if the people I’m following on Twitter have any new posts,” and “I’ve got to check out my friend’s pics on Instagram.” Only then did some students go deeper and talk about internal noises: “Gurgles in my stomach,” “I’m just itching to go on break,” and “Maybe my own random thoughts are a kind of noise.” At this point, I introduced the idea of “listening below the noise” as LeClaire’s (2010) way of expressing being alone, in silence and solitude with the Self. Some students seemed intrigued by the idea; others found the prospect of listening solitude and silence “boring,” “tolerable,” and “terrifying.” Reminding them that this is a course in listening, I asked them to remain open and receptive to LeClaire’s ten-minute audio story. After listening to the story, many student attitudes shifted: “How could she stay silent for a whole 24 hours?”, “Twice monthly?”, “For over twenty years?!” , “ I don’t get how being silent made her more in tune with others?”, and “How can she stay comfortable in her own skin with all those thoughts running around?” Curiosity and wonder in the form of questions now pervaded the atmosphere in

class—just the type of motivation I needed before inviting them to listen to the silence and solitude within themselves.

I challenged students to carve out some time (not less than one, but no more than six hours) the following week to be silent in a private quiet place without talking to anyone, and without the influence of media (no texting, facebooking, gaming, skypeing, googling, netflixing, etc.)...JUST BE. Journal writings of their experiences revealed that many students could not recall a recent time in their life when they intentionally created a space for silence and solitude. Reactions to the solitude and silence activity varied greatly: some were frustrated with continuous mind chatter that filled the silence, others heard the chatter but in a more detached way, still others experienced their thoughts slowing down, sometimes accompanied by feelings of peace, like “muddy waters becoming clear” (Progoff, 1983). As we discussed their experiences, we discovered different ways to practice the art of “silently listening to the self in solitude”: (a) pausing to recollect oneself in the car upon arriving to school, work, or home, (b) sitting outside--under a covered porch, on a park bench, or on a patch of grass--free from the tether of electronic devices, and (c) clearing a corner of a room, shed, or garage for a private place to be alone. There seems to be seeds of silence and solitude in each of us that, in due season, sprout in a place where we can “listen below the noise”, where we grow to discover our true self, and perhaps in time, where we blossom and bear fruit. In the words of the Trappist monk Thomas Merton (1949, p. 59, italics added),

The truest *solitude* is not something outside you...it is an abyss opening up in the center of your soul...And this is a country whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. You do not find it by travelling but by *standing*

[being] still...here you discover act without motion, labor that is profound repose, vision in obscurity, and...a fulfillment whose limits extend to infinity.

The class activity of “listening below the noise” begins to orient students in the direction of their interior life, a life so beautifully and poetically described by Merton. The benefits of silence and solitude are available to all who are willing to listen to the Self that speaks below the noise.

SONG of the self and other: Listening sticks. I found some sticks made of cedar, birch, and pine in the landscape of *Trinity Pines* in Chesapeake, Virginia, cut them to one-foot lengths, rounded the tips, sanded the body, and rubbed Murphy’s oil soap into the grain. The crafted sticks are the centerpiece of an activity designed to hone the skills of listening to self and other. Typically, sticks like this are called *talking sticks* when used in the context of small group sharing. The person holding the stick is the one that talks; others listen. In the *listening stick* (Lindahl, 2003) version of the traditional talking stick activity, the one with the stick still talks, but with a special listening focus: listening to answer a question, and listening to create a question.

Following is brief description of the listening stick activity (adapted from Lindahl, 2003, see pp. 32-37 for complete instructions). The class is divided into small groups of no more than five arranged in a closed circle. The first person holding the stick voices a question out loud for the group (I provide three starter questions to choose from: When was the last time you had a good belly laugh? When you think about the future, what are you most afraid of? Who do you turn to for support in times of need?), closes their eyes, and silently listens to whatever answer(s) bubbles up inside of them during the next 30 seconds. Next, holder of the listening stick speaks their answer to the question while others in the group listen with their heart without interruption. Lastly, the stick holder closes their eyes a second time, returns to their

inner world, and listens for a new question to emerge in the next 30 seconds. They speak this question aloud to the group, and pass the listening stick to the next person who repeats the question out loud, closes their eyes in search of an answer, and so on until the last person has taken their turn with the listening stick.

Class discussion of the listening stick activity uncovered several learnings. First, many students could not recall a time in their recent past when someone listened to them with complete attention--without interrupting, commenting, or giving advice--just listening. Students treasured the comfort and freedom of knowing that they could speak without being interrupted, and that they could continue to speak for as long as needed. Second, group members noted a different *quality* to their *other-listening*. Normally, when a group is given a question for discussion in class, group listeners preoccupy themselves with formulating their answer to the question while simultaneously attempting to listen to the speaker, that is, listener attention is divided. But, in the listening stick activity, since the question changes with each speaker's turn, group listeners did not know what question they would be asked until it was their turn to hold the listening stick. Unburdened from the need to rehearse a response to a common question, group listeners were free to give their undivided attention to the speaker. Third, students discovered that the extended response time can add a creative dimension to their *self-listening*. For some, their initial response to the question morphed during the 30 second reflection period into something unanticipated, something richer, fuller, and often more profound than their initial response to the question. We could not determine how to apply this learning to public face to face interaction between strangers and acquaintances where extended pauses like this would be considered a negative violation of social expectations (more than three seconds of silence is often considered an undesirable lapse of time

in normal conversation; McLaughlin & Cody, 1982). However, we decided that the listening stick activity could be reproduced in the context of a close personal relationship where partners frame the pregnant pauses as birth places for creative ideas. Finally, the nonverbal passing of the “listening stick” from one person to the next in the group, each with a new question to answer and a new question to pose, provided some students with a feeling of group cohesiveness, the sense that they were part of something larger than themselves, perhaps that they were collectively sharing and searching for “communal truth” (Palmer, 1998).

SONG of the other: Surfing the waves of empathy. In a talk to members of the *Google* organization, Buddhist teacher Kabat-Zinn (2007) quotes Swami Satchidananda who reportedly said, “You can’t stop the waves, but you can learn to surf!” Waves of life energy are continually emanating from human beings, and we can learn to surf these waves by listening empathically (Rosenberg, n.d., 2005). In class, we learned to surf the waves of energy from another person by having each person in a small group tell a short story (the wave of energy) from the past week followed by other group members empathizing with the feelings and needs⁵ in the story (attempting to surf the wave). We adopted the following question to structure empathic responses, “Are you feeling...(guess the feeling), because you are needing...(guess the need)” (Rosenberg, n.d.). Sometimes we catch the wave, experience the exhilaration of popping up on the surf board, and ride the wave of energy into the shore. Other times, we miss the wave or wipe out; but, even in “wiping out,” our attempts to empathize with the other person demonstrate the values of caring and support, thereby sustaining our connection with the waves of life energy flowing from the other person.

As an east coast university, students resonated with the surfing metaphor as a way to understand the process of empathic listening. Sometimes it is hard to “catch a wave” because the wave is too “...humongous, intense, or otherwise gnarly.” Likewise, it is challenging to catch the feelings and needs of others when their story is embedded in language that blames or criticizes the listener. In such cases, we may first need to empathize with our own feelings and needs before empathizing with another. Developing an expanded feelings and needs literacy for ourselves may enhance our ability to connect with the feelings and needs of others (see Rosenberg, 2005 for developing feelings and needs literacies). I note that some students remained skeptical about empathically surfing waves of energy outside the classroom. “Dr. B, this is cool for class, but my friends aren’t gonna listen like that...if they’re done talking and I don’t say anything right away, they’re gonna think somethings wrong with me!” “Yes,” I replied, “That’s probably going to happen because of the elongated time it takes to: clarify our own feeling and needs, listen and verbalize the feelings and needs of the other, and allow time for feedback from the other to ensure that we accurately heard their feelings and needs.” After empathizing with the student, I ended with a simple metaphor that seemed to satisfy: “like surfing, empathizing just takes practice!”

Interlude: Voicing our learnings. We recited learning poems to mark our mid-semester assessment (students also completed weekly journals as part of the mid-semester assessment). To motivate students to meditate, write, and recite a learning poem for the class, we listened to Kay’s (2011) mediated presentation of her poem entitled “B...” which begins with the phrase, “If I had a daughter...” From beginning to end, the class sat in rapt attention as she performed her poem, and when Kay paused at the end of the poem, the class clapped with intensity, and I felt

wetness beneath my eyes. After performing the poem, Kay shares insights and activities for developing a poetic voice. Students inspired by Kay's poetry and message, were ready to create and share their listening learnings as poetry. A week later, students recited their learning poems. There was a palpable silence in the room while each student in turn gave voice to their personal learnings as poetry. When the last student finished reciting their poem, one student in the class playfully remarked: "Dr. B, don't you have a poem for us?" I replied, "I sure do!" Unfolding a poem from my back pocket, I began to slowly recite, *Wonderings and Hopes of a Professor*.

SONG of nature: Sunflowers and tubers. The second half of the term began (student's voice) with the professor placing a few grains of sand and a small yellow flower in the palm of each of our hands. Our instructions were to let our gaze focus on these natural objects resting in the palm of our hand and meditate. After a time, the professor wrote some lines on the whiteboard and then recited William Blake's (1803) *Auguries of Innocence*, "To see the World in a Grain of Sand/And a Heaven in a Wild Flower/Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand/And Eternity in an hour." In listening to Blake's words, I began to experience concretely a connection with nature. I thought about how the micro grains of sand resting in my hand also make up the macro world around my hands. Processed sand makes up parts of the classroom we are in, and sand is embedded in the concrete walkways on campus. The poem also inspired me to look with renewed senses at the flower in my hand: smelling the aroma, beholding the golden color, and feeling the velvety petals.

I (professor's voice) have a vivid picture in my mind's eye of a group of students (men and women) adorning their hair with the sunflowers that I had given them as they departed class that evening. They were smiling, laughing, and rearranging the flowers in each other's hair. After this initiation into listening to nature,

we as a class engaged in many other nature activities (see Cohen, 2007). We offered our exhaled breath (carbon dioxide) to green plants; and in return, consciously breathed in the gift of the plant's life-giving oxygen. We explored the unseen characteristics of small stones through the sense of touch. We sat outside in a natural setting near the classroom with closed eyes and silently named the individual parts of the soundscape surrounding us. We mindfully ate a single raisin in the space of three minutes. Overall, we explored different ways to listen to nature: buzzing insects, singing birds, animal movements and sounds, colorings and textures of plants, brightness and warmth of sunlight, and the "feel" of the earth on our bare feet.

Our discussions of the different nature activities left students with mixed feelings: awkward, perplexed, surprised, peaceful, renewed, happy, and so forth. As one example of these mixed feelings, I recall the story of student that said, "Putting my head into a green plant in a public place was one of the silliest things I have ever done, but after breathing with the plant for about a minute, I found myself feeling inexplicably happy." Another student found connection with nature in a mature Magnolia tree that she had been observing from our second story class window during the first half of the semester. Recounting her story to the class, she said, "I felt drawn to the tree, hugged it like an old friend...I saw a name plate next to the tree, and when I googled the name, it was a professor that had died over a decade ago...I'll always remember the name of that professor and that special Magnolia tree." Another insight from experiencing nature came from "listening to the feel of a stone." One student said: "You can feel things about the stone that you cannot see with the naked eye." This insight was particularly revealing because it experientially demonstrated that we possess latent abilities to listen with more than just our ears and eyes. In the feeling stone activity, there are subtle textures of the stone that we

cannot see with the naked eye, but that we can know by feeling them with our hands. Cohen (2007) suggests, based on 30 years of leading workshops and extended trips in nature, that there are at least 52 senses that humans are capable of “listening” to (e.g., temperature, heliotropism, balance, proximity, the passage of time, and electromagnetic fields). Further, Cohen believes that we can actively cultivate listening with these senses to enhance our connection with, and understanding of, the natural world.⁶

The nature section of the course ends with handing out a thumb sized, light brown colored, plant tuber to each student. Recall that I handed out small sunflowers to each student at the beginning of the nature section of the course. The tubers and sunflowers came from the *same plant* in my garden known as the Jerusalem artichoke (*Helianthus tuberosus*) or Sunchoke. The Sunchoke flowers from my garden had faded with the cooler temperatures of fall, and I harvested the tubers the day before I handed them out in class. I asked students if they could see the connection between the flowers I handed out two weeks earlier and the plant tubers I gave them today. Gradually, students began to articulate the universal “circle of life” in nature...tuber gives birth to plant, plant to flower, flower to seed, and seed gives birth to tuber, and so on. I could only smile to myself as the discussion slowly filled in the missing pieces of the circle of life that I was sketching on the board as they voiced their ideas. Finally, the circle was complete, and we marveled at what we created based on our experience of deeply listening to nature.

As a follow-up, I challenged students to plant the tuber in a pot, or in the ground, three to four inches deep, and then patiently wait for spring when the tuber put out shoots and grows into a six to eight-foot Sunchoke (or a three to four foot plant if potted). Fall will bring a harvest of flowers to enjoy, and the edible tubers can

be consumed in the company of friends. This assignment involves *listening* to the needs of the plant, cultivating the soil to ensure the spreading of roots, ensuring ample sunshine by attending to the movement of the sun, providing appropriate moisture by listening to rainfall, and conscious breathing with the plant to continue the connection. In return for listening deeply to nature, the plant will yield beauty, nourishment, and wisdom about the great “circle of life.”

SONG of God (the divine): Lectio divina. Written accounts of an individual’s direct experience with God (Sigler, 2014), or more broadly the divine, when validated by a community of believers, is sometimes raised to the status of “sacred scripture” among major world religions. Examples of sacred scriptures in world religions abound, for example: the Hindu *Vedas*, the Jewish *Torah*, the Christian *Bible*, and Islam’s *Quran* (Beverluis, 2000). Listening deeply to sacred scripture, as in prayer and/or meditation, can guide the listener into something akin to the original divine experience that inspired the sacred writing. Deep listening can also connect the listener with a community of believers embodying the meaning and lived experience of the sacred scripture. *One* way to practice this deep listening to sacred scripture, in the Christian tradition, is called *lectio divina* or divine reading.

I borrow from the Benedictine tradition in Catholicism, and retreat notes from Monsignor Chester Michael to provide students with a simple version of *lectio divina* as listening with four R’s: Read, Reflect, Respond, and Rest.⁷ Following are instructions I provide students for practicing divine reading/listening. First, select a short text (a page or less) believed to be divinely inspired. Second, slowly *read* the sacred text until inspired by some word or phrase that speaks to the head, heart, and/or gut (Rohr & Ebert, 2001). Stop and *reflect* on the meaning and significance of the word/phrase by slowly repeating the word(s) as if sipping a fine wine, swishing

the wine in the mouth, absorbing the full flavor. When the word(s) has little or no remaining *taste*, then begin again to slowly read the passage until feeling inspired by another word or phrase. Continue this process for a period of time (in class, 5-10 minutes), and then *respond* to the sacred text by listening for a praxis message. What is the passage calling one to be and/or do? After making at least one concrete resolution, *rest* with the passage. Gently hold the passage in consciousness, let go...relax...rest. For logistical purposes in class, I set a time limit for each of the four steps of *lectio divina*. I invite students to bring closure to a given step before proceeding to the next one. For out of class practice, I encourage students to allot at least a half hour for the entire process without concerning themselves with the time spent on any particular step.

After we practiced deep listening as *lectio divina*, our class discussion revealed that no one had any prior experience with the method. Despite the lack of familiarity, students said that the four steps seemed “natural,” “not difficult,” “easy to flow with.” One student suggested that we read college textbooks this way, slowing sipping on the words to extract the maximum meaning and practical benefit. Other students counter-argued that this would take “way too long.” Still others suggested that most college textbooks are not “divinely inspired,” and therefore do not deserve/require the attentive listening that sacred scripture does! We used the experience of listening to sacred scripture as a spring board to introduce: (a) *passage meditation* (Easwaran, 1993), memorizing a passage of sacred scripture, and slowly, silently, repeating the passage, and (b) *centering prayer* (Keating, 1986), intentionally, silently, and gently repeating a “sacred word.” I encouraged students to try out these other methods of listening to the divine outside of class.

In student conferences near the end of the course, three students who identified themselves as “not religious” or “atheist” found new connections with the divine. For one student, the new connection was described as “something larger than me, a feeling that there is more to life than just me, that there is a something out there that I can connect with.” For another student, the divine connection was a return to, and reframing of, their family’s religious roots. This student was estranged from their family’s fundamentalist Christian practices, but the experience of *lectio divina* rekindled an interest in approaching the Bible in a new way. They found this new way more “meditative, practical, and restful.” Still another student expressed their new connection with the divine as: “...mysterious, hard to explain, a presence.” Coming from an agnostic, the realization that there is “something there,” and that our languaging of it falls short of the actual experience, is particularly insightful. I’m reminded of the Taoist idea that *the Way* cannot be verbally spoken or communicated to another person through ordinary language. Rather, *the Way* is known through direct experience (Merton, 1965), that is, through listening. Similarly, *lectio divina* provides a way to experience the divine through deep listening. In addition, the majority of students with a religious and/or spiritual faith expressed their connection with the divine in our class discussions and in their journal writings with words like: “renewal, growth, peace, and happiness.” The joy of being able to facilitate these kinds of listening experiences with students is the fulfillment of a life-long dream for me for I too am experiencing renewal, growth, peace, and happiness.

Ending the class SONG: Beginning the life SONG. We ended the term the same way we marked the middle of the term, by voicing our listening learnings through poetry. My face felt wet with tears welling up on more than one occasion as I listened to the heart felt poems that conveyed the breadth and depth of students

listening to the SONG of life throughout the semester. In their individual student conferences, students said things like: "...this has been a life-changing experience for me," "I will actually use what I learned," "I learned more in this class than in any of my other communication classes," "I hope you offer this again because my friends want to take it..." I felt a sense of fulfillment in what we accomplished together. I reflected on the semester as well, bringing closure to the last class by reading my poem, *Dr. B. Dreaming*. Students lingered afterward, we talked some, and more importantly we *listened to OUR SONG of life*.

Extending the SONG: Future research. "Listening to the SONG of life" integrates pieces of my life into a holistic picture that brings me joy and pleasure in recalling and writing the story. This is the "auto" part of autoethnography. When I as author share the story with colleagues, students, and friends, connecting my story with their story, the "ethnography" part of autoethnography is emphasized. For example, anecdotal feedback from an earlier version of this autoethnography delivered at the *International Listening Association's* annual convention (Baesler, 2015b) indicates that several academics are interested in incorporating some of the ideas from "listening to the SONG of life" into their listening courses. To extend the potential impact of this narrative beyond the scope of the conference, in the next section, I invite readers to connect with the ideas in the autoethnography by considering possibilities for future research that center around issues of validity and assessment.⁸

There are several options for validating the veracity of autoethnographies that emphasize teaching-learning in a classroom context like the present narrative. One option involves students (instead of teacher as author, or reviewers as critics) judging the accuracy of autoethnographic claims. For example, in the present

autoethnography, I surveyed former student's opinions of six reconstructed student excerpts (see previous section "Narrating the Song") to obtain a partial validation of the story. Additional ideas for future research to bolster the validity of the story might include exit interviews, or surveys, of students immediately after grades are posted. Questions such as the following might be asked: Is the instructor's descriptive story of the course synchronous with your perceptions as a student in the course? Are instructor paraphrases of student voices accurate? Has anything especially important from class discussions been left out of the story? Another option for enhancing the veracity of the story is to use the narrative paradigm (Fisher, 1989) as an evaluative lens for the autoethnography. Fisher's narrative paradigm provides two criteria for evaluating the rhetorical persuasiveness of a story: narrative coherence (does the story hang together?) and narrative fidelity (does the story ring true with everyday life?). To test the rhetorical efficacy of an autoethnography, students upon completing the course could read the autoethnography and complete survey items to measure the coherence and fidelity (see Baesler, 1995 for items) of the story. Finally, future research might involve instructor and students co-authoring an autoethnography of their learning experiences throughout the term. Co-authoring increases the validity of the story through the dialogue of multiple voices. This integration of instructor and student perspectives allows for a living document to emerge over the course of time through, for example, an on-line *Wiki* that includes student and instructor postings, weekly summaries, and middle and end of term assessments. In the next section, a more quantitative approach is described to assess student competencies in "listening to the SONG of life."

Quantitatively, listening competency could be assessed by students completing a self-assessment of their competencies in the four listening contexts of

SONG the first day of class and then compare them with assessments completed the last day of class (a preliminary assessment measure is available from the Author upon request). A more ambitious effort might include self *and other* (a friend or family member) assessments of student listening competency across the listening contexts to provide an outside evaluator's perspective. Another study might integrate the unique aspects of listening to the SONG of life with existing measures of listening like the listening styles profile (Watson, Barker, & Weaver, 1995), and then compare measures to assess predictive validity. Finally, the types of listening skills associated with each verse of the SONG of life could be more systematically mapped into "process components, descriptors, and listening behaviors," and then organized into skill levels as exemplified in Thompson, Leintz, Nevers, and Witkowski's (2010, pp. 270, 275) listening criteria matrix in their integrative listening model.

Deepening the SONG

"Listening to the SONG of life" is a new type of listening course that connects students with the whole of life by learning to listen within and between the four contexts of self, others, nature, and the divine. In this final section, I develop visual and sonic metaphors to deeper our understanding of "listening to the SONG of life."

Imagine the listening contexts as four circles arranged like the rings of a dart board: the smallest circle occupies the center (the bull's eye), the next largest circle surrounds this center, the third circle surrounds the second, and the largest circle surrounds all the others (like the outer rim of the dart board). The inner most circle represents listening to the self, and involves being centered, open and aware of one's thoughts, emotions, and needs. This self-awareness expands to include a receptive awareness of other human beings in the circle of *other* that surrounds the center of *self*. Listening to others includes listening to their verbal and nonverbal

messages, and listening to their emotions and needs via compassionate empathy. The circle of *other* expands to include non-human *others* in the natural world of the third circle such as: micro-organisms, insects, animals, plants, trees, rocks and minerals, and celestial bodies. Human beings exist in this context of nature, and our relationship with nature includes listening.⁹ Finally, our consciousness of the natural world can expand to include an awareness of the supernatural and/or supraempirical world. This fourth circle, subsuming all of the others, I call the *divine* circle (represented as “G” for God in the acronym SONG). I encourage students to adopt their own naming for this circle depending on their particular religious/spiritual/philosophical orientation.

Lastly, we move from the visual metaphor of interrelated circles to a sonic metaphor of musical strings to add further depth to our understanding of the “listening to the SONG of life.” Consider the four listening circles as different strings on a ukulele (a musical instrument that looks like a small four stringed guitar). Each string produces a unique tone when plucked. So too, listening to a particular circle in the SONG of life produces a unique tone. When the musician uses their finger(s) to push two or more strings against the fretboard of the ukulele and strums across the strings, a blended tone or chord is produced. So too, when we listen to two or more tones in the SONG of life, we can hear a blended, and often richer, chord of life. As we cultivate listening to multiple tones in the SONG of life, we hear an arrangement or sequence of chords known as a song. There are many such songs in the greater SONG of life that can be experienced if we develop the capacity to consciously listen to them.

In conclusion, my hope is that we can open spaces in our lives to cultivate an ability to listen to the many songs of life within and among the four circles of life:

songs of sowing, reaping, dancing, loving...songs that help us cope with fear, hate, disease, destruction, and death...and songs of courage, hope, resilience, transformation, and renewal. From our personal centeredness in the greater SONG of life, I hope that we can teach our students how to listen more intentionally, mindfully, and compassionately to the harmonies, melodies, chants, and hip hop beats that play among the four circles of the SONG of life. May those that endeavor to teach and learn how to listen to the SONG of life experience the beauty, vastness, and joy of the great SONG of life.

Endnotes

¹ I use the term “divine” rather than “God” in the listening course because some students have negative conditioning associated with the word “God” while the term “divine” opens up possibilities for discussing a broader range of spiritual ideas. However, the SONG acronym for the course would not “sound as pleasing” if I used a “D” for divine (the *SOND* of life) instead of a “G” for God (the *SONG* of life); thus I retain the “G” in the acronym SONG for rhetorical purposes. Further, when discussing the “divine” in class, students meditate on the word “divine,” and then write about what *they believe is divine for them* whether that be God, Ultimate Reality, Divine Light, Higher Self, Ground of Being, Nature, or any of the names of God associated with world religions (Keating, 1993), or humanistic/philosophical values of the highest sense like Truth, Love, and/or Beauty.

Moreover, there are those uncomfortable with conceptualizing “listening to the divine or nature” as part of the field of “human communication”; but, if at least one human being is involved in the process of listening, then there is some “human communicative” element in the listening system. A similar argument is found in the body of research that argues...[content omitted to protect anonymity]...(see Baesler, 2003, 2012b)...Finally, listening to the divine and nature as a part of “human communication” is supported by the words of the late Bud Goodall (1996, p. 94), “Communication is the primary experiential source of all lived and imagined connections to all life forms and forces as well as to how, why, and what we know about them.” Part of establishing a lived/imagined connection with nature and the divine as “life forms and forces” involves listening deeply to discover the “how, why, and what we know about them.”

² I realize that my personal network is very limited when compared to the national data based samples of listening curricula in U.S. colleges, but my personal network does represent a limited set of real people, and so I advance the claim about the lack of development of listening curricula as *informed speculation* with one caveat. By “development of listening curricula” I mean a *series of listening courses* introducing students to the listening literature (theory and research) and providing opportunities to develop listening competencies (including practice, feedback, and further practice until a predetermined level of listening competency is achieved), and *at least* one additional listening course at the intermediate or advanced level that builds on the knowledge and skills learned in the introductory course. Finally, one notable exception to the lack of development in listening curricula is the well-developed listening curriculum called the *Integrative Listening Model* which is taught across the curriculum at Alverno College. This listening curriculum focuses on receiving, constructing meaning, and responding to verbal/nonverbal messages (Thompson, Leintz, Nevers, & Witkowski, 2010).

³ A google search in December of 2015 for the phrase “SONG as self, others, nature, and God” revealed one anonymous Facebook webpage with the identical phrase (Facebook, n.d.); thus, I cannot claim to be the first to use this acronym in these four listening contexts.

⁴ The methodological rationale for using autoethnography as *story* to describe this new approach to teaching the listening course as a SONG of life is embedded in two assumptions. First, language is a primary medium by which we are conscious, understand the world, and communicate our learnings to others in *stories* (Coles, 1990). Second, there are many “signs” in the teacher/student learning context that, when read with the assistance of the imagination, can open up new understandings of the relationship between teacher and student in the ongoing *story* of life (Goodall, 1996). These assumptions, based on the work of Coles and Goodall, are developed in more detail in Baesler (2009).

⁵ Rosenberg references the work of Chilean economist Max-Neef (1992) who describes a human matrix of needs and satisfiers that are culturally and historically universal. Needs are categorized as a combination of axiological (e.g., subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, creation) and existential (e.g., being, having, doing, and interacting) criteria. For instance, the “protection BY interacting” cell in the human matrix of needs is described as a “Living space, social environment, dwelling” while the “understanding BY doing” cell is described with as “Investigate, study, experiment, educate, analyse [*sic*], meditate” (Max-Neef, p. 206).

⁶ Since teaching the listening class for the first time in 2014, I discovered and have incorporated ideas from the naturalist Joseph Cornell (2015) who frames “listening to nature” as a sequence of *flow learning* in which one: (a) awakens enthusiasm, (b) focuses attention, (c) offers direct experience, and (d) shares inspiration.

⁷ Hall (1998) provides a readable introduction to the general method of *lectio divina* with a special emphasis on the contemplative listening dimension of the experience.

⁸ Different criteria are to assess autoethnography in the field of communication (e.g., Ellis, 2004; Pelias, 2004; Frenztz, 2008; Chang & Boyd, 2011; Gingrich-Philbrook, 2013; Bochner, 2014). I hold four criteria in particular as a personal standard. Autoethnographies that I narrate should be: (a) rooted in the personal experience of the author (auto) and in the lives of others (ethnography), (b) connected with a stream of ideas in scholarship and in the life-world, (c) engaging to readers in ways that facilitate mindful reflection and life-enhancing praxis, and (d) grounded in the human mystery of the interconnections between mind, body, and spirit. Mirroring this criteria, the present autoethnography fulfills, at least to some degree, each of these criterion: (a) the story of “listening to the SONG of life” is rooted in my teaching experience as a professor and in the lives of my students, (b) there are connections in the story to formal (e.g., scholarly journals and books) and informal sources (e.g., nonacademic books and digital resources), (c) the verses of “listening to the SONG of life” organize the content of the story as a song, and the description of the listening activities, and student responses to them, may inspire teachers to reflect and consider options for enhancing learning in their own listening courses, and (d) the acronym SONG is a holistic representation of the interconnections of listening to life in the contexts of self, others, nature, and the divine.

⁹ Most indigenous peoples believe that we can communicate with the natural world (see Beversluis, 2000). For instance, one Lakota prayer suggests that humans can hear the Spirit in the wind of nature: "O Great Spirit, *whose voice I hear in the winds* and whose breath gives life to all the world, *hear me.*" (Easwaran, 1982, p. 162, italics added). In the field of Communication, Bud Goodall claims that we can communicate with the natural world (refer to quote at end of Endnote 1). Even in the physical sciences, scientists like George Washington Carver (best known for developing 199 peanut products) suggest that we can listen to the *language of nature*: "More and more as we come closer and closer in touch with nature...are we able to see the Divine and are therefore fitted to interpret correctly the various *languages spoken by all forms of nature* about us" (Kremer, 1987, p.127, italics added). Finally, eco-psychologist Michael Cohen (2007) writes about our ability to connect with the natural world through over 50 *human senses*. In short, indigenous peoples, communication scholars, scientists, and eco-psychologists provide evidence of varying kinds that humans have the capacity to listen to nature.

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