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Prayer Life of a Professor

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ABSTRACT

Borrowing from the ethnographic methodologies of Coles and Goodall, this autoethnographic account describes interconnections among a Professor's personal prayer life, teaching, and research. The contextual frame for the story is episodes and observations from a 12-year span of time, encompassing post academic tenure and promotion to present. The recurrent theme is that prayer touches and transforms all life, including content and approaches to teaching, and the direction and substance of research.

Images from the Seabed of Consciousness

I close my eyes in prayer and images from the past appear like gifts from the sea of time, deposited briefly on the foamy shores of this present moment, then slipping back into the seabed of consciousness...images of bedtime prayers, "Now I lay me down to sleep...", praying before first communion I see the gold chalice and white host emblazoned on the front cover of my black prayer book...a small chapel, friends and family gathered, words spoken as a prayer to my one true love, "To love, honor and cherish..." These are some of the gifts from the seabed of consciousness belonging to a Catholic religious/spiritual heritage that frames and influences my prayer life as a Professor. I punctuate this particular story with the period immediately following tenure/promotion to present, focusing on how my personal prayer life¹ has influenced my teaching and research. My prayer is that others might resonate with parts of this story and discover/explore how prayer can spiritually nourish their teaching and research.

Methodological Assumptions

Two methodologies influence how I tell this story. First, I borrow from Coles' (1990) story-telling tradition that presumes: (a) we have awareness/consciousness, (b) it is through language that we understand the world and can communicate what we learn to others, (c) conclusions and generalizations are less important than the veracity of phenomenological descriptions of lived experience, and (d) the best way to learn is "prolonged encounters" with others where we let others tell their story [in my case, prolonged praying with God where memories are discovered, recorded, and fashioned into a story]. Second, the autoethnographic approach of Goodall (1996) provides many insights that inform the present story including: (a) spiritual meaning is found in community by analyzing the nexus of private and public messages, (b) imagination engages the map of "what is" to envision spiritual possibilities of "what can be",

(c) spiritual autoethnography uses everyday signs as openings to the spiritual interconnectedness of all life, that is, ANYTHING can become a trigger for spiritual messages having multiple interpretations, levels, contexts, and perspectives, (d) paying attention to the details is essential as they contain the whole story, and finally (e) stories are meant to be connected to other stories, to be part of a dialogue, a sharing of spirits.

Demarcation: Post Tenure and Spiritual Renewal

Is there life after tenure and promotion from Assistant to Associate Professor? Relief and confusion accompanied news of tenure and promotion, relief from proving competencies in teaching, research, and service, and confusion about the import and meaning of my research agenda. Relief and confusion soon gave way to God's grace and the stirrings of a spiritual awakening. The security of tenure/promotion unleashed new feelings/intuitions from their interior home in the seabed of consciousness. The feelings bubble, effervescence of newly opened Champaign, but instead of lessening in intensity over time, they grew in frequency and intensity, culminating in a time of spiritual renewal at the Well Retreat Center situated in the Isle of Wright County in Virginia, a place bounded by tall maples, pines, and a small lake, teeming with a variety of wildlife.

Two images open up an appreciation and understanding of the phenomenological experiences of this time of spiritual awakening/renewal. Building a dam in late summer across a small stream reminds me of repressing stirrings of the Spirit through the academic years culminating in tenure. I did not take time to listen to the flowing waters of the Spirit; I filled precious time building a dam of academic publications. However, in the springtime of Nature's cycle of life, when the winter snows melt on the mountain, the waters of the Spirit swell and eventually break through small dams, flowing as they were naturally meant to, ultimately finding

union with the sea. Similarly, after five years of producing publications for tenure, the Spirit breaks through and flows, feeding the interior seabed of consciousness, waking me to a new spiritual perspective. The second image that resonates with this new spiritual perspective is pregnancy and birth. First, there are signs, like morning sickness, indicating something is different. Unable to see the beginnings of the growth of the child, one may misinterpret the initial experiences as flu symptoms, but over the weeks/months, there comes a definite heartbeat, and later still the feeling of kicking from within, leaving no doubt that life is growing. Finally, there is the dramatic, and often traumatic, process of being born. So it is with the work of the Spirit in me, there were initial signs that were misinterpreted, but growth nonetheless was taking place, then after tenure, the signs were easier to read, and eventually, the birth of a new spiritual way of being/living.

During the first of what would be nearly 30 silent retreats spaced over the course of the next decade at the Well Retreat Center, I felt free from academic and family concerns. I basked in the beauty of nature, ate simply, breathed deeply. It wasn't long before I discovered the Center's library filled with books and tapes on spiritual topics. I devoured books on prayer, spending much of the remainder of my first retreat within the library walls, searching for answers, fueled by cat naps, tea, and my own prayers for guidance and wisdom. Somewhere in the early morning hours after midnight, I found a series of audio tapes on prayer by Trappist monk William Meninger (n.d.).² He narrates a story about an immigrant family spending everything they had to purchase tickets to America by ship, saving their last crusts of bread and cheese for the long journey. About the third day on voyage, the eldest son, after completing his exploration of the ship, returns to the family with unbelievable news about the most delicious pies, meats, and fruit. The father thinks the lad is delusional, but follows him anyway to a dining

hall where they discover a banquet. It seems that the price of the ticket included the meals. All they had to do is show their ticket, enter the hall, and enjoy the feast! So it is with prayer says Meninger: Most of us have become accustomed to eating stale bread and cheese, and do not realize that we possess a ticket to a heavenly banquet that we can begin enjoying right now. I desperately wanted to taste this "prayer banquet" so I put Meninger's advice on prayer to the test by devoting regular time to the practice of contemplative prayer. The spiritual discipline of contemplative prayer has since touched every aspect of my life, including my life of teaching and research as a Professor. Contemplative prayer remains a significant portion of my daily existence, as easy to do as brushing one's teeth, as comfortable as an old friend, and imbued with the fullness of spiritual meaning and life.

From Personal to Professional Prayer Passions

Prayer and Research

The first major academic decision I made as a result of my experiences at the Well Retreat Center was to radically change the direction of my research. I felt concomitantly called to expand and deepen my personal prayer life, and to conduct scholarly research on prayer. With the burden of tenure/promotion cast off, I felt free to personally and professionally pursue a "calling to prayer", something that many mainline Communication scholars consider an unimportant and/or marginalized topic.³ I still faced the reality of producing research for yearly faculty evaluations, but I no longer wanted to simply publish to build a thicker vitae. I wanted to publish research related to prayer, galvanizing other scholars in the pursuit of prayer research, and contributing to the vitality of spiritual lives. This meant letting go of all current research projects, some near the stage of publication, and devoting myself exclusively to the work of prayer.

Praying for direction and wisdom, like some prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures, I struck a deal with God. I said:

If You really want me to do this prayer research, You're going to have to help me. I don't know anything about conducting "prayer research". All I have is this desire to serve You, this sense that You're calling me to this work of prayer. I need Your guidance and support, and I need a "signs" along the way that I'm in Your will. If You bless this work with talks, workshops, convention papers, and publications in journals, then I'll continue to work, but if You decide I need to do something different, then I'll close up shop, and follow wherever You lead.

After more than a decade of prayer research, God is still answering my heartfelt prayer, guiding and supporting the work of prayer with talks, workshops, convention papers, journal articles and a scholarly book.

The prayer research journey hasn't been without anxiety and doubts. During the first decade, each research project seemed like a prayer. I had no idea what to do for the next project until nearing the completion of the current project when God would provide only enough inspiration and direction to begin the next project. In hindsight, the actual program of research appears quite logical, even planned, but the enactment of projects was an amalgam of prayer, intuition, and serendipity. For example, consider the serendipitous and prayer-filled nature of the following episode. During one summer I found myself in the library stacks searching for a reference to wrap up a manuscript when I saw the face of a faculty member in Psychology that I had met only a few times before. He recognized me and inquired about my research. I narrated my story about prayer research and he said (paraphrased), "Curious you should mention prayer. I have this data set of interviews with mothers with HIV, and even though I didn't ask them, they

spontaneously talked about their relationship with God and their prayer lives. I have no idea what to do with this data. What do you think?" Several collaborative conversations/sessions later, Val Derlega, others, and I co-authored an article on Prayer and Mothers with HIV (Baesler, Derlega, Winstead, & Barbee, 2003). This kind of serendipitous encounter is not coincidence for me, but part of God's plan for a prayer research agenda, something that cannot be completely planned, that unfolds in God's time, and is easier to receive when one's ground of life is composted with prayer.

Only in the last year has God provided more guidance for what kinds of prayer research are possible, and like the prophet John the Baptist in the opening of the Christian gospel of Mark, I feel like a voice in the wilderness, a herald of sorts, envisioning a new research agenda housed in a Interdisciplinary Prayer Institute where a critical mass of scholars engage in collaborative programs of funded prayer research. Over time, hundreds of prayer projects have emerged from the Spirit's seabed of consciousness. I have at least fifty of these projects in various stages of completion written on a "scroll" (a huge piece of drafting paper). Realizing the need for collaborative efforts lest I become a workaholic, I've prayed for nearly a decade to meet other scholars, and very slowly over time, a handful of collaborative relationships developed.

I still pray for direction, discernment, support, and wisdom in creating and conducting prayer research, especially at the beginning and ends of each semester, but also week to week during the term. Prayerful meditation on research questions can be part of any Professor's research agenda: Am I on track with God's will for this particular project? Are there needs in the community related to my research that I should be addressing? Am I trying to do too much alone? Have I discerned the appropriate priorities among the different research projects? These questions are worth praying over again and again, as each time renders fresh ideas for the

research journey. Sometimes the ideas/answers are not forthcoming during the time of prayer, but appear later, often at surprising times: when I gaze out from my second story office window over Foreman Field in the middle of a sip of afternoon tea, while strolling through the neighborhood with my 18 month old in tow, after listening to Pamela Frank play one of Mozart's violin Concertos...no single activity consistently foreshadows answers to questions posed in prayer, rather prayerful receptivity to life opens one to a myriad of possibilities.

Prayer and Teaching

Prayer Talks. Ideally, prayer research influences content of teaching. I began giving talks on prayer at my local church for those entering the church through Rites of Christian Initiation, and for those participating in various types of Adult Religious Formation. In both cases, the outcomes of the prayer talks were similar. Audiences seemed interested, curious, had questions, and made comments afterwards like, "very interesting", "I really liked your presentation", but coordinators of the talks did not invite me to speak again on prayer. Similar reactions over the years came from audiences of different sizes and ages in a variety of venues: a local men's group from another church, an evening seminar with graduate students at a private University, a small group of students at Catholic Campus Ministry, the Philosophy Club at my home University, members of the Science and Reasoning Society of Hampton Roads, and faculty of my own Department of Communication and Theatre Arts. Why were responses to these prayer talks uniformly generic and positive, and why was I not invited to speak again? I still don't know the answers to these questions, and the most troublesome unanswered question that bothers me is: Did the prayer talks have any impact on listener's prayer lives? Without systematic evaluation/assessment, there is no scientific way to answer this question. I have approached some of these groups with ideas for assessment, but the answer is usually some version of: we

don't have the time for that, we cannot commit to that, we have enough to do as it is, and so forth. Then, why continue the prayer talks? I have faith that in some small way the prayer talks make a difference to some people. Hence my policy on prayer talks is the same as it was over a decade ago: I do not seek to speak about prayer, rather I wait to be invited, and if in praying about the invitation I feel God calling me to speak, I do so. Overall, I consider prayer talks a type of teaching and a spiritual service/ministry.

Developing Prayer Courses. Talking about prayer for an hour or two to an audience that I'm not likely to meet again is a different teaching environment than lecturing for three hours a week to a large class for an entire academic term. I was somewhat embarrassed recently when visiting with a collaborator for a prayer project at another local University when he discovered that I didn't teach any academic courses on prayer, "You mean you don't teach in your primary research specialty?!" I then described the prayer talks I had been giving, and the fate of my attempts to teach an academic course on prayer.

I felt called to develop an academic course on prayer about six years ago. As an initial step I searched 309 Christian College web sites for academic course offerings on prayer. Finding 17 academic prayer courses, I persuaded seven instructors to share their syllabi with me. Content analyses of these syllabi, along with what I had been learning about prayer during the past several years, provided the basis for developing a detailed academic course syllabus on prayer (for complete syllabus and details of method see Baesler, 2000). With this research background complete, I felt ready to offer a course on prayer, and presented the idea to a local private Christian college. They were receptive to the idea and we listed the first "Communication and Prayer" course as a summer offering for their graduate program in Communication, but the course was not offered due to "insufficient enrollment." I was

disappointed and let another year pass before sensing another call to teach an academic course on prayer. I revised the Communication and Prayer syllabus to reach a broader audience, entitling the course "Religious Communication" and targeting it to graduate students in the Masters in Humanities Program at my home institution. The course was offered in the evening during the regular semester, but it too suffered from fate of "insufficient enrollment."

I began having doubts about teaching prayer in higher education. I prayed and decided to wait. In the interim I took an on-line course on prayer from the University of Notre Dame. The content was relevant, but I was disappointed in the lack of direct interaction with the Professor. The course was facilitated by a graduate student, and there was very limited feedback on our writing except occasional comments by fellow students or the graduate facilitator during weekly on-line chat sessions. I knew I didn't want that kind of learning experience for my students of prayer. I prayed more and waited several more years.

Only last year did God resurrect the call to teach an academic course on prayer. Some of our faculty were considering developing a Master's degree in Communication, Health, and Wellness, and suggested we develop undergraduate topic courses in our primary research areas to be later revised and offered as part of the graduate program. At the time, I was wrapping up a piece on "prayer and health" so it wasn't difficult to begin developing a course on Religious/Spiritual Communication and Health (with a heavy dose of prayer content). The course is scheduled to be offered next fall. Only God knows if this course will meet the same demise as the previous two prayer courses of "insufficient enrollment", but I feel hopeful and have a sense that this may be my debut of teaching prayer in the academy. In hindsight, it seems that God's timing is not necessarily my timing. The apparent failures of previous prayer courses provided more time for me to grow in my personal and professional understanding of prayer, and

this contributed to revisions in the current course offering on prayer. I'm beginning to learn that, despite multiple set-backs, I need to continually open myself to the possibility that God provides opportunities to teach in the area of my research specialty. Overall, my prayer research has only partially translated into content for teaching prayer, but prayer has influenced the teaching of my regular academic courses in other significant ways.

Personal Prayer and Teaching Regular Courses. Prior to last year's National Communication Conference I received an invitation to write a piece on prayer and teaching. Since I have not taught an academic course on prayer, I was uncertain why someone would ask me to write about prayer and teaching, but during the Conference I was encouraged by Katherine Hendrix to explore the connections between my personal prayer life and my teaching life. As I created space for these connections during my prayer time, I discovered echoes of prayer in the teaching of regular academic course offerings like Research Methods, Theory, Persuasion, and Nonverbal Communication. My personal prayer life became part of my academic teaching without much conscious awareness of the application/translation process.

For example, after teaching college courses for 20-some years, I still found myself getting terribly nervous before the first day of classes...nightmares, feeling ill, sick to my stomach, doubting my ability to teach effectively. All that changed one semester after morning prayer as I gazed over a roster of students that I would soon meet for the first time. Still feeling in the contemplative space following morning prayer, I began slowly reciting the name of each student, growing in the realization that these names represent eternal spiritual beings, and that we in the forthcoming semester would shape our eternal destiny together. As I continued listening to named beings, I began praying for them, a simple prayer that God would bless them. Somewhere during this blessing prayer, anxiety began to melt, replaced by a sense of peace,

knowing that a spiritual kinship was initiated. I began anticipating the delightful union of name and face that soon would take place, secretly rejoicing in the spiritual connection that had already begun and would continue to grow during the course of the term. Since that time, I've continued the practice of blessing my students before the start of each term. It not only relieves most of the pre-term apprehension, but more importantly, it opens a spiritual dimension to the student-teacher relationship. I begin to see deeper levels of our relationship, levels that foster growth, encouragement, inspiration, kindness, hope...things representing the eternal manifestation of the Spirit, things that will last for eternity.

My personal prayer life has influenced the teaching of regular course offerings in other profound ways. Cultivating a contemplative prayer life changes one from the inside out. One of these spiritual transformations is a growing attitude of receptiveness to life, including the lives of my one-hundred-and-some students each semester. The spiritual discipline of cultivating a center within, a place that allows the Spirit entry to work and move spills over into my personal relationships⁴, including my relationships with students. I find myself less defensive, more ready to openly admit my errors (even laugh at them), a greater willingness to be vulnerable when listening, a conscious effort to engage in authentic dialogue (Swidler, 1999). Contemplative prayer has helped me become a better listener, focusing on student concerns, worries, challenges, and questions.

Authentic listening can also create a good deal of stress for the listener (Pennebaker, 1990), hence over time I've discovered some practical prayer strategies to cope with the stress of being a Professor. First, I allot part of my lunch hour for personal prayer in a private place.⁵ In the midst of a busy day, prayer can shed much of the unwanted stress that accumulates from little stressors like: unexpected traffic commuting to work, an unkind word/look, minor conflicts

before, during, or after class. Prayer during mid-day often slowly dissolves these minor stresses so that I can begin afresh, renewed/energized for the second half of the day.

The second prayer strategy I use to cope with stress is the time-honored tradition of praying the Holy Name (Baesler, 2001a). Variations of this prayer occur in most of the major world religions including Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Taoism (Benson, 1975). The repetition of the Holy Name is especially useful for coping with negatively charged emotions, not simply repressing negative emotions, but spiritually transforming them into a form that can be positively re-directed (Easwaran, 1998). In teaching, I might use this prayer strategy when anxious before a lecture, when confronted with a particularly challenging question, or when disappointed or angry with a student's juvenile behavior. The repetition of the Holy Name is a soothing balm for the negative stresses of teaching (and research), and is also a source of creative inspiration when I need ideas for a lesson plan or just the right phrase for research writing. The process for using this prayer strategy for creative inspiration is described in detail by Benson (1987).⁶ From personal experience, I can testify that using the Holy Name to creatively address a challenge doesn't always work the way I anticipate, but I have yet to be disappointed in the end results after several attempts.

Return to the Seabed of Consciousness

I close my eyes and images from the seabed of consciousness come forth again, old images having new meanings now. I still pray at day's end, no longer as a child, "Now I lay me down to sleep..." but as an examen of the day, "thank you God for the gift of life, for these blessings, forgive me for times I fell short, help me serve my students as teacher and discern/engage in research that will benefit others." I still see the host and chalice on Sunday at mass, continuing to receive spiritual nourishment from communion, but now I experience the

process of being transformed into bread and drink for others in the ministries of teaching and research. Finally, I still keep my vows of loving, honoring, and cherishing my wife (and two sons), but now the circle of love grows wider, engulfing neighbors, students, colleagues, and beyond. In this seabed of consciousness, I am sustained by the prayer of St. Chrysostom (cited in Bounds, 1997, p. 34):

Prayer is an all-efficient panoply, a treasure undiminished, a mine that is never exhausted, a sky unobscured by clouds, a heaven unruffled by the storm. It is the root, the fountain, *the mother of a thousand blessings* [emphasis mine].

It is my prayer that all Professors may know and experience the truth of this spiritual message in their teaching, research, and relationships with others.

Notes

¹ "Personal prayer life" refers to an individual's spiritual communication with God, which may or may not take place in a private physical space. Sometimes personal prayer is referred to in the literature as "private prayer". However, the spiritual reality in Catholic tradition maintains that prayer is always communal; theologically there is no "private prayer". We pray in the company of all the saints, angels, and "universal Church" in the eternal present. In addition to personal prayer, there are other prayer contexts that influence my teaching and research as a Professor, including face-to-face interpersonal prayer, small and large group prayer. While significant, these additional prayer contexts are beyond the scope of the current paper due to space limitations, but these contexts are discussed in further detail in Baesler and Ladd (2006).

² Father William Meninger is a Trappist Monk that originally taught contemplative prayer to Religious (priests and sisters) on retreat at a monastery in Spencer, Massachusetts before relocating to the sister monastery in Snowmass, Colorado and teaching prayer to a wider lay audience. His work is rooted in the anonymous 15th century book *The Cloud of Unknowing*, part of the Catholic apophatic tradition, and in Aquinas' Scholastic epistemology. See Meninger (1994) for a concise introduction to these topics. Others from Meninger's Catholic spiritual tradition, notably Fathers Thomas Keating (1986, 1994) and Basil Pennington (1986) teach slightly different methods of contemplative prayer called "centering prayer" based on spiritual insights of Saints John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila, the Dessert Fathers and Mothers, and on Depth psychology (e.g., Washburn, 1994). A detailed comparison of these and other contemplative approaches to prayer can be found in Baesler (2001a).

³ There was less than a handful of studies published on prayer in the field of Communication when I began this research endeavor in the mid 1990's, none of which

systematically addressed prayer as a type of communication. Thus, my first task was to establish the legitimacy of studying prayer as a type of *spiritual communication*. Two studies address foundational issues related to studying prayer as spiritual communication (Baesler, 1997, 1999). Since then, I have expanded my thinking about prayer and advocate a Relational Prayer Model (Baesler, 2003).

⁴ The principle that one's adult spiritual relationship with God becomes a template for other personal relationships is explored further by Greeley (1995) and Baesler (2001b).

⁵ There are a variety of ways to engage in personal prayer. I have already mentioned the method of contemplative Christian prayer as one possibility, but there are many others. For those interested in exploring different ways to pray I recommend Halpin (1999), Hays (1981), and Link (1976). These resources represent primarily Christian spirituality since this is the tradition I am most familiar with. For those wishing to explore other spiritual traditions and practices I recommend Walsh (1999).

⁶ Benson's method paraphrased and applied to the Holy Name prayer might read: elicit the relaxation response [by repeating the Holy Name] to disengage from the habitualized thinking and open self [to the voice of the Spirit], then focus/ponder on something positive (e.g., passage from a Holy Scripture, poem, painting, music, religious icon). This second phase is thought to establish new neural pathways in the brain, and enhance the ability to creatively address the problem/issue at hand.

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