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Researcher, Analyze Thyself

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Abstract

This article attempts to answer the phenomenological question, “What does it mean to be a qualitative researcher?” and an ancillary question, “What does ‘making meaning’ mean?” The author, in collaboration with selected participants at the 2018 *The Qualitative Report* and the International Institute for Qualitative Methodology’s Qualitative Research Methods conferences, proposes that research is devotion. Three major categories or components of devotion are purpose (personal and professional validation), belonging (communal grounding), and meaning (an enriched life). Ten subcategories or “elements of style” as qualitative researchers include: meticulous vigilance of details, unyielding resiliency, visionary reinvention, social savvy, humble vulnerability, representational responsibility, finding your methodological tribes, emotional immersion, gifting your ideas, and knowing and understanding yourself.

Keywords

Phenomenology, Research, Qualitative Research, Meaning, Style

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This manuscript has also been published in the International Journal of Qualitative Methods (IJQM) as part of a Special Issue featuring the keynote presenters from recent conferences held by the International Institute for Qualitative Methodology (IIQM).

Researcher, Analyze Thyself

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This article attempts to answer the phenomenological question, “What does it mean to be a qualitative researcher?” and an ancillary question, “What does ‘making meaning’ mean?” The author, in collaboration with selected participants at the 2018 The Qualitative Report and the International Institute for Qualitative Methodology’s Qualitative Research Methods conferences, proposes that research is devotion. Three major categories or components of devotion are purpose (personal and professional validation), belonging (communal grounding), and meaning (an enriched life). Ten subcategories or “elements of style” as qualitative researchers include: meticulous vigilance of details, unyielding resiliency, visionary reinvention, social savvy, humble vulnerability, representational responsibility, finding your methodological tribes, emotional immersion, gifting your ideas, and knowing and understanding yourself. Keywords: Phenomenology, Research, Qualitative Research, Meaning, Style

Researcher, Analyze Thyself

This article adapts two keynote addresses presented at the January 2018 conference of *The Qualitative Report* (TQR) on the Nova Southeastern University campus in Florida, and at the May 2018 Qualitative Methods (QM) Conference sponsored by the University of Alberta’s International Institute for Qualitative Methodology (IIQM) in Banff. TQR director Ronald J. Chenail initially commissioned the address for the conference theme, “The Phenomenology of Qualitative Research.” For the QM conference’s “Qualitative Methods in a Time of Change” theme, conference chair Maria Mayan accepted the address for follow-up presentation. The contents of this piece include both the TQR and QM keynote audiences’ oral and written reflections as additional data. The analysis and conclusion are the products of those groups’ input as initiated, filtered through, and interpreted by me.

Inside the Brackets

This keynote address, this reflective project, challenged me as one of the most difficult I’ve ever had to write in my 24 years as a qualitative researcher. How easy it seems to analyze others—much easier than it is to analyze oneself, especially phenomenologically.

A folkloric principle I espouse in several of my research methods books is: “You can’t learn how to tell someone else’s story until you first learn how to tell your own.” As an analogous leap, I posit: “You can’t analyze others until you’ve analyzed yourself.” Indeed, some counselor training programs require their future clinicians to spend time in therapy themselves to come to a deeper understanding of what it means to be in analysis.

It seems appropriate, then, that qualitative researchers become not just reflexive about our own work, but even autoethnographic—introspective about our own investigative journeys—metacognitive of what, how, and especially *why* we’re doing what we do by exploring the phenomenon or culture of qualitative inquiry through a culture of one’s own

experiences. But unlike phenomenological studies, we cannot bracket ourselves. We must examine what's inside the brackets. It's within the brackets that meaning is to be made.

The Pathway Was Rocky

When I received the TQR invitation in January 2017 to deliver a keynote address for their January 2018 conference, I spent the first seventh months of 2017 occasionally at other research conferences informally observing my colleagues, at work and at play, and reading new research methods books in the field throughout the year in an attempt to answer my phenomenological research question, "What does it mean to be a qualitative researcher?" I listened carefully to other researchers presenting their work, highlighted salient passages in textbooks, jotted a few key words and phrases, and reflected on how everything fit together.

Initially I really wanted to talk to people, to ask *them*, "What does being a qualitative researcher mean to *you*?" But I felt that would have been cheating—asking others to do my homework for me. So I opted instead for peripheral participant observation, document reviews, and introspective reflection rather than in-depth, open-ended interviews.

Concurrently, I composed the first draft of this keynote address based on my own responses to the research question and came up with a few good yet tentative things. Ironically, I wrote the conclusion to this keynote first and was quite pleased with the analytic summary. All I had to write now was everything leading up to it. But the pathway was rocky. I knew where I needed to go but wasn't quite sure how to get there. I had a plot but no storyline.

Showing Others

In May 2017 at the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry conference, I took the Performative Writing workshop led by Ron Pelias. He gave us several prompts to explore for a 40-minute personal writing exercise, and one prompt stood out to me:

Category: Reflexive Writing

Subcategory: Implication

Write a paragraph or two where you describe how you are part of the problem you are trying to understand or solve. In other words, show how your actions are actions you are writing against.

So I tackled why it was so hard to come up with the answer to, "What does it mean to be a qualitative researcher?" And without revision, here's what I hastily composed:

In six months, I must have answers. Hundreds of people are counting on me to give them insight, wisdom, awareness, breakthrough revelation.

It scares the hell out of me—one of the toughest challenges I've ever had to write. I'm the one who rants and raves, "Answers, damnit, not questions!"

And, as of today, I have none. Answers.

Well, I have some, but nothing meaningful, insightful, wise, aware, or revelatory.

I want my brain to feel as if it's grown too big for my skull to hold. Not out of arrogance or pride, but out of a mind that's expanded beyond what it normally holds.

I refuse to give up. I will think and think and think until the blood drips from my eye sockets, ears, nose, and mouth.

I observe, listen carefully, just a few words now and then, hoping it all crystallizes into meaning.

(By the way: What *does* “making meaning” mean? But I digress.)

Six months to deliver. Tick, tick, tick.

They’ll be waiting—and they’ll be judging. Oh yes, they’ll be judging.

Look at the list of words again, maybe something will miraculously jump out at me. . . .

“Showing how smart you are” stood out.

Is that the answer? Is it mine?

Damnit, no questions—answers!

Showing how smart you are.

(Oh, I could tell you its roots, but that’s another paper and therapy session altogether.)

Showing how smart you are. That could be it. That could be the answer. It’s what I’m doing now: showing how smart I am.

The essence, the essentials, the phenomenology of *being* a qualitative researcher.

Showing how smart you are.

Showing others that you have the answers.

Showing others that you got it right.

Showing others that you’ve made meaning, made insight, made wisdom, made awareness, made breakthrough revelation.

Am I bleeding yet? Am I bleeding yet?

Damnit, that’s a question.

Answers

As you may have inferred from my writing exercise, I hate unanswered questions. Masculinist that I am, I’m always problem solving, fixing things, and mansplaining, even in my books. As a teacher and teacher educator, “how to” is my *modus operandi*. To me, it’s all about method: to discover not just what and how but, more important, *why* we’re doing what we do.

I acknowledge that some of you will disagree with me but, to me, it’s not the questions that are interesting. It’s the answers that are interesting. It’s the answers that are profound. Some people relish in questions, but I’ve cynically and perhaps unfairly observed that those are also often the people who seldom come up with any productive answers. I detest philosophical movements that wallow and remain stuck in tenets of the messy, ambiguous, and uncertain domains of life. Yes, life is complex and complicated, but if we don’t bother to generate answers, then what’s the point of just asking questions (which, ironically, is a question)?

Lesser Than

My impatience with privileged scholars who spend far too much time on the philosophical and not the pragmatic also arises from my cultural positionalities. As an elder gay man of color without a PhD in theatre—an art form usually perceived by university administrators as a field not as worthy as the hard sciences or other high income-generating disciplines—my “lesser than” statuses have relegated me to the margins for over 40 years as a student and professor in higher education. I have waited so long for equality and social justice. I’ll spare you the stories of micro-aggressions, overt hostility, and discrimination I’ve

experienced, but know that there are some people in the United States who would literally exile or even exterminate me if they could. I've been fighting the good fight for decades and have surprisingly little to show for it. Two steps forward yet one step back. Time for me is running out. There is urgency before I pass on. I need to know that some social problems can be solved. I don't need to "trouble the data" because life for me is troubling enough. So for me, answers, not ambiguities, are needed. Now.

What Makes Someone Smart

Showing how smart you are doesn't mean you're up on all the current jargon of ontologies and epistemologies and philosophical paradigms. Showing how smart you are doesn't mean a curriculum vitae packed with pages of publications and conference presentations. Showing how smart you are doesn't mean calling the shots or leading the way or winning the argument.

To me, what makes someone smart is someone who can articulate the most complex of ideas using the simplest, most elegant language possible.

To me, what makes someone smart is not their intelligent vocabulary or sense of arrogantly deserved seniority and entitlement, but their analytic creativity.

To me, what makes someone smart is someone who makes me say out loud, "Wow," as I'm reading or hearing their research reports because they made insights that never occurred to me. Their analyses transcend science. Their analyses are poetry.

Defining "Research"

Like any good researcher, I went to the dictionary, as a presumed authoritative source, for definitions and hopefully, admittedly, inspiration. "Research" is defined in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* as:

Careful or diligent search; studious inquiry or examination; critical and exhaustive investigation or experimentation having for its aim the discovery of new facts and their correct interpretation; the revision of accepted conclusions, theories, or laws in the light of newly discovered facts, or the practical applications of such new or revised conclusions, theories, or laws; to search or investigate exhaustively; to search again or anew.

I admittedly roll my eyes at the use of cloyingly hyphenated, slashed, or parenthesized prefix terms such as "re-search," "re/search," and "(re)search." The device was clever about 40 years ago; nowadays, it's just a tiresome cliché. Nevertheless, it does reinforce an intriguing part of the *Webster's* definition: to search again or anew, suggesting an iterative, cyclical, oscillating, and reverberative journey. Researching is multidirectional multimodal multitasking. As Yogi Berra's classic line goes, "When you come to a fork in the road, take it!"

Is / Means

I struggled over this keynote, as one of my Facebook posts from May 2017 attests:

Work on keynote address. Check Facebook. Play with cat. Work on keynote address. Eat a bowl of cereal. Refill coffee mug. Work on keynote address. Check calendar. Check e-mail. Work on keynote address. Trim fingernails.

Organize desk drawer. Work on keynote address. Reflect on life. Reflect on death. Work on keynote address. . . .

In *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (Saldaña, 2016) one of my profiles is “Themeing the Data,” in which the researcher explores what something “is” or “means,” a method suitable for phenomenological investigation. When we examine what something “is,” we look for the manifest, the apparent, or the observable. When we examine what something “means,” we venture into the latent, the processual, subtextual, abstract, or the conceptual. Thematic statements are categorized and, if possible, placed in a hierarchical outline to bring some sense of order to the various themes. Or the analyst can venture into what are theoretical constructs, which transform themes into broader meanings.

The bigger analytic task here is not what being a qualitative researcher *is*, but on the phenomenological essences and essentials of what we do—that is, what being a qualitative researcher *means*. I read recently in a new qualitative research textbook’s bold opinion on essence-capturing in grounded theory, “There are no essences—we are postessentialist.” But I respectfully disagree because there’s evidence to disconfirm that assertion. Categories and themes are not dead. Look through the corpus of qualitative journal articles from multiple disciplines that have come out in just the last quarter. Categorizing and themeing are not dead.

I don’t need to tell you your job as a qualitative researcher and what being a qualitative researcher “is.” If I want to know what it *is* you do, all I have to do is turn to the table of contents of any introduction to qualitative research methods textbook and I can find the answers.

Making Meaning

Before we can answer, “What does it mean to be a qualitative researcher?” we need to first ask ourselves a very tricky question: “What does ‘making meaning’ mean?” I’ve been struggling with that question for decades and have yet to read any “aha” answer and can barely come up with one myself. I tackled it in my book, *Thinking Qualitatively*, and defined meaning-making as “the individual’s intertwined cognitive and emotional mental processing of something (a text, a piece of art, an experience, etc.) that stimulates personal interpretive relevance and generates personal understanding” (Saldaña, 2015, p. 60). But even then, I find that definition only satisfactory at best. It’s not very scholarly, but sometimes the way I know I’ve made meaning is when I exclaim, “I get it!”

I take solace in what is, to me, a profound insight by an artist. Composer Philip Glass creates richly complex music, and occasionally collaborates with theatre director Robert Wilson to design visually and aurally arresting and enigmatic stage productions such as *Einstein on the Beach*. Audience members who were profoundly moved yet nevertheless puzzled and confused by the radical performance art of the operas would ask Mr. Glass what certain sections meant. He wisely replied, “It’s not important that you understand what something ‘means’. What’s important is that you understand that something has *meaning*” (Obenhaus, 1985).

I can’t explain to you why I get a new book in qualitative research methods and immerse myself in it and complete my reading of two or three hundred pages in just two days.

I can’t tell you the total number of clock hours I’ve spent in fieldwork, or the total number of hours I’ve spent listening to audio recordings and transcribing interviews verbatim.

I can’t tell you the number of times I’ve stared at a computer monitor perusing data repeatedly in search of patterns and connections, or the number of times I’ve stood in the shower or driven on the highway or laid in bed at night still mulling through the data in my mind. Playwright Jane Wagner (1986) gives me comfort when she muses: “At the moment you

are most in awe of all there is about life that you don't understand, you are closer to understanding it all than at any other time" (p. 206).

What I *can* explain to you is why qualitative research and qualitative data analysis are so important to me.

Personal and Professional Validation

First, qualitative research gives me, and perhaps us, **personal and professional validation**. It's not just the participants who are important. Research lets me know that I've done something significant, that I've accomplished something in and with my life, and that my writings may succeed me after I pass on. Even if the project wasn't action or community-based participatory research, people are changed to some degree when we enter their lives and field sites.

We validate them when we tell them that what they have to say to us in an interview is important. We validate them when we carefully observe what, to them, is just everyday living. We validate them when we document their words and actions in our written reports. The pseudonyms we use may not make them famous, but they can, in secret, know that a trace of their lives is forever in digital print. And if a reader or audience member resonates with some slice of truth we've captured in a report, that validates their comparable observations about life.

Throughout my career, I've presented artistic experiences to grades K-12 children. In final exit interviews, they told me what they remembered seeing and hearing, years later. I've made lasting memories. I've helped young people in elementary school explore the destructive dangers of bullying and some possible solutions to peer oppression. One girl in particular who was the newcomer and stigmatized for her differences became emboldened during one session in which she showed she could indeed stand up for herself, not by fighting back but by reaching for higher ground. I've case studied one beginning teacher's first two years on the job, observing helplessly as I watched her struggle with children who spoke a different language and who were sometimes involved with gang violence. I followed one young man's life from ages 5 through 26 in a longitudinal case study as he dealt with child psychotherapy, bipolarity, drug use, an alcoholic and abusive father, and two suicide attempts, yet his eventual transformation into a minister of God. Who can do and witness all that and not be changed?

Validation gives us a purposeful life.

Communal Grounding

Second, qualitative research gives me, and perhaps us, a sense of **communal grounding**—a sense of place where we interact with participants of every stripe, where we interconnect with like-minded colleagues with whom we share an affinity, if not love, for the social domains of life.

Admittedly, I'm a very poor team player—the control freak in me wants everything done my way with everyone doing it the way I want it. Perhaps that's the play director and teacher educator in me coming out. But over time, I've learned how to collaborate. I've learned how to compromise. I've learned that other people's perspectives and opinions are just as important as mine—sometimes.

I'm nervous as hell when I enter a new field site for the very first time. But after a few visits, I begin to feel somewhat comfortable in the surroundings. There were times when I sensed I wasn't always welcome, but I was never turned away. And what a sea of participant humanity there is in the world: a Vietnam veteran school principal who proudly displayed his service medals on his desk; a fifth grade boy whom you just knew was destined to end up during his teenage years in the juvenile justice system; a clique of four fourth grade girls who

ruled the playground at recess with their savvy confidence and street smarts; a teacher who was loved by his third grade students but who would eventually take his own life during the school year due to a hidden mental illness. There are such people out there in the world whom we may not always understand and love, but whom we must always respect.

In this very room, I count several of you as not just my colleagues but some of my closest friends. It is our common love of research that has brought us together. Your openness and support—and sometimes your challenges—have made me a better person and a better researcher. I’m sort of a lone wolf, I don’t have many personal friends back home, and I never had a long-term, close confidante in my department when I worked at a university I hated. There was such meaningless work, such inequity, a place full of what I labeled “bullies, divas, and dicks.” If it weren’t for the wonderful students I had the opportunity to teach, there would have been no community, no purpose in my being there. I had to go outside my turf to other departments like education and communication, to qualitative research methods conferences like this one to find my tribes, my place.

We get it. I can see it in your faces. I can feel it in your souls. Hence, we are not alone. In this community, we belong.

An Enriched Life

Third, qualitative research gives me, and hopefully all of us, **an enriched life**, a perceptive acuity, emotional awareness, and sometimes too much empathy into the messy mysteries of being human. Qualitative research shows me how life works. It gives me answers. It tells me not just what but how and why. We may not always completely understand why we and others do the things we do, but most times it makes sense. And *when things make sense, you’ve made meaning*.

My epiphanies in my research career were turning points: The first time I made analytic connections in a classroom fieldnote exercise and felt I finally understood what the term “rising above the data” actually meant. The first time I experienced cognitive dissonance during participant observation and realized I should be assessing a teacher’s life from *her* perspective and values system, not mine. The first time I read Norman Denzin’s book *Interpretive Ethnography* and learned that research could be presented as performance. The first time I finally won a research award for a qualitative research study after losing it three times before for quantitative reports.

The first time I submitted a book prospectus to Sage Publications, it was rejected because reviewers felt it wasn’t good enough. I wanted validation, I wanted to belong in that writer’s community, I wanted to accomplish something big so that I would have a sense of personal significance. When you get to be my age, 63, intrinsic rewards are sometimes not all that important anymore. Extrinsic rewards are tangible proof that you’ve lived a life and done something meaningful with it.

The Elements of Our Style

I once put forth in a book chapter, “If you want to discover the meaning of your life, then closely examine the style of it” (Saldaña, 2018, p. 173). So what is our style? What are the elements of our style? Remember: It’s not important that you understand what something “means”; what’s important is that you understand that something has *meaning*. But meaning isn’t something that’s fixed in something else; meaning is activated when you abductively encounter the puzzling.

So what is the meaning of a qualitative researcher? Based on my reflections and the input of the TQR and QM conference attendees, we offer the following ten categories:

Being a qualitative researcher means **meticulous vigilance of details** yet the ability to condense the minutiae, and to find what is salient and significant, even in the mundane. It is a work ethic that rivals a hardcore scientist's—ruminating, reasoning, and evaluating how everything unifies, fits together, works together, and makes life happen together. It is fierce organization, strenuous mental effort, multidimensional thinking, metacognition, allowing a matrix of possible interrelationships to swirl in your mind, total immersion in the empirical materials, making plausible inferences, and relentless pursuit to generate new, insightful patterns and configurations of the social world. It's not just analyzing people, it's analyzing *life*, generating not just factual knowledge but clarity, understanding, discovery, wisdom, and profound revelation.

Being a qualitative researcher means **unyielding resiliency**, a sacrificial fortitude within you that will not give up no matter how impossible the analytic task seems. Acknowledgment that there is an inquiring duty to be met, pursued with selflessness for the greater good. Whether combatting the crucibles of grant applications, IRBs, complex technology, or the harsh critiques of journal reviewers, you will not give up. A fierce promotion of your work so that it does not get lost among the millions of other published articles to get the attention it deserves. A perseverance and tenacity that tell you you may not get it absolutely right but, damn it, at least you will not get it completely wrong either. Unyielding resiliency that gives you a willingness to look at the problems and atrocities of the world and to work toward righting the wrongs.

Being a qualitative researcher means **visionary reinvention**, achieved oddly enough, though an almost addictive need to become hooked and high on your data, seeing them in new and semi-psychedelic arrays that positivist reality cannot begin to conceive. Visionary reinvention shatters your assumptions about what you thought you knew and held to be true. It pushes you to the edge and forces you to cross self-imposed boundaries. Visionary reinvention is conceptualization, originality, creativity, eclecticism, a love of language and form that enable you to imaginatively communicate unique interpersonal and intrapersonal experiences in prose, poetry, drama, even tables, diagrams, and matrices—whatever works in showing your readers and listeners the trustworthy logic of your argument, the display of your ideas, the account of findings that you've rendered and proudly exhibit as not just social science but as art form. Visionary reinvention is the reflexive growth, transformation, and reinvention of the world and yourself as a qualitative researcher, if not a human being.

Being a qualitative researcher means **social savvy**—not just social awareness or social intelligence but social presence, social “withitness.” It's having the savvy to negotiate with field site gatekeepers for access and the savvy to persuade what may be total strangers to tell you what's going through their minds. It's looking at life, every day, not just as a participant in the world but as a passionate observer of every human nuance, gesture, vocal tone, physical appearance—our quirky yet unique personalities that tell you who a person is, what he or she values, and what he or she may be hiding. It means to discern the intricate interplay of human action, reaction, and interaction by interpreting the routines, rituals, rules, roles, and relationships of social life. It means knowing the literature of our field intimately and the wisdom about life that's been documented with perceptive insight.

Being a qualitative researcher means **humble vulnerability**—open to empathic understanding, open to other people's fragilities and idiosyncrasies, open to messy collaboration, open to bring wrong. Humbly vulnerable to being utterly confused and so awash in data that you have no idea where to begin or what direction to take. Humbly vulnerable to the possibility that your opinion doesn't matter and that your interpretation is incorrect. Humbly vulnerable to expressing your political beliefs, humbly vulnerable when asserting your moral compass, knowing right from wrong, and realizing that there are many more grey areas than black and white ones in this world.

Being a qualitative researcher means **representational responsibility**, telling other people's stories as well as your own. Crossing borders and reaching out to enable and empower the voices of this world to be heard. Documenting their concerns and histories, their opinions and feelings, their values and their needs. It's the expression of your own voice, which is not something you must "find" but something you must learn to trust. Yet it's also the responsibility to represent with ethical concern, in-depth investigation, and rigorous analysis. It's finding the delicate balance between subjectivity and objectivity, between feeling and form. It is through the representation of self and others that we hope to liberate.

Being a qualitative researcher means **finding your methodological tribes**. In this eclectic field of inquiry, there are some approaches we may find more appealing to our personal interests, and we socialize and bond with those who share those same affinities. We invest ourselves in selected research genres or styles because they feel right as forums for our creative investigation. If there are negative aspects to being a qualitative researcher, this meaning category may contain them, for it is this sphere where we may encounter isolation from others who do not share those same interests, and selected tribes that become warring factions, asserting their paradigmatic dominance or superiority over others. But when we find our tribes, we find our colleagues; we find our friends; we find our place.

Being a qualitative researcher mean **emotional immersion**, connection, feeding your spirit, an openness to the highs and lows of humanity, an angry sense of social justice and activism when things are not the way they should be, a coming together of like minds and like souls. It means a passionate investment in the inquiry, not just working at it but loving what you do, finding joy, hope, and even fun in the endeavor. Too much emotion can be harmful, but too little of it can be dangerous in the world today. It means acknowledging that emotions are not an analytic nuisance to be kept in check but a driving force of human action and inquiry. Emotional immersion means your eyes watering up after you've written something down.

Being a qualitative researcher means **gifting your ideas**. Remember that the root meaning of datum is not something collected but something *given*. And giving your new ideas about the human condition back to the academic and lay communities is paying it forward, leaving a legacy of qualitative work that contains not just your knowledge but your ways of working and your personal signature. It is more than simply revealing your findings—it is enthusiastic revelation of your discoveries for the current generation to ponder and for future generations to refine.

And finally, being a qualitative researcher means **knowing and understanding yourself**—knowing and understanding yourself so deeply that it scares the hell out of you. You are your own case study, a mirrored perception of self that is reflective, reflexive, and refractive about your age, your gender, your ethnicity, your sexual orientation, and all the myriad of ways you categorize and construct your personal identities. It's dwelling deeply in your own presence, knowing where you are in place and positionality, in space and standpoint, in context and in contrast. It's knowing that if you think and feel a certain way, then perhaps others do too. And maybe that means a connection, a relationship, possibly a universal truth.

You can't analyze others until you've analyzed yourself.

Our Mission

It shouldn't be too surprising that the dictionary defines a researcher as "one who researches." But the second definition of a researcher is more intriguing: "a person who *devotes* himself or herself to research." Devotion's definition focuses on its religious origins and meanings: a personal, selfless act done with earnestness and zeal, with fervor and passion, for purposes of not just worship but of service to others. As for me, I *do* find meaning when I sacrifice for those I love. Through a personal loss of certain kinds, there is also personal

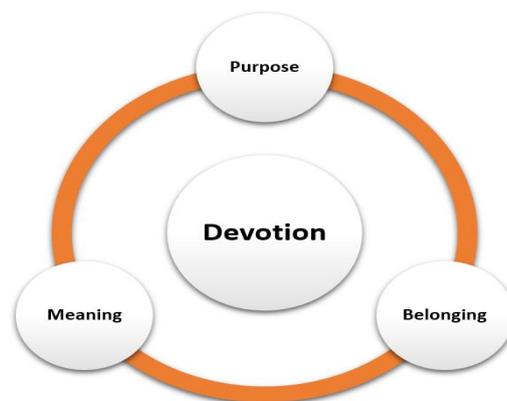
fulfillment. And personal fulfillment is achieved when a sacrificial purpose has been met willingly out of love.

Perhaps our mission as qualitative researchers is also somewhat spiritual. We devote ourselves, our time and talents, to our studies; we devote ourselves to our participants and their welfare; we devote ourselves to a personal code of ethics in the search for what we perceive as interpretive truth; we devote ourselves to discovery, revelation, insight, and understanding.

Purpose, belonging, and meaning—lofty accomplishments, indeed. Some might even say spiritual goals to lead a better life. So perhaps research *is* devotion: a selfless act done with earnestness and zeal, with committed focus, fervor, and dedication (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 – Research Is Devotion

Research Is Devotion



Purpose: *Personal and Professional Validation*

Meticulous Vigilance of Details
 Unyielding Resiliency
 Visionary Reinvention

Belonging: *Communal Grounding*

Social Savvy
 Humble Vulnerability
 Representational Responsibility
 Finding Your Methodological Tribes

Meaning: *An Enriched Life*

Emotional Immersion
 Gifting Your Ideas
 Knowing and Understanding Yourself

Qualitative research is not just inquiry *about* other humans. Qualitative research *makes* us human.

(Have I shown you how smart I am? Am I bleeding yet?
Damnit, those are questions. . . .)¹

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¹ After the keynote address, TQR and QM conference attendees were asked the following: "If making meaning means 'I get it!', then what do you 'get' out of being a qualitative researcher? *Why* do you research and/or research qualitatively?" Participants, in groups of two or three, dialogued about their motivations or the "payoffs" they personally receive from being a qualitative researcher. Whole group response afterward contributed selected facets to this analysis. Readers of this keynote address are encouraged to reflect on those same questions and topics for personal-professional development.