

6-13-2020

## Journeying into the Well: An Autoethnography of 35 Retreats Across Two Decades

E. James Baesler  
*Old Dominion University*, [jbaesler@odu.edu](mailto:jbaesler@odu.edu)

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### Recommended APA Citation

Baesler, E. J. (2020). Journeying into the Well: An Autoethnography of 35 Retreats Across Two Decades. *The Qualitative Report*, 25(6), 1579-1598. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2020.4442>

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## Journeying into the Well: An Autoethnography of 35 Retreats Across Two Decades

### Abstract

In this autoethnography I narrate the story of my retreat experiences and spiritual practices at the Well Retreat Center over a span of two decades. The Well is both a geographical place in the Isle of Wright County in Virginia, and a metaphor for a spiritual journey into the inner Well of our being. I chronicle an amalgam of 35 retreats in one 24-hour retreat, narrating stories about: leaving home and settling in, dreaming and awakening, sunrise and sunset, walking in nature and walking the narrow path, discovering life behind a cracked door, and uncovering the mystery that lies at the bottom of a Well. I punctuate each story with questions for the reader to contemplate, inviting them to go deeper into their own inner Well, to contact and connect with the life-giving waters that nourish our growth, sustain our hope, and orient our lives toward loving compassion. Finally, I address issues of validity, limitations, and future research.

### Keywords

Spiritual Practices, Retreats, Autoethnography

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### Acknowledgements

This work is dedicated to retreatants that came to The Well in search of life-giving water, and to all the people that served at The Well, especially the first caretakers, Sister Nancy Healy and Diane Weymouth, and the last caretakers, Tom and Linda Ashe. A poster version of this paper was presented at the 15th International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, Urbana-Champaign, May 2019.

## **Journeying into the Well: An Autoethnography of 35 Retreats Across Two Decades**

E. James Baesler

Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia, USA

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### **Discovering the Well<sup>1</sup>**

Have you ever drawn water from a Well? If so, did you pump a handle, turn on an electrical switch, or throw a bucket into a hole? I first drew water from a Well that my grandfather dug just ten steps from the kitchen window in Hebron, North Dakota. After leveraging my eight-year old body to pump down on the handle many times with no visible results--the water was being drawn up the pipe--I felt astonished to see, and then feel, the clear cold water gushing from the pipe. Like many things in life, laborious effort often precedes a steady flow of results.

It takes even more energy to dig a Well. Using a toothed PVC (polyvinyl chloride) pipe as a hand drill, and water pressure from two garden hoses, I dug a twenty-foot Well ten steps from our kitchen window in Chesapeake, Virginia which we occasionally use in the heat of summer to water nearby marshmallow and pineapple guava plants. The hard work that goes into constructing a Well can nourish and sustain life in a geographical locale for many years, especially if the Well is connected to a larger underground body of water. Similarly, it takes a mixture of persistence and divine grace to dig deep into the Well of our lives and reach life-giving waters. When our Well is connected to the underground river of life, we can readily share these life-giving waters to refresh those we work, play, and live with.

If you have not drawn water from a Well, then perhaps you have seen a Well. In driving through the country roads of Suffolk, Virginia on my way to a retreat center called *The Well Retreat Center (The Well)*, I see Wells covered with a curious compilation of plywood, aluminum, and weeds in the front yards of many older homes. Perhaps this image of a Well

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<sup>1</sup> Note on nomenclature: I use the phrase “the Well” to indicate a physical Well (I capitalize the word “Well” to differentiate it from the lower-case word “well” as in “well, how about that?”) that one draws water from, or as a metaphor for an inner Well within each person while the italicized phrase *The Well* is an abbreviation for *The Well Retreat Center*.

represents a place on the spiritual path: the inner Well covered by a multiplicity of concerns that make up modern life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We can rediscover our inner Well, remove weeds and covering, and begin searching for methods—be it pump, electric motor, or bucket—to reach the underground water. What follows is the story of how I rediscovered my inner Well at *The Well Retreat Center*, and a description of the spiritual practices that taught me how to dig deep down to reach the life-giving waters that nourish and sustain me and those I work, play, and live with. In traveling with me on this *journey into the Well*, you may re/discover your inner Well, finding waters of refreshment for yourself and those you love.

### Questions for Reflection

What kind of images do you associate with a Well? Do you see an old-fashioned pitcher pump, an electric pump, or a simple village Well? What symbolism does the image of a Well evoke for you...practical, cultural, spiritual? When you consider delving deep into the inner Well of your being, what emotions are stimulated and why...fear, anxiety, excitement, curiosity?

### Retreats at The Well

To narrate the story of *The Well*, one must know something about retreats.<sup>2</sup> This section orients readers not familiar with retreats. Most retreats, regardless of religious/spiritual faith, are for a specific time (typically varying in length from one day to a week), spent in a place different from one's routine life (e.g., a retreat center, an ashram, a monastery, a remote cabin), for some spiritual purpose (e.g., deepening one's relationship with the divine, developing concentration, attention, and mindfulness, and/or discerning a vocation, solving a problem, or making a decision). Retreats may be individual silent retreats, with or without the guidance of a spiritual director, guru, teacher, or elder, or they may be group retreats (silent or not) with or without talks given by a teacher. *The Well Retreat Center* offers both individual and group retreats that are silent, directed, and/or involve talks by a teacher. Those on retreat at *The Well* stay in hermitages that resemble an austere hotel room. There is a main complex for group events, a community dining room for groups and individual retreatants, and a resource library of books and media.

I first heard about *The Well Retreat Center* from Cynthia Morgan, an elderly wise woman, who invited our congregation to watch a five-minute promotional video about *The Well* after church services. I felt odd as the only person out of 200+ people to watch the video. After viewing the video, pleasant memories of a group retreat in high school surfaced, and I felt intrigued by the possibility of exploring my adult spirituality on retreat at *The Well*. During this season of my life over two decades ago, my roles as husband, father of a seven-year old, householder, and assistant professor combined to create many stressors, and I desperately needed to reach deeper within to experience the life-giving waters of *The Well*. Images of the 23 acres of natural landscape with rolling grassland, flowers, trees, and wildlife, positioned beside a small lake in the Isle of Wright County in east Virginia beckoned me. I sensed the possibility of rediscovering my inner Well at *The Well* and made plans for my first retreat.

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<sup>2</sup> Sometimes retreat centers are called *meditation centers*. See Nelson's (2001) *Come and Sit: A Week Inside Meditation Centers*. I don't want to dichotomize meditation centers as places where people meditate and retreat centers as places where people pray. My sense is that meditation and prayer occur at both places, but since the focus of this story is on *The Well Retreat Center*, I use the nomenclature of "retreat center" rather than "meditation center" throughout the narrative.

## Questions for Reflection

Have you ever been on a retreat? If so, how would you describe your experience to someone who has not been on a retreat? What season of life were you in and what life lessons did you learn on retreat?

If you have not been on retreat, what roadblocks are preventing you from attending a retreat, and how might you overcome these obstacles and make plans for a retreat? Does an individual private retreat appeal to you or a group retreat? Where would you go, how long would you stay, and what would be your spiritual intention?

## Autoethnographic Method and Writing Process

Before diving deep into *The Well*, I describe the autoethnographic method I use to narrate this story. I understand *autoethnography* as a method of academic research grounded in two core 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, *signs*, in and outside of a particular context in the life-world, serve as entry points to a variety of ways that reflect and enhance meanings in the ongoing story of life (Goodall, 1996). In addition, a *good* autoethnography, based on my reading of autoethnographers in the field of Communication (e.g., Bochner, 2014, Ellis, 2004; Frenzt, 2008) and my own contemplative reflection, is: a personal and emotionally engaging story about meaningful events in the author's life (auto) that connects with the story of others (ethnography) within a stream of ideas (e.g., a model, theory, body of literature, and/or culture), grounded in the human mystery of the interconnections between mind, body, and spirit, for some particular purpose (e.g., consciousness raising, mindful reflection, influence, praxis and/or learning). Moreover, a unique characteristic of autoethnography as a method, distinguishing it from autobiography, is the conscious cultivation of a relationship between the self and the other (e.g., another language, race, gender, group, organization, and/or culture). I create this relationship between myself and other retreatants (those who have been on a retreat and those considering attending a retreat) through a series of questions that punctuate the narrative.

To prepare for writing this autoethnography, I review 35 retreat journal entries. Each entry ranges between 1 - 27 handwritten pages (median of 7 pages). I wrote the retreat journals over an 18-year period in my middle years (ages 34 - 52). Thirty-one individual and four group retreats are evenly spaced through the years 1995 through 2013 with 1-5 retreats per year (median of 2 retreats per year) except for two gaps of several years each. One gap is due to an extended family illness and another gap occurred after the birth of our second son. All but one of the individual retreats are of a 24-hour duration. The majority of individual retreats take place during the middle of the week when there are no group retreats scheduled, affording a greater degree of solitude. Most retreats take place in the months of January, May, and August, corresponding to periods immediately prior to, or after, a fall or spring semester.

I read and prayed over the retreat journals for one week. This process involves recalling the memories, recounting the events, asking questions, and using my imagination to fill in the gaps to create a narrative truth (Bochner, 2014). To assist in this process, I underline and jot notes in the margins of the journals in places that resonate with me. Second, I review 33 photos that I've taken of *The Well* and arrange them on the floor as a visual map to stimulate my memories. Next, I review the journals looking for recurring spiritual practices. By *spiritual practices* I mean "...those that help us experience the sacred—that which is most central and

essential to our lives” (Walsh, 1999, p. 3)<sup>3</sup>. I conceptualize my spiritual practices as *prayer*: “...anything that helps our relationship of love with God [the divine]” (Michael, 2001, p. 43). Lastly, I organize the spiritual practices chronologically into an amalgam of one 24-hour retreat that represents the best of the spiritual practices across the 35 retreats.

I waited on the Spirit for inspiration, letting my thoughts and intuition percolate. Then, I begin to write at my laptop. I write two times a day, six days a week (Monday through Saturday) for about an hour each session. I habitually write first thing in the morning, after stretching and prayer, with a cup of herbal tea by my side. I write once more in the late afternoon or evening, depending on the events of the day. I keep writing until I reach the end of the first draft. My log shows 21 days of writing for a total of nearly 50 hours for the first draft. After the first draft, I read the paper aloud one paragraph at a time, reviewing fluency, grammar, endnotes, references, and organization of titles. I play with the wording until I feel it is as good as I can get it. Next, I have a trusted other, usually my wife Mary Elizabeth, critique the paper, and make the necessary edits. Then, I let the paper sit for a several weeks before I return to it for a final read. Lastly, I wait on the Spirit to help me find a home for the piece. Several of these writing practices are based on or variations of writing practices recommended by Goldberg (2005).

My plan for this story is to invite the reader on a journey of an amalgam of retreat experiences that emphasize life-enhancing spiritual practices. Each spiritual practice emerges from a combination of journal writings, memories, pictures, and spiritual inspiration associated with my retreats at *The Well*. These three sources are intertwined as Borromean rings (Schneider, 1994), each ring, while distinct, interlocks as one trefoil knot such that I cannot say with certainty which source is the primary influence for a particular spiritual practice. I punctuate these retreat experiences with questions for reflection. These questions are based on my personal meditations, journal writings during the process of writing this paper, and my re-reading of the text, *The Art of Socratic Questioning* (Paul & Elder, 2006). The questions invite readers to plumb deeper into their own inner Well, recovering the waters of life that can nourish and sustain us all.

## Journeying into the Well

### Leaving Home

Leaving home for each retreat leaves me with mixed emotions. The physical and emotional untethering process of a retreat begins with saying goodbye to those I love, realizing that I may not see them again. The stark reality of traveling in a motorized vehicle in modern life is that dying in a car crash is a possibility.<sup>4</sup> We have a tradition in our family of saying goodbye each time a person travels from home. We hug and say “I love you,” and we wave the “I love you sign” until we lose visual contact when the car turns the corner at the end of Maple Drive. We entrust our loved ones to the Spirit, and we pray for a safe journey. As I look through the rear-view mirror and see my family waving goodbye, I know that their love goes with me. Leaving home, a transition begins inside of me as my inner eye looks from home to *The Well*.

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<sup>3</sup> Walsh’s (1999, p. 14) research uncovers seven central spiritual practices for transformation: transform your motivation, cultivate emotional wisdom, live ethnically, concentrate and calm your mind, awaken your spiritual vision, cultivate spiritual intelligence, and express spirit in action.

<sup>4</sup> According to 2014 data from the National Highway Safety Administration (<https://www-fars.nhtsa.dot.gov/Main/index.aspx>) the chances of a fatal car crash for the average American are about 1 in 10,000 each year.

## Questions for Reflection

What significance does the word “goodbye” have for you? Do you have any rituals for saying goodbye to family/friends when you leave for work, school, or a trip? If not, how might you add spiritual meaning to your goodbye? Perhaps you might add a gesture with a phrase like: “Peace go with you,” or “Blessings upon your journey.”

*The Well Retreat Center* is a thirty-five-minute drive from my home in Chesapeake, Virginia. Traveling through flatland acres of soy, corn, and cotton fields in Suffolk, I notice the names of farms and ranches, Meadowbrook, Whispering Pines, signposts that mark the road between the small towns of Driver, Sandy Bottom, and Hobson. Crossing a rickety wooden bridge, I pass the only hilltop near the James River. Turning right onto Cherry Grove, the road shrinks to one lane and I travel through a tunnel of forest green oak, maple, and pecan tree tops that line both sides of the road. In the clearing, I see a Well.

### Encountering The Well

The five-foot tall Well, circular in shape and faced with palm-sized stones set in mortar, has no cover. I maneuver my twenty-year-old white Buick to the edge of a lane marked *Quiet Way* for a closer look. I see lavender and yellow colored pansies growing out of the top of the Well. This is not a functional Well for drawing water, but a marker at the entrance of the driveway, symbolizing life that *springs from* the center of a Well. A few inches from the Well is an oak sign that reads, *The Well*. An inscription from John’s gospel (New Jerusalem Bible 4:14, italics author) reads: “...the water that I shall give will turn into a *spring inside* him [her], welling up to eternal life.” Like Jesus who offers more than water to the Samaritan woman at the Well in biblical times, more than Well water is being offered at the entrance to *The Well Retreat Center*.

In Progoff’s (1977) *The Well and the Cathedral*, the Well symbolizes a quality of consciousness within a person (the spring inside) which is often muddied by the multiplication of activities in our outer lives. But “Muddy water/Let stand/Becomes clear” is a saying attributed to Zen philosopher Lao Tzu<sup>5</sup> (Progoff, 1977, p. 35). Through the process of meditation, a muddy mind can eventually settle and reach a still center within. Descending into the depths of the Well, one can discover the life-giving waters that are part of an underground divine river. The significance of this *Well* water is described in Fox’s (2000, p. 5, italics author), *One River, Many Wells*:

To go down a Well is to practice a tradition, but we would make a grave mistake...if we confused the Well itself with the flowing waters of the underground river. Many Wells, one river. This book is an effort to *get us into the Wells* and hopefully deeper into their source.

As I journey down my inner Well at *The Well Retreat Center*, I discover the divine underground river. We are all capable of descending into the inner Well of our being, maybe not at a retreat center like *The Well*, but perhaps at a *different* kind of Well that leads to the *same* underground

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<sup>5</sup> Legge’s 1891 translation of Lao Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching*, in the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter, reads: “Who can (make) the muddy water (clear)? Let it be still, and it will gradually become clear” (retrieved 4/18/2017: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/tao/taote.htm>). I can verify the veracity of the statement. I invite you to do the same. I filled a five-gallon bucket with water, added a heaping handful of soil, stirred, and waited for the mud to settle. The mud did not settle in an hour, or a day, but three days later I could see clear to the bottom. Yes, muddy waters do become clear if you are patient to wait long enough.

river. My journeys at *The Well* speak to a process of traveling down the Well to connect with the life-giving waters and traveling back up the Well with waters of creative inspiration to share. If you are not connected to a Well (a spiritual faith, tradition, or practice), you may begin to discover one as you journey with me at *The Well*. Spiritual practices I discover at *The Well* allow the muddy waters of life to settle and reveal the clear life-giving waters. I hope that some of these discoveries will assist in settling the muddies of life, gaining clarity in purpose, providing nourishment and refreshment. After the following reflection questions, I return to my journey at *The Well Retreat Center*.

### Questions for Reflection

Review the entire set of questions in this section, and then choose one or two to meditate on. How would you describe your spiritual or life journey to a close friend? Can you remember when you became conscious that you were on a journey? What are the stages or phases of your journey that serve as signposts along the way? Is there an ultimate aim to your journey, and/or destination(s) that you would like to reach and why? Are you sojourning with other companions? If not, where might you find like-minded pilgrims to accompany you on the journey, or do you prefer to travel alone? What practices have helped the most on your journey? How could you share these experiences and practices so that others might benefit from them?

### Spiritual Practices at The Well

I continue my drive pass the small Well that marks the entrance to *The Well Retreat Center*, and slowly motor down the winding gravel road that empties into a rectangular dirt parking lot. Turning the engine off, sitting quietly, I realize how grateful I am to be here. With backpack in tow, my gaze surveys the scenery: a ten-foot wooden cross, puff ball clouds against an azure sky, the Zen-like sound of a wind chime. Approaching the double glass door entrance of the main building, sky blue and emerald green dragonflies rest on the patio furniture and on colored flowers in pots lining the cement walkway. Entering the door, I find the main office, meet the staff, and receive a brief tour of the main building, cafeteria, and place where I will be staying. I walk slowly, meditatively, toward my private hermitage on a strip of walkway called *Wind Song*. Opening the door to the hermitage, I'm greeted by a fiery middle-aged woman with yellow, orange, and red flames emanating from her body framed in a twelve by fifteen-inch picture on the wall. Beneath her is a twin bed. To one side of the bed rests a desk, chair, and reading lamp, and next to the bathroom, a stand-up dresser. I walk four paces to the dresser and tip the digital clock upside down so that I cannot see the numbers. I do not want to be influenced by *chronos* (the human tick tock of chronological time) on this retreat. I want to embrace *kairos* (the Spirit's time) at *The Well*.

Next, I take care of the body: deep breaths, stretching, yoga, tai chi, body tapping, and pulse alignment, ending with a hot shower and foot massage.<sup>6</sup> Thoroughly relaxed, I slide under the bed covers, gently close my eyes, mentally review my intention for the retreat, and entrust myself to the Spirit. I let my consciousness drift into sleep, trusting I will remember any dream messages. The routine of attending to the body, mentally focusing on an intention, and spiritually letting go is something I *fell into* on the first retreat, and it is a simple spiritual practice I re-enacted on every retreat thereafter.

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<sup>6</sup> There are many ways to care for the body, and care for the self in general. See Wilber, Patten, Leonard, and Morelli (2008) for holistic practices to care for the body, mind, and spirit.



### Questions for Reflection

How do you feel, right now, in your body? Do you feel *at home* in your body? Are you *good friends* with your body? What specific things do you do each day to take loving care of your body (e.g., nutrition, exercise, conscious breathing, progressive relaxation, massage)? Does your body serve you well, or is it more like an untrained hunting dog that chases after anything that moves in the brush? What gentle ways might you begin and/or continue supporting and nourishing your body?<sup>7</sup>

### Dreaming and Awakening

Sound asleep, I enter a dream cycle, naturally awakening three to four hours later. The open journal beside my bed serves as a *dream catcher*, recording, interpreting, and honoring dreams, a sequence adapted from Johnson's (1986) practice called *active imagination*. Unconscious symbols percolate at the bottom of the Well and dreaming brings some of these symbols to the surface where I can identify and begin dialoguing with them. Unless I immediately record a dream upon awakening, I find it difficult to recall the details of the dream. I interpret dream symbols as parts of myself communicating with me. By naming and dialoguing with emotionally intense symbols, often insight and integration results. Honoring the dream provides closure in the performance of a small ritual related to one of the dream symbols within the next twenty-four hours. For example, if I dream about a child swinging on the monkey bars at a park, I interpret this as a need for more play time in my life. I might honor the dream child that wants to play by climbing a tree, shooting a few hoops, or going to a park and swinging on the monkey bars.

### Questions for Reflection

Do you have a favorite *dream catcher*? Ideas for dream catchers include: recording the dream with a special pen in a dream journal, talking the dream into an *iPhone*, and typing the dream on a laptop. Having caught a dream, how do you interpret the dream? Could dreams be messages from the unconscious trying to break into your everyday consciousness? If so, what might your dreams be telling you? Finally, consider sharing your dreams with a trusted friend. Ask for their interpretation of the dream before telling them yours, and then exchange roles so that you both have a chance to share your dreams.

### Marking Time with the Sunrise and Sunset

For most retreats, I arrive mid-morning, well after sunrise. After my morning routine of caring for the body and sleeping and dreaming, I usually feel well-rested and enjoy actively exploring nature in the early evening near sunset. As shadows lengthen, I face west, observe the sun descending below the tree line, bringing a sense of closure to the day. There is poignancy and finality in viscerally experiencing the end of each day. *This* day is over, done, never to return. Meditating on the day, I harvest moments of consolation and desolation in my journal. Grateful for the gift of life, I entrust myself to the Spirit and pray with hope and faith that the sun will rise again for me. After sunset, there is ample time to nourish the body with food and drink, sometimes in the company of the caretakers of *The Well* who serve as spiritual directors for me. Evenings I pray, read, contemplate, and journal. Bedtime usually falls after

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<sup>7</sup> Easwaran (1978) describes a series of practices to train the senses, addressing topics like: automatic eating, conditioning, entertainment, artistry in living, vigilance, choice, and responsibility.

midnight. Sleep is light with creative thoughts whirling on the seabed of consciousness. I sleep only a few hours before I feel soft light touching my eyelids.

The sound of a single bird breaks the silence of the hermitage. Opening the window, I sense dawn approaching. Walking briskly in semi-darkness about three hundred paces to the edge of the lake, I position myself in the center of a family of mimosa trees. Looking eastward, I wait...all at once, a glimmer of fire appears on the skyline...slowly an orb of light emerges from the horizon, and a single ray makes its way from the opposite shoreline, across the water's surface, to the place where I stand. Enveloped in a beam of radiance, I breath deep and absorb the mystery of sun, air, light, earth...the gift of a new day. Grateful to be alive, I sit in meditation, basking in the warm golden rays. I often use the Lakota prayer, *Let me Walk in Beauty* for meditation in the morning. Here, I cite a part of the prayer that speaks to the imagery and significance of the sunrise (Easwaran, 1982, p.163):

...Spirit who comes out of the East, come to me with the power of the rising sun.  
 Let there be light in my words.  
 Let there be light on the path that I walk.  
 Let me remember always that you [Great Spirit] give the gift of a new day.  
 Never let me be burdened with sorrow by not starting over...

### Questions for Reflection

How often have you attentively observed, for more than a few minutes, a sunrise or sunset? If your schedule permits, watch at least one sunrise and one sunset this week, ideally on the same day. What emotions are stimulated as you watch the sun rise...as you follow its descent? Objectively, we know that the sun provides light, warmth, and energy for all life on planet earth; but subjectively, what symbolic meanings does the sun hold for you? And, how might you incorporate a greater awareness and gratitude for the sunrises and sunsets of your life?

### Fox Walking

Usually my afternoons at *The Well* begin just outside the threshold of the hermitage and expand outward into the 23 acres of natural wonder. Sometime during the afternoon, often near sunset, I walk the perimeter of the *The Well*. My *walkabout* is not as serious or intense as the rite of passage walkabout for young men in the Australian outback, but there is a similar spiritual intent. I walk to listen to nature. I walk without a predefined path or destination. I walk slowly, barefoot. I combine the mental attitude of *mindful walking* (Hanh, 1991) with the practice of *fox walking* described by Brown (1989, p. 35) as:

...the foot is placed on the ground before the weight is committed...back is centered comfortably on the hips and the head is held high...with a short stride...the foot should lightly touch the ground, bringing into play the entire outside edge of the foot, simultaneously hitting the ground with the ball, heel, and edge of the foot. The foot is then rolled inward, until the whole surface area of the foot is on the ground.

Walking like a fox, I am free to mindfully observe and listen to the natural world enveloping me. I do not concern myself with where I step (in normal walking, I look down to avoid pinecones, sticks, and holes) because the bottom of my foot senses the ground before I commit my weight to step forward. With practice, my feet automatically adjust their position to find a

safe and comfortable place to rest on the earth with each step. Sometimes I walk with my eyes closed. I call this practice *walking the narrow way*.

### **Mindfully Walking the Narrow Way**

From the entrance of *The Well Retreat Center* to the main building, there is narrow gravel road bordered by various grasses and wildflowers, a light pole near the edge of the road, a drainage ditch with a two-foot drop, and two rows of evergreen trees along the border. Barefoot, I begin at *The Well's* entrance, straddling the right side of the narrow way. My left foot feels the sharpness of the gravel road and my right foot feels the softness of the grass next to the road. Walking the narrow way is like walking through life. There is the hard (the sharp gravel) and the soft (the grass), the yang and the yin. I attempt to walk the entire stretch of road (about a half mile) from the entrance of *The Well* to the porch of the main complex *with my eyes closed*. Each step requires mindful attention. My thoughts race...left foot on gravel, good...right foot on gravel, opps, too far, next step needs to come more to the right...left, gravel...right, grass, okay, I'm back on track. Fear begins a litany of thoughts and emotions tempting me to give up: are there snakes on the road, what if I bang my head into the metal light pole, sprain my ankle in the ditch, or scrape my eye on a pointy branch. Then another voice replaces the fears: keep going...you can do this...have faith...one step at a time. Thus, I walk the narrow way with some trepidation. Many times, fear overwhelms me, and I open my eyes to reassure myself. Other times, I walk the entire narrow way before opening my eyes at the end of the road, looking back, and visually retracing my steps. The experience of mindfully attending to *each step* enables me to traverse the distance without thinking about where I'm going...and then suddenly...I arrive. Walking the narrow way cultivates an ability to keep my sense of balance while moving through life, adjusting my steps to feel the hard and the soft. By letting go of fear and embracing faith, I eventually complete the journey.

### **Questions for Reflection**

Can you recall the last time you went for a long walk, the kind of leisurely stroll where there is little concern about time or destination? On retreat, I walk mindfully, like a fox, open to nature, and sometimes I walk the narrow way to help bring my life into balance and overcome fear. What other reasons might you go for a walkabout? Konig (2005, p. xvi) writes, when a problem arises, I say to myself, "...it's a lovely spring day...I'm going for a long walk...I will think about it and decide by sundown." Long walks can provide clarity for problem-solving and decision-making. What problem or decision that you need to make could you take on a walk today?

### **Nature Speaks: Listen**

Nature walks at *The Well* are imbued with silence and solitude. I am often the only retreatant walking among the wonders of nature at *The Well* since there are typically no group retreats scheduled in the middle of the week during the day. Creating solitude and silence helps me "listen below the noise" (Le Claire, 2010). Unconcerned about the presence of others, I feel a sense of freedom. Unencumbered by the need to listen or speak with others, there is room to listen to nature. On my walks, I often pause and contemplate a particular place by taking a *long, loving, leisurely look at the real* (McNamara, 1976), bringing forth the spiritual dimension of nature (Steindl-Rast, 1999), heightening an awareness of the sacredness of *this* particular place. In the next section, I take the reader on a tour of the perimeter of *The Well*, highlighting experiences of *listening to nature speak*.

Just outside the doorway of the hermitage, I pause before beginning to walk around *The Well*. With both hands extended in prayer, a sky-blue dragon fly lands on the tip of my outstretched right index finger with its head facing me. Nature speaks, I listen: what are you pointing toward in life, what do you need to face?

Walking a short distance from the hermitage to the shoreline of a swampy area near the lower side of the lake, a palm-sized turtle moves from the shore toward the water. I perceive a slightly raised area of lumpy soil. Perhaps she buried her eggs here? Nature speaks, I listen: In what ways have I left my comfort zone and planted ideas for hatching?

Following the shoreline, I reach the highest point at the Well, a mound topped with a circle of stones, a place for prayer and meditation. Nature speaks, I listen: What purpose brings these stones from separate places on earth to join in circle with larger stones pointing to the cardinal directions? What ideas and objects do I *call into circle* (Baldwin, 1998) around me, and how can I expand my circle to include others in the greater circle of life?

Continuing my walk down the mound near the shoreline of the lake, a light breeze touches my cheek, and my ears sense music. A gust of wind set the reeds at the water's edge to singing for a moment, then silence. Nature speaks, I listen: What song are the reeds singing? When I feel the wind of the Spirit, how might I harmonize with the wind and sing a spirit song?

I follow the curved hip of the lake's body and walk beneath outstretched mimosa limbs, fingers extended to feel the tickle of pink and red mimosa blossoms. Nature speaks, I listen: When was the last time you felt tickled? How can I be the feather-like softness of the tickling mimosa blossoms on the skin of someone I love?

Rounding the bend near the entrance of *The Well*, I begin walking in the direction of the hermitage. I stand in unison with a lone walnut tree in the center of a grassy knoll. In the fall, wind releases crinkled brown leaves from petioles, and they perform their first and last aerial dance earthward. Some of the leaves lightly touch my chest before finding a home on the earth. Nature speaks, I listen: What areas of my life is the Spirit asking me to let go of? How can I gently release these things, let them float to the earth, decay, and eventually bear new life for the benefit of others?

Past the walnut tree, I walk between the sentinels: two large cedar trees standing together in the middle of the property, inscribing a curved arch between them, as if they are holding hands. Nature speaks, I listen: What am I guarding? Whose hand can I hold for support while passing through the center of life?

Walking down the narrow way, I pause at a ten-foot wooden cross, staring at a yellow and black garden spider. She is centered in her web, waiting...patiently. Nature speaks, I listen: What cross am I facing? Am I waiting patiently like the spider to see what the Spirit brings into my web?

Walking toward the back of the property, I remove cobwebs from the face of St. Francis of Assisi, his granite arm holding a petrified bird in his right palm. Two splintery wooden benches with overgrown plants surround Francis and the bird. Nature speaks, I listen: What cobwebs do I need to remove from my face to clearly see? What little bird in my life have I petrified, and how can I bring her back to life...set her free? What kind of sandpaper can be applied to smooth the rough edges of my personality so that others might feel invited to sit and talk with me on a wooden bench?

Reaching the edge of a brush line near a stream at the back of the property, I glimpse a hare darting into the brush. Moving closer, I see a well-worn entrance made by the many comings and goings of the hare. Nature speaks, I listen: What people and projects have I darted away from, disappearing in my own private rabbit hole? What paths in the brush of life have I entered so many times that they have become habits...which good habits shall I continue to cultivate, and which habits do I need to change, perhaps by seeking a new path?

### Questions for Reflection

How would you describe your relationship with nature? What are some of your favorite memories spending time in nature? How could you cultivate a greater awareness and appreciation of nature? How might you cultivate ways to listen to nature speak?<sup>8</sup>

### Canoeing the Lake of Life

Walking from the hermitage to a landing near the lake, I spied an inverted canoe atop a raised wooden rack tied down with two tattered ropes. Untying the knots, two paddles drop from inside the canoe. Leveraging the ten-foot aluminum canoe to the water's edge, I push past the thick algae, and begin paddling one stroke on the right side, then one stroke on the left. I sight a tall oak tree at the far side of the lake to serve as a directional beacon while negotiating the crosswind. Within minutes my arms feel like wet noodles, and suddenly the paddle slides an unusual way at the end of the down stroke and the canoe moved in a different direction than I intended. This serendipitous experience led to learning how to *paddle from one side of the canoe* by manipulating the direction and twist of the paddle during the down stroke. No longer did I need to lift the paddle out of the water, across my chest, and into the water on the opposite side of the canoe to maintain course. I now navigate paddling entirely from one side of the canoe with much less effort. There is also a delightful rest period between each stroke of the paddle. At first I paddled quickly, one stroke right after the other, often over-compensating for course deviations with each stroke. Eventually, I learned to paddle with minimal effort, enjoying the sensation of gliding across the water before engaging the next stroke. Similarly, in life, once we discern a worthy goal, we can learn to paddle with minimal effort, and enjoy the sensation of gliding toward our destination without being concerned about continuous course corrections.

### Questions for Reflection

What canoe in your life wants to be untied and leveraged into a body of water to begin a journey? In this imaginary body of water that represents your life, what direction is your inner compass pointing to? Are you stuck in the pattern of a crisscross canoe paddler? Is there another pattern of canoeing that you might experiment with, like the method of one-sided canoe paddling? How might you cultivate the ability to pace yourself when canoeing the waters of life, mindfully enjoying the space between efforts that glide you toward your destination?

### New Life through a Cracked Door

Around 10 p.m., after the caretakers of *The Well* left the main building to retire in their cottage at the edge of *The Well's* property, I began exploring the main building with apple cinnamon tea in one hand, and a lit white candle in the other. I see a *cracked door* across from the chapel on the north side of the building. Easing the door open, I reach for the light switch. Instantly, the room is ablaze with shelves of books from floor to ceiling. I'm in paradise.

My love for books began after I contracted mononucleosis (the kissing disease) in seventh grade. To help me pass the time while convalescing at home on the sofa, my mother

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<sup>8</sup> For those that want to cultivate a greater awareness and appreciation of nature, Cornell (2015) describes the experience of nature as a "flow" marked by four phases: awakening enthusiasm, focused attention and receptivity, offering direct experience, and sharing inspiration with others. I describe additional nature activities in the "listening to nature" section of a course I teach called "Listening to the SONG of Life" where SONG is an acronym that stands for listening to Self, Others, Nature, and God or the divine (Baesler, 2017a, 2018).

purchased three paperback books for me to read. School reading is all I knew up to this point in my life, and I detested it. But, the books Mom gifted me with are different: Ryback's (1971) *The High Adventure of Eric Ryback* (an 18-year old's solo backpacking journey from Canada to Mexico), Seton's (1901) *Lives of the Hunted* (a fictional account of the lives of personified animals), and Von Daniken's (1974) *Chariots of the Gods* (an introduction to theories and evidence related to extra-terrestrials). These books opened the door to reading for answers to questions about life, and for pleasure and fun. After my illness, I began to regularly check out books at the school and public libraries. Now, I am a bibliophile. I love the texture, color, and artwork of book covers. I love the smell of opening a book. I love learning about the author's back story and motivation in writing the book in the preface and introduction. I love perusing the table of contents, reading for ideas relevant for living, dialoguing with the author by writing questions and notes in the margin. I love copying the best ideas in the book by hand, and discovering other treasures in the book (e.g., names of other authors, books, ideas, quotations, illustrations, photos...) that lead me to other books.

Standing in the middle of *The Well's* private library, surrounded by books, I sense a mystical presence...people, ideas, and energies blend into something mysterious, unspeakable, palpable, and real. This is holy ground. I begin sampling books, letting myself be led by the Spirit to whatever I need. The books seem alive, speaking personally to me, a title, an author's name, even the thickness or color of a book might attract my attention and beckon. Eventually, I gather a knee-high pile of books. Glancing at the spines, I see a pattern. All the titles relate to prayer. This pile of books is the starting point of a personal and professional quest to practice and research the topic of prayer for the next two decades. Reviewing the table of contents of each book, I choose an armful of books to read more carefully. This process of discerning what to read reminds me of Bacon's (1906, p. 150) adage:

Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested: that is, some books are to be read only in parts; others to be read, but not curiously; and some few to be read wholly, and with diligence and attention.

Most books I dip into and read only the parts that interest me. Other books require more attention. A few books I read from cover to cover; and of these, there are the rare gems that I return to several times throughout my life. I've developed the habit of using an index card to maintain records of most books I read. On one side of the card, I record the title, author, year, and publisher, and on the opposite side I record the *best ideas* from the book, the most important lessons learned. I review these cards at least twice a year, remembering, integrating and practicing the wisdom I've harvested.

Over the course of several retreats, I culled fifty definitions of prayer from different books in *The Well* library. All the definitions of prayer include some *communication* component, for example, talking to God, listening to God, and dialoguing with God. I conclude that *prayer* is a type of spiritual communication to/from/with the divine. This insight began a new line of prayer research for me as a professor of Communication that eventually led to creating and testing the Relational Prayer Theory.<sup>9</sup> My personal experiences of prayer were initially based on Keating's (1986) *Open Mind, Open Heart*, Meninger's *Loving Search of God*, Merton's (1961) *Seeds of Contemplation*, Easwaran's (1978) *Meditation*, and an anonymous

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<sup>9</sup> My first scholarly publication on prayer appeared in 1997 (two years after my first retreat at *The Well*) and my last publication on prayer appeared in a special edition of *Journal of Communication and Religion* that I guest edited in 2012 (the year before my last retreat). In between, from 1997-2012, are nearly twenty published scholarly research projects on prayer. A google scholar search for "Baesler" and "prayer" will yield most of the publications.

Russian peasant's (1978) *The Way of the Pilgrim*. These books opened a multiplicity of ways to explore the Well of prayer.

The influence of these books from *The Well's* library is profound. It is not just the physical book, but the soul of the person that wrote the book, their personality, humor, energy, ideas, and creativity that refreshes and nourishes me. The authors of these books are mentors and friends. I have a poster of thumb nail pictures of some of these authors on the wall near my bed where I greet them in the morning with thanksgiving and wish them blessings at night. Some of the faces on my wisdom keeper's poster include (alphabetically): Eknath Easwaran, Mathew Fox, Thich Nhat Hanh, Thomas Keating, Thomas Merton, Gabrielle Roth, Ken Wilber, Andrew Weil, and many others. Part of who they are lives on in me and in the lives of those I share their wisdom with. We are all interconnected in the one river at the bottom of the Well (Progoff, 1977) that I discovered behind the cracked door in the library of *The Well*.

### Questions for Reflection

How would you describe your relationship with books? Do you have favorite books that serve special functions in your life, for example, books that make you laugh, inspire you, or help you cope? Do you maintain a digital library of books and/or a physical library of books? How do the different media (digital and physical books) influence the way you feel when reading? If you could only choose three books to take with you to a desert island for six months, which ones would you bring and why?

### Mystery at the Bottom of The Well

Books from the library at *The Well* rekindle the spirit of prayer within me, and it is prayer that brings me to the chapel. Entering the side door of the main complex from the hermitage walkway, take an immediate right into the hallway, and enter the open wooden door of the chapel leading into a small rectangular room. This evening, the chapel's two windows opposite the entrance are set aglow by the rays of the setting sun. This natural sunlight sets fire to the golden tabernacle housing the Blessed Sacrament.<sup>10</sup> Finding a comfortable spot in the middle of a row of chairs facing the tabernacle, I rest in quiet meditation. Later in the evening, after my nightly expedition to the library, I return to the chapel. Facing west toward the single candle flame illuminating the tabernacle, I fall into the deep waters of meditation at the bottom of The Well.

My custom is to visit the chapel to meditate at least once at the beginning, middle, and end of each retreat. As I invest personal energy in this space, there seems to be a corresponding sense of a growing presence (something or someone) within the chapel and within me. Meditating in this space reminds me of digging for Well water. If I intend to reach life-giving water (graces of the Spirit) by digging a Well (meditating) at a holy place (the chapel), I need to persist in digging and not change the place where I dig when encountering obstacles (e.g., the clay of tiredness, the rock of discomfort, the roots of obsessive thoughts). If I keep changing the place I dig whenever I encounter an obstacle, then all the Wells I dig will be shallow, and

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<sup>10</sup> *The Well* brochure gives one the impression that it is open to seekers of all religious/spiritual faiths, but because *The Well* is owned by the Catholic diocese of Richmond, Virginia, certain parts of *The Well*, such as the chapel, are distinctly Catholic. The *Blessed Sacrament* refers to the Catholic belief that the hosts (circular white pieces of consecrated bread about the size of a quarter) stored in the tabernacle of the chapel are the real presence of Jesus Christ, "Under the consecrated species of bread and wine Christ himself, living and glorious, is present in a true, real, and substantial manner..." (Catholic Church, 1994, p. 395). I note that other Catholic beliefs include the real presence of Christ in the Word (Bible) and in the body of Christ as a community of people gathered in His name.

I may not ever reach water. But, if I stay in one place and persist in digging through the obstacles, then my faith tells me I will eventually reach the life-giving waters of the Spirit at the bottom of the Well.<sup>11</sup>

While meditating late one evening in the chapel, I feel a *presence* completely fill the space and, at the same time, permeate me with a sense of stillness, solitude, silence, and peace (words do not adequately describe the phenomenological experience). I didn't dare move and disturb the subtle but real sense of presence within and around me. Somewhere in the silence, I hear one word...not audible as in broadcast from a speaker in the corner of the room, and not the usual voice inside my head, but a unique divine word spoken personally to/in me--one word.

I treasure that word, sometimes holding it to my heart during pray and meditation, and I hope to cling to this word as I transition from this life in the dying process. I respond to this mystical experience with a deep bow of gratitude and thanksgiving.

### Questions for Reflection

Is there a special place in your life that you can visit and find some solitude, stillness, and peace? If so, what have you learned there, and what could be shared for the benefit of others? How could you arrange your schedule to dig for the life-giving waters at the bottom of the Well in your special place? If there is no such place for you in this season of your life, how could you create a small space (e.g., a corner of a room, a closet, a tool shed, a tree house, a secluded park bench) in your life for some solitude and peace?

### Internal Validity

I address the internal validity of the autoethnography through three sources: academic scholars at a conference, individuals in a small faith group, and three retreat directors. At the 15<sup>th</sup> annual *International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry*, I presented a poster version of this autoethnography and received verbal feedback from about fifteen individuals. All but two *had never been on retreat*, but they showed interest in the possibility of attending a retreat after viewing the poster of spiritual practices. Based on this anecdotal feedback, the autoethnography has value in stimulating others to consider the possibility of attending a retreat. Second, I received feedback on the autoethnography from a small men's faith group called *Seekers of the Spirit*. I am a member of this group that has met monthly for over fifteen years, and all members have previously been on retreat at *The Well*. Their feedback based on reading the paper suggests that they could use some of these spiritual practices on a future retreat. This feedback indicates that at least some of the spiritual practices are useful for men in a future retreat setting. Third, two former directors of *The Well Retreat Center*, who are also certified spiritual directors, and one retreat director from *Shalom House* read the paper and answered questions about the veracity of factual claims about *The Well*, and the value of the spiritual practices for retreatants. I consider these individuals experts in the area of spirituality because of their years of experience as directors of a retreat center and their credentials as spiritual directors. Overall, their responses indicated that the veracity of the factual claims about *The Well Retreat Center* in the beginning and at the end of the story are valid (there was only one correction related to total acreage of *The Well*), and that the spiritual practices described in the story would be of

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<sup>11</sup> I first encountered this idea in Easwaran's (1977) discussion of mantra prayer. The idea is not to change one's mantra but keep repeating the same mantra despite obstacles and challenges. If one persists, eventually one will reach the spiritual waters of the Well.



potential benefit for individuals who have, and who have not, been on retreat. For example, some of their feedback on the spiritual practices include: "...easily help lead the uninitiated on their first retreat," and helpful to those who have been on retreat "recall their retreat experiences...inspiring them to make retreat a part of their lives again if time has lapsed." Comments related to spiritual practices also included words and phrases like: "instructive", "good technique", "inspiring", "personal", "lovely", "inspired by the Holy Spirit", and so forth (there were no negative comments). In addition, there are positive comments about the reflection questions throughout the story such as, "questions allow people to go deeper and plumb the depth of their current Spiritual life", suggesting that questions are integral and valuable in engaging retreatants to reflect on their spiritual life and practices. In sum, data from a professional conference, a small faith group, and retreat directors support the internal validity of the story, especially the value of the spiritual practices for retreatants.

### Limitations and Future Research

Some limitations of this autoethnography are intrinsic to the writing process while other limitations relate to reliability, generalizability, and impact. In the following sections, depending on the type of limitation, I compensate for the limitation, address the limitation in future research, or accept the limitation by offering an explanation.

Two limitations are connected to the autoethnographic writing process. First, in re-reading two decades of journals from 35 retreats, and choosing a sample of spiritual experiences to describe, an unknown number of memorial biases are introduced into the narrative. I attempt to compensate for this limitation by being truthful to the narrative spirit of the experiences (Bochner, 2014) as recorded in the written journals. Second, organizing the best spiritual practices from different retreats into one 24-hour retreat could create unrealistic impressions of what to expect on a single retreat. For instance, those that have not been on a retreat, after reading the autoethnography, may develop high expectations such as, "I'm looking forward to these wonderful spiritual experiences on my first retreat!" They will probably be somewhat disappointed when they do not have most of these spiritual experiences on their first retreat. Conversely, the story could create a negativity comparison bias for those that have been on a previous retreat such as, "I didn't have many of the spiritual experiences that I read about in the autoethnography on my last retreat, therefore, I must not be that spiritual." I attempt to compensate for these possible impressions by framing the 24-hour arc of the story as an *amalgam of retreats* that offer individuals a cornucopia of spiritual practices to experiment with.

One criterion for inclusion of a spiritual practice among the many recorded across 35 retreats is the *reliability* of the practice over time. By privileging recurring spiritual practices for inclusion in the autoethnography, I limit the total number of practices, and may overlook significant practices that are not readily replicable. I compensate for reliability as single inclusion factor by considering two additional factors: the significance and the potential applicability of the spiritual practice for other retreatants.

In this section, I consider generalizability and impact factors of the autoethnography. Many autoethnographers, for example the 30-some authors in the *Handbook of Autoethnography* (Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013), are not concerned with *measuring* the generalizability or impact of the stories they narrate. Conversely, readers trained in the social sciences are more concerned with the generalizability and impact of their research (Bochner, 2014). I self-identify as an autoethnographer *and* social scientist.<sup>12</sup> For this study, I

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<sup>12</sup> I committed to embracing autoethnographic and social scientific perspectives for research in another autoethnography that narrates religious and spiritual influences on my journey to full professor (Baesler, 2016). The relevance for this autoethnography is the timing of the closing of *The Well Retreat Center* in 2013 and my

am in the role of an autoethnographer writing a story about spiritual practices while on retreats. For future studies, I can embody the role of social scientist, suggesting how social scientific methods can add value to the autoethnography. In the next section, I elaborate on the autoethnographic and social scientific perspectives in terms of generalizability and impact issues of the current autoethnography.

*As an autoethnographer*, I want my stories to engage and influence a variety of readers, but ultimately, my primary concern is to write because I feel called by the Spirit to write (Coles, 1989; Rilke, 1996). The generalizability and impact of the autoethnography is not my primary responsibility as an autoethnographer to measure. I align myself as an autoethnographer with the poet T. S. Eliot (1963, p. 189) who wrote in the *Four Quartets*: “For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.” Translated: mine is the response to the call of the Spirit to write this particular autoethnography from a space of heart, openness, authenticity, and service. As an autoethnographer, the ultimate generalizability and impact of these spiritual practices on the lives of particular individuals is not my business to measure. Further, I accept the limitation that this autoethnography represents a single story told from the unique perspective of an: older white male, married with children, a professor of communication, living in the south eastern part of the United States, and embracing multiple spiritual traditions. To move beyond this single voice, future research might invite a diverse group of academics to write and publish an anthology of similar stories that describes their spiritual practices while on retreat.

*As a social scientist*, I can suggest how future research might enhance the value of the autoethnography by using the methods of social science to measure the generalizability and impact of the story. The generalizability of the story can be estimated by correlating interview reports of spiritual practices from mature retreatants (those that have attended multiple retreats across at least ten years) with the spiritual practices described in this autoethnography. These mature retreatants can be recruited from similar retreat centers in the commonwealth of Virginia like *Shalom House*. In addition, new retreatants could read the autoethnography in preparation for their retreat and evaluate the story in terms of its narrative coherence and fidelity (persuasive impact) using the COFIDEL measure (Baesler, 1995). Another type of impact assessment involves selecting the best spiritual practices in the autoethnography and introducing them to a group of individuals to experiment with on retreat under the guidance of a spiritual director. Alternatively, instead of a short-term retreat intervention, future research could introduce one practice per week over the course of several weeks in a in-person or digital workshop format as a longitudinal assessment of the efficacy of the spiritual practices.

One final suggestion for the future is to interview mature spiritual retreatants (those that have been on multiple retreats for at least ten years), asking them to retrospectively recount and rate the significance of their spiritual practices over the course of their lifetime. This interview methodology minimizes the expectancy effect of an experimenter (e.g., the spiritual director) in introducing spiritual practices in a retreat or workshop context. Especially significant to note would be those practices discovered on retreats that eventually became part of the individual’s everyday spiritual practice. The aim of this future research is to discover, describe, and make available to retreatants the most life-enhancing spiritual practices for promoting spiritual growth.

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last publication on prayer from a social science perspective (Baesler, 2012), and the beginning of an autoethnographic line of research (e.g., Baesler, 2017a, 2017b, 2018). While I self-identify as an autoethnographer and social scientist, my recent research has embraced more autoethnography. Specifically, in Baesler (2016, p. 109, parentheses added), I predict that future research will “...harvest these experiences (the 35 retreats at *The Well*) and weave them into a story to help others remember *the Well*, consider the spiritual grace that retreats can bring, and reveal the connection between living a spiritual life and engaging in meaningful scholarship.” I hope this autoethnography, at least in part, fulfills this prediction.

## Conclusion

Discovering the *Well Retreat Center* in 1995 began a journey of 35 retreats that stretched across nearly two decades. I narrate my retreat experiences at *The Well* by describing the: metaphorical significance of the Well, mixed emotions when leaving home, caring for the body, awakening at sunrise, the finality of sunset, mindfully fox walking the narrow way, listening to nature speak, paddling a canoe, opening books to a new life of prayer, and the mystical experience at the bottom of the Well. I punctuate the autoethnography with questions that invite readers to look deeper into their own inner Well. My hope is that some of these retreat experiences and reflection questions resonate and engage readers in ways that facilitate the activation of positive spiritual practices, bringing healing and wholeness to life everywhere.

My hope for others is founded in the integration of these spiritual practices in my own life. Surveying the landscape of life since my first retreat at *The Well* in 1995, I see how these spiritual practices facilitate healing, growth, and a growing sense of spiritual presence. My relationship with the place called *The Well* was experienced as an intimate presence evolving over time much like Altman's (1973) Social Penetration theory describes the development of a personal relationship with increases in disclosures of breadth and depth over time. This spiritual presence is the embodiment of the Divine Feminine and is known by various names depending on the religious tradition (Harvey & Baring, 1996). I have come to know Her as the Holy Spirit that invited, enticed, and satisfied me with the many flavors, textures, and colors of spiritual practices over the course of two decades at *The Well*. She continues to nourish my spirit even though *The Well* retreat center is closed. In sum, my spiritual identity evolved from a believer and practitioner of primarily one religious faith to an interspiritual being (Teasdale, 2001)<sup>13</sup> engaging in many spiritual practices from multiple religious/spiritual faiths and traditions.

## Questions for Reflection

Are there special places in your life that you are particularly fond of (perhaps a home, park, hangout, vacation spot, or even school or work)? How has your relationship with these places changed by revisiting them over the years? In cases where the place no longer exists (e.g., bull-dozed, replaced by some other structure, sold, or repurposed by another organization), what lessons did you harvest from the place, and how might you honor the memory of the place?

## Postscript: The Death of The Well and a Transition

Why have I not returned to *The Well* since 2013? The Catholic Diocese of Richmond, according to their public relations spokesperson Jeff Sheler (2013), asserts that the "...location, changing needs of retreat-goers, consideration of how each center [retreat center] aligned with the diocese's mission, and anticipated future capital needs" are sufficient reasons for closing *The Well*. It may be that *The Well* is not a financially lucrative operation even though, according

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<sup>13</sup> Teasdale describes interspirituality as consisting of nine elements drawn from the world religions: moral capacity, solidarity with all living beings, deep nonviolence, humility, spiritual practice, mature self-knowledge, simplicity of life, selfless service as compassionate action, and prophetic voice. In this autoethnography I emphasize the "spiritual practice" dimension of interspirituality, and it is my hope that I am evolving into a being that embraces the entire constellation of interspiritual elements.

to the caretakes Tom and Linda Ashe, *The Well* was financially stable at the time of its closing.<sup>14</sup>

Sadly, attempts to convince the Bishop to continue supporting *The Well* (letters, phone calls, and meetings) ultimately resulted in the sale of *The Well* to a local landscaping company. Sometimes, I still feel a sense of loss and grief when I think about the death of *The Well*. The diocese may close *The Well*, but they cannot close my memories of *The Well*. Perhaps the greater lesson for me is that *The Well* is more than a physical place, just as a person is more than their physical body.

*The Well* is a spiritual place, presence, and relationship that I carry within me, just as when the people we love transition, we carry them in our heart. The sense of spiritual presence that I experienced at *The Well* continues to grow within me, inspiring me, and those in my household, to recreate aspects of *The Well* retreat center in our home. For example, there are permanent meditation, music, and art centers within the home in addition to a half acre garden of Eden around the home including over eighty edible plants, bushes, vines, and trees. In a sense, *The Well* is reborn by the conversion of our home into a retreat-like place with the presence of the Spirit and the engagement in spiritual practices at the center of our life together.

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<sup>14</sup> There are other possible reasons for closing *The Well*. I can only trust that the Spirit knows what is best. I pray for those in authority that make these decisions, and I do what I can, like writing this narrative, to honor the memory of a place called *The Well*.

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### Author Note

E. James Baesler (PhD, 1990, University of Arizona, Tucson) is Full Professor of Communication in the Department of Communication and Theatre Arts at Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: [jbaesler@odu.edu](mailto:jbaesler@odu.edu).

This work is dedicated to retreatants that came to *The Well* in search of life-giving water, and to all the people that served at *The Well*, especially the first caretakers, Sister Nancy Healy and Diane Weymouth, and the last caretakers, Tom and Linda Ashe. A poster version of this paper was presented at the 15th International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, Urbana-Champaign, May 2019.

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### Article Citation

Baesler, J. (2020). Journeying into the well: An autoethnography of 35 retreats across two decades. *The Qualitative Report*, 25(6), 1579-1598.  
<https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol25/iss6/10>

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