

Spiritual Formation: An Interdisciplinary Field  
Lecture for Promotion to Full Professor of Spiritual Formation  
Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary  
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On this occasion, I extend my gratitude to President Amerson, Dean Rector, faculty colleagues, administrators, students, members of the board of trustees, family, and friends. I am grateful that my wife, Ruth, and our sons, Joe and Dan, can be here today.

I must thank all of you, particularly students in spiritual formation studies, and many of your predecessors. We are here today only because of the visionary leadership of Garrett-Evangelical since the early 1980's to name spiritual formation as a distinctive field within the seminary curriculum. I am personally indebted to many people within this community, in particular to Doug Wingeier, director of the Doctor of Ministry program in the 1980's, and Dean Dick Tholin, who invited me to teach a class in 1984 for the Doctor of Ministry program on Spiritual Disciplines. The debt goes forward to Barbara Troxell who was named to a position that was half-time teaching in spiritual formation and half-time director of field education in 1986. Our initiative in spiritual formation is also indebted to Doris Rudy, as summer school coordinator in those days, in her understanding of the significance of United Methodist Certification studies. The debt carries forward to the creative imagination of Dean Jack Seymour and President Neal Fisher, when our family moved from northern California to northern Indiana in 1994 to work with Oakwood Spiritual Life Center. With the blessing of Dean Seymour, I began a collaboration with Barbara Troxell, Doris Rudy, and a bit later with Margaret Ann Crain, leaders at The Upper Room and the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry to imagine the United Methodist Certification in Spiritual Formation, which was adopted in 2000. With Dean Seymour's ingenuity, Garrett-Evangelical blessed the teaching I was doing at Oakwood in spiritual formation, so that in the first year of approval of

the Certification we were able to register 40 students. Certification in Spiritual Formation immediately became the largest of our Certification areas of study and remains so today.

In 2001, with the retirement of Barbara Troxell, President Fisher and Dean Seymour invited me to serve as Associate Professor of Spiritual Formation and Director of the Doctor of Ministry Program. More recently with the initiative of President Amerson and Dean Rector, this position has grown into the present full-time faculty position in spiritual formation. We are celebrating this achievement for the seminary with our initiative to raise \$2 million in endowment funds for the Rueben P. Job Professor of Spiritual Formation. Garrett-Evangelical led the way in envisioning the United Methodist Certification in Spiritual Formation and will continue to lead seminary education in spiritual formation studies well into the future through the endowed chair. I am humbled and most grateful to have served a role in these accomplishments.

I am grateful to past and present colleagues on our teaching faculty in spiritual formation and spiritual direction studies, Barbara Troxell, Al Caldwell, Diane Stephens, Wendy Miller, and more recently, David Neff and Jane Vennard. Gratitude goes as well to Professors Mark Fowler and Ann Rosewall in their continuing integration of spiritual formation practices in our Vocational Formation and Church Leadership curriculum.

I also express my gratitude to Professor Ruth Duck who chaired the promotion review committee and to faculty colleagues, Professors Ken Vaux, Larry Murphy, and Mark Teasdale, who served on the committee along with Dean Rector. They had a major task, which was first of all to think through the constituent elements of the field of spiritual formation, so that they could assess my own contributions. They took on this extra burden with grace and diligence. Their care made the review an exceptionally creative and collaborative process.

For me, personally, this journey began before I understood the field of spiritual formation in the broad reading of my mother, Murlene Garrett Judy (yes, “Garrett” is in my maternal lineage). As writings began to be available in the 1960’s in this field, my mother was diligent in her reading in the areas of prayer and classic writings of the historic Christian saints. I treasure the many books in this field that she inscribed and gave to me over the decades. I must also thank my father, Marvin T. Judy, for his dedication to the education of persons for ministry, as he began teaching at Perkins School of Theology in 1952. It was my personal privilege to have the two of them in a continuing education program in spiritual formation that I designed for Perkins School of Theology in the 1980’s. At that time we all learned together much of what has now become the curriculum for the Certification in Spiritual Formation. What I must say, if I can do so with a clear voice, is that today represents not my achievement, but it is the fulfillment of Murlene Judy’s vision that one day there would be a place in seminary education for the regular teaching of spiritual formation. To her memory, I dedicate these remarks. For my deceased parents, I thank you for the immeasurable ways you held this vision before it captured me and for the support you and Ruth’s parents, Bill and Nell Hagemeyer, gave to each of us as we continued to grow in our understanding of our life missions. Thank you in particular for the blessing you gave to our risky choice of PhD studies at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology in 1980. You encouraged us to follow our hearts’ leadings, even when there were no clear outcomes as we began our studies. I am mindful of the extremely rare privilege I have today that my meandering career has had a part to play in helping legitimize the field of spiritual formation within seminary education.

Of course, Garrett-Evangelical is not alone. Spiritual formation studies are being embraced widely within United Methodist seminaries. Certification in Spiritual Formation or specialized programs in spiritual direction are now being offered by most of our sister seminaries. Since 1996, The Association of Theological Schools has required all seminaries to define and evaluate how they incorporate “Personal

and Spiritual Formation” into seminary life and curriculum. We have reason to hope that spiritual formation practices are here to stay in seminary education and in the life of the church.

We join many of our sister Protestant denominations, which have also been pioneering this work in various specialized training and degree programs. A partner for us all has been The Upper Room, with its consistent leadership in modeling curriculum for spiritual formation in The Academy for Spiritual Formation, as well as providing exceptional resources for small group studies within congregations. Spiritual Directors International, founded in 1990, has grown from a predominantly Roman Catholic membership into an ecumenical and interreligious organization of more than 6000 members, dedicated to the practice of spiritual direction as a unique way to assist one another in discernment, personal prayer practices, and life decisions. In the past decade, the Fellowship of United Methodist Spiritual Directors and Retreat Leaders has become a recognized affiliate organization within the United Methodist church. I believe this movement has been a work of the Holy Spirit for our time, bringing forth the wisdom of historic prayer disciplines to assist us individually and corporately to discern the movement of God in our lives, our churches and our world.

The theme for today’s reflection, *Spiritual Formation: An Interdisciplinary Field*, is the result of the promotion review committee conversation last spring. After exploring practices of spiritual formation, Professor Ken Vaux posed the question, “what is the science of spiritual formation?” He explained that any legitimate field must not only have an array of practices (or its praxis), in which spiritual formation has excelled, but must also have a legitimate cognate discipline or disciplines, which inform the praxis. As I laid out several arenas of study, which would enable us to claim spiritual formation as an interdisciplinary field, I believe we each found the conversation exciting.

Today I will describe some of the practices, which form the foundation of this field, as well as cognate disciplines with which those practices interface. This enterprise needs to be undertaken within

Western Protestant Christianity, as we enter the twenty-first century, so that there is a foundation for the very important conversation that can now take place between Western Protestant Christianity and global expressions of Christianity, as well as interreligious dialogue.

Or to put today's theme more succinctly, if one is to be a professor of spiritual formation at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, what must one profess? To do so is first, to speak of the practices of spiritual formation, particularly of prayer. Then, I will suggest that spiritual formation draws on several recognized cognate fields within the seminary curriculum, which include church history and the writings of the saints; inner life process related to Pastoral Counseling and Psychotherapy; and understandings of faith formation over the life-span shared with Christian Education. Our work in inner life development must be grounded in biblical and theological perspectives and intersects with practices of worship, preaching, and discernment of Christian mission.

In the Spring, 2007, journal *Spiritus*, Douglas Burton-Christie gave a framework for the field. He described two approaches found in writings on spirituality: a "phenomenological-descriptive" approach and a "theological-confessional" approach.<sup>1</sup> Spiritual formation as a field is providing the framework for us to attend carefully to both dimensions. Spiritual formation studies take the content of spiritual experience seriously, the phenomenological dimension described by Burton-Christie. And the field illumines unique theological-confessional dimensions of our spiritual life related to our various denominational streams.

Our contemporary attention to the phenomena of spiritual experience has been highly influenced by our culture's renewed attention to the experiences with the dying. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross' work, *On Death and Dying*, was published in 1969. It's hard for us now to imagine how revolutionary this work

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Burton-Christie, "Spirituality: Its Uses and Misuses," *Spiritus, A Journal of Christian Spirituality*, Vol. 7, number 1, Spring, 2007, 74.

was in reclaiming the attentive presence to persons in their dying process in Western life. For me personally, I see my own calling into this work as coming from just such a phenomenological moment of awakening.

During my nine years of pastoral ministry in the 1970's, I served a congregation that was predominantly young to mid-life adults and their families. Experiences of death were rare but quite intense for this congregation. One of the women in the congregation in her mid-thirties carried a congenital heart problem. She had carved out a career in public school teaching and had married in spite of these health challenges. However, over the course of one year, her health greatly deteriorated. In what became her final days, I went to visit her in the hospital. It was actually early on Easter Sunday morning. When I entered the hospital room, she reported that Jesus was also with us. We conversed in a normal way, yet we were surrounded by an intense benevolent radiance that I could not deny. I had no context from my seminary education to help me make sense of this shared numinous experience, yet I could not deny its reality. This experience, among others, compelled me to look much more carefully at the phenomenological elements of spiritual experiences, reported from the past, and to recognize that they might still be occurring in our time.

The experience that there is a living reality of transcendent Presence, sometimes manifesting as the resurrected Christ, sometimes as the Holy Spirit, was confirmed over and over again as I began to guide people in experiences of Ignatian prayer or the use of imagination with the stories of Jesus. I found people receiving wisdom from the inner Christ far beyond their own framing of their life concerns. Even now I stand in amazement at the summons to ministry that many of our students have received from such a transcendent source. The field of spiritual formation has helped validate such experiences and context them within historic biblical and theological perspectives of authentic Christian life.

As we have learned to attend more fully to our subjective and sometimes mystical experiences, we are working with the “phenomenological-descriptive” approach to spiritual life. This has been the domain of transpersonal psychology and Pastoral Counseling as research has given voice to transcendent experience and its effects on daily life. But, a purely “phenomenological-descriptive” approach to spiritual experience will always be inadequate without discussion of the “theological-confessional” context of such experiences. I hope today to describe a particularly Protestant approach blending both of these elements in our understanding of spiritual formation studies.

We will start with the renewal of contemplative prayer practices in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One could make a case that the Protestant world was awakened to a missing element of its life with the publication in 1969 of Thomas Merton’s signal work, *Contemplative Prayer*. Merton had just died in 1968. He had already accomplished much in his life to bridge the world of hidden monastic practices into public discourse. *Contemplative Prayer* brought words on prayer into the world that Merton had written for the monastery. The 1971 edition carried an introduction by the Quaker writer, Douglas Steere, in which Steere wrote: “Thomas Merton was passionately aware of the inward crisis of our age and of its acute need of the dimension of contemplation.”<sup>2</sup> Steere’s words offer a remarkable contrast to my own seminary education occurring at the time of the writing and publication of *Contemplative Prayer*, and the explicit lack of any awareness of these dimensions of prayer and the interior life. In my seminary formation within the late 1960’s “spiritual” was a completely neglected word. We did not have a language to speak of the inner movement of the Holy Spirit within our lives and ministries. The “inward crisis” was left to fend for itself or perhaps to be taken into the consulting rooms of the newly forming field of Pastoral Counseling. The distinctively spiritual theme of an interior relationship with God was much neglected. Merton’s own words speak to the power of this need:

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (Garden City, NY: Image Doubleday, 1971), 11.

What is the purpose of meditation in the sense of “the prayer of the heart”?

In the “prayer of the heart” we seek first of all the deepest ground of our identity in God. We do not reason about dogmas of faith, or “the mysteries.” We seek rather to gain a direct experiential grasp, a personal experience of the deepest truths of life and faith, *finding ourselves in God’s truth*. Inner certainty depends on *purification*. . . . We learn *recollection* which consists in listening for God’s will, in direct and simple attention to *reality*. . . . *Prayer* then means yearning for the simple presence of God, for a personal understanding of [God’s] word, for knowledge of [God’s] will and for capacity to hear and obey [God].<sup>3</sup>

What has happened since 1969 is quite remarkable. Western Christian tradition has recovered the practices of contemplative prayer, which were so neglected within the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Why have the church and seminaries responded? Why has there been a renewal of contemplative prayer in our time? The clearest way I have found to speak of this receptivity to contemplative prayer is in the discussion of the seven mansions in Teresa of Avila’s *Interior Castle*. As with Merton’s *Contemplative Prayer*, *Interior Castle* was Teresa’s most mature writing completed just five years before her death in 1582. As she laid out the process of the interior life, she spoke of a deepening of awareness leading from focus of our life’s concerns almost exclusively on worldly or exterior affairs (life in Mansions I) to a full alignment with God’s will on a daily basis in Mansions VII, which manifests as good works in the world.<sup>4</sup> Her Mansions II is a description of what I would hope every church does well. And that is to help people in their understanding of God and their faith development through what she called “exterior means.” The practices of exterior means include good sermons, good books, and helpful conversations. I interpret Mansions II spirituality for our time to mean that there is no excuse for every

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<sup>3</sup> Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 67.

<sup>4</sup> For discussion of the seven mansions, see chapter 2, “Teresa’s Psychology of Spiritual Development,” in Dwight H. Judy, *Embracing God: Praying with Teresa of Avila* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996). Original source: Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle, The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, Vol. II, trans. Kerian Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1980).



church on every street corner, whether small or large, NOT to be magnificent in offering welcoming worship, opportunities for biblical and theological discourse, and community service, that is, a community of compassionate presence and external support to which people are drawn. The Wesleyans among us will immediately hear many of John Wesley's "ordinary means of grace" in Teresa's exterior means – public prayer, attending the sacraments of the church, holy conferencing and searching the scriptures with others.<sup>5</sup> However, Teresa suggests that there comes a time when we must make our faith our own and for that purpose, we need to cultivate a disciplined life of what she called, "prayer and self-reflection." We need Wesley's private prayer as well as public prayer. We need to learn the ways of prayer that lead us day by day into the encounter with God described by Merton. This is the clue to mending the "inward crisis" of which Steere wrote. In our historical era with such massive socio-political changes and ecological disasters, we are in great need of sustained interiority, as well as good circles of companions to help us think theologically about our life story. We do that only with some form of sustained contemplative life. Ken Wilber, one of the major contributors to the recovery of spiritual awareness within psychology, writes that some form of meditative or contemplative practice is the new categorical imperative for our time.<sup>6</sup> In his view, if we are to move through the dramatic issues before our world, it is imperative that individuals do the hard inner work of self-awareness and cleansing ourselves of our accrued cultural biases and prejudices. Without this inner work, we are completely at the whim of the loudest voices within the culture around us, many of which are promoting deeper divisions rather than affirming the struggle to move toward a sense of our global family, what Professor Vena helped us see in his lecture two weeks ago as the vision of the kingdom of God, held in Jesus' teachings.

So, the first thing that a professor of spiritual formation should be able to teach are ways of prayer and the interior life, so that we are inspired with God's vision and sustained for meaningful service in the

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<sup>5</sup> John Wesley, "The Means of Grace," <http://gbgm-umc.org/UMW/Wesley/serm-016.stm> [accessed 4/5/11].

<sup>6</sup> Ken Wilber, *Up From Eden: A Transpersonal View of Human Evolution* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1981), 321.

world. We now have access to such distinctively Christian prayer practices. These include the practice of *lectio divina*, as a particular mode of scripture reflection, not neglecting the tasks of contextual biblical interpretation, but also listening for the Word of God spoken through the scripture into our own heart; the Jesus Prayer from Eastern Orthodoxy; Centering Prayer, growing out of medieval Europe; Ignatian use of imagery with scripture; as well as the active prayer forms of intercession, petition, confession, and thanksgiving.<sup>7</sup> In the seminary curriculum, we should enable all graduates to be conversant with this rich tradition of prayer that leads us to a direct encounter with God.

In my years of teaching at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology following my PhD studies there, I learned a great deal about the damage that repressive forms of Christianity have done. I regularly taught a required course called Psychology of Meditation, which was a survey of contemplative practices from many of the world's religions. I came to expect that when I turned to share the rich legacy of Christian prayer, someone would burst into tears and others would be moved to outrage. People bore such deep scars from their experience in Christianity that any use of Christian language brought out very deep areas of unresolved hurt. The health of their souls had required them to reject the form of Christianity with which they had been raised and which had frequently joined images of a punitive God with a family system of abuse. There is a great evangelical need for us to proclaim the life-giving, health-promoting aspects of Christian contemplative prayer. People literally do not know that there are healthy streams of Christian tradition that provide practices for sustained inward life.

This example demonstrates the inescapable link between the phenomenological-descriptive approach to spiritual life and the theological-confessional approach. With bad theology, it's almost impossible to cultivate psychological health through religious practice. I want to suggest that there are several distinctive gifts of contemporary spiritual formation, influenced by the Protestant principle of the

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<sup>7</sup> For discussion of these contemplative prayer forms, see Dwight H. Judy, *Christian Meditation and Inner Healing* (White Sulphur Springs, W.V.: OSL Publications), 2010.

ability for each individual to stand directly before God in the priesthood of all believers. We come to this work with a respect for the dignity and worth of each individual, the desire to cultivate psychological health, and an open spirit to explore similarities and differences of such contemplative practices with practices of other religious traditions. Clearly, as we recover the use of contemplative prayer practices, these will be most effective for our Christian formation, if we are steeped in broad biblical understanding and if we have learned to link our own personal healing with the expansion of our capacity to grow in love, so that we can be yet more attentive to human suffering and the quest for social justice. We need our prayer experiences to be in dialogue with our theological-confessional understandings of faith. If we are now accessing an inner Christ in our prayer, we need to be sure that this inner voice matches the message of Jesus in our scriptures and historical understanding. So, we never leave Teresa's Mansions II. We are always in need of Christian community, of good conversations about life's challenges, good help in Christian conferencing and good means of searching the scriptures. But in the mid part of the twentieth century, we discovered that the inner closet of prayer had been neglected. T.S. Elliot's 20<sup>th</sup> century "hollow [man] . . . head piece filled with straw"<sup>8</sup> has been met by Teresa of Avila's image of God enthroned on our heart, so that "we will not imagine that we are hollow inside."<sup>9</sup> That which was lost to public discourse in the West has been found: the living lineage of prayer from the earliest days of Christianity to the present, enabling us to cultivate a stability of interior self-hood through sustained contemplative practice.

Teresa of Avila's words show us that a primary cognate field, which is needed for spiritual formation is church history and signal figures within Christian tradition. I was fortunate in my undergraduate studies to take a year-long course in medieval European history. I became fascinated at the

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<sup>8</sup> Adapted from T. S. Elliott, "The Hollow Men," 1925, <http://www.aduni.org/~heather/occs/honors/Poem.htm>, accessed 4/4/2011.

<sup>9</sup> Adapted from Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection, The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, Vol. I, trans. by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1980), 144.

age of 20 with a rhythm that could only be seen as evidence of the life of the Holy Spirit impacting the church. It seemed to me then as now that the struggle between order or bureaucratic structures and Spirit in the church has been a very challenging dance. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit there have been consistent bursts of insight pouring forth from deeply inspired individuals, such as Augustine, Benedict, Francis, Clare, Dominic, Hildegard, Julian, Ignatius, Teresa and Martin, to name only a few. Out of their commitment to Christ and the gifts of divine vision, literally new forms of church were born, often taking the form of a new religious order. Or after the Protestant Reformation, taking the form of new denominations. These individuals of profound vision seemed to me to burst forth at times when the bureaucratic church was becoming corrupt. The vision of Jesus has to take form in the ordered structures of the church, but inevitably these structures will become corrupt. Then, the Holy Spirit stirs again as a profound renewal taking form within inspired individuals and as a result the larger body of the church is renewed. We need to understand this historic process, in part, because we are again in such a time. We are in need of the inspiration pouring forth from our students to enliven the tired structures of our present church institutions. In my classes what I want students to understand is that prayer is not “new age.” Just because we all close our eyes, light a candle, maybe even chant if we’re in Taizé worship, does not mean this is something new! No, we are standing on the shoulders of 2000 years of persons who sought to live the Christian life with authenticity, prayer, and self-reflection. We are standing with those who learned what Merton described as the “paschal” rhythm of prayer, the continuous offering of ourselves for renewal through the inner death and resurrection to new life.<sup>10</sup>

For this work I require students to read both Evelyn Underhill’s *Mysticism*, published in 1911, and Richard Foster’s *Streams of Living Water*, published in 1998. These two works form bookends to 20<sup>th</sup> century Christian spiritual formation. Underhill’s *Mysticism* traces the history of the quest for this most

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<sup>10</sup> Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 34.

intimate relationship with God, through the stories of many of the saints of the Western church, as well as illuminating the interior process of sustained contemplative prayer. Foster's *Streams of Living Water* shows us the varieties of authentic Christian spiritualities, and forms a basis for conversation across these primary ways of expressing faith, broadening our understanding to include Charismatic, Contemplative, Evangelical, Social Justice, Holiness, and Incarnational streams. In 1911, Underhill gathered up the legacy of Western prayer. In 1998, Foster laid the foundation for going forward with conversations across global Christianity in the variety of Christian spiritualities, the task now before us. Of course, I have copies of both of these books with my mother's notes!

Our professor of spiritual formation, as well as students of these disciplines, should also be intimately acquainted with one or more of the signal figures within the lineage of persons who have delved deeply into the human spirit, have come to know God and self, and journeyed through prayer in a way that leads to service. We may read deeply in the stories archived in Eastern Orthodoxy in the writings of the *Philokalia*, a body of writing stretching from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>11</sup> We may study the early church fathers or one or more of the medieval women who left profound records of the inner life; or Meister Eckhart, Thomas à Kempis, the Spanish mystics; the Wesleys; Luther, Calvin; or more recent figures such as Howard Thurman, Martin Luther King, Jr., or Henri Nouwen. When we read the writings of such persons, we may find our hearts illumined with experiences of God's presence, with the fire of divine love burning in our hearts. They invite us directly into the transcendent hope that sustains us beyond the turmoil of human life. Listen to such devotion from Thomas à Kempis in *The Imitation of Christ*:

Above all things, and in all things, do thou, my soul, rest always in the Lord, for He is the eternal rest of the saints.

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<sup>11</sup> For some of these writings, see E. Kadlouovsky and G.E.H. Palmer, eds. and trans., *Early Fathers from the Philokalia* (London and Boston: Faber, 1954).

Give me, O most sweet and loving Jesus, to repose in Thee above all things created; above all health and beauty, above all glory and honor, above all power and dignity, above all knowledge and subtlety, above all riches and arts, above all joy and gladness, above all fame and praise, above all sweetness and consolation, above all hope and promise, above all merit and desire.<sup>12</sup>

The saints help us to remember that there is an Eternal calling for our transient life. We hear very little of such a high calling for human existence in the fear driven public discourse of our times.

To help us understand the phenomenological-descriptive elements of spiritual formation, the field is perhaps most closely aligned with Pastoral Counseling and Psychotherapy. We live in the age of psychology as a discipline of human understanding. Mainstream Protestants will approach our inner experience with an expectation of psychological understanding. The contemporary conversation between religion and psychology began in a profound way with the publication of William James lectures, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, in 1902. James, who is seen as the father of American psychology, declared that religious experience should be included as a proper domain of psychological research. During the mid-part of the twentieth century, this approach was severely tested with the rise of behavioral psychology; but it has seen a veritable renaissance in more recent trends in pastoral counseling, transpersonal psychology, studies in the field of human consciousness, and brain research. It's important to note the focus on Jungian psychology in the writings of one of the early contributors to spiritual formation studies, Morton Kelsey. His book, *The Other Side of Silence*, published in 1976, utilized a distinctly psychological approach. In recent decades, research psychology has developed reputable qualitative designs that allow us to inquire into the inward life described by Steere. With such research methodologies, there are significant inquiries into the potential physiological benefits of contemplative prayer practice, as well as into the capacity to assist persons in the relief of anxiety and other emotional

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. Richard Challoner (Rockford, Illinois: Tan Books and Publishers, Inc., 1989), 196.

challenges. We have learned in the recent field of psychoneuroimmunology, bridging medicine and subjective experience, that our thoughts directly affect our physiological state of well being. Because of this connection our own National Institutes of Health regularly provide research money for approaches using human consciousness and prayer as interventions in health concerns. The interface with health psychology enables a rich conversation also about how to hold our times of illness in realistic yet transcendent hope. There is much to be gained in a deep conversation now on the benefits and limitations of intercessory prayer in prayer research studies that are being conducted.

Contemporary psychology continues to inform us on issues of psychopathology. We have a more precise vocabulary than the simple labels of demons from earlier eras of human history to describe the often painful realities of the human psyche. For example, there is an important conversation to be made in the relationship between the spiritual dark night of the soul and what we now understand as clinical depression. This conversation is now facilitated from the standpoint of psychology as well as from the religious dimension. Only in the past 15 years with the publication of the DSM-IV, which is the diagnostic manual for psychiatry and psychology, has a non-pathological category been included for diagnosis of “Religious or Spiritual Problem” (V62.89).<sup>13</sup> Prior to the inclusion of this category, religious issues were not welcomed into psychological consulting rooms, except through the work of Pastoral Counselors. In the past 10 years, issues of religious experience have seen major publications from the American Psychological Association.

This conversation between prayer and psychology helps us affirm that daily prayer is good medicine for soul, mind, and body, as we cleanse our emotional burdens and discover God’s transcendent hope for our lives again.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer stated this principle simply:

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<sup>13</sup> *Diagnostic Criteria from DSM-IV* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 1994), 300.

. . . we want to rise from meditation different from what we were when we sat down to it. We want to meet Christ in his Word. . . . Meet him first in the day, before you meet other people. Every morning lay upon him everything that occupies you, concerns you and troubles you, before fresh burdens are laid upon you. Ask yourself what is still preventing you from following him completely, and let him be Lord over it before new hindrances come your way.<sup>14</sup>

Spiritual formation shares with both pastoral care and Christian education themes of life-stages and faith development. Fifty years ago Erik Erikson's pioneering work on *Identity and Life Cycle* was published. Much attention has been given in these past 50 years to themes of changes over the adult life-span in relationships, capacity for interior experience, and changes in our brain structure, itself. James Fowler's *Stages of Faith* helped bring this attention to faith changes over the life span. Carol Gilligan, Maria Harris and others have since helped us to be mindful of differences in gender in relationship to such life-stage development. Gerontology has emerged as its own field now naming distinctive characteristics for people entering into their senior years. As we are learning much more about the formation of the young adult brain and issues of faith formation, we are also witnessing the discovery of what Gene Cohen describes as *The Mature Mind*, noting changes of brain function among persons in their sixties and beyond. Our work within congregational settings is greatly enhanced by attention to particular life-stage themes, as well as inner life practices. Each passage of life offers a remarkable opportunity to share the practices of "prayer and self-reflection" that enable a fuller inner life. We have long known that midlife can be a time for reorienting of life's priorities and becoming more intentional in prayer practices. But, now I am often hearing of the profound faith experiences arising within our high school and college ministries when moments of silence, walking the labyrinth, or focused prayer are shared. I have

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<sup>14</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Introduction to Daily Meditation," *The Way to Freedom*, Letters, Lectures and Notes 1935-1939, *Collected Works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Vol. II., ed. by Edwin H. Robertson, trans. by Edwin H. Robertson and John Bowden (London: Collins, 1966), pp 57-61.



personally learned to relish opportunities to share contemplative prayer practices with persons 60 years of age and above. Often people have been experimenting on their own with modes of meditation and contemplative practice and are very eager for conversation with others. We are only beginning to bring this work in a sustained way into congregations. At each juncture of life, there is the opportunity to share the Wesleyan understanding of sanctification as a life long process of growing in love in this life. And to engage the means of grace in order to assist this life-long journey.

As I hope is becoming clear, any work we do in spiritual formation practice is deeply theological. We cannot speak of religious experience or of encounters in the depths of the psyche with a transcendent hope, without making theological claims. How well we understand the nature of these claims, how clear we are that our theological understandings profoundly couch the words with which we speak of these personal faith experiences is very important. What do we mean when we say, “I’m praying for you?” What do we mean when we say, “God will sustain you,” when we encounter someone in crisis? What does our language about “God’s will” actually convey to people? One of the significant contributions, I believe, of distinctly Christian spiritual formation to the interest in issues of spirituality within popular culture is to bring the “theological-confessional” context of any faith claim into our conversation. Christian spiritual formation has an important role to play in questioning the theological or ontological implications of claims made within the vast array of self-help resources that now sit in our bookstores on the shelf next to Christian classics and instructions for prayer. In Christian theology, we have learned historically to put some distance between human experience, that we call “experiences of God,” and God in Godself. We have learned a fearsome reverence to approach the sense of ultimate reality and claim too close a relationship in the nudges of this Presence we feel within our own hearts. While the mystics of Christianity will make claims for such intimacy, particularly those who embody the kataphatic forms of prayer, they will also ordinarily continue to hold a distinction between their own limited human capacities

and the reality of God. This sense of God's transcendence has been particularly guarded by those who practice apophatic forms of spiritual life. Frequently, I do not find these distinctions adequately made when persons outside of the theological domain approach their discussion of spiritual experiences. There is too quick a leap from one person's subjective experience to ontological claims about ultimate reality.

As we begin to approach the varieties of Christian spiritualities, the understanding of the theological-confessional context is very helpful. I've found students illumined when both the "phenomenological-descriptive" and the "theological-confessional" aspects of spiritual life are taken seriously. I've become accustomed for persons formed in Pentecostal prayer traditions to read Teresa of Avila's descriptions of her Catholic, contemplative prayer experiences and find for the first time an adequate description of the phenomenological content of their Pentecostal prayer experience. Western Protestant Christianity could not have this conversation in the mid part of the twentieth century, when it had forgotten to take seriously the phenomena of subjective spiritual experience. Such conversations across global Christian practice are now possible.

With biblical studies, spiritual formation shares a deep reverence for scripture. A contribution of the prayer practice of *lectio divina* (lingering over scripture images or phrases for personal insight) has been to reclaim the allegorical method of biblical interpretation. This practice is greatly enhanced with the analysis of cultural and linguistic approaches of other forms of biblical studies, but the allegorical method also invites participants to listen deeply for life meaning from the scripture. Scripture story and my life story illuminate each other. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes: ". . . as a Christian I learn to know Holy Scripture only by hearing sermons and by meditating prayerfully."<sup>15</sup> In the practice of *lectio divina*, the church is again listening for the Word of God to be spoken directly into our hearts.

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<sup>15</sup> Bonhoeffer, "Introduction to Daily Meditation."

In order to continue to illumine the phenomenological-descriptive elements of spiritual experience, spiritual formation studies must draw on the cognate fields of theology, biblical studies, church history, Christian Education, and Pastoral Counseling and Psychotherapy. Without these, the field cannot adequately articulate the theological-confessional context of spiritual development or understand the phenomenological content of spiritual experiences. In addition to these fields, spiritual formation studies and the work of liturgy and preaching share the common focus of seeking a direct encounter with God. Spiritual formation studies enable us to think together on the profoundly symbolic nature of the human mind, providing a very rich intersection with liturgy, preaching, and the arts. Our hymnody can also be studied as the repository of spiritual experience and ecstatic awareness of God throughout the centuries. From this perspective we are witnessing a profound resurgence of spiritual awakening in our contemporary praise choruses.

If spiritual formation studies are here to stay, where are they headed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Dean Rector and I have begun some of these conversations as we think about the search for our next professor of spiritual formation as my retirement approaches. The primary task of the field to this point, particularly within Western Protestant Christianity, has been to recover and practice the living lineage of prayer that I've been seeking to describe today. As I look at my life work, this has been the fundamental task that has been mine. We did not have the array of Christian prayer practices in the public domain or readily available for congregational life in 1960. Christianity is not alone in this process of renewal of interior practices. What was hidden in monastic life across religious traditions in the world's religions is now available in every bookstore. Whether we speak of meditative practices of the many varieties of Buddhism, the fundamentals of inner life development in Islam, the varieties of Yogic practice in Hinduism, or rituals of indigenous cultures, we now have access to these. A very vivid example of this

phenomenon has been the renewal of the labyrinth of medieval Christianity as a tool for prayer in our time.

We now have a consistent body of spiritual practices recovered within Western Christianity. This has been an admittedly Eurocentric process, but an essential one, because of the particular loss of interiority in the West. Now, what is needed is genuine dialogue across global Christian practice. For example, more and more I'm discovering an interest in Korean students for a contemplative practice to balance the expressive Tong Sung Kido prayer. At the same time, our Euro-American students long for such expressive prayer. African-American students have long questioned my use of the term, "recovery of prayer," when in the Black church, there was never a loss of prayer. Barbara Holmes provides a model for the conversation between contemplative prayer practices and a unique Christian tradition in her book, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices in the Black Church*. I believe we will begin to see much more of this kind of illuminating discussion within Christian spiritual practices. In addition to the intra-Christian conversation, comparison of contemplative practices becomes an entry point for interreligious dialogue. We need much more attention to interreligious conversation as the world faces global challenges and divisions often perpetrated in the name of religion. The practice and teaching of contemplative prayer has now become normative for any professor of spiritual formation. I hope that my successor in this position will be able to engage the intra-Christian and the interreligious conversations more richly than I have been able to do.

The disciplines of inward life, of course, come to nothing if they do not lead to a more compassionate presence in the world. Teresa of Avila was one of the most articulate writers on inner life. Yet, she also writes:

The highest perfection obviously does not consist in interior delights or in great raptures or in visions or in the spirit of prophecy but in having our will so much in conformity with God's will

that there is nothing we know [God] wills that we do not want with all of our desire. . . .love has this strength if it is perfect, for we forget about pleasing ourselves in order to please the one we love.<sup>16</sup>

Will a deepening interior life lead to an enriched life of public service? It will, if we keep before us the desire to love God with all of our heart and soul and mind and strength and our neighbor as ourself. And if our inner experiences are wrapped in the external hope for shalom, a world sustained by peace and justice.

We will find a multitude of ways in which Merton's words are realized:

“*Prayer* then means yearning for the simple presence of God, for a personal understanding of [God's] word, for knowledge of [God's] will and for capacity to hear and obey [God].”

In the peace of Christ, may it be so.

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<sup>16</sup> Teresa of Avila, *The Foundations, The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, Vol. III, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1985), 120.

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