

Preparation for Attention (Soul Matters theme for November)

Alice Walker famously wrote, “I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don’t notice it.”

Walker’s words are a great reminder that attention and gratitude go hand in hand. Indeed they are a perfect embodiment of the dominant message about attention: that it’s here to wake us up to life’s many gifts.

But it’s also important to remember that attention has a few ulterior motives up its sleeve. So some fair warning is required. Because attention won’t just make you grateful, it will make you fall in love. And it won’t just allow you to notice life’s gifts, it also makes it impossible to ignore life’s pain.

First, the love part of attention. Mary Oliver writes, “Attention is the beginning of devotion.” It’s a beautiful way of saying you cannot love something that you do not really see. Love simply isn’t possible without deep noticing. And noticing deeply seems to inevitably lead to love. Glances and self-interested attention never get to the real person. They stay on the surface and treat the other as a mirror, so that all you’ve really done is fall in love with yourself. Truly loving another person asks you to focus simply on who they are right now, something entirely and uniquely new, uniquely them. Once you notice that uniqueness, you’re in trouble, because you will most definitely be devoted. You will no longer think about what you’re getting. You will only want to give.

And now the pain part of attention, which is not all that different from the love part. This time it’s a UU minister, Rev. Sean Dennison, that captures it best. Sean writes “The ability to see beauty is the beginning of our moral sensibility. What we believe is beautiful we will not wantonly destroy.” In other words, once we notice the beauty at the heart of others and the world, it pains us to see it destroyed. So seeing the beauty of something comes with a commitment. You don’t just think to yourself “Oh, that’s pretty,” you think “My God, I must protect it.” Its survival becomes your survival. Its pain becomes your pain.

When you pay attention, then, you may feel both love and pain. When you pay attention and feel love, the gaps or problems in your connection to another may result in pain, as may the threat of loss. Something similar can happen when you pay attention to your thoughts and feelings. Your noticing may bring pain as well, and you may struggle with a combination of love and pain as you work toward self-compassion.

Walker asks us to pay attention to the color purple, but you can also pay attention by listening, by sharing a physical presence, by focusing your thoughts and feelings inward, by engaging in action, or even by smelling, as our animal companions remind us. All this is to say that there are many ways to pay attention, and when you do, you should expect to feel grateful. But don’t be surprised if you end up feeling loving and devoted, too, and there may also be pain mixed in with the gratitude and the love. So consider yourselves warned, friends: True attention always comes at a cost, because real looking always results in your not being able to look away. Often for the better.

Whenever you find tears in your eyes, especially unexpected tears, it is well to pay the closest attention. They are not only telling you something about the secret of who you are ... of where you have come from and is summoning you to where ... you should go next. *Frederick Buechner*

The world is full of magic things, waiting for our senses to grow sharper. *W.B. Yeats*

When I take a deep breath and pull in the reins of my “hurry” I begin to find the numinous everywhere. I notice the soft breeze and how it caresses, soothes, and quiets me ... I speak with someone on the phone and I hear not just a person’s voice, but also the bond of life that connects us.
Joyce Rupp

Every time that we really concentrate our attention, we destroy the evil in ourselves. If we concentrate this intention, a quarter of an hour of attention is better than a great many good works.
Simone Weil

This is the first, wildest, and wisest thing I know that the soul exists, and that it is built entirely out of attentiveness. *Mary Oliver*

Our attention determines the direction toward which we stretch our minds, yet all too often, exercising our attentional power feels less like intentional movement toward some select object of contemplation and more like the passive bracing for an onslaught of sensory input and competing stimuli. *Jenny Xie*

Questions to Ponder

1. Have you ever given your attention so deeply to something that you suddenly felt one with it?
2. Think of a time when you gave full attention to another person, without judgment or expectation. What did that feel like?
3. Think of a time when someone else gave you their full attention, without judgment or expectation. What did that feel like?
4. Who or what in your life needs you to offer the gift of attention right now?
5. What do you pay attention to in your life that brings you pain?
6. Psychologists and spiritual teachers tell us that we become what we give our attention to. What has more of your attention – and more of yourself – than you want?
7. When you were growing up, what one thing above all others did your family see as worthy of attention? Beauty? Duty? Kindness? Honesty? Education? Loyalty? Being good? Success? God?
8. If you practiced one of the spiritual exercises, what was that like?

Words of the Day

Before coming to the Gathering, think about something or someone you would like to pay more attention to. For the Words of the Day, we will complete this sentence: “I would like to pay more attention to ... ”

Parts of this material, including most of the essay, quotes, some questions, and the spiritual exercises, are adapted from *Attention*, the November issue of *Soul Matters*.

Spiritual Exercises to Consider

Soul Matters includes several spiritual exercises with each month's theme. These spiritual practices take us beyond the question of "What do you think?" and invite us into the deeper question of "Where are you willing to let your faith take you?" Each month you are invited to consider trying one of these.

Option A: Noticing with Mary Oliver

In her poem *Gratitude*, Mary Oliver asks herself and then answers eight questions of attention:

What did you notice?

What did you hear?

When did you admire?

What astonished you?

What would you like to see again?

What was most tender?

What was most wonderful?

What did you think was happening?

It's a poem that treats the details of our days as a blessing and calls us to do the same.

First, take a few days and just spend some time with the poem. Here it is for you to read:

<https://thevalueofsparrows.com/2013/11/27/poetry-gratitude-by-mary-oliver/>

Then use Oliver's questions to write a version of your own by giving your own answers to her eight questions. Decide on the setting of the poem, it maybe after a hike, or the end of an ordinary day.

Option B: Make Attention Count

Most of the time, it's a bird or a cricket that causes it. Their sharp chirp jolts us into the awareness that we are surrounded by sound – sounds that fade into the background most of the time but can easily come to the forefront with a bit of attention.

So for this exercise, go sit on the porch or stand in the middle of your favorite field or woods, and then try to notice the many sounds that surround you. And here's the catch: actually, *count* them! Take a pen and paper and list all the sounds you can detect. After your list is as full as you can make it, take some time and think about the message of it all. What are those sounds trying to tell you?

Option C: Notice Them

Let's be honest, we sometimes ignore the needs of our loved ones. It's never their big needs that we ignore. But on a daily basis, it's all too easy to get ... well ... busy. Wrapped up in work. Or worry. We also know how big of a difference a little attention makes. Your kid comes home all excited to tell you a story and you have the good sense to put the phone down and look right in their eyes as they spin their yarn. They light up right in front of you.

Spend a day or week intentionally finding all the ways you can to give your full attention and full heart to someone near you. Pay attention to the difference it makes for and to them, and the difference it makes to what goes on between you and them ...

These Spiritual Exercises are adapted from the *Soul Matters* November issue, *Attention*. You can find additional spiritual exercises in that issue.