It has been widely reported that the human attention span decreased from twelve seconds in the year 2000 to eight seconds in 2013. From twelve seconds to eight seconds. Wait, are you still with me? It has been widely reported that the human attention span decreased from twelve seconds in the year 2000 to eight seconds in 2013, and that this is less than the average 9 second attention span of a goldfish.\textsuperscript{i}

I am concerned about this news. There is no scientific evidence that goldfish have short attention spans. Humans... yes. But we don’t need to offend goldfish just to make a point about it.

I spent last weekend at Upaya Zen Center in Santa Fe, where I went to learn from the Zen Priest Angel Kyodo Williams. I have quoted Rev. Angel before from this pulpit before and was excited to attend her dharma talks. The retreat was about the Four Noble Truths, core teachings in Buddhism. The teachings have everything to do with paying attention. With noticing where we are creating suffering for ourselves. And what liberates us, in a spiritual sense.

But one thing that was kind of interesting is that Rev. Angel wasn’t concerned with exactly what the Buddha said. Because, she pointed out, times have changed. The Buddha lived 2,500 years ago. His frame of reference was life then. We aren’t harnessing our oxen in the year 2019. Things are different. In particular, the pace of life has changed! There is a lot more going on. The experience of attention and distraction is very different now than it was back then. We face new challenges. Rev. Angel says we live in extraordinary times. A time in which we are called to evolve as a species, in order to realign ourselves with the earth on which we depend. It calls for our sustained attention.

Jenny Xie writes, “The word attention stems from the Latin ad tendere, meaning ‘to stretch toward.’”\textsuperscript{ii} Our attention determines the direction toward which we stretch our minds, yet all too often, Xie says, paying attention feels less like intentional focus and more like bracing ourselves for “an onslaught of sensory input and competing stimuli.”

There are many forces clamoring for our attention now. It used to be that if humans wanted to talk to each other, they had to physically find each other. Now we have phones in our pockets, and in those phones not only communication, but notifications and news...

I read Jenny Xie’s words online. When I got to that part, a brightly colored ad slid across the screen. Our attention has become commodified. It is worth money. One of my favorite sayings about money also applies to attention: if you don’t tell yours where to go, it will go away.
In our reading, I Lift Up Mine Eyes, Howard Thurman reflects on the way his attention scatters and gets caught up in the endless little things of the day. When he lifts up his eyes, meaning when he turns his attention beyond that stuff, he notices life, love and what he calls the Spirit of God. The things that transcend the clamoring. The things that lead us (from the heart, spirit) instead of distract us.

Thurman knows about big things that demand our attention, too. He was an African American man born in the American south in 1899. When he says he is refocusing his attention so that he meets the spirit of God in “sad and bottomless renunciations”... those are the words of a person who knows that those words mean.

One of the best ways we can direct our attention is through spiritual practice. At Upaya we experienced the spiritual practice of chanting at the end of the day. The chant went like this: Creations are numberless, I vow to free them. Illusions are limitless, I vow to transform them. Reality is boundless, I vow to perceive it.

Rev. Angel said, “You are not actually going to free all of creation. These are setting your intentions.” In this way, they help us direct our attention. After we chanted these words three times, a single voice said, “Take heed, take heed. Don’t squander your life.”

Any spiritual practice can direct our attention. Meditation, affirmation, time spent in nature, or in church. Anything that opens up some stillness within us, and connects us beyond ourselves.

As a congregation, we also have to remember to look beyond the everyday stuff and lift our attention up. We are at a wonderful moment together. Do you know that? We are days away from having a newly renovated social hall. Before the renovation, our social hall was constantly in use. Community groups, church groups, justice work. We used it for coffee hour, but also to house homeless families.

Once, when an anti-abortion measure was on the Albuquerque ballot, we turned that hall into community organizing space to protect reproductive rights. It was the home of Roots Academy, an African American led kids summer camp. And all of that happened when the hall was creaky and stinky, had only one meeting room with no window, and the ceiling leaked. Just imagine what we are going to be able to do now! Three meeting rooms, bathrooms with showers, a brand-new kitchen. How will we put it to work and share it for love and justice?

With the hall done, our campus is in the best shape it’s been in in years. I know, the Wesson-Arnold wing is not pretty. You have to turn the heat on by pulling a stick in the wall. But that’s to keep us humble. We are one of the largest UU congregations in the country and we can’t let that go to our heads. Let’s embrace the stick for now.

Overall the campus is in good shape. Not only that, you have a minister in her tenth year, and one with fresh new eyes and energy. In the new year, the board will lead us in conversation
about where we to turn our attention next in these extraordinary times, and we will make plans. We are going to meet these times together.

Because this moment is so filled with promise, the board did something that surprised me a few months ago. It has to do with our budget for 2020. I want to take a few minutes of our time this morning to tell you that story and give you an update. And I’ll return to the theme of attention before we are done. (Wait, are you still with me? … I’m going to “just keep swimming.”)

Every fall, we usually set our annual fundraising target by looking at the past year’s budget, and calculating what changes are necessary—for example, we now have to pay for parking in the business lot next door, so next year’s budget has to include that. And we try to keep the increases to a minimum. We do that because this congregation is member supported. The money we each give is the money we have as a church.

This year, our budget has to cover having an Associate Minister on staff again after being in transition for the last few years. Our Director of Religious Education has achieved professional credentialing, and Susan, our Music Director, is about to. That means they have education not only in music and children’s spirituality, but also leadership, justice, and anti-oppression. We get to be a stronger church because of their hard work.

It means we have to raise more pledges for 2020 than we did for 2019. And many of us are giving for the social hall renovation, too. So the first fundraising target we set had those built in increases, and some cuts to try and offset them. We call it the Trim Budget target. It calls for just under $952,000 in pledges. It’s a growth budget, but at the same time, it’s conservative.

The board considered this and came back with a different proposal. They said, what if, instead of focusing so much attention on how to keep the target conservative, we focused on what we’d do if we had the ideal budget?

Ok, I said. I’m listening.

They said, if we had the ideal budget, we know what we’d do. (They had been thinking about it the whole time.) We’d fund that needed growth, plus fully fund our UU kids camp and more staff hours for justice organizing, not less. 2020 is an important year. We’d pay our share for the social worker who helps us serve everyone who shows up at the church doors—especially people experiencing homelessness and addiction. We’d make free childcare available at church events, so everything is more welcoming to young families. We’d add staff support for ministers, so the ministers could focus more on leading and outreach, and giving First U a public voice in New Mexico. And less on things like fundraising.

Now they had my attention.

The ideal would require more money-- $86,000 more-- than the Trim target. Sounds pretty good though, right? We call this the Beacon on a Hill Budget.
We agreed that everyone would want to know what would be possible with an ideal budget like that. And, we thought it would be good to make a mid-level budget, that did many of those things, if not all of them. To help us set our intentions, like those chants. “Creations are numberless, I vow to free them.” We might not free up numberless dollars, but we would let the vision pull us and see where we landed.

That’s how we got the three-tiered fundraising goal that you have heard about in a skit, and in the Radical Generosity Team’s coffee hour display.

So, are you wondering yet what we’ve raised so far? Good! Most households who pledged last year have already pledged again this year, and we’ve heard from some brand new pledgers, too. Thank you so much, all of you. So far, we’ve received almost 450 pledges for a total of $843,000. We are almost 90% of the way to the Trim budget. So close.

To put that in perspective, if we each pledged an average of $360 more per person, that would get us to the trim budget level. That’s $30 per person per month, on average, and done. About $8 per week. That’s less the cost of buying one delicious lunch at East Ocean. (They still let us use their parking lot for free on Sundays).

If we pledged an average of $10 a week more per person for next year, that would get us to the beacon on a hill budget. That’s an additional pledge of $520 per year per person. $10 per week. Some people have more to share, some have less.

But the campaign is officially ended, and the end of the year is coming soon. That’s the final deadline. Rather than arrive at the end without telling you where things stand, I wanted to give us a chance to hit the trim budget goal—and maybe even go beyond it.

So today, members of the Board and Radical Generosity Committee have some Close the Gap cards to hand out. You guys can go ahead and hand those out. Now, if you are a new visitor here, you can let those cards go right on by. You are our guests. Or if you have already pledged as much money as you can, thank you so much. You are the strength of this place, and you should also let those cards go right on by.

But if you’ve been around a while and you haven’t pledged yet, or if you think you might have a little wiggle room left next year, even if it’s just a few dollars, I hope you’ll take a card. Let’s see what we can do together today.

There are many religious groups out there right now that are driving a politics of social control and dominance, rather than inclusion, diversity, and justice. That kind of religion is well funded right now. I am not willing to just sit back and let that go. What we do here matters. That’s why

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* Are you reading this sermon? You can find an online pledge “card” at [http://uuabq.com/pledge-drive/](http://uuabq.com/pledge-drive/) or email or call the church with your pledge. Thank you for your support!
I challenged us last year to hit our goal for 2019, and I’m inviting us to do it again today for 2020. This place is important and it is worth it.

You’ll notice the card says “Increase my 2020 pledge.” If you haven’t made a 2020 pledge yet, you can still fill it out. It will just be an increase from zero—and that’s wonderful. So appreciated.

So far this year we’ve received pledges ranging from $25 for the year, to $25,000. I don’t mean that rhetorically- that really is the range. There is incredible generosity at all points on that spectrum. People have different levels of resources. A small pledge can be a truly big gift.

The average pledge is a little over $1800. If we can get some new pledges like that today, it will really help move us forward. Remember, when you make a pledge you don’t have to turn in money right away. You have the whole year of 2020 to pay it. It just lets us know what we can count on, and that’s how we know what we get to fund in our mission.

This year we introduced something a little bit new in the fundraising campaign: Giving Circles. These are groups of people who pledge at a certain level. I say they are a “little bit” new because there has always been something called the Lead Donors. That was everyone who pledged above a certain amount. What’s different now is that there is more than one category—there are three—and they start at a lower amount than the lead donor group did, so more people can be in them.

A few people have expressed concern about the giving circles—they are wondering whether people who have more money will be given unfair special treatment. Is this going to be like at a theater or something, with VIP packages? No. We won’t be publishing who gives what. And trust me, no one wants to sit in the front row here. I mean, just take a look.

There are many ways to belong to groups at First Unitarian. Some, like the hiking or book groups, are simply about community. Others are about service, and they require giving time or talent—such as serving on the board or immigrant justice team. Not everyone the same amount of time to share.

Giving Circles are another kind of group. The purpose is to express gratitude to those who give much more than the average pledge.

This is important to me, because without people who made more than average gifts, my family would not have had a church to belong to when I was a kid growing up in a low-income trailer park, or later when my husband and I were a young family struggling to get by. We wouldn’t have had a church to welcome us, and that’s what led me to become a minister. Without people who gave more than average, and made a space that was welcoming to everyone else, none of that would have been possible.
It’s also true that people who give above-average gifts are not necessarily wealthy people. In fact, most are middle class people who are making our church community and its mission a priority in their budgets.

Giving Circles are about acknowledging that those kinds of gifts make it possible to have a welcoming community for all, regardless of money. I would not want to be part of a church that didn’t welcome everyone. So the circles are about saying thank you for supporting that, just as we say thank you in other ways to people who give a lot of their time.

The Sustainers Giving Circle is for pledges starting at $3000 per year. The Beacons circle starts at $5000. Visionaries start at $7500. And Transformers pledge $10,000 or more per year.

If you are fortunate enough to be able to imagine giving at one of these levels, you will help First Unitarian have a big embrace, and reach as many people as possible in our mission of love and justice.

It takes a community to make a community. In the end, what makes the church work is big and small pledges. It is the spirit and the math of everybody doing what they can. It all adds up together, to help us be strong, welcoming, joyful, and ready.

I’m going to ask the Board and Rad Gen are going to collect the cards now as our musicians offer us another song. If you’ve got one to turn one in, place it in the basket, and then they’ll go add it all up and we’ll tell you what we raise in this service before you go. My husband is putting one in the basket on our behalf—at both services. We had already increased our pledge compared to last year, and now we are doing it again, and again, twice. It’s also fine to hand your card to me in the receiving line. If you do that, I’ll be happy to get to thank you personally.

Be sure to keep an eye out for a message this week about the total amount we raise today.

*Music as cards are collected.*

Another 20th century theologian, Mircea Eliade, wrote of sacred time and profane time. Sacred time and profane time. He’s using the word “profane” in a different way than we usually think of it these days. When we hear the word profane we think of profanity, like the f-word, which may have its uses in prayer, but that’s not what I’m talking about this morning. Eliade meant something else. The word profane comes from root words meaning *before or outside the temple.*

He spoke of the way religious ritual and ceremony connect us to that which is sacred and timeless, how it takes us out of profane (or ordinary) time. Ordinary time kind of tumbles along or we tumble along in it from one moment to the next. It’s full of things—big and small things. Profane time has a linear quality. It moves forward. Sacred time is what we experience when
we have a sense of transcendence. Connection beyond ourselves. It connects us to that which is timeless. Ultimate.

Eliade explained his sense of this in complicated theological terms. I’m reframing it a bit now through a more modern, humanist lens.

The difference between sacred and profane time is not a difference of location. It doesn’t matter whether you are inside or outside of a temple or church, or whether you are on or off a meditation cushion. It is not a difference of place. It is a difference of attention.

It’s what we are noticing, even as everything tumbles along. With our attention, we weave sacred and ordinary in our lives. And, we decide what we want to pull us along in these times. Likewise, the spirit of this congregation flows out from this place.

We began this morning speaking words of affirmation together.

We gather to turn our attention
to that which is true,
to redirect our affections
toward that which will sustain our tired and tender hearts,
to look out beyond the narrowness of what is,
so that we begin to perceive, together, what is possible,
and asking to be born.iii

It is a blessing to be together in these extraordinary times, setting our intentions, making plans, caring for each other and giving away the love and spirit of this place. Thank you for being part of it today.

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i from https://relate.zendesk.com/articles/attention-finite-resource/
iii By the Rev. Scott Taylor