

Minilogue

Attention, please! The Soul Matters theme for the month of March is “Paying Attention.”

In his now-classic book, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, the Unitarian Universalist minister, Robert Fulghum, summarized the most important lessons he absorbed in early childhood, concluding his list with the instruction to “remember the Dick-and-Jane books and the first word you learned - the biggest word of all - LOOK.”

Never mind that I didn’t actually encounter the Dick and Jane (and their dog, Spot) books until the first grade; Fulghum’s point is still well-made, and worth remembering. All learning begins with paying attention. One might argue that the word, “listen!” is at least as large as “look!” but in either case the invitation is to *pay attention* -- to direct our focused awareness toward a particular sight or sound in the world around us.

As we grow up, and become habituated to our surroundings, we may no longer even notice things that captivated our attention at an earlier age. It may take some extraordinary interruption of our perceptual routines to refresh our awareness. Perhaps visionaries and artists are simply those among us who haven’t lost the original innocent vision of childhood, but have carefully preserved and cultivated this attentive capacity, developing it into its mature form.

Something of that original child-like awareness can be recovered through the practice of mindfulness meditation. Simply *paying attention* to one’s own passing breath can be the starting place for a more general and generous attentiveness toward the world. Sitting quietly, simply meeting and greeting each arriving moment as something fresh, original, and fleeting, we come to appreciate the endless creativity of consciousness, and we learn that our attention is something we can control and direct, at least to a certain extent.

In a world where information is abundant, attention becomes a scarce and valuable commodity. We live immersed in what has been called an “attention economy,” an unrelenting and sophisticated assault on and competition for our attention by major tech and social media companies. In his book, *Stand Out of Our Light: Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy*, James Williams argues that “something deep and potentially irreversible seems to be happening to human attention in the age of information. Responding to it well may be the biggest moral and political challenge of our time.”

Many of the meditative and prayer practices of the world’s religions involve a firm but gentle disciplining of the faculty of attention. In the Western Christian monastic tradition, for example, the Latin term, *custodia oculorum* (‘custody of the eyes’), referred to the learned ability not to be carried away by the sight of the ‘vanities of the world.’ I sometimes think the hyper-stimulated world of today could use a little bit of that kind of spiritual practice. “My experience,” wrote William James in his classic *Principles of Psychology* (1890), “is what I agree to attend to.”

What to you ‘agree to attend to’ throughout the day? What captures and holds your attention, perhaps even *without* your ‘agreement?’ Try being aware of *how* you pay attention, too. Do you find yourself ‘carried away’ or do you ‘consent?’ There’s a difference between consciously focusing your attention in a deliberate way, on the one hand; and finding yourself lost down a social media rabbit-hole that has been specifically and algorithmically engineered to snare and hold *your* attention, on the other.

It is important for us to reclaim the power of our own attention. I haven’t gone so far as some of my Catholic friends and declared a ‘social media fast’ during Lent, but I understand their motivation, and I intend to practice a form of *custodia oculorum* -- the stewardship of attention, as an ongoing spiritual discipline.

In attentive fellowship,

Rev. Bruce