

November 2019

Exploring What It Means to be a People of Attention

November's Soul Matters theme, which will be used in our Religious Education classes and in our covenant groups, is this question: What does it mean to be a people of attention? This month's service on this theme will be on November 17th and the sermon conversation will follow after second service.

The Soul Matters Packet says that: "Attention is here to wake us up to life's many gifts." Gifts we often take for granted, including our loved ones. Attention invites us into deep seeing, which leads to love. Attention, which is to see through the eyes of love, is a type of looking that keeps on looking until you discover something entirely new, entirely other, entirely and uniquely them. Attention also comes with a price. Rev. Sean Dennison 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.

Could it be that attention was once necessary for our survival? Here is an excerpt from Restoring Ourselves Though Attention to the Language of Birds:

"Attending to the tongues of other species is our inheritance, bequeathed by a lineage of ancestors extending back hundreds of millions of years... Our ancestors were ecological polylinguists. To listen was to learn about food, danger, opportunity, and the subtle nuances of ecological time and space, the mastery of which allows all creatures to thrive. To listen was to live and to find meaning. Disconnection and inattention invited death. And thus, natural selection placed the capacity to hear and understand beyond-human languages at the core of our human nature. So when we walk outside today and open our ears to the sounds of a sparrow, we reclaim what is ours by birth. We connect to meanings that emerge from the deep time of our membership in life's community..."

Here is a link to a reflection and audio recording you can use to create an auditory meditation: <https://emergencemagazine.org/story/five-practices-for-listening-to-the-language-of-birds>

Here are some more quotes about the month's theme:

*Had I gone looking for some particular place rather than any place, I'd have never found this spring under the sycamores. Since leaving home, I felt for the first time at rest. Sitting full in the moment, I practiced on the god-awful difficulty of just paying attention. It's a contention of my father's—believing as he does that anyone who misses the journey misses about all he's going to get—that people become what they pay attention to. Our observations and curiosity, they make and remake us.

-William Least Heat-Moon

*In a cemetery once, an old one in New England, I found a strangely soothing epitaph. The name of the deceased and her dates had been scoured away by wind and rain, but there was a carving of a tree with roots and branches ...and among them the words, “She attended well and faithfully to a few worthy things.”
-Victoria Safford

*In a world with exponential information growth, we need new filters, new ways to discern and pay attention to what matters, and the best spam filters the internet has to offer will not suffice. We need soul filters... the problem is not the quality of the information around me, but the quality of my own attention, and my lack of careful discernment. Anything can be worthy of our attention if we have, with care, found it to be so. Anything can be a distraction if we are not mindful...
-Rev. Molly Housh Gordon

*At a certain point you say to the woods, to the sea, to the mountains, the world, Now I am ready. Now I will stop and be wholly attentive. You empty yourself and wait, listening. . .
-Annie Dillard

*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 look out the window beyond my desk and I see not just trees, I see how they behold the sun and receive the nurturance offered to them. 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

All winter long I overlooked three uninhabited nests... What else is there in this world that my hustling and bustling have barred me from sensing and seeing?... My guess is that it is not only delights, such as these nests but violence, too, that’s within perception’s range, if only I gave it my true attention. Acts of exclusion, discrimination, and the impacts of systemic oppression are all there, right before me. I don’t always perceive them—I have been taught to not see them—but they are there...
-Rev. Karen Johnston

Here are some questions for reflection from Soul Matters:

What helps us stop and be totally attentive? What have we seen, heard or experienced when we've done so? What gets in the way of being totally attentive?

Have you looked away from uncomfortable truths, such as a person who is homeless? Does privilege shelter you from the challenge to pay attention to oppression, exclusion, and discrimination?

What is truly worthy of not only our attention but our very lives? Has that changed over time? How do we decide what deserves attention?