

Paying Attention as Key to a Spiritual Life

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On the first Sunday in March, Sue read a talk written by Rev. Tulou who asked, “How do we protect our sacred imagination and open our hearts?” She stated that “media seek to control our sacred imagination.” Without our sacred imagination we lose our connection to the spiritual. Rev. Goodwin asked the question in a somewhat different way. “What deserves your attention?” As a Christian he states the “divine mystery-God,” is what deserves our attention. We UU’s tend to be less prone to using “God” language. But, for me words and beliefs are less important than the experience they point to. Regardless of the faith tradition one subscribes to, or even no faith tradition at all, human beings need to feel whole; we need to connect a dimension beyond the self that I call “spiritual.” I don’t mean the “occult.” I appreciated Rev. Goodwin’s words as much as Rev. Tulou’s, because they both directed us to a life of the spirit. Here is my dear, departed friend, Phil Gilmore’s definition of spirituality:

I really didn’t think the word spiritual or spirituality was a difficult concept. I know it when I feel it. A heightened reality, an intuitive feeling, a deep appreciation, a sense of accomplishment, a sense of awe and wonder, the feeling of being in love, deep gratitude, a sudden realization that a story resonates for me. All these seem spiritual to me.

Through the ages, human beings have found it challenging to connect to the spiritual. As I understand it, the role of religions is to assist with what Rev. Tulou called our “sacred imagination.” Rev. Goodwin spoke about idolatry, the worship of false gods, as the barrier to the spiritual. With the dominant place the internet and media have now, the challenge for humanity is possibly as great as ever. Rev. Goodwin regards social media as “idolatry,” and I see his point.

It appears we are in the midst of a psychological pandemic, and I am not exaggerating: Adult Attention Deficit Disorder has nearly doubled in the past 20 years and now represents more than 10% of the adult population! Use of social media is regarded as the main cause for this rise. In addition to the obvious factor of increased time spent in social media, research also points to a societal tendency of expecting instant gratification, being impatient and unable to delay gratification. This tendency is manifest on the internet so the two things go hand-in-hand. The desire for instant gratification keeps many people glued to their devices. A New York Times essay written a couple of years ago had as its title, “Powerful Forces are Fracking Our Attention.” Referring to cell phone use, the article states, “Increasingly powerful systems seek to ensure that our attention is never truly ours.” Studies have shown that cell phones and social media in particular, are undermining mental health and sleep, especially for youth. Many of us have been caught in the trap of our brain’s reward system which is hard to escape.

When I spoke in December about finding hope I quoted from Erich Fromm’s book, The Revolution of Hope. Written in 1968, this work accurately predicted two alternatives for the future of humanity; one in which our lives are controlled by what he called “technology” and to which we now include “media.” The alternative more positive future, is one where people take charge of their lives and detach from excessive influence of social media. I believe this month’s theme of paying attention is very much targeted to the option of detaching regularly from media and taking charge of the direction of our lives, to include the

spiritual. The alternative, that of spending too much time with media, exposes us to the propaganda, misinformation, disinformation and incessant distraction. This distraction substantially undermines our capacity for sustained attention and the opportunity to connect to the spiritual.

If you think you are among those who spend too much time on electronic media you can try keeping a record for one day of each time you are on a device and for how long. You might be amazed. Companies of course make money from our time spent on our phones but what is the cost to us? What is this grand distraction doing to our spiritual selves? I believe that paying attention, this month's theme, is an essential practice for a spiritual life. This seems to be one of the main objectives of the theme for March. I hope to highlight that bringing balance to what we attend to is necessary for our physical, mental, and spiritual well-being, and effectiveness.

The positive message I want to share, is that each of us has the power to choose where we place our attention. Both of the previous presentations this month made that clear. We could deliberately opt to avoid any news or information, true or false, from entering our consciousness at all. We can essentially detach from evil conspiracy theories crises, and disasters. However, there are negative consequences to that choice too. If we opt for that, we would be less able to act as responsible citizens. Another harmful choice would be to immerse ourselves completely into the unfortunate endless stream of bad news, local, national and international. As we heard in the talk by Rev. Tulou, this is also not productive or psychologically healthy. I think you will agree, it is best to be mindful of the choices we make regarding both where we focus attention and for how long. What seems most constructive to me is that we consciously apportion some attention to current social issues, but also to spend time in nature, with loved ones, and in solitude. If we don't stay informed about local, state, national and world affairs we will not be participating in helping to make a difference; we will not be living into our UU Values. But on the other hand, if we devote too much attention to the problems of the world, or to inane or delusional content, we are likely to become discouraged and abandon our sense of agency and control. We can choose to allocate our attention in a way best suited to our health and effectiveness. My main suggestion and that of the two previous presenters this month, is that need to insure that give some attention every day to our spiritual imagination.

For the purposes of this talk I will consider the terms "paying attention," "mindfulness," and "meditation," as meaning the same thing. Meditation Teacher Manoj Dias, speaking to the benefit of mindfulness, says it helps us to be more flexible and it can improve insight into ourselves and our relationships. It can also enhance our spiritual lives.

If we can commit to living mindfully and choose to engage our curiosity and be tender towards ourselves and others, we're able to be present to the changing beauty in all things without clinging to fixed views about how things should be. We learn to be emotionally flexible and to be open to the momentary experience. From this place, we fine tune our ability to witness our minds at work instead of being at their whim, and we begin to see things with much more clarity.

All the major world religions teach mindfulness in one form or another. One cannot access the spiritual without being mindful or paying attention. Christians, Jews and Muslims all practice prayer as their way to focus attention on the spiritual. Psychological studies have shown that regardless of the content of the prayer or meditation, the practice is associated with similar brain wave changes. Whether one is praying to Allah, or Saint Mary, or sitting in Buddhist meditation, alpha brain waves are being produced. Alpha

waves are associated with a sense of peace and a feeling of oneness. We UU's do not have the same requirement to pray or meditate as a ritual daily practice, as other faith traditions do. However, we see the spiritual and psychological benefit we can expect, when we choose to build this practice into our daily schedule.

Unitarian and Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson who found his spiritual life outdoors said in his essay *On Nature* that when we pay attention, we become spiritually elevated:

...if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars. The rays that come from those heavenly worlds, will separate between him and what he touches. One might think the atmosphere was made transparent with this design, to give man, in the heavenly bodies, the perpetual presence of the sublime.

Standing on the bare ground, — my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, — all ... egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.

Emerson was a pantheist; his "God" was all of nature. Emerson also said what we "worship" by which he meant pay the most attention to, we become. If we attend to a multitude of distractions we lose our grounding. We become chaos; our mental health and our spiritual life suffer.

Former Dean of our UUA Theology School Rev. Dr. Rebecca Ann Parker said that we must resist distractions and place our attention where we find meaning and value, so we can remember who we really are:

Almost all of us know that meaning of life cannot be found in [a] narrow way.... It is hard to disconnect ourselves from this dominant activity and the endless distractions of media, schedules and the busy-ness that consumes our days. We must resist this devaluing of ourselves and the earth on which we live by doing the work of remembering who we are....

I think what Rev. Parker means by "remembering who we are," she is referring to who we are as spiritual beings. We connect spiritually when we focus attention.

I and others spoke last summer about the concept of "faith" for religious liberals. I presented several definitions that revolved around the idea of "sacred trust in an infinite and unknowable reality." Paul Tillich, one of the most important liberal theologians of the last century, told us that a spiritual life, or faith, must be grounded in what he called "Ultimate Concern."

An ultimate concern is a supreme, unconditional commitment that drives a person's existence, demanding total surrender and promising spiritual fulfillment. It becomes the center of personality and determines one's "being or not-being."

For Tillich, in order to pursue a spiritual life, we have to devote ourselves completely. In the language of attention, to foster our spirituality we have to devote our attention as fully as possible to where we find the sacred. For Tillich faith is, "the state of being ultimately concerned." It is an act of the total personality, involving total surrender to what is deemed of supreme, infinite, and unconditional importance (the "ultimate concern"). Faith is not merely intellectual belief, but an existential, passionate, and risk-filled commitment to the ground of one's being. To devote "ultimate concern" is to give full

attention to what is most precious. As Rev. Parker said in the quote I read earlier, “we must do the work of remembering who we are,” as spiritual beings. This is how we develop our “sacred imagination.”

Buddhism is a spiritual path based upon cultivating undivided attention that grounds me. Buddhism’s core tenants include learning focused attention through meditation and mindfulness, and embodying compassion for the suffering in the world. Mindfulness has been defined as:

the practice of intentionally bringing one’s attention to the present moment without judgment. It involves being fully aware of one’s thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and the surrounding environment.”

We experience meaning with the practice of paying attention, or in the language of Buddhism practicing mindfulness.

Joseph Campbell said in the Power of Myth series that what human beings are seeking is “the experience of being alive.” That experience does not happen without focused attention. In championing focused attention, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said:

Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed.

This quotation from Heschel tells me that when we are “radically amazed” we naturally feel gratitude for life’s gifts. Gratitude is another spiritual practice and is the result of paying attention.

Dr. Parker gives the example of the Jewish Sabbath as spiritual practice for nurturing attention and mindfulness:

To keep the Sabbath is a radical act of resistance in a culture that lost track of the meaning of life. Keeping the Sabbath, we break free of our consumer-oriented, media-dominated busy-ness and give ourselves room for the things that have real meaning: our families, friends.... time to reflect and give thanks.

The Sabbath then, is a practice of paying attention to what is sacred and as well a way to take a break from the problems of the world. It can include unplugging from devices for a period of time. I engage in a personal Sabbath on Saturday morning when I do not watch any TV or use my cell phone except to talk to family and friends.

I recently watched an episode of “Wisdom Keepers,” a PBS series devoted to helping us live more meaningful lives. By the way, I recommend the series. The episode I refer to featured African-American Episcopal Priest Kelly Brown Douglas. She related a story from her childhood. She grew up in a Black neighborhood in Dayton Ohio and rarely ventured outside her community and rarely interacted with White people. On a memorable occasion as a child, her family drove into the downtown on a very cold day. There she saw a school age White boy and girl in the street who did not have coats on. She was very concerned about their well-being. At that moment she decided to devote her life to helping people like the boy and girl. That led her career choice. Reverend Kelly was paying attention and it gave her life meaning and direction.

In thinking about our UU Values, it seems to me that we cannot live into them without paying attention to injustice occurring in dictatorships around the world and increasingly in our own country. We need be willing and able to attend to the injustice that minority groups experience if we are going to work for Justice. It is by paying attention that we become aware of the suffering that others endure. We need to attend to the injustice carried out by ICE agents and not be distracted by false claims that contradict what we witness for ourselves. To live into all of our UU Values requires that we pay attention. We covenant to respond to tragedies and crises with Love. When we are paying attention, we can respond most effectively. But as I mentioned, we also need to nourish our spirit and bring renewal and equilibrium to our souls.

Like Rev. Tulou, I am proposing that we apportion our precious attention in ways that embrace our UU Values and enhance our spirituality. We need to show care and concern for the world's problems, but we must also renew our souls with time and attention to solitude, and to our loved ones. We need to be mindful of our choices for attention and seek balance. In the language of Reverend Goodwin, we need to avoid worshiping the idols of social media. The challenges for our attention are ever present but we must resist for the sake of our spiritual lives and sacred imagination, and in order the repair of the world.