

## Pay Attention!

A Sermon by the Rev. Molly Housh Gordon  
Delivered to the UU Church of Columbia  
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In the fourth section of her poem “Sometimes,” the poet Mary Oliver writes:

Instructions for living a life:  
Pay attention.  
Be astonished.  
Tell about it.

(Worship Associate sends text message. Phone on pulpit near mic makes its text message sound.)

Oops, Sorry, I’m just getting a message here. Let me see...

Oh, it’s Todd, and he’s sent me a bible verse. Psalm 46:10. Hmmmm... let me just look that up on my bible app... (yes, I have a bible app.)

Ah, here it is. It says: Be still, and know that I am God. Be still. And know.

Timely for the topic, Todd, thanks! You know it reminds me that I wanted to post that blog reading about Being Still by Glennon Melton on Facebook.

Oh look, \_\_ posted \_\_ this morning!

Oh... sorry. I was preaching, wasn’t I? What was I saying?

Ah yes, Mary Oliver... Pay attention.

It’s hard these days, isn’t it? Paying attention.

Who can guess what the average human attention span is these days?

According to the National Center for Biotechnology Information, the average human attention span in 2013 was 8 seconds. That’s down 4 seconds from only the year before, in 2012, when we could go 12 seconds without being distracted. It’s also 1 second less than a goldfish, which has a 9 second attention span.

Yikes!

But it makes sense. The amount of information available to us seems to grow exponentially with every technological advance, and it presses in upon us through the way we live and work and communicate.

Indeed, some scholarly folk have found, it doesn’t just *seem* that information is growing exponentially. It *is*. Every minute of every day, more than 200 million emails are sent. Each minute, 571 new websites are created, and Google receives 2

million search inquiries. Each minute, You Tube users upload 48 hours worth of video. Think about that, 48 hours per minute.

There is more information in the world than we humans, even collectively, can possibly process. More and more, our attention has become our most precious commodity.

But then again, this has always been the case. Humans have always lived in a bustling, lively world – and I’m talking the material world now, not the digital one – whose sensory cues for us far outnumber our capacity to sense and use that information.

For example, take a moment of silence now to see if you can notice everything that is going on in this room.

I can virtually guarantee you that many of you noticed different things from each other, some noticed more than others, but no one noticed everything.

Our brains have sensory filters that help us notice useful information – like what could be a threat or what could be a benefit to our survival – and that tune out whatever information seems unnecessary for survival. Our brains do this in varying degrees, reflecting the neuro-diversity of any group of humans – some more sensitive than others.

The most sensitive among us might find our lives made varying degrees of difficult by the sheer amount of sensory information let in by our brains. By the miracle of human adaptability and the perseverance of the human spirit, such individuals usually find ways to cope with the overload and pay attention in their own ways, even if those ways are different to what others might expect.

In a changing information landscape compounded by the sheer size of our digital worlds, perhaps we *all* need to adapt better ways to cope with information overload.

And perhaps it is exactly the role of spiritual communities, whose ways have always been different than what others might expect, to help us manage this adaptation.

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 poet Mary Oliver writes: “This is the first, wildest, and wisest thing I know, that the soul exists, and that it is built entirely out of attentiveness.”

Indeed, where we give our attention is where we invest our souls.

When we are centered in our selves, we pay attention to what we care about. Though it looks different for all of us, still it seems that attention is how we give that most precious human gift – love.

It is what a child wants from their parent, what a dog wants from their human, what a lover wants from their love – simply, and profoundly: the full attention of the soul. Attention that witnesses and holds the other.

Even the phrase *pay* attention gets at this fact – it is the most valuable currency we have to spend in this life. Where we give our attention is how we live our lives.

We speak often in this congregation about our calling to better love each other and this beautiful, broken world.

There is no way to accomplish such a lofty spiritual goal, than to start by paying attention to that which most speaks to our souls – to one another, to the earth under our feet, to the heartbreak and the glory around us.

I don't know about you, but I find this incredibly challenging. There is a lot vying for my attention – some of it worthier than others – and I don't always invest it wisely.

Riffing on Glennon Melton, sometimes I get that itchy feeling and I do go shopping, or turn frantically outward, rather than taking the time and stillness to get centered in myself.

In these times, 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.

For instance, our contemporary communication technology can certainly be distracting to our monkey minds, as I attempted to demonstrate earlier. But it is, in itself, simply another way to connect. The question is how we use it. How we give attention.

On the flip side, even our most valiant efforts to love the world can be mere distraction if we have not taken the time to focus our hearts in wisdom – on where our attention will bear the fruit of love and care.

It is the tragedy and the beauty of the human soul that we cannot love the world all at once, but only in its particularity, with wise hearts and focused attention. Because of this, we must choose. We must discern, which literally means to sift away. We must sift out what really matters to us.

As Thomas Merton writes: “to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence. The frenzy of the activist neutralizes [their] work... It destroys the fruitfulness of [their]...work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful.”

Lord do I know what this feels like. I have gone through days and weeks on overdrive, only to feel dissatisfied and depleted at the end, snippy snappy at the people I love, and itchy for a deeper engagement with my own life.

I have also gone through days and weeks full of that same level of activity, but which fed my soul and brought me great joy. The difference was taking the time to enjoy the fruits of my attention. The difference was time for stillness, every single day. The difference was mindfulness.

In his book *Mindfulness for Beginners*, John Kabat-Zinn writes: “Mindfulness is what arises when you pay attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgementally, and as if your life depended on it.” (17)

And the thing is, our lives do depend on it. They will bear fruit or wither away based on the quality of attention we give them.

Kabat-Zinn continues: “Mindfulness reminds us that it is possible to shift from a doing mode to a being mode through the application of attention and awareness. Then our doing can come out of our being and be much more integrated and effective.” (18).

So it is, among the great philosophers of the Western Intellectual Tradition. We hear “to do is to be” from Socrates. From Jean Paul Sartres “to be is to do.” And from the great Sinatra. “Doo bee doo bee doo.”

Sinatra’s got it right. We gotta do awhile *and* be awhile. And singing helps too.

The ability to both do and just be. The skill of mindfulness, and the quality of attention. These may be just what it takes to have a life that is full, rather than just busy. And isn’t that what we long for, when we fill up our days? A true feeling of life as full and fruitful?

Religious mystics and monastics the world ‘round would tell us – we can have that fullness and fruitfulness, even amid lots of doing, as long as we find stillness within it all.

They would also tell us, much to our chagrin, that this takes practice.

In a world that has always been too full to process, paying attention takes practice. Most spiritual teachers would argue, sustained daily practice.

So that is my challenge to you this month, via Mary Oliver: Pay Attention. Be astonished. Tell about it... or via the psalmist: Be still, and know. My challenge to you (and to my self) is to practice every day these next four weeks. If you do not have a regular meditation practice, try 10 minutes a day to be still and focus on your breath. Even if its on your lunch hour. Even if you have to get up 10 minutes early or go to bed 10 minutes late. Spend that time just being, and see how your doing is transformed.

If you already have a meditation practice, perhaps you can extend it out by spending 10 minutes each day of intentional listening with a loved one or friend.

Then, tell about it! Share with each other and other loved ones, reflect in your small groups, facebook or tweet about it. How does practicing mindfulness bring fullness into your life?

Pay attention.

Be astonished.

Tell about it.

And I suspect the result of our mindfulness will impact more than our minds. Our hearts will be strengthened to love this world. Our souls will be quickened and awakened to their core. Our lives will be full and fruitful and whole.

May it be so.