



Soul Matters

**What does it mean to be
a people of ATTENTION?**



Small Group

November 2019

What Does It Mean To Be A People of Attention?

Alice Walker famously wrote, “I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it.”

Walker's words are a great reminder that attention and gratitude go hand in hand. Indeed they are a perfect embodiment of the dominant message about attention: that it's here to wake us up to life's many gifts.

But it's also important to remember that attention has a few ulterior motives up its sleeve. So some fair warning is required this month. Because attention won't just make you grateful, it will make you fall in love. And it won't just allow you to notice life's gifts, it also makes it impossible to ignore life's pain.

First, the love part.

Mary Oliver writes, “Attention is the beginning of devotion.” It's a beautiful way of saying you cannot love something that you do not really see. Love simply isn't possible without deep noticing. And noticing deeply seems to inevitably lead to love. Glances and self-interested attention never get to the real person. They stay on the surface and treat the other as a mirror. What you fall in love with is how they make you feel and how they enhance your statue with others. Which means that all you've really done is fall in love with yourself. Loving them, truly them, requires noticing your needs and then putting them down. It asks you to look without expectation of who you want or hope they will be, and instead try to focus simply on who they are right now. It's a type of looking that keeps on looking until you discover something entirely new, entirely other, entirely and uniquely them. And once you notice something that uniquely new, you're in trouble, because you will most definitely be devoted. You will no longer think about what you're getting. You will only want to give.

And now the pain part, which is not all that different from the love piece.

This time it's a UU minister, Rev. Sean Dennison, that captures it best. Sean 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.

All this is to say that we should expect to feel grateful this month. But, also, don't be surprised if you end up feeling devoted as well. Again, attention doesn't simply help you notice all you've been given; it also makes you fall in love and demands that you give of yourself. So consider yourselves warned, friends: True attention always comes at a cost, because real looking always results in you not being able to look away. Often for the better.

This month may that be true for you!

Our Spiritual Exercises

Option A : Notice With Mary Oliver

In her poem [Gratitude](#), Mary Oliver asks herself and then answers eight questions of attention:

*What did you notice?
What did you hear?
When did you admire?
What astonished you?
What would you like to see again?
What was most tender?
What was most wonderful?
What did you think was happening?*

It's a poem that treats the details of our days as a blessing and calls us to do the same. So for this month's exercise, let's accept her invitation:

First, take a few days and just spend some time with the poem.

Here it is for you to read: <https://thevalueofsparrows.com/2013/11/27/poetry-gratitude-by-mary-oliver/>

Here's an arresting video of it being read aloud:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=65&v=1XKg514_K3s

Then use Oliver's questions to **write a version of your own** by giving your own answers to her eight questions.

Here's an elegant example of someone making it their own:

<http://walkingintheholypresence.blogspot.com/2017/04/poem-gratitude-by-mary-oliver.html>

But here's the catch: You've got to decide how to gather the details for your poem. When reading Oliver's poem, you get the feeling she wrote it at the end of a long day outdoors. But it could just as easily have been written at the end of a week, a year, or even a life. So you pick what calls to you. Maybe you take a 2-hour hike and then sit down and write it. Or maybe sit down and write it at the end of an ordinary day of work and family? You might even want to answer the questions as if they are asking about the past year of your life? Or the past few decades.

Think about sharing the poem with a close friend or your life partner before you come to your group.

The point is to let Oliver's eight questions help you remember that our attention is a way, maybe the best way, we say thanks for these precious days we've been given.

Option B: Join the Slow Art Movement

You've probably heard of the [slow food movement](#). But how about the "slow art movement"? It arose from museums realizing that people were "seeing" their art but not really "looking" at it. For instance the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York discovered that people spent an average of only 17 seconds looking at their masterpiece artworks. 17 seconds! So now museums around the country organize special days where guests are asked to sit and view the art for 10, 20 even 30 minutes at a time, and then discuss what happened for them in that time of intensive and intentional looking.

This month you are invited to do the same. What a great excuse to invite a friend to your local museum! And if you don't have a museum near you here's a video with a bunch of options:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3DAESq9BGMc> . Or maybe you want to do it with a piece of art in your house that you say you love but now rarely give your attention to.

Here are a handful of articles and videos to get you centered and inspired for this exercise.

Come to your group ready to share how more than 17 seconds change what you saw.

- The Slow Art Movement: It's More than Meets the Eye
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/in-the-brain-the-beholder/201411/the-slow-art-movement-its-more-meets-the-eye>
- The Art of Slowing Down in a Museum
<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/12/travel/the-art-of-slowng-down-in-a-museum.html>
- Arden Reed: Slow Art in the Age of Instant Everything
https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=16&v=XQxSrJV15ag
- Slow Art Fast City
<https://vimeo.com/67614797>

Option C: Watch it Grow... and Find the Sublime

"One does not need to fast for days and meditate for hours at a time to experience the sense of sublime mystery which constantly envelops us. All one needs to do is notice intelligently, if even for a brief moment, a blossoming tree, a forest flooded with autumn colors, an infant smiling."

- Simon Greenberg,

This exercise is about moving Greenberg's words from a written experience to a real one. As he says, it's a powerful thing to witness the natural world in transition, glimpsing and grasping it as a growing, developing thing. So this month you are invited to observe and soak in that process **by planting a fast-growing indoor plant in your house!**

Grow a plant?! How's that spiritual? Well, of course it depends on the attention you give to it. The exercise is really about *noticing a growing plant*. And if you do that, as Greenberg and the great mystics agree, you will find the sublime.

Here are a bunch of plants that will grow substantially in a month's time.

- <https://indoorgardenook.com/fast-growing-indoor-plants/>
- <http://plantozoid.com/fast-growing-indoor-plants/>

Use these links (or a green thumb friend) to identify the plant you want to grow and observe. Place it in an area of your house that will make it not simply visible but easy for you to sit down with it, like near the chair you sit in for your morning cup of coffee. Spend each day of the month finding your own way to pay attention to its emergence. For instance, it might be just observing it while you have that first coffee of the day. Or maybe you will take one picture a day to document the progression. Some of us might pick up a pencil or paints and make a new portrait of it every week. Whatever you choose, the goal is to let the miracle and mystery of emergence sink in, really sink in.

Here's a link to a few videos that will give you some inspiration: <https://mashable.com/article/watch-plants-grow-subreddit/>

Option D: Make Attention Count

Most of the time, it's a bird or a cricket that causes it. Their sharp chirp jolts us into the awareness that we are surrounded by sound - sounds that fade into the background most of the time but can easily come to the forefront with a bit of attention.

So for this exercise, take a morning or evening, go sit on the porch or stand in the middle of your favorite field or woods, and then try to notice the many sounds that surround you. And here's the catch:

Actually, *count* them!

That's right. Take a pen and paper while you're standing or sitting there and list all the sounds you can detect.

There's power in doing this alone, but it's also wonderful to do with your partner or child.

After your list is as full as you can make it, take another 10 minutes and think about the message of it all. What are those sounds trying to tell you? "You're not alone."? "There's more to life."? "This world is wilder than let yourself imagine."? "Listen up."?

Option E: Notice Them

Let's be honest, we sometimes ignore their need to be noticed. We're talking, of course, about our loved ones. It's never their big needs that we ignore. But on a daily basis, it's all too easy to get...well...busy. Preoccupied. Wrapped up in work. Or worry.

We also know how big of a difference a little attention makes. You see it in your partner's eyes when you take an extra 3 minutes and bring them coffee in bed before you rush out the door with your own mug. Your kid comes home all excited to tell you a story and you have the good sense to put the phone down and look right in their eyes as they spin their yarn. They light up right in front of you.

Yes, we're tired. Yes, life is stressful. Yes, half-hearted attention is not sin. But this month take a week and fight it. Spend a week intentionally finding all the ways you can to give your full attention and full heart to someone near you.

Oh, and be sure to pay attention to the difference it makes for and to them, and the difference it makes to what goes on between you and them...

Option F: Find the Attention Calling to You in Our Recommended Resources

Our recommended resources are full of wisdom about what it means to be a people of and a person of attention. Engaging these resources and finding the one that especially speaks to you is a spiritual practice in and of itself.

So, if none of the above exercises call to you, engage the recommended resources section of this packet as your spiritual exercise for the month.

Set aside some regular time throughout a week to go through them and meditate on them until you find the one that most expands or deepens your understanding of attention. After you've found it, consider printing it out and carrying it with you or pinning it up so you can continue to reflect on it throughout the weeks leading up to your group meeting. Come to your group ready to share where the journey led you.

Your Question

As always, don't treat these questions like "homework" or try to answer every single one. Instead, make time to meditate on the list and then pick the one question that speaks to you most. The goal is to figure out which question is "yours." Which question captures the call of your inner voice? Which one contains "your work"? And what is that question trying to get you to notice or acknowledge? Often it helps to read the list to a friend or loved one and ask them which one they think is the question you need to wrestle with!

1. Who was the first person in your life to offer you their attention, without adding their advice?
2. Who in your life needs you to offer them the gift of attention without advice?
3. Would you be pleased if your gravestone read: "She attended well to a few worthy things"?
4. When you were young, did your family teach you to look away from uncomfortable truths or to call attention to them?
5. Is it time to look upon yourself with a bit more tenderness?
6. Where in your life would it help to say, 'Look what's happening!' rather than 'Look what's happening to me!'?
7. Have you ever given your attention so deeply to something that you suddenly felt one with it?
8. Has looking ever made the world suddenly seem magical to you? Do you miss that magic?
9. Have you become too good at staying focused on the wrongs done to you?
10. Gurus and psychologists alike tell us that we become what we give our attention to. What has more of your attention - and more of yourself - than you want?
11. When was the last time you let your attention linger on beauty? Did you keep your gaze there long enough to feel changed? Or to hear it speak to you?
12. Something has been pulling at your attention lately. Do you know why?
13. Is it time to pay a bit less attention to what you hope your life *will* be?
14. When growing up, what one thing above all others did your family tell you was worthy of attention? Beauty? Duty? Kindness? Honesty? Education? Loyalty? Success? God?
15. What in your life is hungry to be noticed?
16. **What's your question?** Your question may not be listed above. As always, if the above questions don't include what life is asking from you, spend the month listening to your days to hear it. Or maybe the question or call you need to hear is waiting in one of the quotes listed below. Consider looking there!

Companion Pieces

Recommended Resources for Personal Exploration & Reflection

The following resources are not required reading. We will not analyze these pieces in our group. Instead they are here to companion you on your journey this month, get your thinking started and open you to new ways of thinking about what it means to be part of a people of Attention.

Word Roots

Attention stems from the Latin *ad* (toward) and *tendere* (to stretch), meaning “to stretch toward.”

We need to remember that our word tender also comes from *tendere*. So, the tenderness of our attention comes both from our reaching toward something out of love, and also in the way stretching ourselves towards something changes us and makes us more tender.

Wise Words

This is the first, wildest, and wisest thing I know that the soul exists, and that it is built entirely out of attentiveness.

Mary Oliver

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

Looking but not seeing is the hearing but not understanding of the eye.
Mokokoma Mokhonoana

Real attention needs empathy; attention without feeling is just a report.
[Mary Oliver](#)

If we want to support each other’s inner lives, we must remember a simple truth: the human soul does not want to be fixed, it wants simply to be seen and heard.
Parker J. Palmer

To give one’s full attention is to look closely, to linger upon, to delve, to immerse oneself into something that at first seems ‘other’ but soon seems ‘one with.’ To give attention, in the end, is to be grasped.

[David Seaburn](#)

There are all different kinds of voices calling you to all different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than of society, say, or the super-ego, or self-interest. By and large a good rule for finding out is this. The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done. The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.

Frederick Buechner

What you see you become.

Deepak Chopra

Your attention is like a combination spotlight and vacuum cleaner: It highlights what it lands on and then sucks it into your brain—for better or worse.

[Dr. Rick Hanson](#)

If you take a deep breath and look around, 'Look what's happening to me!' can become 'Look what's happening!' And what's happening? The incredible drama of life is happening. And we're in it!
Sylvia Boorstein

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](#)

Whenever you find tears in your eyes, especially unexpected tears, it is well to pay the closest attention. They are not only telling you something about the secret of who you are, but more often than not, God is speaking to you through them of the mystery of where you have come from and is summoning you to where, if your soul is to be saved, you should go next.

Frederick Buechner

I've always thought that you don't love a country by turning a blind eye to its crimes and to a problem. The way that you love a country is by seeing everything that it's done wrong, all of its mistakes, and still thinking that it's beautiful and that it's worthy.

Junot Diaz

Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.

James Baldwin

There is no more time for pretending that everything can be all right without your care, without your attention.

[Rev. Theresa I. Soto](#)

Three things cannot be long hidden: the sun, the moon, and the truth.

attributed to the Buddha

Imagine how our lives might be if everyone had even a bit more of the wisdom that comes from seeing clearly. Suppose people everywhere, simultaneously, stopped what they were doing and paid attention for only as long as it took to recognize their shared humanity. Surely the heartbreak of the world's pain, visible to all, would convert everyone to kindness.

Sylvia Boorstein

Barbara Brown Taylor recommends that from time to time we take off our clothes, look at ourselves in the mirror, and tell ourselves with as much tenderness as we can, “Here I am...this is my soul’s address.” To face ourselves naked in the mirror with some measure of gentleness, much less reverence, is a hard assignment,... It is deeply spiritual work to put down our self-loathing... It is deeply spiritual work to learn to treat ourselves with compassion; to learn to see ourselves, if only in moments, the same way we look at something or someone we find beautiful: a newborn baby, the ocean, a sunset...

[Rev. Elea Kemler](#)

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.

Thomas Merton

Every time that we really concentrate our attention, we destroy the evil in ourselves. If we concentrate this intention, a quarter of an hour of attention is better than a great many good works.

Simone Weil

I once had a garden filled with flowers that grew only on dark thoughts but they need constant attention & one day I decided I had better things to do.

[StoryPeople](#)

Noticing

Janisse Ray

Full poem at <https://religiousnaturalism.org/poetry-of-janisse-ray/>

I would not have seen the web
a spider strung between us and sky
except the sun crested the cliff...
So much depends on where one looks...
Too often the little voices
that say “See!” and “There!” are silent...

Once there was a man who filmed his vacation...
With a flick of a switch, there it would be. But he
would not be in it. He would never be in it.

[Wendell Berry](#)

I have noticed that beliefs work like blinders on a racehorse. They keep you focused in a specific direction. This can be great as long as you have a destination in mind. But what good are blinders when you are grazing in a beautiful meadow on a crisp, clear spring day? I wore my blinders so long I forgot I had them on!

Melody Anderson

I have always seen it as a kind of parental duty to show my own children beautiful stuff, and in so doing reveal to them an alternate world

[Nick Cave](#)

He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He's not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person.

Arthur Miller

Attention is the beginning of devotion.

[Mary Oliver](#)

Poet Mary Oliver said, "Attention is the beginning of devotion." You cannot love something you do not (really) see.

[Ben Sternke](#)

Forget about enlightenment.
Sit down wherever you are
And listen to the wind singing in your veins.
Feel the love, the longing, the fear in your bones.
Open your heart to who you are, right now,
Not who you would like to be,
Not the saint you are striving to become,
But the being right here before you, inside you,
around you.

All of you is holy.

You are already more and less
Than whatever you can know.

Breathe out,
Touch in,
Let go.

John Welwood

What is this life if, full of care
We have no time to stand and stare.

[William Henry Davies](#)

The world is full of magic things, waiting for our
senses to grow sharper.

W.B. Yeats

Songs

Check out all of our "Attention Songs" on our November Soul Matters Spotify playlist. Click [here](#) to check them out! You can also explore the playlists from other months [here](#).

Videos

Say Her Name

FreeQuency

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=64ZQu_RhTTg

Can Art Amend our History (and Attention)? - TED Talk

Titus Kaphar

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DDaldVHUedI>

"What I'm trying to do, what I'm trying to show you, is how to shift your gaze just slightly, just momentarily..."

More on Kaphar:

Article: <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/titus-kaphar-erasure-art-history-1497391>

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-3SRX2vTwYo>

Talk by Kaphar:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1364&v=6RDtFncTPVk

More on his art: <https://www.tituskaphar.com/>

This is Water

David Foster Wallace

<https://dotsub.com/view/6b8cc93f-3b53-486b-a1ce-025ffe6c9c52>

On attention and the work of choosing. "If you really learn how to think and how to pay attention, then you will know there are options. You get to decide how you get to see it! That is real freedom. The alternative is unconsciousness."

The Man with the Violin... That No One Paid Attention To

The story of a famous violinist playing in the subway as a street performer. Only 7 people pause out of 1,097.

About the experiment:

<https://www.liveabout.com/a-violinist-in-the-metro-3299658>

The video of the event:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9gti4JFwP_o

Another moment of paying attention to beauty in the subway:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x--yddOolRQ>

The Secret Powers of Time - RSA Animate

Philip Zimbardo, social psychologist

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A3oliH7BLmg&list=PL39BF9545D740ECFF&index=16>

How our perspectives about time shape our attention - and lives - for better and worse.

Where Joy Hides and How to Find It? - TED Talk

Ingrid Fetell Lee

https://www.ted.com/talks/ingrid_fetell_lee_where_joy_hides_and_how_to_find_it?language=en

A call to pay attention to joy as distinct from happiness. "It was like I had a pair of rose-colored glasses, and now that I knew what to look for, I was seeing it everywhere. It was like these little moments of joy were hidden in plain sight..."

A little fun with how James Taylor's attention has expanded...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Un-FO8iXCrA>

Podcasts

Confronting Racism (with closer attention)

Bringing attention to the too often unnoticed consequences of racism, from the everyday to the systemic

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/confronting-racism/id523121474?i=1000433704517>

Tunnel Vision - The Hidden Brain

<https://www.npr.org/2019/08/05/748207152/you-2-0-tunnel-vision>

On the impact scarcity has on our attention, and our health

Articles

Understanding that you, too, are racist (even if you're one of the "good ones")

The call to pay attention to what truly needs done
Shay Stewart-Bouley

Full article [HERE](#)

"For the liberal, white progressive or the white moderates as Martin Luther King Jr. referred to them in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," the goal has almost never been about achieving the type of racial equity that acknowledges that America's prosperity was bought and paid for with the land, blood, bodies and souls of Black and Indigenous people of color (BIPOC) and that continued oppression and marginalization of both groups has been a mainstay of maintaining the America status quo. Nor has the goal or effort been to really sit with that reality and look at what is truly necessary to right 400-plus years of such immense wrong..."

Restoration in the Attention Economy

Jenny Xie

Full article at <https://poets.org/text/restoration-attention-economy-reading-c-d-wrights-shallcross>

Our attention determines the direction toward which we stretch our minds, yet all too often, exercising our attentional power feels less like intentional movement toward some select object of contemplation and more like the passive bracing for an onslaught of sensory input and competing stimuli... It comes as little surprise... when one considers the fact that our attention's capture and commodification fuels a multibillion-dollar industry....

Books

The Fifteen Books School Should Have Had Us Pay Attention to But Didn't

<https://www.bustle.com/p/15-history-books-you-didnt-get-assigned-in-school-but-definitely-need-to-read-76540>

Buddha's Brain: The Practical Neuroscience of Happiness, Love, and Wisdom

[Rick Hanson](#)

Change your attention to change your brain to change your joy!

Movies

When They See Us

<https://www.netflix.com/title/80200549>

Article on the film: ['When They See Us' Makes Sure We Really See The Central Park Five](#)

Groundhog Day

<https://www.netflix.com/title/563104>

This classic calls us all to pay attention to the preciousness of our days, and not let us get stuck in the trap of a broken record life. Is it time to take a closer look at the patterns you're stuck in?

Review and

interview: <https://onbeing.org/programs/groundhog-day-naomi-alderman/>

Boyhood

<https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/boyhood>

This highly-acclaimed and highly original film asks much of our attention, not only paying attention to the nuances and slow unfolding of a life, but also the singular, unique and often unnoticed [thread](#) that runs through all of our lives.

Transamerica

<https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/transamerica>

Bringing affirming attention to the trans experience.

Get daily inspiration
on the monthly theme by liking our
Soul Matters Facebook inspiration Page:
<https://www.facebook.com/soulmatterssharingcircle/>

Find musical inspiration
on each theme by following our monthly
Spotify Lists:
<https://www.soulmatterssharingcircle.com/spotify-lists.html>

Find support for bringing the
monthly themes home and into your family life with
Soulful Home: A Guide for Families:
<https://www.soulmatterssharingcircle.com/soulful-home.html>

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