

Paying Attention
December 4, 2022

While driving to Wellesley this morning from CT, heading towards Providence, I became distracted in thought.
Not sure what I was thinking about.
Suddenly I was in Attleboro, MA
How did I get here? How did this happen?

I would image many of you know that feeling of losing track, spacing out, not paying attention.

Without turning around, with a show of hands, how many of you know what that banner hanging from the choir loft says or what its design is.

We live about a 5–10-minute walk from the beach.
One of my most favorite drives when I'm coming home from the gym or shopping is to drive along Pequot Ave where there are beaches along the water.
I love to see how the sun is shining on the water. Or how the clouds change the color of the water from blue to a greyish color.
Often there is a ferry on its way out or its way in.
If I'm lucky, I'll see a submarine going out to sea – built by Electric Boat General Dynamics, which is right across the harbor in Groton.

I tend to be a very visual person. I pay attention to the sights around me.
I can tell you how many shrubs line the neighbor's driveway, or how many trash cans go out across the street at our neighbor's house on Fridays.
I notice the brilliant red leaves this fall on the maple tree on the corner, or the little park bench someone just put up under a tree in their yard.

What I'm not so good at is paying attention to sound. The sound of the water, the sound of the wind, or the sound of those crimson red leaves rustling in the wind. And yes, listening for silence.

Just think about it – from our earliest lives we are told to “Pay Attention!” Our parents, our teachers, even our friend insist on having our attention. “Listen to me.” “Look at me when I'm speaking to you.” “Look out – look both ways

before crossing the street!" We grow up with the expectation that others will demand our attention, and we often try hard to give it.

The irony of all of this is that in doing so, we are offering our attention outwardly, taking attention away from our own still centers. We spend it. We are rarely taught to listen to ourselves, our own deepest selves, or listen to the moments of wonder and silence around us.

One of my most favorite Psalms is Psalm 46 from the Hebrew Scriptures: "Be still" wrote the psalmist. "Be still and know that I am God."

Rev Angela Herrera writes:

***"Beneath the hustle and bustle
Beneath the stream of thought that clambers and chatters
Over the landscape of our interior world,
Beneath our habits of momentum and stirring,
There is a stillness, deep and peaceful,
The place where creation begins.
Who lives there?"***

Certainly, we have many names for who or what lies beneath our surface, beneath the chaos and the distractions. The Holy. Spirit of Live, Spirit of Love. The Eternal Presence, God. Perhaps we call it as truth, wholeness, or our deepest selves, calling out to us.

One of the weeklong workshops I attended last summer on Star Island was on "Listening and Wonder." We were encouraged to find a "sitting spot" somewhere on the island – somewhere quiet and away from commotion and spend 20 minutes each day sitting in silence. And I can tell you – this was not an easy task for me! But as the days went on, I found myself able to settle in on my "sitting spot" close my eyes and listen. One of the tasks was to cup your hands behind your ears and listen, then cup your hands in front of your ears and listen.

I was amazed at the difference in sound – and silence – each of these positions offered. And after a bit, I was able to hear the deep silence of my own being singing and dancing with the cacophony of sound in the external world. The birds, the wind, the water. Even the rhythmic beating pulsing of my heart in my ears. Now truth be told, I AM NOT a good mediator...I find it painful to sit

in silence without my thoughts pinging all over the place. But this exercise on Star Island allowed me to be fully present with my own silence yet also be present to the wonder around me.

So, one of the things I have taken to do recently is to pull over, get out of my car, and sit on the seawall in front of the beach. Sometimes I close my eyes and listen, sometimes I just try to take in the wonder and beauty and grace around me. Our natural world is filled with spectacular wonder, and going even deeper, spectacular grace. Ultimately I am always interrupted by a dog barking or a truck going by or a car horn...but for those few seconds I experience wonder.

After witnessing a 4-story decent of a mockingbird, Annie Dillard in her book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* writes *"The fact of his free fall was like the old philosophical conundrum about the tree that falls in the forest. The answer must be, I think, that beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there."*

In our world around us, in our personal lives, in the natural world or in our interactions with each other, beauty and grace and wonder are there, whether or not we will them or sense them. The least we can do is to try to be there. You see, in trying to be there, we are taking on the holy task of attending and placing ourselves in the presence of beauty and grace and wonder. And simply witnessing.

I would say that most of us yearn to witness beauty, and mystery and wonder. To bear witness. To be there. To be present.

What Dillard doesn't point out in that quote above is that sometimes we are called to witness hardship, and suffering, and pain. We often think of wonder as something that surprises us, that brings us joy and delight. But sometimes the things we witness and wonder about bring quite the opposite. Being present when a loved one takes their last breath, witnessing violence and injustice in our communities, the simple pain we are capable of causing each other.

Yet the quality of attention that is required to witness pain and suffering is the same quality of attention required to witness wondrous beauty. I would say that openness is at the heart of attentiveness. Openness to accept what the

world has to offer us for what it is. Having our hearts broken open when what we witness is painful and tragic and wrong – and having our hearts mended and made whole when what we witness is beautiful and inspiring and wonderful.

When we allow ourselves to wonder, we are also allowing ourselves to stay open and attentive no matter what life brings - and especially in those moments of grace when the good just might show up unannounced. When we watch a seagull nosedive, or when we are delighted by what humanity is capable of.

In our lives, we are constantly presented with moments when beauty and grace arrive but the question is will we try to be there. Can we be present in the moment to witness the wonder? Can we be silent in our sitting spots to hear the magnificent songs of the silent?

Angela Herrera writes: ***“The holy waits in your world, too. Maybe today it will find you in a listening posture and will whisper to you.”***

May our lives be filled with beauty and grace and wonder. And may we hear the callings of our most deepest selves.

“Be still and know that I am...”

May it be so.