

On Paying Attention

Rev. Martha Hodges

UUSS

June 25, 2017

Sometimes a few words, a phrase, a sentence, a verse, will stir something in you. You don't know quite why. The source may be highly improbable... Not anywhere you would think of looking for words that inspire, or that leave their mark on your memory. But there they are. They find purchase in your mind and in your heart. A seed is planted. That seed puts down roots. The words become a part of you. If you ask yourself why, what is the source of their power, you may learn something about yourself and your deepest yearnings.

This happens to me fairly often. Maybe to you, too. Maybe you live with the words of a favorite book you insisted on having read to you over and over until you knew it by heart. Or lines from a movie have claimed some permanent place in your memory, even if the movie wasn't a very good one. Song lyrics, lines from a poem, a letter from back in the days before emails and tweets and instant messaging. Words that come to you from out of the blue, unexpected, unlooked for and indelible.

Now, I hesitate to tell you this because I don't want you to get the wrong idea. I'm not a Bible person. Not a student of the Bible, or a lover of the Bible. I was raised Unitarian Universalist. When teachers and other grownups talked about the Bible, I understood that there was a club they belonged to that did not include me. And I was raised not just UU, but a Humanist UU, and have remained one. So when I tell you that such indelible words came to me from the Bible, bear that in mind, and bear with me.

The words are found in Deuteronomy, one of the books of Moses in the Hebrew Bible, the one with all the laws, rules and regulations. Not really where you would expect to find words that stir the soul. Versions of these words are found in the New Testament as well, in Mark, Matthew, and Luke. They are often referred to as the Great Commandment. Here they are:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And the second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

So what was I, a good atheist, a rationalist, a non-believer, to make of this? Why did these words give me goose bumps? Why did these words, especially the first part, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind,” why did these words speak to me? I didn't speak the language of belief. So what did these words mean to me in my deepest heart of hearts?

They spoke to me of passion and commitment. A kind of passion and commitment that I had never experienced and didn't expect to experience. Might not really want to experience, for that matter. And yet... To receive such a clear and powerful call... To find an object worthy of total devotion, worth giving your entire being to, worth giving your very life to... An object infinite, unimaginable. No mere living being could call forth such love, the love of all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind. Imagine. I might not expect to experience such a love, but I did want to understand it, to imagine it, to catch a glimpse of whatever it was that was capable of

exerting such a call, such a demanding call on the totality of one's existence and very spirit. A life-altering call.

It was another set of unforgettable words that eventually allowed me to understand and make some peace with that powerful Biblical verse. Words to be found in our very own hymnal, as a matter of fact.ⁱ They are the words of a Unitarian minister, another Humanist, as it happens, but one that embraced a poetic, naturalistic understanding of the world, not the dry rationalistic Humanism of my upbringing. His name was Kenneth L. Patton. The words that touch me so deeply begin like this: "Let us worship with our eyes and ears and fingertips. Let us love the world through heart and mind and body..." Does that sound familiar? They go on, "Let us worship with the opening of all the windows of our beings, with the full outreaching of our spirits. Life comes with singing and laughter, with tears and confiding, with a rising wave too great to be held in the mind and heart and body, to those who have fallen in love with life. Let us worship, and let us learn to love."

To fall in love with life! What an idea! What would that be like? What would that feel like? And how could I do that? Because that was what I wanted. That's what my spirit and my religion were calling me to do. At last, I had found the words that expressed that deepest yearning. That passion to give away my self to something worthy. To fall in love with life.

To love God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind... To fall in love with life. Two ways to say the same thing, or so it seems to me, as a UU Humanist. I had no interest in a more orthodox imagining of God; the idea of God as a being that looked and felt and thought and talked like us seemed preposterous. But All That Is? The Ground of Being? Source of All, Spirit of Life, Infinite, Creative Good? Life itself? That was another story. That force, that mystery, was worthy of being loved with all one's heart, soul and mind. That was what I wanted! To be called by Life, to serve Life, to fall in love with that kind of all-encompassing reality, to fall in love with Life? This is what I still want. But it isn't easy.

How do you go about falling in love? You can't will yourself to fall in love, but you can will yourself to stay open to the possibility. You can train yourself to stay awake, look for signs of wonder. You can learn to notice things, notice that what at first appears to be ordinary, is at the same time extraordinary, is complex and mysterious and beautiful in ways that your mind and senses, powerful as they are, are far too puny to fully grasp. You can, in the words of the poet Mary Oliver, "Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it."ⁱⁱ This, she says, is how we should live. Falling in love certainly begins with paying attention. And it is how we can begin to live religiously.

Now, there are many ways to live religiously, to live with passion. A life of service, a life of learning, a life of sustained spiritual practice, a life of fearless truth-telling or a life of fearless kindness, a life freely given to a cause, to justice, to love, to creativity.... The possibilities are as numerous as human interests and gifts. As long as your actions are the outer expression of your inner reality, a reflection of your deepest beliefs and commitments, the forms of religious practice, of religious living, are limitless ... Not all ways are possible for all of us. Our choices are dictated by our natures, gifts, influences and environments, though we may all certainly have moments of courage, insight, or altruism, no matter what kind of lives we live.

But a life of attention, or of mindfulness as it is often called, is possible for even the ordinarily gifted among us. It is accessible to all. It can be self-taught and requires no special genius or talent. And it has tremendous rewards.

Delight is not the least of these. Attention is the antidote to boredom. More than any extreme adventure, simply opening your eyes and ears and senses to the textures, colors and flavors of life will shake you out of a well-practiced and jaded cynicism. Surprise or, as Mary Oliver says, astonishment, is the inevitable response to the world closely observed. A world studied with an open mind, a mind that refuses to force perceptions into the same tired old categories of positive and negative, pleasant or objectionable, worthwhile or trivial.

Attended to with care, without these prejudices, these preconceived categories, how can the world do any less than astonish us? It's natural to seek and find patterns, repetitions, to dismiss that which challenges our expectations. To pay attention to and grant greater importance to the forest than to the trees. This is, after all, how we make sense of our perceptions and of our world. We ignore or distort what doesn't fit into our preconceptions in order to make everything fit. The young child is astonished by everything precisely because she doesn't possess these ready-made categories of thought and perception. A four year old can say, as my nephew did some forty years ago, "That's a cute little pimple." And who's to say it wasn't cute? Delight and wonder make the world new again. Appreciation makes us happy.

Appreciation and attention ground us in a world changing from one day to the next, changing so fast and drastically that we can't keep up. Attention grounds us. In this culture that values multitasking, instant messages, the flashing words and images of the various screens that dominate our lives. Attention calls us to slow down, to notice and reflect. We can train our attention, beginning by slowing down. Attention takes time. Sit for a while with a work of art, a photograph, a song, a stone, a cat. Don't rush it. Writing, drawing, photographing or simply recreating in memory all narrow and sharpen our focus.

Connection is another of the rewards of paying attention. Pay attention to the details, and you will learn a great deal about that tree, that work of art, that human being. That information, processed through an open mind, will lead to understanding. And what we understand, we view with compassion and fellow-feeling. We create connections with the world around us, connections of understanding and care, whether these are connections with the imperiled earth, with beauty, with suffering, with all that is. Connections with Life. In short, we learn to love.

When we are in love, we are transformed, as is the object of our love. Our perceptions are sharper. We see the familiar with new eyes. New priorities demand a new viewpoint, and what was once all-important now seems trivial. Being with the beloved is what feels real. The rest is mere fodder, fuel to feed this new and consuming love.

And when the beloved is Life itself, what would that be like? When we are in love with life, we make our own small lives deeper and richer. We perceive the world more sharply, with greater candor and compassion, and with less judgment. When we give our full attention to another human being, or to any living creature, we change ourselves and we change the one receiving our gift of attention. We declare that the other is worthy of this gift. That they matter. And this changes the world.

By attending, we create and reinforce those connections that are the interdependent web of being. Those strands that are made of mutual care and responsibility, appreciation and gratitude, are sacred. They are spun between us by the life-giving power of attention.

Most of all, when we pay attention, we create a life worth living, a life worth loving. A life of obliviousness, of self-absorption, is a life un-lived and unloved. We don't want to miss it, this life that is, as far as most of us know, the only life we get. Don't miss it. Don't go back to sleep. Even if we can stay fully awake, fully aware for only brief moments. Because we can't sustain such intensity of focus. There is too much to see, too much to hear, too much to understand, too much to feel. We aren't able to process it all. We're not made that way. The light of our full attention is too bright. We need the shadows, the inwardness, the sleep, as well.

But lest we live too much in the shadows of inattention, we can train ourselves to see, to use all our senses, to allow our perceptions to come to consciousness.

This is one reason for meditation. Meditation teaches us to pay attention, to sharpen our focus, as does prayer.

We can learn to listen to others, to listen deeply to music, to the sounds around us, and to other human beings.

We can learn to look up when we walk, to tear our gaze away from the sidewalk or the path, to see the sky and all that lies in between.

And when the object of our attention is the un-beautiful, the drab, the seemingly soulless? What then? How do we love a ravaged city street, a site of destruction? How do we love someone who is thoughtless, cruel, arrogant and belligerent? How do we love life when life seems devoid of color, joy and hope? When we are struggling with loss, anxiety, illness, pain or depression?

That's the real test, isn't it? It's easy to love life when the weather is balmy, your rent is paid up, your children are healthy and a vacation is on your calendar.

This is the story of Job, isn't it? Satan says to God, "You think your man Job loves you? Sure he loves you now, when he has a thriving family, wealth and love and health. Would he love you so much if he lost it all?" And God, to his great discredit, in my opinion, takes him up on the bet. Will Job love God when his children die, when his livelihood fails, when, god forbid, he is covered in boils?

Not so easy to love God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind under those circumstances. Not so easy to love Life.

Not so easy to love the desert. Love is not so easy in the storm.

This is when paying attention may save us. When paying attention is not about enriching your life, but about saving it. Paying attention may be the way back out of the desert at such times.

Attention transports you beyond current circumstances... and beyond yourself. It puts a different frame around experience. It reminds you that your inner life is not the sole reality. It

reawakens curiosity when indifference has dulled your interest in life. It forces you out of repetitive and fruitless mental ruts, forces you to re-engage with your surroundings. To re-engage with life. It may even rekindle delight and astonishment, even in the worst of situations. Love provides the comfort of an embrace to rest in when we are battered by circumstances.

But how to explain this: The very life that has battered us is the life we are trying to love, to turn back to for renewed energy, hope and joy. It sounds like the recipe for an abusive relationship.

I believe the answer is that my life, your life... These are the forms that Life takes – Life with a capital “L”, but they are not all of Life. God-believers know God by reducing the Divine to manageable, knowable size, by reducing it to something that can be understood in human terms. Too often, that human-sized God is mistaken for the Unknowable, when in fact, the God of our human religions is merely a stand-in for a greater reality.

In the same way, we seek to know and understand Life, All That Is, through our personal experience of life, but that is never the whole picture. We see just a corner of that bigger picture. A precious corner, a confounding corner... More than enough to occupy our little hearts and minds, but a corner nonetheless.

The process philosopher Charles Hartshorne described it this way. Sitting on a hilltop in wartime France, he wondered how the world could be so lovely, so green, how the children below could be so full of laughter and joy, when the world was at war and he himself was struggling with despair. He wrote: “I am a tiny fragment of human life. The rest of it is not all unfortunate or wretched...” Asking himself if his life was at that moment good and beautiful, he might have to say, no. But this was not the same as asking if life was good and beautiful. He wrote, “[T]here is some minimal good, beauty in all life, including my own... [W]hat matters... is the life of the Whole.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The life of the Whole... The living interdependent web of being... That is what matters. Paying attention to its smallest manifestation, its details may, paradoxically, remind us that we are not the only living creatures, and that our pain is not the only story. Attention may remind us that we see only a fragment. It may bring us back to hope, to gratitude, and to wonder.

Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it. The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you. Don't go back to sleep. The door is round and open.^{iv} Pass through it and prepare your heart to be astonished.

ⁱ Responsive Reading #437 in *Singing the Living Tradition* Boston: UUA, 1993

ⁱⁱ Oliver, Mary. “Sometimes”

ⁱⁱⁱ Hartshorne, Charles. *The Dark and the Light: A Philosopher Reflects on His Fortunate Career* Albany: SUNY Pr., 1993, p. 150

^{iv} *Poems of Rumi*. Coleman Barks, tr. (Threshold Society) <https://sufism.org/origins/rumi/rumi-excerpts/poems-of-rumi-tr-by-coleman-barks-published-by-threshold-books-2>