

Paying Attention as an Act of Love and Compassion

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The day I started this sermon, I was in a procrastinating mood so I drove to a Starbucks to hang out and read first. After all, nothing gets a sermon started like reading a book about a completely different topic. It was a Saturday morning and the place was jammed, so I had a long wait for my latte. As I waited, I noticed that one of the baristas seemed particularly overwhelmed. I watched her for a few minutes and saw her take a quick, stressed, gulp of air between making drinks when she thought no one was watching. Her shoulders were shaking. A flash of sadness went through me – mostly for the barista and her discomfort but also for the uncountable number of times I had waited for a latte, absorbed in my own thoughts, paying no attention to anyone else. It just so happened that morning that I was not absorbed in my own thoughts and was paying attention, and so I caught a brief but powerful moment of vulnerability on someone else's part. And for that moment, I wasn't the center of attention in my own mind. A young woman was, a woman who was working very hard and seemed exhausted at ten in the morning, and whose life I found myself wondering about. Did she have kids? Was she coming off the night shift of another job? Did she make decent money at this job? How late would she be working? I wondered and wondered. And when I finally sat down with my latte and my book and started paying attention to my own agenda again, I felt just the smallest sense of loss, as though I had barely begun to crack open a door before closing it abruptly.

Sometimes, we pay attention easily and joyfully. We pay attention to our friends, to our loved ones, to our pets. We pay attention to our favorite song, to a compelling book or, in my case for the past year, to the Great British Baking Show. We pay attention to our tasks at work, to our creative projects, to buying the dessert we know our sweetie loves the best.

But some things are harder to pay attention to than others. And maybe this is an especially challenging time to pay attention, given how politically, culturally, socially, and environmentally frightening the world can be. I don't know about you but I find it immensely tempting to distract myself, to sit down with that book and that latte and shut out my grief, terror, and rage at the state of things. I confess that playing games on my iPhone is easier than focusing on people who are hurting – people I know and people I don't. Engaging with the pain of others is, simply, painful. And these days when I try to keep up with the news, I tend to skim over all the hard stuff, the stories about politics and pipelines, corruption and conceit, fires and floods, alternative facts and actual violence. It's hard to pay attention when doing so makes us miserable.

But, as a character says in the play *Death of a Salesman*, attention must be paid. Our lives can be enriched when we pay attention and then act on what we notice – not just about the lovely things but about the tough things as well. And if we are really going to transform our world, save the environment, and bring about societies in which every last person is actually treated with the dignity and worth that is their birthright, that will take some disciplined, clear-eyed, deep-breath attention paying. So that is what we will think about together today: the idea of paying attention as a moral practice of compassion and love. I'll say a bit about the four levels at which our attention-paying can be nurturing, healing, and useful: paying attention to ourselves, to those we know, to the society in which we live, and to the natural world around us. With Thanksgiving

close at hand, I will say a bit about paying attention as an occasion of thanksgiving, drawing on two wonderful Peter Mayer songs. I'll close with an attention-paying exercise.

We already do a lot of paying attention in our lives, because we want to and because we have to. That kind of paying attention may come naturally to us. It may be pleasurable or simply necessary. But paying attention can also be a practice, something we do with intention and focus and with the goal of getting better at it over time even if it takes a lot of work. In this sense practicing attention-paying is like practicing the piano. It's not always fun, but if we are diligent and put in our time, our abilities improve. Or consider baking, since I mentioned the Great British Baking Show earlier. The best bakers on that show have put years into learning how to make bread, cakes, cookies, and other delicious things. They have gotten into the competition tent by practicing, even if they don't use that term. Similarly, we can practice paying attention and thereby get better at it. For me, that comes down to three things: getting out of my own head, expending the necessary energy, and being willing to focus on situations or truths that make me uncomfortable. Since all three of these things are hard for me, I need to practice them a lot.

Done well, paying attention can also be a profoundly moral practice, which is why I'm talking about it today. There are at least two senses in which we can think about paying attention as moral. First, the Principles invite us to be in right relationship with ourselves, others, and the world around us, and relationships are built on paying attention. And while the Sources don't say this in so many words, the best religious and humanist and activist traditions from which we draw are all based on paying attention – to the transcendent mystery, to social injustice, to the human capacity for wisdom, to the earth itself.

There's another sense in which paying attention can be a moral practice, which has to do with the fact that sometimes we pay attention even when doing so makes us uncomfortable, because we know that it is the right thing to do in the circumstance. For me, that means sitting in silent meditation for a few minutes every day even when my mind is racing. It means being mindful about how life is treating the people I love even when they are hurting and their pain brings me pain. It means learning as much as I can about white supremacy and sharing what I learn with people in my life, even when both the learning and the sharing are awkward and unpleasant. And it means trying to understand the environmental consequences of my diet and my car use even if I am not quite ready to change either my diet or my car use.

So, if we want to get better at paying attention, how do we go about it? What enables us to pay attention to the hard stuff as well as the fun stuff? Or, put differently, what traits or virtues should we cultivate in ourselves to help with our practice of attention-paying? There might be many good answers to that question, but today I'll touch on compassion and love.

Compassion, at its simplest, is the sense of connection that enables us to pay attention to others. It is the experience of feeling what someone else feels. Compassion drives our desire to know someone else's story, and that desire helps us pay better attention to them. Lacking compassion, we are likely to struggle to focus on others. That morning at Starbucks, I didn't just notice a distressed worker, I had a flash of compassion for her. Her suffering touched me. I wondered who she was, and what it would in fact be like to be her for a day. In the language of my song, I wanted to walk a mile in her shoes.

Interestingly, the Hebrew word for compassion is related to the word for womb. Compassion can be thought of as wombishness, as the connection we have to someone else that is comparable to the empathy a mother has for her child. When Jesus says to be compassionate as God is compassionate, we should be envisioning God as a loving mom, not a stern, distant, judgmental father. But there's a way of thinking about compassion that works for absolutely everyone regardless of their biology and gender identity, which is the idea that compassion is a feeling of connection to someone else that is so strong it literally hits us in the guts. If you've ever seen someone suffering and felt your stomach clench, that's compassion at work. Fortunately, compassion can also make us gutsy, brave enough to advocate for someone else even when doing so is not easy. Minus compassion, paying attention is hard work. With compassion in place, we find ourselves invited to pay attention and sometimes even grateful for the opportunity.

What does it mean to think about paying attention as an act of love? Many years ago, psychologist and author Scott Peck provided a definition of love in his book *The Road Less Traveled*. Peck understood love to be “[the] will to extend one’s self for the purposes of nurturing one’s own or another’s spiritual growth.” I like this definition but I think it needs some serious expansion. We are more than spiritual beings, and we are accountable to more than just ourselves and the specific people with whom we interact. Moreover, Peck defines love as the will to extend oneself but does not say anything in his definition about the actual work we do when we extend ourselves to support human well-being, spiritual or otherwise.

I would therefore modify Scott Peck’s language and define the active component of love as “the work we do to flourish and to support others in their flourishing.” Love includes self-love, the love of particular others, the love of humanity more generally, and the love of our fragile planet. And if love is the work we do in service of human and planetary well-being, attention is an important part of love. We can’t care for someone if we don’t care about them, and we can’t really care about them if we don’t understand them to at least some degree. And, of course, we can’t understand someone without paying attention to them. If compassion is, in part, the impulse to pay attention, then love is the work of paying attention.

There is also another key component of love that Peck does not address directly, which is the idea of love as relationship itself. Self-love, for example, includes the work I do to take care of myself but it’s also a way to describe the sense of connectedness I feel to myself and my well-being. Loving another person involves a sense of communion with them, that place where each of our individual selves meet and interact. Our love of humanity or of nature is similarly rooted in a sense of interdependence. I think of love as the experience of being part of something bigger than my own agenda, as what is like to be confronted with someone else’s reality, needs, gifts, limitations, and pain, and to welcome that person into my heart. In that sense, love is not just the actions we take to support flourishing, it is a feeling and an experience – of mutuality, of vulnerability, of openness to the other even when that other is my own, long-repressed pain. Love in this sense doesn’t demand that we pay attention; it invites us to pay attention. Sometimes it even entices us to do so. Two decades ago, it was not a burden to figure out what subway train Phoebe was going to be on and to surprise her on the platform at my stop. Love made that exercise of paying attention very enjoyable indeed.

So, paying attention is a good thing. Done well, it is a moral practice of love and compassion. But beyond that, paying attention is literally life-saving. When we pay attention to ourselves, those around us, our society, and our planet, we can change the world. We can heal broken hearts, save people from dying, and slow down the disaster of global climate change. And paying attention can save our lives more gently by deepening them and making them more joyful.

If I had not paid attention to my painful gut in 2018, my diseased gall bladder might have gotten infected and become dangerous before it got taken out.

If I had not paid attention to that strange pain in my right side a few years ago, we might not have caught the liver cancer in time and I might not be here today.

On a more positive note, I write songs like “A Mile in Your Shoes” and liberal religious hymns today because, at some point a couple of decades ago, I noticed that I wrote bad romantic love songs and mediocre political activism songs but actually pretty decent songs about spiritual yearnings, ethics, and the ways in which social justice and liberal religion come together. At that point, I did not know anyone who wrote liberal religious songs and did not know it was something one could do. But I paid attention to the kind of songwriting that made me happy and grateful, and this experience of paying attention has enriched my life and led me to write music that enriches other peoples’ lives.

If my stepmother had not paid attention to my father’s experiences of discomfort and breathlessness when exerting himself a few weeks back, dad would almost certainly have had a massive heart attack. Instead, he is now recovering from quadruple-bypass surgery and doing wonderfully well.

And if my terrific wife Phoebe had not known to bring me a non-fat decaf latte, also known as a “Why Bother?” back in 1997 or so, we would not have passed the 22-year mark as a couple this past October.

A few weeks ago, I visited the National Museum of African American History and Culture. Plenty of white people don’t know much about the history and present reality of anti-Black racism in the U.S., but the ones who have gone to that museum and paid attention know more now than they did before their visit. I have to trust that as more white people take the initiative in learning about and working against racism, people of color will benefit in concrete ways, facing less discrimination and less violence over time. And I have to trust that when the lives of people of color are better, all of our lives are better.

One concrete way that Unitarian Universalist congregations can pay attention to white supremacy and be accountable to working against it is to adopt the 8th Principle as recommended by the Black Lives of UU Organizing Collective. For those who have not encountered the 8th Principle yet, it reads as follows: “We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote: journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.” If High Plains is not currently considering adopting this principle, I encourage you to do so.

Since my experience with the barista in Starbucks a couple of months ago, I have also noticed that I am curious about what it is like to work a crappy service job these days. That experience led me to start chatting with some other Starbucks baristas while waiting for my latte, and yes, I do drink enough Starbucks lattes to know several baristas by name. What I've learned is mostly disheartening and has convinced me that the way our society practices capitalism more generally at this point in time is inhumane and immoral. I've read Marx for decades, so it is not as though I did not know this before. My FaceBook feed has been full of essays by progressive economists and sociologists for years. But seeing one person in pain, in one tiny moment that almost did not happen, has somehow caught me in the gut in ways that whole forests' worth of books never quite managed. So far, all I have done about this is try to learn more and donate a little money to some organizations that support low-wage workers. But that's a start.

And of course, there is the matter of paying attention to the interdependent web of all existence, which unfettered consumerism and greed is currently shredding into pieces. I'll admit that I find it profoundly hard to focus on global climate change and the harm it is causing. It feels too big, too intractable, and too dangerous. It's hard to feel as though I can actually do anything. But this much I do know: if enough of us pay attention, if enough of us can stay focused on the environmental disaster unfolding before us, and if enough of us come together to work against the forces tearing our planet apart, we will make a difference. Maybe all we can do for now is slow down the disaster. But even that could buy us and the planet a little time. If we are willing to look unblinkingly at the rising temperatures and melting seas, the oil spills and the species going extinct, we will learn what to do. And maybe enough of us will do it to make a difference.

Today, I've focused mostly on paying attention when and where it is hard to do, awkward, uncomfortable, and challenging. But of course, paying attention can also be an occasion of wonder, joy, awe, and gratitude. Thanksgiving is coming up this week, and for many of us it may largely be a holiday of tasty food, adrenaline-fueled football obsessions, and maneuvering through challenging relatives. Certainly, the holiday's history is complicated and morally worrisome, to say the least. But what if we were to use Thanksgiving as an opportunity for actual thanksgiving? What would that look like? I cannot think of a better person to answer that question than Peter Mayer, whose decades of songwriting have drawn attention-paying and gratitude together over and over again.

Mayer's song "Awake" is about paying attention to things that so many of us are too distracted to notice: trees and oceans and atoms, mountains and the wind, the beating of blackbirds' wings. In the song, nature itself is grateful for our attention-paying. Mayer sings, "All the splendors of creation are very happy that you came because they needed someone to see them and you, my child, are awake." Mayer invites us to ask whether we ourselves are awake. Do we perceive these wondrous things? Or are they not known to us because we are sleeping?

If we are indeed awake to the world around us, we just might find, as Mayer has put it in another song, that "everything is holy now." Mayer finds miracles in the singing of a bird, in the face of a child, in the arrival of a new day, in the very fact that, as he puts it, "anything is here at all." But of course, we won't be grateful for any of these things if we take them for granted. And I'm sure

I am not the only person in this room who wakes up each day and thinks, “OK, what do I have to get done today? What will be challenging? What’s depressing and frightening about the world?”

I don’t wake up and immediately think, “Wow, I’m alive! I get to love and be loved today! I get to have fun and be useful today! I get to connect with people and appreciate everything that’s wonderful about life and make someone else’s life better today.” I wish I did that automatically. I don’t. Maybe you don’t either. But maybe we could learn how to do it. Maybe that too is in part a matter of practicing. Maybe our opportunities to get better at paying attention include both facing things that make us uncomfortable and remembering all the things for which we are thankful. In fact, maybe we need to ramp up our thankfulness if we are to have the strength and resilience to face the harder stuff. And more gratitude is never a bad thing if it is gratitude for the genuinely good realities of our lives.

So, let’s end with a little communal attention-paying. Close your eyes, if you would, and take a couple of deep breaths. Notice the silence. Take a moment to pay attention to how you are feeling. How does your body feel? How are you doing emotionally? To use Buddhist language, how might you direct some kind attention toward yourself today after the service?

Now take a moment to pay attention to someone near you, someone you know. Mentally send that person a blessing, using whatever words are meaningful to you. Consider whether you might go up to that person after the service, ask them how they are, and really listen to their answer. And consider whether, if someone asks you how you are after the service, you might say something more than just “I’m fine.” Can you share some of your truth with someone else? Can you tell them some of your story?

Now take a moment to think about something happening in our society or elsewhere in the world, something that disturbs or concerns you. Your attention may not change what’s happening, but imagine being one of many, many people paying attention to the situation and acting on their attention to change the situation for the better. What might that look like? What role could you play in it? What could you do with your particular life, with your energy and resources and talents, to tip the scale of the world just a bit toward justice and well-being and beauty and safety and abundance?

Finally, take a moment to think about our planet. What do you find beautiful and moving in nature? Dwell on your answer for a minute. Visualize it. Now think about what you can do personally, alone or with others, to protect that which is beautiful and moving in the non-human part of our interdependent web of existence.

When you are ready, please open your eyes.

Friends, may we bring our loving attention to our own lives and to the world in which we live. May our attention always lead us back to thanksgiving for the many blessings in our lives. May we choose to pay good attention to those who most need our care. And may we, through our attention, our compassion, and our love, help make the world what it should always have been. Amen and blessed be.

Our closing hymn is number 1057 in the teal hymnal, Go Lifted Up. Following the hymn, please remain standing for the Benediction.

Benediction: May we leave this place filled with gratitude and with deepened commitment to inspire gratitude in others by the lives we live and the love we offer. Even as we extinguish our chalice, may the chalice in our hearts burn brightly, fiercely, bravely, and magnificently. The service is ended; may our service to the world begin again. Amen and blessed be.