

“Extraordinary Attention”
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We’re going to try something a little different this morning. First, does each of you have a Clementine? If not, our ushers will bring you one.

I invite you to take a close look at the Clementine you’re holding. Notice its shape. Turn it slowly. What do you see? How might you describe it to yourself? Do you notice anything unusual about it? Are there any marks on the skin? How does it feel against your hand? Against your cheek? Inhale its fragrance. Get to know your Clementine on an intimate level! Even though your Clementine came from a huge grove in South Africa, the particular fruit you hold in your hand is special, different in some way from all other Clementines.

I have previously done this exercise myself, and I discovered that there’s a lot about a Clementine that I had never really noticed before. Did that happen for you? I’d love to hear about your Clementine experience after the service.

We don’t do this kind of thing very much. The fact is, most of us experience our lives with limited awareness. We miss a lot. Yet the practice of mindfulness, of paying attention, is considered by many spiritual people to be the foundation of our ability to “read” the sacred in everyday life. To recognize the extraordinary within the ordinary. So why don’t we live more of our lives this way?

There’s a story about an elder and a disciple that illustrates one of the problems.

“Where shall I look for enlightenment?” the disciple asked.

“Here,” the elder said.

“When will it happen?” the disciple asked.

“It is happening right now,” the elder answered.

“Then why don’t I experience it?” the disciple persisted.

“Because you do not look,” the elder said.

“But what should I look for?” the disciple continued.

“Nothing. Just look,” the elder said.

“But at what?” the disciple asked again.
“At anything your eyes light upon,” the elder answered.
“But must I look in a special kind of way?” the disciple went on.
“No. The ordinary way will do,” the elder said.
“But don’t I always look the ordinary way?” the disciple said.
“No, you don’t,” the elder said.
“But why ever not?” the disciple asked.
“Because to look you must be here. You’re mostly somewhere else,”
the elder said.

Whether we’re fully present with a Clementine or fully engaged in drinking a glass of water, when we’re really paying attention, we are “here.” We are in the “now.” Our minds are not focused on the past or the future. Yet that is where we tend to spend a lot of our time. Dwelling on past events, imagining future scenarios, worrying about what might happen or not happen...

Why else don’t we pay more attention? We’re busy. Little things don’t seem very important. Parts of life seem boring. Other parts of life are, frankly, painful and we want to avoid focusing on them.

One day, I was sitting at my desk. And I was getting ready to pay bills. And, I don’t know. Every time I go to pay my bills, all of a sudden everything else seems to become a lot more interesting...

I became aware of a delicate leafy shadow dancing gently on the wall in front of me. I had sat facing that wall hundreds of times and had never noticed this shadow. So I just sat there for a minute, enjoying the “show” as the soft breeze blew against the leaves outside the window.

In those moments, the rest of the world disappeared. I was completely in the present moment. And, I felt content and at peace. I thought to myself, “If I could pay extraordinary attention to everything, everything would become extraordinary.” I think that, if I were able to achieve this ideal, it would be considered something like Thich Nhat Hanh’s description of enlightenment.

Now, in the story of the disciple and the elder, the elder said that in order to achieve enlightenment, all the disciple had to do was to look in the “ordinary way.” The reason this didn’t work for the disciple, according to the elder, is that the disciple was “mostly somewhere else.”

I spent years of my life struggling with depression and anxiety. Most of the time, my mind was somewhere else. Since then, I've gotten the help I needed. And I have come to recognize that the more time I can spend in the present moment, the better my life seems to be. I have come to understand that there is beauty to be found almost anywhere, whether it's on a wall, in nature, in human handiwork, in music, in people...really, the more I have started opening myself to the possibilities of appreciating my surroundings through attention, the more I have begun to drink in the world through all my senses.

The poet Walt Whitman, in "Song of Myself," recognizes the extraordinary nature of the ordinary. I'm going to share with you a short excerpt. And, just fyi, the second line includes the word "pismire," which refers to an "ant."

I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journeywork of the stars,
And the pismire is equally perfect, and a grain of sand, and the egg of the wren,
And the tree-toad is the chef-d'oeuvre for the highest
And the running blackberry would adorn the parlors of heaven.

Native Americans and other earth-centered cultures also recognized the extraordinary nature of the ordinary. Traditional Native American spirituality is based upon a sense of reverence and passion for the earth and its web of life, joined with reverence and passion for humanity (adapted from John Collier, one-time US Commissioner of Indian Affairs). In this worldview, everything is sacred and worthy of respect. It includes an understanding of God being present everywhere and in everything. This is very different from the predominant Judeo-Christian view, in which God is separate and above the world.

A holy man of the Oglala Sioux, called Black Elk, in the book, Black Elk Speaks, explained, "The first peace, which is the most important, is [the peace] which comes within the souls of people when they realize their relationship, their oneness with the universe and all its powers, and when they realize at the center of the universe dwells the Great Spirit, and that its center is really everywhere, it is within each of us."

When we can be in that place of peace and understanding of our place in the universe, it's a great feeling. Increasing our awareness of the beauty that surrounds us and learning to view the world through a lens of respect seem like reasonable goals, maybe even fun. Like getting to know a Clementine. The tricky part comes when we challenge ourselves to apply the practice of attention every area of our lives. If this were easy, we'd all be doing it. Paying attention, being fully in the moment and being at peace in some areas of our lives can be difficult.

Psychologist Timothy Miller writes extensively about the practice of attention in his book, How to Want What You Have. I know. Isn't that a great title? He suggests that a major block to the practice of attention has to do with the way in which we interpret our experiences.

It's very common in our society to go through life making value judgments about nearly everything. Do I like this or do I dislike it? Is this good or is it bad? Take a hot day, for example.

Let's say I spend the morning in an air-conditioned mall. As I exit, I'm hit by a blast of hot, humid air. I can react to this experience by saying, "Oh my God! This heat is unbelievable! I hate it when it's so hot. And the humidity just makes it worse. I can already feel myself starting to sweat. Ugh, I can't stand being sweaty. And I heard that it's supposed to be this hot all week. I don't think I can take it. Oh, and I have to mow the lawn today... I can't wait until fall!"

Let's say I have a twin sister with me on this shopping trip. And she has decided to try and withhold her value judgments. So, she's hit with this blast of hot air. She might say, "Wow! It is really hot out! The contrast between the cold air inside and the air out here is amazing. I can feel the hot sun on my head, on my shoulders and on my arms. It's pretty humid, too. I can feel the sweat collecting on my upper lip, on my scalp and under my arms. Whew! This heat is really knocking the energy out of me, so I'm going to take it slowly, otherwise I might faint or something. I'll have to make sure I drink a lot of water when I get home, and then maybe I'll take a few breaks when I'm mowing the lawn, so I don't get overheated."

And I'm going to turn to her and say, "You make me sick! You think you're so spiritually evolved, don't you?"

But the truth of the matter is, one of us is hot and suffering and the other one, my make-believe, holier-than-thou twin, is simply hot. I've already decided that I'm miserable and so I focus only on my discomfort and unhappiness. Whereas my "twin" fully recognizes that she is hot, but by refraining from making value judgments, she is able to remain open to the experience.

Maybe a cool breeze comes along. She might appreciate how refreshing that feels. She pays attention to her sensations, whatever they are. Whereas, I'm already in a funk and I might not even notice that breeze. My attention is focused on the sensations that I've labeled "unpleasant." I'm not recognizing that I have choices in how I categorize my sensations, whether I label them as "pleasant," "unpleasant," or "neutral." I'm just wallowing in my suffering.

And that's one of the problems with making these value judgments. When we have an "ideal world" in our heads and reality collides with what we believe "should" be, we suffer.

These value judgments get in the way of our spiritual practice of attention. All human experience can potentially be labeled positive, negative, or neutral. If we were to make a list of common value judgments about routine experiences and circumstances, we'd probably be here for a very long time.

A few examples from Timothy Miller:

I really hate it when people drive so slowly in the fast lane.

I wish I were taller.

If only my husband would go to the gym...His physique really needs some work.

I really like roses better than daisies.

Value judgments close our minds and hearts. They conceal our perception of beauty. They suppress our curiosity. They interfere with compassion.

I am working on my ability to pay attention without the cloudiness of value judgments. And as with many things in life, it's a matter of making progress, not achieving perfection.

In order to pay attention and to live fully in the present, we need to work toward not dividing our experience into categories such as good and bad, desirable and undesirable. This tendency is natural and a part of being human, but as people committed to spiritual growth, our task is to move beyond our comfort zone.

If you are a person who prays, asking for help can make a big difference. Or ask the highest part of yourself, your inner wisdom, to help you change this habit.

Practicing attention means performing every action as if it were very important, treating every sensation as unique and precious, talking with every person as if they were the one you most admire and respect. Practicing attention means treating each moment as if it were precious.

Whatever we feel, let us feel it completely. Whatever we see or hear, let us see or hear it completely. Whatever we touch, smell or taste, let us touch, smell or taste it completely, with all our being. Whatever we do, let us do it mindfully. As Thich Nhat Hanh says, “You can get joy, peace, and happiness just from drinking a cup of water.”

