

The Garden of Attention

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ www.buf.org

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Rev Paul Beckel

It is with acts of attention that we decide who to hear, what to see, and who in our world has agency. In this way, attention forms the ground not just for love, but for ethics.

—*Jenny Odell*

Gathering Songs #1000 *Morning has Come*, #1050 *Jazz Alleluia*

New Member Ceremony Welcoming Erica Mallin, Joe Shuster, and Jane Ronca-Washburn

A Gap in the Order of Service

Thank you Erica, Joe, and Jane, for taking the time to get to know us, and then making a decision to be a part of this community of learning and unlearning, this community of growing forth, and stepping back, this community of giving, and receiving, and simply letting go.

Each of these is deeply important to our lives as individuals, to the life we choose to share in our various subsets of community, and to the life we cannot escape—the biosphere in which all living things are one ... this interdependent web within which our bodies are just one phase of life's immortality ... until the day that our bodies are released and recycled into this biosphere, to nurture countless other lives.

Today in our order of service you may notice a big gap just about here and now. Please breathe easy and step with me into that gap. I promise that there will be no surprises. Nothing but hope, prayer, yearning, maybe a touch of humor, acknowledgment of some of life's impossibilities, and a bit of extended silence.

So let's step together into a nothingness as vast as the space between the stars. Vast as the space between the atoms that make up the air we are breathing in ... and breathing out.

Let's take a moment to breathe. Starting with ourselves, and eventually coming to recognize that we breathe as one, not only as human beings, but with all primates, mammals, birds, fish, and reptiles, bugs and worms. We breathe the same mix of air as the plants and the seas, and we thank them for their part in this cycle in which we live together in harmony. Cleansing, cooling, forgiving.

Close your eyes if that helps you to feel your breath. Feel the atoms filling your lungs. And returning. Filling your lungs. And returning. [pause]

Let's see if we can do this with our minds now ... filling them, cramming them – oh no! – how did they once again get so full of information and disinformation? Ahhh. And now let it out. Oh if it could only be that easy.

My mind is too full. My brain, my consciousness or unconsciousness or whatever it is. Too full. But this is a moment now to step back from the news, unshackle ourselves from social media, to attend now to what is most life-giving, what is most basic. Grounding. Perhaps to attend to nothing but nothing.

The following is adapted from an article called, “Your Brain is like a Garden,” by Judah Pollack and Olivia Fox Cabane:

There's an old saying in neuroscience: neurons that fire together wire together. This means the more you run a neuro-circuit in your brain, the stronger that circuit becomes. This is why, to quote another old saw, practice makes perfect. The more you practice piano, or speaking a language, or juggling, the stronger those circuits get. The ability to learn, though, is about more than building and strengthening neural connections. Even more important is our ability to break down the old ones. This is called “synaptic pruning.

Imagine your brain is a garden, except instead of growing flowers, fruits, and vegetables, you grow synaptic connections. We are not alone on this journey. We have gardener cells working for us in our brains. Some of these cells act to promote growth, Others pull up the weeds, kill pests, rake up the dead leaves. Really! We have cells in our brains whose work it is to prune, and even to destroy certain neural pathways.

Researchers are just starting to unravel this mystery, but what they do know is the synaptic connections that get used less get marked by a protein, which the pruner cells bond to – kind of like the immune system cells latch onto and destroy germs – in order to destroy the synapse. This is how our brains make the physical space for us to build new and stronger connections so we can learn.

Most of this work is done while we sleep. And in fact, we actually have some control over what our brain decides to delete while we sleep. the synaptic connections we don't use get marked for recycling. The ones we do use are the ones that get watered and oxygenated. So we need to be mindful of what we're thinking about.

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When we find ourselves thinking or feeling aggressive ... defensive ... Let's stop a moment now—not to overindulge those thoughts, but to honestly ask ourselves if there are patterns in our own thinking and feeling, situations to which we react with unhelpful, maladaptive reactions.

Unfairness, discomfort, evil that should be inconceivable – and yet there it is.

It's tricky. It's not helpful to pretend that we don't have these thoughts and feelings. It's also not helpful to allow ourselves to dwell upon them, to bind ourselves by turning synaptic flashes into ropes and chains that won't let us go.

Instead, let's allow the gardeners of our minds, or if you prefer a more poetic metaphor, the gardeners of our hearts, you spirit, you hope, you beauty ... let these nurture and strengthen the most important and valuable connections. Let them prune the pernicious, the pathological, the unnecessarily complex, allow them to help the garden of our souls to flower.

I am a novice gardener. Both in my yard and within my self. It took me years to get up the nerve to prune away unhealthy growth. I imagined that with just the right care I could transform it all to vigorous health. So now that I've started to do that, I'm just beginning to get the nerve to cut away even healthy limbs that tangle trap and tire the core necessities of my being. How many times I've read that the apple tree needs to breathe. It needs room for light to come thru, and air to dry out dank recesses.

But to remove what appear to be healthy lovely tangly internal branches – for the sake of my whole self, this is so painful and confusing. It can be paralyzing, even, to face the awful decisions when we don't know which branches are the best ones to cut.

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African American poet and activist Audre Lorde speaks of self *preservation* as an act of political warfare. For we have no capacity to take on the world if we're constantly overwhelmed, or at war within ourselves. It's not a sin to take care of ourselves. ... though we do need to be careful, as so-called "self care" has also been commercialized to deceive us into buying expensive "self-care" products. The rhetoric of "you deserve it" is easily overdone.

No, self care is subverted if we think that it's all about preserving the fortress of ourselves. Rather, it's purpose is to enable us to dwell within the oneness of all.

Jenny Odell writes: It is with acts of attention that we decide who to hear, what to see, and who in our world has agency. In this way, attention forms the ground not just for love, but for ethics.

She says, "simple awareness is the seed of responsibility."

This reminds me of the Buddhist loving kindness blessing.

In which we begin by offering loving kindness to ourselves
then to someone to whom it feels good to offer loving kindness
then to someone for whom it feels hard
then let's come back to WE, so that as allies we can hold one another....

There are four components to each blessing. Let's say together:

May I be filled with loving kindness, may I be at peace and at ease, may I be happy, may I be well. Then we continue: May _____ be filled with loving kindness, etc.

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Su has a song for us, a meditation, a prayer, an invitation to briefly look inside of ourselves. During and after the song, instead of responding outwardly, consider keeping your eyes closed (you can express your appreciation to Su later) and remain with the prayer for four or five minutes as the music fades into silence.

Take Time Back, by Su Livingston

Take Time Back from the moving screens
and the endless search to know everything
Break away from your streaming friends, hours click away
in deletes and sends, sending you
Far away from your senses, at the helm of speed and control where the
easy ringing of instant reward chip away and away at your soul

Take it back, unbroken attention
Take it back, your time to be slow
Take it back, from kneejerk reaction
Spinning in information over overload

There is no emoji for the loss of the stories we shared
now shrunken to cartoons and memes in a post that slice our attention mid air
So- Take time back for the smell of rain
and the slow sweet kiss of the sun again
Take time back for heart and home
for the place that you live, what you love-- alone

Take it back,
attention
Take it back,
time to be slow
Take it back
reflection
in worlds within that
even words
don't know.

[silence]

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At the Walker Art Museum in Minneapolis, there is a room with seats in which you can lean back and look through a large window in the ceiling to see a portion of the sky. Yes it's a luxury to be able to simply look at the sky. We may not feel that we have time for that. The thing is, we don't need a big room in an artsy museum to take in the majesty of the sky for just a minute now and then throughout the day.

Just to be in awe without needing to understand.

One advantage of the room at the art museum, though, is that the walls are bare. There is nothing else to see—*no context*—which makes it more likely that we can just see the sky and experience it as blue, grey, pink, orange, still, or filled with moving clouds.

Perhaps though you don't need a fancy skylight for this, to temporarily remove yourself from the rut, the insistence, the false need to interpret what is beautiful in itself.

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Attend for a moment to nothing
Allow for open spaces in your garden
 aesthetically
 and biologically
 we need nothing to allow in the breezes
 to allow light to get in to our deepest parts
 allow space for relationships, and space for relationships to fall away
 space to grieve that which will never return

Hearing nothing is the prerequisite for listening well. Hearing nothing for just a while each day will help us to make room at other times, at the right times, for that which brings life into our souls. So we may find ourselves at one with that which is whole.

Sharing our Gifts

Sending Song *Spirit of Life*

Benediction from Tao te Ching

Empty your mind of all thoughts
let your heart be at peace
watch the turmoil of beings
but contemplate their return

Circle 'Round

*Imagine that your attention is a garden.
What will you cultivate for more growth? What will you prune?*