

The Education of Attention

BY BRADFORD S. HADAWAY

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form of attention which, when directed toward God, is the
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Apparently my nine-year-old son, Jackson, is a mystic-in-the-making. As we walked a path along the River Thames as it leaves Oxford, England, my two oldest children and I enjoyed one of those quiet spells that occur when you have walked far enough away from your daily world to feel truly alone with your thoughts. My moments of solitude were preoccupied with cursing the new sneakers that were slowly rubbing holes on both feet, but something sparked a different order of thought in Jackson. After a half hour of quiet, he turned to me and said that taking a long walk into the woods is “like opening the envelope of your soul – an envelope that is usually sealed up tight.” To explain further, he said, “It gives you a chance to concentrate...” and then he stopped himself and said, “No, that’s not quite right. In fact, it’s exactly the opposite. When you’re out here, you’re not really concentrating even though your mind is working. It’s like you are aware of important things without even having to try. Your envelope is opening.”

My first thought in response was, “This, and yet you can’t remember to put your dirty clothes in the laundry basket.” My second thought was, “I need to get little Thoreau here a journal, a quill, an inkwell, and a little cabin by a pond just to see what else he might come up with.” His out-of-the-blue metaphor has stuck with me ever since our walk. In it, I hear the nine-year-old stirrings of something like contemplative prayer – the kind of prayer that occurs when we empty the self (open our envelope) and turn a patient, attentive gaze outward, finally prepared to receive the light of God which is *always* shining. A young boy’s surprise and pleasure at being opened up to

something beyond himself reminds us that we are made for this kind of communion with God. Yet the frenetic pace of life and our restless love of constant activity reshape us into people who genuinely struggle to practice the kind of slow, deliberate, self-emptying attention that would allow us to touch and know the Truth.

We need more walks.

Or, if Simone Weil (1909-1943) is to be believed, we need more *books*. Weil was a French political activist, philosopher, and Christian thinker, and just a year before her death, she wrote a wonderful little essay entitled, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God."¹ Its central argument is that something as ordinary as school studies, undertaken in the proper spirit, can develop that specific form of attention which, when directed toward God, is the very substance of prayer. By exploring Weil's ideas about attention and study in some detail, we may also uncover other ordinary practices – such as reading novels, creating art, and, yes, taking long riverside walks – that can prune our diseased habits of restless distraction and train us for patient, attentive prayer.

THE STRUCTURE OF ATTENTION

School studies can help us cultivate attention, Weil believes, when they take us beyond ourselves and our current level of understanding about a subject. The key word here is "understanding," which goes way beyond information gathering. We top off our information levels daily – for example, when we peruse the sports page to see if our favorite team won or scan the headlines to find out what the politicians just said – but this sort of scanning activity does not flex our mental muscles like reading a many-sided text for understanding does. When we pause to study a rich text – say, Paul's letter to the Romans, or Weil's essay on school studies – we can gain genuine insight about significant matters, but only as we attend to the text with an appropriate method, diligent effort, and patient waiting that allows us to uncover the truth it contains.²

The sort of attention required for such understanding, Weil notes, cannot be reduced to the mental concentration that allows us to avoid distractions and pursue some task to its point of completion. If this were all that attention required, then the master of a stare-down contest would possess everything necessary for true spiritual attunement; but this is hardly so. Nevertheless, this ability to tune out distractions is an important ingredient of study. (For example, it helps when my philosophy students put away their smart phones and encounter Plato's vivid allegory of the cave without the tweets, pokes, vines, and other electronic stimuli that have become a virtual carillon of Pavlovian bells for their response.)

Weil believes it is important for our power of concentration to become second nature. If we have to drag ourselves kicking and screaming to the study table, the end result will not be attention of the relevant sort. Indeed,

Weil warns, the kind of will power “that, if need be, makes us set our teeth and endure suffering...has practically no place in study.”³

The heart of attention, then, is not in any such strenuous activity, but rather in an easy *receptivity* or *openness* to deliverances of the truth. “Attention,” Weil suggests, “consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object.”⁴ It is a kind of waiting—a fruitful inactivity that does not seek anything, but stands ready to receive “in its naked truth” the object explored.⁵ The openness that characterizes attention is not a mere *willingness* to accept the truth, but an *anticipation* of it—a hungering for the truth and hopeful expectation of its arrival. The attentive person’s waiting is laden with the desire that her intelligence bear fruit.

Weil’s view makes more sense if we believe the significant truths that we gain through study are “gifts” granted to us through insight, rather than products that *directly* result from some combination of scholarly industry, genius, or clever guessing. (However, as we will see shortly, some grinding work is involved in preparing us for receptive study.) If truth comes as a gift, then our primary job is to humble ourselves and be open to that moment. We must wait for it.

The gift-like character of apprehending truth is especially apparent in moments of genuine intellectual struggle: we wrestle with a thorny problem, try a number of failed strategies, and feel stymied by lack of progress, only to be *hit* with a new thought that leads to a solution. Weil generalizes from this mysterious experience of insight to all discovery of truth. The experience may differ among the various school exercises we undertake, but Weil thinks this process of waiting, or being open and receptive, is as necessary for “the right word to come of itself at the end of its pen”⁶ in a writing exercise as it is for our arriving at a profound insight about the nature of the self, the world, or God.⁷

PREPARATION FOR ATTENTION

Even though the apprehension of truth comes to us as a gift when we are attentive, our preparation for the openness and receptivity of attention is not effortless. The ground must be tilled before the fruit of insight can spring forth. First, Weil assumes that apprehension of the truth always takes place against a backdrop of knowledge which makes the moment of insight intelligible. We cannot be struck by just the right way to translate a line of Latin if we do not know Latin grammar or vocabulary. So part of the work that makes attention possible in the first place is the more grinding, often-monotonous, and less intellectually challenging collection and maintenance of this background knowledge.

But once this preparation is done, the real work of attention begins. Weil claims that “attention is an effort, the greatest of all efforts perhaps, but it is a *negative effort*.”⁸ By this suggestive phrase, “negative effort,” she means we

must continually adopt the stance of open and receptive anticipation of insight which we have been discussing. But “negative effort” refers to other preparatory work as well.

For instance, we must hold the relevant background knowledge in our minds, even while we are primarily trying to leave our thoughts open to “penetration” by the objects we explore or the solutions we seek. She compares this to how persons who stand on a mountain can focus on the vast empty space, even while they are seeing a “great many forests and plains” below. Or to take a more concrete example, solving a proof in geometry will not come to us without our using the technical apparatus of proofs, some knowledge of rules of inference, and the like (which are the details of “many forests and plains” in the metaphor above), but if we concentrate on those details we will not be sufficiently attuned and open to the solution to have it penetrate our thought in the appropriate way. So, another aspect of negative effort is keeping our “particular and already formulated thoughts” visible and available for use, but held sufficiently at bay to allow for full apprehension of the truth related to some object or problem.⁹

A more important negative effort involved in attention is emptying our souls so they can more purely reflect the truth for which we wait. Putting aside the self is the way that we create the space to perceive things the way that they really are. “Emptying our souls” is one of the more elusive but suggestive metaphors by means of which Weil analyzes attention. I like my son Jackson’s metaphor of the opened envelope as another way to express this thought. The envelope is not opened to deliver its own contents. Instead, once it is opened up, it remains empty and ready to receive. Or to employ a different metaphor from Weil, when the self has been emptied, the intellect can act like a mirror, reflecting reality purely with “no dimensions of its own.”¹⁰

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This metaphor of emptying the soul is a nice summary of Weil’s view of attention in school studies. First, self-abnegation occurs in the very openness and receptivity towards the truth that is at the heart of attention. When a student gets “lost” in a text or problem, the concerns of and concerns about herself slip away. Second, we empty the soul when we reject the prideful pretention that we must master objects and problems rather than apprehend

the truth about them as a gift. Instead we adopt a posture of humility. Weil's very concrete proposal to foster such humility is for us to "take great pains to examine squarely and to contemplate attentively and slowly each school task in which we have failed, seeing how unpleasing and second rate it is... trying to get down to the origin of the fault."¹¹ She predicts that frequently we will trace the origin of the fault to our misplaced efforts in trying to

squeeze the problem or object before us into a pre-conceived solution or interpretation.

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Weil concludes, "We do not have to understand new things, but by dint of patience, effort, and method to come to understand with our whole self the truths which are evident."¹² The "patience" refers to a hopeful anticipation of the truth, the "effort" is the negative task of emptying one's self,

and the "method" is the indirect approach of remaining open and receptive to insight regarding truths that are already in view.

ATTENTION AND PRAYER

So, what does attention cultivated through our schoolwork have to do with prayer or communion with God? The school exercises do not represent the highest aspirations of the development and use of attention. As Weil notes, attention is ultimately important not because it enables us to generate a thoughtful interpretation of the *Iliad*, but because it is the *substance* of prayer. Prayer, she writes, is "the orientation of all the attention of which the soul is capable toward God."¹³ Attention manifested as prayer empties the self and waits in love for a direct encounter with God. Even though school studies only aim at a lower form of attention, Weil claims they are "extremely effective in increasing the power of attention that will be available at the time of prayer."¹⁴ Here's why: the common practice of attention in school studies only leads to a particular truth, but that truth is "the image of something precious." For example, because the solution to a geometry problem is "a little fragment of a particular truth, it is a pure image of the unique, eternal, and living Truth, the very Truth that once in a human voice declared: 'I am the Truth.' Every school exercise, thought of in this way, is like a sacrament."¹⁵

The parallels between study and prayer are most evident in the spiritual disciplines that dispose the soul for union with God. Thomas Merton writes,

Monastic solitude, poverty, obedience, silence, and prayer dispose the soul for [its] mysterious destiny in God. Asceticism itself does not produce divine union as its direct result. It only disposes the soul for union. The various practices of monastic asceticism are more or less valuable to the monk in proportion as they help him to accomplish the inner and spiritual work that needs to be done to make his soul poor, and humble, and empty, in the mystery of the presence of God.¹⁶

In *Life and Holiness*, he explains that

our seeking of God is not at all a matter of our finding him by means of certain ascetic techniques. It is rather a quieting and ordering of our whole life by self-denial, prayer, and good works, so that God himself, who seeks us more than we seek him, can “find us” and “take possession of us.”¹⁷

Merton emphasizes that the spiritual disciplines only prepare the soul for divine union, rather than accomplish it. Once our soul is attentive—empty, waiting, and desiring communion with God—God can find us. Weil makes a similar point about school studies, when she notes

each loving adolescent, as he works at his Latin prose [may] hope through this prose to come a little nearer to the instant when he will really be the slave—faithfully waiting while the master is absent, watching and listening—ready to open the door to him as soon as he knocks. The master will then make his slave sit down and himself serve him with meat.¹⁸

Weil draws attention to a notable difference between the cases of study and prayer. The diligent exercise of attention may not always yield results in the intellectual realm, but it never fails to yield the desired increase in light on the spiritual plane. We can undertake the practices of patient attention in faith and hope because, as Weil recalls from Matthew 7:11, if asked for bread, the Father does not give a stone.¹⁹ There is no promise that we can apprehend all truths we desire to know, but we may be confident that all we need to know of the Truth, which is God, will be available to us because “a divine inspiration operates infallibly, irresistibly, if we do not turn away our attention, if we do not refuse it.”²⁰

Many of us have waited for God, but without immediate results of a profound and deep awareness of God’s ineffable transcendence. “Even if our efforts of attention seem for years to be producing no result,” Weil counsels, “one day a light that is in exact proportion to them will flood the soul. Every effort adds a little gold to a treasure no power on earth can take away.”²¹ We are in this for the long haul. The more ways we find to practice attention with patience, the more we can trust that God will continue to take

greater and greater possession of us. After all, it is God who is seeking us.

BEYOND SCHOOL STUDIES

Study, then, is exactly the kind of spiritual practice that a restless and activity-infatuated people of God need. Weil reminds us that some daily activities are pregnant with the possibility of growing our capacity for communion with God. Rather than add to our already oppressive to-do lists, we

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need only to survey current practices to discover which ones, like school study, can help us cultivate the relevant form of attention.

The practices we are looking for will be characterized by a truth-orientation—that is, they will reward sustained attention with insight about the way things really are, the best strategy to solve a problem or win a complex game, the best turn of phrase in a written note, the proper brushstroke in a

painting, and so on. Further, these practices will require attention for the insight to occur—that is, they will push us beyond ourselves and encourage an empty, humble, patient outward gaze filled with a longing to receive the truth. Finally, they will be congruent with the ultimate goal of cultivating a capacity for prayer.²² If the final goal were anything else—even something as high-minded as self-development or the cultivation of excellence so that one can better serve others—the self, rather than sliding from view, would threaten to reappear and disrupt the receptivity to the truth.

Some obvious candidates are the forms of study that live on long after our schooling has officially ended. For example, reading serious novels and short stories can cultivate attention when we allow their rich narratives to illumine significant aspects of life. Studying the Bible or books of Christian reflection in a church setting does this too, particularly when we spend quiet moments of preparation before the group discussion takes place. And Weil's comments about school children laboring over Latin translations reminds us how important it is for parents to provide their children with self-emptying, reflective learning activities to supplement the necessary but more mundane information transfer that happens in most schools today.

Other attention-cultivating practices may lack the academic feel of those described above. Practicing music, creating art, playing chess, pausing in worship to reflect quietly on a text or image—all of these have a truth-orienta-

tion and a built-in demand to wait patiently on those truths to emerge.

And let us not forget those long, quiet walks, where the “text” is the beautiful created order. If we are attentive and “open the envelope” of our souls as we walk, the insight we receive is as forceful as through the written word. Wordsworth’s “Expostulation and Reply” begins with a character, William, being chastised for wasting away his morning on an old grey stone when he could have devoted that time to studying the light bequeathed by books. William replies,

The eye – it cannot choose but see;
 We cannot bid the ear be still;
 Our bodies feel, where’er they be,
 Against or with our will.
 Nor less I deem that there are Powers
 Which of themselves our minds impress;
 That we can feed this mind of ours
 In a wise passiveness.²³

The great work of prayer is to find *all* the ways to quiet our souls, practice attention, and wait patiently for the light to find us in our “wise passiveness.”

NOTES

1 The essay is collected in Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, translated by Emma Craufurd (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1951), 105-116. For more information about Weil’s life, see the fine biography by one of her friends: Simone Pétrement, *Simone Weil: A Life*, translated by Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976).

2 The patient learning process Weil is describing often takes place outside of a school setting, when the learner can access or generate the right sort of questions to ask about a text, problem, or object.

3 Weil, *Waiting for God*, 110.

4 *Ibid.*, 111.

5 *Ibid.*, 112.

6 *Ibid.*, 113.

7 Weil’s philosophy and theology are heavily indebted to Plato. For a fine collection of articles on those metaphysical underpinnings, see E. Jane Doering and Eric O. Springsted, eds., *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004).

8 Weil, *Waiting for God*, 111 (*italics added*).

9 *Ibid.*, 111-112.

10 Miklos Veto, *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil*, translated by Joan Dargan (New York: SUNY Press, 1994), 31.

11 Weil, *Waiting for God*, 108.

12 Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, translated by Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr (London: Routledge Classics, 2002 [1952]), 116.

13 Weil, *Waiting for God*, 105.

14 *Ibid.*

15 Ibid., 112.

16 Thomas Merton, *The Silent Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1957), 3-4.

17 Thomas Merton, *Life and Holiness* (New York: Image Books, 1963), 29.

18 Weil, *Waiting for God*, 113.

19 Ibid., 107.

20 Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 119.

21 Weil, *Waiting for God*, 108.

22 Ibid.

23 William Wordsworth, "Expostulation and Reply," *The Complete Poetical Works* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1888), www.bartleby.com/145/ww133.html (accessed November 18, 2015). This poem should be read with its companion poem in the same volume, "The Tables Turned," www.bartleby.com/145/ww134.html (accessed November 18, 2015).



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