



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

- 📖 The Education of Attention
(*Attentive Patience*, pp. 28-36)

Suggested Articles:

- 📖 Waiting to Eat
(*Attentive Patience*, pp. 80-83)
- 📖 Toward a Slow-Enough Church
(*Attentive Patience*, pp. 89-93)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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The Education of Attention

If Simone Weil (1909-1943) is to be believed, we need more books. She shows how 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.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Luke 5:15-16

Meditation: from Psalm 46:10a

Be still and know that I am God.
Be still and know that I am.
Be still and know.
Be still.
Be.

Reflection

That we are living in (what Jeffrey Bullock calls) an “age of impatience” is nowhere clearer than in our attitudes toward knowing the truth about ourselves, the world, and God. We rate too quickly (and often too positively, but sometimes negatively) our own intentions and character, hastily categorize other people’s actions and motives, rush to judgment on how natural systems work, and cursorily evaluate programs and institutions. We suffer from a cultural attention deficit disorder that leaves us gorging on easy-to-digest info-nuggets and avoiding the substantial mystery in ourselves, our friends, the world, and even God.

We have “diseased habits” of inquiry, warns Brad Hadaway. To prune them away and replace them with habits of patient attention, he builds on Simone Weil’s insights in “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God.”

- ▶ *Receptivity, not strenuous activity, is the heart of attention.* Weil says, “attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object.” This openness, Hadaway explains, 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.” He compares apprehending truth to receiving a gift: “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.”
- ▶ *We must prepare ourselves for this openness and receptivity.* We need background knowledge to make the moment of insight intelligible. Gathering and maintaining this backdrop of knowledge can be a “grinding, often-monotonous, and less intellectually challenging” preparation for attentive study.

Next, the act of attending itself requires (what Weil calls) “negative effort.” We must keep certain “particular and already formulated thoughts” of background knowledge in our minds, but hold them sufficiently at bay to be open to new insights about the object of our study.

Finally, we must “empty our souls” of prideful concerns to master objects, problems, and persons. Our failures to understand some-



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thing, Hadaway notes, often trace “to misplaced efforts to squeeze the problem or object before us into a preconceived solution or interpretation.”

- ▶ *The highest use of attention occurs in prayer*, which Weil calls “the orientation of all the attention of which the soul is capable toward God.” Other studies prepare our hearts for prayer because the truths we seek participate in the Truth, which is God. “Many of us have waited for God, but without immediate results of a profound and deep awareness of God’s ineffable transcendence,” Hadaway admits. But “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.”

“Study, then, is exactly the kind of spiritual practice that a restless and activity-infatuated people of God need,” Hadaway notes. But other daily activities—if they are truth-oriented, require patient attention, and are congruent with the ultimate goal of developing a capacity for prayer—can encourage the sort of patient attention we need in prayer. He mentions, for example, “reading serious novels and short stories,” “studying the Bible or books of Christian reflection in a church setting,” “practicing music, creating art, playing chess, pausing in worship to reflect quietly on a text or image,” and taking “quiet walks where the ‘text’ is the beautiful created order.”

“Rather than add to our already oppressive to-do lists, we need only to survey current practices to discover which ones, like school study, can help us cultivate the relevant form of attention,” Hadaway concludes. “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.’”

Study Questions

1. Describe the easy receptivity or openness that is essential to study which leads to insight, according to Simone Weil. Why does she think that willpower which “makes us set our teeth and endure suffering...has practically no place in study”?
2. What sorts of preparatory, “negative effort” can prepare us to have moments of insight in our studies?
3. What are the key similarities between certain forms of study and prayer that allow those studies to prepare our hearts for prayer, according to Weil? What is the distinctive difference in prayer, and why is it so important?
4. Which of your daily activities seem to encourage “diseased habits of restless distraction”? Which activities nurture the sort of patient attention required for prayer?
5. Consider, with Taylor Sandlin, how participating in the Lord’s Supper, or Communion, can foster attentive patience. What other worship practices can have this benefit, to some extent, as well?

Departing Hymn: “To Know That You Are God”

The Education of Attention

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 3 and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To examine Simone Weil's view that school studies, done in the right way, can foster the kind of patient attention that is essential to prayer.
2. To review members' daily activities to see whether they encourage habits of restless distraction or foster habits of attention required for prayer.
3. To consider how participating in the Lord's Supper and other worship practices can nurture patient attention.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Attentive Patience (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

"Apparently my nine year-old son, Jackson, is a mystic-in-the-making," Brad Hadaway reports. He recalls a walk they took on a path beside the River Thames as it leaves Oxford, England. "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."

Noting that "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," Hadaway concludes: "We need more walks." (*Attentive Patience*, pp. 28-29)

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to bless members' preparation and study with insight that draws them closer to one another and to God.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 5:15-16 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation from Psalm 46:10a during a period of silence.

Reflection

This study analyses the sort of patient attention that is required for gaining insight about ourselves, other persons, the world, and God. It expands on Simone Weil's views that we can develop habits of patient attention, and that these habits prepare our hearts for the form of prayer that is resting in God's presence and aligning our will with God's. The scripture passage reminds us that Jesus sometimes withdrew from the distraction of the crowds that followed him in order to attend to God in such prayer (cf. Luke 6:12; Luke 9:28; Matthew 26:36//Mark 14:32//Luke 22:41).

In certain practices of worship we nurture patient attention to one another and to God. As time permits, you can draw on the suggested articles to explore this point.

Study Questions

1. Simone Weil says the easy receptivity or openness required for insight involves "suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object." It is an anticipation of and willingness to receive a gift. Invite members to share their experiences of insight – into their own character, desires, and actions; about a close personal relationship; or regarding the solution to a vexing problem – that fits Weil's description. She believes this receptivity must be second nature (that is, done without the effort of constant self-management, which easily could distract us from the object of study).
2. Brad Hadaway identifies three things Weil might have in mind as "negative effort" to prepare for insight: continually adopting the stance of open and receptive anticipation of insight; keeping relevant background knowledge in mind, but not allowing it to dictate our attention (like focusing on a vast mountain vista, while seeing many details); and clearing our hearts of prideful intentions to "master" the object, person, or relationship we study. Such efforts are "negative" because they do not lead to insight, but remove obstacles to it.
3. Both study and prayer require patient attention to the other and are oriented toward receiving the truth. Prayer is distinctive, on the one hand, because its object is the highest – the Truth, which is God – and thus it requires our utmost attention. However, if Weil stopped with this point, she would be saying that prayer is just the most demanding form of study. However, she insists that prayer is a relationship initiated by God, and its success depends on God seeking communion with us. Thus she writes, "Even if our efforts of attention seem for years to be producing no result, 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."
4. Form two small study groups to brainstorm those daily activities that encourage habits of distraction (television watching, Internet surfing, use of cell phones, window shopping, and so on) and those activities that nurture patient attention (preparing nutritious meals, reading to a child, and so on, along with the ones that Hadaway mentions). As each group reports its list, invite other members to add to or question items on the list.
5. Taylor Sandlin notes that communal meals require us to slow down, wait for other diners, and attend to their needs. He writes, "The practice of the Lord's Supper is anything but efficient. It does not seem to have the immediate effect of a clever sermon or emotion-stirring song. In a world that constantly boasts of faster, more efficient service, the Lord's Supper, when it is done well, remains excruciatingly slow." For this reason, "the [Lord's Supper] table serves as a practice run for the rest of life. If we cannot wait for each other there, we likely will not wait on or serve each other anywhere else."

Invite members to share how other worship practices can have this benefit. They might mention showing a child how to use a hymn book or prayer book, singing hymns or praying responsively, listening to prayer requests, sharing times of quiet meditation, and so on.

Departing Hymn

"To Know That You Are God" is on pp. 55-57 of *Attentive Patience*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.