On Attention and Intention

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We live in a world of distractions, some of our own making, others present because our world is, as William James aptly described, “one great blooming, buzzing confusion.” Even as I write these words, distractions surround me: frenzied violin music playing in the background; a ringing cell phone; the tone from my computer alerting me that I have new e-mail messages; a friend’s voice, asking me to join him for lunch; my colleague asking me to do something that cannot wait; my grumbling, hungry stomach; the realization that the eleven things on my “to do list” likely will not be accomplished today; my longing for a weekend when I can finally set aside some of these distractions and relax; my worry that I will not relax because I will be distracted.

In this world of distractions, consider the ways we must be attentive every day just to get along in the world. If I am not properly attentive to the traffic lights that tell me when to stop, go, and be cautious, I have a diminished chance of arriving safely to my destination. More complicated are the ways that we must be attentive to the persons around us. My best friend may say she is fine, that her day went well, that she in fact has never felt better, yet I sense something different in the tone of her voice and her downward glance as she speaks. Something, I can tell, is just not right with her. This kind of attention is of a different order than appreciating the difference between red, yellow, and green lights at the intersection. Being attentive to my friend requires my willingness to be present to her now, to watch and listen and speak to her, instead of all the other persons and things that vie for my attention.

People often talk about the need for time management skills and joke that if only they had thirty-six hours in a day, they could do all the things they need and want to do. But maybe what they really need is the discipline of attention. If we are not properly attentive to the important things around us, allotting thirty minutes here or three hours there makes little difference. What matters is whether we are attentive in the time we have—and what we are attentive to. But what is the discipline of attention, and how is it a spiritual discipline? And what is its relevance for the academic life?

Simone Weil (1909-43, pronounced “vay”), a French philosopher and religious writer, considered these questions in an interesting little essay titled “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God.” Exploring how Christians might understand the proper aims of academic study, Weil points out the profound connection between attention and prayer, namely that prayer is a form of attention, requiring us to turn ourselves away from distractions and towards God. Put another way, prayer consists of rightly directing ourselves to see, to listen—indeed to wait for God. “The quality of the attention counts for much of the quality of the prayer,” Weil explains. “Warmth of heart
cannot make up for it.” Attention does not simply allow us to shut out the “blooming, buzzing confusion” around us; it draws us closer to God.

The spiritual discipline of attention, however, is not confined to prayer; it likewise applies to the scholarly work of teachers and students. Weil believes that when we devote ourselves to learning, for instance, Latin, trigonometry, music, history, chemistry, literature, or physics—indeed any discipline—we are developing the same discipline of attention that is indispensible for seeking God. As we concentrate on the meaning of a difficult poem or try to solve a tough calculus problem, we are increasing our grasp of truth; that is, we are cultivating our capacity to realize, though only in part, the way things really are. In fact, even during those occasions when our intellectual efforts seem futile—perhaps we spend an entire Saturday afternoon toiling over organic chemistry homework that we cannot seem to get a handle on—we are still building capacities of attention that make us better able to know the world around us. As long as we sincerely strive towards understanding, no effort of attention is pointless.

And while we do not often recognize a connection between prayer and study, Christians should realize one important similarity: both seek the same end. Just as prayer draws one closer to the Divine, so does learning in the academic disciplines. For Christians, the pursuit of truth, regardless of the road traveled, leads ultimately to God, who created and sustains all that is. Both prayer and study require the attitude of one who watches, listens, waits, and seeks to understand with patience and humility. Such genuine attention brings us closer to knowing the Divine.

Yet the question remains: given that our world is full of distractions, how do we strive to become attentive to the most important things in our lives?

This summer I participated in a weeklong retreat at a remote venue in the Texas Hill Country where physical beauty abounds, but where there is no access to the Internet or cell phone service. For the first two days of the retreat, I confess to feeling uncomfortable about being disconnected from the larger world. I had no access to news reports and sports scores, and I could not check my e-mail and text messages. Others at the retreat confessed similar distress, even slight annoyance, from not being “plugged in.” But once the initial shock to our systems subsided, many of us suddenly realized that some of the ways we “plug in” actually complicate our lives, sap our energy, and turn our attention away from things that really matter.

I relay this experience not to suggest that cultivating the discipline of attention is as simple as occasionally abstaining from cell phones or Facebook or removing our iPods from our ears. Nor can we return to a pre-technological age. The better cure for distraction may be found by asking a single question: what are we aiming to achieve?

We cannot possibly know what things count as distractions without first knowing what we are seeking to do. Indeed, none of the examples of distraction that I mentioned above always count as distractions. The violin music I hear in the background is no distraction if listening to classical music is what I intend to do, and if I seek to be in the company of
friends, there is no more welcomed sound than my friend’s voice. So a proper description of intention—of what we aim to do—is necessary. Of course, there are various ways to inquire about intention. Consider, for example, these questions:

Why are you reading this essay right now?  
What do you hope to achieve by taking University 1000?  
Why are you at Baylor?  
What are your highest hopes and aspirations?

Asking questions about intention introduces the concept of having a goal. To have a goal is to recognize something as genuinely worthy of pursuit and then to act in a way that will realize the goal. The Greek philosopher Aristotle, for example, begins his *Nicomachean Ethics* by proposing that every action leads to something that we see as worthwhile, and that the sum of all our actions might lead to a ‘highest good,’ what he later identifies as happiness or flourishing, the state of living and doing well over a complete life. Living intentionally, of course, need not require us to pause before each and every action and ponder how it will contribute to our overall good; it simply means that we live reflectively, deliberately, and with purpose. It means that we keep in the foreground of our consciousness, questions about the ultimate meaning of our lives. Like a compass, the discipline of intention helps us get our bearings and keeps us from going astray.

Only when we practice intention will attention be possible; only when we set out towards a worthy end will we be in a position to avoid the obstacles that impede us from living truly good lives. Christians see their lives as replete with meaning for a special reason: life is a gift from God, full of Divine purpose. The spiritual disciplines of intention and attention bring us closer to a realization of the particular ways that God calls us to lead the lives given to us.

We live in a world of distractions, some of our own making, others present because our world is a booming, buzzing confusion. As you begin your studies at Baylor, may you be encouraged to strive to avoid the distractions that sometimes inundate our lives, and find the time and space to consider your own queries about meaning and purpose. To pose these questions is never quick or easy, nor will it guarantee a good grade or a six-figure salary when you graduate.

It is, nevertheless, among the most important things you can do while you are here. And it just might change your life.

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