

THE LOST ART OF WATCHFULNESS

The Attention Wars: Reclaiming the Sacred in a Distracted Age — Talk 2 of 4

HOW DID I GET HERE?

The other day, I picked up my phone for one simple, holy, ministerial purpose: to check the weather. That was it. But before I knew it, I was watching a video about a man who trained his dog to ring a bell every time it wanted cheese. Then a recipe for garlic butter chicken. Then a Maui sunset. Then a tiny house inside a school bus. Then — somewhere around the third video on how to fold fitted sheets — I looked up and said, "How did I get here?"

Here is what I realized: the algorithm wasn't showing me random things. It knew me. It knew what I liked, what I paused on, what I clicked, and what I returned to. And little by little — without my knowledge or consent — it was training my attention.

WHAT STUDIES OUR ATTENTION BEGINS TO SHAPE OUR ATTENTION

This is not a sermon against technology. Your phone is not evil. Social media is not Satan wearing Wi-Fi. Technology is an amazing servant — it is just a terrible master. But anything that watches what we notice, what we click, what we linger on, and what we react to can gradually learn how to influence us. The algorithm notices: he paused on that video, he liked that recipe, he stayed with that outrage story. Then it gives you more of the same. And little by little, your attention is trained.

THE ATTENTION WARS

We are living in what I call The Attention Wars. Not because someone wants our money — companies have always wanted our money. Today they want something far more valuable: our attention. Because attention is where life happens. It determines what we notice, what we think about, what we feel, what we remember, and ultimately — what we become.

"WATCH AND PRAY" — MATTHEW 26:41

The ancient spiritual traditions understood the battle for attention thousands of years ago. Standing in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus expressed the antidote in these simple words: "Watch and pray." Notice He didn't say, "Worry and pray." He didn't say, "React and pray." He didn't say, "Scroll and pray." He said, Watch. Watch your thoughts. Watch your heart. Watch what you are feeding your consciousness. Watch where your life energy is flowing. Then pray.

YOU CAN'T TRANSFORM WHAT YOU NEVER NOTICE

Watchfulness is sacred awareness. It isn't suspicion. It isn't hypervigilance. It isn't walking around wondering who is trying to corrupt your soul. Watchfulness is gently noticing where your attention has wandered — and lovingly bringing it home. Because here is the truth: you cannot transform what you never notice. The first act of every genuine spiritual practice is awareness. See what is actually happening inside you. Then you can choose.

BRINGING IT HOME

Every spiritual practice is ultimately trying to bring us home. Prayer brings us home. Meditation brings us home. Gratitude brings us home. Forgiveness brings us home. The problem isn't that we leave home once in a while. The problem is that we sometimes forget we ever lived there. Have you ever sat in a beautiful place — watching the sunset on Maui — and not actually been there? Your body was watching the sunset. Your mind was replaying yesterday's argument, worrying about tomorrow's appointment, mentally composing an email. Your body arrived. Your awareness took another route.

I am here. I am awake. I am available to the sacred now.

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THE UNTRAINED MIND WANDERS

This isn't only happening because of our phones. Phones simply reveal something that has always been true: the untrained mind wanders. The Buddha talked about it. The desert mystics talked about it. The Christian contemplatives talked about it. Modern neuroscience talks about it. Our attention naturally drifts. But here is the good news: awareness can return. Again, and again and again. That is the practice. Not perfection. Return.

OUR THOUGHTS ARE CREATIVE. ATTENTION IS CREATIVE TOO.

In Unity, we teach that our thoughts are creative. Well, if thoughts are creative, then attention is creative too — because whatever consistently receives our attention begins to shape the landscape of our consciousness. If I continually feed fear, fear grows. If I continually feed resentment, resentment grows. If I continually feed gratitude, gratitude grows. Attention is like sunlight: whatever it shines upon begins to grow. So perhaps the deeper question isn't only "What am I thinking?" it is: "What am I watering?"

WHAT HAS YOUR ATTENTION BEEN FEEDING THIS WEEK?

Think about your own life. What has your attention been feeding this week? Peace? Comparison? Joy? Politics? Fear? Wonder? Gratitude? You don't have to judge yourself. Just *notice*. That's watchfulness. The mystics discovered that the sacred isn't hiding. God isn't absent. Our awareness is. Watchfulness doesn't create the sacred — it reveals it.

THREE PRACTICES OF WATCHFULNESS

1. Pause Before You Give Your Attention Away

Before opening the app, clicking the headline, or turning on the television, pause. Ask yourself: "Is this where I want to place my life energy?" Not because it's wrong — but because attention is precious. Every moment you hand your attention away is a moment you are choosing what will shape your consciousness.

2. Identify the Influencing Thought or Belief

When you notice your attention has been captured, ask what is driving it. "Is this fear? Comparison? Outrage? Boredom? Limited thinking?" Name it. Call it what it is. Because the moment you name it, everything changes.

The moment you name it, you are watching it. You are no longer trapped inside it.

3. Come Back to Your Body

Take one conscious breath. Feel your feet on the floor. Relax your shoulders. Notice the sounds around you. Say quietly: "I am here. This is now. God is present." It takes less than ten seconds — and those ten seconds can change the trajectory of your entire day.

I am here. I am awake. I am available to the sacred now.

CLOSING WORD

The Attention Wars are not won by throwing away our phones. They are won by reclaiming our awareness. Every day we are deciding what will shape our consciousness. We may not control every notification. But we can choose which ones deserve our soul. Three times today, pause and ask: "Where is my attention? Who is choosing it? What would love have me notice right now?" That simple practice may become one of the most revolutionary things you ever do.

THIS WEEK'S BLESSING

May your awareness be gentle and your attention be clear. May you notice the sacred in the ordinary and the divine in the everyday. May your thoughts be guided by love, your choices rooted in presence, and your heart anchored in peace. May you return, again and again, to the quiet center within you where God is always present. And may your life become a living prayer — awake, aware, and aligned with the highest good.