

Laura Fitzpatrick-Nager
 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
 Texts: Psalm 71:1-6; Jeremiah 6:16; Jeremiah 7:1-7
 October 10, 2021

Seeking Soul in an ER World: The Sacred Art of Paying Attention

“Thus, says our God, stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls.”

Jeremiah 6:16

Let's begin with a moment of silence. Feel free to close your eyes if that's comfortable...Let's settle into the silence and listen. Listen into this shared sacred space of breath and autumn air, the heartbeat of our neighbors, the rustling of a bulletin, maybe a bird outside the window...let's settle in for a minute letting your breath in and out slowly and easily... (1-minute passes)

Thank you.

Have you had many chances to do that this week? To do nothing but sit and listen to your surroundings. To give yourself a moment for your soul to catch up with you?

I found it to be a hard week for finding a quiet moment. There wasn't any silence to be had in the Emergency Dept at Yale this past Monday. Waiting to be seen in an emergency department is like being on a hospital tv show, only what you're witnessing is real life: the drama of wounded patients filling every inch of every hallway, the confusing maze of beds stacked up around the medical stations, the distress cries of someone in pain. The worry about catching COVID while you're waiting for help and hope.

There's an emergency in the ER every few secs it seems.

There's a woman holding her head in both hands as though it's too heavy for her to carry by herself. There are broken bones and broken hearts. And lungs that won't breathe properly.

And ever present, is this stalwart army of medical personnel working to stem the tide of illness, accidents, overdoses and disease. These angelic steely-eyed mortal combatants saving lives with all they've got.

I was accompanying a friend who fell and she's teaching me patience as we wait. We're waiting for her X-ray and while we wait together, I'm moved by the dance we're witnessing. The physicians, nurses and technicians individually and collectively form a cadre of competence and assurance. It is orchestral, beautiful and deeply reassuring as they try to steel themselves to address the death in room 3, the fractured tibia in hallway 1 and the intubation in room 10.

I hope they know how good they all are. And how grateful I am they've bandaged the arm of my loved one and released us back out into the world. I listened and learned from them

how to not be afraid, how to work in community under extreme circumstances as best as one can. How to be human in the chaos.

I wonder though, at the toll living at that level of stress must take.

Lately, it feels that many of us are living at an adrenaline pace not unlike what I experienced in the emergency department. The acuteness of the pandemic has passed more or less...and so, armed with masks, the schedules and activities and appointments have returned at a harried clip taking precedence over wellbeing.

One of the challenges I'm noticing around us (and experiencing myself) is adjusting to the frenetic rush of life resuming. After having more slow time to choose more discerningly what to pay attention to. Now, I find I'm even more attached to my phone than ever before. God forbid I don't return someone's text in the next 5 minutes no matter what activity is interrupted or who I'm with. Where did my boundaries around time and space go? And the waves of anxiety that come especially at 3 in the morning seem relentless.

I figure others are experiencing this too as the Sleep aids and melatonin lotions section at CVS has grown into its own exhibit area off the main aisle.

And as we organize youth events and church programming we run up against the myriad of demands for time on family and student schedules. In fact, it feels like we are in a competition. And to what cost?

I see this caught in the headlights look on parents' and grandparents faces— and on my own. I know that look—it's the “how am I gonna get this all done” and “what if I miss something” look. It's the never enough look; never enough time, never enough hours, never enough help, never enough.

Perhaps it was like this before the pandemic, but now it feels even more intense, or my sensitivity and perceptions have changed. There's hardly time to breathe let alone reflect on the journey, on this moment now. Where is the contemplative path found at this hectic pace?

Current clinical research and newspaper articles indicate, anxiety among our children and youth is significantly impacting their mental health and ability to perform in school.... the ripple effects are deep and wide. For many children, the profound disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic — from remote learning to reduced social contact — significantly exacerbated, or led to the emergence of, experiences of anxiety and depression.¹

What's underneath all these challenges? What's broken? Where do we go from here?

¹ https://www.courant.com/coronavirus/hc-news-coronavirus-mental-health-connecticut-childrens-20211006-cvpgy3longr7ii5sk7zqbe6ya-story.html?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Don%27t%20Miss&utm_content=5581633530212#nws=true

Our prophetic scripture for today speaks into this abyss of fear, time and anxiety. Jeremiah, that ancient and beleaguered poet of God, accompanies his people in and out of exile. He carries their pain on his back, in his heart. Jeremiah reminds his community, the city of Jerusalem, of their theological resources and roots to make a way through trauma and loss. Jeremiah reminds God's people that the story of Exodus, Moses leading the people to freedom with courage- this story is theirs, too. And ours. The Book of Jeremiah is filled with lament and with hope. Burdens ever present and yet, sorrows lifted and blessings shared for a future full of hope.

Writes the theologian, Walter Bruggemann, "the poet in exile sings his people to homecoming..."

*Stand at the crossroads, and look, (he preaches)
and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies;
and walk in it, and find rest for your souls." Jeremiah 6:16*

Jeremiah, like Jesus, six centuries later, promises rest for one's soul. "Come to me Jesus says, all who are heavy burdened, and I will give you rest." There is a way and a place. Stand at the crossroads and look.

There's no panacea offered. Only choices and modes of being in the world that invite a slower pace and a spiritual re-attunement. Time for quiet and solitude, I'd call it the Sacred Art of Paying Attention.

Artists, musicians and poets in our midst remind us of where this pathway lies.

One writer calls it "Slow-walking". Slow walking is the practice of taking time to respond to bids for your attention, allowing the dust to settle, to see if things really need attention. Slow-walking is approaching everything as if it's not on fire, but asking instead if it's worthy of procrastination. SHmmm...is this worthy of my attention? Of my Procrastination? Some questions for the crossroads.

Because you know what? Most things are rarely as important as they feel in the moment. And they're rarely so urgent that they need an urgent ER response.

In her book, *Doing Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*, author Jenny O'Dell describes the ER world we're living in and a way to deeper presence in the world.² She suggests we look at and question those external demands on our attention that in many ways have changed our society and relationships. Our attention is monetized for the sake of profit. Odell describes a capitalist productivity driven system that monetizes our very human desire to connect with others, live in community and feel a sense of belonging.

According to author Odell, paying attention is an act of resistance that not only frees us from the captivity of the attention economy but frees us to engage more deeply with our humanity and sense of place in the world. Odell pushes back against the ever-present corporate

² Jenny Odell, *Doing Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (2019).

nature of time and productivity and the way platforms (dare I say FB and Instagram, Tik Tok) buy and sell our time—and our kids' time.

If you've seen the latest 60 Minutes episode on what's being revealed by a Whistleblower and former employee from Facebook and the systemic nature of the social controls built into their algorithms that manipulate and profit from our human behaviors (in particular, our fears and anger). I can't say I understand all the dimensions but its very Brave New World-esqe, others dictating and shaping our minds, hearts and choices. And the impact is felt worldwide. While buying and selling is an ordinary part of the economy, the challenge of today is that the vying for our attention whether from politicians, advertisers, influencers or newsmakers, is relentless. We know that advertisers are paying for our attention, a valuable resource in this world, and that social media networks are getting savvier at capturing it for big money.

What O'Dell suggests is that “doing nothing” is about disengaging from the attention economy; and secondly, re-engaging with something or someone else. She offers an invitation to mindfulness, putting down that phone and taking a walk.

In the religious imagination, we'd echo Jesus' words, “being in the world but not of the world is part of the Way” (Jn 17.14) and go off to a quiet place. Finding places of solitude in which to dwell and do nothing before re-engaging the world. “To rest in the peace of wild things” as Wendell Berry would encourage us to do, to walk slowly and bow often tapping into the rhythm from solitude to community and back again.

The tradition of the mystics, like Teresa of Avila and others, was to lead fellow travelers and seekers to relationship with God and one's world. To foster an “interior castle” as this 16th century mystic imagined it. Avila wrote, “Each of us has a soul, but we forget to value it. We don't remember that we are creatures made in the image of God. We don't understand the great secrets hidden inside of us.”

As a church, we're standing at the crossroads too. Emerging from all that has occurred in the past year and a half means fostering ways of coming together that supports the life of the soul within one another and our community. And widening our attention to the neighbor before us.

This is a time to Pause.

Pause mindfully before we welcome a new refugee family, pause as we re-negotiate gatherings with COVID and red zones still a reality. Pause before we hurtle into that next staff or Zoom event. A place to start may be to pay attention to where you and I are paying attention—in a given day, what is claiming your attention, and what's needed to help encourage a renewed or new more contemplative way of being? The slow walking way—far from the reach of the predatory algorithm.

Writes *Katherine Willis Pershey*, “We need to cultivate the sort of resilient solitude immune to the temptation to check for notifications. We need to be neighbors before we are consumers.”³ To immerse ourselves in the holy moment in the woods.

³ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/reflection/it-takes-faith-resist-attention-economy>

We all have the ability to still our minds and enter what the monks call, “the Great Silence.”

Like the prophet’s testimony to stand at the crossroads, I think we as Church, as people on our own journeys of faith, are uniquely situated to find more balance in our days, not for navel gazing—that’s not what the interior life is. An examined life is not for public consumption but for the soul’s rest and a deepening awareness of the presence of the holy. In order to return to the world again with new eyes and an awakened heart.

A crossroads is a threshold place. A thin place, the Celts call it, an opportunity to encounter the sacred and walk another way. Living contemplatively in an ER world. Hear this blessing by John O’Donohue:

“Take refuge in your senses, open up
To all the small miracles you rushed through.
Become inclined to watch the way of rain
When it falls slow and free.

Imitate the habit of twilight,
Taking time to open the well of color
That fostered the brightness of day.

Draw alongside the silence of stone
Until its calmness can claim you.
Be excessively gentle with yourself.

Stay clear of those vexed in spirit.
Learn to linger around someone of ease
Who feels they have all the time in the world.

Gradually, you will return to yourself,
Having learned a new respect for your heart
And the joy that dwells far within slow time.

Go gently my friends.