

*Intention and Attention***A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation****By The Rev. CJ McGregor****Delivered on April 3, 2022**

I'd like to begin this morning with a poem by Mary Oliver titled *The Summer Day*.

Who made the world?
 Who made the swan, and the black bear?
 Who made the grasshopper?
 This grasshopper, I mean -
 the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
 the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
 who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down -
 who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
 Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
 Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
 I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
 I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
 into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
 how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
 which is what I have been doing all day.
 Tell me, what else should I have done?
 Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
 Tell me, what is it you plan to do
 with your one wild and precious life?

+ Mary Oliver

The most famous lines of this poem are the last two: they're taped to mirrors and pinned to cork boards and framed in embroidery and on and on — and sure enough, they're lines worth remembering. But the heart of the poem is a couple of lines earlier: "Tell me, what else should I have done?" What else, that is, besides "falling down in the grass, being idle and blessed, strolling through the fields all day." At its heart, this poem is a little revolution, a provocative question mark beside the conventional answers to the query, *What makes for a day well lived? How should I spend this "summer day"?* *This summer day, I mean — the one we're in right now. The one we'll live in tomorrow.*

Oliver's potentially life-changing intention is that we very well may need to rethink what a "productive day" looks like. It may look a lot less like a day tied to screens and email and housework and errands and getting things done, and a lot more like the simple, astonishing affair of getting to know a grasshopper. This grasshopper, I mean. And if we remember that not everyone today has the opportunity to take a day in the fields to be "idle and blessed," then this

poem may redouble our efforts to build a world in which everyone — everyone! — has the occasional time and space to stroll through the fields, “wild and precious,” holding out a little sugar in our hand. Being intentional about paying attention.

Deepak Chopra tells us, “Attention energizes and Intention transforms.” Attention is the act or power of carefully thinking about, listening to, or watching someone or something. It is showing interest and awareness and applying the mind to something. Intention is the thing you plan to do; an aim or purpose. Let us consider intention the product of attention. Devoting attention to something is an intimate act. Our focus is narrowed and we are able to bring to life or awaken that to which we are applying the power of our mind—for better or worse. If we focus attention on our body we may notice we are hungry or our knees are tired from bicycling. If we focus attention on reconciling our checkbook, we have a better chance of finding the balance we seek. Focused attention on the smallest steps of our goals brings about the action needed to complete them. When we focus our attention on the negative aspects of our lives, we are able to keep those alive as well.

This is not to be confused with the subtle difference of *observing*—an act done with a sense of neutral separation from the suffering ego. If I am lying in bed trying to fall asleep and I notice a small pain in my shoulder, if I focus my attention on it, my mind responds with a sense of panic—albeit a low-level one—and the pain intensifies a bit, worrying my mind more, thereby increasing the pain more and so on, and the pain grows. If instead, when I *observe* the pain, I look at it objectively as if I were outside my body and my mind is more likely to be unruffled and there’s a good chance my awareness of the pain will slowly dissolve. This works because I have previously set an *intention* to be more mindful of my body’s messages and to become aware of where I put my attention vs. what I decide to simply observe.

Intention holds a space for that which we desire. It is the hope that cheers us on and it allows us to experiment with different solutions—different places to place our *attention*—in order to achieve our goal. As Mary Beth Janssen explains in her book *Pleasure Healing*, “Intentions aren’t fleeting thoughts or wishes, but rather they’re like sacred rocket fuel, turning your good, but half-baked ideas into brilliant, fully-formed bullet points.”

This reminds me of the writings of May Sarton. I fell in love with the notion of the intention to pay attention while reading Sarton’s *Journal of a Solitude*. In this she writes with intense observation and emotional courage of both inner and outer worlds: a garden, the seasons, daily life in New Hampshire, books, people, ideas—and throughout everything, her spiritual and artistic journey. “I am here alone for the first time in weeks,” May Sarton begins this book, “to take up my ‘real’ life again at last. That is what is strange—that friends, even passionate love, are not my real life, unless there is time alone in which to explore what is happening or what has happened.” In this journal, she says, “I hope to break through into the rough, rocky depths, to the matrix itself. There is violence there and anger never resolved. My need to be alone is balanced against my fear of what will happen when suddenly I enter the huge empty silence if I cannot find support there.” In this book, we are closer to the marrow than ever before in May Sarton’s writing.

Let's unpack Sartre's thoughts. She tells us that passion and love are not real life unless we take the time to explore and discern what is happening or what has happened. She describes a breaking through to the matrix. Think of a fine-grained rock in which gems and crystals are embedded or if you're like me, think of it as getting to that gooey center of your favorite confection. Seek and you shall find. Henry David Thoreau offers us words as seekers that may comfort us. He said, "As you simplify your life, the laws of the universe will be simpler; solitude will not be solitude, poverty will not be poverty, nor weakness." He also said, "I have a great deal of company in the house, especially in the morning when nobody calls."

It can take practice to finesse the balance between these two powerful forces—intention and attention. By continually returning to the present moment and objectively looking at where we can put our attention *right now*, rather than lamenting where we've failed to act in the past, or worrying too much about where we're going to have to act in the future, we allow our intention to manifest more easily and with far less suffering. Intention and attention are partners who need one another to bring about the change in our lives we desire. When we set an intention but avoid attention, it remains elusive and unattended. Without the action encouraged by attention we grow cynical and can experience a dip in self-confidence. The elusiveness of our plan can become an excuse for avoiding action. This creates stress, feelings of guilt and frustration. Attention without clear intention can cause feelings of spinning our wheels and ultimately lacking a sense of purpose. We can repeatedly experience a quick fix, but we see no long-term transformation.

Your attention determines the experiences you have, and the experiences you have determine the life you live. Or said another way: you must control your attention to control your life. Today, in a world where so many experiences are blended together — where we can work from home (or a train or a plane or a beach), watch our kids on a nanny-cam from work, and distraction is always just a thumb-swipe away — has that ever been more true? To be consistently productive and manage stress better, we must strengthen our skill in attention management. Rather than allowing distractions to derail you, you choose where you direct your attention at any given moment, based on an understanding of your priorities and goals. Better attention management leads to improved productivity, but it's about much more than checking things off a to-do list. The ultimate result is the ability to create a life of *choice*, around things that are important to you. It's more than just exercising focus. It's about taking back control over your time and your priorities.

One element of consciously choosing how to relate and respond to the world means I'm frequently asking myself, again and again: How do I want to respond to these challenging times? What is my intention in the midst of it all, and how does my practice support me? Can I "let be" and relax with this level of uncertainty and how does my intention support me in doing just that? Can I cultivate self-compassion and compassion for others as we all navigate this uncharted territory? And can I begin again when I feel that I have strayed from my intention (which, if I am being totally honest, has certainly happened countless times)? The reminder here is that intention is pointing in a direction, it's a north star, not a destination. If I am paying attention when I get off course, which will inevitably happen, I can always make a course correction.

In our lightning-paced world, people everywhere are experiencing an attention deficit crisis. I believe attention is the new currency. Attention is EVERYTHING! Intentional attention is about creating moments that *MATTER*. Here's the caveat to that however: Intentional attention may mean reducing your social media time, putting away devices and noticing everyone around you. While that may seem a little stressful – your life will be richer for it. It's an extraordinary time to be alive. When we take the time to slow down a little and truly appreciate the world, the people around us and the moments we're in – we can enjoy it all the more. I leave you with instructions for living a life written by Mary Oliver. She writes, "Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it."

May it be so.