

## The Practice of Paying Attention

Ruth Haley Barton

*“Spiritual leadership springs forth in grace from our very desire for God’s presence. This does not take effort or striving. It takes courage, a kind of showing up, attentiveness.” --Gerald May*

It was a very humbling moment in my life as a person in ministry. I was on staff in a church where, like most churches and organizations, we had lots of meetings. It was normal for our days to be so packed with back-to-back meetings that sometimes it was hard to take care of personal needs, let alone pay attention to anything! On one such day when I had allowed myself to get scheduled in this manner, our youngest daughter, Haley, was at home sick. As I headed into an afternoon meeting that would last until the end of the day, I realized that I had not had a chance to call home and check on her. Since I could not be late for this meeting, the only thing I could do was call home while I was (quite literally) running through the hallways. It was not a pretty sight.

As I rounded a bend in one of those hallways—running, talking on the phone, skirt flapping in the breeze—I almost ran into another staff member coming down the hall from the opposite direction. He was so stunned by this mini-tornado careening down the hallway and I was so embarrassed by the state I was in, that we both stopped and stared at each other. I finally mumbled a greeting and kept on going, all the while thinking, “When the spiritual formation people are running through the hallways, talking on their cell phones, there is something seriously wrong with this picture!”

I take full responsibility for my state of being on that day and most days. The way I was careening down that hallway was a microcosm of the whole and it was no one’s fault but my own. *I had allowed myself* to slip into a way of life in which I was running

from here to there with no time for listening and paying attention. And that is precisely my point. *Many* of us have allowed ourselves to get caught up in a way of life that does not set us up to pay attention to the presence of God in our lives. We long for a word from the Lord but somehow we have been suckered into believing that the kind of pace we keep is what leadership requires. We slide inexorably into way of life that offers little or no opportunity for paying attention and then we wonder why we are not hearing a word from the Lord when we need it.

### **“I Must Turn Aside and Look at This Great Sight”**

Contrast this mad dash through the hallways of our lives with Moses’ experience with the burning bush in Exodus 3. He had been in solitude for forty years, so he had become pretty quiet on the inside. He had gotten real with himself and with God in some very profound ways, but still hadn’t made sense of it all. On this day, he was staying faithful to what he had been given to do—tending the flocks of his father-in-law, Jethro—but he ventured out a little further than usual and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.

It was almost like God had been waiting for this moment—waiting for Moses to settle down and become quiet enough so that he could address Moses directly. Up until now, God’s presence in the story had been strongly implied, but no action or word had been directly attributed to him. Now that God had a saner person to deal with, he could take a more direct approach!

It was an angel of the Lord that caused the initial commotion of the burning bush and *when the Lord saw that Moses had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush*. It seems that there was a cause and effect relationship between Moses’ willingness

to pay attention and God's willingness to speak. At last, all other voices had quieted down enough so that Moses could recognize a new Voice calling to him from the burning bush in the middle of his own life. Finally, he was ready to receive a word from the Lord.

### **The Practice of Paying Attention**

The practice of “turning aside to look” is a spiritual discipline, which, by its very nature sets us up for an encounter with God. Elizabeth Dreyer, in her book *Earth Crammed with Heaven*, makes this provocative statement: “In a profound way, our intentionality is a key ingredient determining whether we notice God everywhere or only in church or only in suffering or nowhere. It all depends on how we choose to fashion our world.”

These days there is so much vying for our attention—such a glut of information and stimulation—that it is often hard to know what to *give* our attention to. Should I take that class, read this highly recommended book, attend that conference, subscribe to this magazine or newsletter, interact with this blog or website, watch this television program, read this research, search the Internet just a little more...? When we do create space where we can exercise some discretion about what to do with our time, we might find that we are literally spinning in circles from one worthy-of-attention thing to another, not knowing what to choose.

Learning to pay attention and knowing what to pay attention *to* is a key discipline for leaders, but one that rarely comes naturally to those of us who are barreling through life so fast with our eyes fixed on the goal. One of the down sides of visionary leadership is that we can get our sights set on something that is so far out in the future that we miss what's going on in our lives as it exists now. We are blind to the bush that is burning in

our own back yard and the wisdom that is contained within it. We squander the gift of this day just as it is, these people just as they are, the uniqueness and the sweetness (even the bitter sweetness) of this particular place on the journey just as it is, the voice of God calling to us in our own wilderness places.

All of us have burning bushes in our lives, places that shimmer with grace, alerting us to the possibility that God is at work doing something that we could not have predicted. Recently our leadership community went on retreat to listen for God's direction regarding some fairly significant directional decisions. During this retreat, we spent a great deal of time taking an honest look at our financial picture and asking questions about what that meant relative to smaller decisions and larger directional decisions. After getting the issues on the table and spending time in silence and personal reflection, we were not able to answer all of the larger questions but we did make some smaller decisions based on our financial forecast. One of those decisions was not to take on some additional office space that we had had our sights set on for quite some time. This was a painful but unanimous decision. A few days later, I explained our decision to those close to us and that was that.

Or so I thought.

Later on that day, one of the people who had heard about our decision, sensed God saying, "You can help with that!" In finding out the details of what the office space would cost, they sensed God prompting them to contribute the funds that would enable us to take the space for the year.

Now, if I had been functioning primarily in typical boardroom mentality, I might have seen this as a closed issue since we had already voted on it. I might have expressed my appreciation to this person and tried to talk them into giving to operational expenses

or some such thing. I might have assumed that since we didn't know everything about our future, we should take a pass on this particular opportunity at this time. But instead the offer of this gift seemed more like a burning bush—something that was strange and unexpected and warranted our attention. It was something none of us could have orchestrated and it was clear that we needed to ask God what it meant rather than approaching it merely as a mental exercise.

As I paid attention to it in God's presence, what I heard was surprising and clarifying. First of all, I sensed God saying very clearly, "*You don't know what your future holds but I do and I know what you will need for that future. That is why I am giving this to you.*" I even experienced a sense of anticipation about one day looking back at this moment from some future perspective and seeing more clearly why this office space was so needed.

The second thing that God impressed upon me had to do with the nature of gifts. *What do you do with gifts?* I heard God ask.

*You receive them,* I heard myself answer.

I heard God saying, *Stop grasping at what I haven't given. Instead, just receive what I am giving you and build your ministry with that.*

What a simple and straightforward thing for God to say! These two learnings filled me with so much peace that there wasn't anything else I needed to know. My soul was strengthened in a very deep way and I was ushered into a kind of rest in ministry that I had not experienced for a very long time. Paying attention to this particular burning bush served more than just the moment; it became a light that illuminated the path ahead.

## **Paying Attention to All Things Burning**

For a leader to take time to turn aside and look is no small thing. In the rush of normal life, we often blow right past the place where God is creating a stir so he can get our attention. But if spiritual leadership is anything, it is the capacity to see the bush burning in the middle of our own lives and having enough sense to turn aside, take off our shoes, and pay attention! Amid the welter of possible distractions, an essential discipline for leaders is to craft times for quiet noticing in which we allow God to show us those things that we might otherwise miss. We need time for the chaos in our souls to settle a bit so that we can turn aside to look at the great sights in our own lives and seek understanding about what they mean.

If we are aware of our longing for a word from the Lord, we might ask ourselves, “Does my life allow for much listening? How much paying attention am I doing--really? Do I have enough ‘give’ in my schedule to be able turn aside and look when there is something going on that warrants it? If I haven’t heard a word from the Lord in awhile, could it be that I am moving so fast that I do not have the time to turn aside and look?”

One of the most soul-strengthening things that can happen to a leader in the crucible of ministry is to know that God is at work and to hear a Voice speaking that is not our own. The practice of paying attention to all things burning in and around us gives us the chance to hear God calling us by name once again. The practice of paying attention awakens us to that which is extraordinary in the midst of the ordinary. And as we live our lives in response to the One who is calling to us out the burning bush in our own lives, we discover that we are standing on Holy Ground more often than we think!

## Practice

As you come to end of this reading, take a few moments to pay attention to your own life. First of all, pay attention to your breathing. Notice how in the rush of things, your breathing tends to become shallow and something you take for granted. On this day, take time to breathe deeply and more slowly. Receive each breath as God's gift to you, evidence that he wants you to be alive today.

Then, take time to notice anything in your own life that seems surprising or out of the ordinary. Ask God to reveal whatever it is in your life that might be a burning bush and ponder what it might mean for you. It doesn't matter whether it seems significant or insignificant to you. The fact that God is bringing it to your attention and speaking to you about it is reason enough for you to take off your shoes and respond with reverence. Listen to what God has to say to you with utter willingness to follow the wisdom or guidance that comes.

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