

## SLOWING TO ATTENTION

THE UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP OF PETERBOROUGH

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NOVEMBER 10, 2019

### OPENING WORDS

~ *Richard S. Gilbert*<sup>1</sup>

We stop. We pause. We pay attention. We center ourselves.

We free ourselves from the compulsion of projects to finish, work to be done, things to accomplish.

We leave ourselves alone for a time.

We journey deep down into that quiet center where no voice is heard.

We live for a brief time on an island of peace.

We apprehend the world from a quiet center.

Here is the center of the world.

In this instant are centered the whirling orbs, the movement of the earth and sky.

In this fragile moment of time is the culmination of all that has been and the promise of all that shall be.

Here in our grasp, in this moment, is the center of the world.

May these words guide us in the ways of worship and of wonder.

### STORY 4 ALL *The Sloth Who Slowed Us Down* ~ *Margaret Wild*

*(A sloth comes to live with the speediest family in the world, and helps them to slow down.)*

### LITANY FOR REMEMBRANCE DAY

For all those who have served, at home and abroad, during times of war, conflict and peace, and for those who are in harm's way today... *We hold you in love.*

For all who serve with gladness, or remember their service with fondness, and who came home largely intact to their families and their lives... *We hold you in love.*

For all those whose time in service still haunts them, who returned broken and struggling, unable to tell us what they experienced and saw... *We hold you in love.*

For the families and beloveds of those who did not come home, carrying the confusing and heartbreaking burdens of pride, anger and grief... *We hold you in love.*

For all those who live in war-torn regions of the world, who have lost their homes, and who suffer in the presence of violence and danger... *We hold you in love.*

For those leaders who would choose war over negotiation, and for those leaders who would choose peace at the cost of control and power... *We hold you in love.*

For those of us, who, far from danger, might harden our hearts and turn away, that we find compassion, knowing that all deserve to be happy, and safe, and loved... *We hold you in love.*

*We hold you in love.*

For all of us, in all places, in every trench and battlefield, despite the evil that is done, despite the proclaiming of high ideals, despite our disagreements and our differing feelings on Remembrance Day... *We hold you in love.*

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<sup>1</sup> found in Rejoice Together, page 31 UUA meditation manual

**READING** *Sometimes it Takes a Little Craziiness* ~ Angela Herrera<sup>2</sup>

When you arrive at the store and can't remember why,  
and you forget the vet appointment and almost miss the dentist, even though they  
called you yesterday,  
and the bills are late and your kids need homework help and you are behind at work  
and haven't exercised in weeks,  
and you've been eating fast food while vegetables wilt in your fridge and your garden  
is turning into compost and the one time you try to cook you leave the granola in the  
toaster oven, setting the damn thing on fire,  
and you double book yourself again and laundry forms mountains around your home  
and you begin to look askance at your beloved because you haven't had fun together  
since you can't remember when,  
and then, just as you are starting to wonder about signs of dementia, you find yourself  
placing a metal spoon in the microwave and turning it on...  
just breathe.

Sometimes it takes a little craziness to get your attention.

The prophet Elijah fled from a hundred pursuers. He hunkered down in a cave on the  
wind-whipped mountainside, trembled through an earthquake, and shielded his face  
from a wildfire. He looked for God in the chaos. But when the storms blew over, when  
the shaking stilled and the flames died down, he crouched, panting, and thinking he'd  
missed it, his heart pounding in his ears. Then he finally noticed the still small voice.  
The holy waits in your world, too. Maybe today it will find you in a listening posture,  
and will whisper to you.

"You tumble like a leaf," it will say. "And yet by some miracle you are still here. Now  
what is the purpose of that?"

**MESSAGE** *Slowing to Attention* ~ Rev. Julie

I don't have this experience every morning, probably because I'm not paying attention, though  
maybe you've occasionally experienced this too...those few luxurious moments, still half  
asleep, when I slowly stretch out...every limb, my scalp, my eyelids, fingers and toes...feeling  
with each movement the gentle touch of the sheets as I move, and the morning light filtering  
into the room and nudging my eyes into focus. This stretching is often accompanied by a long  
expulsion of breath, an ahh... as my body awakens and with both regret and expectation, once  
again, becomes part of the waking world. A gentle slow slow transformation.

Though I was really tickled by the picture of the sloth hanging upside down to admire  
themselves in the mirror, my favourite part of this morning's story is when they go out for a walk  
in the evening. The illustrations are reminiscent of those moments of waking... methodical  
and sluggish...in a prone position, pushing one leg forward at a time, spreading its body  
forward at the speed of molasses across the grass. And because the family's usual 'quick trot  
around the block' was interrupted, they experienced a new slowness, which allowed for  
interactions with neighbours and pets, and time to admire the moon, and to star gaze.

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<sup>2</sup> Found in *Reaching for the Sun* (pg. 21), UUA meditation manual

I've learned that while they can move slightly more quickly, most of the time, sloths move at about 15-30 centimetres per minute. By way of example, if during the two minutes of silence we took earlier, you had been a sloth on the move, you would have advanced no more than 2 feet in all that time. Just take a moment and see if you can emulate a sloth. Embody sloth energy. Slow your heart. Slow even your blood flow, and just be stillness.

"Right away. Chop, chop," said Amy's mom in the story. Many moons ago, when I worked in production management for a large theatre company, one of my stage manager colleagues was much like that mother. She abhorred any absence of productive energy. "What is this, a turtle derby?" she'd ask. "Stop being such a slow loris," she'd command, while she scurried around backstage, on clickety clack high heels. "Chop, chop." I loved and admired her, though she sort of scared me. Still, I wanted to be like her. Efficient, terse, commanding, no nonsense.

And sometimes there is good reason to want to be that way. But today's message is just the opposite. DO be a slow loris. DO participate in turtle derbies. SLOW DOWN.

The grassroots Slow Food movement began in 1989 to respond to the disappearance of local food cultures, to counteract the rise of fast life (and fast food) and to reverse our dwindling interest in where the food we eat comes from and how our food choices affect the world around us.<sup>3</sup> Though it may have been the first, slow food is just one of many movements calling us to slow down...slow history, slow journalism, slow travel, slow money, slow or close reading, and slow art.

Slow art comes in response to research showing that even in the greatest museums in the world, even while observing the greatest masterpieces of all time, art viewers stop for an average of only 6-10 seconds. Slow art asks how taking more time to observe might change us.

Arden Reed, the author who coined the phrase 'slow art',<sup>4</sup> wrote of it as the prolonged encounter "between beholders and the beheld" ...an experience that unfolds in space and time when an artwork and its spectator mutually activate each other. When the observer meets the object, he says, it's transactional.<sup>5</sup> Relational. The artwork and the observer change one another. I think this is part of the purpose of art in great cathedrals and other places of worship...be it statuary, or stained glass windows, or painted ceilings. But there, in a slower mode, we gaze at these objects, and something shifts within us. Maybe you've had that experience here on occasion...the changing light coming through the coloured windows, the expansive space over our heads, the shimmering vibrancy of the oranges and blues in the ark behind me. In contemplation, we gaze, and that interaction changes us. Slow down. Attend to what is in front of you.

I'm reminded of the story of The Little Prince.<sup>6</sup> Remember when he meets the fox? At first, he hears, rather than sees, the fox, because the Little Prince has been crying, and is not paying

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.slowfood.com/about-us/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520300583/slow-art>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=16&v=XQxSrJV15ag](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=16&v=XQxSrJV15ag)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.piffe.com/thinkery/the-fox-and-the-little-prince.php>

attention. And then he wants the fox to play with him, and cheer him up, but the fox demands something else of the Little Prince. He demands to be tamed.

"What must I do, to tame you?" asked the little prince.

"You must be very patient," replied the fox. "First you will sit down at a little distance from me--like that--in the grass. I shall look at you out of the corner of my eye, and you will say nothing...But you will sit a little closer to me, every day ..."

And the Little Prince did this. He tamed the fox. And when it came time for them to part, though fox was very sad as they had developed a need for one another, he shared this secret with the Little Prince: "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye."

We see rightly through that which is invisible. Isn't it fascinating that it is by looking carefully and slowly that we 'see' what is invisible to the eye? It is the time spent noticing, paying attention, slowing down...which some consider to be wasting time...that the heart is changed. In slowing down, we give space for understanding and transformation to unfold and appear.

Going back to the work of Arden Reed, he likened modern life to an autobahn, on which we are traveling faster and faster, and said that the more quickly we move, the fewer available rest stops exist. Speed directly affects the lack of speed. The faster we go, the further we are, on the speedometer, from zero. We've learned to admire speed, become addicted to it, really. Everything new and shiny claims to do it better and faster.

But this speed takes its toll, and can't be sustained. And unfortunately, just as our need for timeouts grows, the means we have available to meet that need shrinks.

I am moved by Reed's analysis of the changing landscape around us and art's role in our potential transformation. As I understand him, he suggests that in earlier times, art was experienced within a spiritual context, and was something to contemplate, which is the practice of looking at something with intentional attention. It's a kind of religious musing, where space is set aside to notice, and to try to make sense of what might seem senseless.

But, said Reed, just as our need for such pauses to contemplate and slow down increases, at the same time, because of secularization, traditional means of experiencing that deceleration have become less and less available. He quoted Hegel, who in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, bemoaning how art had begun to move away from portraying 'that which art didn't invent', even then, said: "We bow the knee no longer before these art works. The statues are now only corpses from which the living soul has flown, just as the hymns are words from which belief has fled."

So Reed wondered what it is that can take the place of the worshipful gaze? And he believed it is the practice of slow art, which can occupy social spaces and replace those earlier practices of looking that happened in religious spaces.

But what I take from this, given my context, in this particular place and space with you, is that in our deep need to take a break from the craziness of our lives, we can still, always choose to

come together in contemplation. Slow art, sure. Absolutely. But also, slow spirituality. Slow religion. Slow communing with nature. Slow relationship. Slow attention.

Did the reference to Elijah in the earlier reading make any sense to you? It's a big dramatic saga found in the first book of Kings, but the point is that eventually, after a bunch of running, and ignoring, and crazy storms, Elijah gets himself into a listening posture. Finally he slows down and listens. Which is just another way to be in contemplation. Slow attention. Senses tuned. Looking. Listening. Feeling. Noticing.

Parker Palmer, who seems to make his way into most of my sermons, and also written about contemplation, saying that the practice first deprives us of familiar comforts, and then fills us with an inner emptiness where new truth can emerge. I expect we've all had a taste of this...when staring at a silent lake, or gazing at the stars, or when listening to an exquisite piece of music, or to the wind in the trees. It takes a moment, or sometimes longer than that, to still ourselves, and to let go of whatever has been occupying our minds and our hands. But then comes that emptiness, a very patient kind of waiting, without expectation.

But that emptiness is alive. As Reed said, it's transactional. We are in relationship with the stillness, and it changes us.

I've read about the work of Matthew Crawford, who wrote a book called "The World Beyond Your Head: Becoming an Individual in an Age of Distraction." Apparently, he argues for an ethics of attention. Not because attention is somehow moral, or the right thing to do, but because attention can reflect the sort of ethos we want to inhabit, an ethos that he calls an ecology of mindfulness.<sup>7</sup>

And so here's the question, given all that you've heard and experienced today, is slow attention an ethos you want to be able to inhabit? What's the purpose of being here, if we can't slow down and notice? Sure, most of us can't be in a place of contemplation all the time, but I do think that most of us are moving too fast most of the time, and would do well to find places of rest...to pause, to slow ourselves, and to pay attention. This is, and can be, that place for careful observation. Of life. Of death. Of the holy. Of our despair. Of meaning. We can, together, address our need to make sense of the senseless. In that mindful, slow, attentive gaze, we are changed.

The more we take time to slow down, the less often we will find ourselves racing through life. The more we pause, the less we rush. We can then, joyfully, lazily, relinquish our place as the speediest people in the world.

And wouldn't that be, well, slothful. And wonderfully life-changing.

So be it. Amen.

**READING**      *Notice Your Belovedness*      ~ Gretchen Haley

There is a time to let go  
the resistance  
the steadfast march

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<sup>7</sup> <https://whitebearunitarian.org/an-ethics-of-attention-01-10-16-sermon/> d

to complete the to-do list  
for parents and activists  
and for all who love this life  
these people, these mountains, this sky  
There is a time to rest,  
and to trust  
the world will go on  
filled with partners at the ready,  
all of us splitting shifts on this project  
of building and healing, tending and turning.  
Breath and being  
require their own  
practice  
their own attention  
and the heart needs time for becoming  
stronger, after the shattering  
the opening wider  
the learning to love more  
and again.  
[Take in the] stillness [of this moment]  
[Notice] your belovedness  
like a memory calling out  
from the center of your being  
connecting every little piece  
of everything to everyone, and all of us  
Feel gratitude rising,...  
For this chance to begin  
Again  
This day  
With hope.

**\*CLOSING WORDS** *Do Not Fail To Notice (adapted)*

~ *Gretchen Haley*

[As we part,  
Do not fail to be surprised  
By the catching of your breath  
The quickening of your heart  
The fullness of your eyes  
Wide and suddenly awake...  
[The world is] filled with wonder,  
[ready to be] born anew.  
Do not fail to notice.

Go in peace. Slowly. Noticing the world around you. Amen.

**EXTINGUISHING THE FLAME**