

## REFLECTIONS

*“Sacred Days, Holy Nights”*

I have been spending more time than usual in the past few weeks doing nothing but staring out our living room window. You see, at eight months, this is Sam’s new favorite pastime. He loves standing on the couch staring out the window watching the chipmunks and squirrels looking for food and trying desperately to get to the birdfeeder and watching the birds land on that feeder effortlessly and eat their fill. During a good windstorm he’ll stay there all day just to watch the leaves tumble down from the trees and dance around in the yard.

At the beginning I found this all completely tedious and spent my time with him contemplating the million other things I needed to be doing: laundry, dishes, paying the bills and balancing the checkbook, making a grocery list, or perhaps, working on a sermon. I sat there with him trying to figure out how I could tear him away from this window with the least amount of crying so that I could take him with me to another part of the house and get some real work done. Why was I sitting on the couch watching leaves fall when I had so many other things I needed to be doing? What toy could I distract him with that would give me the ten minutes I needed to check e-mail, make some phone calls, and quickly down that now lukewarm cup of tea? You see, Sam and I have a fundamental disagreement – I think that I can do at least four or five things at once and he thinks it’s important to focus on one thing at a time and at that moment it was some swirling leaves in the driveway.

At eight months, I am realizing that Sam is going to be my greatest teacher. I’ve given up on the notion that I, as his mother, am going to be the one teaching him. I’ve realized that I have much to learn from this tiny guide. That day at the window, which was exactly like so many days before it and hopefully days that will come after, I began to learn how to be completely in the present moment.

Not to worry about what happened that morning or to fret about what would happen the next day, but rather to simply be and enjoy that moment in a life. No matter how ordinary, to be with that moment and make the most of it.

And this simple yet complicated task of paying attention, of giving one moment our full and undivided attention, I believe, could be the challenge of our life's time and a way for us to heal ourselves and perhaps even a hurting world.

For paying attention is something that we do selectively and rather haphazardly these days. We spend time eating without tasting, hearing without really listening, and staring out a window and not seeing what is right there in front of our eyes. And mindfulness is one way of calling us back, reminding us of who we are, what we value, and helping us to wake up to the fullness of our lives.

But there does appear to be somewhat of a shift happening in our culture. Meditation is appearing as a cover story for Time magazine and the Harvard Law Review, and you'll find it on the covers of newspapers around the country. Everywhere you look, in cities big and small, meditation centers are opening and offering retreats, classes, and workshops and are being inundated with people who want to be there to learn and to practice. In our small group ministry here at FUS, our Chalice Group Program, we currently have three groups devoted to meditation that are full and many people signed up and waiting for new groups to form. We cannot create chalice groups fast enough to fill the need and the desire for meditation based groups.

“What on earth is going on? You might say that we are in the early stages of waking up as a culture to the potential of interiority, to the power of cultivating awareness and an intimacy with stillness and silence. We are beginning to realize the power of the present moment to bring us greater clarity and insight, greater emotional stability, and wisdom. We are beginning to understand that mindfulness is not an overwhelming practice or a complicated technique but

rather learning how to pay attention, a way of being in the world, a way of relating to one's own experience, a way of seeing, a way of knowing. In a word, mindfulness is no longer something foreign and exotic to be feared or ignored. It has arrived. And none too soon, either, given how desperately our world is in need of it." (Kabat-Zinn, *Coming to Our Senses*)

In a book entitled, *Coming to Our Senses*, Jon Kabat-Zinn writes:

"One manifestation of the disconnection and dis-ease that is increasingly prevalent in our world, is attention deficit disorder, ADD for short. ADD is a serious dis-regulation in the process of attention itself. It occurs in both children and adults. Thirty years ago, no one had ever heard of attention deficit. In fact, such a diagnosis didn't exist. Now, it appears to be a widespread and growing affliction. It might be worth stating that it appears as if our entire society suffers from ADD and from its most prevalent variant, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. And it is getting worse by the day. Learning how to refine our ability to pay attention and to sustain attention may no longer be a luxury but a lifeline back to what is most meaningful in our lives, what is most easily missed, ignored, denied, or run through so quickly that it could not possibly be noticed.

I have a sense that as Americans, we suffer from attention deficit in another way due to the particular direction our culture is heading. That is, in our driven and work obsessed culture we are prone to loneliness and isolation. And in that loneliness is a deep longing, a yearning, to belong, to be connected to a larger whole, to not be anonymous, to be seen and known. For relationality, exchange, give and take, especially on an emotional plane, is how we are reminded that we have a place in this world, how we know in our hearts that we do belong. It is deeply satisfying to experience meaningful connection with others. We hunger for that feeling of belonging, for the feeling that we are connected to something larger than ourselves. We hunger to be perceived by others, to be both noticed

and valued for who we actually are, and not merely for what we do. And mostly we are not.

Rarely are we touched by the benevolent seeing and knowing of who we are by other people, who, for the most part, are moving too fast to pay attention to anyone else for long. Our way of life, across suburban and rural communities, tends to be insular and isolating. Children watch hour upon hour of television or disappear into computer games rather than play in neighborhoods, in part simply to insure their safety, in part out of habit. Their attention while watching television is an entirely passive, asocial attention, a perpetual distraction from their own interiority, and from embodied relationality. Many studies are showing that active social engagement is on the decline in children. And as adults, we may no longer know our neighbors, and we certainly don't depend on them as earlier generations did.

Even in families, in this era many parents of young children are often so stressed, so preoccupied, and so busy that they are at high risk for not being present for their children, even when they are physically present. Parents are so chronically overwhelmed that they may not even see their children clearly in many moments, or even think to pick up and hold the little ones when they are distressed. So no one in the family may be getting the amount of attention they need and deserve.”

The challenge of our life's time is to decide if we are to continue on this course of non attention, or partial attention, of living out of touch with ourselves and one another or if we are going to stop and decide that we want to live differently, that we want to be differently. The decision is ours to make – do we want to continue living mindlessly or do we want to live a life in which we are fully awake, fully open, a life of mindfulness?

But what would that even look like? I have a colleague who tells me that she remains mindful by starting and ending her day with a 45 minute seated meditation. I must say that as the mom of that energetic and seemingly always awake 8 month old that sounds wonderful and impossible at the same time. So what to do? I find myself asking some important questions that I now pose to you:

What would it be like to settle into your own body, into a sense of just being alive, even for a few moments, or say, five minutes at the end of the day, lying in bed or just sitting around in the evening, or at the beginning of the day, before you even get out of bed? What would that be like?

What would it be like to drop in on yourself every once in a while and purposely not fill up that moment with anything – no worries, no anxieties, no to-dos, no should haves?

What would it be like to stop for a moment during a meal to check and see if you are actually eating that meal, or whether your mind is off someplace else filling itself up and forgetting to drop in on the here and now and the food on your tongue?

I am reminded of that great poem by Wendell Berry called *The Vacation*:

*Once there was a man who filmed his vacation.  
He went flying down the river in his boat  
with his video camera to his eye, making  
A moving picture of the moving river  
Upon which his sleek boat moved swiftly  
toward the end of his vacation. He showed*

*His vacation to his camera, which pictured it,  
Preserving it forever: the river, the trees,  
the sky, the light, the bow of his rushing boat  
behind which he stood with his camera  
preserving his vacation even as he was having it  
so that after he had had it he would still  
have it. It would be there. With a flick  
of a switch, there it would be. But he  
would not be in it. He would never be in it.*

Even on vacation, we can fill up our time seeking to have a good time, worrying about what's going on at home, what is on our agenda for tomorrow, are we seeing it all, fitting enough in? When we get home we have a photo album to prove we were there, but were we really?

As the pace of our lives continues to increase, many are searching for a way to slow down, to wake up to the fullness of their lives, and are finding themselves drawn to a practice of mindfulness, to this radical act of being, as difficult as that may be in our speed obsessed, goal obsessed culture.

“It is the challenge of this era to stay sane in an increasingly insane world. How are we ever going to do it if we are continually caught up in the chatter of our own minds and the bewilderment of feeling lost or isolated or out of touch with what it all means and with who we really are when all the doing and accomplishing is sensed as being in some way empty, and we realize how short life is?

Ultimately, it is only love that can give us insight into what is real and what is important. And so, a radical act of love makes sense – love for life and for the emergence of one's truest self.” (Kabat-Zinn)

One final thought: I do believe that if we allow ourselves to enter into the fullness of our lives, if we begin to live our lives as if they really mattered, if we open ourselves to the practice of mindfulness we will, one at a time, change the world. As we do this work of transformation and healing on a personal level we become aware of the need to be in real relationship, the need to be connected to a larger whole, to be seen, to be known and to know one another. And when we learn how to pay attention, full attention, to those around us we can truly learn how to open ourselves to one another with compassion and we are led to act accordingly. And, when we pay attention to the world around us, we become aware of the pain and the conflict and the sorrow and the injustice and we are called to be fully present to the struggle and to lend our strength and wisdom to the cause.

Jon Kabat-Zinn reminds us, “The world needs all its flowers, just as they are, and even though they bloom for only the briefest of moments, which we call a lifetime. It is our job to find out one by one and collectively what kind of flowers we are, and to share our unique beauty with the world in the precious time that we have, and to leave the children and grandchildren a legacy of wisdom and compassion embodied in the way we live, in our institutions, and in our honoring of our interconnectedness, at home and around the world.

The creative and imaginative efforts and actions of every one of us count, and nothing less than the health of the world hangs in the balance. We should say that the world is literally and metaphorically dying for us to wake up and pay attention, and now is the time. Now is the time for us to wake up to the fullness of our beauty, to get on with the work of healing ourselves, our societies, and the planet, building on everything worthy that has come before us and this is flowering now. No intention is too small and no effort insignificant. Every step along the way counts. And every single one of us counts.”

This is the work of a lifetime, and the challenge of a lifetime. I know that I will be calling myself back to the practice of mindfulness time and time again. But for right now, you can find me staring out the window, watching the world go by, with my greatest 2 ½ foot tall teacher.