

BREAKING GROUND
ON ATTENTION

“To gain control of the attention is the sole aim of all spiritual disciplines.”
(Ramana Maharshi, d. 1950)

Texts on Ash Wednesday

February 13, 2013

Matthew 6: 1-18

I AM DRAWN to an idea set down by the Spanish philosopher Spinoza a long time ago. “Any thought not interrupted by another thought becomes action.” You can prove this. Hold your hand open. Think about closing it. If you think only that thought, you will close your hand. Otherwise, you will pass on to some other matter, more important. In other words, you will interrupt the thought; no action will follow. All action is composed of thought held like a flame until it catches the will in action. All inaction is composed of interruptions that douse the flames of thought.

In itself, seeing how thought becomes action will not heal us, for some thoughts are useless or evil, and it was our awful power to focus on them—our terrible obsession—that became an action we now so regret. Still, Spinoza’s rule holds: sometimes, no action is best and interruption is required. Yet sometimes, no action is no help at all. Do you wonder why a committee never gets anything done? Just watch how they let their thoughts get interrupted. Sometimes, no action was the worst thing we did. We knew what needed to be done, but we let interruptions come, and the hour of action was lost. How true like an arrow is the ancient prayer, “Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against thee in thought, word, and deed; by what we have done, and by what we have left undone.” Yes, true. But equally true is the reverse. “Most gracious God, we thank thee, for thou hast given us the attention, in thought and word, from which to choose our deeds, and to guard our attention from thoughts that yield bad deeds. Amen.”

Since everything we call good depends on good action, and since every good action depends on thought held well, then, in one sense, our human predicament is very simple to describe. Either we are learning how to bring attention to our thought, so that we may choose more freely which to give life to, and which to let die. Or we are so caught up in our thoughts and emotions that they have us, and not we them; so caught up in them that we care not to use the gift God gives us, our humanity, but rather charge ahead like hungry bears, taking what we like, running from what we don’t, hungry for what the world might have for us and afraid of what it hasn’t.

Let it be said never more plainly. The whole world turns on attention.

Right attention is the blade that breaks through the hard ground of sin and systems, of misery and the mechanisms of fear. Right attention is the gift of God. Indeed, God gives nothing except through attention. Whoever prays to God to give good things, but asks not for a new mind—a new attention—by which to receive the gift can touch neither God nor the gift.

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is beloved of the church. We think we almost know it by heart. If we did, we should all be free of misery and filled with charity. Perhaps the Lenten journey is best thought of as—Now! Another opportunity to learn to pay attention to what it *really* means to be human—to become more free to live and to let go, as Christ Jesus did; more free to be who you are, brother and sister to your Lord.

Jesus' direction to his disciples is simple: Discipline. Attention. Think what you aim to do, hold the flame, choose it, and do it. Just do it.

If you are giving money away, pay attention. Let your Father who sees in secret help you see your secret hidden motives. Stop. Look. Listen. Then let go of motives, and of money.

If you are fasting, pay attention. Let your Father who sees in secret help you see all the silly and stupid reasons to fast and not to fast. Then choose your fast. From what will you withdraw obsession and useless attention, the better to stop, look, and listen to what is?

If you are in need, and you know you must pray—pay attention. Pray not for things, says Jesus, but for a new mind. Pray to be free of the debts and burdens of the past, so you may heal where you have cut. Pray for a spirit of courage to face tomorrow's trial tomorrow, so you may be present to the day God gives. Pray to be ready to receive today what is given today, be it night or light. "Prayer," writes Benedictine Brother David Steindl-Rast, "is a quality of attention so focused on what is given that it appears to you as a gift."

In the sincerity of the secret hour, may you enter upon the Lenten discipline under the sign of the ashes, asking God to send upon you the gift of attention, the Lord's plow blade to overturn the hard ground crusted by fear and death, to sow in you the seed of life without end but God.

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in the City of New York*