



*Soul Matters*

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# Paying Attention

Small Group  
March 2026

# Welcome to Paying Attention

Alice Walker famously wrote, “I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it.”

Walker's words are a beautiful reminder that attention and gratitude go hand in hand. Indeed they are a perfect embodiment of the dominant understanding of attention: that it's here to wake us up to life's many gifts.

But dig a little deeper and you discover that attention has a few additional and ulterior motives up its sleeve. So, friends, we want to give fair warning right here at the start. We want you to be ready for all that attention has in store for you. You see, the truth is, attention won't just make you grateful, it will make you fall in love. And it won't just enable you to notice life's *gifts*, it also will make it impossible to ignore life's *pain*.

So, first, the part about falling in love.

Mary Oliver wrote, “Attention is the beginning of devotion.” It's an essential reminder that we cannot love someone or something that we do not fully see. Glances and self-interested attention never get to the real person or thing. They keep us on the surface of things and treat the other as a mirror. What we fall in love with, in such cases, is what we want from them and how we want them to make us feel. Which means that all we've really done is fall in love with ourselves and our own longings.

Attention wants more for us than this. It wants us to learn that *truly* loving someone or something requires the difficult work of noticing our wants and then putting them down. This kind of love asks us to look without expectation of who or what we hope the other will be, an act that mystic and philosopher, Simone Weil, calls [self-emptying](#). It's a type of looking that keeps on looking until we discover something entirely new, entirely other, entirely unique. And once we notice that stunning uniqueness, we're in trouble, because it will completely reshuffle our desires and devotions. It will knock us to our knees. Nothing will seem as important or precious as the particularity of the other. We will want nothing more than to ensure that the other feels seen. And we will come to know this as love.

Now, what about attention and pain? What does attention want from us in this regard?

Well, this time it's a UU minister, Rev. Sean Dennison, that best guides us on our way. Rev. Sean writes “The ability to see beauty is the beginning of our moral sensibility. What we believe is beautiful we will not wantonly destroy.” In other words, seeing the beauty of something comes with a commitment. You don't just think to yourself “Oh, that's pretty,” you think “My God, I must protect it.” Its survival becomes your survival. Its pain becomes your pain.

All of which is to say, yes, you can expect to leave this month feeling grateful, but you should also be prepared to feel altered. To understand attention as a doorway into love and pain, is to understand that the work of attention is not just about realizing all we've been given; It's also a reminder that to look, to *really* look, is to risk being re-ordered. And made larger, as devotion to others and the pain of others displace the smallness of love of self.

And maybe in the end, that's what we should be most grateful for: the way looking, almost always, leaves us larger.

# Spiritual Exercises

It's one thing to analyze a theme; it's quite another to experience it. By pulling us out of the space of *thinking* and into the space of *doing*, our spiritual exercises invite us to figure out not just what we have to say about life, but also what life has to say *to us!*

With that in mind, pick and complete the one exercise that speaks to you the most. **Come to your group ready to share why you picked the exercise you did, how it surprised you and what gift it gave you.**

## Option A

### *People Watching & What Shimmers for You*

Paying attention with intentionality is core to Soul Matters. In our groups, we practice altering the quality of our attention by shifting from the “judging mind” to the “receptive mind.” This attentional stance allows our inner wisdom to “speak” to us through our spiritual exercises, introspective questions and each other’s sharing. It also trains us to listen to other aspects of our lives for messages of challenge and comfort.

With all that in mind, this exercise invites us to apply our skills of receptive attention *to people watching!*

Here are your instructions:

- Identify a space where you can watch a wide variety of people for a significant amount of time. Think a mall, a park, a bus stop, even church coffee hour.
- Set aside at least 30 minutes.
- Bring along a small notebook and pen.
- Find a place to sit and watch where it won't be obvious to others that you are watching them.
- Center yourself and shift your attention so that you are observing folks through the receptive mind, i.e. observe them through the questions of “How might my inner wisdom be speaking to me through these people?” and “How might close observation of these people offer me a message of comfort or challenge, or reconnect me with an important memory?”
- Write down what [shimmers](#) for you and how those shimmers offer you gifts of memory, comfort or challenge.

#### Some Tips:

- The details are key. Pay attention to how people uniquely carry themselves and interact with each other. Notice what they are wearing and what their facial expressions stir up in you. Ask where you see parts of yourself reflected in the details of the crowd. Notice what details spur your empathy, longing or even sadness.
- Sometimes it helps to bring your imagination along and [make up a story](#) about the people you are watching, as if they are characters in a movie and you've written the script. Focus on someone and make up a backstory about them or dream up their internal dialog. Speaking of dialog, focus on people talking and concoct the script of what they are saying to each other. Then sit back and analyze your imaginings, asking what they say (or are trying to say) about you.
- Wonderful insights and gifts can also arise by being playful and imagining you are an alien sent to observe humans to figure out what kind of creatures they are. Use this approach to also open yourself to what kind of creature you are.

## Option B

### *Let Mary Oliver Guide Your Attention*

In her poem [Gratitude](#), Mary Oliver asks herself and then answers eight questions of attention:

*What did you notice?  
What did you hear?  
When did you admire?  
What astonished you?  
What would you like to see again?  
What was most tender?  
What was most wonderful?  
What did you think was happening?*

It's a poem that focuses one's attention on the details of an experience, fostering a feeling of the sacredness of even the most ordinary of experiences. So for this month's exercise, let's follow Oliver's lead and **create our own version of her poem!**

**First**, spend some time with the poem, noticing its pattern and what moves you most about it. You can find it in written form [here](#) and [here](#). You can also listen to an arresting video of it [here](#).

**Then** use Oliver's questions to write a similar gratitude poem of your own by giving your own answers to her eight questions. Here's an example of someone making it their own to inspire you:  
<http://walkingintheholypresence.blogspot.com/2017/04/poem-gratitude-by-mary-oliver.html>

**But here's the catch:** You've got to decide how to gather the details for your poem. When reading Oliver's poem, you get the feeling she wrote it at the end of a long day outdoors. But it could just as easily have been written at the end of a week, a year, or even a life. So you pick what calls to you. Maybe you take a 2-hour hike and then sit down and write it. Or maybe sit down and write it at the end of an ordinary day of work and family? You might even want to answer the questions as if they are asking about the past year of your life? This could also be a meaningful way to revisit a particular period or experience of your life. For instance, when your child was born, or left for college, the last few days or months of your parent's life, the [pandemic](#), a beloved moment of your childhood, the period when you took a risk and changed careers, the moment you met your life partner.

To expand your engagement with your poem, think about sharing it with a close friend or your life partner, asking them what strikes them about your words.

Along the way, may you be reminded that our attention is a way, maybe the best way, that we say thanks for the preciousness laced through the ordinary moments of our lives.

## Option C

### ***Four Walks Through Four Pairs of “Eyes”***

*The only true voyage ... would be not to visit strange lands but to possess other eyes, to see the universe through the eyes of another, of a hundred others, to see the hundred universes that each of them sees.*  
- Marcel Proust

Cognitive scientist, Alexandra Horowitz, is the author of [On Looking: Eleven Walks with Expert Eyes](#). It's an inventive and adventurous effort by Horowitz to expand her attention and deepen her relationship with her home neighborhood. Simply put, she took [eleven walks around her city block](#) with eleven “experts,” including a sociologist, a geologist, typographer, a physician, a sound designer, a woman who became blind as an adult, as well as her toddler and dog. By looking at her “well-known” world through their “eyes,” she awoke to the reality that many worlds lay in front of us at the same moment.

With this in mind, you are invited to use the attention of others to discover the many worlds right under your nose. The instructions are simple: **Take a walk around a place you consider “home turf” with at least four people and have them tell you what they notice along the way.**

Obviously a big part of this exercise is thinking about exactly whose perspective you want to guide your attention. Some many options exist: a child, an older friend who walks at an older pace, a bird watcher, a friend who uses a wheelchair, an artist you know, your scientist brother, your most philosophical friend, your most introspective friend, a friend struggling with illness or loss.

Whoever you pick, it's important to explain to them why you are asking them to take this walk with you. It will also help to explicitly ask them to pay attention with what they consider their unique perspective.

Take notes as you go, but also be sure to capture your insights and thoughts right away after each walk. As you reflect, think about what your walking partner's way of looking says about your own way of attending to the world. Also think about what aspect of their attention you want to develop as your own.

*Another thought:* In addition to taking the walk with others, consider starting things off and ending things with a walk all by yourself, using these two solo walks to help you notice how your well-known part of the world has just grown!

## Option D

### ***Savor***

Another way to pay closer attention to the world around you comes from master looker, Rob Walker, the author of the completely absorbing blog, [The Art of Noticing](#). One of his more recent efforts is what he calls Savor of the Month. In short, at the start of every month, he announces one specific type of thing or general idea for his blog followers to look out for and document by taking pictures. The goal is to find as many examples of that thing/theme you can. The idea, as he puts it, is “to convert something everyday and taken for granted into something we might, yes, savor.”

So this month, make up a savor adventure of your own!

- **Start by picking your own one-word thing or theme** to look out for all month. Here are some examples to choose from or inspire a selection of your own: [Reflections](#), [Shadows](#), Circles, Stripes, Signs, Wind, [Benches](#), Piles, [Locks](#), Trash, [Stickers](#), [Repetition](#), Hubcaps, Rust, [Cracks](#).

- **Keep your theme in mind all month.** The gift of this part of the exercise is recognizing the power we have to train our attention and become [more intentional](#) about how we use [our precious and limited focus](#).
- **Compile your collection of photos and notice the details** of each version of the thing/theme you choose. Soon it will become apparent that these are not “the same thing.” While they share general qualities, each is its own unique expression of existence. This will become a reminder of how often we see things and people as categories and thus don’t really see *them* at all.
- **Extra Credit:** Do something creative with all the photos. Make them into a collage, video, booklet or calendar; Something that will allow you to revisit this exercise and remember the insights and invitations it offered you.

## Option E

### ***What Do You Want to Fall Back in Love With?***

[The Sanctuary Boston](#) is a UU spiritual community that creates deeply moving contemporary worship music. One of their songs is called [More of This](#). It’s a song that invites you to not only pay deeper attention to life, but also fall back in love with life.

So this exercise asks you to accept that invitation by listening to/watching [the video of this song](#) using our Soul Matters disciplined listening practice. Here are your specific instructions:

- Set aside 15-20 minutes and find a quiet place where you won’t be disturbed.
- Gather up your computer or phone, as well as a pen and paper to jot down thoughts on.
- On your first listen/watch of [the video](#), clear your mind and just let it wash over you.
- Then listen to/watch it again with this question in mind: “What parts of my life do I want to fall back in love with?” Along with keeping this question at the forefront of your mind, bring extra attention to the details of the video and lyrics, paying attention to what [shimmers](#) for you and letting those shimmerings lead you to and illuminate parts of your own life.
- If it helps, you might want to listen to/watch it twice. On your second time around, you might also just listen to the song rather than watch the video.
- Afterward, spend some time writing down the aspects of your life that the song led you to, aspects that are precious to you but that you’ve lost connection with. Reflect on what has caused them to grow dull and drift from the focus of your attention. And finally, identify one or two things to commit to in order to connect with them again and fall in love with them again.

## Option F

### ***Which Companion Piece Speaks to You?***

Sometimes we come across a quote, song, article or movie and it perfectly captures what’s going on for us right now or allows us to view our current circumstances in a new light. With this in mind, spend some time this month going through the Companion Pieces section below to find the one piece **that speaks most powerfully to you.** (Or [“shimmers”](#) most strongly for you.)

Come to your group ready to share the piece you picked, why it called to you and what insight, memory, or message of comfort or challenge it offered you.

## Option G

### ***Ask Them About Paying Attention***

One of the best ways to explore our monthly themes is to have conversations about them with people who are close to you. It's also a great way to deepen our relationships! Below is a list of questions to guide your conversation. Be sure to let your conversation partner know in advance that this won't be a typical conversation. Telling them a bit about Soul Matters will help set the stage. *Remember to also answer the questions yourself as they are meant to support a conversation, not just a time of quizzing them.*

Come to your group ready to share what surprised you about the conversation and what gift or insight it gave you. As always, keep a lookout for how your inner voice is trying to send you a message of comfort or challenge through these conversions with others.

#### **Paying Attention Questions**

- As a child, which of your senses was your favorite way of paying attention to the world?
- When growing up, what one or two things, above all others, did your family communicate were worthy of attention? Beauty? Duty? Kindness? Humility? Honesty? Reputation? Education? Loyalty? Success? God?
- [It is said](#) we become what we give our attention to. What are 2-3 things that you pay attention to that capture 2-3 things you treasure about yourself?
- Tell me a story about a time you purposely avoided paying attention to something painful or hard. Often our avoidance involves a mix of both healthy and not-do-healthy motives. How was that true for you?
- What do you turn your attention to when you want to find yourself again?
- Have you ever given your attention so deeply to something that you suddenly felt one with it? How did that experience change your living and loving?
- As you've aged, what new things have grabbed your attention in a way they haven't before? How are you [a different kind of person](#) because of this?
- Who taught you the most about using your attention wisely?
- Are you paying enough attention to yourself?
- Has paying close attention ever led you [to an encounter with the holy](#)?

# Finding Your Question

This list of questions is an aid for [deep reflection](#). How you answer them is often less important than the journey they take you on.

So, read through the list of questions 2-3 times until **one question** sticks out for you and captures your attention, or as some faith traditions say, until one of the questions "[shimmers](#)." Or as we like to say, "Read over them until one of the questions **picks you**."

Then reflect on that question using one or all of these questions:

- What is going on in my life right now that makes this question so pronounced for me?
- What might my inner wisdom be trying to [say to me](#) through this question?
- How might this question be trying to wake me up or get me to realize something through this question?
- How might Life or my inner wisdom be trying to offer me a word of comfort or challenge through this question?



1. As a child, which of your senses was your favorite way of paying attention to the world?
2. When growing up, what one or two things, above all others, did your family communicate were worthy of attention? Beauty? Duty? Kindness? Humility? Honesty? Reputation? Education? Loyalty? Success? God?
3. When was the last time paying attention [left you astonished](#)? What would it mean to have more of these moments in your life?
4. Would you be pleased if your gravestone read: "[She attended well to a few worthy things](#)"?
5. Do you need to stop beating yourself up for avoiding paying attention to an overwhelming or painful part of your life?
6. Is it time to finally pay attention to that overwhelming or painful thing you've been avoiding?
7. Are you [wasting your attention](#) and energy on people who take you for granted?
8. [Wise ones](#) tell us that we become what we give our attention to. What has more of your attention - and more of you - than you want?
9. As you've aged, what new things have grabbed your attention in a way they haven't before? How are you [a different kind of person](#) because of this?
10. Where in your life would it help to say, 'Look what's happening!' rather than 'Look what's happening to me!'?
11. Have you ever given your attention so deeply to something that you suddenly felt one with it? How did it change your living and loving?
12. What in your life is hungry to be noticed?
13. Are you paying enough attention to yourself?
14. **What's your question?** Your question may not be listed above. As always, if the above questions don't include what life is asking from you, spend the month listening to your days to find it.

# Companion Pieces

## ***Recommended Resources for Personal Exploration & Reflection***

*The following resources are not required reading. Nor are they intended to be analyzed in your group. Instead, they are here to companion you on your personal journey this month, get you thinking and open you up to new ways of embodying this month's theme in your living and loving.*

### **Wise Words**

Instructions for living a life:

Pay attention.

Be astonished.

Tell about it.

[Mary Oliver](#)

Pay attention to the things that bring a tear to your eye or a lump in your throat because they are signs that the holy is drawing near.

*Frederick Buechner*

When you really pay attention, everything is your teacher.

*Ezra Bayda*

The land is the real teacher. All we need as students is mindfulness. Paying attention is a form of reciprocity with the living world, receiving its gifts with open eyes and open heart.

[Robin Wall Kimmerer](#)

Once there was a man who filmed his vacation... With a flick of a switch, there it would be. But he would not be in it. He would never be in it.

[Wendell Berry](#)

Distraction gives you plenty of stimulation, but very little chosen experience. You don't decide what matters; you drift into what is loud, new, frictionless, and emotionally sticky. And drift becomes a worldview — an unconscious credo: nothing deserves full presence; everything can be interrupted. The deeper problem is not that you miss a few minutes. It's that you slowly lose the thread of your own life. You become someone who is always "around," but rarely here.

[J.W. Bertolotti](#)

Evil is whatever distracts.

[Franz Kafka](#)

If we were not so single-minded about keeping our lives moving, and for once could do nothing, perhaps a huge silence might interrupt this sadness of never understanding ourselves.

[Pablo Neruda](#)

For anyone trying to discern what to do w/ their life: PAY ATTENTION TO WHAT YOU PAY ATTENTION TO. that's pretty much all the info u need.

[Amy Krouse Rosenthal](#)

When you pay attention to something you don't especially value, it's not an exaggeration to say that you're paying with your life.

[Oliver Burkeman](#)

When we cede control of our attention, we cede more than what we are looking at now. We cede, to some degree, control over what we will care about tomorrow.

[Ezra Klein](#)

Tell me what you pay attention to and I will tell you who you are.

*José Ortega y Gasset*

Your attention is like a combination spotlight and vacuum cleaner: It highlights what it lands on and then sucks it into your brain—for better or worse.

[Dr. Rick Hanson](#)

I once had a garden filled with flowers that grew only on dark thoughts but they needed constant attention and one day I decided I had better things to do.

[StoryPeople](#)

Shake the scales from your imagination. Reach. Stretch. Rise. There is no more time for pretending that everything can be all right without your care, without your attention.

[Rev. Julián Jamaica Soto](#)

All winter long I overlooked three uninhabited nests... What else is there in this world that my hustling and bustling have barred me from sensing and seeing?... My guess is that it is not only delights, such as these nests but violence, too, that's within perception's range, if only I gave it my true attention. Acts of exclusion, discrimination, and the impacts of systemic oppression are all there, right before me... I have been taught to not see them—but they are there.

[Rev. Karen G. Johnston](#)

If we want to support each other's inner lives, we must remember a simple truth: the human soul does not want to be fixed, it wants simply to be seen and heard.

[Parker J. Palmer](#)

Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity.

*Simone Weil*

You cannot love something or someone you do not truly see.

[Ben Sternke](#)

In any moment, on any given day, I can measure my wellness by this question: Is my attention on loving, or is my attention on who isn't loving me?

[Andrea Gibson](#)

I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it.

[Alice Walker](#)

The world is full of magic things, waiting for our senses to grow sharper.

*Eden Phillpotts*

## **Videos & Podcasts**

**Is Our Attention for Sale?**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PSaybP1UivQ>

**Your Mind & Attention Is Being Fracked**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ihGEL8ICXVM>

**Paying Attention to The AI Dilemma**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MLvxRHlsMz0>

“Character.AI founders [once] joked, ‘We're not trying to replace Google. We're trying to replace your mom.’...”

**On Giving Our Attention to Beauty Not Busyness**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9gti4JFwP\\_o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9gti4JFwP_o)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x--yddOolRQ>

**Attention is the Doorway into Awe & Tenderness**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Odp6cCIYjBI>

**Focusing Your Attention on Giving**

<https://www.instagram.com/reels/CvvD7nCsewM/>

**On Attention's Ability to Set Grief to the Side**

<https://www.instagram.com/reels/DMRAfhmujJb/>

**Orange, Sarah Kay**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aubc0gZevhQ>

“The way you notice can be a weapon or an act of love. Color blooms through every city, whether you see it or don't. Whether you seek it or don't. So why not seek? Why not see?...”

**Paying Attention to the Last Time**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rKEAz-pMJmg>

**Paying Attention to the Time You Have (In JellyBeans)**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BOksW\\_NabEk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BOksW_NabEk)

**On Not Paying Attention to Income Inequality**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EdqxBNgnmxU>

**Paying Close Attention to Children as They Lead Us**

<https://www.instagram.com/reels/DOMSqFSjCqX/>

**Some Fun with James Taylor's Expanded Attention**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Un-FO8iXCRA>

## Books

### [Four Thousand Weeks](#)

[Oliver Burkeman](#)

### [The Anthropocene Reviewed](#)

[John Green](#)

### [How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen](#)

[David Brooks](#)

### [The Four Pivots: Reimagining Justice, Reimagining Ourselves](#)

[Shawn A. Ginwright](#)

On shifting our attention and focus for the sake of social change

### [The Nickel Boys](#)

[Colson Whitehead](#)

## Movies

### [Train Dreams](#)

### [The Social Dilemma](#)

### [Perfect Days](#)

### [Nickel Boys](#)

### [Puzzle](#)

About self-discovery and paying attention to your own longings.

### [Cleo From 5 to 7](#)

## Music

Our thematic playlists - on [Spotify](#) and [YouTube](#) - are organized as a journey, so consider listening from beginning to end and using them as a personal musical meditation.

Click [here](#) for the **Spotify playlist** on Paying Attention

Click [here](#) for the **YouTube playlist** on Paying Attention

## More Monthly Inspiration from Soul Matters!

Our Facebook Inspiration Page: <https://www.facebook.com/soulmatterssharingcircle/>

Our Instagram Page: Find us as "soul\_matters\_circle"

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