Spirituality



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My friend Laura wrote to me after her lifesaving surgery: "I've been fascinated recently about being present to experiences, and to acknowledge that sometimes what you are experiencing, you're experiencing for the last time, although you may not know at the time that it is the last time." Her words bore witness to a depth of awareness born from her health challenge.

They also refreshed a memory for me.

Mom was in home hospice in Fort Myers, Florida. She asked, "Will you drive me to the beach tomorrow to watch the sun come up?"

She had only two days left, but of course we didn't know that.

Early the next morning, I bundled her into the car, and off we went across the causeway to her beloved Sanibel Island. We found a place to park and sat together in sacred silence while the sun rose over the sea, for the last time for my mother.

I will see that sunrise forever.

> May you and I come to see with an open and observant heart. Fully attentive to God, and God alone. As if for the first time. As if for the last time.
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Mom died in 1994. How many times since then has the sun risen gloriously over a shining sea, and over the brown desert and purple mountains of my Tucson home, and I have not paid attention? I'm a busy person, I've said.

Now in retirement, I am doing a bit better. Once recently when I went out early to retrieve the newspaper, I met a sunrise so breathtaking that I had to wake my husband so we could stand out in the cold in our pajamas and take it in. And he has occasionally come to get me, late in the evening, to say, "Come away from your thinking and your writing. Come outdoors and see. The stars are so bright."

Being fully present. Paying attention. As if for the first time. As if for the last time. It applies to our prayer as well.

Years ago, I was in New York to work on a sacred dance film with Fr. George Torok, director of Hallel Communications. First thing each morning, he and I prayed Morning Prayer and the Eucharistic Liturgy. Then we went to the kitchen, made our breakfast and prayed again. We prayed a third time with the camera crew before beginning each day's filming. We then prayed before dinner, and after dinner as well.

In the evenings, he and I took long walks around the grounds of the studio. I remember one night as we walked, Father George cried out passionately into the darkness: "Attention to God! All this introspection, no! But attention!" Father was referring to undivided attention to God in prayer and in creative work. His cry bore into me the need to get out of my head and into my senses and heart, to not only pray with undivided attention, but also to attend fully to each person, sight, sound and taste, each moment. As if for the first time. As if for the last time.

Do I succeed? Not often. But I remember those night walks, and the intention to pay attention remains.

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Attention focused on God in prayer is just that. It offers no possibility of drifting into mental analysis or self-conscious machinations. As we walked, I began to grapple with what the saints and mystics meant: "When attention seeks prayer, it finds it."

As we sat on the tailgate of his truck on a cold, rainy morning, warming our hands on mugs of campfire coffee, my hiking partner regaled me with the story of the novice who asked his abbot if he might drink his coffee while he prayed. "Of course not! Shame!" admonished the abbot. "You must attend fully to your prayer." Undaunted, the novice then asked if he might pray as he drank his coffee. "Of course, my dear son," the abbott replied. "You must pray always."

In our necessary adult pursuits of work and career, raising a family, maintaining a home, caring for aging parents or keeping up with retirement activities, we may neglect moments of mindfulness and attention. We may carelessly leave our cellphones on during conversations with friends and loved ones, allowing the beeps and bleeps to distract us from treasured, uninterrupted intimacy.

I am not now experiencing the keen sensitivity to priorities that serious illness brings, the sensitivity demonstrated by my friend Laura. And I am not currently facing my end (although at age 80, it does no harm to be aware I don't have decades to go). It is easy to focus on the future, the day ahead, the week ahead, dual-tasking, even triple tasking, inattentive to this very moment and its here-and-then-not-here gifts and graces.

We fail to see (in the words of the poet Henry Blake) "a world in a grain of sand, and heaven in a wildflower / Hold infinity in the palm of your hand, and eternity in an hour."

I will pay attention to what God is doing right now. Go out to see the sunrise. Look up at the stars. Listen to the rain. Or — a special treat here in the Sonoran Desert — watch the bobcat napping in the afternoon sun on the back patio.

May you and I come to see with an open and observant heart. Fully attentive to God, and God alone. As if for the first time. As if for the last time.