

Rector's Essay

Stewardship of Attention

By Jarrett Kerbel (10/23/26)

During elementary school, I spent my summers at Girl Scout camp. Because my mother was a Girl Scout leader and effectively a single-mother due to my father's travel schedule, I got to join my sisters at Camp Agnes DeWitt in the Sourland Mountains on the hot hazy days of New Jersey summers.

Mrs. Williams was a counselor at camp. She had deeply tanned skin that was cragged like the bark of an old oak tree and she wore her silver hair back in a tight bun. An amateur botanist, her job was to teach us all about nature. No one - before or since - has kindled such wonder and joy in the natural world as her.

In her little botany hut, Mrs. Williams had all sorts of woodland flora and fauna for us to explore. Every day, she would place an item in her mystery box and invite brave children to stick a hand into the black box to guess what was in it. It could be a prickly walnut seed casing, it could be the skin shed by a snake, it could be a deer antler or a crayfish shell.

Once a week, she would lead us on a hike. My favorite was the wet walk down the red-shale mountain stream that bisected the camp. In each pool of water, Mrs. Williams would point out all of the living things to be found. She taught us to be still, observant, patient, and curious. She taught us how to pay close attention, and, in essence, taught us to see in a new way.

Hearing and seeing, i.e. paying attention, are gifts that we cultivate through practice, and gifts that we discipline through the virtues taught by Mrs. Williams. Many voices and visions compete for our attention - more so now than ever before, in fact. So we must teach ourselves and our children the stewardship of attention.

We can take a page from Mrs. Williams and create time and space to practice looking and seeing in fresh ways. Ideally, prayer time and worship are such places. The attention we give at church with eyes, ears, heart and spirit trains us to see God in our lives, to see God's goodness in the world, and to know what is worthwhile for our attention and what is not.

The church has a lot to offer all who are struggling with fragmented attention and the unprecedented proliferation of poisonous subjects competing for our attention. What if those boys at Cornell had been taught to attend to women as bearers of the image of God, to seek and serve Christ in them? My hope is that such training in attention would have restrained their vile and viscous impulses and guided at least one of them to rescue that young woman from danger. It worries me greatly, that this generation of young men have had their attention so warped by the pornography industry - both crass and subtle - that they have seemingly lost all the blessings that come with true interpersonal intimacy as intended by God.