

Attention, Work and Well-Being. What Happens When We "Pay Attention" to the Work We Are Doing?

Benedictine Institute Lectures

October 16, 2012

Chick Hardy:

Thank you for coming and welcome. Thank you for being here. The Benedictine Institute and the Collegeville Institute are co-sponsoring this event today and as, I don't know, some of you may not know that but round Lunch and Learn events are professional development opportunities for employees and guests to learn a little bit more about the Benedictine aspects of where we work. We usually offer at least one a semester, sometimes two a semester so just check e-mail announcements, Bulletin Board. So, if you want to watch for next semester's, we have a pretty special guest for next semester too.

I'd like to introduce our speaker today, it's Dr. Samuel Thomas, but I found out very quickly that he responds nicely to Sam. ***audience laughter*** He is an associate professor of Religion at California Lutheran University. That's in Thousand Oaks, California. He teaches courses in Biblical Studies, Environmental Ethics, and Religion and Culture. He also teaches a short course in woodworking for art majors. And he's been a furniture maker for over 15 years. He is a 1994 graduate from St. John's. He graduated with Biology so, ***audience laughter*** biology majors. I asked him how did he get from biology to teaching theology but he really had a pretty good answer for me so. He got his advanced degrees at Yale University Divinity School and the University of Notre Dame. He's published several books and articles on the Dead Sea Scrolls and is currently a resident scholar at the Collegeville Institute where he's working on a book on the theme of paying attention. I asked him who we're supposed to pay when we pay attention. ***audience laughter*** That's the end of the info he gave me, but I have since learned that he's become pretty involved with the wood, with the abbey woodworking shop. He's been volunteering down there keeping Mike Roske in line, trying. And he's been able to finish one piece of furniture while he's been here. He's also got involved with the stickworks house out at the Arboretum, he was pretty involved with that. He's a great cook. He's a good neighbor, his office is right next door to mine, so. As the registration numbers were growing you know 70, 80, 90, 100, I'd keep him informed and he was always kind of like hmm. So I don't know if it fits living in California, that he's just laid back, or if it's that Johnny demeanor, you know the confident, "Oh, well that's cool" ***audience laughter*** But you know there are some people here who do remember you Sam, when you were a student. You know when you were 18 and 19 years old they're your teachers, colleagues, people used to work with. And I do remember reading in the Bible that there's a verse that says that a prophet in his own land is not easily honored. ***audience laughter*** I, on that note, no pressure Sam but this better be good. So please join me in welcoming Sam ***audience applause***

Sam Thomas:

Well thank you Chick. . . ***audience laughter*** And thanks to the Benedict and Institute, and to Chick Hardy for organizing this event, to Father Hilary Thimmesh and Father Mark Thamert for their invitation to do this. I'd like to thank also the Collegeville Institute and for a just an incredibly wonderful time during my stay there. It's coming to a close and I'm sort of sad about that. I'd also like to thank the folks in the Abbey woodworking shop, Father John Meoska, and Mike Roske, and Robert Lillard, and Lew Grobe, and others for the hospitality that they extended to me during my stay here. You know when I first contacted father John and said, "Hey would you mind if I come and work in the woodshop?" I wasn't really sure what kind of response I would get because that you know, that can be a good or a bad thing I suppose. But I experienced nothing but hospitality and an openness there and so it's really been a wonderful, wonderful time. And of course it is great to be back, and I make no claims to being a prophet of any sort but it is wonderful to be back both in my hometown, I grew up in St. Cloud, and at St. John's where I, you know, spent several important years in my life. And thanks to all of you for coming out today. And thanks also to the dining service who made this meal possible, a very delicious meal.

So, we've all heard that we live in an age of distractions. Whether those distractions are evaluated positively or negatively will of course depend on one's perspective. And no doubt you've heard that, or no doubt that what counts as a distraction depends largely on what counts as attention. Take a moment to think to yourself about what an average day looks like for you. How much time do you spend interacting with technology of various sorts? Roughly how many times a day do you check your email, phone, and other devices? Do you focus on one task for an extended period of time, or do you move from one thing to another in quick succession? I'd be willing to bet that at least some people in this room at some point in the next 30 minutes are going to think about looking at a smartphone, are going to actually look at that smartphone, or maybe even divert attention away from what I'm saying in order to reply to a text that apparently cannot possibly wait for another few minutes. Maybe now that I've said this you're less likely to do that. ***audience laughter*** And actually, then again, this morning I was looking on Facebook and I came across a post from a friend of mine who apparently was at some sort of conference and she posted that she was at a great workshop but the current presenter doesn't relate to anything I work on. Time to Tweet and Facebook. ***audience laughter*** So I know that that impulse is strong but I now I will ask that you continue to at least look at me, kind of, ***audience laughter*** while I'm doing this.

You've probably heard that you know there's been a lot of talk in recent years about multitasking as well. Whether it's possible, whether it exists, whether we should believe in multitasking, and what it does to us and what it does for us. Most of us I think are so accustomed to doing several things at once that switching rapidly from one thing to another is really no big deal. Instead of isolating our focus on one single object or task, we pay what psychologists call continuous partial attention. We're never actually multitasking. But, unless we're Buddhist monks who have perfected the art of meditative breathing, we experience attention as being a rather fluid engagement with both our internal states and external realities. We do what Winifred Gallagher in her book Rapt, we do what she calls you know

distilling the universe into your universe. And I'm not going to read that whole thing. But this is a basic idea of attention, that it's a certain kind of complex series of processes that do that basic function for us, to still the universe into your universe.

So there's mounting neurobiological evidence that our brains are actually changing in response to our constant interactions with the internet and other communication technologies. Such that interactions lend us less physiologically capable of sustained attention over time. Even if we would want to do that. So some set off alarm bells about this development. Nicholas Carr for example in his book *The Shallows* writes that we program our computers and then thereafter they program us. They program us to shift our attention rapidly from one thing to another and to avoid the kind of careful sustained attention to any given moment or activity. On the other hand, people like Cathy Davidson in her book *Now You See It* is more optimistic about how we can use technology to transform our institutions, to adapt to new a new understanding of attention, how it works and what we should do with it.

Now I'm actually not here to talk about the internet, or about technology in general, but starting this way helps to frame the question I'd like to ask. What is attention, or attentiveness? What does it matter for how we engage in work? And what does it contribute to our individual and community well-being? I'm going to try to get at this, some of these questions, by talking about woodworking as a practice of attention and as a metaphor for work more generally. Notice, I'm going to talk about a lot of different things today. I'm actually take off my jacket because I'm getting serious now. ***audience laughter***

Pope Paul VI stated in his 1967 encyclical, "God gave human beings intelligent, sensitivity in the power of thought. Tools with which to finish and perfect the work God began. Every worker is to some extent a creator whether artist, craftsperson, executive, laborer, or farmer." And this is actually a sentiment that was anticipated in the St. John's University Bulletin and we're, none of us in this room, are surprised that things that come out of the Vatican actually happened here first, usually. ***audience laughter*** Thanks for laughing at that, I appreciate that. This is something that was anticipated in the St. John's University Bulletin in the early 1950s. This idea that you know that that once awakened, creative self-expression tends to spread to other fields of making. A human created in the image and likeness of God is naturally a maker. Now these texts both have gender specific language which I've adapted to be more inclusive but whatever the case, there is a creative element, or there should be a creative element, in all kinds of work and as such there's a relationship between worker and work that is facilitated by the human faculty of attention, Alan Wallace writes in his book *The Attention Revolution*. Now I honestly do not know how my own relationship to woodworking would change if I depended upon it to you know, George Bush's famous terms, to put food on my family. ***audience laughter***

And I was I was talking about this problem the other day with the guys in the woodshop and I asked them you know, as I'm working on this book project, how can I avoid romanticizing manual work and you know romanticizing woodworking when I write and speak about it? Father John Meoska's answer was go down to the shop and hit your thumb with a hammer.

audience laughter Which I think is excellent advice. Now I don't want to be one of those intellectuals who traffic and precious images of manual work it can in certain circumstances be onerous, degrading, oppressive. But I still think manual work has things to teach even those who do not engage directly with it. Craftspersonship provides a kind of ideal, one that is not always realizable, but one that's worth holding up in any case.

When I'm at my best, my own attention and patience extend beyond the time spent in the woodshop. I now wait and watch to see what different woods and finishes and joints will do over time so that I can more carefully and completely understand what I'm doing in the process of building. When we pay attention we bring our full selves to a task, a problem, another person, to the art of living well, or to the attitude of reverence.

Paying attention pulls us outside ourselves, our expectations, our desires, our attempts to shape reality into our own images. And it means not only being responsible to the world in a new way it can also lead to surprise, and wonder, and self-discovery. Attention requires that we focus upon an object of our concern, that we give ourselves over to it in a manner of speaking. Mastery of work derives from attention paid overtime to the intricacies and nuances of a given set of tasks and from being incrementally challenged to improve and expand our range. We may be inclined to think that mastery is incompatible with reverence, and yet any reflective crafts person is likely to agree that deep skill is the result of a sustained interaction with materials that have taught the maker how and what to make. In other words, it's precisely the craftsperson's constant confrontation with human limitations that animates the work of making. Attention allows the maker to be in control to one degree or another of design process and the movements of the body to manipulate materials, but the awareness that how one does these things is limited by the nature of the materials and the tools themselves. And this I think inspires an attitude of reverence.

Take the building of a table. If I set out to fashion an item that may be used for eating meals and the way that most Americans expect to do, it would be strange for me to place the tabletop at a 45-degree angle relative to the floor. The item might resemble a table, and it might be an interesting work of art, but no longer really function as a table, at least without the use of superglue or lots of velcro and spill-proof containers. I'm constrained in the building of a table by the conventions of table making. I can, however, maintain an attitude of reverence for what a table is and allow for my own interpretation within those constraints. This is what makes for design variety and beauty in the making of tables. There's reverence, there's inspiration, both of which I think derived from attention in its receptive mode. And some makers understand their work to derive primarily from an external source, an inspiration or intuition that participates in the already given form of a work. D.H. Lawrence famously stated about his own writing, "Not I, not I, but the wind that blows through me." And to give a woodworking example, George Nakashima was famous for his assertion that his craft was simply to bring the interior desire of the object into its fullness to serve as the physical vehicle by which the innate wish of a tree might become what it was already waiting to be.

Lewis Hyde in his book *The Gift* refers to this same phenomenon. He says you work at a task and you work and work and still it won't come right. Then, when you're not even thinking about it, while spading the garden or stepping into the bus, the whole thing pops into your head. The missing grace is bestowed. The gift will continue to just charge its energy so long as we attend to it in return. So how should we understand attention in light of this passivity of the Creator in moments of inspiration? What's the relationship between the careful attention to detail required to make objects of value or to do most any kind of work well in the creative work of the imagination when it's prompted by the gift discharging its energy?

Now recently I was sitting in a chair designed by a famous architect, who also designed the building in which I'm staying at the Colledgeville Institute, and I noticed that the chairs, there were two of them facing a window, overlooking a beautiful lake, I thought that they would benefit by having a little table between them. And so I set myself to thinking about what kind of table would be suitable and after trying to work through ideas carefully, the answer came out of nowhere. The table would draw its inspiration from another building nearby, one whose shape was itself calling out to be modified into a table. Perhaps my receptivity to this idea was shaped by a prior long-standing engagement with the art and craft of table making. In other words, it's because I have become attuned to the tableness of tables in all their variations that I've acquainted myself with what is required in the building of tables, the new forms of tables suggest themselves to me even when I'm not attempting to design one. Or perhaps it's because Marcel Breuer was correct that his bell banner would serve as a symbol, a distinctive silhouette to be carried in the mind, in my mind, over all these years. And perhaps that might explain both the design of the table that I, the bell banner side table, that I designed and built here in the abbey wood shop but I think it also may help to explain or may suggest that I seem to have been playing with this form in various ways over the last decade or so without really being conscious of it.

In her book *Gravity and Grace* Simone Weil suggest that we do need to bring our past experiences and images to bear in the ways that we pay attention, but that all this is in the service of something higher, and openness to the divine and to the possibility of unexpected grace. Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object. It means holding in our minds within reach of this thought but on a lower level and not in contact with it, the diverse knowledge we have required which we are forced to make use of. Is it possible that we can live our lives in this way?

Whatever the answer to that question, I'm reminded that in Chapter 57 of his *Rule*, St. Benedict provides some guidelines for the artisans of a monastic community. Here he says that no one kind of work is more important than another and if one particular person starts to feel uppity about what they're doing, they're to be removed from that position. ***audience laughter*** Now I'm not sure how that principle actually plays out within the university setting. But he says if there are artisans in the monastery, let them practice their crafts with all humility provided the Abbot has given permission, but if any one of them becomes conceited over his skill in his craft because he seems to be conferring a benefit on the monastery, let him be taken from his craft and no longer exercise it. Now there's a crucial insight here, I think.

Attention to the work we do is not disconnected from the attention that we pay to other people. If we're going to be obedient in the sense that Benedict means here, for to listen and be attentive and to trust one another, we must carry that attitude over into the work that we do. If we insist that we are always right or that our work is more important than another's, we have missed the point about the role of attention in meaningful and fulfilling work.

In her book *Friend of the Soul* Norvene Vest says that Benedict's teachings about artisans can apply to all dimensions of human work. She breaks down Benedict's teaching into this area into three basic principles; first, having a vision of one's work as a contribution among many to the whole life of the community, second don't overcharge or commit fraud, which I think is generally good advice but I think also can be taken as you know generally be the honest and an upright in your dealings, and third in all things glorify God. Father David Ransom put it this way in his essay on Buddhist and Christian Monasticism in *Dialogue*. He says, "when we situate the different nuances that Benedict has for obedience, we begin to realize that it's a lot more than just doing what one is told. It is more radically about developing a deep attentiveness in life. This receptivity is essential in the process of conversion and transformation."

Woodworking has helped me to develop a deeper attentiveness in the ways I have been talking about today, both in terms of control over specific tasks and in terms of receptivity. But there's always progress to be made. The shop has been for me a kind of soul craft that has been deeply shaped by my encounter with this place and with the Benedictine tradition that guides it. And I've learned that attention, while perhaps still difficult to define, is an important key to working and living well.

Thank you.

audience applause