

We Are Disciples of What We Pay Attention To (Part 1)

1 Samuel 3:1-11

You may have heard from me already that when I was in my 20's, I left the religion of my childhood, and didn't return to church for about ten years. In my journey back to faith, one of the turning points came through a book called *What Really Matters: Searching for Wisdom in America*. The author of that book is Tony Schwartz, who, it turns out, also ghost-wrote Donald Trump's book *The Art of the Deal*. For this book, Schwartz spent four years traveling around the country investigating the traditions and movements where it looked to him like people had found something important about life: truth, purpose, meaning. He did this both as a journalist and in his own personal quest for wisdom.

Here's how it started for him: One night he was at a reception with hundreds of guests who were there to celebrate the success of *The Art of the Deal*. He said,

“I was about to earn more in a few weeks than I had in the whole of my working life, giving me a financial cushion that few people are ever lucky enough to enjoy. Publishers were eager to sign up whatever book I chose to do next. My marriage of ten years was strong and stable. My wife had her own challenging career, and our two young daughters, ages two and six, were healthy and mostly happy. I jogged several miles a day and played tennis at least twice a week. I had several close friends, and I felt I contributed usefully to my community.

Why, then, wasn't I happier?” (p.3)

So, he set out to see if he could find something that might make him deeply, enduringly happy. Some purpose that would make everything else that happened in his life—good and bad—make sense. Over four years, Schwartz tried things like yoga, meditation, dream therapy, popular Buddhism, the Enneagram. (He never tried church, I noted, which was curious to me at the time; but maybe not surprising in American culture today.) Here's what he said as he got to the end of his four years:

“An unmistakable pattern emerged. Introduced to an impressive teacher, a new system, a novel set of insights, or an interesting technique for tapping the depths of the unconscious, I quickly became enraptured and immersed. Frequently enough that it amused my friends and colleagues, I'd announce that I finally had the answer—or at least the best way to go about seeking it. In time, however, my initial passion gave way to the skepticism that always lurked just beneath the surface. A particular technique, so powerful at first, inevitably began to provide diminishing returns. I would become increasingly aware of the disparity between a given teacher's inspiring message and his everyday behavior.” (p.14)

Essentially, by the end of the book, he found—nothing. Nothing that satisfied his longing for truth or that seemed powerful enough to carry him. He never lost himself in a new way of being. He said, “I was seeking a form of wisdom [that was] suited to my own life and to the culture I lived in. I wasn't interested in renouncing my material desires...or giving up my professional ambitions.” In other words, he set out to find truth, but only a truth that wouldn't seriously change the contours of his life.

And he never found anything that was life-changing enough, compelling enough, to push him past those limits he'd set at the beginning. Each time he got close to giving himself totally away, when he got that feeling of being drawn toward a new truth, a purpose that might answer his search for meaning, he'd hold it up to the light: how it looked when someone actually tried, unsuccessfully, to practice it; what kinds of changes it might require in his own life. And every time he measured it against those practicalities, the glow would fade until he could walk away easily.

In a book I was reading more recently¹, another author called those moments when we feel drawn to give ourselves over to a bigger purpose an *epiphany of recruitment*. A moment when something new opens up and draws you beyond yourself, a moment when you are inspired by compassion or love to give yourself away for something good, something that might be “a calling”. This author remembered a Sunday at his Catholic church when he was a child. He was carrying in his pocket all the dimes he'd been saving from his allowance. That morning there was a speaker in church from the St. Vincent de Paul Society. She talked about the Society's work with people who were very poor. This little boy felt inspired, and so spontaneously, he took all the money out of his pockets and put it into the offering plate. After church, to his great surprise, his father thought he'd made a terrible mistake. To make his point even more clear, he punished the boy by not giving him any allowance for the next two weeks. What stung that little boy even more, he said, was something his father said to him that day: “Nobody likes a holy Joe.”

Now, we might think that father made a terrible mistake with his son. But I would bet that most of us have some version of that father's voice in our own heads. It's the voice that responds to our own *epiphanies of recruitment* by saying, “Be practical. Don't get carried away. You're not a hero.” Mostly, we respond to even our most vivid epiphanies by rationalizing them away. I promise you, it's not just you. It's all of us. It is part of our human nature to second-guess the voice that seems “only” spiritual, less “real”.

The great philosopher William James acknowledged that if he told the truth about himself, he really wanted to be *both* a saint and a millionaire. 70% of the students entering Harvard Law School say they plan to practice public interest law; only about 3% actually do it. The opportunities to take a path that will bring more money and prestige, or just comfort, are just too compelling. The question for each of us is: Which voice will we listen to?

The story we read this morning from 1 Samuel is a reminder of how deeply and essentially human this internal dialogue is. Samuel will become one of the most important prophets in Jewish history, but in this story he is just a boy. He's in the care of the old, wise priest, Eli, so that he too might learn what it means to give his whole life to God. Samuel was an attentive pupil, and on this night he is sleeping in the very center of the worship space—the room where the ark of God was kept, the container that held the Law itself. This was the most holy space possible; the ark was, for the ancient Israelites, like the *physical* presence of God among them.

But even here, even in this holy space, the voice of God is not all that clear. Three times Samuel heard a voice calling his name. It's not until the third time that he figures out that it's God—after he's gone twice to Eli and asked “What can I do for you?” Finally Eli says, “I'm telling you, it wasn't me! Maybe there's something going on here that you should pay attention to.” Indeed there was. God was trying to speak. And when Samuel is paying enough attention to hear, God says, “I just want to tell you: I'm about to do something big. Something so big, it will make your ears tingle when you hear it.” Once in a while, God lets his sense of humor show.

But here's the line in this passage that really catches my attention. It's early in the story, even before God begins to call to Samuel. "*The word of the Lord was rare in those days, visions were not widespread.*" (v.2) And I wonder: Was the word of the Lord rare because God had stopped speaking? Where had all the visions gone?

Maybe God had been speaking all along. Maybe there were *epiphanies of recruitment* everywhere—only the people hadn't recognized God's voice, or they let the other voices in their heads talk them out of responding.

Because responding to God's voice can seem impractical. Ill-considered. Maybe even dangerous.

Have you seen the movie *Dead Poets Society*? Robin Williams is an English teacher at a very traditional boys' school. He uses poetry to inspire in the boys a different, free-er way of looking at the world than anything they've ever seen before. But he's too edgy for the school's administration, a little bit dangerous to its traditions, the *status quo*. This is the scene just after he is fired. Watch the internal dialogue that gets played out in these boys.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i64SctPKmqk>

(from *Dead Poets Society*)

The struggle you just saw on those boys' faces is what's supposed to be happening inside of people who are trying to follow Jesus. Church should be the Eli in your life, the voice that says to you, "I think that might be God talking to you." The voice you hear here will, I hope, move you toward your own epiphanies of recruitment, and then beyond them—to take the dangerous step of giving yourself away for the sake of compassion and justice—even when other voices are saying that seems excessive, or unbalanced.

If you don't want the contours of your life to change, I'm not sure this is right place for you. Church is a place for people who are ready to have their lives disrupted. You get to decide whether to make your place here—to belong—in a community what will not leave you alone.

A community that is listening for the God who repairs the world by calling out to people like us with new words and new visions. Ones that just might make your ears tingle.

ⁱ Brian J. Mahan, *Forgetting Ourselves on Purpose*, Jossey Bass 2002