

Attending to Attentiveness

Attend [ME *atende(n)*, from OF *atendre*, from L *attendere* 'stretch towards']

Attach [ME *attache(n)*, from OF *atachier*, from *a-* + word akin to 'tack']

Detach [F *détacher*, from *de-* + OF *tache* (Rom. *tacca*) 'nail']

Present [ME, from L *praesens* 'being before (one, the other)']

In discussing the themes of stories during a course I once gave called 'True Stories', one of the participants commented that so many stories imply we have to learn *detachment*. At the time I responded that I thought we have to learn simultaneous detachment *and* attachment, and tried to say something in explanation of what I meant. On my way home I thought further about it. Later I went to my dictionary.

I would now ascribe what I wanted to mean that evening to the word *attentiveness*. I am convinced that attentiveness has just one fundamental prerequisite: to be *present*. Only by 'being before' someone or something can you be attentive. First to be here, and then to 'stretch towards'...

Simultaneous detachment and attachment means not being stuck ('nailed') yet still being right on the spot, a being before and a stretching towards which requires a considerable inner mobility. This does not mean being all over the place, but rather achieving a dynamic poise in which there is potential for every movement.

It is so easy to wander off. Think of the occasions when you have been asked, challenged probably, to be fully present. What *is* your attention-span, the length of time you can attend, to be there and stretch out? It is a fact that usually we go out towards things just briefly, and then withdraw. Rudolf Steiner has characterised this as the polarity of *sympathy* and *antipathy*, and states that we are continually oscillating between the two. If we were only to stretch out in sympathy, we would lose ourselves — if we remained within ourselves, we would lose the world. So there is this continual attaching and detaching taking place.

Attentiveness is not only about registering the external phenomena; it is also importantly about observing internal phenomena. There is an aphorism by the German Romantic poet Novalis, to which I shall return frequently: 'The seat of the soul is where the inner world and the outer world meet. Where they overlap, it is in every part of the overlap.' Attentiveness is about being present in these phenomena of the soul, where the inner world and the outer world meet, and in particular where these two worlds overlap. Can we be more concrete about this?

Consciousness arises at the boundaries of the soul. I begin to be conscious of myself in encountering the world, and conscious of the world because I know a self. This meeting point of inner and outer is like a two-way mirror; I both see through it and am reflected in it. Think about this for a moment. In waking up each morning, there is a more-or-less simultaneous recognition: out there the world is, and here I am. This is an act of remembering, out of the dissolution of the night when for a while I lose sight of both world

and self. In the morning I re-member, I re-collect, not only the world, but also myself. If there is dissonance between my inner state and that of the world, I will readily notice it. I feel bad, or I feel good; the world seems bad, or it seems good. If there is a warm resonance between the two, then I rise like a lark (when she was a tiny tot, my daughter would say, 'I'm as happy as a *laugh!*') into the morning.

The first state, of experiencing some dissonance with the world, is a meeting. It is an essentially antipathetic encounter, and we observe that in this meeting, the reflection in the mirror awakens memory, and also our conceptual life. I would go so far as to suggest that at this meeting-point we are awakened, even pained, into what Jungian psychologists have called a *focussed consciousness*, which is the basis of a Classical, more Apollonian orientation towards the world.

The second state, of sympathetic resonance, is experienced in the overlap; and when we are present in this overlap we live in a kind of *diffuse awareness*. In her book 'Knowing Woman', the Jungian analyst Irene Claremont de Castillejo refers to diffuse awareness as a state in which individuals may experience 'the wholeness of nature, where everything is linked with everything else and they feel themselves to be part of an individual whole'. I think we can readily identify this as a more Dionysian, more Romantic notion.

Can we *actually* be both here and there? Or do we become, with practice, simply more adept at switching rapidly between the two modes? At the meeting-point of inner and outer, we do indeed find there is a toggle-switch, the experience of sympathy / antipathy. However, it seems to me that there is another experience where we can be simultaneously here and there, and that is in the place Novalis calls the overlap. Here we do not 'toggle' but rather dissolve our normal subject / object consciousness in that specific state of diffuse awareness which is the activity and realm of *Imagination*.

While it is relatively straightforward to experience the meeting-point of the inner world and the outer world, what exactly is this place where they overlap? The American poet Robert Bly, introducing the poems 'Silence in the Snowy Fields' in his 'Selected Poems', writes that:

at certain moments, particularly moments alone, we can pass into a deep well of the mind, and at this instant we may pass as well into a tree or a hill, as when the dreamer travelling to some far place finds himself not farther from the soul but nearer to it, and wakes with the sweet sensation of friendship from other worlds.

A 'deep well of the mind'? Where, and what, is that? Through quite specific meditative exercising, we can experience an initial loosening, a kind of dis-membering within the body, along with a sensation of hovering in flight, or of being adrift in an ocean... These are two characteristic experiences accompanying the development of *Imagination*, as outlined by Rudolf Steiner in many of his books (and in my book 'A Way of Seeing'). This meditative inwardness is Bly's 'deep well of the mind'. In this place we discover that everything is continually in a process of becoming something else — it is a world of transformations, of a kind of constant 'morphing'. Here, we can experience that, just because something in us becomes inwardly *detached*, so in this condition it can become *attached* elsewhere, or rather it can be *in touch* with other things. This is in fact what happens when our 'body' of formative

forces (which maintains and sustains the life of our body, and provides the medium for our thinking) becomes inwardly freed from its normally tight bond with the physical body. In this loosened state, this etheric body is highly susceptible to impressions from the surrounding world, and is able to register them empathetically. It actually is *in-formed* by them. It then becomes part of the ebb and flow, the surge and the shifts of the forces embodied in all existence. In being attentive to such experiences, we are indwelling the overlap.

The most compelling evidence that there *is* indeed an overlap is the initial problem of identification when in such a state; we know we are experiencing something, but do not know what. Nor do we know at first whether this something is an inner or outer reality. In this respect the pictures we experience as Imaginations are similar to dreams, in which inner organic sensations may present themselves as external phenomena (Rudolf Steiner gives the example of a dream of writhing snakes, which represents a digestive upset). So we only know we are experiencing something, and must then clothe it with the familiar. Consequently this world of Imaginations can be very confusing, and we may be prone to error in interpreting our experiences.

In order to find our orientation then in such a state we must develop that quality which the Romantic poet John Keats called *negative capability*: to be 'capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason'. That is, we must refrain from leaping to conclusions, and learn to live faithfully in the presence of the phenomena. To focussed consciousness, the overlap presents itself as a gap, a lacuna in knowledge; it is thus an alarming void for the rationalist.

However, it seems easily avoided. It can be stepped over, and it slips from view, below the threshold once more, through our absorption into the demands of materialistic culture. Go out, go out, go out, be endlessly busy. But when we return, in the moment we pause, it is waiting there. Again it can be avoided, through alcohol and other chemical means, through television, through flooding the senses with impressions...

At what cost? Rudolf Steiner said that during the twentieth century, humanity would unconsciously cross the threshold. This is where the overlap exists. The boundaries have softened, and we can either choose to inhabit the overlap, or be inhabited by spectres. These ghosts are real beings, not just abstract shadows; they comprise everything we are not aware of and yet which influence us. If we are attentive to this, 'without any irritable reaching after fact and reason', then we become aware of what is present. We must first learn to practise *presence*. It is important, however, to realise that diffuse awareness is not vague awareness; it requires a rigorous 'work-out' in *being here*.

Now, if I went along to a gym, I could test my physical fitness; various types of apparatus could be adjusted to exercise particular muscles, and I could 'work-out' against them. The interesting thing about 'working-out' is our 'love-hate' relationship to these machines. They function essentially through the effects of various weights and friction mechanisms: too much resistance, and we are defeated; too little, and nothing is achieved. They are set up to be mirrors for our capabilities. Spiritual exercising, the activity I call 'working-out in the soul-gym', is subject to similar rules. We need a comprehensive programme. We need to

have just the right resistance. We need to sweat a little in learning to 'be here'. But to begin with we might need some relatively straightforward exercises.

To further establish what exercising 'being here' means, another aphorism by Novalis that I will come back to repeatedly is instructive: after commenting on the dual nature of self-expression he goes on to say that 'the first step is introspection — exclusive contemplation of the self. But whoever stops there goes only half way. The second step must be genuine observation outward — spontaneous, sober observation of the external world.' This is very similar to Rudolf Steiner's approach to development, in suggesting that the deliberate exercising of focussed consciousness back and forth across the boundaries of the soul is the 'work-out' prerequisite to indwelling the overlap.

In his book 'Knowledge of the Higher Worlds' Rudolf Steiner asks us to create secluded moments of inner tranquillity in which to 'contemplate and judge our own actions and experiences, as though they applied not to ourselves but to some other person'. We are thus to form an objective view of ourselves, to identify the essential and non-essential elements in our lives. We can identify this as the first step in being here, a self-knowledge based on what Novalis has called 'exclusive contemplation of the self'.

The second step is taken when we develop what Novalis then refers to as 'spontaneous, sober observation of the external world'. In 'Knowledge of the Higher Worlds', Rudolf Steiner goes on to state that the aspiring student of the spirit must learn to 'look out on the world with keen, healthy senses, and quickened power of observation, and then give himself up to the feeling that arises within him. He should not try to make out, through intellectual speculation, what the things mean, but rather allow the things themselves to tell him.'

This requires an attitude of surrender, out of our stilled inner world, to those things we observe about us. As such it is a gesture of humility in being here, of a reverence which, says Rudolf Steiner, 'awakens a sympathetic power through which we attract qualities in the beings around us, which would otherwise remain concealed'. Perhaps here we can sense what Robert Bly means in writing of 'some deep well of the mind' where he 'finds himself not farther from the soul but nearer to it, and wakes with the sweet sensation of friendship from other worlds'.

This is where attentiveness can lead us. First, a truly focussed consciousness is asked for, directed methodically towards both the inner world and the outer world; and then a giving ourselves up through a diffuse awareness to the feeling that arises within us. Where? In the overlap, in that deep well of the mind in which we have become capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason. It is here, just here, that we can attend to attentiveness — to that aspect of our soul-spiritual activity which just touches on things, yet stays in touch.

~ John Allison