



Fresh Rain

A Quarterly e-Journal of the Open Path / Sufi Way

WINTER 2020

IN THIS ISSUE: Essays by Pir Elias, Binah Taylor, Amina Kathryn Bragg, and Yona Chavanne; Poetry by Ayaz Angus Landman, Gabriel Mezei, Carol Barrow, Jeanne Rana, and Sharif Stannard



Dear Friends,

The rains have come in earnest here in Northern California. We've had close to seven inches (17.75 cm) in the last two weeks. Praise be! the end of the fire season until next Fall.

In this issue, we consider "paying attention." I wanted this particular theme because I consider it a life practice. The prose contributions are from Pir Elias, Binah Taylor, Amina Kathryn Bragg, and Yona Chavanne. The poems were contributed by Gabriel Mezei, Carol Barrow, Jeanne Rana, and Sharif Stannard. There is another short poem on kindness by Ayaz Angus Landman which I neglected to include in the last newsletter. We always benefit from kindness reminders!

Thanks to all who write for us. Please (strongly) consider doing so for future issues. We always wonder if we'll have enough material. For Spring, let's consider the theme of **Grieving**, and for Summer, **Climate**. I look forward to reading your writing. It inspires me.

With love for each one of you,
Amrita
editor, *Fresh Rain*: freshrain@sufiway.org



Contents

Paying Attention and Paying Presence p. 2
– Pir Elias

Paying Attention p. 3
– Binah Taylor

Attentive Shared Presence p. 4
– Amina Kathryn Bragg

Giving Attention p. 5
– Yona Chavanne

Kindness p. 5
– Ayaz Angus Landman

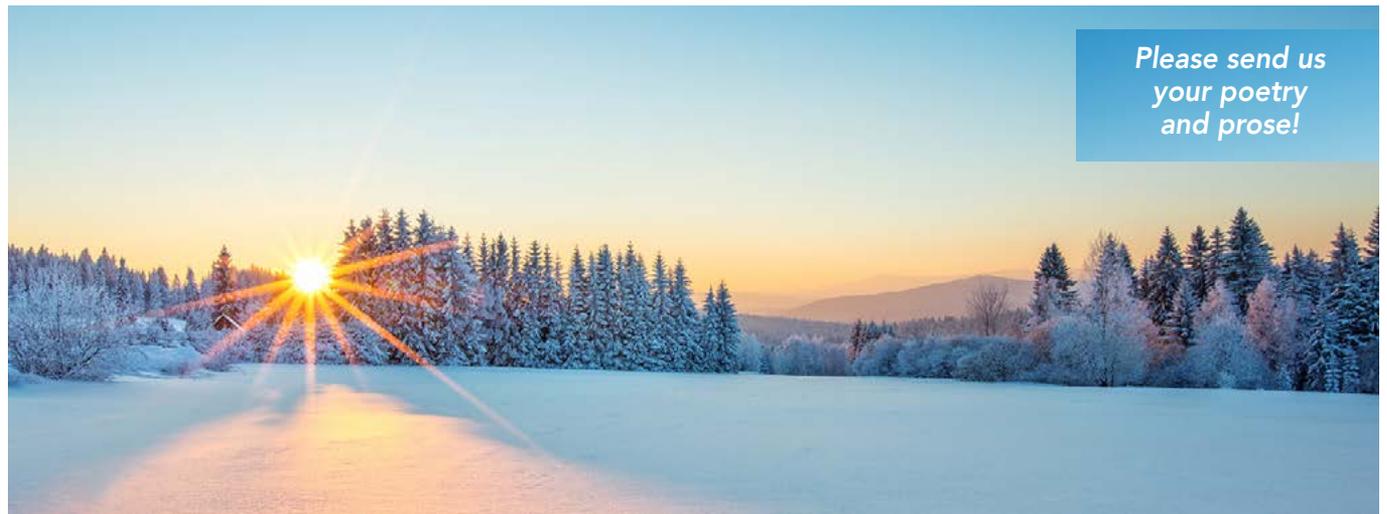
Pay Attention p. 6
– Gabriel Mezei

Blackbirds p. 7
– Carol Barrow

my mind p. 8
– Jeanne Rana

Pay Attention p. 9
– Sharif Stannard

Upcoming Programs 2020 p. 10



Please send us your poetry and prose!

Paying Attention and Paying Presence

by Pir Elias

I know paying attention is a good thing. I was taught that and I believe it. I remember when I was eleven years old walking to school on a beautiful May morning, only three more weeks until summer vacation, climbing up the front stairs to the school doors, going inside, leaving the bright morning outside for the clatter of students going through the halls and the smell of the floor polish the janitor had used before we arrived, finding my desk, opening my spelling book and then sensing the sweet breeze coming in the window slightly open next to me, looking out at the new green leaves of the maple trees and feeling the big bright morning out there going in all directions up and around the school building, the morning's light and freshness and beautiful promise, and then, smack! the sound of the teacher's ruler whacking her desk and her pointing at me, saying, "Young man, *pay attention!* Tell us how you spell *disreputable.*"

It's a good thing I was taught to pay attention — I mean it — otherwise I'd never have learned how to spell these words I'm writing, and yet ... the morning, the maple leaves, the sky, my distracted gaze away from the work at hand, my little heart soaring out there beyond the school building, they were good too, they were not disreputable, they were present and for that moment I was present with them — my presence not something focused like attention but something bigger, something wide open, unknown and unknowing. I was "paying presence," not attention, though it didn't have that name and certainly wasn't given the value that paying attention is given.

When we pay attention, we focus awareness. When we "pay presence," what are we doing? We're not exactly focusing, but at the same time we're not oblivious. We sense a wholeness in things, an at-once-ness, the gift of an ever-assembling gestalt. I think "paying presence" is a function of our consciousness just as much as paying attention, and though it isn't validated in our education in the way paying attention is, we rely upon it just as much, and in its own way it is equally worthy a skill as paying attention.

When I play the piano, I've learned that if I pay too much attention to what my fingers are doing I soon make

mistakes and lose the music. To the extent I can "pay presence," I'm in the flow of my body, my fingers, the music — I let it all happen rather than try to make it happen. I realize the word "pay" in "pay presence" sounds awkward but, in fact, it's also awkward when we think of "paying" attention. In any case, the currency used in both is awareness — one focused awareness and the other wide open.

When we read these lines of Rumi:

*Presence plays with form,
fleeing and hiding as the sky does in water,
now one place, now nowhere.*

we "pay attention" to the words and their meanings, but our attention-paying isn't enough by itself. If the poetry

is to reveal something to us, we need to let our focused attention open and join with what is beyond the meanings of the words themselves. This "beyond," this "presence," is not something we can "pay attention" to — the "paying" happens in a different way.

Another example: listening. When we listen attentively, we're "paying attention" to what someone is saying to us

— this is respectful, and it leads to understanding what the person is saying. When we're "paying presence" to what they're saying as well as paying attention, we open our awareness to include an intuitive feel for the spirit of the other and the whole context that is present in that moment, and our listening becomes even more sensitive and compassionate.

There are countless other examples we might think of to see how this same bifold magic — attention and presence — functions in the play of consciousness. If we only validate the focus involved in paying attention, we miss the intuitive space that comes with paying presence. If my teacher had said, "Young man, are you enjoying the beauty of the morning?" I probably would have stammered, "Uh, yes, yes I am," and she could have said, "That's wonderful, it is indeed a beautiful morning. Let's put down our work for a moment and all look out the window and just feel how beautiful it is." And then after a bit she could have said, "Now, let's see if we can pay attention to our spelling work, while not forgetting the lovely morning."



Paying Attention

by Binah Taylor

“Pay attention, B, I’m talking to you!” Teacher strides over and bangs the lid of my wooden desk. Pencils leap up and my notebook slides onto my lap. “We’re having an important lesson and you’re looking out the window, daydreaming,” she shouts.

I barely notice her or my jumping desk for I am transfixed, having witnessed a skein of lightning unravel at speed over the ground, its scorching liquid gold opening up a jagged trench in the tarmac. First a bolt connecting with the conductor; but then, insufficiently earthed, searching, its flash becoming a golden thread burning the ground barely yards from where I sit.

By the time the teacher reaches me, the lightning has disappeared into the earth. A boy in the back row speaks up he has seen it too—and outside the evidence is visible with the lightning conductor dangling limply on the side of school building, a nod to the fissured tarmac below. And so the lesson of the day turns towards paying attention to the mechanics of how lightning tries to earth itself, as well as teacher’s extensive monologue of safety warnings reminding us of our hilly location in an area of frequent electric storms.

Paying attention: how does it work, both inwardly and outwardly? How do we keep focus on what we observe and on what is invoked in us? Are we more present when we release attention? It was easy to pay attention to the lightning bolt running amok, because it was shocking and out of the ordinary. But was I also paying attention to what was happening inside me, apart from a pervasive sense of awe? Was I afraid, excited, tense in my body, my heart beating faster? Probably all of these, yet my attention was primarily focused on what I was seeing and my internal responses were secondary.

Reflecting on this event so many years later—and it is still so clear!—I wonder how it might have been for my ten-year-old self to have widened my lens and stepped back from the lightning phenomenon, the teacher’s

remonstrations, and the feelings and sensations within me. In this sequential releasing I imagine my awareness opening, allowing me to be more present. Just putting this into words gives me a feeling of freedom and spaciousness. Of course, I was young and my consciousness not developed, nor was I aware of this internal process. I am thinking too there are different kinds of attention: concentrative attention,

which requires a narrow focus (such as tracking the lightning path), and an open, receptive approach, such as mindfulness, which requires a wide-angle lens of attention. While we can direct our attention to shift across and incorporate both, we may privilege one over the other, depending on what is before us or how we want to engage.

A couple of weeks ago, I experienced the sharp end of paying attention to a negative state and becoming closed and

reactive—despite my intention to the contrary. I had set off to get registered at the local health office as I have now become a Spanish resident. In the long wait before my turn, I read passages from Rosalind Pearmain’s book, *Heart of Listening* (Attentional Qualities in Psychotherapy)—a beautiful book bringing together insights from Sufism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Raj Yoga to enhance therapeutic attention and understanding. Just as I was reading a quote from Hazrat Inayat-Khan—“Feeling is a deeper aspect of mind ... we do not have to struggle to assert mind over feeling, nor treat these as entirely separate domains of subject and object, but as two mutually informing and intertwining aspects of living”—my number was called out. Walking into the room I felt buoyant, inspired by what I had been reading and confident I had enough Spanish to communicate and achieve the task. I couldn’t have been more wrong. The first obstacle was the woman at the desk spoke no English. Then it became clear she had never registered a foreigner before, and looked far from keen to do so.

As my anxiety increased, my Spanish diminished, and I began to close off so my internal space felt muffled,



rendering me less able to be attentive and attuned. Her fluster increased too, and in an excruciating dance of ten minutes or so we stumbled around in the unknown, two frustrated people clenched in misunderstanding. A colleague was called over but, she too, was out of her depth, and there was a lot of muttering and gesturing as they looked at my papers. Finally the form was completed, stamped with a flourish, then pushed to my side of the desk. As I glanced through it, even with my limited Spanish I could see my address had the wrong town, my mobile number was missing a digit and Aragon had suddenly become my birthplace. It was also only valid for three months, which made no sense. What little composure I had left was now shredded on the floor.

“No es vale!” I found myself saying, repeating it with increasing volume and waving the form at the two women. Both looked at me, clearly annoyed, repeating “tranquillo!” to which I responded “no es vale!” We

went back and forth mirroring each other and stuck in our mantras until a gesture was given by the taller woman and I was shown the door. Two thoughts accompanied me on my way out the building: in placing my attention on feeling vulnerable and misunderstood, I became defensive and uppity. The other was, I’d better not get sick.

I walked to the local café at the seafront to get back some sort of equilibrium. I felt I had let the book down as well—such beautiful words and I could not stay aligned with them! Each sip of delicious coffee however brought with it reflection and a slowing down to allow things to settle. I began to notice the golden day, gorgeous sea, smiling people around me. My embarrassment subsided although an apology was in order, as well as some inner housekeeping. Paying attention is definitely more complicated in the dance with another when the steps have yet to be learned.

Attentive Shared Presence

by Amina Kathryn Bragg

Are we lulled into the familiar and repetitive experience of life as usual? What cracks us out of the bored, bland, and blinded cocoon in which we envelop ourselves?

Is it the occasional shock of beauty? The undeniable pain of death? The flash of compassion for the suffering of others? A fright, a threat, a brush with mortality? Or a simple moment of calm abiding, when all is well, and we know that “all” means “All”?

In a moment of normality, as in lying down between flannel sheets and feeling gratitude for warmth and safety, does our attention come to the present? Reading the gritty account of a worker in Yemen or Nicaragua, seeing bare feet of children walking through dumps, or alongside bombed out buildings, or in precarious refugee boats?

Can it be the sensual experience of swimming in warm transparent water, or gliding upon a snowy river path, or sitting with someone’s grandchild in your lap?

An instructor encouraged me to be attentive, but not to concentrate. In his experience, concentrating adds ego

into the equation, whereas attending to something is simple presence, with nothing added. A practitioner can be present with her client in this attentive, shared presence; both may notice that the separation between “client” and “practitioner” vanishes, and a unitary connection



arises. The attention is therapeutic, healing, insofar as connection is the truth of our being.

Giving Attention

by Yona Chavanne

It is well known by now: one never lives anything else than the moment now, this present moment, the manifested instant. Yet we live myriads of moments. How to reconcile?

* * *

A Zen story tells about a Zen student who, after many many years of studying with a respected teacher, the student, one day, while walking on the countryside along with other students during a break for picnic, happens to be sitting on a stone just next to his teacher and complains:

“After so many years I have been studying and practicing Zen with you, I am so sad to say that I never understood what Zen is. Could you please, today, tell me?”

“Can you hear the sound of this river?” the teacher asks.

“Which river?”

“The river there, flowing down the nearby mountain.”

Indeed there, at some distance, a majestic mountain is standing.



Long silence follows.

“Oh yes,” suddenly the student says, “oh yes, now I can hear it.”

“Well, now you have entered what Zen is.”

* * *

Giving attention could also be called pure listening.

Listening just now, listening at now, with one’s whole presence—intuitional ears, touch, smell, eyes, mouth ... We could call it *Tasting the Moment*.

However, as a matter of fact, we are rarely present to the fleeting moment, we often are not really here, but in some other sketch of time—past or future—conditioning thoughts (even thoughts about the present moment: what it means, how important it is to give attention to it, etc.)

If music is the silence between notes, I am this as well.



Kindness
Like beauty
Is emanation not Source
The bloom and blush
Of that which can only be known
In this way

—Ayaz Angus Landman

Pay Attention

Pay attention to life
To existence itself

A miracle
And a mystery

My spirituality stems from
Realizing this

The utter unlikeliness
Of this coming about

A universe with rules
Things and energies

Organic life
Consciousness

Presence
Self-awareness

Humanity
With great art

Spirituality
With open awareness

Why?
From where?

We'll never know
Need not know

Just experience and enjoy this
With eternal attention

—Gabriel Mezei



Blackbirds

a pantoum*

A cloud of blackbirds darkens the sky,
expanding and contracting
like a huge breath.
How can we not pay attention?

Expanding and contracting—
in a dance spontaneously choreographed—
how can we not pay attention?
The movement and joy are contagious.

It's all a dance spontaneously choreographed,
and, admit it or not, we are being danced.
The movement and joy are contagious;
for a moment we forget who we think we are.

Admit it or not, we are being danced.
We're being twirled by a beloved partner,
And for a moment we forget who we think we are
as we watch a cloud of blackbirds darken the sky.

—Carol Barrow



**Pantoum: A poem of any length composed of four-line stanzas in which the second and fourth lines of each stanza serve as the first and third lines of the next stanza.*

my mind

*the wind whips my mind
prayer flags snapping*

wind before the rain
red maple leaves
twirl across the patio

wind whips through my mind
Tibetan prayer flags
circle and spin out of control

now the wind has gone
rains have begun
some of the leaves float
in puddles
and now that smell
first rain
on pavement

the storm is passing over
and the rain tapering
now my mind begins to float.

If I were to paint it
the beginning of the poem
is black swirled with grey
and now it has become
sapphire blue
and clean
like the smell of sun-dried sheets.

I used to hold the bag of clothespins
as my mother in her apron
pulled sheets off the line
hurrying as the wind hurled them
away from her
hurrying to bring them in
before the rain.

I wish
to love agitated mind
as much as I love wind and rain.

—Jeanne Rana



Pay Attention

"Pay attention"
Whispers a small patch of blue sky
Peeking out from a long-lasting overcast.
I can choose to pause as the patch slowly grows
Letting the sun shine through the gloom
And my spirit soars in response.

Or I can just as easily ignore it
And carry on with my routine, eyes down
And miss the wonder around me.

"Pay attention"
Screams an even smaller grain of sand
Grinding uninvited through my body
As a kidney stone.
I have no choice as it drives all else from my awareness,
Robbing me of sleep at night
And focus in the day.
And my spirit spirals helplessly downward.

"Pay attention"
Comes the voice of my Friend,
"We are together in life
Sharing both the joy and the pain."
In the sunshine that is so easy to embrace
With poetry, laughter and dance.
But in the painful darkness I'm not so sure.
Clearly, there are still lessons ahead,
Calling me to
"Pay attention."

—Sharif Stannard



Upcoming Programs 2020



ENTERING into SILENCE

A Sufi Walking Retreat in the Moroccan Desert
with Karim Noverraz and Elmer Koole
February 23 – March 3, 2020



BEING MORTAL

The Grace of Living, Aging, and Dying
A Four-Day Retreat with Pir Elias Amidon
New Eden Retreat Centre, Sparjeburd,
Hemrik, the Netherlands
September 3 – 6, 2020



BEING MORTAL

The Grace of Living, Aging, and Dying
A Four-Day Retreat with Pir Elias Amidon
Aldermarsh Retreat Center,
Whidbey Island, Washington
April 23 – 26, 2020



BEING MORTAL

The Grace of Living, Aging, and Dying
A Four-Day Retreat with Pir Elias Amidon
Himmelreich Retreat Center, Lindau, Germany
September 16 – 20, 2020



BEING MORTAL

The Grace of Living, Aging, and Dying
A Five-Day Retreat with Pir Elias Amidon
Poulstone Court Retreat Center, Herefordshire, UK
May 23 – 27, 2020

