

"Nobody Sees a Flower, Really, It Is So Small": Extolling the Ethic of Attention

Abstract

The poet William Blake taught us to befriend and attend to the small in his line, “To see a World in a Grain of Sand, and a Heaven in a Wild Flower.” In this essay, after exploring the importance of an ethic of attention through multiple disciplinary lenses, I will share an experience where some very small flowers stretched toward me, and I stretched back with my photographer’s eye. The images captured in the series “Arnica Montana: The Archetypal Heart of a Flower” are more than just an exercise in anthropomorphic projection; they embody an ethic of attention, a performance of psychotherapy with the *anima mundi*. Jung wrote, “It is a general truth that the earth is depreciated and misunderstood.” Appreciation and understanding can arise through paying attention to the archetypal resonance between nature and human nature; these flowers show us the vagaries and varieties of the Heart’s manifestations.

“Nobody Sees a Flower, Really, It Is So Small”: Extolling the Ethic of Attention

“To pay attention, this is our endless
and proper work.”

Mary Oliver (2005, p. 151)

"This is the first, the wildest and the wisest thing I know: that the soul exists and is built entirely
out of attentiveness."

Mary Oliver (2001, p. 34)

Freud is often quoted for having said, “Everywhere I go I find a poet has been there
before me” (cited in Brown, n.d., ¶2). Of course, the poet Mary Oliver came after Freud, but
don’t miss my point—I want to align myself with the poet and extol the ethic of attention. In
doing so, I align myself as well with C. G. Jung who attended to the images of his own psyche
and framed this attention as an ethical issue. He wrote,

I took great care to understand every single image, every item of my psychic inventory .

. . and, above all, to realize them in actual life. That is what we usually neglect to do.

We allow the images to rise up, and maybe we wonder about them, but that is all. We

do not take the trouble to understand them, let alone draw ethical conclusions from

them. (1961, p. 196)

Before we can begin to understand our images, of course, we have to pay attention to them. So
this essay begins with the subtitle by extolling the ethic of attention first, and then moves
backward to the title to explore how some small flowers taught my soul “the first, the wildest,
and the wisest thing I know” about the archetypal Heart.

Extolling an Ethic of Attention

“Attention” comes from the Latin “attendere” which means, literally, “to stretch toward, from *ad*, meaning to, and *tendere*, meaning stretch” (“Attend,” n.d.). When we pay attention to something, we stretch toward it, lean into it, move nearer, whether with our literal bodies, or our soul’s energetic body.

Other words cluster around attention. There’s “attend,” which means to take care of. We “tend” to what we care for. We become an “attendant,” one who “attends.” In order to attend, we need to be in “attendance,” which means to be present, to present oneself to that which calls for our attention.

Psychotherapy clearly calls for the ethic of attention. One sits in attendance with another soul, stretching toward it, tending to it, being its attendant. The psychotherapist is paid for her time; she is paid to pay attention. Freud said the most advantageous attitude for the analyst was adopting “a state of evenly suspended attention,” in order to “catch the drift of the patient’s unconscious with his own unconscious” (1923, p. 242). Thus, attention is one way of *listening for*, of *listening to* the unconscious, from the unconscious.

Early in his career, Jung explored how the unconscious spoke through disturbances of attention. There are relatively few references to the concept of attention in the *Collected Works*—56 to be exact—and the vast majority in the first three volumes: 6 in Volume 1, *Psychiatric Studies* (1970), 20 in Volume 2, *Experimental Researches*, which includes the essay “Studies in Word Association” (1973) and 18 in Volume 3, *The Psychogenesis of Mental Disease* (1960). During this stage in his career, Jung was chiefly concerned with the role of attention in

mental disorders, and posited that a disturbance in attention is indicative of a disturbance in the psyche.

For instance, he described hysteria as a disturbance of attention, agreeing with Janet who wrote

One can say that the principal disturbance consists not in a suppression of the intellectual faculties but in the difficulty of fixing the attention. Their [the patients'] minds are always distracted by some vague preoccupation, and they never give themselves entirely to the object which one assigns to them. (as cited in Jung, 1907/1960, CW 3, ¶162)

Jung also categorized schizophrenia as a disturbance of attention (¶1-3), or sometimes a total lack of attention, as in catatonia; he quoted from the French psychologist Rene Masselon who wrote of catatonia, “Perception of external objects, awareness of our own personality, judgment, the feeling of rapport, belief, certainty, all disappear when the power of attention disappears” (¶14).

In addition to mental disorders, Jung wrote about the complexes as disturbances of attention, supporting his theory through his experiments with the word association tests. He noted, “Attention is of cardinal importance” in the word association test, as the “delicate affective apparatus that reacts first in abnormal physical and mental conditions” (Jung & Riklin, 1904/1970, CW 2, ¶13).

Jung often placed the adjective “feeling-toned” in front of the noun “complex,” as in a feeling-toned complex (1907/1960, CW 3, ¶82). A complex is indicated not only by a strong feeling-tone, but carries a strong “attention-tone,” a term referenced four times in the

Collected Works. He noted, “Ideas which directly concern our own persons are always the most stable, and to us the most interesting; we could also express this by saying that they possess the strongest *attention-tone*” (1907/1960, CW 3, ¶183). He stated that when a complex arises, it “crowds everything else into the background” and suppresses everything else into “complete (momentary) unconsciousness”—it is then that the complex “possesses the strongest attention-tone” (¶184). He continued, “Thus we should not say that we direct our attention to something, but that the state of attention sets in with this idea” (¶184).

Jung also noted two factors that could cause a lack of attention which did not indicate the presence of mental disturbance or a complex: boredom and fatigue. He stumbled upon this as well during the word association tests—he found when he used 200 words, his subjects would lose attention and start to make more external and sound associations—such as “flower/power.” He lowered the number of words to 100 and got better results (1906/1973, CW 2, ¶1882). Subjects who were fatigued also had an inhibited capacity to pay attention. He wrote, “During the state of attention the dominant idea is alertness,” and it is of course hard to be alert when you’re physically exhausted (1931/1970, CW 8, ¶1690).

Jung referred to attention as a virtue:

Hence it is of the greatest importance that the ego should be anchored in the world of consciousness and that consciousness should be reinforced by a very precise adaptation. For this, certain virtues like attention, conscientiousness, patience, etc., are of great value on the moral side, just as accurate observation of the symptomatology of the unconscious and objective self-criticism are valuable on the intellectual side.

(1959/1969, CW 9ii, ¶146)

Certainly we can interpret *The Red Book* (2009) as the quintessential example of this, where Jung paid attention to his inner images with such patience and conscientiousness, as he attempted to accurately observe the symptomatology of his own unconscious with as much objectivity as possible. We can see attention then as a crucial factor in facilitating his individuation journey.

To summarize Jung on attention, then, a lack of attention can simply be a sign of mental boredom or physical fatigue, or it can more complexly be an indication of mental disturbances ranging from neurosis to psychosis. What’s clear in converse is that a healthy physical and mental body is one capable of paying attention. Not only is attention a sign of health, it is also a moral virtue and an ethical imperative to the development of consciousness.

Why is attention in Hillman’s words “the cardinal psychological virtue?” (1985, p. 89). He provided one answer when he wrote, “On it depends perhaps the other cardinal virtues, for there can hardly be faith nor hope nor love for anything unless it first receives attention” (p. 89). For Mary Oliver, “Attention is the beginning of devotion” (2004, p. 56).

Attention has not only been extolled within psychology and poetry, but within spirituality as well. The Indian spiritual teacher Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj wrote, “Do not undervalue attention. It means interest and also love. To know, to do, to discover, or to create you must give your heart to it—which means attention. All the blessings flow from it” (n.d., section 31).

There is a familiar teaching story in the Zen tradition about an earnest student who comes to a master and asks for the highest and most secret teaching on the *dharma*. The master picks up a brush, dips it in some ink and writes the word “Attention.” The student, sure

this can't be all there is to the dharma, pushes for another, deeper teaching. The master takes up the brush again and writes “Attention. Attention.” The student is highly unimpressed. “If you are a master, you should be able to give me more than that,” he says. The master sighs, picks up the brush, and writes “Attention. Attention. Attention” (Beck, 1993, p. 68). In this story, attention *is* the dharma, the most basic principle that orders the universe.

I find this principle mirrored in Alice Walker's 1982 novel *The Color Purple*. In the section that gives the book its title, Shug Avery, the wild, passionate woman who serves as teacher and lover to a beaten down Celie, talks to Celie about God. Shug tells Celie that when she found out God was a white man, she lost interest, but then she came to believe that God is everything, “Everything that is or ever was or ever will be.” She continues, “More than anything else, God love admiration.” When Celie asks if that means God is vain, Shug says, “Not vain, just wanting to share a good thing. I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it” (p. 166).

Celie asks what God does when its pissed off, and Shug replies that “it” just makes something else. “People think pleasing God is all God care about. But any fool living in the world can see it always trying to please us back. It always making little surprises and springing them on us when us least expect.” Celie asks, “You mean it want to be loved, just like the bible says?” Shug replies, “Everything want to be loved. Us sing and dance, make faces and give flower bouquets, trying to be loved. You ever notice that trees do everything to git attention we do, except walk?” Shug reveals the secret teaching of the universe to Celie: that “everything that is or ever was or ever will be” wants our attention, and through that attention, our admiration (Walker, 1982, pp. 166-67).

The idea that it “pisses God off” if we don’t notice the beauty in nature was a central theme in the work of artist Georgia O’Keefe, and is perhaps reflected best in her paintings of flowers. O’Keefe was troubled that no one saw flowers, really saw them. “Nobody sees a flower, really, it is so small. We haven't time - and to see takes time like to have a friend takes time” (Artcyclopedia, n.d., ¶1). She used her art to meet this goal of calling attention to flowers. She wrote,

If I could paint the flower exactly as I see it no one would see what I see because I would paint it small like the flower is small. So I said to myself— I'll paint what I see—what the flower is to me but I'll paint it big and they will be surprised into taking time to look at it—I will make even busy New Yorkers take time to see what I see of flowers. ¶2

From psychological importance to poetic injunction to spiritual imperative to artistic inspiration, perhaps the 11th commandment should be—Thou shall pay attention.

And what shall you see when you see the expressions of nature? Writer Henry Miller stated, “The moment one gives close attention to anything, even a blade of grass, it becomes a mysterious, awesome, indescribably magnificent world in itself” (“Nature,” n. d.). Artists, even if they are attending to some small part of the world, hold up that small part so it becomes mysterious, awesome, an indescribably magnificent world in itself, worthy of our attention, just as psychotherapists attend to the soul of the patient, holding up that small part of the human psyche as an awesome, indescribably magnificent world in itself, worthy too of our attention.

When the artist pays attention to nature, when they recreate the wonder that they see, we could say they perform a mirroring function similar to the function of a psychotherapist. Thus, they perform a form of psychotherapy *with* (not on, not for) the *anima mundi*, stretching

toward that part of the world’s psyche that is stretching toward them, mirroring the magnificence of the world in their creations. None of this is possible without an ethic of attention.

“Nobody Sees a Flower, Really, It is So Small”

The poet William Blake taught us to see the magnificent in the mundane, imploring us “to see a World in a Grain of Sand, and a Heaven in a Wild Flower” (1803). This is a story of how some small wild flowers captured my attention, and what they taught me about the Heart that beats in the center of all creaturely things, great and small.

I didn’t set out to find the flowers; they found me. I was spending the summer in Big Sky, Montana, and a friend told me I should hike down to Ousel Falls to take photographs of the waterfalls. Of course, they were magnificent, as all waterfalls are, and I took the requisite photographs (Figure 1).¹ But on the way back from the walk, when my attention was evenly suspended, in Freud’s term, and I had met my ego’s goals, I found my attention drawn then to these small yellow wild flowers peppering the trail. From a distance, they weren’t so magnificent, but up close, they were wonders.

I marveled at their diversity of expression, their hardiness, and their fool heartedness. While others passed me by on their way to the falls, I kneeled, squatted, crouched, stooped, stretched, did whatever it took to capture each flower in its particular glory.

I began visiting them every day, at different times of the day, marveling at how the changing light changed them too (Figure 2) and what a difference a day could make in their

¹ All photographs are in the Appendix and are the author’s original work from her series “Arnica Montana: The Archetypal Heart of a Flower.”

opening up toward life (Figure 3), to their closing down toward death (Figure 4). I came to feel that each flower had a heart, an individual heart, yet all these were expressions of the archetypal Heart in its multiple manifestations.

In his book describing the fusional complex, Nathan Schwartz-Salant wrote, “In a forest, I have felt many times over that it was not I who looked at the forest. Some days I felt that the trees were looking at me, were speaking to me . . . I was there, listening” (2007, p. 22). As I began listening to and for Heart, I began to name the flowers based upon what they whispered to me when they told me their stories (Figures 5-9).²

In a beautiful reversal between subject and object, I came to realize that in paying attention to the flowers, in tending to them, they were tending to me. Their external presentation of Heart was allowing me to go inside and gather my inner images of Heart, and to better understand my own heart and its peculiar history. I remembered times when my heart had shut down (Figure 10), and times when it was open (Figure 11). I remembered when I was shy (Figure 12), and when I would hide, hoping to be found (Figure 13), and when I threw caution to the wind, and with arms wide open, gave freely of my heart (Figure 14). I remembered the half-hearted loves (Figure 15), the love triangles (Figure 16), the years I was alone and learned to love myself (Figure 17), and the yearning to find my soulmate and experience true love between two open hearts (Figure 18).

² Georgia O’Keefe wrote, “I made you take time to look at what I saw and when you took time to really notice my flower you hung all your own associations with flowers on my flower and you write about my flower as if I think and see what you think and see of the flower - and I don’t” (n.d. ¶13). I share this to acknowledge that you might associate different archetypal expressions with these heart-flowers. I have come to see them as small yellow Rorschach tests, and imagine someday therapists might open a book of them, and ask their clients to point out the flower that best expresses how their heart feels.

Not only did I understand my own heart better as a result of communing with these flowers, but I came to better understand the hearts of others. Indeed, when I looked into their hearts, I saw not a shape nor a muscle but a flower. His heart, doubting (Figure 19). Her heart, battered (Figure 20). Her heart, withholding (Figure 21). His heart, holding on (Figure 22). His heart, eager (Figure 23). Her heart, full of grace (Figure 24). Their hearts, codependent (Figure 25). Their hearts, competitive (Figure 26).

Could I have come to such a deeper appreciation for and understanding of Heart without this art, without the artifice of photography? Could I have attended and befriended the hearts of these flowers without the gaze of the lens, the snap of the shutter? For me, I'm not sure. John Dewey wrote, “The moral function of art itself is to remove prejudice, do away with the scales that keep the eye from seeing, tear away the veils due to wont and custom, perfect the power to perceive” (2005, p. 328). Getting closer, stooping down, examining the flower in all different lights, looking for the most expressive angle, zooming in and zooming out, and then bringing them home with me in the tangible form of these photographs, continuing to meditate upon them and writing about them—all of this artistic activity has helped to perfect my power to perceive.

And what's in it for the flowers? I imagine my photography and this presentation of it is one way I say to them you were born, you bloomed, and you were noticed. How easy it is to assume the Other doesn't care, especially if the Other is nature, and yet we're still captivated by the koan, if a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, does it make a sound? We know from studies that plants when talked to lovingly thrive. We know from studies that we can

wither them with our thoughts of malice. Might we imagine these flowers touched by the attention?

Martin Buber wrote, “Everything is waiting to be hallowed by you” (1952, p. 44). Were these flowers waiting to be hallowed by me, or was I the one in need of hallowing? Was my relationship with these flowers an example of Buber’s “I-” relationship, or was this drawing away of my attention onto the flowers a sign of a Jungian complex? Was I trying not to piss off God, or was God trying to please me, or was, am I, playing God, imbuing each of these creatures with my nature? Can we shrug this off as mere anthropomorphism, or was Jung onto something more mysterious and less reductive when he suggested, “We need to project ourselves into the things around us. My self is not confined to my body. It extends into all the things I have made and all the things around me” (cited in Sabini, 2002, p. 13). What would Freud say? I imagine him looking at me incredulously and snorting, “Jennifer, come on. Sometimes a flower is just a flower. “

I want to end this essay by *not* answering these questions, *not* offering speculations or interpretations. By doing so, I follow Susan Rowland (2010), who wrote that a Jungian approach to art is a practice *against interpretation, and for imagination*. I know only that I was transformed through this dialogical relationship, this interpenetration between Self and Other through creative imagination. It changed the way I looked at and imagined flowers *and* it changed the way I looked at and imagined humans; ultimately, I gained an appreciation and an understanding of the vagaries and varieties of different ways the archetypal Heart manifests itself in human and nature.

This appreciation and understanding is ethical to me, calling us to art and to action on behalf of the Other. It is this ethic that the earth needs now more than ever. Jung wrote, “It is a general truth that the earth is depreciated and misunderstood” (1930/1997, p. 193). Of course, this is what allows us to violate her so, or to witness her violation and turn our attention elsewhere. Nor must we ever claim that we really understand her, for she is wildly, radically Other. I know I barely understand myself, and I’ve been following myself like a Facebook fan for 46 years. But there is an attunement there, an archetypal resonance, if only we pay attention.

Postscript

My daily visits with these flowers ended abruptly when I received a phone call from my mother saying she had been diagnosed with breast cancer. I rushed back from Montana to California to be by her side as she undertook the double mastectomy and resulting chemotherapy.

From time to time I wondered about those flowers, the way you wonder about a friend with whom you’ve lost touch, and silly as it may sound to say, I mourned the loss of my role as witness to their life cycles. I printed out their pictures and pasted them each on a piece of thick paper, and I did active imagination work with them where I wrote down what I heard them say to me about their individual hearts.

At one point I became curious about their collective name. I went online and learned they were called *Arnica Montana*, and that they have been used by Europeans and Native Americans for five centuries to soothe muscle aches, and heal wounds (“Arnica,” 2008, ¶1). As I

attended to my mother's wounded body, working with these flowers was indeed salve which soothed my heartache, and allowed me to keep my heart open, as they continually opened their hearts to me.

"Instructions for living a life.

Pay attention.

Be astonished.

Tell about it."

-- Mary Oliver (2010, p. 58)

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Appendix



Figure 1: Ousel Falls

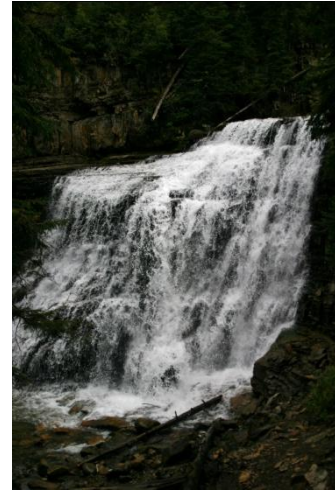


Figure 2: Changing Light

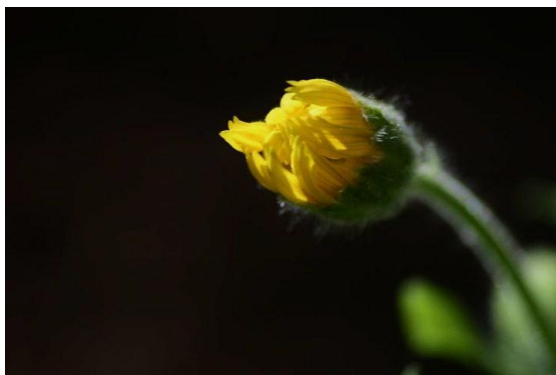


Figure 3: Opening Up Toward Life



Figure 4: Closing Down Toward Death



Figure 5: The Dejected Heart



Figure 6: The Rejected Heart



Figure 7: The Nurturing Heart



Figure 8: The Dying Heart



Figure 9: The Aloof Heart



Figure 10 : The Shut Down Heart



Figure 11 : The Open Heart



Figure 12 : The Shy Heart



Figure 12: The Hiding Heart



Figure 14: The Throwing Caution to the Wind Heart





Figure 15: Half-Hearted



Figure 16: Love Triangle



Figure 17: Self-Love



Figure 18: Soulmates



Figure 19: The Doubting Heart



Figure 20: The Battered Heart



Figure 21: The Withholding Heart



Figure 22: The Holding On Heart



Figure 23: The Eager Heart



Figure 24: The Graceful Heart



Figure 25: Codependent Hearts



Figure 26: Competitive Hearts