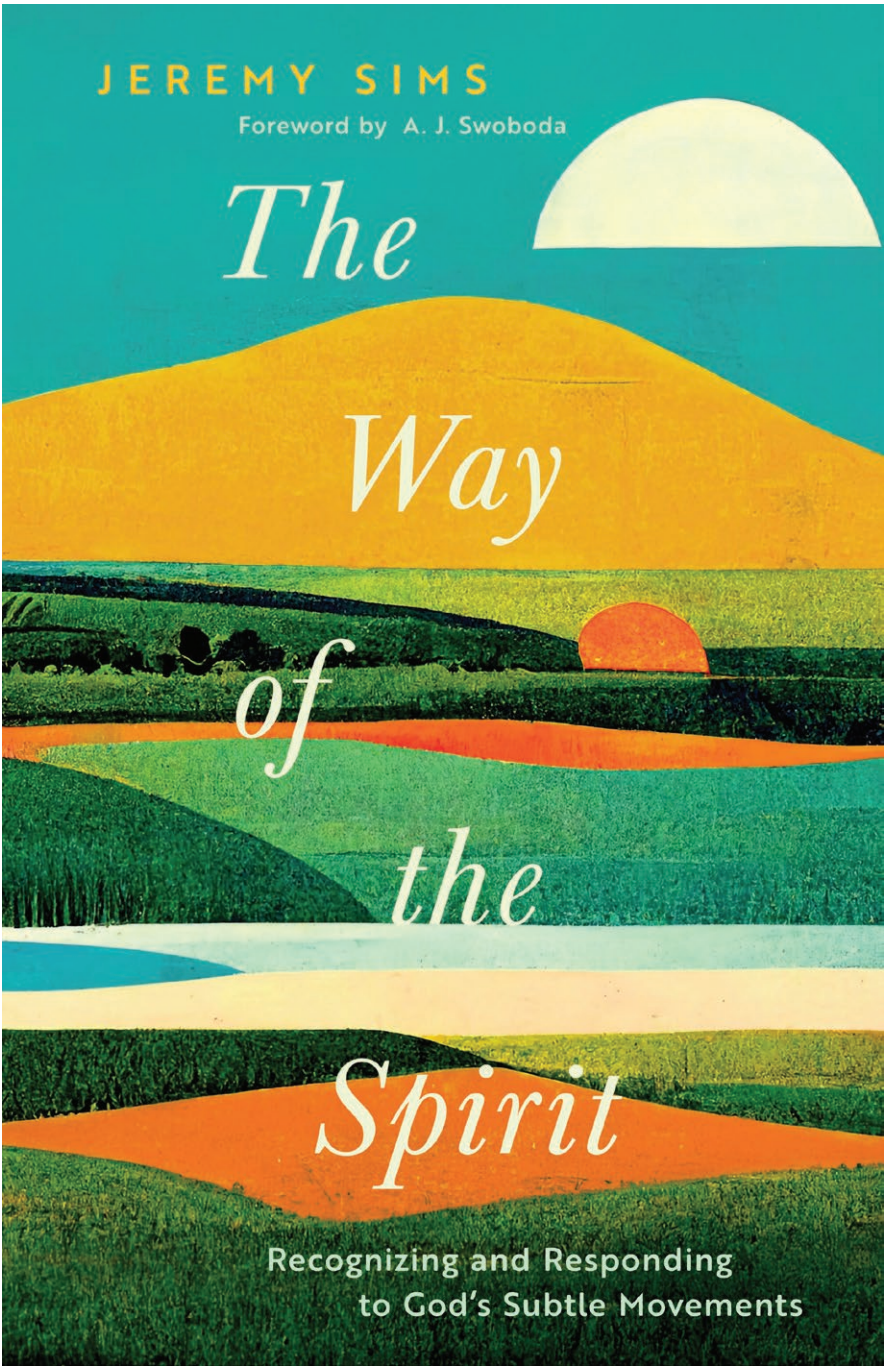

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MARK OF ATTENTION 1

ATTENTIVE PRESENCE

I DID NOT LEARN attentive presence in a classroom. I learned it by sitting in a quiet room across from someone who refused to hurry me.

In 2013, I emailed a woman named Alice and asked if she would consider spiritual direction with me. I did not yet understand how much I would need someone to sit with me in silence. My first wife, Tiffanni, had been diagnosed with Huntington's Disease. Our family was living in a state of exhaustion. Faith felt fragile, like glass we were trying not to drop.

Month after month, Alice created space. Sacred, unhurried space. She would sit across from me with a gentle presence and an open posture. She did not try to manage my pain or fix what was beyond repair. She simply paid attention. To God. To me. To the Spirit's subtle movements that continued even when I could not perceive them.

Looking back now, I see that her attention was not therapeutic technique. It was a gift. It helped keep my faith from collapsing under the weight of grief. It tethered me when I could not hold on myself. It taught me something I had not known how to name: Attentiveness is not a small courtesy. It is the beginning of communion.

Alice showed me how to attend to another person, but I had already begun to learn attentiveness, surprisingly, long before I realized it was happening.

When I finished my doctoral work, I felt restless. I didn't want to stop learning. I loved ministry and wanted to grow as a preacher.

Somewhere along the way, I had this idea: If I could write better, I could speak better.

My two favorite teachers growing up were my seventh and ninth grade English teachers. There was something about reading a story at home and then coming to class to listen to them unwrap its hidden layers. They were part literary critic, part magician. So I did what any self-respecting adult would do: I called them both and asked if they would tutor me in creative writing. They both said no.

I wasn't ready to give up. Next, I called my local university to see if I could audit a creative writing short story course. I scheduled a meeting with the professor, made my case, offered my résumé, and tried to appear both competent and earnest. She listened kindly, nodded thoughtfully, and then told me no.

That left one last option: a poetry workshop with a different professor. Poetry. I didn't read poetry, didn't understand poetry, and wasn't particularly interested in learning. But I figured if I took the class and didn't make a complete fool of myself, maybe the poetry professor would put in a good word for me to the professor teaching the short story course. I enrolled as a strategic sacrifice.

Except something happened. I sat in that class, opened the pages, picked up my pen, and I never wanted to leave. It was the culmination of a string of the most serendipitous "no's" I have ever received.

Something came alive in me during that course, and the two that followed. I was captivated by the precision of the words, the economy of language. Every syllable mattered. Every punctuation mark, every space, every line break was a decision. Poetry wasn't just self-expression. It was intention. It was attention.

I wrote a poem once titled "Cellar Door" because I had learned that it's the most euphonious phrase in the English language. Two words. The most pleasing to the ear. What could I unlock with them? What could I say about the universe in a few stanzas?

I remember spending an entire morning at the park with a notebook, trying to describe a single leaf falling. Not just the movement, but the metaphor. My first poems weren't any good, and I knew it. But still, I kept writing, because I was beginning to see. I started jotting down one-liners, fragments, questions, things I would have missed weeks before. There was a freshness to everything, and I wanted to notice it all.

I was moved by new mentors, though I never met them. I scoured used bookstores for these poetic seers, those who could detect truth in the twitch of a gesture or the fall of a shadow. I once read a line in a poetry anthology about getting a tattoo that I'll never forget: "Make of my life a few wild stanzas."[1] It lit something in me.

That's what poetry does. It refuses to be rushed. You cannot skim a poem the way you skim a headline or scroll a screen. It will not yield its meaning to the impatient. A poem invites you to linger, to return, to listen again. Its very form resists the tyranny of speed. You read a line and pause, not because you are finished, but because the silence is part of the meaning. In poetry, attentiveness is not a suggestion. It is a requirement.

The line breaks demand it. The metaphors conceal and reveal. The rhythm interrupts your rhythm and offers its own. To read poetry is to yield your inner cadence to something deeper and slower. It is to be invited into another way of seeing, one that cannot be grasped without first being received.

More Than a New Idea

Attentiveness is not a productivity hack, a psychological trick, or a spiritual upgrade. It is a way of being in the world, a posture of open-hearted presence. It's not about mastering a technique. It's about unlearning distraction, releasing control, and recovering the ability to truly be here. This book is not offering you a new task. It's inviting you into a new lens.

If we're not careful, attentiveness can become just another technique we try to master, another method for achieving spiritual presence through effort and grit. If I can just get these steps down, this mantra right, this silence deep enough, I'll finally have the presence of mind and soul to grow. I once had a friend tell me, "I've tried everything. The other day I found myself sitting on the floor, legs crossed, hands in my lap, low humming, trying to enter some state of prayerful silence. Then it occurred to me what I looked like and started laughing. I immediately lost any chance at mystical union."

The truth is, we'll try anything that promises even a flicker of intimacy with God. Even if it means a modern-day asceticism that contorts us into postures emptier than we admit. I want to release you from that. This is not that. This is not a new hack. This is a new way of seeing.

Before we can talk about how attentiveness is cultivated, we must pause to ask what attentiveness even is.

In the early 1900s, a young French philosopher and mystic named Simone Weil began to write with extraordinary clarity about attentiveness. In one of her most beloved essays, she makes a vital distinction between willpower and willingness. This difference is everything: "We have to try to cure our faults by attention and not by will. . . . What could be more stupid than to tighten up our muscles and set our jaws about virtue, or poetry, or the solution of a problem. Attention is something quite different."[2]

Where willpower pushes, attentiveness opens. It is not the forceful grasp of presence, but the surrendered posture that waits for it. Not the clenched fist of striving, but the open hand of readiness. In Simone Weil's imagination, attentiveness is a kind of silent hospitality, a patient clearing of space where grace might choose to dwell. We do not will ourselves into wisdom, or depth, or even meaningful prayer. These are not rewards for effort. They arrive more like guests

than goals. Which is why, in the end, attentiveness is not so much an ability as it is a willingness.

In the opening paragraph of *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster names the ache behind so much of our striving: "The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people."[3] But here's the tension: Depth cannot be willed. The moment we try to force it, we move in the opposite direction. Depth resists control. It emerges not from grasping but from releasing. The more we strive for it, the more it slips through our fingers. Only a willingness to relinquish control can put us in a posture to receive what cannot be taken.

So much of my life has been shaped by willpower. It's effective, to a point. It helps me complete a task I don't want to do, or push through a meeting when I'm tired, or drag myself out of bed on the kind of morning when everything feels heavier than it should. But Simone Weil is right: When it comes to the deeper work, the spiritual work, willpower falls short.

It's like trying to force open a delicate lock with a hammer. It involves a lot of effort, and maybe even comes with the illusion of success, but it is not the kind of transformation I was actually longing for. I might change a habit for a while. I might feel like I've made progress. But the deep work, the soul-level work, refuses to be manhandled.

Weil's alternative is both quieter and far more demanding. She offers attentiveness. It is not the kind of intense, narrow focus we use to get things done, but a gentle, steady presence. It is not aggressive but receptive. Not striving but waiting. If I'm wrestling with a fault in myself, the impulse is to grit my teeth and will it away. But that never seems to last. Weil's vision is different. Turn the attentiveness of your soul—not with pressure, but with openness—toward what is good. Stay there. Watch. Wait. Be present long enough for change to happen on its own terms.

This kind of attentiveness asks something of me. It requires my noisy, self-insisting "I" to step back. It creates a quiet space where something true might actually emerge. It is not passive, but it is deeply patient. It is the kind of seeing that waits for something real to dawn.

Jesus and the Eyes of the Soul

If we want to understand attentiveness, we need look no further than accounts of Jesus in the Gospels. They depict him as a master of seeing. And that seeing was not incidental; it was cultivated through a life of prayer. Simone Weil was aware of this connection when she wrote, "Attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer. It presupposes faith and love. Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer."[4] In Jesus, prayer and attentiveness are not separate disciplines. His life of communion with the Father formed his capacity to notice, to pause, to respond.

In Luke's Gospel we read, "When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, come down immediately'" (Luke 19:5). We remember the story of Zacchaeus because Jesus saw him. The story of a man in a tree becomes a story of redemption not because he called out to Jesus, but because Jesus looked up. This is the pattern of other encounters Jesus has in the Gospels as well: The woman at the well. The late-night conversation with Nicodemus. Mary of Magdala. The blind, the mute, the paralyzed. Jesus did not stumble into these moments. He was attentive enough to recognize what the Spirit was doing and willing enough to join in.

Jesus is constantly readjusting the attention of his disciples. In John 4:35, he says, "Open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest." He wasn't just talking about grain. He was teaching them to see with spiritual eyes, to recognize that the people they walked past every day were ready for redemption.

Again and again, Jesus calls his followers not only to hear but to see, not only to act but to attend. "To be present is to be available to the

presence of God, in whatever form it takes," Leighton Ford writes.[5] That's what Jesus models. His presence is particular, grounded, and available. He listens. He slows his pace. He allows interruption. And through all of it, he sees what no one else is seeing.

That is the gift of spiritual attentiveness. It does not simply make us more aware of the world. It makes us more available to the Spirit. Jesus didn't just model a life of presence. He awakened others to it. He taught them to see again.

But what happens when we don't see rightly? What happens when our vision is distorted—or worse, destructive? That's where we turn next.

The Scales Fall

Saul's story is often remembered as a dramatic conversion, and it is, but beneath the flash of light and the fall to the ground, there is something quieter and more foundational taking place. His transformation does not begin with belief. It begins with blindness.

He was a man of deep conviction, brilliant and zealous, shaped by rigorous training and spiritual fervor. His life had been built on willpower, discipline, and devotion honed into certainty. He believed he was defending the faith, but in reality, he was harming the very body of Christ. He was blind to what mattered most.

When the risen Christ meets him on the road to Damascus, Jesus does not confront him with arguments or theological rebuttals. He asks a question: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:4). That single line holds the weight of revelation. Saul had misidentified the enemy. He had missed the face of Christ in the ones he condemned. And then, with merciful precision, he is struck blind.

For three days, Saul sits in darkness. He does not eat. He does not speak. He does not move forward. The blindness is not punishment but invitation. Without sight, he is finally able to see. This is often how grace begins: not by adding something, but by taking

something away. In that stillness, something loosens. His clenched certainty gives way to a quieter posture. His well-trained will loses its grip. What begins in blindness ends in a new way of seeing, but not before the soul learns to wait.

The turning point arrives not through a vision, but through another person. Ananias, a disciple whom Saul would have once labeled an enemy, is called to lay hands on him. Through Ananias's simple obedience and physical presence, Saul's vision is restored. "Something like scales fell from Saul's eyes," Acts tells us, "and he could see again" (Acts 9:18).

But he did not see the same way. And he was no longer the same man.

The Spirit had not only opened his eyes but had made him someone new. He could now perceive what he had missed before: the presence of Christ in the suffering, the call of God in the church, the face of God in those he once sought to silence. As Chris Green puts it, "We're learning to see reality as God sees it. Without this fundamental formation in truthful seeing, we lose our capacity to recognize Christ's presence in the vulnerable and become blind to what God is doing in the world."[6] This is what happened to Saul. His name would change. His mission would change. But most profoundly, his way of seeing had been changed.

This is the essence of spiritual attentiveness. It is not gained through force or clarity of doctrine but through the willingness to be disrupted. Saul's journey is not about mastery. It is about surrender. He does not think his way into the kingdom. He is blinded into it. The scales do not fall because he tries harder. They fall because he stops trying at all.

If attentiveness is a willingness to see differently, then Paul becomes the model of what that willingness requires. The story does not begin with light. It begins with darkness. The voice of Jesus interrupts his momentum. The silence of blindness reorients his soul.

And when his eyes open again, he does not return to the world he knew. He steps into one he had never truly seen.

Attentiveness as Gift

True attentiveness does not hover above life like a drone with a camera. It does not scan, capture, or analyze from a safe distance. It sits down beside. It listens. It stays.

Across the years, Alice did just that. She quietly walked with me through nearly every significant turning point in my life: through Tiffanni's decline and death, through the fog of grief that followed, through the slow process of healing and re-engaging with my vocation. She walked with me as I fell in love again, as my three children began to settle into a new rhythm of life, as I married Hannah, as we had two babies, as I transitioned out of full-time pastoral ministry and into the classroom of a university to train and mentor pastors. She walks with me even now, as I discern the shape and heart of this book.

She never inserted herself. She never offered advice she wasn't asked to give. She never managed my pain. She was just there with me, gently, consistently, patiently.

I often say that in spiritual direction, the space is the magic. There is no greater gift we can offer another than the space to be attentive. And that is what spiritual direction has been for me: sacred space to become aware of the activity and invitation of the Holy Spirit. It has been the single most important spiritual discipline I have engaged in over the course of my life with God.

During the long decade of Tiff's illness and the grief that followed, there were many seasons when I avoided God. When Scripture felt hollow. When prayer felt impossible. But I showed up to direction, month after month. That is its quiet power. It became my anchor, not because it changed my situation, but because it tethered me to presence. It offered me no easy answers. It did not relieve the weight

of sorrow. But it reminded me, again and again, of what was true. That Jesus had never left. That he would never leave. That he was with me in all of it.

Simone Weil once reflected that the capacity to give one's full attention to another is a kind of miracle. Warmth and good intentions are not enough. Real attentiveness requires something deeper. It asks us to set aside our own agendas, our impulse to fix or manage, and to simply be with. That kind of presence, she suggests, is one of the rarest and purest forms of generosity.[7] I have come to believe that. And I have received it. What Alice offered me all those years was not advice or answers. It was her attention, and that attention became a quiet act of love. Her presence taught me that attentiveness is not a small courtesy. It is the beginning of communion.

This way of seeing sharpens our awareness of God's nearness instead of letting everything blur together. It is attention that begins to connect the dots. It is in paying close attention that what once felt random begins to reveal the shape of grace. When we learn to notice small movements, we begin to see how intentionally God is already at work. This kind of attentiveness trains us not just to believe that God is near, but to participate in what God is doing right here.

The Danger of Inattention

We rarely think of inattention as sin. Distraction feels more like inconvenience than rebellion, and busyness has become the cultural cost of doing life. Numbness, too, is something we often wear like a survival tactic, a way to protect ourselves from the endless flood of information, responsibility, and pain. But slowly, quietly, and often without our awareness, inattention begins to shape us. It forms us just as surely as attentiveness does, only it takes us in the opposite direction.

Leighton Ford writes, "Pity that we are tone-deaf to his voice and his knock. Perhaps inattentiveness is our greatest sin—not only

against him but against ourselves."[8] Inattention is not a passive state. It is not simply the absence of presence. It is a presence of something else entirely—an undercurrent of fragmentation, a subtle refusal to be shaped, a slow drift toward blindness. And over time, it changes who we are.

We begin to miss beauty without even knowing we are missing it. We no longer notice pain until it disrupts us. We start to believe that what we already understand is all there is to know. We move through our days on autopilot, not out of intention but out of momentum. And when that happens, we don't just miss moments. We miss people. We miss God.

This is the quiet tragedy of inattention: It slowly erodes our capacity for love. We might still go through the motions of faith, still speak the language of belief, still participate in religious life, but something essential begins to fade. The connection between the soul and the moment, between our interior life and the world around us, begins to unravel. Inattention doesn't just leave us neutral. It makes us numb.

Jesus told a story once about a man who had been beaten and left on the side of the road. A priest came along, and then a Levite. Both of them saw the man; Scripture makes that painfully clear. They did not fail to *see*. They failed to *stop*. They passed by, not because they were unaware, but because their awareness had no weight. Perhaps they were busy, perhaps they were unsure, or perhaps they had grown so accustomed to spiritual clarity that they no longer believed interruptions could be holy. Whatever the reason, they kept moving.

But then a Samaritan came along. He, too, saw. But he allowed his seeing to become presence, and his presence to become compassion. This is the difference. Attentiveness does not stop at perception. It draws us into participation. It refuses to treat human suffering as scenery. It becomes love in motion.

I have had moments when I realized, often too late, that I was the one who had passed by. I was there in body, but my mind was somewhere else entirely. I was with my children but distracted by the demands of work. I was in a conversation but already forming my response instead of listening. I was in a room of worship but numb to wonder. These are not grand failures, but they accumulate quietly, and in time they form a kind of spiritual anesthesia.

Inattention rarely feels dangerous in the moment, but it dulls our hunger for what is real. It slowly convinces us that silence is empty, that nothing important is happening here, and that we are safest when guarded. Over time, we become less willing to look and even less willing to see.

That was Saul's condition before he met Jesus on the Damascus Road. He was not malicious. He was convinced. His blindness was not the absence of passion, but the misdirection of it. He had been trained in the law and shaped by discipline, but he could not see the Christ who had come to fulfill the very promises he believed he was defending. He was so sure of his clarity that he had no room left for revelation.

This is what inattention can become. It does not always arrive through ignorance. Sometimes it is the byproduct of a life so busy with spiritual effort that we no longer make space to be surprised by grace. It is not that we intend to shut God out. It is that we crowd our lives with so many layers of distraction, noise, and certainty that we leave no margin for mystery.

Grace has its own rhythm. It interrupts, it waits, and it returns again and again.

The Spirit does not shame us for our inattention. Instead, the Spirit invites us to wake up. This is not a demand for perfection or an impossible vigilance. It is an invitation to turn our face once more toward the God who is always looking for us. Attentiveness can be recovered. It begins with the simple willingness to look again.

Behold

There is a moment in the spiritual life when our seeing begins to change. It does not happen all at once. It does not happen with fanfare. But slowly and quietly, our eyes begin to adjust. We start to see not only what is in front of us, but what is beneath it, what is within it, and what it is becoming. This is not mere perception. It is beholding.

Throughout Scripture, this kind of seeing is emphasized with a word: behold. To behold is to not merely give a casual glance or a passing acknowledgment. When Scripture says *behold*, it is inviting us to pay deep attention. It is calling us not just to notice, but to notice with maturity, to see with eyes that have been shaped by communion with God. Beholding is not the beginning of attentiveness. It is its fruit.

It is Paul, once blinded by his own certainty, who eventually speaks this word with such clarity. "Behold," he writes, "the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17 ESV). Not, "Understand this doctrine," or "Agree with this idea," but behold. See what I now see. The world is not what it once was. You are not who you once were. Something beneath the surface has shifted. Something holy has taken root, and if you are willing, you can see it too.

This is the full arc of attentiveness. It begins with noticing. It moves through presence. It deepens in surrender. Eventually, it arrives at beholding. It is the unveiling of what has been there all along, now seen through eyes that have been softened by mercy, trained by slowness, and reformed by grace.

To behold is to see things as they truly are. Not as they appear through fear or fatigue, not through the lens of performance or pain, but through the lens of resurrection. The veil has been lifted. The scales have fallen. The eyes are open, and what they see is astonishing.

This does not mean everything looks beautiful on the surface. It means we begin to see beauty as it truly exists. We find it tangled in

sorrow, forged in silence, and resilient in the ordinary. We begin to see Christ in places we never expected. We see him in the faces of those we once avoided, in the conversations we once hurried past, in the moments we once dismissed as unspiritual.

To behold is not simply to see what is new. It is to recognize what has always been true: that Christ is here, that redemption is real, that the new has, in fact, come.

This is what the Spirit has been doing all along. The Spirit has been training our vision, shaping our inner lens, forming us into people who can see rightly. This is not a technique to master. It is a grace to receive. It is the gift of a God who does not only want to be believed but longs to be seen.

And when we behold, when we truly behold, everything begins to change.

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