

Do not regard that attention as insignificant

Beloved person,

Sunday morning, just after half past nine. A little later than planned, we park the car at the building. Grab the bag, lock the doors, quickly go inside. With my attention still on which gift I am going to buy for my niece, the phone call I must not forget to make on Monday, our dog that needs her medication later, and the news about our King's state visit to one of the most powerful countries in the world, I actually don't remember who welcomed me with a handshake at the door when I entered the main hall.

So many demands of my attention in just ten minutes! Or are they things that I think should have my attention? What do I really want to focus my attention on at the deepest level?

The German sociologist Hartmut Rosa analyses how the current acceleration in society, wherein the focus is primarily on faster and more, undermines our ability to connect.¹ Conscious attention often has to make room for distraction. However, this is not new. The feeling that the world is accelerating was already present in Shakespeare's time: in the tragedy *Hamlet*, the main character laments that time is 'disrupted.' Now that we often have twenty-four-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week access to social media, news, and consumption, it is even more difficult to focus our attention sustainably or even to determine what we truly want to devote it to.

Yet Rosa writes that people actually flourish and can live meaningfully if they take the time and space to let themselves be moved. Perhaps that is exactly the reason I had consciously freed up the Sunday morning: to think about what I devote my attention to. To turn inward and make space for the connection with who I deeply want to be and with the other. This does not only happen in the main hall; it already begins at the front door. Someone, who genuinely wants to give me attention and acknowledge me, stands there. *I see you*. And just as I want to be known for who I truly am, I want to acknowledge the other in their humanity.

How do I do that then? It starts with freeing myself from all stimuli. Being there with full attention for myself and the other person. Listening to what is being said, consciously speaking my words, and giving the other person the feeling that I really am completely present. Whether it is in a phone call, a catch-up conversation, or a meeting with a stranger on the street. Conscious attention is such a sacred act, especially in a society where there is so much distraction. Something happens within me and between us that can touch my soul. Perhaps it is not always about the manner or the duration of the contact, but about experiencing connection with the other person, with life, and that which transcends us.

I have personally often been able to feel what genuine attention means to me. By truly being there for me, the other person made me feel that I matter. What then stands in my way regarding my own strengths? What I give attention to, grows! For me, that does not mean that I do not see what is happening in my large and small world or that it should not concern me. I do want to be continually aware that what I do in my circumstances, my connection with the other person, that handshake at the door, is of great significance.

With a loving greeting, gladly your brother and sister,

Paul Bethlehem and Marieke van Muijden



¹ Hartmut Rosa, *Living in times of acceleration. A plea for resonance*, Boom Publishing, 2016, translation Huub Stegeman.