

T. S. Eliot wrote, “If we take culture seriously, we must see that a people does not need merely enough to eat . . . but a proper and particular *cuisine* . . . Culture may even be described simply as that which makes life worth living.”

We know we can't live without enough to eat, and we know having enough to eat doesn't make life worth living. As much as we need bread to live, we need a reason to get out of bed: if not someone to love, something meaningful to do or something to hope for.

Jesus and the disciples attempt to get away for some rest. So many people were coming and going that the disciples had no opportunity to eat. They board a boat to go to a deserted place. Somehow the crowds know where the disciples are headed and are waiting for them when they disembark.

Jesus is moved inwardly with compassion for the crowd because they are like sheep without a shepherd. What has always struck me about this story is how Jesus' compassion is expressed: “He began to teach them many things”.

Mark doesn't tell us what Jesus taught, just that he taught past dinner time and everyone was hungry and there was nowhere to go for enough food for everyone. So Jesus feeds 5,000 plus people with five loaves of bread and two fish.

What Mark does by sandwiching a story of feeding between stories of teaching and healing, is the same thing T. S. Eliot was doing in his essay. It is necessary to have something to eat, but having enough to eat is not sufficient. The soul needs a proper and particular *cuisine* for a life worth living.

I heard a story of a young pastor in team ministry with an older, very experienced pastor. A mother called the senior pastor one morning to ask for help with her young adult son. The mother and pastor had known each other a long time. The son had taken to the sofa in the family room, not to play video games or watch TV or listen to music, but just to lie on the sofa and stare at the ceiling. He wasn't eating, he wasn't doing anything.

The senior pastor decided the newbie should pay the son a visit. The young pastor went to the house, was greeted by the mother and ushered into the family room where the son was stretched out on the sofa, staring at the ceiling. The pastor introduced himself and sat down in a chair next to the sofa. The mother left the room, in fact, left the house.

The pastor had no idea what to say or do, so he just sat there. After an hour, an hour in which no words were exchanged between the son and the pastor, he got up, mumbled a blessing, and left the house feeling like a complete failure.

The next day the mother called the senior pastor to report that her son had arisen from the couch, ate dinner and resumed his life. She was ecstatic. The senior pastor called his young associate

with the good news and wanted to know what he had done. He responded, “Nothing. I just sat there with him in silence. That’s all I did.”

Dr. Linda Blair is an Associate Fellow of the British Psychological Society, a graduate of Wellesley College and Harvard University. She trained at Maudsley Hospital (University of London). Why am I telling you of her impressive resume? Because she said the most valuable lesson she was taught in her training was to never forget the power of silence.

Parker Palmer is an author, educator, founder of the Center for Courage and Renewal. He has also experienced episodes of severe and debilitating depression. Many well intentioned friends uttered sage advice, attempting to comfort. The one person who helped him most during this time, took off Parker’s slippers and massaged his feet. No words were spoken. He was simply present.

I want to suggest that something more is at work in these two stories than the power of silence. That something is attention. What bread is to the body, attention is to the soul. Attention is the proper and particular *cuisine* of the soul.

Paying attention has the power to heal. Being present with someone in pain without trying to justify or explain their suffering requires courage. Silence is always preferable to explanations which are in the end little more than attempts to shield the explainer from the pain. Compassion is the courage to be present, to be a presence.

Frederick Buechner said the summation of all he has ever written, which is a shelf full of books, is “pay attention.” Day by day, year by year, your own story unfolds—your life story. Things happen. People come and people go. The scene shifts. Time runs by. Time runs out.

Maybe it’s all utterly meaningless. Maybe it’s all unutterably meaningful. If you want to know which, pay attention to what it means to be truly human in a world that half the time we’re in love with and half the time scares the hell out of us.

The unexpected sound of your name on somebody’s lips. The good dream. The strange coincidence. The moment that brings tears to your eyes. The person who brings life to your life. Even the smallest events hold the greatest clues. So pay attention.

“If one looks long enough at almost anything,” wrote May Sarton, “looks with *absolute attention* at a flower, a stone, the bark of a tree, grass, snow, a cloud, something like revelation takes place. Something is “given,” and perhaps that something is always a reality *outside* the self. We are aware of God only when we cease to be aware of ourselves, not in the negative sense of denying the self, but in the sense of losing self in admiration and joy.”

Maybe it is all utterly meaningless. Maybe it is all unutterably meaningful. If you want to know which, pay attention, absolute attention, until something like revelation takes place.