

# Art of Paying Attention

Isabelle Stengers, *In Catastrophic Times*

“What we have been ordered to forget is not the capacity to pay attention, but the **art of paying attention**. If there is an art ... this is because it is a matter of learning and cultivating, that is to say, making ourselves pay attention. Making in the sense that attention here is not related to that which is defined as a priori worthy of attention, but as something that creates an obligation to imagine, to check, to envisage, consequences that bring into play connections between what we are in the habit of keeping separate. ... attention requires knowing how to resist the temptation to separate what must be taken into account and what may be neglected” (Stengers 62).

In *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism*, author Isabelle Stengers outlines a skill we citizens of a capital-driven world are expected, if not made, to forget. That skill is *the art of paying attention* - a manner of being with the world around us: listening, observing, thinking, not simply accepting the messages we are fed without batting an eye.

Contradictory messages are everywhere we turn. “We must take drastic measures to save the world, but not so drastic we hurt the economy!” “Never fear, your guardians have everything under control! Still, you have to do your part!” Most importantly, “yes, we see that our lifestyles are leading us to destruction, but we can’t linger on that, we must put growth first!” The art of paying attention is about hearing such demands and listening beyond them. It is a practice of parsing through ideas that are easy to passively accept and absorbing new possibilities through open-minded observation. When we achieve this, we bolster our ability to fight back against mandates that previously seemed to be inescapable realities.

The art of paying attention is unexpectedly practiced. Here we will discuss some unusual teachers of this art: birds. In her book *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*, author Jenny Odell tells of the unintentionally meditative habits she developed in the years following the 2016 American presidential election. She describes routinely visiting Morcom Rose Garden in Oakland, California, to sit in silence and simply take in the area. She notes feeling a bizarre sort of guilt over this activity; it felt “incongruous... beautiful garden versus terrifying world,” but also that in her state of constant anxiety and information overload, going there felt like a survival technique.

“Doing nothing” for Odell did not equal a total forfeit of attention. Rather, she practiced a different form. For the brief time she was at the garden, she did not focus on the topics she was accustomed to letting consume her thoughts. Her labor productivity and the sociopolitical world around her ceased to be the urgent concerns they often felt like. Instead, she watched and listened to her immediate surroundings. “Our usual cultural training,” says Odell, “...teaches us to quickly analyze and judge more than to simply observe.” For once, she was going against that training.

She continues exploring her development of different forms of attention by relaying stories of her adventures in birdwatching. The practice, she explains, changed her perception of

her surroundings. When she was just beginning to intentionally birdwatch (which she comically notes could easily be called “bird noticing”), she would only perceive general “birdsong” around her. Next, she started to observe how ubiquitous it was, if one cared to listen for it. Then, she began to distinguish particular songs and associate them with specific birds. Late into her adoption of the gobby, she noticed the presence of different species of birds as she wandered through the Rose Garden, an observation that would simply have not entered her awareness before.



Jenny Odell observes a bird in the rose garden. [instagram.com/jennitaur/](https://www.instagram.com/jennitaur/)

Odell, her writing tentacular, present, and intertwined as it is, compares this phenomenon to the time she realized that her mother spoke Ilonggo as well as English and Tagalog. Anyone who has learned another language recognizes the bizarre feeling, when what was once just sounds becomes recognizable as conversation. Your mind receives meaning where there was none; there is one more element of the world that you cannot tune out.

Odell's heightened awareness led her to other unique experiences, along with new comforts and lines of imagining. She tells of noticing a group of black-crowned night herons that frequently perched outside her neighborhood KFC (and had, she learned after browsing the restaurant's Google Maps history, been doing so for many years). While she might have looked past them before, she now noticed them every time she walked by. She reveals that she started catching herself modifying her walk home to pass by them. She found them comforting,

especially in moments where she felt particularly overwhelmed by information. They were a reassurance of something constant, tangible, and real.

At another time, Odell learned of the above-average intelligence crows have, and decided to try an experiment in befriending them. I'm tempted to put that word, *befriending*, in quotations, but something tells me both Odell and Stengers would disapprove of that. Nevertheless, Odell began to win their favor by leaving peanuts for them on her balcony, and eventually they started coming. She realized after some time that she had formed a genuine relationship with these animals; they began to intentionally visit her, just as she had intentionally sought them out. Even, she noted, on occasions when they didn't want food. As she spent time with them, she found herself considering their perspective as well (I am also tempted to put *perspective* in quotations when it applies to a non-human, why is that?).

"I began to wonder what these birds see when they look at me," she says. "I assume they just see a human, who for some reason pays attention to them. They don't know what my work is. They don't see progress. They just see recurrence. ... through them, I am able to inhabit that perspective. To see myself as the human animal that I am. And when they fly off, ... I can inhabit that perspective too. Noticing the shape of the hill that I live on, and where all the tall trees and good landing spots are."

One unfortunate effect of the way our daily lifestyles operate is that they cause us to be in so many ways *removed*- removed from nature, from our own bodies, from the current moment in time and space. We are constantly fed information, most of it through virtual means. We are asked to always be producing, always planning ahead. We are made to be anxious of the looming future, and guilty over any time spent idling. Odell discusses this atmosphere extensively, and gives this response:

"What [is] missing from that surreal and terrifying torrent of information and virtuality [is] any regard, any place for the human animal, situated as she is in time and in a physical environment with other human and nonhuman entities."

In moments like these, the art of paying attention can be exceptionally hard to practice, but it is worth the effort, for the world and our own happiness. Truly paying attention means noticing your surroundings, and everything grand and tiny in them. It means listening to your body, your feelings, your reactions. It means actively being part of an ongoing conversation. Most of all it means allowing yourself to be a piece of the world's whole - not its destroyer or savior, not apart from it in any way. Included in the natural organism. Entangled with it.

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