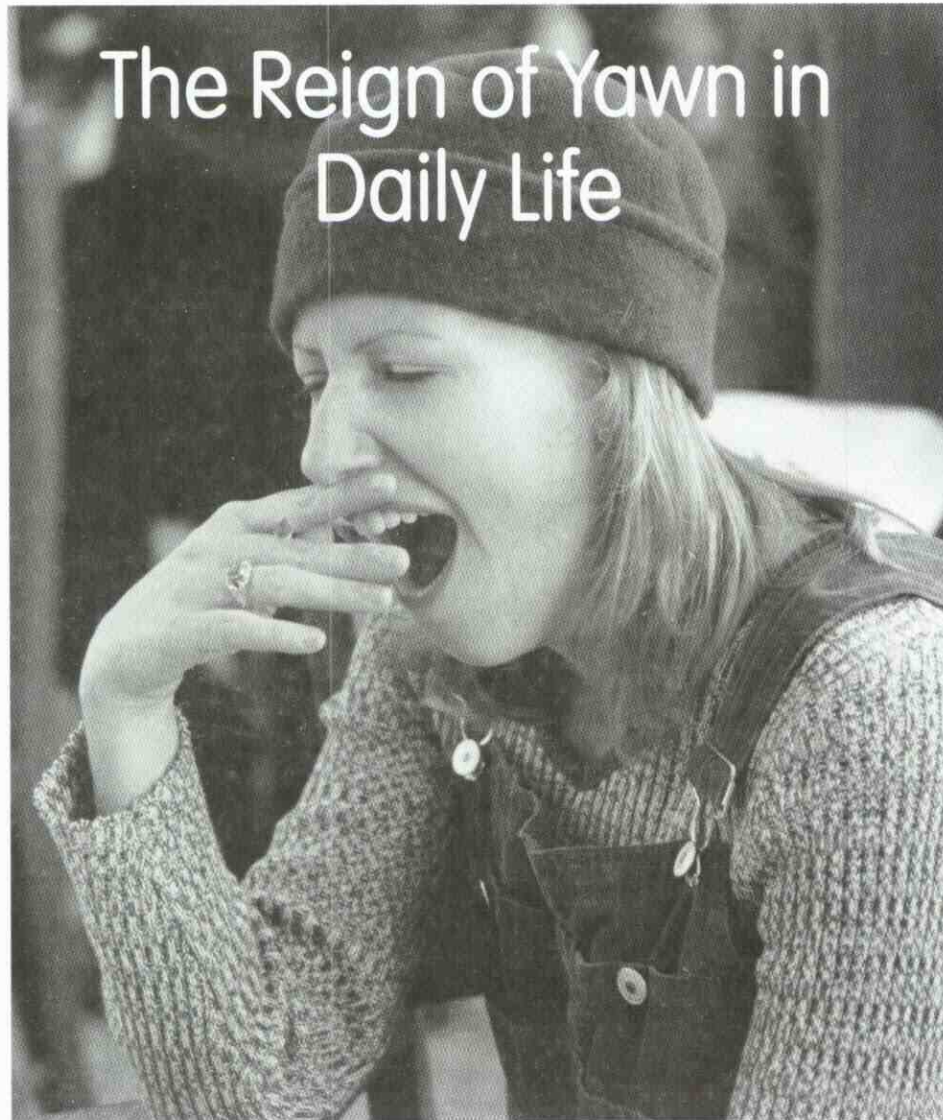


Ripples of Disregard



by Bob Sitze

Let's be honest: Most of us aren't paying attention to most things most of the time. In our workplaces, in our homes, and in our churches, we're finding it harder to process all the information we receive every day. Why is this happening? In today's world, there's just too much information accosting our brains. The glut of information overloads the brain's limited processing capabilities. Our brains can handle only so much input at a time — remember only so many names and faces, hold only so many facts together in a meaningful construct, or reckon with only so many fear-inducing people or events. Automatic default mechanisms in

the brain work to protect its health and viability, shutting out or filtering information. The result is a kind of existential "yawn."

The more toxic information we encounter, the more likely it is that our brains will filter it out. After a while, we get used to not paying attention and attach an attitude to it — disregard. And because the information is usually attached to the people from whom it comes, our brains easily assign inattention and disregard to people as well. The brain is doing what is necessary in order to protect itself from overload.

Once folks get used to your frenetic posturing to garner their mindfulness, their brains come to expect your overworked leadership as normal!

It's Happening Everywhere

"Yawn" describes most of contemporary life. If you know where to look, inattention and accompanying disregard are everywhere:

- Increasing numbers of children and adults live with attention-deficit dysfunctions and anxieties.
- Mass media, especially television, work harder to push information (and attitudes about that information, such as "Buy our product before you get really ugly!").
- The amount of information in the world increases exponentially – over-filling libraries, curricula, and sermons.
- Increasing amounts of possessions require increasing amounts of attention regarding the care and protection of "stuff."
- Most of us work too quickly to keep up with all the information coming at us. (In accidents involving highly complex technologies, this is called "operator error.")

The net effect? Trying to avoid the increasing amounts of information that our brains can't process adequately, we turn inward – blocking out information and other people. When we experience others' disregard, we tag it as "arrogance" and reciprocate with inattention, disregard, or seemingly justified arrogance. The neglect and inattention pile up to form barriers between us and other people, helping diminish the effectiveness of our enterprises and destroying the fabric of our institutions.

Not Good in Your Church, Either

Not a good thing, this disregard, because it can sap the vitality from your congregation like a bark beetle sucks the life from a pine tree. When enough disregard piles up in enough people, folks start "yawning" about most everything and everyone. The ripples of disregard ricochet back and forth inside your congregation, frustrating you and other leaders who depend on members' attention and regard. You have to work too hard to get and hold attention, to "motivate" people to participate, to help them decide to do something together. You start to feel like Old King Sisyphus, condemned forever to roll that infernal rock up the hill, knowing that when you let go (or finish your work) the rock will end up at the bottom of the hill again (or on top of you).

There's something even more frustrating in this scenario. The harder you try to engender regard or attention,

the worse things can get. You put information in front of people 27 times – yes, the number used to be 7 – and they're more likely to ignore it. You try all kinds of attention-getting devices or methods – high-technology worship, dramas, jokes, Web-like interactivity – and start to feel like an entertainer or huckster. Even worse: once folks get used to your frenetic posturing to garner their mindfulness, their brains come to expect your overworked leadership as normal!

How, Then, Shall We Be Saved?

Doesn't sound good, does it? For too many people there is too much information chasing too few brain cells that are working too hard to keep up. The net result is too much disregard frustrating too many good leaders like you.

Like many large-scale problems in life, though, this one contains its own solution, simply stated: Get people's regard by first regarding them. (This is how Jesus worked.)

None of us wants to be ignored, to live unattended or alone. None of us really wants to disregard others or the messages they bring us. None of us wants to live in a cold world of fear-induced isolation. It's not in our human nature to be forever and completely selfish. As redeemed and sanctified sinners, we certainly don't want to watch ourselves become arrogant or inattentive regarding others' needs or capabilities.

Where does the solution start? The secret of gathering and holding attention and regard is to first give and maintain attention and regard for others *as they most want to be regarded*. Basically, others want to be known primarily as who they are in their worlds of work, family, friendships, and play. Most don't participate as leaders in the church, but all participate in their own contexts as influencers, friends, counselors, and truth-tellers. Most wouldn't yawn if you asked them about their work, hobbies, life experiences, or deepest yearnings for their kids. Most would return your attention, if only because they understand "value given for value received."

It's really kind of simple: As we trust others to reciprocate our love and attention, we first offer our love and attention to them. Following Christ's example and God's command, we love others first. Just like God's regarding us "while we were yet sinners," we offer to others what they most dearly want: Non-yawning and noncondemning appreciation and affirmation.

How That Might Work

You can put some wheels on this ideal by “acting your way into thinking.” (This means that you don’t wait until you cobble together just the right amount of the right attitudes about other people.) Start your own regarding and attention-giving in some of these ways:

- Learn about the practices and philosophies of “appreciative inquiry” or “asset-based approaches” to life and relationships. (Do an Internet search on either term and see what happens.)
- Check over your congregation’s behaviors and structures with these questions in mind: “Who benefits from all of this, really?” and “Who’s paying the costs, really?” See where “regard” is evident or not evident.
- Ask and answer the question, “How do I include or exclude certain types of people?”
- If needed, revamp or reform your congregation’s ways of saying “thanks” to members – not only for what they do in the congregation, either!
- Ratchet up your ways of using conversation and relationship building as primary methods for decision-making or program delivery. (Both methods are quiet, nonintrusive, and welcomed by the entire brain!)
- Ask people what’s important for them. (Stay away from the wrong-headed presumption that you’re there to assuage their eternal neediness, because you may be only fulfilling *your* need to be needed!)
- Audit the affinity groupings in your congregation. (This is a fancy way of saying, “How do people come to know and identify with each other?”) How could you strengthen this kind of mutual regarding?
- Try some simple and direct behaviors: Visit your members where they work or live. Change the places where

church groups meet. Keep bulletin boards filled with “beyond this church” news about members. Talk with members about their lives, not just church business.

Some Final Thoughts

You need members’ attention and regard. They’re the basic stuff from which trust, love, motivation, a sense of mission, and community are built. It’s simple: No regard, no leaders; no attention, no congregation.

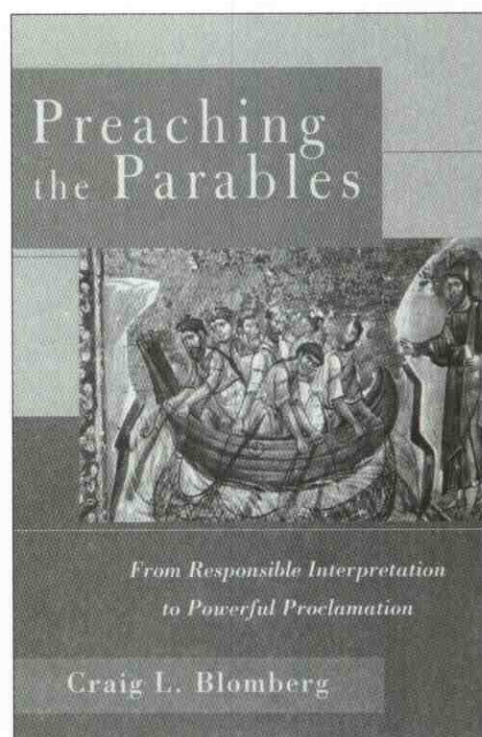
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Without your attention, these matters – disregard, yawning, inattention, arrogance, and all their ugly cousins – eventually will overwhelm you and your leadership. If you work harder at the wrong things – hustling imagined attention like a dog barking at the moon – you’ll wear yourself out. You have other choices: Assure those you serve that God answers their prayers, including the ones that go beyond hurts, pain, and sorrows. Be fully present in the places and ways in which congregation members are excellent, effective, hopeful, and courageous. Give to others the attention they deserve as God’s people, even if you think you don’t have all that much to give away.

Above all, see yourself as God’s own embodied word of regard, God’s way of “appreciating” people – affirming and adding to their lives. In Christ, God has first attended to you lovingly. Your attention to others, in Christ’s name, will be a

powerful blessing for their daily lives. They will spread God’s holy regard and God’s love in what they say and do. God will be glorified.

Can we be honest once more? You have every reason to be joyful in your ministry of regard!

– Bob Sitze serves the members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America from the ELCA churchwide offices in Chicago, Illinois, where he is director for Congregational Stewardship Development. Bob’s latest book, *Your Brain Goes to Church: Neuroscience and Congregational Life*, will be published by The Alban Institute later this year. ♦

WHAT IS ATTENTION?

Biologically, *attention* consists of four processes that take place in about 1/200 of second:

- **arousal** (the brain’s alertness increases from a generic state of readiness);
- **orientation** (the brain’s motor centers focus the body’s sensory mechanisms);
- **detection** (the brain’s systems decide what’s normal, safe, new, edible, or sexually attractive, and tags the information with an emotional label); and
- **execution** (the frontal lobe connects everything with memory; irrelevant stimuli are blocked and the motor center begins working toward goals).

Inattention is a necessary function of a healthy brain, and occurs in a complex interplay of brain structures. Glial cells are a primary way in which the strength of brain cell firing is regulated. The amygdala marks incoming information with an emotional tag and together with the brain’s pleasure center determines whether information is beneficial and/or actionable. Because of their habituated functions – “Cells that fire together wire together” – bundles of brain cells quickly relegate to inattentive normalcy what can be dealt with simply.

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