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**Tish Harrison Warren**

# How to Pray With Our Eyes Open

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**You're reading the Tish Harrison Warren newsletter, for Times subscribers only.** An Anglican priest reflects on matters of faith in private life and public discourse.

April is my favorite month in Austin, my hometown. The banks along the highways burst with wildflowers. Bluebonnets preside over dainty, pink buttercups playing with bold black-eyed Susans. Trees glisten with their chirpy new green. Birds enthusiastically pass on news, waking me up each morning. The air drops hints of the summer heat soon to come, but it isn't unpleasant yet. It's just warm enough to be tempted to splay out on a lawn chair and doze off. Or better yet, to stay awake and take it all in. My favorite time of day during my favorite month is evening, when the sky stripes turquoise and coral. There's a distinct smell that blankets the evenings. Grassy, mossy, fresh and earthy. I remember even as a kid feeling like there was something in that scent that turned the air spiritual, magical, electric. It's the smell of anticipation and life, making me feel like the waning light, which stretches out longer each evening, holds endless possibility.

I want to slow down this time of year. I almost feel a duty to do so, to make sure this time does not pass without me noticing it properly. I am eager to drink it in. And I strain to listen as, in the words of the Psalms, “the heavens declare the glory of God.” I want to hear what they say.

“Attention,” wrote the poet Mary Oliver, “is the beginning of devotion.” These days, it is in short supply. Our precious and painfully limited attention is the white whale of technologists and marketers. It has been commodified and commandeered for profit. In a 2019 essay on Oliver in *The Atlantic*, Franklin Foer wrote, “If the attention of humans can be so easily filched by a machine — or, more precisely, the companies that operate those machines — then it follows that the capacity for devotion is damaged along the way.”

This is why I feel a sense of responsibility, even of obligation, not to miss what is all around me. In the frenetic and disintegrated world of screens, smartphones, notifications and noise, the material world beckons — the world of skin, dew, mourning doves and evening primroses. It quietly asks us to see, to notice, to attend to its wisdom and beauty. “We are here to abet creation and to witness it, to notice each thing so each thing gets noticed,” wrote Annie Dillard in *Life* magazine in 1988. “Together we notice not only each mountain shadow and each stone on the beach but we notice each other’s beautiful face and complex nature so that creation need not play to an empty house.”

Heeding this tangible world has become more difficult for us. In “Crossing the Postmodern Divide,” the philosopher Albert Borgmann contrasts the brilliance and pliability of hyperreality — of digital life — with the “eloquent” character of material, embodied things and practices. The material world is eloquent because it demands contact with reality itself rather than a curated, ultrapalatable version of it. But with that contact comes thorns, bruises, mosquitoes and, worst of all, boredom. My backyard does not move at the pace of YouTube. It is not as bright as V.R. It does not buzz my pocket with notifications or headlines. It extends a quiet, complex blessing and leaves it up to me to receive it or not.

In his 2016 essay for New York magazine, “I Used to Be a Human Being,” Andrew Sullivan explores the emotional and spiritual costs of a very online life. He argues that “the greatest threat to faith today is not hedonism but distraction.” If attention gives birth to devotion, then perhaps part of the mission of people of faith today is to counter distraction by calling people to the goodness and wonder of the material, embodied and natural world.

The church is now in the season of Easter, which is a 50-day period of joy and celebration. During this time, Christians around the globe celebrate and proclaim that Jesus physically rose from the dead, not as a spirit but in a body — one marked with scar tissue and freckles, one that ate and drank, one that, though transformed, was still recognizable, touchable and palpable. Christians believe that when Jesus rose he walked on hard earth and ate fish caught from real, salty seas. This resurrected body points to the ultimate destiny of humanity. It says that we will not float away to some faraway heaven but that eternity will be found right here on earth, in what the Bible calls a “new heaven and new earth,” a place with bays and banjos, artichokes and art, dandelions and dancing. Easter is not, then, a celebration that is primarily “spiritual,” if by that we mean nonmaterial. It is instead the ultimate affirmation of materiality. It tells us that the Christian faith is as interested in mountains as it is morality; that it asks for attention not just to dogma but to dogwoods, that it is occupied not only with our souls but with our five senses.

The resurrection of Jesus is a proclamation that the material world is good and worth savoring, protecting and attending. So, to inhabit this season fully, we need to take up the task of embracing the goodness of the palpable, analog world, whether it be to make time for a hike or to notice the sweetness of gentle rain or to revel in the bitterness of good coffee or to listen to the laughter of children. “God is the biggest materialist there is,” the priest, author and chef Robert Farrar Capon once said. After all, God created the material world, Capon pointed out, he must enjoy it even more than we do.

There's a hymn that they used to sing at my childhood church that goes, "Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace." I get the point it's trying to make: that encountering true hope, beauty and holiness puts pettier things in perspective. Still, my experience of faith is nearly the opposite of what the hymn describes. The more I have tried to seek God — the more I reach for truth, beauty and mystery that I know exceeds my grasp — the more bright, vivid and vital the things of earth become.

Not to say that they are always beautiful and lovely. The sorrow, sin and ache of the world — the violence of nature itself, which is "red in tooth and claw," as Tennyson put it — is clearer to me each year. Yet, as I grow in faith and in years, the lushness of this earth of ours, the glory in even the most ordinary of backyards, the astounding excessiveness of the natural world feels more and more urgent for me to regard and honor. There is no dimming of the things of earth, only a deeper sense of call to them. Christianity, to me, is nothing if not sensual.

One of my favorite essays is a 1986 piece by the late theologian Eugene Peterson, about the work of Dillard. He describes her as a woman who "prays with her eyes open." Instead of closing her eyes to focus on things above, on so-called spiritual things, prayer becomes an act of noticing, of reveling, of cultivating the attention that leads to devotion. Peterson says that Dillard's task was to exegete creation "in the same way John Calvin was an exegete of Holy Scripture. The passion and intelligence Calvin brought to Moses, Isaiah and Paul, she brings to muskrats, rotifers and mockingbirds."

This task, however, isn't limited to Dillard. Her work itself insists that this is the task given to every human being. Today, with one click of a keyboard, we have more ability to see what's happening on the other side of the earth and to hear what everyone we know (and don't know) thinks of it. Yet with that power comes a temptation, like never before, to miss seeing our own city park, our own block, our own yard, and the faces around our own kitchen tables.

This spring, in the 50 days of Easter, I want to pray with my eyes as open as possible, to attend to the world around me in ways that do not always come naturally to me. This will require slowing down, logging off and opening myself up to the material world, which takes discipline and more than a little grace. This asks me to turn my eyes on Jesus and, by his light, let the things of earth grow bigger, stranger, and more and more captivating.

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