

Mindful: Psalm 8

by [Mark Ralls](#) in the [May 15, 2007](#) issue

Calvin Trillin's lighthearted and best-selling tribute to his late wife, Alice, has made husbands like me nervous. By "like me" I mean the ordinary, absentminded kind—husbands who have little more than a 50-50 chance of guessing correctly when their wives ask, "Do you notice anything different about me?" In essays that Trillin wrote as a staff writer for the *New Yorker*, Alice made regular appearances. Throughout their 36-year marriage, Trillin catalogued her sense of humor, her sense of style and her childlike sense of wonder. He noticed little things about Alice that most spouses let slide like fish over an open dam. This may explain why a young woman once wrote Trillin and confided that "she sometimes looked at her boyfriend and asked herself, 'But will he love me like Calvin loves Alice?'"

What seems to have separated Trillin from the rest of the pack of husbands was *mindfulness*. He was mindful of Alice, so his delight in her presence remained undimmed. While it is overreaching to say that God loves us as Calvin loved Alice, it may be that their marriage provides a window into the kind of relationship that God chooses to have with humanity. The ancient poet who gave us Psalm 8 suggests as much. He acknowledges that the Creator whose glory exceeds the heavens—who set the moon and the stars in their place—is nevertheless mindful of each one of us. This reality, the psalmist concludes, is as remarkable as the act of creation itself.

Mindfulness is a divine attribute that has received little theological attention. Perhaps this is because it is so easily absorbed into the broader category of love. The distinction I would suggest is this: Mindfulness is love that resists distraction. It is a staunch refusal to fall into absentmindedness. It is focused, sustained attention toward the beloved. In this way, mindfulness seems less tied to the cognitive functions of the mind and closer to what we call an act of will. Mindfulness is choosing to cherish and then choosing—again and again—never to back away from that initial decision. Devoted spouses, dedicated friends, caring parents are all mindful of the ones they love. Above all else, God is mindful of humanity. To paraphrase Karl Barth, God chose—before the foundation of the world—to be the God *for* humanity. On the basis of this primal act of divine will, we can be assured

that God's attention never wavers. Our Creator is eternally mindful of us.

The surprising reality that the psalmist considers and deems remarkable is God's special love for human creatures despite the fact that we are not all that lovable. "What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" New Testament scholar Victor Furnish once said that "God's love is not like a heat-seeking missile which is triggered by something inherently attractive in the target, the object of love." Human beauty lies squarely in the eye of the divine Beholder. Yet, because God chooses to be eternally mindful of us, there is a special relationship between God and humanity. God cares for all creation, for "all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea." But it is human beings whom God "crowns with glory and honor." We are the ones "made just a little lower than God." The difference seems to boil down to intimacy. As Julian of Norwich put it, human beings are "clothed" in divine love: "Our Lord . . . is our clothing, for God is that love which wraps and enfolds us, embraces and guides us, surrounds us." In other words, God is mindful of us in a way that is unique in all of God's creation.

We who are so loved by God embrace this remarkable reality as we become mindful of others. This may have been where Paul was leading when he wrote, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5). The peculiar thing about Jesus' mind was that it was always directed toward others. Jesus was divine mindfulness incarnate. He noticed those who were forgotten. He cherished those who were despised. In the midst of a crowd pulsing all around him, Jesus noticed the touch of a despairing woman who merely grazed the "hem of his garment." On the cross, Jesus noticed the penitent thief beside him making room in his heart for God. In lesser ways, we are called to be mindful of one another. This is our choice to make again and again.

Near the end of *About Alice*, Calvin Trillin relays an experience that his wife had while volunteering at a camp for terminally ill children. Alice befriended a young girl, "a magical child who was severely disabled," whom she remembered simply as "L." L was courageous and optimistic. One day while L was absorbed in a game of Duck, Duck, Goose, Alice spotted a letter that L's parents had written her. She could not resist reading the first few lines: "If God had given us all the children in the world to choose from, L, we would only have chosen you." Alice passed the note to a fellow counselor, whispering breathlessly, "Quick. Read this. It's the secret of life."

The psalmist suggests that in a similar way God delights in our presence. God chooses to cherish humanity, and God never wavers in this decision. In a nutshell, I think what Psalm 8 suggests is this: Our Creator is mindful of each one of us, and we who are made in the image of God are called to be mindful of one another. If I'm right about this, then Psalm 8 may be more than a hymn of praise. It might just be the secret of life.