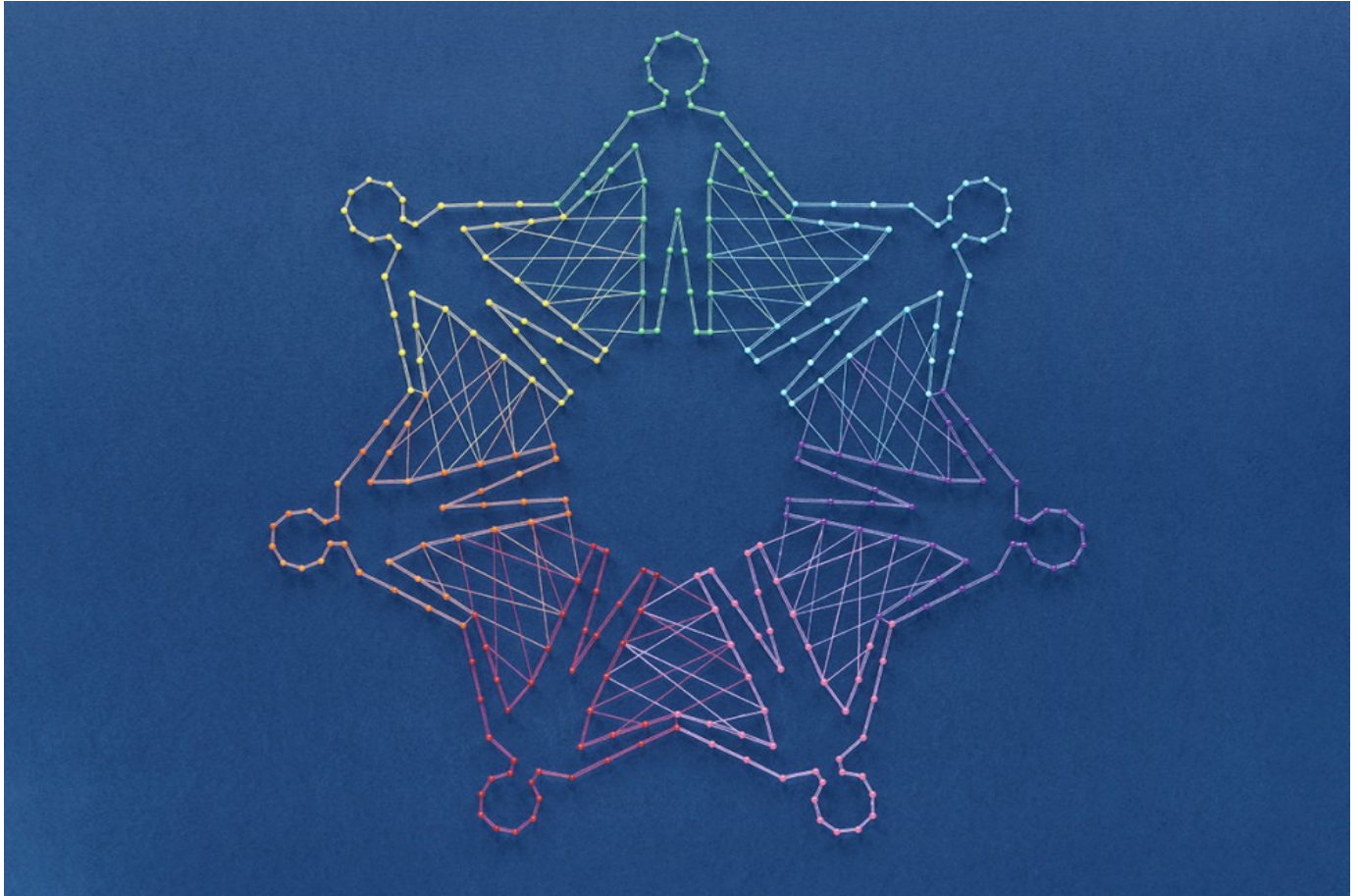


The receptive, reflective act of paying attention

For Simone Weil, paying attention means asking, "What are you going through?"

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [March 23, 2022](#) issue



(Illustration © Pogonici / iStock / Getty)

“Everyone knows what attention is.” So writes William James in his magisterial work, *The Principles of Psychology* (1890). True enough, most of us share an understanding of what it means to concentrate our focus tightly on someone or something. We know that giving serious attention to a person or an activity requires a kind of mental tenacity, a muscular effort of the mind.

But must attention always signal strenuousness? Simone Weil, the French philosopher and social theorist, doesn’t think so. She’s convinced there’s a more

beautiful form of attending to someone than just displaying tense concentration. “To attend means not to seek, but to wait; not to concentrate, but instead to dilate our minds.” When it comes to one’s own attention, Weil suggests a receptive disposition that’s more reflective than aggressive, more standing still than strenuous.

When Riccardo Muti, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s acclaimed music director, walked on stage last month, the attention of the audience was focused on Chicago’s world-class orchestra preparing to perform the single work of the evening, Beethoven’s Symphony No. 9. Regarded as Beethoven’s greatest work, it’s the final movement of that piece, which includes a symphony chorus exalting in the well-known “Ode to Joy,” that audiences eagerly anticipate.

With microphone in hand, Muti turned to the packed house seated in near perfect silence. Two days earlier, Russia had launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. “The stage where we make music should never be a place for political announcement or statement,” said Muti. “We make music that brings joy and peace. But we cannot play this symphony dedicated to joy and brotherhood without thinking of the sufferings of the people of Ukraine.”

One might have thought that this talented conductor, at the height of his powers, would have all of his attention (and nerves) focused on executing the details of Beethoven’s massive orchestral work. But instead, Muti’s mind was dilating. “What we are seeing on television [from Ukraine] is horrible,” he went on. “Tonight, in the final movement, Beethoven takes the text from [Friedrich] Schiller that speaks about joy, joy, joy. But we will think in that moment that joy without peace cannot exist.”

Weil’s concept of attending to others receptively involves recognizing the full humanity of especially those who suffer. For her, this means more than just assigning afflicted individuals to “a specimen in the social category labeled *unfortunate*.” Staring at other people and merely thinking about them is no way to attend to them. “The love of our neighbor in all its fullness,” she writes, “means being able to say to him, ‘What are you going through?’”

Muti spoke as if he wanted everybody in the house that night to attend compassionately to the people of Ukraine by asking the soul-searching question, *What are you going through?* He shared one last sentence before setting down the microphone: “I hope that from this wonderful hall, from the orchestra, from the chorus, from you, a message would arrive to the people in Ukraine that those who

are creating violence and hate and this strange need for war: we are against all that.”

Applause erupted. On a night of magnificent music, Muti seemed intent on first teaching his audience how to practice attending to others, and how to do so reflectively, compassionately, and with dilated minds.

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