

The Point of Paying Attention

“Instructions for living a life. Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it.” — Mary Oliver

Paying attention hurts right now. It is easy to solely pay attention to the broken, cruel, and overwhelming and miss joy, beauty, and delight. We often find what we seek. Lived experience is composed of it all — the good and the bad, the light and the dark, the falling apart and back together. Paying attention to it all has never been more important. If we are to imagine a future better and beyond what we are living, paying attention is the point.

Paying attention is the pulse of wide-awakeness. Wide-awakeness is not my idea. Philosophers, scholars, and artists have been exploring it for generations. I was so hungry to understand it, I focused on it during my Ph.D. and founded the Wide-Awakeness Project committed to living it. At heart, wide-awakeness is about the *in* and *of* experience — where attention and imagination live. Where our work is our project. Where we create and invent. Where we connect and grow. This essay will make the point that paying attention is worth thinking about, especially in these difficult times. It will explore the contours of the existential experience that arise when we pay attention. Ultimately, it will connect the value of paying attention — and telling about it — to establishing social proof of goodness in our world.

I am a writer, researcher, and storyteller. I have been published in the *Washingtonian*, *City Lifestyle*, *Grateful Living*, *Teaching Exceptional Children*, and *Elephant Journal*. I have written about the arts and sciences for leading organizations such as the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, the United States Department of Education, the University of Cincinnati, Ohio University, several state Departments of Education, NASA, and Blue Man Group. I received my Ph.D. from the University of Texas at Austin. Read more about my work in The Wide-Awakeness Project — <https://katiesteadlycurling.substack.com> and via the Selected Publications link on my website — <https://www.katiesteadly.com/writing/>.