

Every Valley Shall Be Exalted, and Every Mountain and Hill be Made Low

A Return to Reality: The reality that God is with Us

- St. Athanasius, On the Incarnation of the Word, 15: The Savior of us all, the Word of God, in His great love took to Himself a body and moved as Man among men, meeting their senses, so to speak, half way. He became Himself an object for the senses, so that those who were seeking God in sensible things might apprehend the Father through the works which He, the Word of God, did in the body.
- (Apprehend means to touch, not comprehend/fully understand)

To make the faith accessible to everyone, we have to teach so that people can learn. Accessibility imitates Christ in this way. Accessibility requires that we remove physical barriers, social barriers, and barriers to attention.

ACCESSIBILITY MEANS BEST PRACTICES TO INCLUDE ALL LEARNERS.

What does reality look like for learning? In the next section, I will explain to you what I call the ORDER OF ATTENTION. It’s based on the teachings of the Fathers and modern cognitive behavioral science, which affirms the insights of the Fathers.

- Though we don’t have time tonight to go into all the ways that the Order of Attention draws from the Tradition, I will be explaining it in detail in an online course that I’m developing later this summer. Keep an eye on my website, SummerKinard.com, to learn more.

THE ORDER OF ATTENTION

- ALL people, regardless of their disabilities, process attention in the same ORDER.
- In order for people to learn, we must engage their ATTENTION.
- If you want people to keep the faith after they leave home, and if you want to include boys and young men, and if you want to include people with disabilities—all areas where the Church has been hurting of late—the way to do it is by teaching to ATTENTION, which will enable the formation of long-term memory, gut feelings of being drawn to the Church, and (as we will discuss in more detail in the second half tonight) the ability to encounter the whole world with ***theological reasoning***.

Everyone processes attention in the same order. We all:

FEEL FIRST

SEE SECOND

THINK THIRD

FRIENDLY FOURTH

The process is cumulative, building on the earlier layer. So if you don’t feel safe and calm, your visual perception will be unable to function well. If you don’t have safe feelings and visual attention, you won’t be able to pay attention to words and language (thinking). If you don’t

have the earlier layers of attention, you can't truly communicate with Joint (or Triadic) attention which is required for all relationships—learning, friendship, teaching.

How do we engage attention at the FIRST LEVEL?

FEEL FIRST:

- Sense of safety and well-being is created by how we set up and move about the physical SPACE
 - Both physical sensations and emotions are part of the first level of attention. They are interconnected and both best modified through SPACE and GROSS MOTOR MOVEMENTS (eg, not tiny, fine motor movements, but large ones)
 - A “small” GROSS MOTOR movement would be making your Cross, and a large one would be going around the font three times. In the classroom, a good gross motor movement will get you in the door and to the prayer corner, traveling across the whole room/designated space to get there.
- Teaching through space
- Preparing a place for everyone
- (See handout on my website about Physical Access)
- Spaces should be beautiful, open, and with a clear purpose that teaches
- Church services are this way. We enter with prayer actions (candles, veneration, making our Cross) and move into the main space where the icons, the Temple layout, and the Altar tell us about our purpose.
- Classrooms should also be arranged and entered purposefully. We are not bound to the restrictions of factory-model schools or daycares that emphasize busy work or entertainment. We want to FORM DISCIPLES, and to do that, we have to ENGAGE THE SENSES.
- It's best to have tables only off to the side, used only for a small portion of the class or when necessary, rather than central. The focal point of every classroom should be an ACCESSIBLE PRAYER CORNER, not a desk or table or whiteboard.
- Factors: space arrangement, sensory aids, music, lighting, quiet, interest, a sense of purpose, sensory-rich environment

SEE SECOND

- Once a person feels at ease and welcomed/safe/engaged, they will process visual information (provided they are able to see; otherwise the corollary processing for people with visual impairments is second, such as tactile learning (Braille, carved icons, speech output buttons, smells, verbal descriptions that orient one).
- VISUAL PROCESSING BRIDGES THE GAP IN COMMUNICATION & ATTENTION
 - This is very important to realize. Many people will be able to attend at a very high level IF they are provided with visual aids, such as: maps, visual schedules, communication boards, pictorial instructions.
 - The difference in attention with and without visual aids can be astonishing, from apparently non-existent to totally engaged. Visual language and communication aids can be the difference between a nonresponsive and responsive person.

- If you don’t have the first layer of attention, however, visual processing can be distorted, too. Thankfully, visual language aids can help communicate the resources that will soothe a person at the first level of attention.
 - Levels of attention are interactive as well as cumulative! Each helps the other.
- Examples of visual language aids: Visual Schedules for the Divine Liturgy, Group Plans for Sunday School classes, Communication boards, Zones of Regulation tools, Reminder signs, Visual Prayers (Our Father and the Jesus Prayer), Story sequences
- These visual aids should be used **alongside** Holy Icons to help students access the Lord, the Mother of God, and the Saints.
- We at Park End Books’ Accessible Church School curriculum project are working on building a Scriptorium curriculum that will help students engage the particular visual language of the faith as well. Communicating about those elements requires the use of visual language supports, though. They’re not mutually exclusive, and students still need “lesser” images to access the full meaning of Holy Icons.

THINK THIRD

- Once the first two levels of attention are present, students can process language and higher reasoning.
 - Language processing doesn’t have to be spoken!
 - Using AAC such as communication boards, speech output devices and apps, speech buttons, sign language, pointing, responding by choosing an item, and other forms of communication count equally!
- In order to keep the lower levels of attention present during THINKING, provide ACTION PRAYERS and INTERACTIVE LESSONS using the whole body to engage the stories and prayers of the faith.
- Example Action Prayers: See my website for Nurturing Independence in Prayer for Families with Disabilities
- Example story sequence on website
- Photo of B doing mustard seed sequence
- More story sequences that build up in an Orthodox context coming next year in the ACCESSIBLE CHURCH SCHOOL curricula from PARK END BOOKS
- In the meantime, see <https://www.freebibleimages.org/illustrations/> for story sequences. You’ll probably need to pare down the stories to 7-10 images/each. Seven images per story is a sweet spot of attention.
- Repeat a lesson 2-3 weeks in a row, building another layer each time. You might ask students to bring sensory anchors related to the story for show and tell on weeks two and three. Add on saints’ lives, prayers, seasonal elements in later weeks, and make each week more fun/cool/engaging gross motor.

FRIENDLY FOURTH

- When the other levels of attention are engaged, people are able to participate in JOINT ATTENTION, also known as TRIADIC ATTENTION. This level of attention is at the heart of

a community. It’s one of the ways that persons in the Church and the Church as a community are formed in the image of God the Holy Trinity.

- Support SHARED ATTENTION with GROUP-FORMING ROUTINES, PRAYERS, AND DISCUSSIONS
 - Use a classroom visual schedule (see the GROUP PLANS on my blog post) to facilitate a shared, consistent routine.
 - Shared, consistent routines make classrooms SOCIALLY ACCESSIBLE
 - Have GROSS MOTOR ACTION PRAYERS FOR THE GROUP
 - For instance, have everyone in the group hold the edges of a large silk scarf while you take turns offering a prayer (aloud, silently, or a picture), then respond, “Lord, have mercy” while lifting/raising the silk. For people with motor challenges, a few scrunchies can be pinned/sewn on ahead of time and attached to a hand, foot, or chair (with assent).
 - The act of gathering around the silk in the prayer area forms a group in space, showing every person that they are welcome and have a place!
 - ACT OUT LESSONS with skits, props, sensory anchors (more on this in the second part), and even large outside games sometimes.
 - SEQUENCE THE STORY as a group.
 - DISCUSS THE STORY while students are engaged with sensory bins, large scale actions.
 - A simple way to do this is to have sensory bins in front of the children, either several smaller ones in the middle or a large bin if possible, so that the students can touch the anchors while they discuss the meaning of the lesson with each other and the teacher.
 - For St. Lucia Day, we use nap mats and foam blocks/seats to build a dark tunnel to crawl through with LED candles.
 - When talking about seeds falling on the good ground, we usually spend three or four weeks. The final lesson, we have the kids take turns sitting in an empty ball pit. As they name good habits (prayer habits, going to church, being kind in different ways, partaking of a Sacrament) that will help prepare the good soil, we fill in some of the balls around them.
 - WHEN STUDENTS FEEL THEY ARE PART OF THE STORY IN THEIR SENSES, THEY WILL REMEMBER IT, VALUE IT, AND LIVE IT.

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THE CROOKED STRAIGHT, AND THE ROUGH PLACES PLAIN: SENSORY ANCHORS

The story of the Way Crosses. Before the Reformation, Scotland had hundreds of Way Crosses, which were stone crosses carved with religious symbolism to guide pilgrims. At different times, the crosses led to important pilgrimage sites such as to the relics of St. Andrew or the holy well and relic sites of St. Tredwell. Pilgrims would stand by one Way Cross and look around for the next one. They would walk from one cross to the next, around mountains and safely across wildernesses. In this way, by following one cross to the next, the crooked, winding paths were made straight.

SENSORY ANCHORS MAKE THE CROOKED STRAIGHT BY HELPING US SEE THE PATTERN, THE MAP, THE PLACES OF HOLINESS AND MEETING WITH GOD, ON OUR PILGRIM JOURNEY.

- Sensory Anchors are physical patterns and objects that repeat in scripture, saints' lives, hymns, and our daily lives. When they repeat or occur in groups, it's a sign that something important is happening.
- Sensory anchors are the accessible way to learn to think typologically (patterns, maps, places) like the Fathers did!
 - They noticed when a boat was important to two stories, and they read the two boat stories together, building the senses to make more meaning. They would not read about Noah's ark without remembering Jesus walking on the water.
 - Sensory anchors help us access the grace of God throughout scripture.
- Sensory Anchors teach us to think and see and interpret the scriptures, prayers, tradition, and our daily lives theologically because God who made the world became incarnate and wants us to know Him in the world and through our senses.
- **What are the anchors?** There are lots of them! Some of them are:
 - Altar, Battle, bird, blood, boat, bread, Bride/Bridegroom, clothing, cooking, dream, face, family, feeding, fire, fish, fruit, garden, healing, journey, light, morning, mountains, night, oil, Passover, priest, reversal, rock, seeds, sheep, shepherd, tree, vineyard, water, wilderness, wine, wrestling/struggle
 - (I will update my post with a printable later this week.)
- **You can add SENSORY ANCHORS to your existing church school programs for adults and children to immediately make it more accessible. How?**
 - Identify the sensory anchors after reading/sequencing the story
 - Have people bring examples of those sensory anchors the second/third week on that story
 - Find other scriptures with the same anchors.
 - Find saint lives, hymns, and prayers with the same anchors
 - Which places have those anchors?
 - When was a time in your life that you interacted with those anchors? How did you experience God there?
- Conclusion: Story of doves