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The Challenge of Attention in the Digital Age

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George F. Will once remarked that, if you are going to read a liberal journal, you should read *The American Prospect*. I read several, but few are as stimulating (and sometimes infuriating) as *TAP*. Evidence of the magazine's stimulus to thought comes as it offers a May 19, 2008 essay by Courtney E. Martin. The essay demands attention — and it is all about attention and attentiveness.

She certainly asks an important question: Do today's college and university students really care about the life of the mind?

She writes:

According to Josh Waitzkin, a 2003 graduate of Columbia University, not much. When he returned to his favorite political theory professor's course a few weeks ago, he slid into a seat in the back of the lecture hall and opened up his trusty spiral notebook. As he stared down at the sea of students, he realized how much had changed in the few short years since he'd been gone.

Professor Dennis Dalton began his lecture on Mahatma Gandhi's mass civil-disobedience campaign following the Amritsar massacre, focusing on the Indian activists' persistence in staying attuned to their own inner morals despite the crush of British imperialism. The students flipped open their laptops and started clicking away. A few solely took notes, but many flipped back and forth between multiple windows: shopping on Amazon, cruising Facebook, checking out The New York Times Style section, reorganizing their social calendars, e-mailing, playing solitaire, doing homework for other classes, chatting on AIM, and buying tickets on Expedia. Josh kept a list because he was in such disbelief.

Was it just a random day, a random classroom, a particularly restless group of college students? Or was it a profoundly sad statement about the state of our distracted minds and the biggest challenge facing all of us in this 24/7, high-tech time: the crisis of attention and intention?

Courtney Martin identifies the state of our distracted minds as the primary cause of intellectual neglect. The static and noise of everyday life and the information overload combine to rob the mind of the capacity for attentiveness — and attentiveness is something Martin rightly believes is necessary to a happy and wholesome life. Of course, the ability to focus the mind is an intellectual skill absolutely necessary for a good education. A distracted mind is not a mind ready for the most demanding intellectual challenges and tasks.

How bad is the problem? Courtney Martin explains:

Everyone is vying for our precious attention—political candidates, Victoria's Secret, tech manufacturers, restaurant chains, YouTube, cleaning product companies, media outlets, children, The Gap, parents, blogs, friends, JetBlue, even pets. The average adult sees 1,000 advertisements a day. Internet users spend 32.7 hours per week online and about half as much time watching television (16.4 hours). Teens, not surprisingly, are most likely to participate in what tech experts call "concurrent media exposure"—using various media simultaneously. Among this crush, how well are we staying attuned to our own inner morals? How intentional are we about whom we let sap our energy, at what times, and in what ways?

Take those Facebook-surfing students, missing out on a potentially life-changing lecture about war and courage. Their diffused attention isn't criminal, but it certainly doesn't do justice to professor Dalton's lectures, their own potential for learning, or the \$51,976 they or their parents are paying for a year of Ivy League education. They mirror something very real in most peoples' lives—the sense that your life is happening “to you,” instead of feeling truly intentional about how, with whom, and on what you spend your time. How many times have you complained about how long you spent emailing — as if some ambitious demon inhabited your body and kept incessantly pecking away at the keys?

The rise of mass media and the culture of entertainment shaped the minds of generations now at mid-life and older. Today's generation of college and university students faces a far greater array of attention demands — most of them now cellular and digital. Many teenagers and college students seem to experience genuine anxiety when they miss a few minutes of digital activity. (In fairness, their Treo and Blackberry toting parents are often almost as distracted and inattentive.)

Ask any educator and you will hear the horror stories. College professors look out at the tops of heads as students are bent over keyboards. On some campuses, faculty members are in revolt over students surfing the Web and maintaining their Facebook pages during lectures. The learning experience is transformed even if the students are taking notes on their laptops. Eye contact between the teacher and the students is often almost totally lost.

As Courtney Miller reports, Josh Waitzken wrote a letter to the students he observed when visiting Professor Dalton's class. This section of his letter should be seen and savored:

I understand that your minds move quickly and we are all impacted by a fast paced culture, but do you realize the horror of shopping online while Dalton describes...mothers throwing their children into a well to avoid a barrage of bullets? What are you doing? There comes a day when we must become accountable for our own learning process...Take it on. This is your life. What is the point of neurotically skipping along the surface when all the beauty lies below? Please seize the moment and listen deeply to Dalton's final lectures. Close the computers. Stop typing madly and soak in the themes he develops...Learning is an act of creativity, not mind-numbing, tv watching passive receptivity.

This is good advice for us all, regardless of age. We are all living distracted lives that promise only to grow more complicated and distracted in years ahead. The discipline and stewardship of our attention is a matter of great and unquestionable urgency.

Join the revolution and refuse the seductions of the mind-numbing allure of all things digital — at least long enough to think a great thought, hear a great lecture, enjoy a quality conversation (with a real, live face-to-face human being), listen to a great sermon, visit a museum, read a good book, or take in a beautiful sunset.

People who cannot maintain mental attention cannot know the intimacy of prayer, and God does not maintain a Facebook page. Our ability to focus attention is not just about the mind, for it is also a reflection of the soul. Our Christian discipleship demands that we give attention to our attention.

