

Get Your Life Back Week 2- Weekly Personal Study

DAY ONE: THE ASSAULT ON YOUR ATTENTION

There is an insistent, unrelenting assault on our attention. News. Marketing. Notifications. Alerts. Status updates. Postings. An incessant barrage of "information" competing for our attention. You can't get away from it. I fly a bit for my living, and airlines know you are a captive audience. Before takeoff, but once I'm buckled in my seat, ads begin to play on the screen before me, and I can't turn them off. Walk through a modern airport—it's a shopping mall designed like a casino, hard to find your way out. I leave the airport and jump in a cab; a screen facing me immediately starts playing commercials, loudly. Driving down the highway my attention is arrested by electronic billboards.

Nicholas Carr nearly won the Pulitzer Prize for his book *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*. In it, he recounts numerous conversations with very bright men and women, PhDs in their fields, who all confessed a similar phenomenon: the noticeable deterioration of their attention. Even though these intellectuals live and move in the world of books, research, literature, Carr was startled to corroborate so many reports that they couldn't read books anymore. Couldn't read articles, hadn't the patience even for a long blog post." He goes on to document how the internet is reshaping not only our ability to take in information, it is altering the structures of our brains. We don't like being asked to focus on anything for very long anymore; we are adapted to the quick, short stimulus of the internet and our mobile devices.

I think you know the zip, zip, zip effect all this is having on your attention. Part of what makes this troubling, Cani notes, is this:

"It's not only deep thinking that requires a calm, attentive mind. It's also empathy and compassion. Psychologists have long studied how people experience fear and react to threats, but it's only recently that they've begun researching the sources of our nobler instincts. What they're finding is that, as Antonio Damasio, the director of USC's Brain and Creativity Institute, explains, the higher emotions emerge from neural processes that are inherently slow...."

The writer of a cover story in *New York* magazine says that as we become used to the "twenty-first-century task" of "flitting" among bits of online information, "the wiring of the brain will inevitably change." We may lose our capacity "to concentrate on a complex task from beginning to end, but in recompense we'll gain new skills, such as the ability to "conduct 34 conversations simultaneously across six different media."

Carr's conclusion is worth repeating here:

The "frenziedness of technology," Heidegger wrote, threatens to "entrench itself everywhere." It may be that we are now entering the final stage of that entrenchment. We are welcoming the frenziedness into our souls.

You already knew this from your own experience; your frenzied soul has been trying to tell you for some time. But we frogs don't yet see the real implications of this warming kettle.

1. Nicholas Carr notes how the "internet is reshaping not only our ability to take in information, it is altering the structures of our brains." How concerning is this to you?

2. Have you experienced a noticeable deterioration in your ability to focus and pay attention for long periods of time? When is this behavior most apparent?

3. How does the "frenziedness" of your soul impact your time with God and those you love?

DAY TWO: THE INABILITY TO LINGER

Down through the ages, followers of Christ have believed that to be able to give God our attention as a regular practice was a very important thing. After vividly recounting the many challenges of faith and character before us, the author of Hebrews says,

Let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. We do this by keeping [fixing] our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith (Hebrews 12:1-2, NLT).

I don't think we realize how much our use of technology and its assault on our attention has made this difficult to do. You can't give God your attention when your attention is constantly being targeted and taken captive ... and you're cooperating.

In a blog post entitled "Mobile Blindness," marketing guru Seth Godin writes,

We swipe instead of click, we scan instead of read, even our personal email. We get exposure to far more at the surface, but we rarely dig in. As a result, the fine print gets ignored. We go for headlines, not nuance. It's a deluge of gossip and thin promises ... blog posts and tweets are getting shorter. We rarely stick around for the long version. "Photo-keratitis," "snow blindness," happens when there's too much ultraviolet, when the fuel for our eyes comes in too strong and we can't absorb it. Something similar is happening to each of us, to our entire culture as a result of the tsunami of noise vying for our attention.

Mobile blindness. The quick pass. The inability to linger and dig deep. It's just the next thing, the next thing, the next thing. Our precious attention has been groomed and taken hostage. Let's contrast that with Psalm 1:1-4:

Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked, or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season, and whose leaf does not wither whatever they do prospers. Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away.

Two types of people are being contrasted here, two types of experience: The first type is rooted and substantive and so life giving. Then there is the person so lacking in substance, so ephemeral that their reality is compared to dandelion puffs, chaff, that a breath of wind can sweep away. The key is this: the rooted person is able to meditate-give sustained attention to the revelation of God. Not swipe, not multitask. Lingering focus. So Crawford wonders, "As our mental lives become more fragmented, what is at stake often seems to be nothing less than the question of whether one can maintain a coherent self. I mean a self that is able to act according to settled purposes and ongoing projects, rather than flitting about."

Dear reader-you can't find more of God when all you're able to give him is a flit and flicker of your attention.

1. What does Hebrews 12:1-2 say is the key to running the race with endurance that God has set before us? How hard is that to do in this world of endless distractions?

2. In what ways do you encounter mobile blindness "as a result of the tsunami of noise vying for our attention"? What might you do to counter that?

3. How would you describe the two types of people mentioned in Psalm 1-and which do you most resemble in this season of life?

DAY THREE: IN LOVE WITH DISTRACTION

Stasi and I celebrated our thirty-fifth wedding anniversary with a trip to Kauai. We find it the most gorgeous of the Hawaiian Islands, maybe one of the most beautiful places on earth. Volcanic cliffs covered with lush tropical forest spill right down to the water's edge. Hibiscus blossoms fall onto the peaceful rivers that wind their way through the Jungle. This isn't your tourist Hawaii. Apart from Prince Mille, the North Shore is way laid back, and after you cross a couple one-lane bridges, you feel you really could be on the outskirts of Eden.

Sitting on a quiet beach there, with no one to our right or of more than two hundred yards of pristine white sand, Ls so luscious I expected Adam and Eve to go strolling by any moment. Now, you'd think this would be delight, and enchant, and soothe any soul, but as I took a stroll down the beach myself, I passed a guy sitting under a banyan tree-watching videos on his iPhone.

Wow.

You can't unplug from your technology even in paradise? Now, to be fair, I bet this is what happened: He had his phone with him-because everybody always has their phone with them and somebody texted him a funny YouTube video, and he couldn't resist the urge, and that was that. He was glued to a little artificial screen watching some cat sit on a toilet, when all around him was beauty beyond description, the very beauty his soul needed, and filling that beauty and coming through it the presence of God.

And I saw myself in this guy.

Because I, too, had brought my phone with me to the beach, and I, too, responded when the little “chirp” alerted me to an incoming text. (We always have our excuses; every addict does. I was “keeping myself available to my children.”) Every notification got my attention, because it triggered the brain's learned response to check out what news had just come in.

Dopamine causes you to want, desire, seek out, and search.... It is the opioid system (separate from dopamine) that makes us feel pleasure. ... The wanting system propels you to action and the liking makes you feel satisfied and therefore you feel satisfied and therefore pause your seeking. If your seeking isn't turned off at least little while, then you start to run in an endless loop (Dopamine Loop). The dopamine system is stronger than the opioid system. You tend to seek more than you are satisfied. ... Dopamine starts you seeking, then you get rewarded for the seeking which makes you seek more. It becomes harder and harder to stop looking at email, stop texting, or stop checking your cell phone to see if you have a message or a new text. ... The dopamine system doesn't have satiety built in. It is possible for the dopamine system to keep saying “more more more,” causing you to keep seeking even when you have found the information.

Neo was never so totally and completely trapped in the Matrix.

1. Have you been on vacation or in a setting to escape the noise of the world when your phone began chirping? What does it say about us that we often will come up with any excuse to not fully unplug-even for brief times of soul care?

2. How difficult would it be for you to turn off the constant interruptions of social media notifications-from your aunt posting another picture of her dog on Facebook to weather updates about a snowstorm across the country to the embarrassing thing the president just said? What are you most concerned about missing?

3. Have you recently found it hard to stop texting or checking for new messages-even when there's nothing urgent happening? How would you describe the effect of the dopamine loop when you're caught in it?

DAY FOUR: DENIAL

Since denial is one of the stages of addiction, let me ask you, dear reader, a couple questions: When your little chime, glass, or swoosh sound alerts you to an incoming text, do you easily ignore it and go on with the conversation you are having, or reading what you are reading, or enjoying the back seat view as you drive through the desert? I'm serious-when that thing vibrates in your pocket, do you regularly ignore it? Or do you automatically reach to see? Can you shut your phone off when you get home in the evening and not turn it on again until morning? When you first wake, do you allow yourself a leisurely coffee and bagel before you look at your phone-or is your phone the very first thing you look at every morning?

Yeah, me too. Let's be honest: we prefer distraction. The more distracted we are, the less present we are to our souls various hurts, disappointments, boredom, and fears. It's a short term relief with long term consequences. What blows my mind is how totally normal this has become; it's the new socially acceptable addiction. I've got a friend who to break with his; he now turns his phone off over the weekend. I text him, and he doesn't reply until Sunday night Monday morning. I'm embarrassed by my irritation: *C'mon, man-you know the protocol. Everybody agrees to be totally available, anywhere, anytime, 24/7. It's what we do.*

What does it say that you look like some sort of nut job when you turn your phone off?

The brother of Jesus was trying to offer some very simple guidelines to a true life with God when, among other things, he said, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world" (James 1:27). That unpolluted part-that's what worries me, when the average American checks their phone eighty times a day! 70 percent said they sleep with their phone within reach.

1. Is it possible that you prefer distraction because it keeps you from your soul's fears, hurts, and disappointments? If so, can you name a few of the issues that you have been avoiding?

2. What might be the long-term consequences of these Short-term choices for relief rather than restoration?

3. In the area of unplugging, what one change can you make to keep yourself from "being polluted by the world (James 1:27)?

DAY FIVE: WE HAVE A CHOICE

Finding more of God, growing strong in soul and spirit, requires creating space in your day for God-to intentionally put yourself in a place that allows you to draw upon and experience the healing power of the life of God filling you. Over the ages, serious followers of Jesus have used stillness and quiet, worship, fasting, prayer, beautiful places, and a number of other "exercises" to drink deeply of the presence of God. And untangle their souls from the world.

The ongoing deluge of intriguing facts and commentary, scandal and crisis, genuinely important guidance combined with the latest insider news from around the globe, and our friends' personal lives gives the soul a medicated feeling of awareness, connection, and meaning. Really, it's the new Tower of Babel-the immediate access to every form of "knowledge" and "groundbreaking" information right there on our phones, every waking moment. It confuses the soul into a state of artificial meaning and purpose, all the while preventing genuine soul care and life with God. Who has time to read a book? Plant a garden?

Let me say it again, because it's so counter to the social air we breathe: what has become the normal daily consumption of input is numbing the soul with artificial meaning and purpose while in fact the soul grows thinner and thinner through neglect, harmed by the very madness that passes for a progressive life. We are literally being forced into the "Shallows" of our life.

I'm not scolding; I'm tossing a lifeline. Sincere followers of Jesus in every age have faced very difficult decisions-usually at that point of tension where their life with and for God ran straight against the prevailing cultural norm. The new Tower of Babel is ours. We have always been "strangers and aliens" in the world, insofar as our values seemed so strange and bizarre to those around us. We are now faced with a series of decisions that are going to make us look like freaks- choices like fasting from social media, never bringing our smartphones to any meal, conversation, or Bible study, cutting off our media intake so we can practice stillness every day. The good news is that we actually have a choice. Unlike persecution, the things currently assaulting us are things we can choose not to participate in.

1. How do you currently create space for God each day? What new practices would you like to try to experience even more of God?

2. What does today's reading describe as the new Town Babel-and how does it confuse the soul?

3. Do you agree that we have a choice to participate or not participate in the things that are assaulting our souls? If so, what will you now choose to no longer participate in? If you disagree, why do you feel you have no choice?