

abridged

The Poet in an Age of Distraction by Sven Birkerts

— from *Hamann's Bond*

The cultivation of poetry is never more to be desired than at periods when, from an excess of the selfish and calculating principle, the accumulation of the materials of external life exceed the quantity of the power of assimilating them to the internal laws of human nature. The body has become too unwieldy for that which animates it. — Shelley

Like the Royal Family, poetry wears titular tiaras that recall its former great estate but wields no power. Auden said that it "makes nothing happen" and he was right, though presumably he was talking about the poetry of recent centuries and not about the grand performances of Homer, Virgil, Dante and Milton, which shaped and directed the imagination of Western man and die-stamped his languages permanently. Illusions about that kind of effectuality have, of course, long since disappeared. Poetry is now largely a face-saving operation, with poets pulling their bitterness inside out and preening themselves on their own uselessness.

But the poets are not that much to blame. From generation to generation they have done their duty by the word, deepening and furthering the idiom of their time. It's the idiom itself, bound as it is to social and historical experience, that has become bloodless. If poets appear irrelevant now it is because great abstract historical changes have relocated all of the power centers. The race is busily standardizing itself and turning its attention outward; sciences, technologies and the mass-processing of information are the order of the day. Truth, for the time being, is what can be measured, calculated, or found on some instrument. The imago is defined by our collective fantasies of control and efficiency. And the inner life is given its due only when the strain of imbalance sends a crack zig-zagging through the outer shell. Psychiatrists flourish in the rich northern suburbs of our cities.

A great distractedness has settled over the West. Outwardly we may be as vigorous and purposeful as ever, but inwardly the static crackles. Every morning the world is laid before us in column inches and we take an anxious sniff. In the hours of light we master the unspeakable threat — but in the dark the faced-off missiles gleam like fangs. And we know that for the first time in history there is no place to hide, a piece of knowledge that the organism cannot endure. Either it finds a God to be friendly with, or else it interposes static between itself and the facts.

The poet today works in the face of this distractedness. There is nothing less likely to capture the public attention than the little web of words he would make. If we construct a scheme of social evolution, the poet is its dodo-bird. Yet he persists in his making. And this is something miraculous. Decades ago, Robert Graves wrote: "At the age of sixty-five I am still amused at the paradox of poetry's continuance in the present stage of civilization." Amusement is arch — amazement would be more apropos. That "phase" has only exacerbated its worst tendencies since.

Why *do* poets continue to write? Why keep playing if it's such a "mug's game"? Some, no doubt, simply fail to understand the situation. And willfull perversity is not to be discounted in others. There is a part of human nature that de lights in absurd, fruitless endeavor — the martyr impulse has tenacious roots. Nor is the poet immune to the redemptive fantasy: he sees the world transformed by the secret force of words. His longings are not confined by the small space of his operation. And when he reads the Bible, he takes special satisfaction from the phrase "the last shall be first," for in his mind there is a picture of humanity making an about-face. He sees himself with a raised baton.

But there is another, better reason why poets go on turning their lives. Useless or not, poetry is the most concentrated implementation of full consciousness possible. I say "full" consciousness. Undoubtedly the specialized concentration of the mathematician or physicist exceeds that of the poet — but uni-directionally.

The poet, in bringing the undivided strength of his being to bear upon the mysterious scrim of language, engages in the most profound general, that is, human, cognition. As Mandelstam wrote:

The spectacle of a mathematician who, without seeming to think about it, produces the square of some ten-digit number, fills us with a certain astonishment. But too often we fail to see that the poet raises a phenomenon to its tenth power, and the modest exterior often deceives us with regard to the monstrously condensed reality contained within.

Poetry, for the poet, is largely its own reward. As a dancer delights in the dance and the fisherman in the physics of his perfect cast, so the poet takes the highest pleasure in finding in himself those glowing points at which his language and his being fuse together. Something of this pleasure survives in the artifact, the poem, which is passed along as a gift to the reader. But the economy of the spirit is no different than the fiscal economy: goods must be kept in motion. The distractedness of the world is most bitter for the poet. His superb recognitions of unremarked — his gift stays wrapped on the mantle.

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Poetic composition is the most profound exercise of full human consciousness. Language and consciousness, though not identical, are co-extensive. There is no higher grade of consciousness without language, and vice-versa. The poem is the most concentrated and refined possible use of language. For once the words are freed of the burden of having to inform, and permitted to sound. Poetry is to customary usage as Sunday is to the rest of the work-week. Aside from the beautiful chatter of love between mother and child, or lover and lover, lyric poetry is the only wholly gratuitous use of language. As such it is an image of freedom.

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Materialistic in our biases, we distribute value along a hierarchy of size and palpability. We scarcely reckon what cannot be seen. An object in space is always more real than a thought in a mind, a large object more real than a small one. We have not yet caught up with the implications of our much-vaunted science, which has achieved its most dramatic effects by prying apart the invisible atom.

We are confused, too, about the differing nature of inner and outer, and we tend to transfer our habits regarding the latter to the former. A poem is small on the page — it is therefore somehow frivolous when compared to the grand objective presence of a shopping mall. A curtain of glass culled from mere sand has automatic precedence over a sonnet culled from the energy field of the psyche.

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Our's is a material age, preferring the outer scape over the inner, and favoring space over time. The poet, in the perversity of his disposition, works in language and attempts to subvert time: he arranges imperishable (because immaterial) signs into patterns. He, too, loves space, but he feels its pathos more deeply than most. And though he can do nothing to forestall change and erosion, he can excerpt and preserve certain aspects of his inner experience by making a pattern of words. His words may endure long after everything that occasioned them is gone. The poet is a self-seeking mortal like everyone else, and this is not the consolation that it is sometimes made to seem. But it is something. And the poet, like any artist, operates according to the principle that something is better than nothing.

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A poem is a construction in inner space (the concept is figurative). Language is to inner space as light is to material space: just as we can only see where there is light, so we can only grasp the inner life where there are words. Language is, as Willem Von Humboldt put it, "the organ of our inner being."

Who has not stared into the mirror and felt the distance growing between the eye and its reflection? Who has not, in the same way, stared at a word and felt the shiver of anxiety as the sign and its meaning came apart — the letters suddenly as strange as the image on the glass? Said Karl Kraus: "The closer a look we take at a word, the greater the distance from which it looks back." Language and consciousness *are* co-extensive, but we cannot

say how. We can say nothing about either without both. Archimedes offered to move the world if someone could show him a place to stand. There is no place to stand.

Here is the poet's arena, where word and world and self have their unfathomable joinery. It is not surprising that poets are half-mad.

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The poet, as the most conscientious user of language, sets himself the task of distilling from language this essence. He achieves this by freeing words from their menial tasks. By subtracting from the sign its primary designating function, he discloses what is left: the dense and subtle accretions of spirit. The word "bucket" in a poem is not the same that we find in the command: "Get me the bucket." The latter indicates a functional object. The former, contextualized in a poem, is first a specific sound-shape, and second a suggestive emblem. Sprung from its task of indicating, the word becomes a bundle of personal and communal associations.

A poem is above all else a language event. It uses language and is at the same time a lens turned upon language. Time and again while reading poetry we have the sensation that if it were possible, figuratively speaking, to turn our head quickly enough, we might catch a glimpse of our unmasked essential selves. Impossible, of course, but poetry knowingly aspires to the impossible — language becoming essence, essence becoming language. The best poetry approaches this fusion asymptotically.

Mallarme dreamed of a pure verbal music, a poetry that would strip all designatory meaning from words — a piece of whimsy. Poetry cannot but build itself up from the tension between meaning and sound. Indeed, conventional kinds of meaning — as in "What is this poem about?" — are generally pretext. They provide a rudimentary structure, a stage upon which language can perform its strip-tease, discarding its designatory veils. To the extent that we are profound, our language is profound, for we have made it. When we experience that language intimately, touching the layers of emotion behind the sign, the deepest and most ancient elements of the psyche are activated. "Meanings" and "messages" are as nothing in the face of the chthonic vibration.

The energy is in the language, not in the poem. The poem is a reactor, an optimum-efficiency system. The better the system, the more directly it makes language release its mysterious quanta.

Consider Shakespeare's Sonnet #42:

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.
In me thou see'st the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west,
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self that seals up all the rest.
In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire,
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the death-bed whereon it must expire
Consumed with that which it was nourish'd by.
This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well, which thou must leave ere long.

We cannot say that the sonnet contains any novel or complex idea. No, it is a simple conceit: I am aging, the fact that you will lose me must intensify your love. The content and our response are in no way commensurate. We can say that certain intricate figurations of sound account for part of our pleasure, and that the archetypal satisfactions of measure contribute further. But even in combination these elements cannot explain fully our reaction. There remains an elusive, floating *x* factor, and this must be sought in the precincts of language itself.

The sonnet, like any poem, is a retarding action, a brake applied to the consciousness of the reader. It slows us

down so that we may encounter language at its ideal natural gait. And it is this encounter, in attentiveness, that is profound. For it affirms the connection between our language and our inner being and shows the capacity that language has to echo the external world to us. We race through the first line and a half of the sonnet, outpacing the words, riding the wave/trough of the iambs, until, on a slight, unexpected modulation — "or none, or few" — we are brought up short. And with this checking motion we are put off balance just enough to be startled by the beauty of the common word "hang" — its open vowel, its fibrous, stem-like guttural. "Hang" suddenly discloses a depth and rightness that we had always somehow overlooked. And with this minor revelation comes a sense of intensified connection between the word and the outer world — which we feel as an inexplicable intensification of self. Shakespeare's great gift is that, having initiated this intensification, he is also able to prolong it. Line after line the language quickens us, and the feeling of connectedness sustains itself. There is no higher, or ulterior meaning, just the keen registration of experience in words delivering some proof we seem to need of a continuum between the material and immaterial.

* * *

Poets are more or less unanimous in affirming that true poetry cannot be produced by conscious craft, however skillful. Indeed, conscious craft appears to have little influence upon getting "the best words" into "the best order" (Coleridge). But if we excise the conscious or controlled elements from our account of the poetic process, what are we left with? The Muse, inspiration, the unconscious, "the ear"? Of these possibilities, the unconscious seems most useful — if nothing else, it conforms to the terminology of the psychologist. Poets, however, tend to be reluctant to locate the seat of their creativity in something called "the unconscious" — as if they were thereby robbing their art of its mystery and consigning it to the care of the empiricist. But this is a petulant gesture. To say that poetic creativity is rooted in the unconscious does not de-mystify poetry. If anything, it enlarges the mystery of the unconscious.

Poetry and the unconscious — a fan of questions slowly opens.

What is the linguistic structure of the unconscious? Or is that a contradiction in terms? If, as I asserted earlier, language and consciousness are co-extensive, where does the *unconscious* fit in?

Simple answers are not forthcoming. For one thing, we have no reliable way to think about the unconscious. We know it through its effects; we hypothesize it to account for phenomena in the psyche that are otherwise inexplicable — in the same way that astro-physicists postulate black holes. Secondly, the psyche is not some Gaul that we divide into clear territories. There is no line where the conscious mind suddenly stops and the unconscious begins, no abrupt blank space where words disintegrate. Words themselves are as motile as mercury. If their outer contours are more or less fixed, their inner substance is chaotic. As Owen Barfield wrote: "The full meanings of words are flashing, iridescent shapes like flames — ever-flickering vestiges of the slowly evolving consciousness beneath them."

It makes more sense to think of a liminal area of some kind, a "field" that is all impulse and energy at one end, and that becomes — if we imagine moving through it — increasingly organized in terms of sound and sense. All clear, conscious utterance, then, would be crystallized out of a ceaseless, fertile babble.

Finished hexameters do not march in stately procession out of the unconscious and onto the page. Most poetic composition involves the active collaboration of hinting unconscious and heeding craft. Still, there are occasional eruptions. Poets do speak of "hearing voices" and "taking dictation." We have to grant that the movement of energy out of the psyche and over the language threshold can be sudden and tremendous. It can make a poet believe that the gods are visiting. Randall Jarrell found a metaphor in the natural order: "A good poet is someone who manages, in a lifetime of standing out in thunderstorms, to be struck by lightning five or six times." The flashing bolt is, of course internal, as are the storms. Whether great or even "good" poetry depends upon these kinds of happy accidents is another question.

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But who will deny that the great days of poetry are past, or are passing? Well over half a century ago, Ezra Pound read and summarized the invisible headlines:

The age demanded an image
Of its accelerated grimace,
Something for the modern stage,
Not, at any rate, an Attic grace;

Not, not certainly, the obscure reveries
Of the inward gaze;
Better mendacities
Than the classics in paraphrase!

The "age demanded" chiefly a mold in plaster,
Made with no loss of time,
A prose kinema, not, not assuredly, alabaster
Or the "sculpture" of rhyme.
— from *Hugh Selwyn Mauberly*

The species is moving away from its immemorial ways of being. The pattern and pace of individual and generational life have been irrevocably altered. As the changes obliterate more and more of the communal memory, the poet's kind of cognition — which depends upon the saturation of language by culture, by human tradition — becomes increasingly peripheral. And even if the poet continues, his public will be winnowed. Other "kinds" of poetry will prosper, the fashionable, the agitated, the aggressively contemporary. But the poetry that comes from language, this is language looking at itself, will become one of the esoteric mysteries.

This is a complex tragedy, and the loss of the experience of poetry is only a small part of it. The less tangible aspect — both a cause and a consequence — is the erosion of the "felt" bond between language and the world it represents to us. Poetry depends upon this bond and functions to intensify it. I don't mean to suggest that there is a cable that will one day snap. No, a more appropriate image would be that of a map on which areas once explored and charted begin to blur their boundaries and lose their shape, until, one after another, they are re-marked *terra incognita*. More and more of the intricacies of private experience are falling out of the reach of natural language — and our distinction as a species is in part founded upon our ability to register these. I feel a gulf opening between outer and inner worlds — and language is less and less able to secure the connection. Useful as it is for some things, the new terminology of psychology will not be able to make up the lack.

Is this too dramatic, too pessimistic? Is it not possible that the great technological/material spurt will prove to be just that, that we will once again snap out of our distractedness and find ourselves face to face with out unknowable existence — the overwhelming *fact* of it — that the claims of the spirit will again assert themselves? If there ever were such a turn-around, it would force a movement back toward a language that comprehended the depths of the psyche's experience. Only in such a circumstance would the poet stand to recoup some of his ancient prestige. Then it would be clearer that it is by way of poetry that language secures its deeper "real" life, and that it has always been the task of the poet to make sure that there is bullion to back the currency that we pass so casually from hand to hand.

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Culture and Technology/The myth of tech gadgets and social alienation

Jordan Kraemer

As mobile communications and media devices proliferate, the nagging worry frequently goes unchallenged: Gadgets like iPods, cell phones and laptops produce an increasingly disconnected public sphere. This is a familiar critique -- last year, a fellow student expressed in the campus newspaper a similar dissatisfaction with the popularity of MP3 players. He argued that, lost in our private worlds of music, we fail to reach out and connect with one another.

Certainly, I wonder about the social impact of new technology --particularly, the contradiction between identical, impersonal mass goods that can nevertheless be personalized, which fools us into a false sense of self-determination as we tailor each assembly-line product to fit our individual needs. But the issue of the relationship between technology and society remains a stubbornly complex one, resting on a number of assumptions that ought to be considered a little more carefully.

Most broadly, technology does not simply progress in some ineluctable, linear manner according to unbiased scientific advances, as British media critic Raymond Williams demonstrated many years ago. Technology is inseparable from culture and depends on the vested interests of those with power and resources. New technological needs arise according to new social forms, frequently dependent on innovations produced for entirely different purposes. The potential social effects of new technology cannot be considered separately from other kinds of social change, such as increasing mobility.

When fearmongering about the effect of new gadgets on the social sphere, some folks assume a simple relationship between social change and technology, where the rise of cell phones and iPods inevitably leads to social alienation. But this view requires a particular understanding of a public sphere that I don't find convincing. Before any of us had an MP3 player or a cell phone, did we regularly engage in conversations with strangers in the street or on the bus? If society has become increasingly atomized, it's not because new tech gadgets absorb us into our own private worlds, but rather because a dearth of social spaces exists to meet current social needs.

When I used to commute to work before iPods and cell phones became ubiquitous, I was always careful to bring a book with me, and even if I didn't, I rarely struck up conversations with strangers. Similarly, in college in the late 1990s, I might occasionally nod to a familiar face when walking to class, but generally, the "public sphere" of walkways and lawns rarely constituted a prime site of social engagement. Getting lunch with friends, socializing in the dorms, working together in the library --those spaces better allowed for creating social connections and were more specialized than a generic "public" space, because they connected us through existing social networks. Both then and more recently, technological wonders like instant messaging and WiFi contributed to social activity, allowing students to communicate easily from across campus, or in the requisite quiet of the library.

Ultimately, I question whether mobile communications and media devices really interfere with the public sphere, or simply provide communications and media for increasingly mobile populations. If opportunities for social interaction are dwindling in modern society, we need to look at how social spaces are produced and sustained. Most communal spaces these days are either private or commercial. Communal public space does not feature prominently in modern urban spaces, and to the extent that it does, people still seek out others with whom they already have some kind of common interest or connection.

If building community is the issue, then we must consider how such social connections are created in a mobile society. Technology can and does facilitate the production of communities of common interest, disseminating information and connecting people according to existing social networks. Our sprawling, mobile, mediated mass society may invite a level of social fragmentation that undermines social capital, but laying the blame on the latest tech toys simply misses the broader picture.

February 10, 2005, *New York Times*

You There, at the Computer: Pay Attention

By KATIE HAFNER

FIRST, a confession. Since starting to write this article two hours ago, I have left my chair only once. But I have not been entirely present, either.

Each time I have encountered a thorny sentence construction or a tough transition, I have heard the siren call of distraction.

Shouldn't I fiddle with my [Netflix](#) queue, perhaps, or click on the weekend weather forecast? And there must be a friend having a birthday who would love to receive an e-card right now.

I have checked two e-mail accounts at least a dozen times each, and read eight messages. Only two were relevant to my task, but I responded right away to all of them. My sole act of self-discipline: both instant messaging accounts are turned off. For now.

This sorry litany is made only slightly less depressing when I remind myself that I have plenty of company.

Humans specialize in distraction, especially when the task at hand requires intellectual heavy lifting. All the usual "Is it lunchtime yet?" inner voices, and external interruptions like incoming phone calls, are alive and well.

But in the era of e-mail, instant messaging, Googling, e-commerce and [iTunes](#), potential distractions while seated at a computer are not only ever-present but very enticing. Distracting oneself used to consist of sharpening a half-dozen pencils or lighting a cigarette. Today, there is a universe of diversions to buy, hear, watch and forward, which makes focusing on a task all the more challenging.

"It's so hard, because of the incredible possibilities we have that we've never had before, such as the Internet," said John Ratey, an associate professor at Harvard Medical School who specializes in attention problems. Dr. Ratey said that in deference to those who live with clinically diagnosed attention deficit disorder, he calls this phenomenon pseudo-A.D.D.

A growing number of computer scientists and psychologists are studying the problem of diminished attention. And some are beginning to work on solutions.

Ben Bederson, who builds computer interfaces at the University of Maryland, said his design goal is to generate a minimum of distraction for the user. "We're trying to come up with simple ideas of how computer interfaces get in the way of being able to concentrate," said Dr. Bederson, director of the Human-Computer Interaction Lab at the university.

When scrolling up and down a document on a computer screen, for instance, he said, some software causes the page to jump. It's an invitation to distraction, in that it requires the eye to reacquaint itself with the document in order to continue reading. To help people understand the importance of avoiding these kinds of jumpy interactions, Dr. Bederson showed that smooth scrolling was not only easier on the eye, but reduced the number of mistakes people make when, say, reading a document aloud.

But some distractions don't need much of an invitation. Take e-mail, for instance.

"It's in human nature to wonder whether you've got new mail," said Alon Halevy, a professor of computer science at the University of Washington who specializes in data management systems and artificial intelligence. "I don't think anything

else is as compelling to divert attention."

Dr. Halevy and others talk about making e-mail intelligent so that it knows when to interrupt the user.

"Suppose you trusted your e-mail system enough that you're alerted to an e-mail only if it's really pertinent right now," Dr. Halevy said. "If I knew the right thing was happening with my e-mail, it wouldn't be such a distraction."

Dr. Halevy said this is a very difficult problem because it requires sophisticated natural language comprehension on the part of the software. "Completely solving the natural language problem is still decades away," he said, but "extracting useful information out of e-mail is a simpler instance that could make much faster progress."

Dr. Halevy is working on what he calls semantic e-mail, which provides some structure to the originating e-mail to make it easier for the software on the recipient's side to understand it and assign a priority.

Many people, even the experts, have devised their own stopgap solutions to the attention-span problem.

Dr. Bederson tries to read e-mail for only 15 minutes every hour. Dr. Halevy sets milestones for himself and breaks down a large task into small ones. "I say, O.K., I'll finish writing this paragraph, after which I let myself check e-mail, go browse the Web a little bit or make a cappuccino," he said. "If I insert enough resting points between the work, I'm much more motivated to go back to it."

Others might say, however, that Dr. Halevy's self-induced interruptions remove him from essential cognitive flow.

Dr. Bederson, Dr. Ratey and others often refer to the notion of flow, a concept coined by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, (pronounced CHICK-sent-me-hi-ee), professor of psychology at the Claremont Graduate University and the author of "Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience" (Perennial, 1991). Flow, in essence, is a state of deep cognitive engagement people achieve when performing an activity that demands a certain level of focus, like writing.

Mary Czerwinski, a cognitive psychologist who is a senior researcher at [Microsoft](#), is studying the effect of interruptions on such deep cognitive immersion, with Dr. Bederson. "We're thinking that if you're deeply immersed in a flow state you'll be less amenable to a distraction from an incoming notification, much less likely to even know the notification came through," she said.

In related work, other Microsoft researchers are developing software that can learn to gauge where and how a computer user is directing attention, part of what they call the Attentional User Interface project.

One piece of software in development learns to assign a level of urgency to incoming e-mail messages while shielding people from messages they can see later - based on an assessment of how busy they are.

"We can detect when users are available for communication, or when the user is in a state of flow," said Eric Horvitz, a senior Microsoft researcher who directs the project.

For Edward Serotta, as for many other people, the problem is reaching that state of flow to begin with. Mr. Serotta is the director of Centropa ([centropa.org](#)), a group based in Vienna that has created a searchable online library of Jewish family photos, linked to oral histories. Part of his job consists of writing lengthy grant proposals, an unwelcome task at best.

For the past eight years, Mr. Serotta has used a laptop computer. "That means I can take my ability to dodge serious work everywhere," he said. "I really depend on small technical distractions to keep me away from the things I dread doing."

He is currently faced with creating a five-year master plan for his institute at the request of two potential funding sources. The continual checking of his e-mail is rivaled by the micromanagement of his iTunes. "I will certainly do what

they ask, but that doesn't necessarily take precedence over figuring out whether I should list Stevie Winwood or Steve Winwood in my iTunes library," he said.

Mr. Serotta has four local weather services on his computer's desktop, all of which he watches like a hawk, even on days when he has no intention of leaving his office, which is down the hall from his apartment. "This is vitally important because one of them might be off by half a degree," he said.

When Mr. Serotta does manage to find himself in the flow of writing, the stretches of time in which he is focused are what Dr. Czerwinski calls "key cognitive flow moments." Dr. Czerwinski's research group is working to identify the signals that such a moment has ended. "It could be hitting save," she said. "Or it could be the end of a Web search."

And this, Dr. Czerwinski said, would be a good time to allow a distraction in, like an e-mail notification. "Most software doesn't take your current cognitive state into account when it lets dialogue through," Dr. Czerwinski said.

But such predictive interfaces, as they are called, do not necessarily promise a cure for distraction, even for those more disciplined than Mr. Serotta, as they can be distractions unto themselves that throw the user off intellectual course.

"It is the very nature of predictive and adaptive interfaces that the user has to look at whatever the system is proposing and make a decision about whether they want to act on it," Dr. Bederson said. As an example, Dr. Bederson cited word-completion software, like the kind often found on cellphones. "It's a trade-off because you have to look at and evaluate each suggestion from the predictive interface," he said.

Dr. Bederson is also skeptical of a predictive interface's ability to know when the best time to interrupt might be. "That's very, very hard for a computer system to guess," he said. Hitting save, for instance, might be the start of a more reflective moment. "And that's the most important time to not interrupt," he said.

Dr. Csikszentmihalyi, the flow expert, believes interruptions have their place. "I shouldn't knock distraction completely, because it can be useful," he said. "It can clear the mind and give you a needed break from a very linear kind of thinking."

He continued, "E-mail could be a kind of intermittent relief from having to think about things that are not really that enjoyable, but when it becomes a habit so you can't do without it, then it becomes the tail that wags the dog, and it's a problem."

Peter S. Hecker, a corporate lawyer in San Francisco, said that when he hears the chiming alert of new e-mail, he forces himself to continue working for 30 seconds before looking at it. Thirty seconds, mind you, not 30 minutes.

"Deep thought for a half-hour? Boy, that's hard," Mr. Hecker said. "Does anyone ever really have deep thoughts for half an hour anymore?"

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Tuned in, zoned out by Abigail Leichman

Are MP3 players making us socially retarded, asks Abigail Leichman

'Now you're in your own little universe'

When Josh Adams sees other students in this visual arts school plugged into an iPod, he figures they're being antisocial.

"I feel like they're trying to shut people out, maybe even unintentionally," says the 18-year-old.

For university student Dante Lima, it's entirely intentional. With his ear buds in place, he's never bothered by sidewalk hawkers.

"If you want to get away from them, just start listening to your iPod," says Lima, 20. "They don't approach people with headphones on."

Wearing headphones has become the modern equivalent of wearing a "Do Not Disturb" sign around one's neck.

Perhaps that's no surprise. The MP3 player is only the latest in a number of gadgets -- starting with the Sony Walkman, leading to the mobile phone and now the iPod -- that give people the ability to reject the outside world.

Shoppers chat on their mobile phones, stopping only to talk briefly to a cashier. Children watch films on the car's DVD player instead of playing numberplate bingo. Airline passengers watch movies on laptops or answer email on BlackBerrys rather than chatting with the person in the next seat.

But is tuning out the rest of the world good for us?

Jacqueline Whitmore, author of *Business Class: Etiquette Essentials for Success at Work* says: "We're living in a world where technology is a huge part of our lives, but it can be a blessing and a curse.

"Some people think this technology can make us more productive. But it's not helping us with social skills. It's alienating us from other people."

Adams, who has downloaded 2300 songs into his own iPod, admits he used the device to duck conversation in high school but these days, he says, he's plugged in less often. "Being in university promotes being more social," he says. "Now I normally listen when I'm going to school or coming home, to make the time go by. But if someone asks me something, I always answer them. I don't have it on so loud that I can't hear the people around me."

Many users of portable MP3 players say the devices help them relieve stress or, particularly at work, concentrate.

A manufacturing foreman says that even 40 years ago, many of his plant's employees listened to music during work. Some of them still prefer radios to MP3s. Younger workers' iPods keep the music from bothering others, he says, yet may be distracting to the user.

"The younger people are more wrapped up in their music rather than using it as background," he says. "We've encouraged iPods if they do want to listen to music, but they have greater concentration if they don't."

If MP3 players help you tune out noisy co-workers or help you relax while waiting for a doctor's appointment, then what's the harm in cocooning inside your own technological bubble?

The danger, says one sociologist, is that we start losing touch with the people in our lives -- even if it's just the cashier -- because we won't get off the phone or take off headphones to exchange pleasantries.

Studies show that these mini-conversations -- with the same woman at the coffee shop each morning or the guy who owns the petrol station -- are important to our psychological wellbeing.

Sociology professor at the University of Albany, Richard Lachmann, says: "If you have a regular routine and you go back to the same places, your day can be filled up with these short contacts with people you see regularly. People who don't have that are really missing something."

Evidence suggests, says Lachmann, that these interactions help us cope with the stresses of everyday life and give us a feeling of community that is "as much good as having a bunch of cousins who live nearby".

"If people lose that," Lachmann says, "it's going to become a big problem."

Still, the fuss about the iPod strikes some as much ado about nothing.

Although he admits that "we go around in a kind of fog of technological insulation," cultural historian Timothy Burke says most people in the United States already avoid making eye contact on planes, trains and, in particular, lifts.

"Before the iPod, in subways or on buses, people carried books or newspapers. Or they looked at the ground," Burke says.

"In that way, there's nothing novel about the iPod. It's just one more way of controlling the social space around you."

Bruce MacKenzie, 44, argues that iPods allow that phenomenon to be taken to extremes. Riding the ferry every day, he says: "Everybody's in their own world, with those things in their ears blocking out the sound. Often I give a greeting and there's no reaction because they don't even realise I'm sitting next to them."

MacKenzie, who works in entertainment marketing for a large company, prefers to use his own iPod to enhance already allocated "alone time" but admits he is relying more on such devices in his workplace.

He says it has become a necessity to use alternative media such as mobile phones and MP3s to reach young people with marketing.

"That's where (children) spend their time," MacKenzie says with resignation.

"Even in the golden age of television, potentially you'd interact with those around you. Now you're in your own little universe."

The Fight for Classroom Attention: Professor vs. Laptop

Some instructors ban computers or shut off Internet access, bringing complaints from students

By JEFFREY R. YOUNG

Like a growing number of college students, Michelle Mei brings her laptop to most of her classes at Bentley College, using it instead of a spiral notebook to take notes.

Well, sometimes she takes notes — if whatever the professor is going on about seems important. At other times, she uses the wireless Internet access in the college's classrooms to do some online shopping or chat using instant messenger. "If it's material that I know, most of the time I will surf the Internet a little bit," says Ms. Mei, a junior.

Professors worry that as wireless networks and laptops become ubiquitous, students will direct about as much attention to the front of the room as airline passengers do to a flight attendant reviewing safety information.

"You'll say something, and you'll see these chuckles from a couple of people," says Norman A. Garrett, a professor of computer-information systems at Eastern Illinois University's business school. And that leaves him wondering. "Is what I said funny, or are they not even in the same universe as I'm in because they're looking at the Internet?"

To keep students focused on class, some professors now ban laptops from their classrooms, arguing that the devices are just too much of a temptation. Other professors ask laptop users to sit in the front row, in part so the professors can glance down occasionally to see what is on the students' screens. And a few colleges, Bentley among them, have set up systems that let professors switch off classroom Internet access during some sessions.

Such measures come after colleges nationwide have spent millions of dollars equipping classrooms with Internet access — and most recently with wireless-Internet nodes.

Many students dislike the restrictions, arguing that people raised in the era of multitasking can balance Internet use and classroom participation. Even some professors feel that banning laptops is wrong, and that students need to learn for themselves how to juggle online and offline worlds, since students are likely to carry those same laptops into corporate environments in the future.

Of course, professors also point to moments when having laptops and Internet access has helped illustrate a crucial point in a lecture. The trick, they say, is figuring out how to manage the new technology.

Banning Laptops

An incident at the University of Memphis recently brought national attention to the practice of banning laptops.

June Entman, a law professor at the university, forbade students from bringing their computers to her civil-procedure class this spring, arguing that the devices were literally getting in the way of learning. In an e-mail message she sent to the students explaining the ban, she said that when students in the auditorium had their laptop lids open, she could not make eye contact with them.

"The wall of vertical screens keeps me from seeing many of your faces, even those of some students who are only neighbors of a laptop," she wrote. "The wall hampers the flow of discussion between me and the class and among the students. Also, by giving students a sense of anonymity, many are encouraged to feel that they are present merely to

listen in."

The law students objected. Some of them signed a petition against the policy and even filed a complaint with the American Bar Association, arguing that they were being denied an up-to-date education. Although the association dismissed the complaint, the quirky classroom battle caught the attention of the national media and bloggers.

In a statement to *The Chronicle*, Ms. Entman expressed frustration over the level of attention her move sparked, noting that many professors ban laptops. "During [the] brouhaha about the matter, I heard from law professors at Harvard, University of Pennsylvania, University of Texas, Widener, and Pace who have also banned laptops for much the same reasons. One had done so three years ago," Ms. Entman wrote. She said that newspaper accounts "blew the events all out of proportion." She declined to comment further.

Ms. Entman is hardly alone in wishing that students would stop using laptops in class, or in trying to make such a wish come true.

Douglas Haneline, a professor of English at Ferris State University, tells his students that they cannot turn on their computers or cellphones in his classes.

"It's a matter of class consideration and of not disrupting the learning environment," he says. "I want to arrange it so there are as few distractions as possible." He says he tries to use humor when explaining his ban on laptops and on cellphones: "If you're not careful, suddenly you can be a bald-headed old man standing at the front of the room pounding on the table ... railing against the modern world."

Andrew B. Aylesworth, an associate professor of marketing at Bentley, says that even though the college for years has required students to buy laptops, this academic year was the first time he saw a critical mass of students use their machines during classes.

"They claim that they're taking notes — and they may well be," he says. "But it still is annoying."

Now he frequently tells students to close their laptops, joking that the class session will be "old school."

"A couple of them have said, 'I don't have any paper,'" says Mr. Aylesworth. He had them borrow some from classmates.

Other professors argue against banning laptops, saying the quality of instruction is to blame if students are seeking distraction online. "The laptop isn't the problem," says Dan Weiss, associate director of instructional technology at Loyola Marymount University's law school, in Los Angeles. "It's teachers who refuse to engage students well enough and who don't set proper boundaries as to what is and isn't acceptable behavior in their classroom."

Internet Kill Switch

Attempting to use technology to help find a middle ground, officials at Bentley College set up an on/off switch for Internet access in each classroom. Called the "classroom network control system," it allows professors in many classrooms to choose one of five settings: turn off Internet access but allow e-mail access, turn off e-mail access but allow Internet access, disable Internet and e-mail access but allow computers to reach campus Web pages, shut off all access, or allow all access. A computer at the front of the classroom lets the professor change the settings at any time.

"Every time I give a tour, it clicks, and people say, 'Oh, my God, that's exactly what we need,'" says Phillip G. Knutel, director of academic technology, library, and research services at Bentley, who helped set up the system. "It became obvious when the Internet became more popular in the mid-90s, we had to figure out a way to rein it in."

The system has been in place for over five years for wired Internet connections in Bentley classrooms. But it was not until this fall that officials figured out how to use the system to shut off wireless as well. Doing so is trickier because

even if one professor turns off Internet access in his classroom, students might still pick up signals from nearby classrooms in which access has not been disabled.

"I had said, We will never be able to address this issue because of bleed," says Mr. Knutel. "But we've got it working. I don't know of any complaints."

Mr. Aylesworth says he appreciates having the option, which he is not shy about using. "I cut off access in the middle of class because I got so frustrated with the students at one point," he says.

On a recent afternoon, Monica J. Garfield, an assistant professor of computer-information systems, switched off Internet access in her classroom while students took the final exam — which involved using their laptops to solve problems. Students at the college are required to buy laptops, and Ms. Garfield had asked them to bring their machines to class that day.

The test was open book, but Ms. Garfield wanted to make sure students were not using Instant Messenger or other Internet tools to give each other the answers.

"It's not open partner, not open e-mail, not open IM," she told the students.

Before switching off the Internet, Ms. Garfield allowed students to get online to download the exam, which she had made available through the college's course-management system. "Go ahead and download it, and then I'm going to disconnect again," she said.

The network-control system appeared to work well, and the students sat intently working on the test. One even had an old-fashioned pen pushed behind his ear, which he occasionally used to jot notes in a paper notebook.

But just down the hall, where another computer-science class was having an exam, the system was not performing as smoothly.

Mark E. Frydenberg, a senior lecturer in computer information systems, was having trouble getting the system to allow students to get to the campus course-management system to take his computerized exam, while disabling off-campus network access. In the end, Mr. Frydenberg left all Internet access on, though students seemed to be focusing on their exams without seeking out help elsewhere on the Internet.

Students say that many professors use the system, and that it generally does work. But they would rather that Internet access be left on as much as possible.

"It shows they trust the students," says Nusrat Mahmud, a sophomore. "It's the students' responsibility" to keep up with the course material, she adds.

"I do like to have the option" of surfing the Internet in class, says Jenna Arnold, a sophomore. But she does admit that "if they turn it off, it does make more people pay attention."

Concerned About Distractions

Kenneth G. Brown, associate professor at the University of Iowa's business school, recently asked the technology staff there to install an Internet kill switch in classrooms.

"I don't want to ban laptops across the board because increasingly we have a lot of students who are using laptops to take

notes, and they seem to get some real advantage out of that," he says. But he says he is concerned about the distractions the Internet can allow.

"Even in my larger classes in lecture halls, I am very sensitive to whether people are paying attention, and I use that information for whether I speed up, slow down, or offer another example," he says.

He would ask a student reading a newspaper to put it down, he says, but he has no way of knowing whether a student with a laptop is taking notes or reading an online paper. "As more and more laptops come in," he says, "I'd like to have the ability to have the same level of control that I have over people reading the newspapers."

Even Ms. Entman, the professor at the University of Memphis who gained publicity for banning laptops, says she initially asked campus technology officials to give her some way to shut off Internet access. "Before reaching my decision to eliminate laptops entirely, I tried to get the WiFi turned off on the third floor of the law building," she wrote in explaining her policy to students. "I was unsuccessful in securing the cooperation of those on campus who control the system."

When the idea of installing a classroom network-control system came up at Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge, officials also decided against it.

"I'd say banning laptops or shutting off wireless on demand is like throwing the baby out with the bathwater," says Brian D. Voss, chief information officer at the university. "Both are draconian solutions to a problem that requires something a bit more diplomatic."

Instead, the university is encouraging professors to come up with their own policies for classroom computer use. A draft report of the university's new "Flagship IT Strategy" noted that "Students should remain able to use technology, as appropriate, to gain clarity or research class content in more depth."

"I actually think taking notes on laptops is a great idea if you're a student because you have it in a form that's so easy to work with," says E. William Wischusen, a member of a committee drafting the IT strategy and an associate professor of biological sciences at Louisiana State. "This is something we need to work through. We need to think of policies that make sense."

from *Hawaii Futures (Univ. of Hawaii, Manoa)*

***abridged BUDDHIST ENLIGHTENMENT & THE INTERNET** by David W. Chappell

An electronic Jesus graces a computer screen on the cover of Time on 16 December 1996. And Jim Dator noted in flight on 30 January 1997 that Time is using the Jesus cove to advertise its magazine with the phrase, "Our Father, Who are online...." "Across the Internet," Robert Wright tells us, "believers are reexamining their idea of faith, religion and spirituality." This reexamination, according to Wright, has the character of a "high-speed spiritual bazaar." Almost everyone, it seems, is getting in on the action--not only pagans, shamans, Gnostics and pantheists but a broad spectrum of Christians from Amish to the Roman Catholic Pope John Paul II. Robert Wright notes that an ecumenically "environmentalist ethic" crosscuts otherwise diverse Internet-based religious activity. And, "for all its seeming newness," he comments, "the marriage between technology and religiosity is an ancient one." People "have always used state-of-the-art technology to convey," Wright continues, one's "deepest thoughts."

A competing perspective on the quality of cybernetic religiosity is that of Professor David W. Chappell. He distinguishes one's ability to connect to discrete "billions of pieces of information" from the kind of "intimacy" required for "enlightenment." Moreover, for Dr. Chappell, communication on the Internet militates against (or at least, does not

provide) the kind of "solitariness" requisite for one's spiritual "renewal." David Chappell's reflections are summarized from "Bodhisattva in the Twenty-First Century," his well-attended lecture in the "Futures Discussion Group colloquium series at the Hawaii Research Center for Futures Studies, University of Hawaii, on 6 December 1996 and another presentation at Wahiawa Honpa Hongwanji Temple on 8 December 1996 at the combined service for Central Oahu to celebrate Bodhiday. Dr. Chappell teaches in the Department of Religion, University of Hawai'i at Manoa--v.k.p.

Although biologically people today are very similar to people at the time of the Buddha, modern communication devices that relay information instantaneously to us make modern society very different from that of the Buddha. Whereas in the past people around the world gradually heard the message of the Buddha mostly through the medium of small group discussion, today our lives are increasingly lived in terms of the new electronic communication devices rather than through interpersonal communication. The claim by Marshall McLuhan that the medium is the message raises the issue about how the enlightenment of the Buddha relates to the information highway and to the new social reality shaped by this modern media.

SOLITARY ENLIGHTENMENT vs. MASS MEDIA

Every October millions of people around the world enjoy watching baseball's World Series, while every December people around the world celebrate another event, the enlightenment of the Buddha. While the World Series is a mass media event watched on television by millions of people and then read about and analyzed in newspapers and on the Internet, the enlightenment of the Buddha happened alone and was reported to others for centuries only by word of mouth.

The strange thing is that in spite of all the press coverage of the '96 World Series, it is now old news--there are no more celebrations. But the achievement of enlightenment by Sakyamuni Buddha that no one knew about when it was happening, and very few understood what happened even after learning about it, is being celebrated today all around the world. Does this mean that the new multimedia trivializes its subject in contrast to interpersonal communication so that people soon lose interest, or does the media do its job so well that it saturates its topic so that people need not return to the subject again? Or is the difference based upon the content of the message in spite of the different media?

INTERNET versus INTIMACY

How did the Buddha communicate and what was his message? Certainly during the lifetime of the Buddha, the power of his personality seems to have played an important role, so that after meeting him and hearing his message, many people changed the direction of their whole lives. Since meeting the Buddha in the flesh is no longer an option, what about the message and medium used for later Buddhist followers? Although many changes have evolved in content and methods of Buddhism, two key elements have endured: the personal meeting between a teacher and student, and the practice of personal morality and meditation as a means to fully understand and embody enlightenment.

Inherent in these two elements is a quality that is notably lacking in electronic communication, namely, intimacy. Robert Aitken, who is sometimes called the "dean" of American Zen masters, has often said that a key feature of enlightenment is the increased capacity of people to be intimate with the varied phenomena of life at each moment. The interpersonal interaction between master and student emphasized in the Zen is necessary for the transmission of enlightenment "mind to mind" or "heart to heart." For Zen students, this is then tested in the dokusan encounter with their master. No electronic medium is adequate for this degree of intimacy.

Based on the unconventional wisdom of Buddhism and this face-to-face encounter, the degree of openness and intimacy needed to practice enlightenment is unusually high, and may have been one of the reasons that the scriptures reported that the Buddha after his enlightenment doubted if he had anything to say to people that they could receive and understand. However, the scriptures say that he was persuaded by the god Brahma that some people did have the capacity to hear his message and be helped. Accordingly, the Buddha began to teach others and to send out his disciples alone to do the same:

Go forth, monks, on your own way for the profit and happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the profit, gain, and happiness of gods and people. Let no two go together.

Teach, monks, the Teaching (dhamma) that is lovely in its beginning, lovely in its middle, lovely in its ending, in the spirit and in the letter, and propagate the perfectly pure holy life. There are beings whose eyes have little dust on them, who will perish if they do not hear the teaching. But if they hear the teaching, they will gain liberation.--Mahavagga of Vinaya 1.11.1

Enlightenment is no information highway available to everyone based on a common set of program commands, but is liberation from individualized confusion and attachments that requires individualized attention and guidance. Alvin Toffler sees the Internet as reflecting a new stage in civilization that facilitates an increasing range of special interests that he calls the third wave in contrast to the second wave of mass production and mass entertainment. But even though these specialized interests can be accessed by the individual hacker, they still do not respond to, reveal, and liberate the inner personal entanglements of the person at the computer. Personal motives are not challenged, personal conduct is not at stake, and interpersonal empathy with others is not an issue.

CONNECTIONS at another LEVEL

One of the startling achievements of the Internet is the new capacity to network with all kinds of diverse people around the globe. But at what level of contact? The World Series was a culmination of many years of effort, organization and training that we enjoyed vicariously, but that few of us actually practice: rather, it is a spectator sport played for mass entertainment. Since baseball is simple and slow enough that many people can understand it and enjoy watching it, even though they might not play, watching it is a safe distraction to give people some relief from the complexities of their personal lives. It is enjoyable because it is both simple and separate. Computer and video games play similar roles.

The Buddha began with a quest that is shared by us all, namely, why do we suffer and how can we be happy? According to some of the early records, his enlightenment came when he discovered (1) the attitudes and motives that made him what he was, and also (2) the attitudes and ideas that made others develop as they did. Having discovered how he and others had come to be as they are, his fears and needs fell away, and he found the peace of nirvana. This second achievement is often neglected, namely, that the Buddha discovered what motivated and affected the direction and quality not only of his own life, but also what affected and guided the lives and happiness of others. Only then did he experience a sense of relief and peace as he felt the fears and pressures of his life fall away. In summary, the Buddha was enlightened when he experienced:

1. how he came to be who he was; 2. how others came to be as they are; 3. the falling away of his compulsions, anxieties, and pain.

It is this claim to understand the plight of others, and the compassion that arose when he was able to understand their plight, that made his life and message relevant to society and was the basis of his public communication:

Monks, there is one individual who arose and came to be for the welfare of the multitudes, for the happiness of the multitudes, out of sympathy [anukampâ, Chinese min] for the world; for the benefit, welfare, and happiness of gods and humans. Who is that one individual? The Harmonious One, the Perfectly Enlightened One.

The content of enlightenment consists of understanding not only how I came to be as I now am, but also how others come to be. This journey of self-discovery and other-discovery is based on interaction between myself and others, as well as on self-reflection. Whereas the information available from the Internet may be life enhancing, the Internet as a tool does not develop the personal processes necessary for enlightenment, especially meditation and morality. Instead, in many instances it may distract us from the self-reflection and the interpersonal communication that is necessary for enlightenment.

The common ground of the Internet is based on electronic connections, whereas the common ground discovered by

enlightenment is based on a heart connection. The word "kindness" is related to the meaning of "the same kind" and for Buddhism it involves not an emotion, but an insight into our shared nature. According to the scriptures, both the Pali texts and the Lotus Sutra, after the Buddha's enlightenment, he was uncertain about what to do, at which point the Brahma gods came to him and persuaded him to begin teaching others based on his human sympathy (ai-min) for them (T 9.23b7, 23b25, 24b20, 24b28). The Internet involves a shared process, but not the affirmation of the shared human worth and caring developed in enlightenment. Many politicians use the Internet, but few would have the capacity of the Tibetan Dalai Lama to affirm that the Chinese who attack and torture them have the same worth and nature as they do.

The Internet allows us to ease our solitude by getting access to things that are compatible with our own interests. However, Buddhism considers that the achievement of enlightenment involves being able to be compatible and have empathy even with things that may seem foreign or offensive or a threat to us by seeing them as connected with and similar to ourselves. This involves not just new information, or a new perspective on things, but a new understanding of ourselves and our relationship to others at a level that touches what is beyond rational expression and manipulation.

The Internet is trying to develop to the point where we can consider its images to be "virtual reality," whereas the Buddha is trying to do the opposite, namely, to get us free and focused so that we can be in touch with the mystery and wonder of each thing rather than to construct substitutes, either mentally or electronically. The Internet as an electronic medium may give us more information about things, but may make us even more out of touch with their experienced reality than ever before.

All great religions teach the need for solitariness as the basis for our renewal. Whether we call it prayer or meditation or nembutsu does not matter. Basically it involves being alone, at a time and in a place where you can come to terms with things. Being alone, even as a result of pain or sickness, is an opportunity to re-evaluate life and priorities, and to learn how our inner processes of perception, interpretation, and reaction shape our psychological world, our attitudes, and our happiness. Tibetan Buddhism particularly emphasizes those moments when our rational thought is broken (the experience of a gap, called bardo)--such as when we sneeze, or die, or are about to fall asleep, or when we have orgasm--as important opportunities to experience reality free from our rational interpretations. Solitude and sensitivity to how we inwardly experience things is crucial to this process. This seems to be a fundamentally different focus from the solitude that is occupied with attention to information on a computer screen.

Knowing that we can connect to billions of pieces of information is a different task from letting go a false but cherished self-image, or finding together. Both encourage a larger global awareness. Both are based on the interconnectedness of life. Both have enriched culture by creating new communities among like-minded people. Both enhance information and are gender neutral. Both are pluralistic, practical, and avoid fighting over dogma.

Jeremy Rifkin, founding director of the Institute for Economic Trends and the author of the book, *The End of Work*, has said that even though all of us are being affected by the new technology and the information highway, it is the source of financial wealth for very few of us. On the contrary, many of us are being replaced by it. With government downsizing and businesses downsizing based on the efficiency of computers and robots, jobs are shrinking. But at the core of American life has not been government, nor the market economy, but volunteerism and caring for others. One half of the adult population of America (89 million) spend four hours each week on volunteer work. In this cause, computers have greatly enhanced the power of individuals and volunteer work. And in this task the Internet shares a common effort with Buddhist groups.

In turn, Buddhists have learned much from the Internet, not only about other Buddhists, but also about what is involved with saving other living beings in the environment and in other countries of the world. Moreover, the new communication media has made clear that meditation is not enough, but that there are many practical things that are required of Buddhists if they are to be helpful.

However, Buddhism also shows that the Internet has its shortcomings. The information highway can enhance social life, or it can be a tool to exploit others. Like the Internet, Buddhism encourages inner calm through its many quiet activities,

but adds that our efforts will produce suffering if we focus only on external information to the point of neglecting our inner awareness of how our minds and hearts are interpreting and using the new information. Instead, we also need to give attention to our inner processes of awareness, our inner attitudes, and our way of interpreting each event if we are to escape egotism and conflicts that are based on greed and anger.

Like the Internet, Buddhism encourages learning about others, but adds that we should also discover the transparency of each experience, the connections which constitute our common ground with others, and through this to develop compassion that takes responsibility for others. Unlike the Internet, Buddhism is not just a tool for increasing information and contact, but is also an agent for personal and interpersonal transformation and liberation. For these religious tasks of inner change, freedom, and compassion that are characteristic of Buddhism, electronic communication must be based on personal awareness and human contact. Even in the age of the Internet, the final medium for communicating Buddhist truths will remain the mind, and the ultimate connection will be made not electronically but by the heart.

Television Addiction Is No Mere Metaphor

By Robert Kubey and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi February 23, 2002, *Scientific American*

Perhaps the most ironic aspect of the struggle for survival is how easily organisms can be harmed by that which they desire. The trout is caught by the fisherman's lure, the mouse by cheese. But at least those creatures have the excuse that bait and cheese look like sustenance. Humans seldom have that consolation. The temptations that can disrupt their lives are often pure indulgences. No one has to drink alcohol, for example. Realizing when a diversion has gotten out of control is one of the great challenges of life.

Excessive cravings do not necessarily involve physical substances. Gambling can become compulsive; sex can become obsessive. One activity, however, stands out for its prominence and ubiquity--the world's most popular leisure pastime, television. Most people admit to having a love-hate relationship with it. They complain about the "boob tube" and "couch potatoes," then they settle into their sofas and grab the remote control. Parents commonly fret about their children's viewing (if not their own). Even researchers who study TV for a living marvel at the medium's hold on them personally. Percy Tannenbaum of the University of California at Berkeley has written: "Among life's more embarrassing moments have been countless occasions when I am engaged in conversation in a room while a TV set is on, and I cannot for the life of me stop from periodically glancing over to the screen. This occurs not only during dull conversations but during reasonably interesting ones just as well."

Scientists have been studying the effects of television for decades, generally focusing on whether watching violence on TV correlates with being violent in real life [see "The Effects of Observing Violence," by Leonard Berkowitz; *Scientific American*, February 1964; and "Communication and Social Environment," by George Gerbner; September 1972]. Less attention has been paid to the basic allure of the small screen--the medium, as opposed to the message.

The term "TV addiction" is imprecise and laden with value judgments, but it captures the essence of a very real phenomenon. Psychologists and psychiatrists formally define substance dependence as a disorder characterized by criteria that include spending a great deal of time using the substance; using it more often than one intends; thinking about reducing use or making repeated unsuccessful efforts to reduce use; giving up important social, family or occupational activities to use it; and reporting withdrawal symptoms when one stops using it.

All these criteria can apply to people who watch a lot of television. That does not mean that watching television, per se, is problematic. Television can teach and amuse; it can reach aesthetic heights; it can provide much needed distraction

and escape. The difficulty arises when people strongly sense that they ought not to watch as much as they do and yet find themselves strangely unable to reduce their viewing. Some knowledge of how the medium exerts its pull may help heavy viewers gain better control over their lives.

A Body at Rest Tends to Stay at Rest

The amount of time people spend watching television is astonishing. On average, individuals in the industrialized world devote three hours a day to the pursuit--fully half of their leisure time, and more than on any single activity save work and sleep. At this rate, someone who lives to 75 would spend nine years in front of the tube. To some commentators, this devotion means simply that people enjoy TV and make a conscious decision to watch it. But if that is the whole story, why do so many people experience misgivings about how much they view? In Gallup polls in 1992 and 1999, two out of five adult respondents and seven out of 10 teenagers said they spent too much time watching TV. Other surveys have consistently shown that roughly 10 percent of adults call themselves TV addicts.

To study people's reactions to TV, researchers have undertaken laboratory experiments in which they have monitored the brain waves (using an electroencephalograph, or EEG), skin resistance or heart rate of people watching television. To track behavior and emotion in the normal course of life, as opposed to the artificial conditions of the lab, we have used the Experience Sampling Method (ESM). Participants carried a beeper, and we signaled them six to eight times a day, at random, over the period of a week; whenever they heard the beep, they wrote down what they were doing and how they were feeling using a standardized scorecard.

As one might expect, people who were watching TV when we beeped them reported feeling relaxed and passive. The EEG studies similarly show less mental stimulation, as measured by alpha brain-wave production, during viewing than during reading.

What is more surprising is that the sense of relaxation ends when the set is turned off, but the feelings of passivity and lowered alertness continue. Survey participants commonly reflect that television has somehow absorbed or sucked out their energy, leaving them depleted. They say they have more difficulty concentrating after viewing than before. In contrast, they rarely indicate such difficulty after reading. After playing sports or engaging in hobbies, people report improvements in mood. After watching TV, people's moods are about the same or worse than before.

Within moments of sitting or lying down and pushing the "power" button, viewers report feeling more relaxed. Because the relaxation occurs quickly, people are conditioned to associate viewing with rest and lack of tension. The association is positively reinforced because viewers remain relaxed throughout viewing, and it is negatively reinforced via the stress and dysphoric rumination that occurs once the screen goes blank again.

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bit-forming drugs work in similar ways. A tranquilizer that leaves the body rapidly is much more likely to cause dependence than one that leaves the body slowly, precisely because the user is more aware that the drug's effects are wearing off. Similarly, viewers' vague learned sense that they will feel less relaxed if they stop viewing may be a significant factor in not turning the set off. Viewing begets more viewing.

Thus, the irony of TV: people watch a great deal longer than they plan to, even though prolonged viewing is less rewarding. In our ESM studies the longer people sat in front of the set, the less satisfaction they said they derived from it. When signaled, heavy viewers (those who consistently watch more than four hours a day) tended to report on their ESM sheets that they enjoy TV less than light viewers did (less than two hours a day). For some, a twinge of unease or guilt that they aren't doing something more productive may also accompany and depreciate the enjoyment of prolonged viewing. Researchers in Japan, the U.K. and the U.S. have found that this guilt occurs much more among middle-class viewers than among less affluent ones.

Grabbing Your Attention

What is it about TV that has such a hold on us? In part, the attraction seems to spring from our biological "orienting response." First described by Ivan Pavlov in 1927, the orienting response is our instinctive visual or auditory reaction to any sudden or novel stimulus. It is part of our evolutionary heritage, a built-in sensitivity to movement and potential predatory threats. Typical orienting reactions include dilation of the blood vessels to the brain, slowing of the heart, and constriction of blood vessels to major muscle groups. Alpha waves are blocked for a few seconds before returning to their baseline level, which is determined by the general level of mental arousal. The brain focuses its attention on gathering more information while the rest of the body quiets.

In 1986 Byron Reeves of Stanford University, Esther Thorson of the University of Missouri and their colleagues began to study whether the simple formal features of television--cuts, edits, zooms, pans, sudden noises--activate the orienting response, thereby keeping attention on the screen. By watching how brain waves were affected by formal features, the researchers concluded that these stylistic tricks can indeed trigger involuntary responses and "derive their attentional value through the evolutionary significance of detecting movement.... It is the form, not the content, of television that is unique."

The orienting response may partly explain common viewer remarks such as: "If a television is on, I just can't keep my eyes off it," "I don't want to watch as much as I do, but I can't help it," and "I feel hypnotized when I watch television." In the years since Reeves and Thorson published their pioneering work, researchers have delved deeper. Annie Lang's research team at Indiana University has shown that heart rate decreases for four to six seconds after an orienting stimulus. In ads, action sequences and music videos, formal features frequently come at a rate of one per second, thus activating the orienting response continuously.

Lang and her colleagues have also investigated whether formal features affect people's memory of what they have seen. In one of their studies, participants watched a program and then filled out a score sheet. Increasing the frequency of edits--defined here as a change from one camera angle to another in the same visual scene--improved memory recognition, presumably because it focused attention on the screen. Increasing the frequency of cuts--changes to a new visual scene--had a similar effect but only up to a point. If the number of cuts exceeded 10 in two minutes, recognition dropped off sharply.

Producers of educational television for children have found that formal features can help learning. But increasing the rate of cuts and edits eventually overloads the brain. Music videos and commercials that use rapid intercutting of unrelated scenes are designed to hold attention more than they are to convey information. People may remember the name of the product or band, but the details of the ad itself float in one ear and out the other. The orienting response is overworked. Viewers still attend to the screen, but they feel tired and worn out, with little compensating psychological reward. Our ESM findings show much the same thing.

Sometimes the memory of the product is very subtle. Many ads today are deliberately oblique: they have an engaging story line, but it is hard to tell what they are trying to sell. Afterward you may not remember the product consciously. Yet advertisers believe that if they have gotten your attention, when you later go to the store you will feel better or more comfortable with a given product because you have a vague recollection of having heard of it.

The natural attraction to television's sound and light starts very early in life. Dafna Lemish of Tel Aviv University has described babies at six to eight weeks attending to television. We have observed slightly older infants who, when lying on their backs on the floor, crane their necks around 180 degrees to catch what light through yonder window breaks. This inclination suggests how deeply rooted the orienting response is.

"TV Is Part of Them"

That said, we need to be careful about overreacting. Little evidence suggests that adults or children should stop watching TV altogether. The problems come from heavy or prolonged viewing.

The Experience Sampling Method permitted us to look closely at most every domain of everyday life: working, eating, reading, talking to friends, playing a sport, and so on. We wondered whether heavy viewers might experience life differently than light viewers do. Do they dislike being with people more? Are they more alienated from work? What we found nearly leaped off the page at us. Heavy viewers report feeling significantly more anxious and less happy than light viewers do in unstructured situations, such as doing nothing, daydreaming or waiting in line. The difference widens when the viewer is alone.

Subsequently, Robert D. McIlwraith of the University of Manitoba extensively studied those who called themselves TV addicts on surveys. On a measure called the Short Imaginal Processes Inventory (SIPI), he found that the self-described addicts are more easily bored and distracted and have poorer attentional control than the nonaddicts. The addicts said they used TV to distract themselves from unpleasant thoughts and to fill time. Other studies over the years have shown that heavy viewers are less likely to participate in community activities and sports and are more likely to be obese than moderate viewers or nonviewers.

The question that naturally arises is: In which direction does the correlation go? Do people turn to TV because of boredom and loneliness, or does TV viewing make people more susceptible to boredom and loneliness? We and most other researchers argue that the former is generally the case, but it is not a simple case of either/or. Jerome L. and Dorothy Singer of Yale University, among others, have suggested that more viewing may contribute to a shorter attention span, diminished self-restraint and less patience with the normal delays of daily life. More than 25 years ago psychologist Tannis M. MacBeth Williams of the University of British Columbia studied a mountain community that had no television until cable finally arrived. Over time, both adults and children in the town became less creative in problem solving, less able to persevere at tasks, and less tolerant of unstructured time.

To some researchers, the most convincing parallel between TV and addictive drugs is that people experience withdrawal symptoms when they cut back on viewing. Nearly 40 years ago Gary A. Steiner of the University of Chicago collected fascinating individual accounts of families whose set had broken--this back in the days when households generally had only one set: "The family walked around like a chicken without a head." "It was terrible. We did nothing--my husband and I talked." "Screamed constantly. Children bothered me, and my nerves were on edge. Tried to interest them in games, but impossible. TV is part of them."

In experiments, families have volunteered or been paid to stop viewing, typically for a week or a month. Many could not complete the period of abstinence. Some fought, verbally and physically. Anecdotal reports from some families that have tried the annual "TV turn-off" week in the U.S. tell a similar story.

If a family has been spending the lion's share of its free time watching television, reconfiguring itself around a new set of activities is no easy task. Of course, that does not mean it cannot be done or that all families implode when deprived of their set. In a review of these cold-turkey studies, Charles Winick of the City University of New York concluded: "The first three or four days for most persons were the worst, even in many homes where viewing was minimal and where there were other ongoing activities. In over half of all the households, during these first few days of loss, the regular routines were disrupted, family members had difficulties in dealing with the newly available time, anxiety and aggressions were expressed.... People living alone tended to be bored and irritated.... By the second week, a move toward adaptation to the situation was common." Unfortunately, researchers have yet to flesh out these anecdotes; no one has systematically gathered statistics on the prevalence of these withdrawal symptoms.

Even though TV does seem to meet the criteria for substance dependence, not all researchers would go so far as to call TV addictive. McIlwraith said in 1998 that "displacement of other activities by television may be socially significant but still fall short of the clinical requirement of significant impairment." He argued that a new category of "TV addiction" may not be necessary if heavy viewing stems from conditions such as depression and social phobia. Nevertheless, whether or not we formally diagnose someone as TV-dependent, millions of people sense that they cannot readily control the amount of television they watch.

Slave to the Computer Screen

Although much less research has been done on video games and computer use, the same principles often apply. The games offer escape and distraction; players quickly learn that they feel better when playing; and so a kind of reinforcement loop develops. The obvious difference from television, however, is the interactivity. Many video and computer games minutely increase in difficulty along with the increasing ability of the player. One can search for months to find another tennis or chess player of comparable ability, but programmed games can immediately provide a near-perfect match of challenge to skill. They offer the psychic pleasure--what one of us (Csikszentmihalyi) has called "flow"--that accompanies increased mastery of most any human endeavor. On the other hand, prolonged activation of the orienting response can wear players out. Kids report feeling tired, dizzy and nauseated after long sessions.

In 1997, in the most extreme medium-effects case on record, 700 Japanese children were rushed to the hospital, many suffering from "optically stimulated epileptic seizures" caused by viewing bright flashing lights in a Pokémon video game broadcast on Japanese TV. Seizures and other untoward effects of video games are significant enough that software companies and platform manufacturers now routinely include warnings in their instruction booklets. Parents have reported to us that rapid movement on the screen has caused motion sickness in their young children after just 15 minutes of play. Many youngsters, lacking self-control and experience (and often supervision), continue to play despite these symptoms.

Lang and Shyam Sundar of Pennsylvania State University have been studying how people respond to Web sites. Sundar has shown people multiple versions of the same Web page, identical except for the number of links. Users reported that more links conferred a greater sense of control and engagement. At some point, however, the number of links reached saturation, and adding more of them simply turned people off. As with video games, the ability of Web sites to hold the user's attention seems to depend less on formal features than on interactivity.

For growing numbers of people, the life they lead online may often seem more important, more immediate and more intense than the life they lead face-to-face. Maintaining control over one's media habits is more of a challenge today than it has ever been. TV sets and computers are everywhere. But the small screen and the Internet need not interfere with the quality of the rest of one's life. In its easy provision of relaxation and escape, television can be beneficial in limited doses. Yet when the habit interferes with the ability to grow, to learn new things, to lead an active life, then it does constitute a kind of dependence and should be taken seriously.

The Myth of Multitasking

Christine Rosen

Christine Rosen, "The Myth of Multitasking," *The New Atlantis*, Number 20, Spring 2008, pp. 105-110.

In one of the many letters he wrote to his son in the 1740s, Lord Chesterfield offered the following advice: "There is time enough for everything in the course of the day, if you do but one thing at once, but there is not time enough in the year, if you will do two things at a time." To Chesterfield, singular focus was not merely a practical way to structure one's time; it was a mark of intelligence. "This steady and undissipated attention to one object, is a sure mark of a superior genius; as hurry, bustle, and agitation, are the never-failing symptoms of a weak and frivolous mind."

In modern times, hurry, bustle, and agitation have become a regular way of life for many people—so much so that we have embraced a word to describe our efforts to respond to the many pressing demands on our time: *multitasking*. Used for decades to describe the parallel processing abilities of computers, multitasking is now shorthand for the human

attempt to do simultaneously as many things as possible, as quickly as possible, preferably marshalling the power of as many technologies as possible.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, one sensed a kind of exuberance about the possibilities of multitasking. Advertisements for new electronic gadgets—particularly the first generation of handheld digital devices—celebrated the notion of using technology to accomplish several things at once. The word multitasking began appearing in the “skills” sections of résumés, as office workers restyled themselves as high-tech, high-performing team players. “We have always multitasked—inability to walk and chew gum is a time-honored cause for derision—but never so intensely or self-consciously as now,” James Gleick wrote in his 1999 book [Easter](#). “We are multitasking connoisseurs—experts in crowding, pressing, packing, and overlapping distinct activities in our all-too-finite moments.” An article in the *New York Times Magazine* in 2001 asked, “Who can remember life before multitasking? These days we all do it.” The article offered advice on “How to Multitask” with suggestions about giving your brain’s “multitasking hot spot” an appropriate workout.

But more recently, challenges to the ethos of multitasking have begun to emerge. Numerous studies have shown the sometimes-fatal danger of using cell phones and other electronic devices while driving, for example, and several states have now made that particular form of multitasking illegal. In the business world, where concerns about time-management are perennial, warnings about workplace distractions spawned by a multitasking culture are on the rise. In 2005, the BBC reported on a research study, funded by Hewlett-Packard and conducted by the Institute of Psychiatry at the University of London, that found, “Workers distracted by e-mail and phone calls suffer a fall in IQ more than twice that found in marijuana smokers.” The psychologist who led the study called this new “infomania” a serious threat to workplace productivity. One of the *Harvard Business Review*’s “Breakthrough Ideas” for 2007 was Linda Stone’s notion of “continuous partial attention,” which might be understood as a subspecies of multitasking: using mobile computing power and the Internet, we are “constantly scanning for opportunities and staying on top of contacts, events, and activities in an effort to miss nothing.”

Dr. Edward Hallowell, a Massachusetts-based psychiatrist who specializes in the treatment of attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder and has written a book with the self-explanatory title [CrazyBusy](#), has been offering therapies to combat extreme multitasking for years; in his book he calls multitasking a “mythical activity in which people believe they can perform two or more tasks simultaneously.” In a 2005 article, he described a new condition, “Attention Deficit Trait,” which he claims is rampant in the business world. ADT is “purely a response to the hyperkinetic environment in which we live,” writes Hallowell, and its hallmark symptoms mimic those of ADD. “Never in history has the human brain been asked to track so many data points,” Hallowell argues, and this challenge “can be controlled only by creatively engineering one’s environment and one’s emotional and physical health.” Limiting multitasking is essential. Best-selling business advice author Timothy Ferriss also extols the virtues of “single-tasking” in his book, [The 4-Hour Workweek](#).

Multitasking might also be taking a toll on the economy. One study by researchers at the University of California at Irvine monitored interruptions among office workers; they found that workers took an average of twenty-five minutes to recover from interruptions such as phone calls or answering e-mail and return to their original task. Discussing multitasking with the *New York Times* in 2007, Jonathan B. Spira, an analyst at the business research firm Basex, estimated that extreme multitasking—information overload—costs the U.S. economy \$650 billion a year in lost productivity.

Changing Our Brains

To better understand the multitasking phenomenon, neurologists and psychologists have studied the workings of the brain. In 1999, Jordan Grafman, chief of cognitive neuroscience at the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (part of the National Institutes of Health), used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) scans to determine that when people engage in “task-switching”—that is, multitasking behavior—the flow of blood increases to a region of

the frontal cortex called Brodmann area 10. (The flow of blood to particular regions of the brain is taken as a proxy indication of activity in those regions.) “This is presumably the last part of the brain to evolve, the most mysterious and exciting part,” Grafman told the *New York Times* in 2001—adding, with a touch of hyperbole, “It’s what makes us most human.”

It is also what makes multitasking a poor long-term strategy for learning. Other studies, such as those performed by psychologist René Marois of Vanderbilt University, have used fMRI to demonstrate the brain’s response to handling multiple tasks. Marois found evidence of a “response selection bottleneck” that occurs when the brain is forced to respond to several stimuli at once. As a result, task-switching leads to time lost as the brain determines which task to perform. Psychologist David Meyer at the University of Michigan believes that rather than a bottleneck in the brain, a process of “adaptive executive control” takes place, which “schedules task processes appropriately to obey instructions about their relative priorities and serial order,” as he described to the *New Scientist*. Unlike many other researchers who study multitasking, Meyer is optimistic that, with training, the brain can learn to task-switch more effectively, and there is some evidence that certain simple tasks are amenable to such practice. But his research has also found that multitasking contributes to the release of stress hormones and adrenaline, which can cause long-term health problems if not controlled, and contributes to the loss of short-term memory.

In one recent study, Russell Poldrack, a psychology professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, found that “multitasking adversely affects how you learn. Even if you learn while multitasking, that learning is less flexible and more specialized, so you cannot retrieve the information as easily.” His research demonstrates that people use different areas of the brain for learning and storing new information when they are distracted: brain scans of people who are distracted or multitasking show activity in the striatum, a region of the brain involved in learning new skills; brain scans of people who are not distracted show activity in the hippocampus, a region involved in storing and recalling information. Discussing his research on National Public Radio recently, Poldrack warned, “We have to be aware that there is a cost to the way that our society is changing, that humans are not built to work this way. We’re really built to focus. And when we sort of force ourselves to multitask, we’re driving ourselves to perhaps be less efficient in the long run even though it sometimes feels like we’re being more efficient.”

If, as Poldrack concluded, “multitasking changes the way people learn,” what might this mean for today’s children and teens, raised with an excess of new entertainment and educational technology, and avidly multitasking at a young age? Poldrack calls this the “million-dollar question.” Media multitasking—that is, the simultaneous use of several different media, such as television, the Internet, video games, text messages, telephones, and e-mail—is clearly on the rise, as a 2006 report from the Kaiser Family Foundation showed: in 1999, only 16 percent of the time people spent using any of those media was spent on multiple media at once; by 2005, 26 percent of media time was spent multitasking. “I multitask every single second I am online,” confessed one study participant. “At this very moment I am watching TV, checking my e-mail every two minutes, reading a newsgroup about who shot JFK, burning some music to a CD, and writing this message.”

The Kaiser report noted several factors that increase the likelihood of media multitasking, including “having a computer and being able to see a television from it.” Also, “sensation-seeking” personality types are more likely to multitask, as are those living in “a highly TV-oriented household.” The picture that emerges of these pubescent multitasking mavens is of a generation of great technical facility and intelligence but of extreme impatience, unsatisfied with slowness and uncomfortable with silence: “I get bored if it’s not all going at once, because everything has gaps—waiting for a website to come up, commercials on TV, etc.” one participant said. The report concludes on a very peculiar note, perhaps intended to be optimistic: “In this media-heavy world, it is likely that brains that are more adept at media multitasking will be passed along and these changes will be naturally selected,” the report states. “After all, information is power, and if one can process more information all at once, perhaps one can be more powerful.” This is techno-social Darwinism, nature red in pixel and claw.

Other experts aren’t so sure. As neurologist Jordan Grafman told *Time* magazine: “Kids that are instant messaging while doing homework, playing games online and watching TV, I predict, aren’t going to do well in the long run.” “I think this

generation of kids is guinea pigs,” educational psychologist Jane Healy told the *San Francisco Chronicle*; she worries that they might become adults who engage in “very quick but very shallow thinking.” Or, as the novelist Walter Kirn suggests in a deft essay in *The Atlantic*, we might be headed for an “Attention-Deficit Recession.”

Paying Attention

When we talk about multitasking, we are really talking about attention: the art of paying attention, the ability to shift our attention, and, more broadly, to exercise judgment about what objects are worthy of our attention. People who have achieved great things often credit for their success a finely honed skill for paying attention. When asked about his particular genius, Isaac Newton responded that if he had made any discoveries, it was “owing more to patient attention than to any other talent.”

William James, the great psychologist, wrote at length about the varieties of human attention. In [*The Principles of Psychology*](#) (1890), he outlined the differences among “sensorial attention,” “intellectual attention,” “passive attention,” and the like, and noted the “gray chaotic indiscriminateness” of the minds of people who were incapable of paying attention. James compared our stream of thought to a river, and his observations presaged the cognitive “bottlenecks” described later by neurologists: “On the whole easy simple flowing predominates in it, the drift of things is with the pull of gravity, and effortless attention is the rule,” he wrote. “But at intervals an obstruction, a set-back, a log-jam occurs, stops the current, creates an eddy, and makes things temporarily move the other way.”

To James, steady attention was thus the default condition of a mature mind, an ordinary state undone only by perturbation. To readers a century later, that placid portrayal may seem alien—as though depicting a bygone world. Instead, today’s multitasking adult may find something more familiar in James’s description of the youthful mind: an “extreme mobility of the attention” that “makes the child seem to belong less to himself than to every object which happens to catch his notice.” For some people, James noted, this challenge is never overcome; such people only get their work done “in the interstices of their mind-wandering.” Like Chesterfield, James believed that the transition from youthful distraction to mature attention was in large part the result of personal mastery and discipline—and so was illustrative of character. “The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again,” he wrote, “is the very root of judgment, character, and will.”

Today, our collective will to pay attention seems fairly weak. We require advice books to teach us how to avoid distraction. In the not-too-distant future we may even employ new devices to help us overcome the unintended attention deficits created by today’s gadgets. As one *New York Times* article recently suggested, “Further research could help create clever technology, like sensors or smart software that workers could instruct with their preferences and priorities to serve as a high tech ‘time nanny’ to ease the modern multitasker’s plight.” Perhaps we will all accept as a matter of course a computer governor—like the devices placed on engines so that people can’t drive cars beyond a certain speed. Our technological governors might prompt us with reminders to set mental limits when we try to do too much, too quickly, all at once.

Then again, perhaps we will simply adjust and come to accept what James called “acquired inattention.” E-mails pouring in, cell phones ringing, televisions blaring, podcasts streaming—all this may become background noise, like the “din of a foundry or factory” that James observed workers could scarcely avoid at first, but which eventually became just another part of their daily routine. For the younger generation of multitaskers, the great electronic din is an expected part of everyday life. And given what neuroscience and anecdotal evidence have shown us, this state of constant intentional self-distraction could well be of profound detriment to individual and cultural well-being. When people do their work only in the “interstices of their mind-wandering,” with crumbs of attention rationed out among many competing tasks, their culture may gain in information, but it will surely weaken in wisdom.

Thought, D. H. Lawrence

Thought, I love thought.
But not the juggling and twisting of already existent ideas
I despise that self-important game.
Thought is the welling up of unknown life into consciousness,
Thought is the testing of statements on the touchstone of consciousness,
Thought is gazing onto the face of life, and reading what can be read,
Thought is pondering over experience, and coming to conclusion.
Thought is not a trick, or an exercise, or a set of dodges,
Thought is a man in his wholeness, wholly attending.

The Ch'an teachers tell a story about a man of the world who one day confronts a master, and asks him to sum up what he has learned in his life as a Buddhist monk. The master hands him a piece of paper with one word written on it: "Attention!" The worldly man now insists that he is a serious student, and implies that the master is holding back. He takes the paper back and writes, "Attention. Attention." The worldly man now appeals to the master's humanity, points out that he too has a soul, and they will both die soon; it is the master's duty to tell him what he needs to know. The master says: "You're right." Taking the paper he writes three words: "Attention! Attention! Attention!"

--Robert Bly

In Buddhism, our effort is to practice mindful-ness in each moment-- to know what is going on within and all around us. When the Buddha was asked "Sir, what do you and your monks practice?" he replied, "We sit, we walk, and we eat." The questioner continued, "But sir, everyone sits, walks, and eats," and the Buddha told him, "When we sit, we *know* we are sitting. When we walk, we *know* we are walking. When we eat, we *know* we are eating." Most of the time we are lost in the past or carried away by future projects and concerns. When we are mindful, touching deeply the present moment, we can see and listen deeply, and the fruits are always understanding, acceptance, love, and the desire to relieve suffering and bring joy.

--Thich Nhat Hanh

Witness

Denise Levertov

Sometimes the mountain
is hidden from me in veils
of cloud, sometimes
I am hidden from the mountain
in veils of inattention, apathy, fatigue,
when I forget or refuse to go
down to the shore or a few yards
up the road, on a clear day,
to reconfirm
that witnessing presence.

When I Woke

Eva Strom

when I woke in the morning my skeleton had gone soft,
my skull was the only solid thing left, it crowned
my skeleton like a hard poppy-seed head,
its mushy contents floating in their liquid
but my arms and legs and my spine had gone soft
could no longer carry me

I wondered what to do, one should be practical
my children still small as strawberry blossoms needed help,
I couldn't take one step, was stuck on the spot,
perhaps I could make wings like Leonardo da Vinci,
he didn't succeed of course, I could always try,
or wings of wax like Icaros,
he fell of course, I could be more careful,
perhaps I would pour into a plaster cradle or steel corset,
or like the adder acquire stiff elastic swaddling clothes
which wouldn't let me walk but at least I could crawl.

The thoughts whirled in my head, one shouldn't despair
I saw a neighbor washing a window in the sun,
she worked so slowly and painstakingly
it was almost like love,
and I thought: all these humdrum things are now beyond me,
spreading a sandwich, opening a door or a window.

But when night spilled over the rim of morning, a membrane broke:
Give me back ordinary things, quite ordinary, now,
give me insignificant things, the least meaningful,
let me walk to the shop and buy bread and milk,
let me pay for them to the girl who is always dreaming,
let me carry them home, let me walk on *that* road,
give me ordinary things, only ordinary things, now!

Why Log Truck Drivers Rise Earlier Than Students of Zen
Gary Snyder

In the high seat, before-dawn dark,
Polished hubs gleam
And the shiny diesel stack
Warms and flutters
Up the Tyler Road grade
To the logging on Poorman Creek.
Thirty miles of dust.

There is no other life.

Untitled, Ryokan

First day of spring-- the sky
is bright blue, the sun huge and warm.
Everything's turning green.
Carrying my monk's bowl, I walk to the village
to beg for my meal.
The children spot me at the temple gate
and happily crowd around,
dragging at my arms till I stop.
I put my bowl on a white rock,
hang my bag on a branch.
First we braid grasses and play tug-of-war,
then we take turns singing and keeping a kick-ball in the air:
I kick the ball and they sing, they kick and I sing.
Time is forgotten, the hours fly.
People passing by point at me and laugh:
"Why are you acting like a fool?"
I nod my head and don't answer.
I could say something, but why?
Do you want to know what's in my heart?
From the beginning of time: just this! just this!

Still by A. R. Ammons

I said I will find what is lowly
and put the roots of my identity
down there:
each day I'll wake up
and find the lowly nearby,
a handy focus and reminder,
a ready measure of my significance,
the voice by which I would be heard,
the wills, the kinds of selfishness
I could
freely adopt as my own:

but though I have looked everywhere,
I can find nothing
to give myself to:
everything is

magnificent with existence, is in
surfeit of glory:
nothing is diminished,
nothing has been diminished for me:

I said what is more lowly than the grass:
ah, underneath,
a ground-crust of dry-burnt moss:
I looked at it closely
and said this can be my habitat: but
nestling in I
found
below the brown exterior
green mechanisms beyond the intellect
awaiting resurrection in rain: so I got up

and ran saying there is nothing lowly in the universe:
I found a beggar:
he had stumps for legs: nobody was paying
him any attention: everybody went on by:
I nestled in and found his life:
there, love shook his body like a devastation:
I said
though I have looked everywhere
I can find nothing lowly
in the universe:
I whirled though transfigurations up and down,
transfigurations of size and shape and place:

at one sudden point came still,
stood in wonder:
moss, beggar, weed, tick, pine, self, magnificent
with being!

From *The Selected Poems: 1951-1977*, Expanded
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The Journey by Mary Oliver

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice--
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
"Mend my life!"
each voice cried.
But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do--
determined to save
the only life you could save.