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OUR OWN DEVICES

by *Joseph Clair*
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A flickering glow welcomed me to my university’s chapel service. Votive candles? If only. No, these were glowing smartphones, as thick as fireflies on a summer’s evening. It was a scene of tremendous absurdity, like a man watching TV while making love to his wife: distracted people distracting themselves during a sacred act. It struck me as oddly understandable (I even joined them to check my email during the sermon), yet also as the foretaste of some looming spiritual crisis. So much has been written lately about the **perils** of smartphone use that I’m reluctant to join the chorus. Yet I feel that many Christians—I include myself—have yet to find any healthy forms of resistance to this new cultural habit.

Attention is precious. It is that part of our soul we give to the world around us, the gateway to the self. “My experience is what I agree to attend to,” William James said; “only those items which I notice shape my mind.” What if, at the end of each day, you received a statement from the Bank of Attention updating all your recent expenditures, along with a heat map of smartphone use? Where did you leave your soul today? Did you blow your precious morning hours surfing ESPN, reading about a baseball player’s groin strain? I confess that I did.

Information dissemination has a long technological history—from papyri and codices to the printing press and digital media. But there is something new and worrisome about the capacity of smartphones to master us. Never before has so much information been so readily available and well-packaged. With push notifications, you don’t even need to go surfing. The gale of information assails you freely, carrying you where it will, shaped to your personal search and purchase history. And our devices aren’t neutral platforms for information delivery. They shape our thoughts and character and desire. As MIT’s Sherry Turkle and others have **documented**, our phones are changing the very nature of our relationships with one another. This all hit me when my wife gave me an anniversary card that read: “There is nobody else I’d rather lie in bed and look at my phone next to.”

Attention is the mind's desire. We attend to what we want, what we need, what we find interesting, attractive, and so on. Thus the problem is less about distraction than about desire. Our dwindling capacity for attention reveals our fractured worlds of desire—hyper-temporary, dazzled by light and color, summoned by restlessness rather than meaning. We have lost our ability to give our attention to the right things, in the right amount, at the right time. We don't *give* our attention at all anymore. Our phones take it from us.

I feel the urge to check mine now, even as I write. We need to rediscover our appetites for the unscreened world. We are reality-starved. I recently glimpsed reality—and rediscovered the importance of contemplation—when I encountered nature first-hand.

This fall I took my dad flyfishing on Oregon's Deschutes River—one of the most beautiful trophy trout streams and desert canyons in the world. Navigating our boat, reading the water, and casting my line across riffles and breaks focused my mind. The mysterious green current, blue sky, and expansive canyon of sage—they possessed my whole mind. I felt my soul uncoiling from the confines of those five beloved inches of touch-screen, and for a moment I was fully present. Nature has the power to gather our scattered attention by captivating us with the un-manmade.

That night I still had a trace of stillness in me and stopped to pray. I recalled the beauty of those trout and let my soul give thanks. I thought of my wife and kids and said a word of praise. I left the shimmering screen in the truck and felt still for a moment. The great French philosopher, mystic, and factory worker, Simone Weil once wrote, "The habit of attention is the substance of prayer." Prayer is attention pointed in the right direction. For Weil, however, attention is not only the substance of prayer but the essence of our relationships with others: "Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity." And for contemplatives like Weil, attention to God and neighbor is the essence of happiness.

As our phones splinter our attention and the infotainment machine shortens the time between impulse and satisfaction, we are delivered from the old agonies of patience—wherein attention and desire stretch to receive gifts that we didn't know we wanted. Weil: "We do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them but by waiting for them."

Our capacity for attention is a matter of Christian conviction and witness. In this age of distraction I want to learn what it means to embody reverential awareness of others—attunement to the world in all its glory and boredom and limitations of time and space. In a sense, this is the movement of Incarnation, of the Word made flesh. It speaks to the satisfactions I've found recently through intentional encounters with the unscreened world: in helping my neighbor load up his baby pigs; putting my phone in a tray as I come through the front door so that I remember to give my kids my whole self; observing the way the Benedictine monks on the hill near my home bow in greeting one another and the way their eyes pierce me—greeting me, the stranger, as a guest, as Christ.

All the metaphors central to Christian community—the Pauline body,

Augustine's concentric circles, Kuyper's spheres—work on the basis of attention first to what is near, slowly extending to include the wider realms of association. Indeed, on the basis of Matthew 25, ordering our attention and overcoming our addiction to distraction has everything to do with our ability to recognize Christ in one another and to learn what it means to be the body of Christ, a people formed by habits of good attention, giving and exchanging the gifts of attention in a world of distraction.

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