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Do Not Take Your Eyes Off This Review

Review by Paul Bloom
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RAPT

Attention and the Focused Life

By Winifred Gallagher

Penguin Press. 244 pp. \$25.95

Don't check your e-mail; stop Twittering, browsing, Facebooking, eating, drinking, listening to music and watching the children. Take seriously, if just for a few minutes, what Winifred Gallagher describes as the grand unifying theory of psychology: Your life is the sum of what you focus on. Then consider the main implication of this theory: The skillful management of attention is the key to happiness and fulfillment. Live the focused life.

Gallagher devotes much of this engaging book to reviewing the psychology and neuroscience of attention. A journalist and the author of several books about human psychology, including "House Thinking" (2006) and "The Power of Place" (1993), Gallagher blends the science nicely with examples of people whose disciplined attention has contributed to their success: Tiger Woods is extremely focused on golf; Mozart really grooved on music; and when Bill Clinton felt our pain, he did so with all his heart.

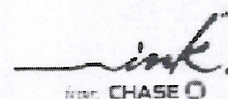
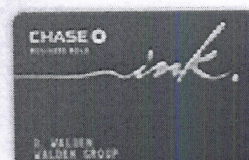
For the rest of us, the connections between attention and the good life are more complex. Happy people have the adaptive trait of focusing on the bright side of life; the depressed do not. These traits emerge early. Gallagher summarizes some elegant research from scientists at the University of Oregon showing that children differ in their capacity to control their attention: Those who are blessed with a tight grip of their mental flashlight find it easier to concentrate on the positive emotions and pull away from anger, fear and frustration. But even if your child lacks these gifts, it's not hopeless -- certain exercises can improve the focusing power of 4-, 5- and 6-year-olds, and Gallagher makes a convincing case that adults also benefit from techniques that discipline our attention, such as cognitive theory and mindfulness meditation.

Such methods might be necessary to combat the pull of technological innovations, many of which sap our capacity for sustained focus. Gallagher notes that young people in America spend over six hours a day tethered to the electronic world, many of them engaged with more than one medium at a time. Spending an hour doing just one thing -- such as reading a book or practicing a musical instrument -- may soon be the equivalent of wearing spats. This would probably be a bad thing. As Gallagher puts it, if you grow up processing information at a superficial level, "when you're finally forced to confront intellectually demanding situations in high school or college, you may find that you've traded depth of knowledge for breadth and stunted your capacity for serious thought."

Like many proponents of unified theories, though, Gallagher tries to do too much. Just about every aspect of human life can be described in the language of attention. Do you give money to charity? You are "attending to the pursuit of virtue." Are you religious? You are "directing your attention to a deeper reality." To conclude, as Gallagher does, that attention is at the root of all good things is to

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muddle cause and effect. I can focus on golf with powerfully rapt attention for every waking minute; it won't turn me into Tiger Woods.

Also, your life is actually more than the sum of all that you attend to. We can be affected -- or as psychologists say, primed -- by factors that we are unaware of. A large body of psychological research shows that social and physical environments affect thoughts at an unconscious level. People are nicer, for instance, when they are outside a bakery with the smell of fresh bread in the air or after they have just found a dime in the slot of a pay phone. In addition, our happiness is affected by what we do, not just what we think. Successful therapy for depression isn't just a matter of shifting perspectives; it's getting the sufferer to change his or her behavior. Even something as superficial as coaxing a person to smile more can have real, positive effects.

The attentional puritans are right that we usually do best with total focus. But often it's more efficient, and more fun, to do two or more things at 80 percent capacity than one thing at full capacity. I listen to music in the gym, check my e-mail while I'm on hold, and walk and chew gum at the same time. And what's so wrong with any of that? Nobody should doubt the power of rapt attention, but there are benefits to a wandering mind.

You can check your e-mail now.

Paul Bloom is a professor of psychology at Yale University and the author of "Descartes' Baby: How the Science of Child Development Explains What Makes Us Human." He is writing a book about pleasure.

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