



# [CONTINUOUS PARTIAL ATTENTION ... THE NATURE OF TECHNOLOGY AND OUR GROWING STRUGGLE WITH TIME]

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## AN INTRODUCTION TO ORDINARY TIME

Have you ever woken up in the dark of night from a dead sleep, the nagging sensation that 'I must check to see if *everything is ok*' clouding your mind and quickening your pulse, your heart racing out of nowhere as you fumble around for your phone? As your fingers struggle to remember your password, your eyes adjusting to the harsh blue screen glaring in the dark, what had seconds ago been a restful sleep suddenly turns into yet another restless night spent *wandering the online abyss* (And no, I am not referring to the dark corners of the web. I'm talking about my Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook feeds, plus the endless list of fascinating articles that scream to be read right now).

*Am I the only human being on the planet who is increasingly frustrated with this addictive pattern in their life?* It's ok to sheepishly nod, joining me in agreement – I'm the pot and the kettle calling myself black, in this situation.

While it's relevant, yet not ultimately important, to consider the larger season of sleeplessness befalling my family as we raise a 14-month little girl who is still teething, needing the comfort of Mom and Dad's presence nightly,

another nagging sensation, this one less easily shaken off, fills my mind with a vague unsettledness.

Ironically, I turn to my phone and start to read online about my struggle, finding a diverse chorus of voices swelling louder, a digital consensus of sorts emerging with a unified voice: Something is off with our increasing reliance upon, need for, and largely unchecked addiction with the technology in our hands. Something is off inside of us, more disturbingly so.

If this consensus is true, what is the underlying reality driving the nature of technology to be ever more present within our lives? And why do we continue to allow this digital struggle for our time to grow? What must be done?

A September 2014 Time magazine cover story entitled "**Never Offline**", on the development and release of the Apple Watch, a triumph in wearable technology, first sounded the alarm bells internally for me. For an article written celebrating the release of another tremendous Apple technological advance, it was noticeably somber in tone: "*We're used to technology being safely Other, but the Apple Watch wants to snuggle up and become part of your Self. This is technology, after being repeatedly repulsed, finally establishing a new beachhead. To wear a device as powerful as the Apple Watch makes you feel ever so slightly post human. This is new and slightly unnerving. When technologies get adopted as fast as we tend to adopt Apple's products, there are always unintended consequences...Nobody anticipated the way iPhones exert a constant gravitational tug on our attention...When you're carrying a smartphone, your attention is never entirely undivided.*" And now, the Apple Watch brings that gravitational tug outside of our pocket, attaching it directly to our bodies? Yikes.

Before you dismiss Grossman and Vella's concerns as alarmist, consider the following: Have I allowed this technological creep in my life? If I

am honest, the question must shift in specificity in my life, more accurately asking, how have I allowed this technological creep in my life? Again, I'm fairly certain I'm not alone in this growing struggle. Recent publications seem to agree with my confession.

The New York Times<sup>4</sup> magazine found it newsworthy recently to interview a neurologist and sleep consultant about *"How to Fall Asleep"* given the ubiquitous presence of our iPhones with us in bed each night. Fast Company<sup>5</sup> triumphed the design of a *dumb phone that only makes calls* as an escape from the distraction of endless notification pings, essentially concluding that we need a second phone to free us from the tether of our smartphones. A piece on Medium<sup>6</sup> entitled *"Why Can't We Read Anymore?"* most recently filled many of our Facebook feeds with the disconcerting realisation that we are increasingly a culture that isn't able to concentrate long enough to read entire books anymore, largely due to the habitual need for constant digital stimulation. This is but a small sampling of the flood of news that describes our digital reality – and distressing struggle with said reality – today.

Linda Stone, a longtime tech executive with Apple and Microsoft Research in the 1980's and 1990's, first coined the phrase **"continuous partial attention"** to describe "the modern predicament of being constantly attuned to everything without fully concentrating on anything." Interviewed in The Atlantic magazine in 2013, Stone's commentary on the distractive potential of smartphones in early-childhood development provides a provocative hypothesis for the reason why we continue to allow technology to usurp our time and attention.

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PREDICAMENT OF BEING  
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Linda Stone



<sup>1</sup> As with all things Banksy, the Twitter handle @therealbansky seems to be the work of an avid fan, and yet no one is actually certain – it could be the work of the graffiti artist himself. But the iPhone roots image seems to be Banksy's commentary on the modern addition to the smartphone, and mirrors his confirmed piece "Mobile Lovers" on the wall of the Bristol Youth Club.

She argues, *"We may think that kids have a natural fascination with phones. Really, children have a fascination with whatever Mom and Dad find fascinating. If they are fascinated by the flowers coming up in the yard, that's what the children are going to find fascinating. And if Mom and Dad can't put down the device with the screen, the child is going to think, 'That's where it's all at, that's where I need to be!'...Kids learn empathy in part through eye contact and gaze. If kids are learning empathy through eye contact, and our eye contact is with devices, they will miss out on empathy...What we're doing now is modelling a primary relationship with screens, and a lack of contact with people."*

If Stone is onto something (and unfortunately, I think she is), then there is a disturbingly direct link between our inability to detach from technology's presence, and the addictive behaviours and lack of focus our children inherit from imitating us. Our technological fascinations model preferences that embed themselves deep within the unformed psyches of our children, and yet we place blame upon our kids for failing to distinguish their immature fascinations from our 'acceptable' pursuit of them as adults. Who does the onus truly lie with? Perhaps the nature of fascination itself, the power to "attract the strong attention and interest of someone,"<sup>8</sup> must be practiced with our children as the recipients themselves of our continuous strong attention and interest.

At least, that's the conclusion my iPhone reached for me.

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<sup>2</sup> Fallows, James. "The Art of Staying Focused in a Distracting World." The Atlantic. June 2013 magazine issue. Accessed 26 May 2015 at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2013/06/the-art-of-paying-attention/309312/>.

<sup>3</sup> Grossman, Lev and Vella, Matt. "Never Offline." Time. Vol. 184, No. 11. September 22nd, 2014 magazine issue. Accessed 26 May 2015 at: <http://time.com/3326576/never-offline/> (Subscribers link) and <http://time.com/3318655/apple-watch-2/>.

<sup>4</sup> Wollan, Malia. "How to Fall Asleep." The New York Times Magazine. May 15th, 2015. Accessed 26 May 2015 at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/17/magazine/how-to-fall-asleep.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/17/magazine/how-to-fall-asleep.html?_r=0).

<sup>5</sup> Peters, Adele. "Leave Your Smart Phone at Home with this Screenless Device that Only Does Phone Calls." Fast Company. May 22nd, 2015. Accessed 26 May 2015 at <http://www.fastcoexist.com/3046373/leave-your-smartphone-addiction-at-home-with-this-screenless-device-that-only-receives-calls>.

<sup>6</sup> McGuire, Hugh. "Why Can't We Read Anymore?" Medium. April 22nd, 2015. Accessed 26 May 2015 at: <https://medium.com/@hughmcguire/why-can-t-we-read-anymore-503c38c131fe>.

<sup>7</sup> IBID Peters, A.

<sup>8</sup> Definition of 'fascinate' taken from the my 2010 Apple MacBook Pro dictionary. Accessed 26 May 2015.

\* Some of the graphic art was supplied by freepik.com



## IGNATIAN CONTEMPLATION

### 1. THE POWER OF IMAGINATION TO MAKE THE TEXT COME ALIVE:

Ex: Finding Neverland: Similarities/Differences in approaching the Scriptures

### 2. EXPERIENCING VS. STUDYING THE WORD

- John 5:39-40: "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life."
- Question: Does our study of the Scriptures prevent us (at times) from experiencing the God of the Scriptures? Meaning, is there a difference between reading/examining words, and meeting the God of the words?

### 3. PERSPECTIVES ON ENCOUNTERING GOD IN HIS WORD

- "We do not understand that once God's word has rung out in the midst of the world, in the fullness of time, it is so powerful that it applies to everyone, all with equal directness; no one is disadvantaged by distance in space or time.

To be sure, Jesus addresses a particular Samaritan woman at the well, but, at the same time, in her, he also addresses every sinner, woman or man.

When Jesus sits, tired, at the well's edge, it is not for this one person alone. Therefore it is not a mere "pious exercise" when, in spirit, I put myself beside this woman and enter into her role. Not only may I play this part: I must play it, for I have long been involved in this dialogue without being consulted. I am this dried-up soul, running after the earthly water every day because it has lost its grasp of the heavenly water it is really seeking.

So it is not at all enough to see the dialogues and encounters presented in the gospels as mere "examples," like the instances of valor in a heroic tale, which a boy reads and feels inspired to emulate. For the Word became flesh at that particular point in order to speak to us, on whatever particular occasion he addresses us, he is concerned with every particular, unique occasion; in addressing this repentant sinner he addresses every sinner; in speaking to this woman listening at his feet he is speaking to every listener. Since it is God who is speaking, there can be no historical distance from his word; hence too our attitude cannot be merely historical. Instead, there is that utter directness which confronted those who met him on the roads of Palestine: "Follow me!," "Go and sin no more!," "Peace be with you!"...

Moreover, it is futile to leaf through the writings of the Old and New Covenants in the hope of coming across truths of one kind or another, unless we are prepared to be exposed to a direct encounter with him, with this personal, utterly free Word which makes sovereign claims upon us." (Prayer, by Hans Urs von Balthasar, pp. 16-19)

- "We can descend with the mind into the heart most easily through the imagination. In this regard the great Scottish preacher Alexander Whyte speaks of 'the divine offices and the splendid services of the Christian imagination.' Perhaps some rare individuals experience God through abstract contemplation alone, but most of us need to be more deeply rooted in

the senses. We must not despise this simpler, more humble route into God's presence. Jesus himself taught in this manner, making constant appeal to the imagination, and many of the devotional masters likewise encourage us in this way. St. Teresa of Avila says, 'As I could not make reflection with my understanding I contrived to picture Christ within me.' Many of us can identify with her words, for we too have tried a merely cerebral approach and found it too abstract, too detached...

Some of us have objected to using the imagination out of concern that it is untrustworthy and could even be used by the Evil One. There is good reason for concern, for the imagination, like all our faculties, has participated in the Fall. But just as we can believe that God can take our reason (fallen as it is) and sanctify it and use it for his good purposes, so we believe he can sanctify the imagination and use it for his good purposes. Of course, the imagination can be distorted by Satan, but then so can all our faculties. God created us with an imagination, and as Lord of his creation he can and does redeem it and use it for the work of the kingdom of God....

It is so vitally important for us to be thrown in utter dependence upon God in these matters. We are seeking to think God's thoughts after him, to delight in his presence, to desire his truth and his way...To believe that God can sanctify and utilize the imagination is simply to take seriously the Christian idea of incarnation. (Celebration of Discipline, by Richard Foster, pp.29-30).

#### 4. IGNATIAN CONTEMPLATION

- Principle and Foundation: Using a Sanctified Imagination
- **The Process:**
  - i. Quiet yourself in the conscious awareness of God's loving presence.
  - ii. Read the selected gospel text, first noticing all the details.
  - iii. Ask the Lord for what you desire from this time of contemplation.
  - iv. Compose or place yourself in the scene.
  - v. Enter into the event:
    - Application of the senses (Hear, Smell, Touch, Taste, See)
    - Play the role of one of the characters
    - Be an observer on the scene
    - Be a companion one of the persons in the story
  - vi. Keep yourself engaged in the action listening for God's **rhema** (personal word) for you.
  - vii. Respond from your heart to the Lord on the basis of your contemplation.

#### 5. AN EXPERIENCE IN IMAGINING THE TEXT:

Pick a text of Scripture to practice!

