

“Distracted”

Maggie Jackson

Kindle notes by Dave Kraft

Technology has made distraction ubiquitous.

The waning of our powers of attention is occurring at such a rate and in so many areas of life, that the erosion is reaching critical mass. We are on the verge of losing our capacity as a society for deep, sustained focus.

Nearly a third of workers feel they often do not have time to reflect on or process the work they do. More than half typically have to juggle too many tasks simultaneously and/or are so often interrupted that they find it difficult to get work done.

One yearlong study found that workers not only switch tasks every three minutes during their workday but that nearly half the time they interrupt themselves.

Amid a plethora of high-tech connectivity, one-quarter of Americans say they have no close confidante, more than double the number twenty years ago.

Today, our virtual, split-screen, and nomadic era is eroding opportunities for deep focus, awareness, and reflection.

The physical and virtual worlds are always with us, singing a siren song of connection, distraction, and options. We rarely are completely present in one moment or for one another.

To cope and to keep up with our pulsing personal orbits, we live in worlds of our own making, grazing from separate menus, plugged into our own bedroom-based media centers, adhering to customized schedules.

"Training can help overcome some of the inefficiencies by giving you more optimal strategies for multi-tasking," says Meyer, "but except in rare circumstances, you can train until you're blue in the face and you'd never be as good as if you just focused on one thing at a time. Period. That's the bottom line."

"It is difficult to know whether an e-mail message is worth interrupting your work for unless you open and read it-at which point you have, of course, interrupted yourself," notes science writer Clive Thompson.

In total, interruptions take up 2.1 hours of an average knowledge worker's day and cost the US economy \$588 billion a year, one research firm estimated.

To Mark's surprise, she and other researchers discovered that nearly 45 percent of workplace interruptions are self-initiated. (And when workers interrupt themselves, they take slightly longer to resume their original work-about twenty-eight minutes on average.) In other words, we are not only naturally catering to the "needy toddler" of a high-tech environment, but we are training ourselves to flit from task to task.

To value a split-focus life augmented by the machine is above all to squeeze out potential time and space for reflection, which is the real sword in the stone needed to thrive in a complex, ever-shifting new world.

By the end of his career, he had come full circle from his early concerns about how fast workers could do piecework to worrying that the education system placed too high a premium on speed and not enough on reflection-Arthur Jersild-Multitasking researcher

Nearly ½ of Americans say they eat most meals away from home or on the go. Forty percent of our food budgets are spent eating out, compared with a quarter in 1990.

The average number of miles that Americans drive annually has increased 80 percent in the past twenty years.

Long weeks in a single community are unusual; a full day within a single neighborhood is becoming rare,

It's not so much moving for a job or a love or an ideal that stirs us anymore. It's moving for movement's sake. "Mobility climbs to the rank of the uppermost among coveted values," observes Bauman. The bootless chase continues. What's around the corner?

We are a country on the go and we don't have time to linger over our food.

In 1970, Americans spent \$6 billion on fast food. By 2000, we were spending \$110 billion annually-more than we spend on higher education, personal computers and software, new cars, movies, and most media.

The number of commuters traveling more than sixty minutes each way to work grew nearly 50 percent to 8 percent between 1990 and 2000.

A culture of constant movement, in part fueled by a love of instant gratification, cannot bear the mystery and unpredictability inherent in the idea of pause.

Nearly 57 percent of Americans don't read a single book a year.

Do we want to build a culture that relies predominantly on skimming? To drift steadily on and on, distracted, across texts, is as much like deep reading, as stockpiling information is akin to acquiring knowledge.

In a distracted time, our virtual, split-screen, and nomadic lives nurture diffusion,

Recall that the thorny skill of selection was the foremost mandate of modern history's greatest collectors. Embracing and rejecting, sifting and culling -that is what we as "re-collectors" were born to do. Amassing towering alternate universes of saved experience marks the abdication of our own splendid, multifaceted powers of remembering-and forgetting. To ensure a future for our past and exploit the disorder of our day, we must be able to think for ourselves. Will we?

Self-control is a complex and fascinating concept that is central to fostering the reflective thinking skills and deep engagement in learning that are so needed, individually and collectively, in the digital age.

Without self-control, we can have the strongest of motivations and set the highest of goals, yet we will invariably get sidetracked in pursuing our aims by the distractions, temptations, and obstacles of life-from channel surfing and chocolate cake to problems so tricky that we give up doing our best.

"Underachievement among American youth is often blamed on inadequate teachers, boring textbooks and large class sizes. We suggest another reason for students falling short of their intellectual potential: their failure to exercise self-discipline.

But what puts the power in willpower? Attentional control is the driver behind willpower and the means of successfully resisting gratification.

Perhaps attention is the true missing key to better learning. Without the powers of focus, awareness, and judgment that fuel self-control, we cannot fend off distractions, set goals, manage a complex, changing environment, and ultimately shape the trajectory of our lives. In a culture of distraction, could the erosion of our skills of attention be linked to some of the alarming ills weakening our higher education system?

Could a culture of distraction be hindering our eternal human struggle to shape our fates?

In attention, we find the powers of selection and focus we so badly need in order to carve knowledge from the vast, shifting, and ebbing oceans of information that surround us. From attention, we glean the will and the tenacity to create lives of meaning and cultures marked by reason and vision. In cultivating distraction, we cannot perceptively look back or see ahead; we are defeated in the battle to shape our future.

He's someone who more often sees distant possibilities than at-hand impediments

Attention is becoming a casualty of our newly virtual, split-screen, and nomadic world.

But as William James observed in *The Principles of Psychology*, "The art of being wise is the art of knowing what to overlook." Wisdom is not fed upon a diet of distraction.