

“Your Attention, Please . . .”

Focusing on one thing, one person at a time, can transform each moment by awakening to life.

by David Servan-Schreiber

Ben has been talking on the phone to his sister for the last few minutes. There's a short break in the conversation; since he's at the computer, he can't miss the chance to have a quick look at his emails. When he finally hangs up, he has a vague feeling of dissatisfaction. He realizes he hasn't really listened to his sister, nor has he properly read his messages. What's going on?

The Chicago psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who defines optimal performance as “flow” in his book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, has done some remarkable research. Over a number of years, he randomly interrupted the day-to-day routines of several hundred people. He asked them what they were doing, thinking and feeling at those moments. His major discovery was that when our attention is not absorbed by some external activity, we almost all turn spontaneously to black thoughts. As a result, we try to keep our minds “occupied.” So we read our emails while chatting on the telephone; we watch TV while we're eating; we listen to the radio while we're bathing the kids, and so on.

The same research also revealed, however, that we only experience pleasure – real pleasure – when our attention is entirely engaged by one thing: having a conversation, preparing a meal, watching a gripping film; only, that is, when we're not dividing our attention between tasks. Our attention is pure energy. It transforms whatever it comes into contact with. Animals and children know this far better than we do. Over and above food, warmth or money, it's attention they're really looking for when they come to us. And they bask in our attention as though it's sunshine. Adults are the same way when they're passionately in love: nothing can beat gazing endlessly into the loved one's eyes.

The ultimate proof that our attention is valuable is all the money spent on attracting us by advertisers and TV channels: “Look at me! No, look at me!” they scream. Yet we are never sufficiently conscious of the rich resource we have. With the power of our attention alone, we can transform each moment, each relationship, in the same way alchemists tried to turn lead into gold.

The greatest therapists, those who could achieve the most profound transformations, had an extraordinary capacity for focusing intently on the patient. They were able to concentrate entirely on what the person was saying, to the exclusion of all other thoughts. This was true of Sigmund Freud, Carl Rogers, Milton Erickson, Françoise Dolto. People often said of them that they had a look “so intense, it was as if their eyes could see straight through me.” Even without that particular talent, we too can choose to invest this precious resource entirely in the moment, in one single thing, in one person at a time. And we can begin by not scanning our emails while we're talking on the phone.

Excerpted from an article by David Servan-Schreiber in Ode Magazine, March 2010.