

Every moment of every day our senses are literally battered with information coming at us from all sides, and all around, and even from within our own selves, and yet the human mind is (typically) able to limit what's noticed, what we pay attention to, so we can function, and not be overwhelmed by the unrelenting "noise" of the world. Our capacity to pay attention has us notice what we need to/choose to, and largely ignore the rest. But, in this noisy, information-rich, highly technological age we're living in, it's getting really hard to know what we need to pay attention to, or should choose to pay attention to, and we're likely not as in control of our attention as we'd like to believe.

91% of us now have smart phones, and 24/7 access to the internet, and so our attention has become something of a valuable commodity, a precious, limited resource from which others extract massive profit, our attention as a commodity, is now a resource for profiteers in tech to fight for, to buy, sell, and trade, whether we're aware of it or not, whether we've agreed to it, or not.

The so-called "attention economy" is very big business. Globally, human attention, as 'harvested' by internet sites and platforms and social media, is thought to be worth about \$600 billion dollars a year.¹ It's estimated this country alone accounts for about a half of that, given the time we all spend online: the average American spends about 7 hours a day now online,² that's a lot of time and attention.

Our attention is skillfully and highly intentionally grabbed, hooked, and manipulated by the online content we engage with, brain science is

¹ see: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/curtsteinhorst/2024/02/06/lost-in-the-scroll-the-hidden-impact-of-the-attention-economy/> and here: <https://medium.com/@fatih.akkaya/the-attention-economy-how-your-focus-became-a-commodity-1cba72616322> as examples of the estimated value of the 'Attention Economy'

² see: <https://backlinko.com/screen-time-statistics> as one source for this statistic

exploited to keep us engaged, to ‘reward’ us with bursts of dopamine as we scroll, game, click, post, bounce around in digital space where there’s always new content to engage with.

Paying active attention, being entirely engaged by a task, so easy to do with a smart phone in-hand, is what my youngest calls “locking in,” it’s when the thing we’re doing is so all-consuming the rest of the world, and all that is in it, just falls away. Limiting our attention like this gives us awesome focus, it’s really good for getting things done; we can be super productive in this state and it can feel deeply satisfying.

But human attention isn’t just a tool for getting things done, attention has another equally powerful and very important role to play in life, and that’s to keep us connected to the fullness of it all,³ the stuff outside and beyond our tasks and our doings, and we do that by opening up our attention, spending time not being focused, being curiously receptive perhaps, allowing our mind to be free to ‘wander,’ maybe even exploring boredom (something that’s far less common now, in this internet age).

Constant engagement with stuff, keeping our attention always ‘locked in,’ can, if we’re not careful, become a serious and problematic distraction, a distraction from the truth of being, our reason for being, a distraction from our true purpose in this life.

I was hoping for quite a bit of open, unfocused attention during my time away, and I was not prepared for how hard it would actually be to disengage, to set down my tech: to stop tracking the news, stop checking my feed. To not be engaged, with something, anything, for any

³ see Lucy Jones, *Losing Eden* (Pantheon Books, NY: 2021), 68, 101 where she references ART: Attention Restoration Therapy

length of time. I caught myself really missing the dopamine hit of scrolling and clicking through. This time away has shown me just how distracted I had become, without even noticing it happen.

There's always new and important stuff to engage with, right? Stuff going on in the world, stuff to hold my attention. I've got ideas to have, sermons to write ... without realizing it, I'd started to believe using my attention this way, staying busy, staying engaged, staying focused, over-using my attention this way, I'd started to believe it was entirely justified, that it was purposeful, and, in many ways, necessary.

There is and always will be stuff to be done, things to engage with - and the role and ubiquitous presence of tech in our lives is making it increasingly hard to un-focus our attention for any length of time, at least, it certainly is for me.

And so, for me, this week, the Mary and Martha story couldn't be more timely. Martha is 'locked in' to task, focused on what needs to be done, her attention focused and limited to the stuff she's engaged with. And Mary, she's parked up in front of Jesus, 'doing' nothing, her attention open, she listens, fully present to Jesus and to the moment.

This story contrasts task with presence, productivity with receptivity, attention with attentiveness. For me this an illustration, through story, of how easily the stuff we engage with in life, must engage with in life, how easily all that stuff can distract us, if we're not careful, can have us forget the true meaning and purpose of life. I read this Gospel episode as a teaching about the importance of Sabbath.

What is it we live for, how do we define the purpose, the point of our existence? By what we do, what we accomplish or achieve? Or by the

way in which we live our lives as an ongoing response to the guiding presence of our living God.

When we're "locked in," when our attention is grasped/focused, we shut out everything else. Sabbath is a mandate to open up, to guard against our lives being distorted/manipulated by the unrelenting pressures of a demanding, life-draining culture. Pressures which have always been present, but in this new era of sophisticated tech, these pressures are now in a whole new league.

Sabbath is the way we remember our place in the awesome and magnificent beauty of the whole, that it is in God that we live, move and have our being. The Sabbath mandate is the setting aside of time to allow our attention to be free of task and busy-ness, so we might be attentive to the presence of God right before us, all around us.

Cultivating a discipline around Sabbath, changes our awareness, creates spaciousness in our attention, time and space for us to listen deeply to all the ways in which the Christ is always speaking. Sabbath is the time we set aside to stop, and to listen, to be fully present before God.

Our fast-paced, profit-driven, unjust, and highly exploitative world can entirely misunderstand Sabbath rest as being about recovery, rest and recovery, so we can recharge, and then get back to it, more productive and more effective for the time away. That's vacation, not Sabbath.

Sabbath is for remembering who and what and why we are, what it is we live for, why we do what we do, why we have the tasks we have, why we engage with the stuff we give our attention to. Sabbath is our time to set down task and focus, and reconnect with the Source of All, our reason for being, and our ultimate purpose.

What we pay attention to becomes our reality.

Resting our attention, Sabbath rest, is essential as we wrestle with figuring out what we should or must pay attention to, and what we should or must ignore. Choosing to be fully present to God is, as Jesus says, the best part and will never be taken away. The discipline of Sabbath, stopping our busyness, setting aside our tasks, is also an act of resistance in a world that would willingly take/claim/steal even our attention, and we must resist so we can remember, so we can stay attentive to our true reasons for being, the truth of our being, the work, the stuff we're actually called to engage with and pay attention to. God is always present, always 'speaking,' teaching, guiding – Sabbath is our mandate to stop and to listen.