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“Your Cell Will Teach You Everything”

Old Wisdom, Modern Science, and the Art of Attention

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A brother came to Scetis to visit Abba Moses and asked him “Father, give me a word.” The old man said to him “Go, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything.”¹ Among the Desert Fathers, Christian monks of the fourth and fifth centuries, it was customary for a novice to go to an elder and ask for “a word,” a word of advice, of counsel, a word to take home and reflect on. What does this word of advice say to us today?

A MULTITASKING WORLD

“Your cell will teach you everything.” To my students, this seems like very strange advice indeed. “Your cell?” When I quoted Abba Moses to a colleague he instinctively reached for his phone. But a monk’s cell? Isn’t a monk’s cell empty, isolated? What can that cell possibly have to teach? And how? The lives of the young men and women I teach are the very antithesis of sitting in a cell. Their attention is fragmented, divided by an array of modern technologies. I watch them walk by my office window, iPod plugged into the ears, cell phone or Blackberry in hand as they check e-mail or send a text message. Time in their rooms is characterized by one eye on the television and another on the computer, on which are open their theology paper, an instant messaging box or two connecting them to friends, their Facebook page, in case one of their friends should post a status update, and perhaps a Twitter feed or their favorite blog. They assure me that they have grown up multitasking. Young Americans spend an average of six hours a day using nonprint media, and at least a quarter of that time they are using more than one screen, device, or channel.² They are connected, linked in, logged on.

It is not just the student who multitasks while doing homework. The average office worker is interrupted roughly every three minutes during the workday, interruptions that the worker herself often initiates.³ These include the phone, e-mail,

checking websites. As more jobs move to the knowledge and service sectors, more of us find the temptation to multitask at work irresistible.

But what effect does all this multitasking have on the person? We're not getting more done, for one thing. Several recent studies have shown that, contrary to self-perception, people really can't multitask. The brain cannot concentrate on several things simultaneously. Instead it switches focus from task to task the same way a computer does. This means that all tasks are slowed down somewhat by the switching process, and the attempt to coordinate too many tasks can lead to more time being devoted to the switching than to the tasks at hand, a phenomenon computer scientists have long been aware of, known as "thrashing." Earl Miller, a neuroscientist at MIT, notes: "Think about writing an e-mail and talking on the phone at the same time. You cannot focus on one while doing the other. That's because of interference between the two tasks."⁴ Miller notes that in an MRI you can actually see the brain struggling as it shifts rapidly from one to the other.

One can see that this might have a deleterious effect on one's work life. Research shows that, once interrupted by an e-mail or a phone call, the average worker can take up to half an hour to return to full concentration on the task at hand.⁵ But why does this matter for the spiritual life? Over time, multitasking erodes our ability to pay focused, close attention, and this eventually eats away at traits such as patience, tenacity, judgment, and problem solving. This is most evident in the latter. In a test of fifteen-year-olds, the United States ranks twenty-fourth out of the twenty-nine developed countries in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development on problem solving skills, with nearly 60 percent of them scoring below the most basic level of using a single source to solve a problem.⁶ But studies show problems with the other traits as well. Young people today are far less likely to delay gratification, to show persistence in a difficult task, or to engage in deep reflection.

Your cell will teach you everything. Sitting in one's cell means, first, not multitasking, getting away from stimuli that compete for our attention, learning to focus.

WHAT WE ATTEND TO MATTERS

Some of my students would note that they are at times extremely focused. I teach computer science; I see the utmost focus and concentration among my students when I observe them playing video games. This raises the questions, Does it matter what we focus on? Could the modern equivalent of the monk's cell be in cyberspace? Don't video games teach patience, persistence, and problem solving? Well, they do. Unfortunately, that is not all they teach.

Video games offer the opportunity for endless repetition of a task. However, the tasks repeated most frequently by video game players are violent ones. In a study of a random sample of video games rated T (for "teen") by the Entertainment Software Rating Board, 98 percent included violence, with an average of 122 deaths per hour of game play, and 69 percent either rewarded a player for killing or required a player to kill.⁷ These first-person shooter games improve marksmanship, which is why they are used by the US military for training. But most are used by teens. Attorney

Michael Breen, representing families of three students killed in a school shooting in Paducah, Kentucky, noted their efficacy: "[The shooter] clipped off nine shots in about a 10-second period. Eight of those shots were hits. Three were head and neck shots and were kills. That is way beyond the military standard for expert marksmanship. This was a kid who had never fired a pistol in his life, but because of his obsession with computer games had turned himself into an expert marksman."⁸

Most video game players do not become school shooters. But neuroscientists note that they are still being formed by their practice. Klaus Mathiak at the University of Aachen used MRI technology to study the brains of thirteen men who played violent video games for an average of two hours a day. He found that during the fights in the video game the emotional centers of the brain associated with aggression, the amygdala and parts of the anterior cingulate cortex, became more active. This pattern is associated with aggression and with the suppression of positive social emotions such as empathy. Mathiak believes that playing violent video games over time strengthens these patterns in the brain. He writes: "Contrary to what the industry says, it appears to be more than just a game."⁹ As educational psychologist Jane Healy puts it, "habits of the mind become structures of the brain."¹⁰ Immersion in cyberspace sets up a cybernetic loop between the human and the machine, a loop that allows each to be changed by the other. The player plays the game and the game plays the player. The rewards system in video games also triggers the release of dopamine. Dopamine triggers both learning and satisfaction.¹¹ This, of course, may underlie the addictive potentialities of these games, which seem to affect roughly 10 percent of players.

Your cell will teach you everything. Sitting in one's cell is not simply a matter of doing one thing. It also matters what you do. Or don't do.

A SCHOOL FOR COMPASSION

So what's a simple monk to do in his cell? One criticism often leveled against the monastic or eremitical life is that it is a life cut off from other people. Fully two thirds of what my busily multitasking students are doing is connecting with friends and family. Facebook, MySpace, instant messaging, text messaging, cell phone calls—these are all about being with others, are they not? Then why is it that one quarter of Americans report having no close confidante, a number that has doubled in the last twenty years?¹²

The ability to attend is crucial in being with one another. Buddhist scholar Alan Wallace notes: "When we give another person our attention, we've given away that portion of our life. We don't get it back. We're giving our attention to what seems worthy of our life from moment to moment. Attention, the cultivation of attention, is absolutely core" to being with one another. Jesus calls it the greatest love to give up one's life for one's friends. While we think of that in literal terms, Wallace points to the fact that in giving our full attention to someone we do give a part of our life.¹³

A recent study by neuroscientists at the University of Wisconsin has shown that meditative practices, including focusing one's attention, meditation on the fleeting nature of the self, shifting perspective to that of another, or a focus on thoughts of

loving-kindness can increase one's capacity for compassion. Brain scans of Tibetan Buddhist meditators, who were exposed to a variety of human emotional sounds while meditating—sounds such as laughter, crying, humming—showed something quite different from the scans of the video game players. Completely different parts of the brain showed activity. For the meditators, the most active part of the brain was the insula, a portion that plays a key role in detecting emotion and in regulating bodily responses to emotion such as heart rate and blood pressure. Activity also increased in the temporal parietal juncture, particularly in the right hemisphere, an area important for feeling empathy and sharing. Activity levels were significantly higher in those with a long meditative practice, as opposed to those with little or no meditation experience.¹⁴ This reinforces the notion that what we habitually do strengthens a particular portion of the brain. Just as video game players strengthen that part of the brain that inhibits empathy, meditators strengthen the part that promotes empathy. What we do matters. We are formed, not just mentally, but physically, by the activities we focus on. Thus modern neuroscience gives the lie to the idea that sitting in one's cell is a basically antisocial activity. What could be more social, and more important in a world of broken relationships, than cultivating loving-kindness, cultivating compassion?

Sit in your cell and your cell will teach you everything. Few of us live the monastic life. We spend our days in a world of work filled with technologies that vie for our attention. And we return at the end of those days, not to a cell, but to an equally busy home and family. Yet the wisdom of Abba Moses matches that of modern neuroscience. It suggests that we find time for stillness, time away from our technologies in which we can learn to focus our attention. It also suggests that we take care what we focus on, for we are thereby building the circuitry in our own brains. And finally, it invites us to reassess our approach to being with one another. The cell phone, instant message, or Facebook page may not be best. The more we learn to be quiet and focused, the more we will truly be able, in the words of Jesus, "to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13).

NOTES

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3. *Ibid.*, 17.

4. John Hamilton, "Think You're Multitasking? Think Again," *Morning Edition*, National Public Radio (2 October 2008); transcript at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=95256794>.

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