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# Attention to Attention, Part II: Attention and Rhythm

— Holly Koteen-Soulé

## Introduction

*The first part of this article was presented in Gateways 75. Concerning phenomena were described to demonstrate how distractibility is replacing our willed capacity to focus attention. Fast-paced, multi-tasking lifestyles disrupt opportunity to sustain thinking, feeling, and willing with any sense of “flow” or rhythmic breathing between focused and more relaxed states. The ubiquitous presence of screens is distracting our attention away from one another as human beings. Relationships built out of sincere, warm interest in the other are becoming harder to create and sustain.*

*This trend is particularly threatening to young children. Dr. Michaela Glöckler, now retired Head of the Medical Section at the Goetheanum, remarked in a 2017 speech that the first three years of a child’s life will affect future health and educational capacities in later years. Lack of concentrated or focused attention in the first year may correlate with attention deficit problems. Depression and aggression may arise in conjunction with not having had a peaceful atmosphere for listening in the child’s second year. Lack of feeling accepted or of having a sense of being at home within oneself may pave the way to problems of addiction and other dependencies. This picture is most concerning, as we see that all of these alarming conditions are on the rise.*

*The author now offers suggestions for what adults can do to counter these trends. Children are longing for kinder, warmer, and more attention-filled spaces in which to live, grow, and to feel at home in both body and soul. How we parents and adults will focus our attention on this matter is an essential first step.*

## Attention and Rhythm

Attention does not mean being focused exclusively on one’s child at all times. That kind of attention tends to be stifling and is not necessarily helpful for a child’s development. Attention, like breathing, has to be rhythmic and responsive to the demands of the situation.

Some activities require us to be wakeful, and others we can do without a lot of focus, such as familiar or repetitive tasks. The rhythm of taking hold and letting go of our concentration is normal and healthy. Working on a computer all day can be stressful for many reasons, but one of the reasons is the kind of wakeful attention that is required. To be able to muster the force of concentration necessary for deep thinking, a significant meeting, or the timely completion of a project requires having rested and renewed one’s capacity for attention.

With the young child, we alternate times of being fully present with the child with times when the child is free to be fully attentive to his own activities. There are also times when we are engaged in side-by-side activities. In this case our attention has a different,

more flowing quality, for example, when we are walking, cooking, or gardening together.

This is different from multitasking, because the tasks being undertaken do not require the same kind of attention. Walking with a friend can sometimes promote a deeper conversation than just sitting together in comfortable chairs. I get some of my best ideas when I am ironing!

Many psychologists, doctors, and educators are recommending screen-free rooms in the home and screen-free times in the day and week. These suggestions, if they are built into the family’s habit life, can greatly support creating healthy rhythms for both parents and children.

## The Re-Schooling of Attention

Young children differ from adults in the kind of attention typical to their age. They consider the whole world with wonder and delight, engaged with one detail, then another. Those of us who spend time with young children are sometimes fortunate to be able to slow down and let go enough to enter into their mood of wonder with them. This can be both refreshing and illuminating.

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Georg Kühlewind, in *From Normal to Healthy*, describes the differences between a child's and an adult's perceptions.

Above all, perceiving in a child is based far less on predetermined concepts, because these have not been formed. This is why the activity of the senses is more intense; everything has to be looked at, touched and listened to. Also, this intense sense activity is still intertwined with the world of feelings, and the feelings are partly cognitive, that is really feeling, feeling toward the outside, not the self-feeling of the adult. The wonder of discovery and the wonder of mental experience are still united. The capacity for devoted attention is much greater in children than in adults, and this is so to the extent that the child does not yet turn his attention egotistically to himself. Psychic experience is multicolored and many-sided and can be characterized by joy. The joy does not apply to the thing perceived, but to perceiving itself. Or rather, perceiving is not yet as separated from the object as for the adult. (Kühlewind at 142)

A rich tapestry of sensory, feeling, and cognitive perceptions that are outwardly oriented and not egocentric can arise from devoted attention. This way of being and attending to the world, which is completely natural in a small child, is the conscious goal of many a mindful adult!

Towards this end, Kühlewind offers us three relevant pieces of advice: (1) Valuable practical experience in freedom of will can be gained by learning to concentrate our attention. (2) The intensity of our sense perceptions can be strengthened "with light, careful attention." (3) Both of these practices can help us transform our cultural addiction to external, passive pleasures into creative, artistic joy. (143)

Attention is important in a mindfulness practice, but no less important in everyday living, according to psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.

Csikszentmihalyi initially studied creative and artistic individuals, and coined the concept of "flow" to characterize what is common about their experiences. In a subsequent study, he documented stories of ordinary people who also found flow in many aspects of their lives, including work, hobbies, and relationships.

Csikszentmihalyi characterizes flow as a state of complete immersion in an activity that is intrinsically rewarding and that lifts the course of one's life to a different level. The intense absorption in such a state is more like the joy for joy's sake of the small child, than typical pleasure. "The important thing is to enjoy the activity for its own sake and to know that what matters is not the result, but the control one is acquiring over one's attention" (Csikszentmihalyi at 129). He maintains that while it is usually difficult to change the external circumstances of one's life, changing the focus of one's attention, and thereby the contents of one's consciousness, is a much more reliable way to achieve a feeling of fulfillment.

Our children not only benefit from the attention that we offer to them directly, but also from witnessing the quality of attention that we cultivate in ourselves, including our interest in others and in the world around us.

### **Attention as Love**

Attention and consciousness are all-encompassing topics, and it is helpful that we are able to study ourselves in addition to working with the research of others.

Through the course of this exploration, I have also begun to understand that, whether one is the giver, the receiver, or sharing an experience with others, attention in the fullest sense involves all of our soul faculties—thinking, feeling and willing. As Mary Oliver, the poet, wrote in elegiac praise of her partner, a photographer, "Attention without feeling ... is only report."

My own practice of genuine attention involves inwardly saying “yes” in three different ways. Bringing myself to a specific focus is the first “yes”; this is mostly connected to my thinking. In my feelings, the quality of “yes” is more like “listening,” or creating a free space. While a portion of will is required in committing to both of these first two aspects, however, there is a third “yes” that comes as I let go of my own needs or agenda in giving attention to something or someone else; this aspect is a kind of selflessness in the will. To be the recipient of such full attention is to receive a rare, and sometimes, startling gift.

Simone Weil, the French philosopher, activist, and mystic, wrote compellingly about the role of attention in life and education.

The poet produces something beautiful by fixing his attention on something real. It is the same with an act of love. To know that this man who is hungry and thirsty really exists as much as I do—that is enough, the rest follows of itself.

The authentic and pure values—truth, beauty and goodness—in the activity of the human being are the result of the one and same act, a certain application of the full attention to the object. Teaching should have no aim but to prepare, by training the attention, for the possibility of such an act (Weil at 119-20).

## Supporting the Forces of Life and Growth

We confront the danger that our attitudes and interests are being strongly influenced by societal forces that contradict our personal values. These influences stream down to affect our children as well. Some young people I know are becoming aware of the need to consciously manage their media use.

It is equally clear that attention is a powerful force that can be transformative. An image that kept occurring to me as I worked with this topic was of two contrasting qualities of light. The light that we associate with our consciousness, that is largely metaphorical (although may have some basis in neurology), seems to me to be a warm, lively light. The light of our screens is cool, and I have often experienced it as drawing life forces out of me. It is the former quality that can warm one’s heart, “light up” one’s eyes, and nourish and heal us.

If we parents and teachers are willing to look at our own habits of attention and try to be healthy models for their children, we can preserve and even strengthen the best of our human capacities. ♦

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### Resources:

- Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Finding Flow* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).
- Georg Kühlewind, *From Normal to Healthy* (Hudson, New York: Lindisfarne Press, 1983).
- Mary Oliver, *Our World* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2007).
- Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (Abingdon, United Kingdom: Routledge Classics, 2002).

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