

The Radical Act of Reclaiming Attention

With Oren Jay Sofer

Given all that we are facing today as a society and a species, the need to have honest conversations about things that matter is paramount. Communication skills are an essential ingredient in this arena, but I don't think they're sufficient. To stay balanced and clear in the face of conflict, suffering and heartbreak takes strength, courage, and resilience. And for that, we need a full heart.

Without a full heart, we falter when called to meet the immense challenges of our day; we shrink in the shadow of their gravity. Nourishing the heart is bit like nourishing the body—it's about what you put into it. What we put in to our heart and mind depends on what we pay attention to.

Attention today is a commodity. There is a multi-billion dollar industry trying to learn exactly how to best attract, capture, and retain your attention through persuasive technology. The sheer volume and pace of information available on a daily basis threatens to fragment attention profoundly. The mind is left flitting briefly like a humming bird from one disconnected thing to another. (Indeed, some are actively grappling with the [ethics of persuasive design](#).) In an attention economy, reclaiming your attention is a radical act of self-empowerment.

Attention is one of our most valuable resources. What we attend to shapes our experience; how we attend shapes our mind. Focus on the never ending to do list and you'll find a creeping sense of pressure and anxiety. Notice only that which is difficult, frustrating, or painful and you'll feel your vision darkens. Fixate on another's faults and you will inevitably find it hard to keep your heart open to them. Spend a few hours glued to social media and you'll probably feel pretty fried.

To nourish the heart we must reclaim our attention and learn how to use it wisely. I'd like to share three practices with you to reclaim your attention so that you have the inner resources to do the work that is calling you.

I. Train the Mind

One of the core tools of contemplative practice is this skill of choosing where we place our attention. It's an art that we can cultivate and apply to any area of life. The most basic contemplative training involves focusing on one object of awareness and redirecting the attention back to that chosen object whenever it wanders. Common objects include the sensory experience of breathing, a visual image, a mantra, a positive emotion like gratitude or kindness.

How you attend is as important as (if not more so than) *what* you attend to, for in the process of attending you reinforce certain tendencies in the mind. Instead of “focusing” on the object, which

often carries habits of strain, contraction and rigidity, consider it more like listening to music or spending time with a friend. Call forth kindness, natural curiosity and ease. When your attention drifts, appreciate the fact that you've noticed and gently allow your attention to come back to the chosen object.

You can continue this cultivation by giving people and activities in life your full attention. When you're with someone else, really show up. Multi-tasking or cramming more work into a fixed period of time only further fragments the mind. Instead, **learn to appreciate the joy and deep satisfaction of giving a task your complete and undivided attention.**

When done properly, this process develops powerful qualities like patience, concentration and wisdom. Concentration is the ability to gather our inner resources around a chosen theme. **Wisdom is the ability to discern what themes and experiences are worthy of our attention.**

Navigating difficult conversations and collaborating across differences also involves making wiser decisions about what we pay attention to. In the basic form of Nonviolent Communication, we focus attention on four aspects of experience that make it easier to hear one another and work together: observations, feelings, needs and requests. (This focus of attention simultaneously supports a shift in consciousness, from separation, blame and aggression to connection, curiosity and compassion).

II. Nourish the Heart

As concentration and wisdom grow, you can apply them to make more conscious choices over how you use your attention during the day. Where do your thoughts go when nothing else is asking for your attention? How do you spend those short moments between activities?

Instead of checking your newsfeed, mind-wandering or worrying, you can use your attention more deliberately so that these brief periods can become mini-breaks to nourish the heart. Notice the sky; cultivate kindness for yourself or those around you; take a few moments to rest quietly with your inner experience. Over the course of a day, **short moments of restful awareness can refresh the spirit.**

When you have more time, take a step back to consider what will serve you best. What's it like to turn towards healthy, non-addictive pleasure rather than allowing habit to dictate your behavior? **The easiest thing to do is often the most habitual, and the least fulfilling.** Calling forth enough energy to break out of a rut and try something different can set you on a new course and begin to replenish your reserves.

Using your attention to nourish the heart in these ways is not about avoiding suffering or pretending that painful issues don't exist. It's about recognizing that just as the body needs sustenance and rest, so too do the heart and mind, and that we can take an active role in that.

III. Stay Connected to Purpose

Human beings need meaning to thrive. It's so potent that it's one of the most protective experiences against burnout (that, and social connection). To support this, we can apply the skill of attention by discerning what's most important, and checking that our actions and behaviors are aligned with that. A powerful reflection for this using the NVC framework is to regularly inquire, "What needs am I trying to meet right now?"

The more we consider our aim in an activity, the more attuned we become to how it feels when we are aligned with a sense of purpose and when we are not. This quality of inner alignment is a sustainable source of inner energy for our activities and work. When we know why we're doing what we're doing, it's easier to stay engaged and to give. We feel more alive and satisfied.

I invite you to explore these three ways of utilizing your attention. See what's most helpful to reclaim your attention, and then use it to fill your heart.