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Attention: A Twenty-First Century Literacy Skill

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> The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will. No one is *compos sui* [master of himself] if he have it not. An education which should improve this faculty would be the education par excellence. But it is easier to define this ideal than to give practical directions for bringing it about.
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> (William James, *Principles of Psychology*, 1890)

It is often observed that science fiction, while purporting to be about the future, is actually a characterization of the present. This is a reminder that prognostications about the future always start with some awareness of present conditions, and proceed either to extrapolate from those conditions or to imagine an alternative. My starting point for these reflections is the growing societal concern, and indeed alarm, over the acceleration of life and the related sense of information overload.

While the new information technologies clearly allow us to do more things and to do them more quickly, the use of these tools has also increased the demands on our time, and made more information available to us than we can sort through, let alone absorb. There is much talk these days about the challenges of multitasking, distraction, Internet addiction, and so on, and a growing concern that such conditions are both unhealthy and counterproductive. For nearly two decades—first at the Xerox Palo Alto Research Center (PARC) and now at the University of Washington Information School—I have been observing the expansion of these trends, analyzing them, and exploring ways to address them.

Let me start by noting that the acceleration we're now experiencing has been going on for more than one hundred years— a lot longer than most of us realize. The roots of this acceleration lie in the industrial revolution and its philosophy of life and work. This philosophy, which we might call "more-faster-better,"

essentially advocates efficient and abundant production and consumption as the central operating principle of life; it privileges fast, task-oriented activities over slower, more receptive practices. But as Thomas Hylland Eriksen, a Norwegian anthropologist, has pointed out, not all human activities can or should be speeded up. In *The Tyranny of the Moment* (2001), he makes a distinction between "fast time" and "slow time," between activities that can or must be done quickly, and those that can't, or shouldn't. The problem in today's society, he suggests, is that "[w]hen fast and slow time meet, fast time wins. This is why one never gets the important things done because there is always something else one has to do first. Naturally, we will always tend to do the most urgent tasks first. In this way, the slow and long-term activities lose out. In an age when the distinctions between work and leisure are being erased, and efficiency seems to be the only value in economics, politics and research, this is really bad news for things like thorough, far-sighted work, play and long-term love relationships." It is also bad news for thinking, and for all the reflective practices we engage in to make sense of the information we have such ready access to.

So what can be done about the ongoing acceleration and overload? We are already seeing a variety of responses, from better email filtering software to national "don't call" lists, from a growing interest in limiting or banning cell phone use in cars to research demonstrating conclusively that multitasking degrades performance. In the decade ahead we can expect a lot more in the way of discussion and debate, research, technology development, and policy setting. I want to propose a particular way forward that may also suggest a new role for libraries.

The root problem, I've come to feel, is the loss of what might be called "contemplative balance." The faster we rush and the more tasks we're superficially involved in, the less time we're actually in touch with what's happening in the moment. And yet serious thinking, real conversation, and the enjoyment of life's simple pleasures can only take place when we're able to focus on our current object of attention (an idea, a person, the food we're eating) clearly and calmly. If we could train ourselves to be more attentive, to avoid distraction, to clarify our real priorities in life and live according to them, we'd be much better able to live effectively amidst the speed, the overly abundant information, and the growing demands on our time.

Learning how to live attentively, and to use our new technologies in more effective ways, would seem to be an essential literacy skill for the twenty-first century.

William James' statement above suggests that he understood the centrality of attention for the effective and well-lived life. Yet at the same time, he had no clue how attention might actually be trained. Fortunately for us today, this has changed radically in the last hundred years. The arrival and increasing exploration of Eastern contemplative practices (most notably a variety of forms of meditation and yoga) in the West have allowed a not insubstantial number of Americans to begin to train their attention "muscle." And at the same time, exciting advances in psychology and neuroscience have been demonstrating the brain's plasticity, and have provided hard scientific evidence that many of the simple attention-training exercises really do work.

What this means is that we are now in a position to offer attention training as a basic twenty-first century literacy skill, as a necessary component for dealing with the new technologies, the increased availability of information, and the accelerating pace of life. And libraries, I would suggest, could be one of the central institutions to offer such training. For they are institutions long concerned with literacy and learning; they are perhaps the only institution in secular American culture that is still holding some understanding of contemplative balance (think of their beautiful reading rooms); and they are trusted institutions located in virtually every community. One hundred years after William James claimed that we had no concrete methods for developing the skill that lies at "the very root of judgment, character, and will," we may finally be in a position to offer just that.