

Rapt: Attention and the Focused Life

By Winifred Gallagher

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A revolutionary look at how what we pay attention to determines how we experience life

Acclaimed behavioral science writer Winifred Gallagher's *Rapt* makes the radical argument that much of the quality of your life depends not on fame or fortune, beauty or brains, fate or coincidence, but on what you choose to pay attention to. *Rapt* introduces a diverse cast of characters, from researchers to artists to ranchers, to illustrate the art of living the interested life. As their stories show, by focusing on the most positive and productive elements of any situation, you can shape your inner experience and expand your world. By learning to focus, you can improve your concentration, broaden your inner horizons, and most important, feel what it means to be fully alive.

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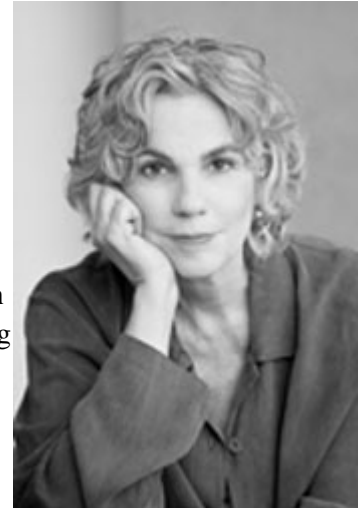
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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Amazon Exclusive: Winifred Gallagher on *Rapt*

A wise research psychiatrist once told me that he had identified life's greatest problem: How to balance self and others, or your need for independence with your need for relationship? Since writing *Rapt*, I've come to believe that we now face a fundamental psychological challenge of a different sort: How to balance your need to know—for the first time in history, fed by a bottomless spring of electronic information, from e-mail to Wikipedia—with your need to be? To think your thoughts, enjoy your companions, and do your work (to say nothing of staring into a fire or gazing dreamily at the sky) without interruption from beeps, vibrations, and flashing lights? Or perhaps worse, from the nagging sense that when you're off the grid, you're somehow missing out?



Science's new understanding of attention can help shape your answers to this question, which pops up all day long in various forms. When you sit at your computer, will you focus on writing that report or aimless web browsing? At the meeting, will you attend to the speaker or to your BlackBerry? Research suggests that your choices are more consequential than you may suspect. When you zero in on a sight or sound, thought or feeling, your brain spotlights and depicts that "target," which then becomes part of the subjective mental construct that you nonetheless confidently call "reality" or "the world." In contrast, things that you ignore don't, at least with anything like the same clarity. As William James succinctly puts it, "My experience is what I agree to attend to."

The realization that your life—indeed, yourself—largely consists of the physical objects and mental subjects that you've focused on, from e-bay bargains to world peace, becomes even more sobering when you consider that, as the expression "pay attention" suggests, like your money, your concentration is a finite resource. How can you get the highest experiential return for this cognitive capital? By focusing on some screen or on playing your guitar? On IM-ing your old friend or joining her for a walk?

Considering the Internet's countless temptations and distractions, deciding how best to invest your time and attention when you're online is particularly challenging. Left to its own devices, your involuntary, "bottom-up" attention system asks, "What's the most obvious, compelling thing to zero in on here? That e-mail prompt? This colorful ad?" Fortunately, evolution has also equipped you with a voluntary, "top-down" attention system that poses a different question: "What do you want to focus on right now? Ordering that new novel, then checking the weather report, then getting back to work, right?" Sometimes, it's fun to just wander around online, allowing your mind to be captured by random, bottom-up distractions. In general, however, it's far more productive to focus on top-down targets you've selected to create the kind of experience you want to invite.

Along with making clear choices about what things merit your precious attention online, there are some other simple ways to protect the quality of your daily life from technological interference. Remember that your electronics are your servants, not your masters, and don't let them choose your focus for you. Abandon vain attempts to "multitask," because when you try to attend to two things at once—phoning while checking e-

mail—you're simply switching rapidly between them, which takes longer and generates more errors. When you need to concentrate on an important activity, try to work for 90 minutes without interruptions, because rebooting your brain can take up to 20 minutes.

Most important, as you go about the day, bear in mind that by taking charge of your attention, you improve your experience, increase your concentration, and lift your spirits. Best of all, enjoying the rapt state of being completely absorbed, whether by a website or a sunset, a project or a person, simply makes life worth living. We cannot always be happy, but we can almost always be focused, which is as close as we can get.

From Publishers Weekly

Gallagher (*The Power of Place, Working on God*) couples personal ruminations and interviews with experts to explore the role of attention in defining consciousness, identity and the human experience: "who you are, what you think, feel, and do, what you love-is the sum of what you focus on." From paying attention to your inner dialogue (helping eliminate negative thought patterns) to bucking the myths of multi-tasking (says cognitive scientist David Meyer, "Einstein didn't invent the theory of relativity while multi-tasking at the Swiss patent office"), Gallagher draws practical conclusions from her examination of conscious ("top-down") and unconscious ("bottom-up") attention strategies. Though her claims to "a psychological version of... physicist's 'grand universal theory'" are a bit outsized, Gallagher takes illuminating forays into the evolution of the species and the global diaspora, looking for instance at how "Western individualism" emphasizes top-down focus while the Asian mentality encourages a broader, contextual perspective. A fascinating psycho-social look at human motivation and the power of focus, Gallagher's latest is worth paying attention to.

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From [Bookmarks Magazine](#)

Gallagher's fascinating book, which analyzes the latest research in psychology and neuroscience, easily translates difficult concepts into layman's terms. She includes contemporary and historical examples of men and women, including Mozart and Tiger Woods, whose ability to concentrate led to their successes. Gallagher's writing is engaging and accessible, and her suggestions for a more focused life range from the mystical (meditation) to the ordinary (separating oneself from distractions.) Critics did, however, have a couple of complaints: her focus on the conscious mind overlooks the subconscious and the veiled effect it can have on thoughts and feelings, and she sometimes tries too hard to relate all of life's experiences back to her topic. However, readers who choose to concentrate on Rapt will not be disappointed.

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Ronnie Hamilton:

What do you consider book? It is just for students as they are still students or the item for all people in the world, the actual best subject for that? Just simply you can be answered for that problem above. Every person has diverse personality and hobby for each other. Don't to be pushed someone or something that they don't need do that. You must know how great and also important the book Rapt: Attention and the Focused Life. All type of book could you see on many methods. You can look for the internet solutions or other social media.

Vera Forde:

What do you about book? It is not important along with you? Or just adding material when you require something to explain what the ones you have problem? How about your free time? Or are you busy man? If you don't have spare time to perform others business, it is give you a sense of feeling bored faster. And you have spare time? What did you do? Every individual has many questions above. They must answer that question due to the fact just their can do that will. It said that about publication. Book is familiar in each person. Yes, it is suitable. Because start from on jardín de infancia until university need this specific Rapt: Attention and the Focused Life to read.

Micheal Ruiz:

Spent a free the perfect time to be fun activity to complete! A lot of people spent their down time with their family, or their friends. Usually they carrying out activity like watching television, going to beach, or picnic within the park. They actually doing same task every week. Do you feel it? Do you need to something different to fill your own personal free time/ holiday? Could be reading a book might be option to fill your no cost time/ holiday. The first thing you will ask may be what kinds of publication that you should read. If you want to test look for book, may be the guide untitled Rapt: Attention and the Focused Life can be good book to read. May be it could be best activity to you.

Travis Hargrove:

Rapt: Attention and the Focused Life can be one of your beginner books that are good idea. Most of us recommend that straight away because this guide has good vocabulary that could increase your knowledge in vocab, easy to understand, bit entertaining however delivering the information. The article author giving his/her effort to place every word into joy arrangement in writing Rapt: Attention and the Focused Life but doesn't forget the main stage, giving the reader the hottest and based confirm resource data that maybe you can be one among it. This great information can drawn you into brand new stage of crucial contemplating.

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