

## *Now You See It: How the Brain Science of Attention Will Transform the Way We Live, Work, and Learn*

Cathy N. Davidson. *Now You See It: How the Brain Science of Attention Will Transform the Way We Live, Work, and Learn*. New York: Viking, 2011. 342 pp. \$27.95. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780670022823.

Cathy Davidson is the counter-voice to Mark Bauerlein's *The Dumbest Generation* and Nicholas Carr's *The Shallows*. Her contention is that attention by definition is focusing on one thing and thereby missing everything else, and this is not such a virtue. For over a hundred years we've been training people in a very deliberative way to focus on one thing. That made sense in an industrial society when workers toiled in factories, on assembly lines, or in offices, repeatedly doing one kind of thing. But today in a service and information society, that kind of cultivating blind spots is not serving us well. In fact, the "mismatch between the age we live in and the institutions we have built for the last 120 years" (schools, businesses) is a serious problem (6). "We are still acting with the individualistic, product-oriented, task-specific rules of the twentieth" (7) century but we live in the collaborative, process-oriented, improv twenty-first century. We need to cultivate new forms of attention and different styles of focus and quit "fretting about multitasking, worrying over distractions, barking about all the things our kids don't know" (12). We need, in other words, to *encourage* the kinds of skills and abilities that life online entails. Chastising people for being distracted or for engaging in multi-tasking or for being lousy readers, writers, workers—dumb and shallow—is just wrong. The aptitudes people are learning by living online are *precisely* the aptitudes that the twenty-first century workplace needs.

Davidson recounts how from birth a baby is constantly taught what is worthy of her attention and what is not. School continues the attention lessons. On one hand, this is a good thing. "Because of the categories by which we bundle our world, we can see efficiently" (42). On the other hand "those same categories make us miss everything else." Those categories are not inherently superior or effective. They help our brain "select, concentrate and focus on some things and not others" (45). Therefore some neural pathways are unused and sheared, while others are used and forged. This process continues throughout life; the brain is permanently plastic, as we learn and attend to new things. Distraction "is really another word for saying that something is new, strange, or different" (55). Distractions are not hindrances but opportunities for learning and achievement.

Schools teach categories, distinctions, boundaries, schedules, obedience, and what is worthy of attention. Expertise, enterprise, specialization, uniformity, and hierarchies: these are the values of an industrial society which our schools are designed to serve. These values are increasingly irrelevant in a global, information, technology-based economy, and our children are increasingly bored and suffering from attention deficit "disorders" under the influence of these values. Davidson instead wants to foster creative thinking that "requires attention to surprise, anomaly, difference and disruption, and an ability to switch focus" (77)—accomplished distracted thinking, in other words. We need to recognize the value in what our children are learning *out* of school, which makes school so boring to them.

The workplace comes under Davidson's scrutiny as well. She notes how "the principal mechanism of our productive labor [the PC] is also the engine of our distraction" (169) and agrees it is not good that *everything* we do—Facebook, e-mailing, reading, shopping, banking, working—comes to us on one machine. Time/distraction studies reveal that it takes workers "nearly twenty minutes to return to their original task" once disrupted (171).

Yet, distraction in itself is not the problem: distraction is our natural state. The problem is that “our habits aren’t quite as habitual as they once were because we haven’t yet developed new habits that serve us without our having to pay attention to them” (172). Davidson is right, I believe: we need to learn new ways of paying attention and customizing workflow. She is not right in saying that we will all work together happily towards a common goal unaffected by interruptions and multiple demands on our time and attention. Her anthropology is incredibly naive. Decentralized and distributed work life? Sure we can do that. Self-control and self-regulation? Maybe we can manage that. But loss of ego and suspicion, innate ability to multitask, placing the common good over the personal? No. Trust is not an automatic thing. We may need to reexamine how we work, but some of her idealism is just plain, well, idealistic.

What has all of this to do with theological librarianship? Theological educators have long assumed that education means reading, and that reading means sustained, uninterrupted, analytical, or contemplative work—in other words, focused attention. We evaluate our students’ writing and by implication their reading on these values. We assume the virtues of expertise and authority, of linear thinking, of deep study. But if the world of ministry is a service and information world, replete with distractions, multi-tasking, collaborative, process-oriented work, *perhaps* we need to reexamine our assumptions about “deep” and “shallow” reading. Perhaps we need to teach our students to read in multiple ways, ways that cultivate new forms of attention, not just in the old twentieth century ways. I may not be ready to agree with Davidson that multitasking is intrinsically helpful, or that the group is inherently more creative or intelligent than the individual. But her questions are important for ministry as well as for theological education.

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