

Staying Focused

By Katie Rose Guest Pryal

When I picked up *Rapt: Attention and the Focused Life* (2009) by journalist Winifred Gallagher, I was suffering what many of us have been suffering for a long time—a tremendous overwhelming of the senses. For me, this overwhelm began when Trump first took office, when one crisis followed so hard on the next that it was difficult to keep up with the horrors. It was at that time that I quit my part-time journalism career—the news cycle moved so quickly that I could no longer write the thoughtful pieces I believed readers deserved.

After four years of this whirlwind, it felt as though we, as a society, were constantly on the edge of our seats, waiting for the next crisis. (Which came, of course, at the beginning of 2020. More on that in a moment.)

The premise of *Rapt* is about choosing what to focus on: “[Y]our ability to focus on *this* and suppress *that* is the key to controlling your experience and, ultimately, your well-being.” Indeed, as Gallagher explains, what you focus on (and what you ignore) becomes your reality: “[Y]our life is the sum total of what you focus on.” Her call to action is simply this:

[I]f you could just stay focused on the right things, your life would stop feeling like a reaction to stuff that happens to you and become something that you create: not a series of accidents, but a work of art.

I really liked the sound of that.

Bottom-Up versus Top-Down Attention

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck one year ago, it was hard to comprehend that one year later we would be approaching half a million dead in this country, a mind-boggling tragedy that lurks constantly in the back of our collective consciousness. Our society has been disrupted in a fashion no one could have imagined in March of 2020.

Add to that what can only be called an attempted coup in January, the likes of which we have never seen in our lifetimes—or in the last century—and it’s a wonder that we can sustain any form of concentration at all on anything but making it from one day to the next. And yet we must. Work must be done: courses planned, papers graded, grants written. But—how? The solution, according to Gallagher, is a practice of active, voluntary focus on what matters most.

Gallagher distinguishes between two types of focusing (a simplification, she acknowledges): bottom-up and top-down. Bottom-up focusing is involuntary: “This passive process is not driven by you, but by whatever thing in your environment is most salient.” She explains that bottom-up focusing is a derivative of evolution, to help us “react to things that could threaten or advance [our] survival.”

Because strange things in our environment were more likely to be dangerous, Gallagher writes, we “are particularly drawn to ‘novel’ stimuli.” But the real danger in the modern age is not the non-existent predator that might eat us, it is the constant barrage of “fruitless, unwelcome distractions.”

Contrast bottom-up with top-down focusing, which is an “active, voluntary form of focusing.” Active, top-down focusing is hard work, though, and you can’t do it for a long time; you will get exhausted. Gallagher’s point, in the end, is for us “to enjoy the kind of experience you want rather than enduring the kind that you feel stuck with,” and to do so, “you have to take charge of your attention.”

How does “taking charge of your attention” look to you? For many of my friends (and for me), that meant removing social media applications from my devices. It meant I had to stop watching the news in mid-November and asking my husband to inform me when something important had occurred. On news channels, the endless speculation stole all of my attention, creating the ultimate

bottom-up focusing. It’s not that I didn’t care

about what was going on. Quite the contrary, I cared so much that I grew depressed and anxious, unable to take care of myself, my work and, worst of all, my children. A blackout of stimuli was the only option.

And, for the most part, it worked.

Here’s the problem: Most of us don’t get to choose.

Do We Really Have a Choice?

But things go sideways in *Rapt* because too much of the book is premised on choice.

In Chapter 7, “Productivity: Work Zone,” she writes, “The American dream is no longer just to get rich quick, but also to enjoy doing it.” And how do you achieve both success and joy in your work? According to Gallagher, it requires “laserlike attention to your goal,” whatever that goal may be. But, Gallagher explains, the way to gain this focus “is to choose activities that push you so close to the edge of your competence that they demand your absolute focus.” After all, she writes, “If an activity is too easy, you lose focus and get bored.” On the other hand, “If it’s too hard, you become anxious, overwhelmed, and unable to concentrate.”

Here’s the problem: Most of us don’t get to *choose*. Gallagher spends a lot of page space quoting psychologists who are white men, and, unfortunately, David Brooks, who disparages “ADD” as though it were a fad. And as we know, white men have had far more choices about what their work would be than anyone else in the United States (I want to add that Gallagher does devote a chapter to Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder and does *not* treat it like a fad or myth.)

She features one person as an object lesson, a woman who left the East Coast to become a rancher in Wyoming

continued on page 14

forward when it's not." She offers the example of the academic journal article that is ready for publication. Parham notes, "If there's a delay and the article comes out in a later issue of the journal, it's not a big deal. With a digital project, you might have the same thing happen, and it's a huge crisis."

In 2015, Parham was part of a team that published "The New Rigor: Recommendations for Evaluating and Supporting Digital Scholarship in the Five Colleges." The report addressed some of the challenges involved in conducting digital research and how such scholarship can be vetted and supported. Overall, Parham recommends, "At the moment of hire, make sure that someone at the departmental level is assigned to understand what's going on with the project so there are no surprises." Parham argues that this designated person can assist with the "work of translation" needed for the dossier in articulating the project and its goals to multiple audiences.

For women interested in expanding their research into digital humanities, Parham warns not to worry about not being a "digital person." She recommends working with digital centers, libraries, or independent labs to figure out what kinds of resources may be available. Parham advises approaching a potential project like a curator. She explains, "Center what you are already interested in and what you already care about. Then, think about what you wish you could have and pull in new technologies, tools and approaches." ■

IN HER OWN WORDS: Women + Girls Research Alliance Looks to Solve Problems, *continued from page 6*

Looking forward to doing some listening sessions, Meggs will seek to determine the Alliance's "marching orders." Conversations will seek to reveal "how we can use our resources to make an impact," she said.

Meggs is looking to hear from the people doing work on the ground. The Alliance wants its efforts to be "inclusive and intersectional."

She intends to strive to build a big table and to make sure everyone knows they have a seat at that table. "They may not feel comfortable being there right now, but when they are, there's a seat for them," she said. ■

MOVEABLE TYPE: Staying Focused, *continued from page 8*

after flitting through a number of jobs: "After college and a stint of teaching that she found 'mentally and emotionally draining,' she went through a 'transitional period,' joining the gang of young ski bums, cowboys and mountaineers in the Tetons who paid for their food, shelter and lift tickets by wearing many hats."

This college-educated woman had the privilege to quit a "draining" job because she was someone with a significant safety net who could take risks of this kind, someone who knew that if things went wrong, she could

always go back to that teaching job she hated so much, or another job that her college degree could get for her. She had no parents or siblings relying on her for financial support. Must have had no student loans to pay—how could she, given that her main concern was to purchase a ski lift ticket? This example, like so many in the book, does not match up with the experiences of most people in the United States, who can't traipse around until we feel focused and fulfilled.

Some, many, indeed I would say *most* readers of this newsletter—cannot avoid bottom-up focusing. We do not have the choice to ignore the stimuli that causes it: our baby's cry or our ten-year-old's frustrated tears, our boss's demands or our students' frustrations and fears.

No—ignoring bottom-up stimuli is a privilege for those who have someone else to pay attention to those stimuli for them. It only comes my way at most an hour or two a day. Sometimes, not even that frequently. And even when I have it, those precious moments to choose what to focus on, one ear is always pricked for the emergency that will jerk my attention away. ■

A New Guide Focuses on Online Feminist Pedagogy, *continued from page 9*

Canvas and technology tutorials and guide information. Other links provide tips and skill building for new and established online teachers.

A Twitter Phenomenon

Once it became a Twitter phenomenon, the trio sought to "create a collaborative process and organize the information in a useful way," making it available to a wider audience. Since its launch last spring, the guide has registered some 10,000 views.

Adobe Spark allows for quick updates and minimal gatekeeping. But unlike a website, it can't measure clicks. Currently, there are some 100 listings in resources and 15 links to tools. The trio is happy to entertain suggestions for additional entries; contact information with links can be found at the bottom of the last page.

There are discussions about creating a book out of the submissions. A proposal is in the works. A published book wouldn't mean the end of the online tool. Ideally, the information could be shared in multiple formats to communicate feminist pedagogy to more people.

If you want to learn more about "Feminist Pedagogy for Teaching Online," this guide is available online at <http://bit.ly/fempedonline>. ■

Women on the Move, *continued from page 10*

- **Keiko Price** moves from senior associate athletics director at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana to assistant VP of campus life and director of athletics at Emory University GA.

- **Maria Ramirez** moves from assistant director of faculty development and diversity to director of equity initiatives for the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education