

Jay Y. Kim

*The Pace
of Peace*



Foreword by
John Mark
Comer

Distraction,
Attention, and
the Gifts of an
Examined Life



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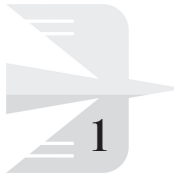
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The Toil of Absence

THE LOUD CRASH SNAPPED ME out of my wandering absence into a sudden, hyper-focused presence. I had rear-ended the car in front of me but was at a loss as to how it had happened, as if waking from a strange fever dream. My eyes had been looking straight ahead, my foot had been moderate on the gas pedal, and my hands gripped as usual on the steering wheel at nine and three. But my mind had been surprisingly elsewhere. More accurately, my mind had been vacillating between a variety of “elsewheres.”

After a few days of travel that included a speaking engagement, a canceled flight, and an unexpected night in a lonely hotel room, I’d finally arrived home, spent time with my family, and was on my way to the gym for a light run. But my mind was sprinting at full speed across the landscape of recent memories, approaching challenges, and a growing multitude of uncertainties. It had already been sprinting for hours, maybe days, and I had grossly underestimated the discord between my physical presence and my mental and emotional absence. My body was ready but my mind was exhausted. And I totaled my car.

Though I do not regularly get into car accidents, I am intimately familiar with the unnerving collision between presence



and absence. I know well the war-torn battlefield of my heart and mind, where the great enemy of distraction lurks behind most corners, lying in wait, ready to ambush at any moment. As the internet has given me access to a literal world of information, I've grown adept at *consuming knowledge* and simultaneously inept at *carefully noticing*. As nineteenth-century psychologist William James notes, "Only those items which I notice shape my mind—without selective interest, experience is an utter chaos."¹ This has been my life for long stretches over the years—utter chaos—not because I lack knowledge but because I fail to notice. In some ways, it is the onslaught of accessible knowledge that is the very thing keeping me from noticing, an overabundance of information constantly calling for my attentive presence leading to a life of ongoing absence.

My guess is that you can relate. Like me, you are familiar with that numbing state of permanent exhaustion born of perpetual distraction. My hope is that you haven't gotten into a car accident because of it. But how often do you find yourself putting down your phone and unable to recollect what it was you were doing just a few moments prior? How many times have you sunk into your couch after a long day and wondered where that day had gone? Like me, you know what it's like to be physically present yet absent in almost every other way, resulting in a life that feels unhinged and undone, as the dashboard of your mental and emotional life flashes and flickers before you in a mad frenzy.

The Dashboard of Distraction

Visually imagine the word *red*, written in the color red, on a screen. Your task is to identify the color of the letters on the screen. What would you say? "Red," of course. This would be the

simplest of tasks. Now, imagine the word *green* written in the color green. What would you say? “Green.” Correct. Now, imagine the word *blue* in the color yellow. What would you say? Reading the text here simplifies things. You’d say, “yellow.” But in reality, if you were actually doing this exercise visually, the process of discerning would take longer than you might think. This is called the Stroop test.

Developed by American psychologist John Stroop, the Stroop test is a psychological experiment designed to reveal how the brain processes conflicting or disconnected information, with a particular emphasis on demonstrating the effects of cognitive dissonance. The word I see is *blue* but the color I see is yellow. My visual muscles tell me to read the word rather than name the color. For the literate mind, reading is an automatic process but identifying colors requires more deliberate attention. The only way to succeed in the Stroop test is to actively maintain a steady, unwavering focus on the task at hand—to name the color rather than read the word. This requires effort and intentionality, to filter and suppress competing urges.

The Stroop test, and similar psychological tests, have shown that cognition and attention are limited resources. The success rate decreases over time. Our mental capacities are finite, and over long periods of exertion they deplete like gas in a car. As Gloria Mark puts it, “When your attentional resources are spent, you can’t do very much. . . . Performance suffers when the cognitive resources we need exceed those we have available.”² In depleted mental states, it becomes increasingly difficult to focus, notice, and attend to things well.

Imagine staring at the dashboard of your car. Let’s assume this is a car you’ve been driving for many years. Amid the array of

numbers, letters, bars, and blinking lights, because of familiarity, you are able to comfortably process all of the information coming at you all at once, easily deciphering which specific, pertinent bits of data are necessary to notice at any given moment, and which are not.

Now, imagine staring at the instrument panel of a large commercial airplane. Let's assume you're not a pilot, have never been one, have no plans to become one, and have spent exactly no time whatsoever studying the flight deck of a plane. In other words, let's assume for the purpose of this exercise that you're just like me. The sheer array of numbers, letters, bars, and blinking lights is overwhelming. But more than that, it's the fact that you're a novice—everything is new, unfamiliar, and perplexing. Paralysis sets in. Despite sitting in a machine built to soar, you find yourself stuck.

Life in the digital age is like sitting in the captain's chair of an airplane with no training. Our feeds run on novelty. The endless barrage of pings from texts, emails, social media, and news media are all invitations toward distraction by way of something new, unfamiliar, and surprising. This is why the little red number next to the envelope icon or our apps of choice never gets old. We feel the same euphoric anticipation every time our phone alerts us that we've got a new message or notice. It's always novel because we have no idea who's reaching out, what they need, what the score is, what happened on the other side of the planet a few minutes ago, and so on. We are stuck on the tarmac, staring at blinking lights on a dashboard, pulled in every direction but going absolutely nowhere.

According to research from journalist Johann Hari, the average college student switches tasks on their laptop every sixty-five seconds, and the median amount of time they spend on a

single task is about nineteen seconds. The average office worker in America focuses on a single task for no more than three minutes at a time.³ Gloria Mark describes our condition well: “When you are immersed in the world’s largest candy store, it is hard to resist sampling the wares.”⁴ This is problematic on a number of levels, but maybe most of all because it is impossible to be distracted and present at the same time. We could say that distraction is the embodied expression of absence.

For years, I assumed this was only a modern problem. I conveniently cast the blame on my smartphone, the internet, and my own digital addictions. But distraction and the subsequent experience of absence have been problems since long before the internet. For generations, Christians believed distraction to be demonic. Maybe they were right.

The Demons of Distraction

John Cassian was a fourth-century Christian monk and theologian who wrote extensively about distraction. He retells a story told to him by a desert father named Abba Isaac of Scetis. The story goes that an elder once went to visit a fellow monk and saw him from a distance, pounding a heavy mallet into a large boulder. Alongside this monk, the elder saw another man with his hand on the mallet, helping the poor monk continue his aimless labor. The elder realized that this other man was in fact a demon whose sole purpose was to keep the monk enslaved to meaningless work. “Riveted by the horrible demon’s assault and by the sheer magnitude of the deception,” the elder eventually rescued the man from the demon and helped him refocus his attention.⁵

In the premodern world, “It was already widely believed . . . that cosmic forces exercised influences on human beings. But in early

Christian demonology, these vectors became profoundly personalized. In the primeval battle between good and evil, demons deployed intrusive thoughts that were custom-fit to their targets. These weapons seemed so shrewdly designed that, to some monks, it felt like the demons could read their minds.⁶ Today, the idea that our distractions could be demonic in nature might seem far-fetched. There is indeed a danger in attributing every misstep to the demonic. My struggle to focus on an important task at hand may simply stem from a lack of discipline or a tendency to give in to the allure of my media feeds. However, when we take a broader view, it becomes clear that the enemy of God does in fact seek to gain an advantage over our thoughts, aiming to lure us into a state of distraction and absence, and away from life-giving presence.

The New Testament writers tell us that the devil blinds the minds of unbelievers (2 Corinthians 4:4) and leads minds astray (2 Corinthians 11:3). They admonish us to *be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour* (1 Peter 5:8). Theologian David Garland summarizes,

The “mind” (*noēma*) is the chief object of Satan’s ploys. This counterspirit does all in his power to prevent humans from becoming the enlightened subjects of the one true God whose image can be seen in Christ. Humans make themselves susceptible to his wiles with their preoccupation with the transient, unspiritual, earthly realm. The mind blinded by Satan cannot think straight, and it rebels against God’s truth.⁷

“Preoccupation with the transient, unspiritual, earthly realm” is about as succinctly precise a description of the digital age as I

can imagine. And if such preoccupation is leading to a life of absence, presence then comes by way of fixing our minds, focusing our attention, and orienting our thoughts on the eternal, spiritual, heavenly realm. This is why the apostle Paul writes about the crucial importance of a disciplined mind devoted to right thoughts: *Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things* (Philippians 4:8).

Paul's letter to the Romans is widely considered his theological magnum opus. In Romans 12:2 he writes, *Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind*. I recently came across an advertisement for a nearby meditation center. The copy conspicuously echoed this Pauline idea: "Renew your mind and transform your life." The desire for a mental fresh start is not a Christian desire; it's a human one. Our modern minds, overwhelmed by stimuli and stress, are desperate for refuge and relief. And the data reveal just how deep our desperation runs.

In recent years the global meditation market, which includes apps, websites, books, online courses, yoga centers, meditation programs, and workshops, has achieved an estimated value of more than \$7 billion. In the coming years, it's expected to nearly quadruple to more than \$28 billion.⁸ Liberation from absence and learning to be fully present to oneself is very big business. But the meditation center offering a chance at transforming my life by way of mental renewal had made a critical error. True presence is relational.

Yes, my relationship with myself matters, but it's incomplete. At their core, relationships are always experienced *with others*. Tom

Hanks had Wilson the volleyball in *Cast Away*, not purely as a storytelling device to create dialogue but because true presence demands the reference point of another. We might “feel peaceful” in isolation, away from the complexity of relationships, but a life lived at the pace of actual peace means a life of shalom, a life that moves at the speed of empathetic, equitable, and effortful connection with others.

True presence, then, is never something we achieve alone. It is revealed and refined in the crucible of our relationships. This is one of the reasons why distraction is so insidious—it doesn’t just keep us busy; it keeps us estranged. The demons of distraction are also the demons of disconnection. When my attention drifts and my presence wavers, it is not only I who suffer; the community around me is burdened with the weight of my absence. Think of the young child tugging on his distracted father’s sleeve, desperate for the loving attention of a dad whose tangible distance betrays his physical nearness. Whether we take the demons of distraction literally or figuratively, it is not hard to imagine that even the momentary severing of such sacred ties might please the great enemy of God.

Control and Fear

“Where are you?” my wife, Jenny, asked. The question wouldn’t have been so strange had it been a straightforward inquiry about location over the phone or text. But I was sitting right there next to her in the car. So why would she ask me that? It wasn’t just strange; it was offensive. And the more I stewed on it, offense began to quickly devolve into defensiveness tinged with anger.

What does she mean? I’m right here, I thought, with a bit of self-righteous indignation. This wasn’t about silence. Jenny and I have

been together long enough that the awkward silence phase is hard to even remember. Quiet presence without words is a familiar and comforting part of our friendship and marriage. But she would never ask about my whereabouts in moments like that. This was different. She could tell that though my body was there, my mind was elsewhere.

Finally, I replied. “What do you mean?”

She responded, “Where are you? Because you’re not here.”

It was difficult to admit, but she was right. Defensiveness and anger first gave way to bewilderment, but then, sobering clarity. This absence was familiar. It was an unusually chaotic season of life and ministry, and I’d become prone to wander. I hadn’t realized it until Jenny asked me about my mental and emotional whereabouts, but I knew then that I’d acclimated to a constant search for escape. I was physically here but otherwise elsewhere, and my proficiency in this dangerous exercise was alarmingly high.

As I began digging beneath the surface, I quickly realized that it wasn’t work that I was trying to escape. I am generally a motivated person and typically energized by opportunities to accomplish meaningful tasks. My tendency toward absence was a form of escapism driven by *control* and *fear*.

I’d been subtly and foolishly attempting to wrest control from God. I’d bought the lie that success was solely contingent on my own ability and skill, believing that I knew best and was fully capable on my own. As a result, I’d been unwittingly living with a tremendous amount of fear—fear of the truth that my ability and skill are not enough, that I don’t actually know best, and that I’m unable on my own. And the disconnect between the lie (that it’s all up to me) and the truth (that I do not actually control outcomes) led to paralysis, which eventually became atrophy. Stuck, I found

myself mentally and emotionally devolving toward apathy. This deeper self-diagnosis of my lack of presence made clear that this was a journey I'd taken many times over the course of my life in general and my ministry life specifically.

But it's not just me. Consider your own feelings of absence. Do you often find yourself desiring escape? If so, what exactly is it you're trying to escape from? For most of us, most of the time, it comes down to control and fear. In a culture that values self-sufficiency and success above almost all else, admission of our need and acknowledgment of our lack feels like defeat; for some it feels like death. For those who live without a spiritual framework and a belief in a divine architecture of the universe, nihilism is the inevitable conclusion. This is one of the reasons why in recent years the New Atheism movement has lost such significant momentum. A purely naturalistic view of reality, void of a divine architect, is untenable. It creates an atmosphere that's breathable but not livable, a reality in which we exist fearfully but never flourish. This is what happens when we attempt to wrest control from God. And this is what's been happening since the very start of the human story.

Presence Not Permission

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die." (Genesis 2:15-17)

In the beginning, a good God creates a good world. Humans are the pinnacle of that good creation, made in God's image for the

purpose of being God's representatives, called to steward the world and bring to bear its good potential through loving, life-giving work. But we know how the story goes. The serpent lies to Adam and Eve, tempting them with the allure of control, that to eat the forbidden fruit might mean to become self-arbiters, able to decide for themselves what is good and what is evil. They buy the lie and eat the fruit.

Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?" He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid." And he said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?" (Genesis 3:7-11)

We can assume this was not the first time God had walked in the garden in the cool of the day. But it was for certain the first time the humans hid. And what reason does the man give for their hiding? "I was afraid." When rebellion introduces sin into the human story, it also introduces fear. Adam and Eve had never before been afraid. Fear wasn't just unfamiliar; it was unknown. And the unknown is the primary fuel for fear, which is why trying to pry control out of God's hands always leads to fear.

Human flourishing is a result of trust, not knowledge. We are relatively tiny specks clinging to a relatively minuscule rock spinning around an average sized star in an average sized solar system which belongs to an average sized galaxy in a universe

whose limits are beyond us. But we continue living by the myth that if our stock portfolios are climbing, paychecks are clearing, bills are paid, or tasks are done, we've got things all figured out. Until disaster strikes. The diagnosis comes. The marriage ends. Depression descends. Anxiety hits. We grab control, only to open our eyes and see that we don't actually have control.

In this way, the tug of war between control and fear has no end. For Adam and Eve, when their communion with God was unmarred by sin, there was no reason and no thing to fear. God walked in their midst, close and literal enough to feel the temperature, offering his ongoing presence. There was no divide. And when the Creator of all things is with you and for you, what is there to fear? When the maker of all knowable and unknowable things has your back, there's no reason to ever look behind your back. The first humans lived in the presence of an infinite God who was near them in their finitude, an unknowable Divine who made himself known.

This gift of connection with God was all they truly needed. But eventually, they conflated *connection* with *control*. God's *presence with* them in the garden did not mean *permission without* him throughout the garden. The humans had been made in the *image* of God, which is distinct from being gods themselves. In the ancient world, while the gods of pagan religions had idols—statues, monuments, and various images—intended to revere and represent the image of the deities in the physical world, Yahweh desired no such idols because human beings were his image bearers. But in conflating connection with control, the first humans gradually came to misunderstand the meaning of image-bearing.

N. T. Wright notes, “[Humans are an] angled mirror, reflecting God's wise order into the world and reflecting the praises of all

creation back to the Creator.”⁹⁹ Adam and Eve turned the mirror onto themselves, and seeing perceived lack (unopened eyes) and a desirable thing (the fruit) that would presumably give them what they desired (opened eyes to arbitrate good and evil), they took that which was not theirs to take. They attempted to wrest control from God. But ongoing connection amid loving presence is always and only built on trust, never control. Between the Creator God and created humans, the created must trust, completely and wholeheartedly, that the Creator is in control and desires our good. Any attempt to take control leads inevitably to fear, as we discover that left to ourselves, we are vulnerable and exposed, naked, afraid, and ashamed.

Where Is He? Where Are You?

I recently met with a young man named Kevin, who had been attending our church for a few years. We had never spoken before, and he didn't provide much detail about why he wanted to meet, only mentioning that he felt compelled to share something with me after one of our services. He walked into my office wearing a hat from an exclusive golf course, designer jeans, and a pair of limited-edition sneakers I'd only seen on Instagram. But more than anything, he wore trepidation. Kevin went on to share with me that he'd grown up in a Christian family, had served as a worship leader at a large church for several years, and had spent much of his young adult life, in his words, “on fire for the Lord.”

In recent years, after marriage, a child, and a career shift into the tech industry, his devotion had waned. He couldn't recall any distinct moment or identifiable experience that had led him here, but he knew that a deep, rich life with God was something of his past, not his present. But a teaching at a Sunday gathering about

hungering and thirsting for more of God's presence had struck a chord. As Kevin continued sharing he became visibly emotional. Several times he composed himself and said, "I don't know why I'm crying." It reminded me of the poignant opening line from Julian Barnes's memoir: "I don't believe in God, but I miss Him."¹⁰ Somewhere along the way, Kevin had exchanged presence for absence. He'd once known the joy of life with God. His attention and his affections had been centered on the constant immanence of God's glory and goodness, everywhere and anywhere, in any and all circumstances. But on this day, this young man found himself sobbing in my office because he'd gained the whole world but lost his soul.

I sat and listened and tried my best to be present. As I did, I realized that my presence with Kevin in this moment was about much more than pastoral responsibility. It was about embodying to him and for him what was actually true beneath the surface of his pain and the vastness of his estrangement.

"Kevin, I don't think God is trying to hide from you." I said. "I think God is much closer than you realize."

"Where, exactly?" he replied.

I was fascinated by his response. I knew what he meant by "where." In some strange, cosmic way, Kevin was curious about location and proximity. This is what most of us mean when we ask the question, Where is God? We're searching for God's coordinates, so to speak. We want to know how long of a trip he or we might need to take to get together. But God himself pulls this paradigm apart.

"Am I only a God nearby," declares the LORD, "and not a God far away? Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see

them?” declares the LORD. “Do not I fill heaven and earth?” declares the Lord. (Jeremiah 23:23-24)

A theology of God’s omnipresence tells us that there is no place we can go where he is not near. As the psalmist asks, “Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?” (Psalm 139:7).

So, the question isn’t “Where is God?” The question is one God asks of us—the same question he asked of the first humans in the garden. It’s a question not of proximity or location; God isn’t just omnipresent, he is also omnipotent, so the exact whereabouts of Adam and Eve were never a mystery to him. It’s a question about presence.

The Lord God called to the man, “Where are you?”



Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. When your mind wanders, where does it wander to most often? Why do you think that might be?
 2. What are you trying to control, and what specific fear(s) might be driving that desire to control?
 3. When God asks, “Where are you?,” how would you answer today?
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