

Living Into Focus: Choosing What Matters in an Age of Distraction **By Arthur Boers**

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Arthur Boers is a professor at Tyndale Seminary in Toronto. He was a pastor for sixteen years and served on the faculty of the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary. He is the author of six books including *The Way is Made by Walking: A Pilgrimage Along the Camino de Santiago* (InterVarsity, 2007). Among the great influences on his thought and life are Eugene Peterson and, above all, Albert Borgman, the philosopher and critic of technology at the University of Montana.

Boers is concerned about the increasing speed and distraction of modern life, especially as this is driven by technology. Our attention span is brief. Our lives are given to growing numbers of gadgets and devices that sometimes draw us together but more often than not pull us apart. *Living Into Focus* offers a wonderful, extended wake-up call to see how our technological society has deeply affected and often deformed or cheapened our lives. Our collective worship and singing is often drowned out and suppressed more than aided by the loud, worship-band-centered, big screen approach adopted by so many churches today. Website-based church newsletters can inadvertently reduce people's live interactions by ending their need to catch up on the news by speaking to each other. Not just church but education, work, home life, parenting, recreation . . . every aspect of life is affected by technology. The upside of technology is wonderful. But we are making a huge mistake if we are not thoughtful about the trade-offs, "side effects," and unforeseen, unpredictable consequences of technology. We have become tools of our tools as Thoreau once warned. The values embedded in technology subtly and not so subtly shape our character and our community.

Technology's devoted promoters start to scream about this time: "Luddite"! "Out of touch with reality." "Hopelessly nostalgic and culturally conservative"! To be sure, Boers (me too!) believes that we must learn to say "No" to some technology, to set limits and boundaries, to make sure (as I have often written) that technology is in the *toolbox* of life, not on the *throne*. But here is where Boers's message is, following Albert Borgman, at its best. Boers argues that the best defense is a good offense. We need to proactively construct our lives and relationships around what Borgman calls *focal practices*. Get those focal practices in place and technology should retreat to its proper, wonderful place. Pay attention here: Boers's message is predominantly a big "Yes" (to focal practices), not an unrelieved "No" to negative technology practices and impacts.

Focal practices are activities, postures, and behaviors that demand our focus, our clear attention. Boers points out that the Latin root of our word "focus" is cognate with "hearth" and "heart"; focus is about attending to the hearth and heart of our lives and relationships. Focal practices have three characteristics: (1) commanding presence, (2) continuity and connectedness, and (3) centering power. Commanding presence means they demand our effort and energy. They have elements of unpredictability. They often induce awe and humility. Second, they create and sustain relationships

with very real, present others. And third, they have centering power --- that is, they pull us toward something greater than ourselves.

Learning to play a musical instrument, preparing and enjoying meals together, quilting, gardening, and walking or hiking are examples --- as is (or should be) our joining together in worship. Boers describes how walking has changed his life --- in his neighborhood but also in the wilderness and, significantly, among pilgrims for a month on the Camino de Santiago in southern France and northern Spain. Another of his focal practice revolutions was when he and his wife remodeled their kitchen into a space that welcomed their children and guests to pull up a chair or join in food preparation; this changed their family life profoundly.

Ok. My techie friends have objected that we can't all retreat to the quasi-wilderness of Montana with Eugene Peterson and Albert Borgman. We don't all have the vocational flexibility of a professor to walk to work and garden a little every day. And not only is it the case that many or most of us *cannot* make such radical changes, many of us *should not* follow these gurus to Montana even if we could! Our calling is precisely to take Christ into the technological hubbub of Manhattan or Silicon Valley or Paris --- not to escape or abandon it.

So what is Boers's message for us ambassadors to high tech urban centers? Same thing, I would argue! In the midst of chaotic schedules and beeping smartphones is precisely where God calls us to find or create relevant, contextualized focal practices. A healthy Silicon Valley career --- just like that of a Montana-based writer --- requires focal practices like meditation and study, prayer groups, jogging at noon, the evening walk, the music lesson or dance group, and the household feast on weekends (at least). Boers never suggests that technology per se is evil, nor does he invite us all to move out into rural communes. His message, so biblical, so appropriate today, is to be thoughtful and aware and make space and time in our lives for what is truly important. This book gets an "A."