

LIVING
INTO
FOCUS

Choosing What Matters in an Age of Distractions

ARTHUR BOERS

FOREWORD BY Eugene H. Peterson



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To
Albert Borgmann
Eugene Peterson
and David Wood
“No one I’d rather be with.”

CONTENTS

Foreword by Eugene H. Peterson ix
Acknowledgments xiii
Introduction xvii

Part 1 Focus Matters

1. Stumbling into Focus 3
2. Awe and Inspiration 25
3. Focal Connectedness 35
4. Focal Centering and Orienting Power 47

Part 2 Losing Our Focus

5. Going on the ALERT 67
6. Attenuated Attention and Systemic Distraction 79
7. Eliminating Limits and Endangering Taboos 95
8. Eroding Engagement 109
9. Remote Relationships 121
10. Taxed Time 137
11. Sundering Space 157

Part 3 Finding Our Focus

12. Finding and Funding Focal Fundamentals 177

Conclusion 203
Notes 209
Index 223

FOREWORD

One of the disturbing features of contemporary culture—some think it qualifies as *most* disturbing—is the extent to which modern technology is impoverishing the way we live. Many voices have been raised in the last fifty years calling attention to the devastation being wreaked on our lives by our indiscriminate and un-discerning embrace of technology.

Arthur Boers is one of these voices. He has identified the Montana philosopher Albert Borgmann as a major prophet of our times with a remarkable ability to separate the chaff in our culture from the grain, and Boers has taken him on as a mentor. For several years he has absorbed Borgmann’s philosophical analyses and concerns and in this book has written a kind of journal of his own personal “taking up with the world” (Borgmann’s phrase) in ways that contribute to a life of wealth and enrichment.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, when technology was not nearly as advanced and omnipresent as it is now, Henry David Thoreau was alarmed when he observed that so many people were living lives of “quiet desperation.” He responded by constructing and then living in a small cabin on Walden Pond to see if it was possible to live a life of simplicity and wealth in a culture of increasingly depersonalized and demeaning clutter. His witness to his life in that cabin, *Walden*, is an enduring monument to the fact that it is possible.

Arthur Boers in this book gives a similar witness, but in a very different setting. One difference is that since the days of Thoreau technology has penetrated virtually every area and detail of our lives. For most of us there is no escaping it, nor would we want to, for it brings many goods and conveniences into our lives. But a more significant difference between *Walden* and this book is that Dr. Boers does not radically separate himself from the world of technology by living alone on a New England pond. He has married and raised a family, he is a professor and a pastor, he owns and drives a car, has central heating in his home, carries a watch and uses a computer.

The usefulness of this book is not in its arguments or preachments (there is virtually none of that) and not in doomsday warnings and irritable complaints (these are also absent) but in its witness, the actual practices that develop into a coherent way of life, practices that any of us can embrace, practices that engage with things local, practices that nurture personal friendships, practices that maintain a close and friendly relationship with the terrain and weather in the place where we live.

It is important also to say what this book is not. It is not a book of condescending advice or a blueprint for imposing suggestions or “plans” for a wholesale renovation of a life that is out of control. Rather, it is a personal working through and reflection on the difficulties of swimming against the stream of contemporary culture and at the same time developing the focal practices that enable any one of us to revel in the good life that the Christian way invites us into.

Jesus famously said, “I have come that they may have life, and have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). Or to put it more directly in the second person, “I have come that you might live a generous life.”

Despite its staggering achievements in raising our standard of living, our technology-dominated society is impoverishing far too many lives. The good life, the generous life, the abundant life has obviously eluded technology.

This is a huge irony. We live in a society that has achieved a standard of living that surpasses the wildest dreams of most of the people in the history of the world; the most conspicuous result is that far too many of us live poor, thin, trivializing lives. Advanced technology is the most prominent feature of contemporary life. It is glittering and glamorous. It disburdens us of laborious and grueling labor, promises

an easier life, a more leisurely life. But there are dangers hidden in the glitter that betray the promises it offers.

So we learn to distinguish between standard of living and wealth. Standard of living simply means more money, faster cars, and bigger houses. Wealth comprises living well, having friends, exercising compassion, enjoying and celebrating goodness and beauty, and worshiping God. The concern of Dr. Boers is not to eliminate technology but to restrain technology so that it doesn't ruin our lives by depersonalizing them, disengaging us from the immediate everydayness of things and persons. For many years now, he has embraced Borgmann's passion for living a generous life. He has put the philosopher's diagnosis and concerns into practice in the context of his own life and work. This book is his personal witness to the practices that develop into a life of wealth, of generous abundance.

Most of us know far more about the Christian faith than we manage to live. There is no lack of words in the Christian community these days regarding spiritual formation, finding ways to think adequately about the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and receiving all the operations of the Trinity. Arthur Boers takes all this a step further. He takes what we know into our neighborhoods and backyards, our homes and workplaces. He then helps us get it all into our bones and muscles, our nerve endings and synapses as we drive our cars, use our computers, work our gardens, cook our meals, and eat together.

Eugene H. Peterson
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Three friends in particular inform and inspire this book: Albert Borgmann, Eugene Peterson, and David Wood. I am grateful for the many ways that our lives intersect and how our friendships came to involve their spouses, Jan Peterson, Jennifer Wood, and the late Nancy Borgmann. These six people do not just talk the talk or dream the dreams—they embody the priorities, potentials, and practices of focal living.

I appreciate how Albert Borgmann gave generously of his time in correspondence, telephone conversations, and face-to-face meetings—even venturing to the Elkhart Consultation (2008) at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS) with professors, pastors, writers, and activists to discuss the implications of focal living.

Eugene Peterson has been unstintingly supportive of this project in his regular pastoral inquiries about its progress, encouragement of my writing, examination of the book's ideas, reading of the manuscript, and generous foreword.

David Wood not only first introduced me to Albert's ideas but is also one of my primary faith and thought partners. We have collaborated on numerous projects over the years, and he helped facilitate the aforementioned Elkhart Consultation.

At the consultation, two people in particular contributed greatly with their expertise on Old Order Anabaptists: Donald Kraybill and Steven Nolt. My thanks as well to the event's other participants: Andy

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Many people graciously talked to me about their focal practices, and they too inspired much of what follows: Ted Klopfenstein on long-distance endurance horse racing; Evelyn Kreider on letter writing; Dick Lehman on pottery; Ruth Mallory on birding; Verlin Miller on wood-working; Leroy and Winifred Saner on gardening, hospitality, and quilting; Rachel Shenk on her European bakery; Stan and Carolyn Smith on music, family life, television abstinence, bicycling, and doing-it-yourself; Don Steider on building one's own log cabin home; and Marie Troyer on quilting. Ray and Aki Epp of Menno Village, Hokkaido, Japan, hosted me for a wonderful visit where I witnessed firsthand their commitment to focal living. Another key conversation partner was Brent Graber, the go-to IT person at AMBS who blended technological expertise with theological and philosophical insights. I also talked over many ideas with our friends Kathy and Willard Fenton-Miller, all the while admiring their devotion to focal practices of cooking, hospitality, conversation, poetry, music, woodworking, and carpentry.

While I have been dreaming about this project for a long time, work on it began in earnest when my previous employer, Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, kindly granted me a sabbatical. Research and travel were made possible by a generous Christian Faith and Life Program grant from the Louisville Institute (funded by the Lilly Endowment). Tyndale Seminary, my present employer, also encouraged me in this book's completion, even as I was acclimating to a challenging new position.

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and I was repeatedly astonished by what she found. “How did I miss that?” I wondered over and over again. Erin also painstakingly transcribed the focal interviews. This is the third of my books she’s helped with, and I can no longer imagine completing one without her.

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My last words are for my greatest inspirations. My deepest thanks are for Lorna McDougall, my spouse of over three decades, and our daughter and son, Erin and Paul. These three dear ones continue to teach me about and challenge me to embrace focal faithfulness. When I grow up, I want to be like them. They lead the kinds of lives that I admire and want to emulate; they show me what is most valuable and most worthwhile.

Epiphanytide 2011
Glad River
Fraserburg, Ontario

INTRODUCTION

The stress of seventh grade started me sleepwalking. Staying balanced in life has been a challenge ever since.

More than once my parents, reading or watching TV hours after I had gone to bed, looked up to find a barefooted twelve-year-old with pillow-mussed hair heading determinedly toward the back door in search of something outside. They got up, caught me by the arm, argued with me, turned me around, and insisted I return to bed. The next morning I would invariably recall a frustrated nightmare of my parents not allowing me to go where I knew that I urgently must.

When we consulted our family physician, he said my nocturnal strolling was likely a sign of stress. But, really, seventh-grade stress?

I had that year transferred from a private church school to a public junior high. The new school divided the seventh grade into sections—7-1, 7-2, 7-3—and it was no secret that these were academic distinctions. Administrators, unsure how to interpret my private school grades, took the middle road and placed me in 7-2.

I was unhappy. I wanted to be recognized as an academic achiever, and, besides, my best friend was in 7-1. I strove and studied all semester with the hope of being promoted. I worked hard every day. I prepared for everything, even the simplest spelling test. I did hours of homework each evening and on Saturdays. Thank goodness my strict Calvinist family forbade homework on Sundays, or I would never have known any break at all.

Stress has been my steady companion ever since. Along the way people have called me “workaholic” and “Type A.” I am a responsible oldest child, firmly raised in a Protestant work ethic, son of a businessman and employer who expected employees to give their all. I took seriously all those hard-earned lessons that grandparents and parents told me about the challenges of living through the deprivations of the Depression, scarcities in Nazi-occupied Netherlands, and hardships of immigration to Canada with nothing but a trunk of possessions to call one’s own. Not surprisingly, I have also struggled along the way with melancholy, depression, exhaustion, and occasional burnout.

Yet such strains are no longer the domain for driven overachievers alone. Our culture has a prevailing sense of being too busy, having too much to do, without enough time for things that matter and priorities that really count. Feeling worried and burdened is an unhappy reality that many of us experience, and we encounter it unrelentingly. Stressing out in seventh grade may have made me an oddball; but I’m not alone anymore.

I meet a lot of folks who are unhappy, stressed, depressed, eating poorly, and not getting enough exercise. Some weeks I feel that at least half the people who are important to me—friends and family alike—are on various medications, just to cope with life’s daily realities. And this in a culture that boasts of being the most affluent and most knowledgeable in the history of the world. The simple fact, as philosopher Albert Borgmann reminds us, is “that people regularly make choices that are counterproductive to the happiness they want.”¹ Study after study shows that numerous daily realities contribute to declining happiness and growing depression:

- commuting
- watching television
- spending time online
- being cut off from nature
- not having enough friendships
- living out of sync with natural and biological rhythms
- insufficient sleep
- feeling distracted

No wonder so many people pursue better living through pharmaceuticals.

Something's not working. "Labor-saving" devices make us busier. The faster computers go, the more time we give to them. As highways and cars improve, we drive farther and vehicles become increasingly expensive. Email speeds communications but eats up greater amounts of time. With the ongoing invention of "essential" devices (even energy-efficient ones), we consume growing quantities of power. I don't know about your house, but we have power strips in numerous rooms; wall outlets no longer suffice.

It's a wonder, then, that there's not an epidemic of sleepwalking these days. Or perhaps there is. Many of us sense that there's something fundamentally awry with our pace of life. Yet we don't know what choice we have or how to make a change or whether we can do anything. We impotently go through days filled with situations and circumstances and demands that feel as though they're taking us off course, leaving us unbalanced, throwing our lives off kilter. But we are as ineffective at bringing change as I was in trying to get my parents to allow me to wander the night air in my sleep. Too much of our lives are fragmented and frantic, leaving us frustrated.

Those formerly popular bumper stickers—"I'd rather be [sailing, fishing, quilting, gardening]"—were a forlorn cry for lost and displaced priorities. Putting those notices on cars made sense, as driving is a primary culprit in refashioning our lives in unhelpful ways, taking time and opportunities away from our highest and most rewarding commitments.

Pilgrims and Seekers Looking for Something More

Decades after my sleepwalking episodes, another kind of walking helped me see with a little more clarity and deeper understanding some of the issues that face all of us.

I once walked five hundred miles to attend a church service.² I am hardly the kind of guy that one might envision going on such a long, arduous journey. After all, for most of my life I loathed athletics. In high school I dropped phys ed as soon as it was no longer mandatory. I admired Mark Twain's rumored approach: "Whenever I get the urge to exercise, I lie down until it goes away." But in midlife, I surprised myself by starting to hike and learning the joys of doing so. Within a

few years I found myself on the Camino de Santiago, the most famous Christian pilgrimage route for walkers.

My physical achievement of averaging sixteen miles a day for thirty-one days was not the most amazing aspect of the venture. Nor was it the fact that I, a Protestant minister, was on a pilgrimage, a practice normally associated with other church streams. Nor was it the unexpected reality that I, a driven, workaholic type, somehow found time for such an inefficient excursion. It was not even the reality that that route is rapidly growing in popularity. What most impressed—and perplexed—me was that many, if not most, of those “pilgrims” profess no religious faith or affiliation at all. I know why I am here, I often thought to myself, as unlikely as that may be. But what, I wondered, are *they* doing here?

On the Camino, it is customary to carry a special “passport.” This identification establishes that one is an official pilgrim, authorizes one to stay in affordable hostels along the way, and—if it is stamped daily—qualifies one to receive a much-coveted certificate from the Cathedral of Santiago at the end of the journey. When acquiring this passport, pilgrims designate their motives as “religious,” “spiritual,” or “other.” “Religious” means traditional pilgrimage priorities—prayer, penance, honoring tradition, reflection, et cetera. This was my category. “Spiritual” is vaguer, a motivation other than traditional Christian impulses but different from secular intentions or pursuits. Many in this category told me that they were “spiritual but not religious,” a familiar notion in our culture. Those who labeled themselves “other” were on the pilgrimage for various reasons—the physical challenge, an opportunity to get away, an economical vacation, or a desire to hike a long distance in good company.

Although I confidently claimed the “religious” category, the “spiritual” and “other” folks intrigued me the most. There were so many of them and they raised startling and unexpected questions. Those pilgrims kept pondering the strange, unsatisfying ways that many of us live today.

Eugene Peterson, a writer who blends poetry and prophetic passion with what he learned as a pastor for some three decades, cautions that in current ways of life “the wonder has leaked out.”³ That certainly rings true to me. We are all aware of a sense of hurry in our culture. In the last church I pastored, congregants identified busyness as their

key spiritual challenge and asked church elders for help. The elders agreed that this was a significant concern but then took two years to get around to addressing the issue . . . because they had so much to do! Some argue that we North Americans now in fact work longer hours and more days than we did a few decades ago. All of us agree that life feels increasingly full, hectic, and busy.

Plenty of evidence demonstrates the paradoxical reality that affluence leaves many unsettled and deeply dissatisfied. As William Greider suggests, “good times” do not automatically equal the “good life.”⁴ Gregg Easterbrook convincingly shows that “society is undergoing a fundamental shift from ‘material want’ to ‘meaning want,’ with ever larger numbers of people reasonably secure in terms of living standards, but feeling they lack significance in their lives.”⁵ As Bill McKibben observes: “Meaning has been in decline for a very long time.”⁶

Surely it is no coincidence that as we become increasingly overwhelmed by demands and circumstances, our culture evinces deepening interest in spirituality. The evidence is all around. When I attended seminary in the early 1980s, I wrote a thesis about “prayer and peacemaking,” but only two courses on prayer were offered. A couple decades later I taught at that school, and one could get a degree in spirituality. I now teach at another seminary, and it too offers degrees in spiritual formation. These schools reflect wider cultural trends. Consider the shelves and shelves of spiritual materials found in even the most secular bookstores now. Or films and television shows that deal with heaven, hell, angels, demons, healing, and God.

I am increasingly convinced that distracted busyness and exhausting lifestyles drive interest in spirituality today. The sense that there must be “something more” propels quests to find better ways. Folks motivated to live spiritually rich lives do not necessarily go to church, because not many Christians have offered the kind of help they need. Christian lives are just as fragmented and frantic. But seekers are looking nonetheless.

The Camino was a locus of change and transformation. Camino conversations—along the path as we walked, resting at tables in outdoor cafés, sharing tea or wine in the evenings at hostels—were often about what was amiss in our lives. We raised questions about lifestyles, jobs, relationships. We wondered about possible changes that we might, could, or would enact. We made resolutions about how we would reorient our

lives. And when we contacted each other after the pilgrimage, we asked what difference the Camino made.

Frequent discussions among pilgrims dealt with vocational discernment. Marcus of the Netherlands fretted that though he had hoped his job would serve the needs of others, it actually required him to spend most of his time acting as a bureaucratic functionary. Susanne of Austria pondered new work that would allow her to live closer to family and friends. Yuki of Japan realized that her life was perilously out of balance and that her situation could only be redressed by seeking other employment. Hendrika of Belgium saw that her job did not contribute to the wider well-being of others. And I kept coming back to the fact that I felt like an exile where I lived and wanted to return to the country of my birth to be close to family and old friends. The Camino was a context for sorting and weighing priorities.

And so it was not surprising to learn of impressive lifestyle changes that fellow pilgrims made after this journey.

A Spanish factory worker that I met walked the Camino for a month and then gave up his job. He bought and rebuilt an old building in which to offer hospitality to others on the pilgrimage.

A German woman was at a time of transition and went on the pilgrimage, unsure of what was next. In a desolate area one morning she heard a flute playing. It was the host at a nearby hostel. Impressed, she ended her pilgrimage there and now tends to passing pilgrims—feeding them, bandaging feet, and offering massages.

When Jon returned home to North America, he had the resolve to take early retirement so that he could devote himself to pursuing art, something he had wanted to do all his adult years.

These folks longed to experience new ways of living. They desired to be alert, aware, and alive. They sought vigorous engagement. They wanted to find and honor priorities that could reliably guide them on routes to meaningfulness and fulfillment. And somehow the Camino helped.

Each of these folks spoke to me of the courage and clarity that came from walking the Camino. Their bravery inspired me to look carefully at my own life and its unhealthy pace. That was certainly worth the walk, a walk that woke me from automatic and unconscious patterns. I trust that sleepwalking is behind me and that more balanced and invigorating patterns of living are available to all of us.

Antidotes and Anecdotes

I know how hard it is to keep my own life balanced and sane, and I am aware that the ways I use and relate to technology often make things worse. As a family man—father and husband—I have seen the challenges of raising children with a proper regard toward television and computers and other devices while guarding precious time together as a family. As a pastor I knew that many ordinary Christians struggled to honor their responsibilities without being swamped by incessant demands and distractions from work. As a citizen and church member, I see how our communities are fraying as people get more disconnected from each other and the values they hold and espouse. These are realities for all of us. Fretting about such matters is not mere nostalgia for “good old days” that never existed. Our lives are speeding up and changing, and not always for the better. We need help, all of us.

Thus this book is written *personally*. It includes theories and analysis. Yes, theology and history and philosophy are all relevant. They certainly inform and inspire me, and we’ll have glimpses of them along the way.

SEIZE
THE DAY

OR

RECEIVE
THE DAY



They'll help us gain clarity and discernment. It's also important to tell stories, ones that will help us see issues from a different vantage point, expanding our imagination and suggesting innovative possibilities.⁷ And so we'll also speak on a small scale about big issues. I write from within my own experiences and weave in what I've learned from others who strive to live well in these challenging times.

Why do we need this book now? I keep running into people who sense something awry with life. Yet we rush on, as if sleepwalkers on automatic pilot, not knowing the right questions. Albert Borgmann quotes Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, who sees a “narrowing and flattening” of life that results in “a loss of resonance, depth, or richness in our human surroundings.” Borgmann calls this a “diminishment of our lives.”⁸ But it does not have to be this way.

This book attempts to get at some reasons why life for many is not as good and fulfilling as we might wish. And it offers hopeful strategies for living differently and moving forward. We are not without choices. It remains possible to live well. Albert Borgmann is one of my most important teachers on these matters, and I appreciate his counsel to me: “The best thing is knowing that there is good news: it is possible to live the good life.”⁹

Part 1

FOCUS MATTERS

1

STUMBLING INTO FOCUS

In spite of my devotion to studying and working hard, already evident when I was an overachieving, sleepwalking seventh grader, many of life's most important lessons come to me accidentally, slanted and sideways, often when I least expect them.

One year I discovered—stumbled upon, really—two practices that affected me in all kinds of unexpectedly rich and life-giving ways. But I could not explain for the longest time why they were important; I just somehow knew that they were. The two seemingly unrelated phenomena were my taking up a regular practice of hiking and our family's decision to remodel the kitchen. Walking and remodeling afforded me glimmers of deeper understandings that would help me live in richer and more rewarding ways.

Learning to Move at the Speed of Life

The Niagara Escarpment dominates much of southern Ontario. Its most celebrated feature, Niagara Falls, is not its only significance. This glacially formed rocky ridge shapes cities and smaller communities on or near it for hundreds of miles. It is our region's most striking topography, the closest thing we have to a mountain, and it is visible for miles.

Its designation as a UNESCO world biosphere reserve recognizes its ecological value as a shelter for threatened forests and wildlife.

All Ontario schoolchildren study it in geography and science, but I hated those subjects. When I was twelve, the escarpment went from being a geological curiosity to a full-blown personal nuisance. Our family bought a three-acre property halfway up the minimountain, just outside the small town of St. Davids. When I rode my bike to school or to visit friends beneath the escarpment, the ride home was always taxing (even with my spiffy new three speed). A few decades later, however, I began to think more appreciatively of the escarpment.

The Bruce Trail, a natural corridor, is a lovely and often demanding route that follows the escarpment. The five-hundred-mile path—about as long as the Camino de Santiago that I eventually trod—begins near Niagara Falls and ends at Tobermory, the northernmost point of the Bruce Peninsula. For much of my life I lived near the trail, and during my sleepwalking adolescent years we were only a mile or two away. But as I said earlier, I have never been athletic or outdoorsy, and so I was not interested.

One weekend, however, when I was in my early forties, I was captivated by an article in the Saturday edition of the local newspaper, the *Kitchener-Waterloo Record*. Over the course of eighteen months, about a dozen middle-aged women had used their days off to hike the entire Bruce Trail. Within an hour I decided that I too would attempt that journey. The challenge was no small goal for me in my middle age. Long-distance walking, coping with blisters, reading maps, and layering clothing for weather would all be new to me. And there were larger lessons in store as well. In fact, some of my most important discoveries in the last few years were found on these hikes and in my growing interest in walking.

One October Saturday my family joined me for the first stage of this trail, walking with me from Queenston—site of important War of 1812 battles—to the small town of St. Davids, where I spent my adolescent years. The route on that first day was enormously rewarding and the scenery breathtaking.

Just like that I was hooked. I steadily dedicated more days off to the trail. Yet I did not finish the project as quickly as the middle-aged women who inspired me. One complication was that within a year and a half

of starting, we moved south of the border. But then I worked vacation time around this priority, and within five years—the same year that I earned a Camino certificate—I received a Bruce Trail Association End-to-End Award, establishing that I was the 1,987th person who officially completed the entire five hundred miles on foot.

Why did I do it? What kept me going? Especially after the added complication of moving four hundred miles away, making it harder and harder to get back to the trail?

At first it was the same stubborn determination that drove me to work so hard in seventh grade. If I start something, I want to complete it. One of the greatest regular pleasures in my life involves making extensive to-do lists in my calendar and then having the joy of striking those things off as soon as they are completed. I do not just put a checkmark beside the line, or strike through the item. No, I take a black marker and obliterate the assignment from sight. This is a problem, as I occasionally black out the wrong line by mistake.

But while setting and achieving goals are important to me, finishing the Bruce Trail was not only about making a thick black line in my calendar. Something more profound motivated my continued effort. The many rewards intrinsic to hiking kept me moving and would not let me go.

I unexpectedly enjoyed the bodily engagement; awareness of my physical ability inspired me. At each hike's start, I experienced moments of self-doubt and asked myself: What have I gotten into? Am I able to do this? What will it take to complete this day's challenge? But those questions added greatly to my eventual sense of achievement and satisfaction. With each hike I marveled, "I can actually do this!" Such feats had been beyond imagining only a few years earlier.

Surprise at the physical accomplishment came home to me on my very first Bruce Trail hike. Our family started at the trail's official head in Queenston and quickly strolled to and past my former home of St. Davids. This was striking because as a boy my best friend was in Queenston and I never went there on my own steam. It was too far to bike, I thought, let alone go on foot. I always begged rides from my parents. But here we all were, easily covering that distance in just a couple hours. Now when I look at a map of southern Ontario, I can hardly believe that I've walked five hundred miles of it. Suddenly, a

significant part of the province is familiar from the ground level because of hiking the Bruce.

One August day, David Wood and I trekked up Mt. Washington, the highest peak in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. I'd been there as a child forty years earlier when our family drove up, and I was duly impressed. But doing the physical work, encountering unpredictably raw weather and 60-miles-per-hour winds on the way (something for which this mountain is famous), and feeling leg muscle pain from physical exertion made all the difference between engaging the mountain and merely visiting it. Hiking allowed me to see my surroundings more vividly than viewing Mt. Washington's beauty through a windshield screen could (thus experiencing the ascent as though it were another television show or webcast). The slow, taxing journey meant observing and absorbing the gradual shift from lush forest to scrub above the tree line and finally to mostly bare rocks with patches of moss and leathery grass. Add to the diverse landscape the enjoyable company of a good friend and the camaraderie of other hikers that we met along the way. While Mt. Washington is known for its view of several states and even of distant Canada, when we climbed we were enveloped in clouds at the top and could hardly see ten feet ahead of us, let alone distant vistas. Had I driven up Mt. Washington, I might have felt that the excursion was a waste of time. But hiking was such a complex and rich experience that it was easily worth it, even without being able to view the famous and stunning scenery from the lookout.

In a culture shaped by technology, we expect good things to be easily, uniformly, and immediately available. Turn on the television and see something beautiful. Or heat your frozen ratatouille in the microwave. We regard children as immature for being impatient, but our gadgets train us to expect immediate gratification. Yet mountains, forests, wilderness, and other natural wonders are best enjoyed and most rewarding when we undergo their demands on us and take them seriously as they are, not as one more notch on a tourist checklist. I despair when I hear that the average visit to the Grand Canyon, this natural marvel, is only twenty-two minutes, making it a quick checklist item for quickly passing tourists.

I regret that it took me so long to make the acquaintance of the Niagara Escarpment and its Bruce Trail. A casual Saturday morning

decision to hike the trail—I say this with no exaggeration—changed my life. That commitment presented me with new realities and questions that have since affected my daily mode of travel, choice of church, priorities in shopping and eating, understanding of how cities and suburbs are arranged, decisions about recreation and how many vehicles to own, and on and on. I thought I was taking on a temporary challenge; instead, the Bruce Trail slowly began to convert me. I am still surprised that I now hike; I have long had an aversion to athletics. But in recent years I discovered other rewarding sports too: walking, biking, canoeing, kayaking. And it all began with the Bruce Trail.

I should not give the impression that my approach to life shifted quickly or easily. Soon after I began hiking, I went to a conference at Holden Village, a remote, off-the-grid Lutheran retreat center in Washington's northern Cascades. I was delighted to find excellent trails near the conference grounds. Every day I set out, going greater and greater distances. As someone who never grew up around mountains, viewing the miles and miles of snowcapped peaks seemed like a fantasy. I knew that there were bears and cougars around and looked for evidence of them. I saw marmots for the first time. At the end of each jaunt, I came back fatigued and sore, longing for a hot bath. But I also felt fulfilled and even exhilarated.

In my Holden Village small group was an acquaintance named Kay. She is around my age and happens to be a therapist. Kay noticed how deeply important my walks were to me. As soon as she pointed this out, I knew that she was right. The act of hiking was knitting me together, making me whole. Once she observed that, I became more committed to regular walking.

Even with my awareness of its benefits, however, I was not yet able to articulate hiking's importance to me. Ultimately, my ideas about why hiking was so meaningful and transformative were clarified in conjunction with another practice that my family took on—something else that I knew was vital but was unable to explain exactly why.

Too Many Cooks, Not Enough Kitchen

My wife and I are not do-it-yourselfers, but we have an unfortunate habit of purchasing houses that need work. Our first house required a

new roof, as did our second. We wondered whether it was our mission to keep shinglers in business. In three of our houses we removed 1970s-era wall-to-wall green shag carpeting. Another mission, apparently.

We thought ourselves clever with the third house: the roof was new, had a warranty, and looked like it would last a long, long time. The only green carpeting was on the stairs and in one hall, not too onerous to amend. The kitchen, however, was a problem.

The small, dimly lit space was easy for one person to navigate, but two adults were not able to wash dishes side by side. Cooking together was an exercise in frustration. And if someone would dare to look in the refrigerator while another family member was preparing a meal, then this was grounds for major conflict. We had too many cooks and not enough kitchen. And we knew that the problem would only get worse when our grade-school children became adolescents and needed more physical space.

Lorna began to lobby for a kitchen renovation. She's patient and I am stubborn—not to mention cheap—and so this campaign took some years to persuade me. I did not particularly like the kitchen, but having averted the cost of replacing a roof, I wanted to keep avoiding other large house expenditures. The renovation seemed like a needless luxury to me. Lorna is not only patient, but she is also persistent. So she periodically raised this possibility. And, gradually, very gradually, I was won over because—as I used to say in the premarital counseling that I offered as a pastor—“Happy spouse, happy house.”

With the help of a craftsman and contractor from our church, we came up with a plan that changed not just the kitchen but also our house and, in fact, our family life. We expanded the tiny workspace to include an adjoining room that until then had functioned as a large hallway with a piano and storage capacity. At my insistence, we moved the sink from facing the wall to overlooking the backyard, adding pleasure to dishwashing. We installed warm-looking oak cabinets and atmospheric lighting.

The result was a bright and inviting room, a convivial place to be and to work, to eat and to visit. Washing dishes and preparing meals were suddenly more appealing. Lorna and I noticed that we collaborated better in the kitchen. The expanded space also included a wooden table beside an enlarged window where our family ate meals together.

When the children came home from school, they did their work at that table, while Lorna or I bustled at the counter. They invariably did not have much to say upon their arrival. “How was your day?” we routinely asked. “Okay,” was the ritual response. “What’s new?” came the parental rejoinder. “Nothing,” was the predictable answer. But as Erin and Paul did homework, they often gradually struck up conversations with whichever one of us was chopping vegetables, doing dishes, or cooking supper.

We noticed that with the new kitchen the family enjoyed sitting together, even long after the evening meal was done. We often set aside dishes and continued dinnertime conversations. Lorna made tea and we savored each other’s company. Our evenings were more focused on each other and less on the distractions of television and computers.

The kitchen had become the nucleus of our house, its heart, and suddenly our home grew a lot warmer and more enjoyable. We discovered this only by accident. Years later, Verlin Miller, artisan woodworker, told me that a house’s primary room is its kitchen, a social place that is the center of activities. With our new kitchen, Lorna and I found ourselves increasingly willing and better able to host guests and get-togethers.

One of our biggest sorrows in leaving that house was letting go of the kitchen that we both loved. The next place we bought partly commended itself to us because its kitchen was large. Unfortunately, what it mostly had was “potential.” This time, however, when Lorna began suggesting it was time for a renovation, it did not take me as long to agree.

As with the hiking, I suspected that there were deeper things to be learned from the kitchen. I knew that the hiking and the revitalized kitchen were important, but I still had trouble precisely articulating why.

Searching for Something More

Within six months of beginning to tackle the Bruce Trail and around the same time that we were regularly gathering with friends and family in our renovated kitchen, a philosopher helped me understand the meaning of what was happening. I realized that things true of my hiking also resonated with our kitchen experience (and later in the testimonies of fellow pilgrims along the Camino). Suddenly, many previously inexplicable phenomena made sense.

Back in the late 1990s, David Wood encouraged me to read Albert Borgmann, a philosopher of technology who has taught at the University of Montana since 1970. I quickly read two books, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life* and *Crossing the Postmodern Divide*. I learned a lot about how our lives are deeply affected by our use of technology. But at first I was unsure of the implications for my own life and ministry.

David, then associate director at the Louisville Institute, organized what became known as the Missoula Consultation. In March 2001 he brought in Borgmann and noted writer Eugene Peterson as conversation partners. He also invited a couple dozen Christian leaders—pastors, scholars, writers, editors, journalists—to reflect on the implications of Borgmann’s work.

The event came at an intensely busy time. I was pastoring a church, teaching a graduate level course, and finishing up my doctoral dissertation. In some ways I’d not changed my harried pace much since seventh grade, I guess. But I was determined to go to the Missoula Consultation. My wife picked me up at the end of my all-day Saturday class and drove me to the airport. Once there, I discovered that a snowstorm threatened to cancel many flights. Although the weather was frightening, I arrived safely and on time. I was exhausted because of my recent schedule, but I never doubted that I needed to be part of the conversation in Missoula.

As I considered Borgmann’s ideas—both in the reading and rereading leading up to the consultation and the conversations at the event—I came to a deeper sense of why hiking and a lovely kitchen were worthwhile. They are not merely privileged middle-class hobbies or luxuries. No, their implications go deeper. Rigorous, long-distance walking outdoors and creating a convivial place to cook and host were meeting needs that Lorna and I felt but didn’t fully understand. These undertakings were what Albert Borgmann calls focal practices—activities that center, balance, focus, and orient one’s life.

Everywhere we turn, people say that they are overwhelmed by their schedules, just too busy. Parents complain of time spent shuttling children from one extracurricular activity to another. Children are introduced to using planners in elementary school. Folks spend hours of their day commuting from behind the wheel. At every committee meeting at work or church or in the community, the lengthiest discussion usually

comes at the end of the agenda when the group attempts to determine a common time slot for the next gathering. One writer I admire describes our lives as being marked by “pathological busyness, distraction, and restlessness.”¹

This unsettled sense of being harried, hurried, and harassed is not just anecdotal. Statistics suggest that North Americans may in fact be working longer and longer hours. Our lives are congested with demands and expectations. Every era has its own particular obstacles and challenges to the spiritual life. Busyness is a significant one these days. We live in a culture to which Exxon Speedpass’s promise of “Less Stop. More Go” appeals.

As we have seen, even while people are preoccupied with stress and busyness—“hurry poverty” or “time sickness”—there is also an astonishing and steadily rising interest in spirituality. I grow increasingly convinced that our emerging fascination is intrinsically related to our frenetic lifestyles. People feel distracted, disoriented, dissipated, and despairing. They sense that there is something more, and their deep yearning is a response to the mad pace of their lives.

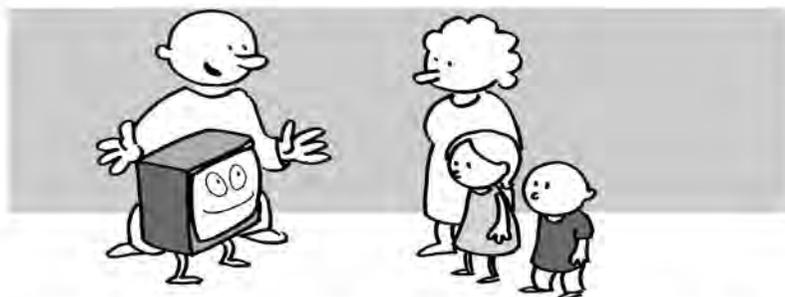
Albert Borgmann argues that our contemporary culture—with its emphasis on putting technology and consumerism and devices at the center of our lives—shapes our characters, our families, and our friendships. In fact, he would contend that the forces of technology and consumerism too often deeply *deform* us. Yet at the same time he holds out alternative ways of living, favoring a lifestyle that he calls “focal.” He’s been talking and writing about these things for a long time, and recently, popular literature is taking up similar concerns with such titles as *Hamlet’s Blackberry*, *The Shallows*, *Alone Together*, and *The Tyranny of Email*. Consider, for example, this *New York Times* headline: “More Americans Sense a Downside to an Always Plugged-In Existence.”²

Focal living, as advocated by Borgmann, helps us identify and perceive the “something more” that people seek. When our existence seems shallow and unfulfilling, he commends focal concerns that “center and illuminate our lives.”³ Focal things and focal practices move, teach, inspire, and reassure. Focal living poses a telling contrast to many realities of our lives today that merely “lead to a disconnected, disembodied, and disoriented sort of life.”⁴

Finding the Focal

Borgmann’s “focal” terminology sounds promising, but what does it mean? *Focal* is not a long word—only two syllables. We sometimes use *focal point* metaphorically to describe something that is of central interest, our highest priority, or the main thrust of an argument. *Focal* has to do with being focused and centered on what is meaningful.

A simple but revealing question for any of us would be to consider what the center of our home is. The kitchen? The living room? The porch? Many houses that I visit have their primary room oriented toward a television—perhaps a large, on-the-wall plasma screen—or some other “entertainment center.” The “family room” is often organized for watching television, surfing the net, or playing virtual games, not for engaging other members of the family, let alone neighbors or guests. In our 2007 interview, Borgmann contended that television is of moral importance: “When I teach my ethics course I tell these relatively young people that the most important decision that they’ll make about their household is first whether they’re going to get a television and then second where they’re going to put it.”



THINK ABOUT HOW TECHNOLOGY SHAPES YOUR LIFE

The word *focus* comes from the Latin word for “hearth”—a woodstove or fireplace, an essential item for comfort and even survival in many climates. A hearth—as its name implies—is often at the *heart* or center of a house. A lot of attention goes into maintaining a hearth, keeping it in good and safe working order, supplying it with fuel. Especially in cold weather, people and pets will cluster around this spot. When our family went to an off-the-grid cottage each summer, my children loved to have me make tea and start a fire each chilly morning. They snuggled in sleeping bags, sipped their steaming drinks, and sat mesmerized by the flames.

As Borgmann notes, hearths have always had symbolic power.

In ancient Greece, a baby was truly joined to the family and household when it was carried about the hearth and placed before it. The union of a Roman marriage was sanctified at the hearth. And at least in the early periods the dead were buried by the hearth. The family ate by the hearth and made sacrifices to the housegods before and after the meal. The hearth sustained, ordered, and centered house and family.⁵

He shows that even though we no longer invest fireplaces and woodstoves with explicit sacred meaning, we surround them with “precious things of the family’s history,” including photos of loved ones.⁶ A friend once lived in a small, inner-city Chicago apartment with a fireplace that no longer functioned. He put special objects—a piece of art, pottery, a lovely feather, a fetching rock—on the mantelpiece and called it his “altar.” The symbolic power of such devices is so compelling that many houses now are outfitted with gas fireplaces to draw people cozily together in front of the flames. One can also get DVDs or programs to turn television sets or computer screens into mock fireplaces.

Lorna and I visited Albert and Nancy Borgmann in their chalet-style home where they lived for around four decades. It is perched on a slope above the Rattlesnake Wilderness Area just outside Missoula, overlooking several mountain ranges. Although they did not design the house, it was easy to see one of its important attractions. At the center of the main floor is a massive fireplace constructed from local stones. It stands at the junction of the kitchen, dining area, and living room. There is not a television to be found. Even though he is over seventy, Albert still chops, hauls, and supplies the wood for the hearth.

The attraction of such centers—woodstoves, fireplaces—is not only symbolic but also practical and functional. One February when I was a teenager, our family went overseas to the Netherlands and stayed with my grandmother in her small row house. Like many Dutch domiciles in the 1970s, her home did not have central heating but was furnished with a *haard*—Dutch for “hearth”—in the main room, a combination living and dining room. Fed by piped-in fuel, its flames barely visible through the screen, it was the sole heat available. The rest of the house was shut off and thus cold and damp. When going to bed, one hustled as quickly as possible through chilly bathroom ablutions, tossed on several layers of bedclothes, and climbed between clammy sheets, waiting to warm up. In the evenings, the family stayed close together in the living/dining room reading, talking, visiting, studying, or watching television. That *haard* was a technological device that pulled people together and gave families and friends a focus.

Other devices have similar potential.

When I walked the Camino early one summer, having enough water was a priority but almost never a worry. Every village we passed through had a prominent fountain, and usually the water was drinkable. By fountain I do not mean one of those white porcelain sinks we find on the walls of hallways in schools, churches, and public buildings here in North America. Those often offer only a dribble of liquid and make you wonder what germs you might be risking when you use them. Rather, in Spain the fountains are impressive brick or stone structures six feet high or taller. They draw on local springs and pour out a steady stream. The fountains usually collect and retain their flow in a large basin or a small pool. The accumulated water was suitable for laundering—I occasionally used one that way after a long day’s hiking—but it had other purposes too. Once I ate lunch in a small village, perched on a wooden bench outside a café. I watched as a dozen cows casually strolled down the main street, drank from the village fountain, and then turned and headed back up the road, presumably toward their home.

Those fountains were gathering and resting places for pilgrims. Snacks were shared. Maps were compared and routes discussed. Counsel was offered about the route. Blisters were tended. Faces and feet were rinsed and cooled. Encouragement was given to one another.

The fountains were also crucial to village life. We often saw elderly men sitting nearby, as they obviously did day after day, swapping news and gossiping, visiting and holding court. But, alas, the importance of such focal places is passing even in Spain. Richard E. Sclove writes about studies done in one Spanish village after it benefited from the arrival of running water.

With pipes running directly to their homes, [villagers] no longer had to fetch water from the . . . fountain. As families gradually purchased washing machines, fewer women gathered to scrub laundry by hand at the village washbasin. Arduous tasks were rendered . . . superfluous, but village social life unexpectedly changed. The public fountain and washbasin, once scenes of vigorous social interaction, became nearly deserted. Men began losing their sense of easy familiarity with children and donkeys that formerly helped them haul water. Women stopped gathering . . . to intermix scrubbing with politically empowering gossip about men and village life. In hindsight this emerges as a crucial step in a broader process through which [villagers] came to relinquish strong bonds—with one another, animals, and the land—that had knit them into a community.⁷

As a child, I noticed how many Bible stories took place beside water wells. I assumed that this was all just a curious coincidence. Crucial events in Hagar's life occur near a well (Gen. 16:7–14; 21:15–19). Abraham's servants conflict with another group over a well (Gen. 21:22–34). Future wives were met at such locations—for example, Rachel (Gen. 29) and Zipporah (Exod. 2). One of Jesus's most famous encounters and conversations occurs at a well in Samaria (John 4).

What I did not perceive before walking the Camino is that in the Bible wells were not just devices for procuring water or aiding laundry, as important and crucial as those functions were. Fountains and wells helped people gather and connect. But what happens when they are gone or no longer used? It is not an idle accident that malls often have fountains; they try to capture something of the purpose of older fountains. In the Detroit airport, a delightfully animated fountain shoots seemingly random jets of water several feet through the air. People, not just children, often stop and watch for a time. I am not aware, however, of strangers conversing there, let alone people finding potential life partners.

We celebrate no longer needing to haul water. When I visit Haiti, I marvel at those who carry heavy buckets for long distances on their

heads. I am not suggesting that we return to that kind of drudgery. There are benefits to piping in water. We no longer do laundry outside in cold liquid, and our clothes do look better. But we don't know, Borgmann points out, how to recognize the "cultural and social losses" in such changes.⁸

Adopting technology often deeply affects our relationships and interactions. Maggie Jackson notes that even in the difficult and tedious labor of taking care of homes and families, whenever we do work together, "we're creating the glue that binds us to the humans we love." She is concerned that relationships may be thinning out so that we are "roommate families" rather than having intimates with deep, intense interactions with each other.⁹

Though some have opted to live "off the grid" and find the lifestyle rewarding, my point is not that we should abandon contemporary technology and naively take on previous hardships and all become—using familiar biblical terminology—"hewers of wood and drawers of water" (Josh. 9:27). Nor do I believe we should pine after the "good old days." Rather, my hope is that we consider which hearths can hold us together, which wells can help us drink in abundant life.

Bringing and Holding Families Together?

Every once in a while a billboard boasts, "The family that prays together, stays together." I loathe that expression. I am leery of reducing Christian faith to a slogan, especially if it rhymes. Religion is too rich and too important to be used as a commercial. And, of course, families praying together inevitably staying together is not only a misguided claim, it's a bald-faced lie. Statistics show that religious faith is not in and of itself a guarantee that families will not break up.

I am also uneasy because this proclamation feels vaguely threatening and oppressive. On a scary note, I remember how a friend was repeatedly abused by the head of her household, who was also in charge of the family's worship. They prayed, but theirs was not a healthy togetherness. There are dangers in imposing prayer.

In spite of my uneasiness about the slogan, I do see a sliver of merit in the claim that "the family that prays together stays together." Even though it is wrong and misguided on many levels, it points to a very real

need and concern, a loss that many feel keenly. Less and less do we find that there are interests or activities or priorities that bind us and build us up together. As Robert Putnam pointed out some time ago, we're all "bowling alone" now. As a consequence of the decline of civic-minded community organizations—bridge clubs, service organizations, charities, and, yes, bowling leagues—people are increasingly disconnected.¹⁰

One might say that our social disconnections are *technologically enhanced*. Central heating displaced hearths so that individuals can now disperse and disappear to separate spaces in our houses. Such heating decentered home life. And other technologies also gut opportunities for relating to one another. Having air-conditioning and television inside the home has meant that we no longer linger outside on porches—cutting us off from visiting with family members, neighbors, and passersby. Television supplants visiting and hospitality. As a pastor visiting homes, I often had to ask people to turn off the television as we tried to talk.

Not long ago, when families watched television, they did it together. I have good memories of watching TV with my parents and sister and various housemates along the way. Granted, there are better ways of spending time together, many of which our family enjoyed (meals, barbecues, church, vacations). But now our homes have so many screens—from multiple television sets, to desktop and laptop computers, to various kinds of MP3 devices—that even that formerly common activity, as unsatisfying as it may have been, is disappearing. Family members watch television programs separately, isolated in their different rooms.

What now holds the potential of helping families or friends, communities or neighborhoods grow together? Borgmann is the thinker who has best helped me come to grips with these matters, and thus throughout this book you will see that I am often interpreting, appropriating, and applying his ideas. Borgmann recommends commitment to focal practices, focal things, focal places. This commitment, he demonstrates, is a key way to begin living lives that are rich, fulfilling, and meaningful. This can be key to living the good life.

Focal living does not need to be about huge endeavors and initiatives, but about reclaiming priorities that are ignored or threatened. Activities suggested by Borgmann—eating meals together, sharing tea, playing board games, making live music in a group, hosting neighbors,

exercising hospitality, hiking, cooking, reading together, gardening—are all small, normal, easy to do.

Now that our children are out of the house and we look back and name the best memories, some of those are once-in-a-lifetime events and experiences: their births, their accomplishments and graduations, trips to Scotland and the Netherlands where their grandparents once lived, their struggles with major life decisions. Yet we also recall many mundane and daily occurrences: eating meals, conversing over tea, going to the playground, hiking as a family, entertaining guests, hosting visitors from overseas. Those prosaic practices stitched us together as a family and formed each of our characters. They were convivial and life-giving.

My friend Nelson grew up as one of the younger members in a large farm family. He told me recently that they never went on vacation, at least not the days or weeks away that most of us associate with that term. There were several reasons: their farm needed careful daily tending, they could not afford expensive travel, and his thrifty parents never were convinced of the need for vacations. But once a year they would all go on a daylong excursion. Nelson began anticipating it months in advance. They would get up early in the morning and be gone until late at night. It was usually a trip to a nearby large city to visit a zoo, museum, or historical site. And they would have the unmatched luxury of eating in a restaurant, something rare for this large family. When Nelson recounts this, he glows with the good memory. He also tells how full his family's life together was; not ever being able to take a multiday vacation was not a deprivation. He did chores, wrestled and argued with brothers, played games with the family, and spent time outside. There was no television, and children developed an extraordinary breadth of hobbies, from woodworking to amateur radio to launching rockets. Nelson's parents delighted in the children's diverse interests, and helped them buy cameras or rockets or shop tools or artists' paintbrushes. Even though the whole family worked hard, there was a sense of Sabbath and creative play. There is no question that the person Nelson is—a gifted man of talent and character—was shaped by small practices in his family of origin. It is no surprise that his own family now, his spouse and children, together value meals, hospitality, reading aloud to one another, games, intellectual pursuits and engagements, poetry and art.

When I thought of hiking as *only* a hobby or of our congenial kitchen as *merely* a luxury, it was easy for me to overlook their importance. But when I understood that they were focal practices, I began to take them more seriously, to be committed to them, and to make sure that I made space for them in my life.

Displacing Focal Priorities

When we allow devices and machines to reside at the center of our lives, we displace values and practices that once enriched the quality of how we live. We end up serving our gadgets instead of using them as tools to support our priorities. Technology itself becomes the center and purpose of how we live. For example, automobiles take up more of our lives as we make increasingly lengthy commutes and feel the need to earn greater amounts of money for their purchase, upkeep, repairs, and insurance.

In seminary courses on personal spirituality, I encourage students to adopt a slightly rigorous daily “rule” of prayer and Bible reading to reflect on what that life is like for one semester. They submit proposed guides to me at the beginning of the course and then hold themselves accountable to their commitment. One year, a graduate student in the last semester of her degree seemed particularly stressed. No wonder, really, as she was newly married, holding down a job, and supervising the student residence where she and her husband lived. Something had to give, and so she decided to cut down her television watching to *only* two hours a day. I am not sure how she found the time for that much TV, but, on the other hand, the average North American watches close to three hours daily.

We must pay attention to what is supplanted by our habits of technology usage. As Borgmann points out: “What concerns or distresses one about technology is its tendency to destroy or displace things and practices that grace and orient our lives.”¹¹ Vital priorities and values often get shunted aside by how we choose to use technology.

Television displaces family time, volunteering, prayer, and even Sunday and Wednesday evening worship. In the 1950s and 1960s the *Wonderful World of Disney* and *Ed Sullivan* lured many away from Sunday evening church attendance. My friends Stan and Carolyn Smith

occasionally owned a TV, but Stan told me that they found the set often messed things up: “You start to build your life around [the television] instead of anything else that you think is important.” When I asked *what* was important, his list included: friends, church life, exploring outside, and doing things as a family.

What else is displaced by our use of technology?

Traveling via car displaces the exercise of walking to perform essential tasks. The unintended results of dependence on cars are several. We don’t enjoy our surroundings in the same way. Our neighborhoods are no longer places to get to know other people. We live on blocks characterized by roads designed to move vehicles swiftly and efficiently.

I regularly visit churches with technologically enhanced worship bands prominently displayed on a stage. The lectern or pulpit is below the dais. A flat, blank screen is usually the most visible object in the room. Drummers are encased behind clear acrylic walls and singers resembling famous entertainers hold microphones. Without exception, the sound of the lead singers’ voices and the instruments dominates.

In such settings it is difficult to hear the congregation sing. I look around, noticing that half of the people around me stand silently. Congregants may clap and raise hands, but many do not open their mouths. Even when nearby neighbors do sing, I cannot hear them. In this kind of contemporary worship—driven by amplified music, bands, microphones, and videos—congregational singing is overwhelmed and displaced by gadget wizardry. Technologically enhanced instrumentation and sound equipment has threatened to dislodge—instead of encourage—the voice of the church. Congregational song, an endangered focal practice once accessible to many different people, classes, and ages, can be unwittingly supplanted.

As devices and commodities move into the center, focal things and practices become peripheral. In an interview with David Wood, Borgmann observes that when several hours of screen time “come into our lives, then something else has to go out. And what has gone out? Telling stories, reading, going to the theater, socializing with friends, just taking a walk to see what’s up in the neighborhood.”¹² For example, he notes:

Once a television set is in the house, the . . . decision whether to read a book, or write a letter, or play a game, or tell stories, or go for a walk, or

sit down to dinner, or watch television no longer really ranges over seven possibilities. The presence of television has compressed all alternatives to one whose subalternatives [are represented] in the question: What are we going to watch tonight?¹³

People who watch television programs are less engaged with their communities; they are less likely to volunteer for good causes, go to church, or visit other people.¹⁴ While watching television contributes to loneliness, people tend to compensate for that loneliness by watching more television, a perpetual and unhealthy spiral.¹⁵ Similarly, online activities displace direct time spent with colleagues, relatives, and friends; they isolate and contribute to isolation, in spite of the “promise” of online communities.¹⁶ A University of Washington study showed, for example, that just having a television on—even if no one is watching it—correlates with a marked decrease in conversations and interactions between children and adults.¹⁷ Likewise, people who spend a lot of time on social networking sites tend to be less socially involved.¹⁸ In spite of these troubling consequences, we persist in making such technological devices central to our lives.

When my wife was a nurse at a new elementary school, its innovative principal, Ray Gyori-Helmuth, initiated a creative way to connect with surrounding neighborhoods before the school year started. On the Sunday afternoon before classes began, school staff—and their spouses—would tour the area on bikes. This would provide a firsthand glimpse of how and where pupils lived. And it would be a friendly way for staff to greet students. A fun time was had by all the bike riders as we chatted and laughed with each other. In two hours of riding, however, we encountered only four students. Afterward, we realized that most were inside, savoring the AC and perhaps watching television or playing video games. There were that day—if you’ll pardon the pun—virtually no students to encounter.

We’re all good at naming the conveniences technology provides. We’re not so good at recognizing its inconveniences, displacements, losses, and intrusions. Sherry Turkle wisely contends: “We have to love technology enough to describe it accurately. And we have to love ourselves enough to confront technology’s true effects on us.”¹⁹

It does not have to be this way, Borgmann urges, and he proposes an antidote. By putting focal practices and focal things at the center of our lives—making them focal priorities—we counterbalance the

potentially negative effects of technology and consumerism. Devices take their proper place only when we show devotion to what matters most. So it is important that as we diagnose the shortcomings and hazards of how we live that we also consider focal practices that point us in other, more life-giving directions. As Borgmann told me, it's not a matter of complaining about devices. We're not trying to take away good things; rather, we're trying to make time for the cultivation of "something much better."

Embarking on a Focal Pilgrimage

Embracing focal living is not about oughts or shoulds. There are many ways to incorporate focal priorities. Seeing how others live out such commitments is *suggestive* and *disclosive*. Pay attention to the focal practices of others and you will see something and think, "I do that," or "I could do that," or "That reminds me of doing such and such."

At the closing session of the Elkhart Consultation with Borgmann in 2008, Todd Friesen, pastor of a suburban Mennonite congregation, observed:

As I think about returning to our congregation in Chicago, I think in terms of my own strategy. I want to work intentionally to affirm the areas in our congregation where we are already engaging in focal practices and don't even know it.

Many in our congregations are not aware of the deeper meaning of what they're doing. One gift we can give them is to show them, this is really significant. Instead of saying, "Why don't you do this?" [or] "Why don't you do that?" take some of the things that we're doing and talk about why they're so meaningful and talk about how they're making space in our lives for what the good life really is and use that as an opportunity to talk about the good life. It's already happening here, but let's do it more, and push it out and hopefully draw in others who haven't made this space yet in their lives.²⁰

A good pastor, Todd celebrates positive things already happening among his congregants.

One year, I set out to interview a dozen people and ask them about their focal practices: baking, quilting, bird-watching, woodworking,

endurance horse riding, carpentry, letter writing, et cetera. Some people I knew well, some not very much at all. On the whole, they are regular folks. They might be gifted in their particular passion but were not famous. I was aware of them usually by word of mouth, through friends or acquaintances. Most of their focal practices are things I either could never do (I just do not have the skills) or would never do. But I wanted to learn more about how their priorities helped them thrive. I wanted to get acquainted with ordinary folks who lived nearby, the kind of people who are likely in your neighborhood too. I wanted to test Borgmann's ideas and see how people have come to understand similar ideas on their own. I had a feeling that there was much to learn.

Two things in particular impressed me.

First, exploring one focal practice often led to speaking about many others. When I spoke to Leroy and Winifred Saner about their commitment to gardening, conversation also moved easily, quickly, and naturally to their family memories of cooking, hospitality, quilting, butchering, photography, woodworking, and picture framing. Those activities are intrinsically related. Each focal practice resonates with others.

The second thing that struck me is that many folks were surprised that I wanted to talk with them. They are not famous, do not necessarily lead organizations, have not written books. These salt-of-the-earth people wondered why I would be interested in their simple practices of letter writing, carpentry, or quilting. But as we talked about what they were doing, each became excited and animated about their ability to articulate why a particular activity was so important to them. When I explained Borgmann's notions of focal practices, something clicked. My interviewees suddenly had new ways of expressing what they already knew to be true about the richness afforded them through their respective practices.

But Would I Know a Focal Practice if I Saw One?

As I talk about focal practices, people ask how to recognize whether or not something or some activity is focal. Washing dishes? Playing golf? Watching NASCAR on television? Online gambling? Video games? I used to try carefully and deliberately to categorize each example but found that doing so doesn't adequately respond to the real issue.

Figuring out whether an activity is focal can be complicated and require discernment. To some extent we need to decide for ourselves. Some things we cannot answer for each other. When I was a teenager I used to ask my parents, “Yes, but how did you *know* that you loved each other enough to get married?” Though their marriage flourished, they never had a satisfactory response to my question. Ultimately, I would have to figure that out by myself. There are some obvious qualities that go into a marriage: affection, humor, compatibility, shared interests, common values. And my parents and other couples I know modeled many of these. But a couple might have all of them and still not quite click. Or maybe they click for no reasons apparent to anyone else. Ultimately, each of us must sort some things out for ourselves.

This is not to say that anything goes. It is clear that some activities are focal—eating meals together, playing musical instruments, hiking, church singing, gardening. Other activities clearly are not focal—casino gambling, viewing pornography, drug abuse, drinking to excess. Figuring out the extremes is easy.

But even potentially worthwhile activities can be misused or trivialized or idolized. And many other activities fall into gray areas. It is not productive to sort out all such categories, especially not on a case-by-case basis. It is more useful to gain a broad understanding of focal priorities. To Borgmann’s way of thinking, focal concerns are objects, activities, or practices with three characteristics: commanding presence, continuity, and centering power.²¹ We need to unpack those terms in order to understand and appreciate them.