The Scarcest Resource in the World Is Attention

by

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In the January/February issue of Harvard Magazine, Elizabeth Warren presented “The Middle Class on the Precipice.” She showed a people at the limit of their resources, just taking care of housing, food, health insurance and child care, without a margin to handle anything going wrong. This is a precipice, indeed, where many are falling.

I would like to add something to this picture of the objective situation, which is what is going on subjectively, in the middle class, surely, but also in every university from Wisconsin, where I teach, to Harvard, where I was in the college and in the medical school. I can put the matter in one brief sentence: when the objective situation is on the precipice, the capacity to attend to anything else disappears.

For a university, this is a calamity. It tends to go unnoticed. This selective inattention occurs precisely because everything is progressing. There is more and more of everything, going faster and faster, and our students and faculty win all the contests, to bring on even more resources, to feed a greater inflation of outward activity.

I am positioned to see the casualties. In my Brief Psychotherapy Clinic, I have been consulted for over twenty-five years by residents and fellows, staff and faculty, on the patients they see who are stuck and cannot get unstuck.

What have I seen? Just take the last three cases, for they stand for the last three hundred, who stand for the three thousand who haven’t come in, but are much the same. You will recognize them all around you. They are variations on the same picture.
When a person is pressed by many more demands than he or she can meet, he or she becomes anxious about the danger of not meeting them, and/or depressed about giving up on meeting them. Often, both. You can see it in the eyes, which get frantic, and/or lackluster. This is what they all have in common, and the variations come in the compensations they attempt to provide for themselves. Of my last three cases, one went into periodic explosions of anger at the spouse, one worried much of the night about the lists of things to do, and one contemplated how to get out of this world.

The people have a great deal of difficulty defending themselves. As one of these three patients said to me, “How can I object, when everything asked of me is reasonable?” “Yes,” I replied, “but the sum total is not.” “Agreed,” she rejoined, “but there is nothing I can let go!”

When the faculty get into this condition, what are the students to do? What little attention they get will be for adding more data to the professor’s concerns. What are the spouses and the children to do for attention? They will find themselves in parallel lives, pursued by their own lists.

In other words, everyone becomes self-absorbed. Consciously, it is the lists of things to do, dictated by the head, that take up all the time. Unconsciously, there is always a rage in the body. It will force its own turn, in drinking, or in affairs, in monologs, or in fantasy on the computer. Such a shadow, gone under, is even less present than the persona who seems gone on the details of his business. Thus, the conscious and unconscious work together as a kind of “disappearing machine” to make us no longer present.
About a month ago I had a dream about the entire panorama, which decided me to write this essay for Harvard Magazine. After a day of patients, students and colleagues, all lost in their self-absorption, I dreamt of starting over at Harvard. How many dreams have I had of this kind, and how many, reader, have you? Perhaps, there was some mistake in the life plan I got into, and I can begin anew? And the same for you?

Having written two books on dreams, I was prepared for an x-ray of our entire situation. I dreamt I was late, with two of my three children, for a GRE exam in a Harvard amphitheatre. Few seats were left down front, and I found one in the middle of a middle row. As I leaned backwards, I fell into the row behind me and found myself looking up from near the floor to see three faces staring down at me in exasperation, understandably, surely, for I had fallen into their laps. I was reminded of a Bosch painting of Christ surrounded like this, and I did not like the idea of crucifixion of the outlaw, so I raised my hand for the proctor.

How he saw my hand, barely visible above the crevasse into which I had fallen, I do not know, but he came to my rescue, and took me to another seat down front on the left. The exam began. Each of us was given what the examiners called “A Tube Coat,” reputedly made by REI for arctic conditions. It was shaped like a cylinder with many layers, into which you were to put yourself. The exam had five essay questions, which always was the case when I was an undergraduate in the College. When I began to contemplate the first, I had to consider the second, and so on to the fifth, so after half an hour, and half my time, I had not written a sentence. I woke in a sweat.

So, there you have our predicament. If I am too loose with the exam, I fall backwards, to be crucified. If I am too tight, in the tube coat, I cannot write a sentence.
This is surely a very difficult machine, in which one must make one’s way! No one seemed to be paying any attention. As Borges argued in his lecture on “Nightmares,” the dream-nightmare has given me a space and a time in which my feelings make sense.

Now that I have described our illness, in the present, I may proceed as its physician to its past history, and to its treatment. I will take the past history, first, in terms of how we as a people got into such a predicament, and second, in terms of how each of us as an individual got into his or her own version of it.

Our Past History with This Illness as a People

Modern man is a recent invention, who irrupted in the west from the region just north of the Black Sea between the Carpathian and Caucasus Mountains, between 2300 and 1900 B.C., sacking Troy and many other cities in the Middle East. These Indo-Europeans took the next millennium to conquer India, and to conquer Europe. Our Indo-European set of languages mark their path.

As Mircea Eliade describes in A History of Religious Ideas, the pattern of their conquering was everywhere the same. They invaded, imposed their order, and assimilated those they had conquered. Always, they imagined this as a slaying by a hero-god of a marine serpent, such as in the Rig Veda, where Indra kills Vrtra. This creates a cosmos out of chaos.

As Jordan Peterson has argued more recently, this passion for order over chaos comes to operate on every scale of Indo-European culture, from macrocosm to microcosm. For four thousand years in the west, variations of Indra have come to run
everything, from the country to the backyard. Eliade says of Indra: “…(he) is called 
sahasramuska, ‘with a thousand testicles,’” he is ‘the master of the fields’ and ‘master of 
the earth,’ the fecundator of fields, animals and women.”

Extraordinary works have come of this, and terrible domination. The two world 
ars of the 20th century and the corporate colonization of the entire world in this century 
are the latest and largest versions. Simone Weil called this threat “the poem of force,” 
exemplified by The Iliad. Its terror is that it makes its people into things, to be dealt with 
ruthlessly. Those who are full of the force think only of themselves. Those who are not 
on the winning side have no appeal.

Millennia later, Machiavelli was to sum it up in a sentence: “Victory is to the big 
battalions.” We may now substitute the word “corporations.” It is dangerous to be in 
them, and it is dangerous to be out of them. In them, you are overwhelmed with details. 
Out of them you have no place.

Literature began from the point of view of these aristocrats of the Trojan War, and 
has gradually descended for three thousand years to the plight of common man. By about 
1890, Freud and Breuer had argued that the illnesses they were dealing with were caused 
by the “strangulation” of the body from the head. Stevenson, almost simultaneously, 
argued that Dr. Jekyll was man himself. Pushing himself ever faster in service as a 
doctor, he became more and more depleted. From within arose a monster like Vrta, ever 
more fiery, who finally began to erupt out the back gate as midnight as Mr. Hyde.

By 1949, Arthur Miller gave us Willy Loman as Everyman in Death of a 
Salesman. His wife, Linda, summarizes the plot to his two boys: “A small man can be 
just as exhausted as a great man. He works for a company thirty-six years this March,
opens up unheard of territories to their trademark, and now in his old age they take his
salary away” (my italics). Here indeed is the exemplar of the Indo-European way, cast
aside. Linda says: “. . . a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid.
He’s not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must be
finally paid to such a person . . .” Attention is not going to be paid to such a person, by
and large. We will now see how it goes in our histories as individuals.

Our Past History with This Illness As Individuals

Each of us meets the group dynamic of the Poem of Force by about age ten, as
elementary school is coming to a close and middle school or junior high opens its gates.
The Teen Pack is waiting for us. Its hierarchy will put us in our place.

Carol Gilligan has given us the clearest account of what happens between ten and
fifteen. The girl naturalist of many interests, with much to say about all of them,
gradually begins to lose her own point of view, to fit into the pack. The most striking
indicator of this deformation is the yearly doubling of her use of the phrase “I don’t
know,” when asked for her response, as to a painting or a book. As she surrenders her
own perspective, she takes on the one that rules all of her friends.

I don’t know of a comparable study of boys between ten and fifteen. I think it
will show the same thing: namely, the surrender of self.

We are talking about a gradual loss of presence. Daniel Stern has characterized it
as a loss of the present moment. Stern explains the present moment, in terms of
contemporary neurobiology, as a achievement of reentry. It takes about four trips around
the brain loop to stabilize an image in about one or two seconds. It turns out that three
seconds is the length of a breath cycle, a phrase in a sentence, a line of poetry, a melodic
theme of music or of dance, or a turn in conversation. Such is the beautiful structure of
presence.

However, as Stern argues, “The present moment can be held hostage by either the
past or the future. The past can eclipse the present by casting so strong a shadow on it
that the present can only confirm what was already known and can add little more. It is
essentially effaced … The future can also annihilate the present by reorganizing it so
much and so fast the present becomes ephemeral and almost passes out of existence.”

Indeed, this is what happens as we pass through the gate into professional life. I
recall, and will recall forever, my rotation in medicine at Peter Bent Brigham Hospital. I
had been captain of our medical school basketball team, and knew well the captain of the
class two years ahead of us. He was my intern at the Brigham. I will never forget
meeting his new and total seriousness, and his bulging front shirt pocket of three by five
cards on all the patients. The days of our playing together were over, and grimness had
set in. This recapitulates at age twenty-four what I first met at age ten. The cog was
being prepared for the disappearing machine.

By about thirty-four, I was fully trained, and for thirty years, I have watched the
machine go faster and faster. As Richard Swenson has argued, its fundamental
characteristic is that any time interval for seeing a patient has no margin in it. Like the
three by five note card of my intern at the Brigham, every fifteen minutes is filled up with
lists of things to investigate. There is no time for anything to go wrong! We are back to
where we began in this essay, with the objective structure of the middle class on the
precipice with no margin. Everyone is in danger of being insufficient in every interaction, and everyone is set up to be defeated. Thus, the epidemic of anxiety and depression has us all by the throat.

Such a situation in biology is called “collective synchronization.” Paul Matthews and Steven Strogatz describe it as follows: “Populations of biological oscillators can spontaneously synchronize to a common frequency, even if there is a distribution of natural frequencies across the population. Examples include swarms of fireflies that flash in synchrony, crickets that chirp in unison, synchronous firing of cardiac pacemaker cells, and groups of women whose menstrual cycles become synchronized.”

Matthews and Strogatz duplicated this synchrony with electrical oscillators by coupling them together into ever denser interaction. When the frequency range is slight, it takes very little coupling to lock the oscillators into synchrony. When their frequency range is greater, two regions emerge on either side of a diagonal line: one is the same synchrony above the diagonal line where the coupling is greater, and one is incoherence below the diagonal line where coupling is less.

Now, the beautiful thing that emerges is a region between synchrony and incoherence. It is a thin slice where coupling pressure and frequency range are about equal strength. In this region, beautiful cascades of ordered and chaotic oscillations arise! This leads us directly into the final section of this essay, on the treatment of the modern illness of the disappearing machine. It will turn out that equal strength of the conscious and unconscious mind has beautiful ramifications.
A liberal education could bring about a person fully present, but, given our circumstances, this is going to be difficult. With everyone around you rushing to their next contest, you are going to be a great deal on your own. That is necessary. So, taking a line from Samuel Menashe, how are you to “… be your own guest?”

Andrew Forge wrote an essay about this called “Painting and the Struggle for the Whole Self,” and Sven Birkerts wrote something comparable for reading called “Against the Current.” Each in his own way is talking about giving the body room to take things in, and find its own motion in reply. This will require a wide margin around oneself from the forces without.

I do not mean to argue against competitions per se. After all, the best athletes are those who can stay fully with their bodily selves, whatever the score. They do not go up into their heads, and talk to themselves, for the conscious mind takes its one or two seconds to make an image, and that is far too slow. Roger Federer is the best tennis player in the world, because of his receptiveness. He sees with his feet.

Rather, I mean that we all need to know about the margin we need, to stay within ourselves. In general, that is going to be a lot slower than the people around us have in mind for us.

I think of it as a problem in anti-predator defense. In general, the logic of antipredator defense is first not to be seen, and if seen, to move as fast as possible. You understand what I mean from glimpses of hares in your neighborhood. In the field of defense against fellow human beings, the same logic obtains. Your first line of defense is
to follow form. If you stay in form, you become relatively invisible. In medicine, a
doctor stays out of lawsuits, by acting like all other doctors act. If, however, you become
an object of outright attack, you have the option of fight or flight.

In general, you get the most room to respond, spontaneously, if you put in one
thing into any window of time, watch what happens to it, and watch your own body.
Mostly, you will find people running on about themselves, anyway. However, you will
be ready for outright hostility.

It always helps to make general principles specific. Consider what Edward Snow
tells us in A Study of Vermeer. The early paintings struggle with the problem of male
presence for a woman, often with a map of the world on the wall behind them. It is quite
a danger for this male presence to take over, and take the light out of the woman’s face.
But, there are men, and there are men, and Vermeer begins to sort this out beautifully, as
in The Procuress, dark leering ones, and a remarkable couple looking at a coin together
with remarkable inward light.

In his full maturity, Vermeer shows two extraordinary balances between inside
and outside. There are the young girls, like The Head of a Young Girl, and like the girl in
The Artist’s Studio, where it is difficult to say whether they are turning toward or turning
away. Then there are the two pregnant women, The Woman Putting on Pearls, and The
Woman Holding a Balance, where it is difficult to say how much the light is coming from
without and how much from within. This is exceptionally beautiful transitional space,
because all the opposing currents are in motion at once. This is being fully present.
Snow is able to show it in every detail, as Birkerts can do for every detail in a poem. We
have slowed down into a present that gets deeper and wider at every opposing turn.
This is what I mean by saying, earlier, that the greatest presence comes when the conscious and unconscious are about equal. It takes a protected space for this to occur, almost always for Vermeer a single room.

This too can happen in a University. I took Paul Tillich’s course at Harvard College when I was a sophomore and a junior, for the History of Western Philosophy took two years. Tillich was alright, but he said pretty much the same thing every lecture, namely, that being was profound. His section man was Paul Lee. Paul had a gift for placing us students on the same level as himself, and bringing out our eloquence as well as his own. The inside and the outside were relatively equal. Because Paul didn’t cram the hour consciously, he left equal room for what came out of us unconsciously.

Paul had a seminar for a few of us at his house, in which we considered the Gospel According to St. Mark, the comedy being that the disciples were always getting things wrong. This too had the effect of putting us into a hilarious state of mind. By the conclusion of this course, I wrote an essay for Paul on the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham. I have been trying to wake up Isaac ever since, and this essay is its latest version!

So there is a force from within, as Wallace Stevens has put it, a violence from within pressing back against the violence from without, that can make the field equal. That is what Shakespeare meant in Sonnet 65 when he wrote, “How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea/Whose action is no stronger than a flower.” The action of the flower lasts centuries in its fertility, whereas the poem of force has passed innumerable times, as it uses up its actors and throws them away.

So what I got from Paul, and later from Les Havens in the Medical School, lives on. In my Brief Psychotherapy Clinic, I get out a big sheet of newsprint for our
discussions. The column on the right is for the conscious mind, and the column on the left is for the unconscious mind. Posed as equals, each is full of discoveries we had never imagined before. The scarcest resource in the world has found its conditions to emerge.

It is much simpler to describe this beautiful region in the classroom than it is to describe the treatment of the disappearing machine in the lives of patients. I refer the reader to my books on this subject.

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