

Wired and unwired: We are losing our capacity for sustained attention

by [Stephanie Paulsell](#) in the [August 10, 2010](#) issue

In 1993, not so terribly long ago, I signed up for my first e-mail account. I remember using it to compose and exchange haikus with other novice faculty about our daily travails, to keep up with friends from graduate school, and to sign up for more electronic mailing lists than I could possibly follow.

One year later, while I was still goofing around with my new electronic toy, cultural critic Sven Birkerts wrote in *The Gutenberg Elegies*, “Ten, fifteen years from now the world will be nothing like what we remember, nothing much like what we experience now. . . . We will be swimming in impulses and data—the microchip will make us offers that will be very hard to refuse.”

He must have had a crystal ball. In precisely the amount of time Birkerts predicted, I have gone from marveling at the novelty of e-mail to being simultaneously resentful of its hold on my life and unable to imagine how I would live without it.

The technological advances of the last few decades have changed our lives. The Internet has made it possible to be in conversation with people all over the world, to gather for meetings without burning jet fuel, to find almost any book, research almost any subject, organize for almost any purpose.

According to several recent books and articles, however, it is not only our lives that have changed; our brains have changed as well. Clicking through Internet links, multitasking in multiple media, interrupting our train of thought to check our e-mail—these activities have been steadily rewiring the neural pathways of our brains. Neuroscience has confirmed that we are losing our capacity for sustained attention, contemplative thought and deep engagement. We risk other losses: we could lose our ability to become absorbed in long, complex books; we could staunch the creativity that flows from contemplation; our capacity for empathy, some fear, could weaken.

Recent books about the Internet's effect on our brains don't say much, if anything, about the implications of these changes for religious life. But our capacity for sustained attention, as Simone Weil once put it, is what makes us able to pray and to be present to others. Back in 1994, Birkerts predicted that as our capacity to read diminished, we would turn to religions for narratives in which to find a place for ourselves. But if our capacity to pray and be present to others diminishes, what will we find when we turn?

Although authors of the many recent books and articles about the effect of technology on our brains don't have much to say about religion, they do use religious-sounding language when they write about what we're losing and what they wish we could hold onto. They write about experimenting with a new asceticism that's born of a desire to resist the seeming inevitability of these neurological changes. James Sturm writes at slate.com about his struggle to unplug. Nicholas Carr describes moving to a less-wired part of the country in order to find enough interior focus to write *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*. Wes Stephenson, reviewing Carr's book in the *Boston Globe*, is determined to live a "hybrid existence" that requires "a new kind of self-discipline, a willed and practiced ability to focus, in a purposeful and almost meditative sense—to step away from the network and seek stillness, immersion."

None of these writers seems to want to give up on technologies that can link human beings to each other across geography and culture and give us access to vast sources of knowledge. But neither do they want to submit to the steady chipping away at our capacity for sustained attention. They want to make choices about their formation as human beings, including some strategic refusals. "There's no going back to the pre-Internet days," James Sturm writes, "but I just want to move forward a little more slowly."

Religious traditions bear within them accumulated wisdom about disciplines of purposeful, meditative attention; religious communities offer opportunities to practice these disciplines in worship, prayer, study and service. There is a potential ministry here to those who seek a "hybrid existence" marked by sustained, contemplative engagement with the world. From Moses and Jesus to Gregory the Great and Catherine of Siena to small groups gathering in churches around the world, we have many guides to teach us how to remain humanly present in the midst of great change; how to live out of our connections with others not only across space but also across time; how to live with compassion at the intersection of

solitude and community; how to say no in order to say a more spacious yes.

Let's follow our congregations on Twitter and connect in every way we can. But let's also cultivate the ancient, practical wisdom we have inherited so that we have something to offer those who long for a more attentive life.