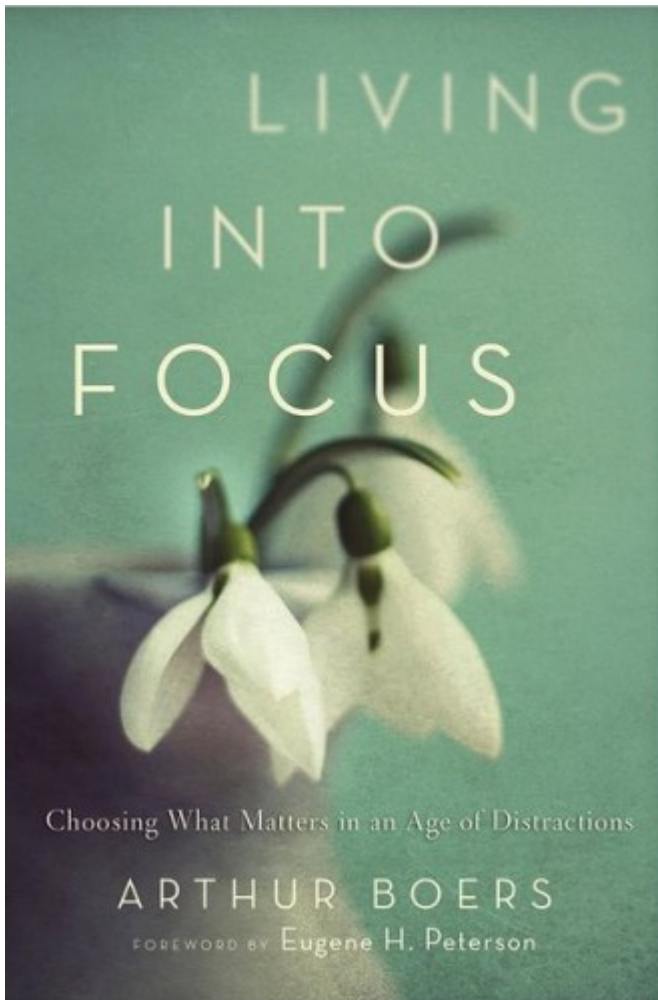


Living into Focus, by Arthur Boers

reviewed by [Valerie Weaver-Zercher](#) in the [May 2, 2012](#) issue

In Review



Living into Focus

By Arthur Boers

Brazos

My fifth-grade son used to walk around the house pretending to be texting. Rehearsing what has become a central practice of 21st-century life, he would move his thumbs across a cast-off cell phone that no longer worked. Finding no solace in

the fact that he had the rest of his life to be beholden to gadgetry, he had decided that feigned distraction was better than no distraction at all. Then, on his 11th birthday, having obtained grudging parental permission, he promptly gutted his savings and bought an iPod Touch.

Arthur Boers's book popularizes the work of philosopher Albert Borgmann, whose writings about technology's command of everyday life, produced three decades ago, were uncannily predictive of my son's milieu: in one survey almost half the kids ages six to 12 said they wanted an iPad for Christmas. Borgmann's 1984 treatise outlines what he calls the "rule of technology," according to which "engagement with things" is exchanged for "the consumption of commodities." Borgmann also introduced the idea of "focal concerns": things, practices and places that "center and illuminate our lives."

It is this second idea on which Boers's book turns: how focal practices such as preparing and eating meals together, gardening, hiking or playing a musical instrument can orient us in an age of disorientation and distraction. Boers interviewed a dozen or so people about the hobbies through which they find meaning and joy, and he sprinkles their stories throughout his book. He also describes his discovery of hiking as an adult and the renovation of a kitchen to make it more central to his family's life as experiences of uncovering focal practices and places. "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," he writes. "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."

Boers examines three main characteristics of focal concerns—their commanding presence, their connection with tradition and with other people, and their centering power—and makes a convincing case for their ability to disrupt the reign of technological devices in our lives. Now a professor at Tyndale Seminary in Toronto, Boers hosted a consultation on Borgmann's work at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in 2008, which I attended and which connected Borgmann's ideas with Anabaptist approaches to technology. Boers does an admirable job of translating Borgmann's theories in a way that honors their complexity, and Borgmann commends Boers for "having taken a theory and made it fruitful."

Boers's diagnosis of the maladies of modern life—distraction, busyness, overconsumption, anomie, technological saturation—is not new. Most people can now offer their own screeds against screens: mournful accounts of the lost camaraderie on subway rides or at soccer games or in classrooms thanks to people's absorption in their devices. Diatribes against devices are becoming as ubiquitous as the devices themselves, and it's hard not to sound preachy when issuing them.

But Boers can be forgiven if his words occasionally become doctrinaire. As any evangelist or activist knows, sometimes making a point requires eliding distinctions. *Living into Focus* is still the most potentially transformative book on technology and faith that I've read, and it is one that individual readers, small groups, and churches should not ignore, in part because it moves beyond diagnosis to ask the question of how we should then live. Boers admits that an acrostic on which he relies—Attention, Limits, Engagement, Relationships, Time and Space (ALERTS)—is a tad goofy. But it functions well to underscore the attitude of alertness and discernment required in the Age of the Device. It also helps Boers get closer to a more nuanced approach, since, as he writes, being alert and discerning requires one to acknowledge that “there is no simple rule for how one ought to behave.”

The acrostic frames the issues surrounding technology use that Christians need to discern. In the middle section of the book, which treats each of these issues in a chapter, Boers offers ways to counterbalance the excesses to which technology use can lead. He offers gentle suggestions for leaving what Borgmann calls “the device paradigm” and taking up not a hobby but a focal practice: birdwatching, viewing icons, praying the examen, writing letters, eating together, walking. Such practices do more than operate as release valves for a screen-addled life; they can orient and restructure our affections and attentions.

When he asked people about the practices that give them life, Boers found that they were often surprised that he wanted to interview them. They viewed their focal practices, such as carpentry or quilting, as “simple” and unworthy of investigation. But “when I explained Borgmann's notions of focal practices,” Boers writes, “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.”

Pastors will find Boers's reflections on worship technologies, e-mailed prayer requests and parishioners' technology-saturated lives especially thought-provoking.

With regard to worship, Boers critically examines the ways that congregational singing is often “overwhelmed and displaced by gadget wizardry,” to the extent that congregants cannot hear anyone near them singing. He also examines the manner in which the communal obligations that inhere in prayer requests can be easily erased from one’s consciousness with the delete button. I generally have a low threshold for didacticism, but I am glad that Boers doesn’t seem to worry himself with the possibility that he will be called a curmudgeon. It helps that he admits to his own predilection for distraction, thus illuminating the manifold hypocrisies of people like me, who decry the habits of our digitally native children even as we addictively check our own e-mail.

Living into Focus is full of stories that help us see, as T. S. Eliot suggested that good poetry does, the familiar as strange. And stories that would have been considered strange 30 years ago abound—of people who sleep with their iPhones, of the student who commits to the spiritual discipline of reducing her television viewing to two hours a day, of congregations that do “virtual baptisms” for candidates who dunk themselves in bathtubs, of churches that have big-screen televisions, gaming consoles and violent videogames so they can attract teenagers.

Stories like these, and like the one of my son and the nonfunctioning cell phone, can serve as cartoon or mirror. It is tempting to view a baptism via Skype or my son’s faux texts as Charlie Brown-like in their humorous pathos. It is easy to use these stories as caricatures of a technological age in which devices rule the imagination to a ludicrous degree and to package our fears in comic-strip versions of cultural declension. For isn’t this where technology ultimately leads: to a vanishing point of attention, authenticity and good sense?

The more difficult task, however, and the one that Boers’s book mostly succeeds in provoking, is to look long and hard at ourselves, at the objects that command our attention and at the practices that make up our days. And then, after he holds up a mirror for us for a little while, Boers asks us the essential, if no longer new, questions: When do we rule our gadgets and when do they rule us? When does technology improve our lives and when does it bankrupt them? What habits might help us manage the omnipresent allures of a technological age? And what can we do if we find ourselves walking around with devices that are not, in the deepest sense of the word, working?