



## **Rapt: Attention and the Focused Life**

*Winifred Gallagher*

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# Rapt: Attention and the Focused Life

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**Rapt: Attention and the Focused Life** Winifred Gallagher

**Winifred Gallagher revolutionizes our understanding of attention and the creation of the interested life**

In *Rapt*, acclaimed behavioral science writer Winifred Gallagher makes the radical argument that the quality of your life largely depends on what you choose to pay attention to and how you choose to do it. Gallagher grapples with provocative questions—Can we train our focus? What’s different about the way creative people pay attention? Why do we often zero in on the wrong factors when making big decisions, like where to move?—driving us to reconsider what we think we know about attention.

Gallagher looks beyond sound bites on our proliferating BlackBerries and the increased incidence of ADD in children to the discoveries of neuroscience and psychology and the wisdom of home truths, profoundly altering and expanding the contemporary conversation on attention and its power. Science’s major contribution to the study of attention has been the discovery that its basic mechanism is an either/or process of selection. That we focus may be a biological necessity— research now proves we can process only a little information at a time, or about 173 billion bits over an average life—but the good news is that we have much more control over our focus than we think, which gives us a remarkable yet underappreciated capacity to influence our experience. As suggested by the expression “pay attention,” this cognitive currency is a finite resource that we must learn to spend wisely. In *Rapt*, Gallagher introduces us to a diverse cast of characters—artists and ranchers, birders and scientists—who have learned to do just that and whose stories are profound lessons in the art of living the interested life. No matter what your quotient of wealth, looks, brains, or fame, increasing your satisfaction means focusing more on what really interests you and less on what doesn’t. In asserting its groundbreaking thesis—the wise investment of your attention is the single most important thing you can do to improve your well-being—*Rapt* yields fresh insights into the nature of reality and what it means to be fully alive.

## Rapt: Attention and the Focused Life Details

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# From Reader Review **Rapt: Attention and the Focused Life** for online ebook

## Scott Key says

This book has changed the way I work. Author Winifred Gallagher has marshaled quite a bit of research into fourteen chapters and has made it approachable with a good takeaway at the end of each chapter that can be integrated into several areas of life where attention is important. If you have read Malcolm Gladwell and John Medina, much of what you read here will not be new.

Gallagher learned about the power of attention for ill or for good when she was diagnosed with cancer and decided not to let it "monopolize [her:] attention" as it wanted but instead to "focus on [her:] life instead." As she endured treatment for the illness, she began paying attention to the present, realizing that it was all she had. The experience was a catalyst to the writing of *Rapt*.

Her thesis, and the realization she got during treatment was that "life is the creation of what you focus on -- and what you don't."

There is much here on attention and how it works and how we are misusing technology to our detriment and to the detriment of those around us.

By and large, we are not multitaskers. Some repetitive or physical actions can be done together -- the proverbial act of walking and chewing bubblegum. However, we aren't programmed to do things such as talk and check email or to drive and text. One activity or both will suffer as a consequence.

In fact, it is hard to be truly productive unless you enter the "flow" state, which requires focused concentrated effort ninety to one hundred twenty minutes. Any interruption, even if for a minute or less (consider the little guitar noise on outlook telling you about a new message, or the siren call of the blackberry's buzz even when you don't actually read the message), is a derailing event requiring about fifteen minute's total recovery time. As a result, an entire day can pass with the result of no substantively completed work but with lots of emails read even if not answered.

Her chapter on creativity is equally compelling. In short, a spark of creative inspiration is the result of hours of contemplation or study. If you constantly short-circuit attention, you are not likely to be the next Wordsworth or experience some sort of creative spark no matter your chosen profession.

Finally, the chapter on relationships and quality of life is worth the read. How you frame the action of those around you shapes fundamentally how successful you are in your friendships, lovelife, and career. It all comes down to showing up and attending to what is on your agenda day in and day out, focusing positively on those around you, and framing the people and events you encounter with a focus on the positive. Most significantly, it comes down to being fully present moment to moment.

Such is the difference, Gallagher suggest between a life lived fully and a life lived that is a nightmare from which you will hopefully wake up (think the buddha's enlightenment)before it is too late.

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## **Nancy says**

It's kind of ironic that I enjoyed this book tremendously, thought it was highly interesting, but yet I kept putting it down and it took me so many months to finally finish this book. I guess I was interested while I was reading it, but was slow to pick it back up each time I put it down. Too bad it wasn't available as an audiobook at my library.

I liked how even though the book was all about attention and focus, it still covered a lot of ground and was successful at bringing everything back to the topic of attention. What you focus on, what interests you will shape your life. Dictate the choices you make. Your unconscious predilections will shape the kind of person you are. Do you naturally focus on the next thing and not dwell on past injuries and wrongs? Or are you more prone to nursing old injuries? Are you aware of this bias and are you working on changing it? Do you pay attention to the food you eat? Do you dwell on your health or do you practice meditation to help lift you out of the mental trap of pain? By knowingly cultivating many interests, you can be a happier, healthier individual. Did you know that what you pay attention to can be influenced by culture? In the United States, we are more prone to notice individuals, the flashier and more colorful, the better. But the rest of the world is more prone to notice the entire context, how everyone gets along together, things that would affect the whole.

I really hadn't known before just how little is really understood about attention deficit diseases. Or how the whole medical field of "attention" is slowly growing and incorporating more and more research. Or how very limited the human brain is in what it can pay attention to and what sticks in memory and what doesn't. Because after all, if you're not interested and not paying attention, there's no way to incorporate the information in your short term or long term memory, no chance to learn it, and you can't use it later when you need it. Mentally speaking, what you choose to pay attention to is what you choose to feed and grow.

The big take-aways I got from this book is that I need to practice meditation, or at least a couple of minutes of mindful breathing exercises every day. I need to do/learn something tough, but enjoyable, in order to grow mentally. So yeah, I'll be starting my ukulele lessons again and learning to read sheet music. And lastly, I need to eat slower and pay attention to my food.

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## **John Stepper says**

The author had my attention (pun, unfortunately, intended) from the very beginning. I believe what she believes, in that our ability to control our attention is the "sine qua non" of a good life.

The book then goes on to provide comprehensive arguments on why and how this is so, which at times felt almost overwhelming. Yes, it's important! The question is...how to cultivate the level of self-control needed to experience the benefits? While the book didn't give me as many answers as I might like, the excellent research and notes offers many opportunities to explore further.

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## **Tucker says**

Strongly influenced by the classic *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, this book, published two decades later, broadens the scope from skilled activities to attention in general. It was motivated by Gallagher's experience of becoming more mindful during a serious illness. Numerous studies and examples back up her arguments that attention contributes to happiness. It is a good companion to *Flow*.

I have always admired her introductory comment that “you might encounter an intuition lurking in the back of your mind, as it was in mine: if you could just stay focused on the right things, your life would stop feeling like a reaction to stuff that happens to you and become something that you create: not a series of accidents, but a work of art.” I was hoping for more such poetry, but this turned out mostly to be about mundane forms of focus and not so much about exquisite captivation (despite the suggestion of the title *Rapt*).

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## **Emma Sea says**

What Daniel said.

I wanted specific strategies and suggestions for increasing the amount of time I spend in deep work (getting off Goodreads would probably be a good start). Instead I got a book of fluff and padding.

1.5 stars.

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## **Courtney says**

I'm disappointed that this book about attention was not, itself, more sharply focused. Instead of building towards a thesis or providing an organized survey of her theme, author Winifred Gallagher begins and ends "Rapt" with scattered essays that don't seem to be much about focus and attention at all.

The meat of the book is sandwiched in the middle, where the author guides the reader through the leading research on focus and attention. We learn that attention can be diffuse or focused, and there are benefits to either state. We also learn that meditation and mental exercises have been shown to improve the mind's ability to attend.

As someone with a diagnosis of attention deficit disorder, I was especially disappointed at how few words Gallagher spent on this central issue. A long digression into the power of "now" -- with odes to Eckhart Tolle -- tells us that our lives have more meaning when we pay attention to the present moment. Tolle wrote a book along this theme, which I hope is less superfluous than Gallagher's summary. She would have her readers surrender thoughts of the future, or any sort of social consciousness, in order to breathe in breathe out breathe in breathe out and live life in the moment.

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## Clara says

*Rapt* provides a survey of a wide breadth of research on attention, yet manages to obfuscate more than it reveals. In one chapter, attention and conscious experience are synonymous; in another, implicit learning is the apogee of well-directed attention. The author broaches claims with no substantive evidence, such as the idea that perpetual interactions in a multimedia context breed superficial brains. Such claims are bereft of the surveyed research because there is no research to back them up! Gallagher ends with a treatise on meditation, extolling the profound benefits of meditation without even attempting to explain the underlying mechanisms. Just to ensure I'm sufficiently annoyed, the text is filled with perfectly legal but nonetheless irksome editorial choices: "cortexes" instead of "cortices;" "home in on" instead of "hone in on..." and on and on. (This second example only bothered me because the phrase was used in *five paragraphs in a row*. Either form is banal.)

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## Heather says

"All day long, you are selectively paying attention to something, and much more often than you may suspect, you can take charge of this process to good effect. Indeed, your ability to focus on this and suppress that is the key to controlling your experience and, ultimately, your well-being."

Gallagher explains that our life consists of what we focus on, and by noticing where we are placing our attentions, we can enhance or even change our experience of life. I especially enjoyed her illustration that the phrase "paying attention" has a monetary aspect to it for a reason--we have limited stores of focus, attention, and will power. When we spend our attention on one thing, we leave less attention in reserves for other things. Attention is also like a muscle; The more it is practiced, the more it can do, and the longer you can hold focus.

I also liked her idea of taking a "daily vacation" -- a period of 20 or 30 minutes each day where you do something that delights you, then looking back that evening and rehashing the experience of that pleasurable moment. All in all, I enjoyed this book, although in retrospect I kind of wish that I had read it with my eyes instead of just listening to it on audible because I would've liked to take notes. I always listen to audible books in the car so that doesn't afford me the opportunity to write down quotes that I like, etc. Perhaps worth reading again sometime!

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## Marsha says

I really liked this book, and thank you to my sister Amy for recommending it. It made me think about how our lives are defined by what we pay attention to. Also, I appreciated the chapter on ADHD, since I see that a lot at work. A lot of the science in this book is also mentioned in Malcom Gladwell's *Blink* and Jonah Lehrer's *How We Decide*, but each of the books offers a different perspective.

I think decision making and focusing our attention are the challenges of our age. We have so much to choose from, to read, to look at, to listen to, and it's so hard to focus! Unlike our ancestors, we don't have the struggle for survival that riveted so much of their attention. We have so much information and so many possibilities it becomes overwhelming. John Milton was able to retire to a country house for a year and read every book that was known to exist at the time. Who could do that today? That's why I think these books on focus and decision making are so popular.

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## Mike says

Winifred Gallagher's *Rapt: Attention and the Focused Life* readily merits its readers' sustained attention. Gallagher persuasively shows how whatever we focus on is—quite literally—how we spend our lives. Our attention, in other words, is like currency. So the ways we choose to spend it determine the caliber and character of our experience.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi introduced us to *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* in 1991. New developments in neuroscience have since revealed even more about how brains function. *Rapt* thus works, in many ways, like an updated version of *Flow* (both of which are indebted, of course, to William James's seminal *Principles of Psychology*, 1890). Yet *Rapt* draws from ancient wisdom traditions as well as from cutting-edge research in brain science. And Gallagher adduces compelling examples from the arts and humanities as well as controlled laboratory experiments.

We thus learn why—and how—mindfulness trumps multitasking (which she cleverly dubs “focus interruptus”), for instance. With chapters on creativity, productivity, relationships, motivation, “disordered attention” (including ADHD, e.g.), and health, *Rapt* offers a comprehensive synthesis of how the ways we spend our precious attention determine our quality of life.

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## Tara Brabazon says

A surprisingly good book. A bit too Malcolm Gladwell for my liking. A bit too much pseudo-neuroscience. But parking those two issues, this is a fine book. There are some emotional and interesting points made in this book.

I read it to - perhaps - offer a vlog to my PhD students on focus and motivation. It does offer some powerful ideas for that goal. But it is an inspirational book about how to - with consciousness - live a life rather than going through the motions of life. All of us - too often - attempt to reach the expectations of mummy or daddy or preacher or boss. How many of us have the courage to understand ourselves and focus on our goals? At its best, this books helps us find that path.

Recommended.

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## Bonnie says

*Rapt* caught my attention after reading an excerpt in the Utne Reader. The thesis was pretty straightforward – what you focus on determines your experience of life. I was intrigued because I had always struggled with paying quality attention to my children, ostensibly the focus of my work as a stay-at-home mother. I wanted to experience my life with them better, and I wanted something more than a simplistic parenting book that suggested setting aside 20 minutes of play without distraction each day with each child.

Winifred Gallagher covers a lot of ground in the psychological study of attention and focus, from bottom-up



attention to your immediate circumstances and needs – the demands of the world to top-down attention that you direct to things that you choose (like your job, family, or hobbies).

Gallagher argues that attention is selective—one can't focus on everything. Further, emotions guide attention, more often than not to negative places as a measure of self-preservation, and it is up to the individual to guide his attention to more positive emotions that actually expand his ability to focus. Rather than seeking to be happy at all times, Gallagher shows that one must guard what one attends to, with the example that older people are often better able to focus on the simple pleasures of life. She cites research that shows that what one pays attention to shapes her brain and behavior.

One of the more interesting parts of Gallagher's book dealt with intimate relationships within families. Rapt attention is crucial for these relationships to work, but also important is the ability to see the other person's world not only from one's own point of view.

Gallagher advocates identifying those activities to which one can pay rapt attention and reach the state of "flow." Ideally, if one's work fell into this category, it would seem not like work at all, but play. Flow is so arresting to the individual that he will continue to challenge himself at the activity to stay in the flow.

The import of attention is also revealed in decision making (we often attend to our memories rather than our experiences) and creativity (great work requires rapt attention). The distractions of modern life – particularly, electronic – and desire to multi-task are shown to impede productivity and real learning in children. Finally, mental and even physical ailments are often grounded in poorly directed attention.

At the end of the book, Gallagher's sometimes annoying propensity to be politically correct and non-religious gives way to her reverence for particularly Tibetan Buddhism, and the rapt attention to the present that is the end goal of much meditative practice.

Nonetheless, Gallagher's thoughtful book provides mental fodder for this mother's desire to focus on the moment with her children, to identify individual motivations that can guide my top-down, chosen attention to that which my remembering (not experiencing) focus has determine to hold the most value in my daily life – my children.

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## Deb says

\*Paying attention to your attention\*

Completely rapt while reading this book at the gym, I was startled when the gym staff member alerted me that the gym was about to close. Apparently, I missed the announcement. Now, if that's not a convincing testimony for the captivating factor of this book, I'm not sure what is.

The basic premise of *\_Rapt\_* is: "Your life--who you are, what you think, feel and do, what you love--is the sum of what you focus on." It not what happens to happens to you that matters, but what you selectively attend to and focus on that ultimately determines your happiness. As Winifred notes: "Paying rapt attention, whether to a trout stream or a novel, a do-it-yourself project or a prayer, increases your capacity for concentration, expands your inner boundaries, and lifts your spirits, but more important, it simply makes you feel that life is worth living."

*\_Rapt\_* presents a fascinating look at how what we pay attention to has profound effects on all aspects of our life--from relationships and work to our health and our hobbies. Winifred does an impressive job of weaving together numerous research findings, quotes from personal interviews, and her own acquired wisdom to bring much needed attention to the subject of attention. (Meta-attention!) Appropriately, the book is completely captivating from page one, and each successive page continues to convey the powerful benefits of (really, really) paying attention to your life.

Since reading this book, I have become even more focused and engaged in whatever I am doing in the moment. And, that alone is well worth the time it took to indulge in *\_Rapt\_*. This is definitely one of those books that changes the way you look at your life.

Here's to the power of paying attention to your attention!

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### **Aaron says**

Like most people who read *Rapt*, I came to the book prehooked. I've never been much of an ace at focus – I was a poor student all the way through college, when I not so much snapped suddenly to attention as graduated to a curriculum based more on a few large tests than endless worksheets to be turned in on the hour – and I was suspected of ADHD more than once as a child and teen. Like many, I never really got a conclusive answer. I certainly didn't feel like I had an attention problem, just that a lot of stuff that I was expected to pay attention to was boring. While I've spent much of life feeling scattered, forgetting to do things and demonstrating a definite overcommitment to considering how bored I'll be as the foremost consideration in most of my major life decisions, I've always managed to get through everything okay. Until recently. It came to me at work, 25 browser windows open at a time, that I wasn't actually doing any one thing for longer than seven minutes or so. After becoming aware of this mostly unconscious trend in my task management, I tried to make it stop and failed completely. Focus never came, and I could almost feel a frantic buzzing to do something else at the very moment I tried to exert myself. Once I became aware of it at work, I quickly noticed I was doing the same thing at home.

So I came to *Rapt*, like many, in the posture of supplication. And *Rapt* has a great hook. It is, I'm sure, selling like prohibition whiskey. Feel distracted? Have trouble focusing? Wonder if all of this multitasking is having an effect on your brain chemistry? Buy my book! I can dress your attentional problems up in *The Omnivore's Dilemma* style science-lite and fix you right up! The book practically sells itself on premise alone. It's a much closer question whether it actually delivers.

Gallagher is quick to identify the trifecta of major attentional issues: ADD, the proliferation of electronic devices, and the possible overdiagnosis of hard pharma like Ritalin to children who are just distracted, moody or overly enthusiastic, not “ADD”. Unfortunately, her positions on these issues aren't very interesting. Drugs are helpful when used correctly, electronic devices are doing something to our brain chemistry, and we are probably overmedicating children. With the issue of Ritalin in particular, Gallagher doesn't tack too close to taking anything approaching a position – she gives us a few cautionary tales of the spread of recreational use and abuse of these drugs as study aids and professional “helpers” for adults, but stops short of taking a real stand against their use.

The book is probably best in the early going – the pseudo-science of perception and focus is well dissected with cute but effective analogies about birds, the distinction between top-down and bottom-up attention is well-integrated into our experience of a hectic, electronic world, and the lengthy discussion about the

essential elasticity of brain activity – that it learns through repetition and is profoundly altered by focus and conscious awareness – is laid out with enough precision to justify its position at the center of Gallagher's ultimate argument that only a mindful life can ever be a good or complete life.

And if this sounds like a Buddhist trope repackaged as neurology mated with self-help, you're already well ahead of the game – after a lot of discussion about ADHD, drugs, perception and some terrible digressions into cultural relativism (Asians are like this, Americans are like this, it's very hard to be an American, what with all this noise and toys), Gallagher ultimately arrives at the fairly complete conclusion that meditation is the answer. For everything. She has the good sense to seem a little embarrassed that this is the sum total of what she has to show for all of the build-up, but that hint of ambivalence actually gives the book a lot of its strength. You can almost see her spreading her hands and shrugging a little in front of a cadre of confused publishers and saying “Yeah, I'm surprised too, but this meditation thing really does seem to work, like, look at these EKG scans/assorted neurological mumbo jumbo! I'm as wowed as you guys are!” I wasn't quite able to talk myself into setting the book down, grabbing a pillow, lighting some incense and focusing on my breathing, but that's what she's ultimately asking us to do and she believes, and has some statistics to prove, that focusing on your breathing and expanding that into a mindfulness of your activity might be the crucial key to a focused life.

Oh, and turn off your goddamn E-Mail.

My big gripe with this isn't the meditation bit – there are literally thousands of years of empirical evidence sitting solidly at her side on that claim, and I'm glad the science and the practice have come around to the same felicitous conclusion, especially when the other option is Ritalin – but rather on the idea that focus is the key to a healthy life.

Absent from her lauding statements about Asian (I'm almost tempted to say Oriental here, her distinctions are that sweeping) vs American capacity for focus is the seemingly obvious problem of obsessiveness, Japanese and Korean students committing suicide in the face of poor exam scores, the overwhelming social pressures that create that singular focus and the various physical and psychological problems that come in with it. And even this is fairly culturally nuanced, but there's really no excuse for the omission of a serious discussion about the perils of focus, from anorexia, depression, stalking and megalomania all the way down the line to how profoundly we're effected by losing our hair. I am willing to accept that meditation is good, that mindfulness can be empowering and that focus, more than talent, ultimately dictates much of what we accomplish. But hell, lady, I could just as easily be focusing obsessively as focusing mindfully, and meditation doesn't quite cover what you skipped over.

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## **Cori says**

“Whenever you squander attention on something that doesn't put your brain through its paces and stimulate change, your mind stagnates a little and life feels dull.” I couldn't agree more, book! How often do we spend an afternoon mindlessly watching reruns and feel this way?

I heard about this book on the radio a while back. I'm guessing it was NPR, but I could be wrong. It's been on my TBR list for a while, and after seeing it on the shelf at the library the other day, I thought I'd finally pick it up.

Is it bad that I had a hard time paying attention and focusing on a book about paying attention and focusing?

I think it was more that I didn't like the narration of the book, and I thought the language was a little too flowery and not enough science-y for this genre (at least according to my own taste). The content, however, was pretty good. It basically boiled down to "you are what you focus on." Gallagher goes through study after study showing that it is better to live the focused life than one where you just react to what's happening around you. What you focus on is one of the biggest factors in how you experience life.

Gallagher relates research about how the brain reacts to different types of attention in different situations (very interesting), and even gives some practical tips for living a more attentive life. For example, she says, "If you really want to focus on something, says Castellanos, the optimum amount of time to spend on it is ninety minutes. Then change tasks. And watch out for interruptions once you're really concentrating, because it will take you twenty minutes to recover." Interesting! I'll have to try this when I really need to focus on something.

But overall, the book itself lacked focus. Each chapter felt like it's own little non-fiction short story and could stand alone. It had a Malcolm Gladwell-feel to it, but I think he is more successful at bringing differing ideas about a topic into a cohesive whole than Gallagher was.

Read my full review here: <http://letseatgrandpa.com/2011/09/22/...>

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