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Johann Hari

Stolen Focus. Why You Can't Pay Attention

When he was nine years old, my godson developed a brief but freakishly intense obsession with Elvis Presley¹. He took to singing "Jailhouse Rock" at the top of his voice, with all the low crooning and pelvis-jiggling of the King² himself. He didn't know this style had become a joke, so he offered it with all the heart-catching sincerity of a pre-teen who believes he is being cool. In the brief pauses before he started singing
5 it all over again, he demanded to know everything ("Everything! Everything!") about Elvis, and so I jabbered out the rough outline of that inspiring, sad, stupid story.

Elvis was born in one of the poorest towns in Mississippi – a place far, far away, I said. He arrived in the world alongside his twin brother, who died a few minutes later. As he grew up, his mother told him that if
10 he sang to the moon every night, his brother could hear his voice, so he sang and sang. He began to perform in public just as television was taking off – so in a sudden swoosh, he became more famous than anyone had ever been before. Everywhere Elvis went, people would scream, until his world became a chamber of screams. He retreated into a cocoon³ of his own construction, where he gloried in his possessions in place of his lost freedom. For his mother he bought a palace and named it Graceland.

I skimmed through the rest – the descent into addiction, the sweating, gurning stage-jammering⁴ in Vegas, the death at the age of forty-two. Whenever my godson, who I'll call Adam – I've changed some details
15 here to avoid identifying him – asked questions about how the story ended, I got him to duet "Blue Moon" with me instead. "You saw me standing alone," he sang in his little voice, "without a dream in my heart. Without a love of my own."

One day, Adam looked at me very earnestly and asked: "Johann, will you take me to Graceland?" Without
20 really thinking, I agreed. "Do you promise? Do you really promise?" I said I did. And I never gave it another thought, until everything had gone wrong.

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Ten years later, Adam was lost. He had dropped out of school when he was fifteen, and he spent literally almost all his waking hours at home alternating blankly between screens – his phone, an infinite scroll of
25 *Whatsapp* and *Facebook* messages, and his *iPad*, on which he watched a blur of *YouTube* and porn. At moments, I could still see in him traces of the joyful little boy who sang "Viva Las Vegas", but it was like that person had broken into smaller, disconnected fragments. He struggled to stay with a topic of conversation for more than a few minutes without jerking back to a screen or abruptly switching to another subject. He seemed to be whirring at the speed of *Snapchat*, somewhere where nothing still or serious could reach him. He was intelligent, decent, kind – but it was like nothing could gain any traction⁵ in his mind.

30 During the decade in which Adam had become a man, this fracturing seemed to be happening – to some

¹ *Elvis Presley* (1935-1977): American singer and actor

² Elvis was nicknamed the King of Rock 'n' Roll

³ (here) a protective barrier

⁴ *gurning stage-jammering*: talking endlessly in a confusing way

⁵ (here) attention

degree – to many of us. The sensation of being alive in the early twenty-first century consisted of the sense that our ability to pay attention – to focus – was cracking and breaking. I could feel it happen to me – I would buy piles of books, and I would glimpse them guiltily from the corner of my eye as I sent, I told myself, just *one* more tweet⁶. I still read a lot, but with each year that passed, it felt more and more like running up a down escalator. I had just turned forty, and wherever my generation gathered, we would lament our lost capacity for concentration, as if it was a friend who had vanished one day at sea and never been seen since.

Then one evening, as we lay on a large sofa, each staring at our own ceaselessly shrieking screens, I looked at Adam and felt a low dread. We can't live like this, I said to myself.

40 "Adam," I said softly. "Let's go to Graceland."

"What?"

I reminded him of the promise I had made to him so many years before. He couldn't even remember those "Blue Moon" days, nor my pledge to him, but I could see that the idea of breaking this numbing routine ignited something in him. He looked up at me and asked if I was serious. "I am," I said, "but there's one condition. I'll pay for us to go four thousand miles. We'll go to Memphis, and New Orleans – we'll go all over the South, anywhere you want. But I can't do it if, when we get there, all you're going to do is stare at your phone. You have to promise to leave it switched off except at nights. We have to return to reality. We have to reconnect with something that matters to us." He swore he would, and a few weeks later, we lifted off from London Heathrow, towards the land of the Delta blues⁷.

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50 When you arrive at the gates of Graceland, there is no longer a human being whose job is to show you around. You are handed an *iPad*, and you put in little earbuds, and the *iPad* tells you what to do – turn left; turn right; walk forward. In each room, the *iPad*, in the voice of some forgotten actor, tells you about the room you are in, and a photograph of it appears on the screen. So we walked around Graceland alone, staring at the *iPad*. We were surrounded by Canadians and Koreans and a whole United Nations of blank-faced people, looking down, seeing nothing around them. Nobody was looking for long at anything but their screens. I watched them as we walked, feeling more and more tense. Occasionally somebody would look away from the *iPad* and I felt a flicker of hope, and I would try to make eye contact with them, to shrug, to say, Hey, we're the only ones looking around, we're the ones who travelled thousands of miles and decided to actually see the things in front of us – but every time this happened, I realised they had broken contact with the *iPad* only to take out their phones and snap a selfie.

When we got to the Jungle Room – Elvis's favourite place in the mansion – the *iPad* was chattering away when a middle-aged man standing next to me turned to say something to his wife. In front of us, I could see the large fake pot plants that Elvis had bought to turn this room into his own artificial jungle. The fake plants were still there, sagging sadly. "Honey," he said, "this is amazing. Look." He waved the *iPad* in her direction, and then began to move his finger across it. "If you swipe left, you can see the Jungle Room to the left. And if you swipe right, you can see the Jungle Room to the right." His wife stared, smiled, and began to swipe at her own *iPad*.

I watched them. They swiped back and forth, looking at the different dimensions of the room. I leaned forward. "But, sir," I said, "there's an old-fashioned form of swiping you can do. It's called turning your head. Because we're here. We're in the Jungle Room. You don't have to see it on your screen. You can see

⁶ a post on the social media platform X, previously known as *Twitter*

⁷ *the land of the Delta blues*: southern states in the USA

it unmediated. Here. Look.” I waved my hand at it, and the fake green leaves rustled a little.

75 The man and his wife backed away from me a few inches. “Look!” I said, in a louder voice than I intended. “Don’t you see? We’re *there*. We’re *actually there*. There’s no need for your screen. *We are in the Jungle Room*.” They hurried out of the room, glancing back at me with a who’s-that-loon shake of the head⁸, and I could feel my heart beating fast. I turned to Adam, ready to laugh, to share the irony with him, to release my anger – but he was in a corner, holding his phone under his jacket, flicking through *Snapchat*.

80 At every stage in this trip, he had broken his promise. When the plane first touched down in New Orleans two weeks before, he immediately took out his phone, while we were still in our seats. “You promised not to use it,” I said. He replied: “I meant I wouldn’t make phone calls. I can’t not use *Snapchat* and texting, obviously.” He said this with baffled honesty, as if I had asked him to hold his breath for ten days. I watched him scrolling through his phone in the Jungle Room silently. Milling past him was a stream of people also staring at their screens. I felt as alone as if I had been standing in an empty Iowa cornfield, miles from another human. I strode up to Adam and snatched his phone from his grasp.

85 “We can’t live like this!” I said. “You don’t know how to be present! You are missing your life! You’re afraid of missing out – that’s why you are checking your screen all the time! By doing that, you are *guaranteeing* you are missing out! You are missing your one and only life! You can’t see the things that are *right in front of you*, the things you have been longing to see since you were a little boy! None of these people can! *Look at them!*”

90 I was talking loudly, but in their *iPad* iSolation, most people around us didn’t even notice. Adam snatched his phone back from me, told me (not without some justification) that I was acting like a freak, and stomped away, out past Elvis’s grave, and into the Memphis morning.

95 I spent hours walking listlessly between Elvis’s various *Rolls Royces*, which are displayed in the adjoining museum, and finally I found Adam again as night fell in the *Heartbreak Hotel* across the street, where we were staying. He was sitting next to the swimming pool, which was shaped like a giant guitar, and as Elvis sang in a 24/7 loop over this scene, he looked sad. I realised as I sat with him that, like all the most volcanic anger, my rage towards him – which had been spitting out throughout this trip – was really anger towards myself. His inability to focus, his constant distraction, the inability of the people at Graceland to see the place they had travelled to, was something I felt rising within myself. I was fracturing like *they* were fracturing. I was losing my ability to be present too. And I hated it.

100 “I know something’s wrong,” Adam said to me softly, holding his phone tightly in his hand. “But I have no idea how to fix it.” Then he went back to texting.

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⁸ *who’s-that-loon shake of the head*: (here) shaking one’s head in disbelief