

Principal's Letter October 8, 2009

Dear Family,

I read a very interesting article a while back entitled "Multi-tasking: attention infidelity" by Ellen Goodman. Ellen talks about her office, where she is sitting in front of a computer with a land phone to her left and an iPhone to her right. As she types into her Word program, Google alerts her to the latest news, e-mails are coming in and she has a text message from her daughter. Sound familiar?

We convince ourselves that our ability to multi-task allows us to be more efficient. But in Ms. Goodman's article, she reports on research by Stanford's Clifford Nass, who teaches human-computer interactions. He led a research team that studied 100 students, high and low multi-taskers. The high ones focused poorly, remembered less and were more easily distracted. They couldn't shift well from one task to another and they couldn't organize well. They couldn't figure out what was important and what wasn't. Nass has yet to study whether they were bad at paying attention to begin with or were driven to distraction. But there's a suspicion, he says, that "we may be breeding a generation of kids whose ability to pay attention may be destroyed."

As Nass says, many multi-taskers believe that they are the efficient exception. They can talk and chew e-mails at the same time. Second, the simultaneous media immersion has become the new norm. This is what normal looks like.

As Ellen says, it's the norm in offices where people are often required to keep chat rooms open and respond to e-mail within 30 minutes. It's in sports arenas where fans in expensive seats actually watch the game on big-screen TV's while texting friends. It's in college classrooms where the professor's lecture competes with the social networking site on a laptop.

Ms. Goodman begs the question, "If the ratcheting up of media multi-tasking is teaching us not to pay attention, is it also training us not to expect attention?" Nass says, "I don't know that this generation values focused attention. The notion that attention is at the core of a relationship is declining," he suspects. "Is saying to someone, 'I am going to give you my undivided attention' still one of the greatest gifts I can give?" Or has multi-tasking led us to a kind of attention infidelity?"

Ellen says that "What we are learning is our limits. Not just on the highway where texting while driving is as common as it is terrifying, but at the dinner table where kids insist (wrongly) that they can text and talk, at the office where multi-tasking is multi-distracting, and in relationships where face-to-face competes with Facebook.

I eagerly looked for an answer at the end of Ms. Goodman's column, but there was none. Darn. One of my goals this year is to "be present in the moment." It's a struggle, as the e-mails pop up, the phone rings, and the playground fighting erupts. I'm still working at it. It's easier for me-I am from a generation where "undivided attention" was the expectation. But what about our children? It's food for thought.

Sheila