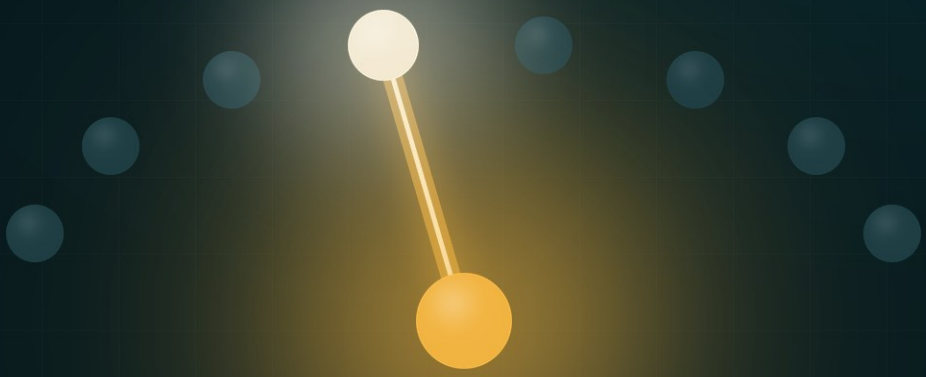
JOHN RECTOR

Undivided

Simone Weil, the gift of attention, and the one thing your delegate cannot give for you



A BOOK IN FIVE PARTS

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John Rector

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PROLOGUE

Go On, I’m Listening

THURSDAY, 7:40 P.M.

You are halfway through telling a friend the thing you have not told anyone. His phone lights up on the table. His eyes drop to it for less than a second and come back. Go on, he says. I’m listening.

You go on. But you notice that the sentence you finish is not the sentence you started. It is shorter. It has less in it. You had been about to hand him the whole thing, and somewhere in that half second you decided to hand him the small version instead.

Nothing was said. He did not pick the phone up. He was not rude by any standard a reasonable person would apply. And still you felt something leave the table, as plainly as you would have felt a draft from an opened door.

We have a phrase for what left. We say he was not paying attention, as if attention were a fee and he had come up a little short. I think the phrase is wrong, and I think the mistake inside it is about to matter a great deal.

A French schoolteacher who died in 1943 spent the last years of her life on what attention is. She said it is not a payment and not an effort. She said it is the rarest kind of generosity a person has to give, and that most of us, most of the time, do not give it at all. Her name was Simone Weil.

I come to her for a practical reason. Whatever lit his phone was almost certainly small. A delivery window. A calendar change. A price that moved. I spend my days teaching people that small matters like these can now be handed down to an AI that works for them, a delegate, and that it will handle them without lighting anything up. I believe that, and I have watched it work.

So picture the same dinner a few years on. The phone stays dark, because nothing small can reach him anymore. The door that kept opening has been shut. Is he with you now?

That is the question of this book. My answer is that shutting the door is not the same as being in the room. Attention is not what is left over when the interruptions are taken away. It is something a person does, something a person has to learn, and the one thing I know of that a machine able to watch everything cannot give on your behalf.

PART I

The Rarest Thing

A teacher, a geometry problem, and a question five words long.

CHAPTER 1

The Teacher from Paris

Simone Weil was born in Paris on February 3, 1909. Her father was a doctor. Her older brother, André, would become one of the great mathematicians of the century, and as a girl she measured herself against him and despaired. She came out of that despair with a conviction she never gave up. Anyone, she decided, however ordinary their gifts, can reach the truth if they want it and keep their attention on it long enough.

She studied philosophy under the teacher known as Alain, entered the École Normale Supérieure, and placed first in the examination in general philosophy and logic in a year when Simone de Beauvoir placed second. Then she did what graduates of that school did. She taught. Through the early 1930s she taught philosophy to girls in provincial schools at Le Puy, Auxerre and Roanne. One student from Roanne remembered her taking the class outside to sit under a cedar tree, where they would look for problems in geometry together.

In December 1934 she took a leave from teaching and got herself hired as an unskilled hand at the Alsthom electrical works in Paris. She worked a press. Over the following months she worked in two more plants, the last of them Renault, and left in August 1935. She was clumsy, often ill, and slow against the piece rate. I will come back to what she learned there, because it belongs to this argument.

The rest was short. She went to Spain in 1936 and came home injured. When Paris fell in 1940 she went south to Marseille with her parents, worked a grape harvest, and filled notebooks. In the spring of 1942 she left those notebooks with a farmer and writer named Gustave Thibon, wrote a handful of long letters to a Dominican priest named Father Perrin, and sailed for New York. By the end of the year she was in London working for the Free French. She died in a sanatorium at Ashford, in Kent, on August 24,

1943. She was thirty-four.

Almost none of what she is known for was published as a book while she lived. Thibon made a selection from the notebooks and it appeared in 1947 as Gravity and Grace. The letters and essays she had left with Father Perrin came out in 1950 as Waiting for God. Albert Camus, who saw much of her work into print, thought she was the great spirit of their time.

I should say plainly that she is not an easy guide. She was hard on herself well past the point of sense, and I would not hold up her life as a pattern for anyone. I hold up one idea. It is in a short essay she wrote for schoolchildren, and it is about homework.

RECORD

Weil taught school, worked a factory press, and wrote about attention in notebooks and letters published after her death.

WHY HER

She asked what attention is before anyone had built a business on taking it.

CHAPTER 2

Not a Muscle

Before she left Marseille, Weil sent Father Perrin an essay for the students he worked with. Its title is long and plain: Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God. You do not need to share her religion to follow it. She says so herself near the end.

Her first claim is that school has one real purpose, and it is not the one on the report card. The purpose is to grow the faculty of attention. The Latin and the geometry are nearly beside the point. They are what the attention is practiced on.

Her second claim is about what attention is, and she starts with what it is not. Tell a room of children to pay attention, she says, and watch what they do. They frown. They hold their breath. They tighten their shoulders. Ask them two minutes later what they were attending to and they cannot tell you. They were not attending to anything. They were clenching.

We never stop doing this. When an adult says he needs to focus, he usually means he is about to clench. He sets his jaw at the page. He confuses being tired afterward with having done the thing. Weil says this kind of effort has almost no place in study. A student can get good marks that way, on natural ability, and learn nothing that lasts.

What she puts in its place is strange the first time you hear it. Attention, she says, means holding your own thought back. You leave the mind open and unoccupied, turned toward the thing, ready to receive it. You do not go and seize the answer. You wait for it. The French word is attente, and it is in the title of her book. Waiting.

Then comes the part I find most useful. Suppose you spend an hour on a geometry problem with that kind of attention and at the end of the hour you have not solved it. She says the hour was not wasted. The faculty grew

anyway, in a direction you cannot see, and the growth will show up later in some place that has nothing to do with geometry. She goes further. A wrong answer reached by real attention does you more good than a right answer reached without it.

Take three things from her. Attention is receptive. It is turned on one thing. And it grows by use on anything hard, whether or not you get the answer.

Hold on to that last one. It only makes sense if the product of school was never the answer. For as long as answers were scarce, nobody had to decide whether she was right. Answers are not scarce now.

> *Attention is not the clench. It is the waiting.*

WEIL'S POINT

Attention is not muscular effort. It is the mind held open toward one thing, and it grows whether or not the answer comes.

WHAT CHANGES

When answers cost nothing, her claim that the answer was never the point stops being pious and becomes practical.

CHAPTER 3

What Are You Going Through

The essay on school studies ends somewhere no one expects a piece about homework to end. It ends with a person who is suffering.

People in real trouble, Weil says, need one thing in this world, and it is not advice. They need someone able to give them attention. She says that ability is very rare, nearly a miracle, and that most people who believe they have it are mistaken. Warmth is not it. Pity is not it. A good heart is not enough.

She reaches for an old story to explain. In the legend of the Grail, a wounded king guards the vessel, and it will belong to the first knight who thinks to ask him a simple question. Weil gives the question in five words: “What are you going through?” To love your neighbor, she says, comes down to being able to ask that.

I would add what I take to be implied. You have to wait for the answer. Asking is easy. Half the people you meet ask how you are. The rare thing is the person who asks and then holds still, with nothing of his own pressing forward to fill the pause.

That is the same act as the geometry hour, turned toward a human being. You hold your own thought back. You do not sort the person into a type. You do not get your reply ready while he is still talking. You leave room, and what he is going through comes into it.

That same spring Weil met a poet named Joë Bousquet. He had been paralyzed by a bullet in the First World War and had lived in one room in Carcassonne ever since. She wrote to him that April, and one sentence of that letter has outlived everything else in it: “Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity.”

Read it slowly, because each word is doing work. Generosity means giving something that is yours and that you could have kept. Rarest means it is

harder to come by than money. People who write large checks without a thought cannot do this for ten minutes. Purest, I think, means that it is hard to give for show. You cannot perform it for long. The other person can tell.

Go back to the dinner. You handed your friend the small version because the question had not been asked. He never said he was not interested. His eyes said the room was not open, and you do not bring the whole of something into a room that is not open.

WEIL'S POINT

What a suffering person needs is someone able to ask what they are going through, and then wait.

WHAT CHANGES

Nothing yet. That is the fixed point the rest of the book turns around.

PART II

The Trade in Eyes

How attention became a currency, and what the factory already knew.

CHAPTER 4

Paying

In English we pay attention. Listen to the verb. Other languages chose differently. The French make it. The Spanish lend it. The Germans have a phrase in which you give it as a present. English alone, of the ones I know, made it a payment, and did so long before there was any market to pay into.

Then the market came. The principle underneath it is simple and I do not need a single figure to state it. Information uses up the attention of whoever receives it. So when information becomes plentiful, attention becomes scarce, and whatever is scarce gets a price. Herbert Simon said this in 1971, before there was a screen in anyone's pocket.

Once attention had a price, businesses formed to collect it. You know their shape. They give you something for nothing and sell your looking to someone else. To do that they need a great deal of looking, so they study what makes a person look.

I wrote a book called The Zero-Attention Economy, and one line of it belongs here. Attention is the remainder of what we failed to predict. When the world does exactly what you expected, you do not notice it. When it does not, your head turns. The trade in eyes learned this without needing me to write it down. It learned to make small surprises by the thousand and to deliver them at a tempo no one could settle into.

Here I need a distinction that the whole book rests on. There are two things we call attention. The first is taken from you by the object. A loud noise takes it. A lit screen takes it. The second is sent by you toward something you chose. William James drew this line in 1890 and called the two kinds passive and voluntary. He also wrote the best sentence anyone has written on the stakes: "My experience is what I agree to attend to."

I will call the two kinds captured and given.

The market deals only in the first. It has to. It counts attention in seconds and in glances, and a captured second counts the same as a given one. From the outside both look like a person looking. But Weil was writing only about the second kind, and the second kind does not appear in any ledger. No one has ever sold an advertisement against an hour that a woman spent listening to her brother.

So we built a very large machine for capturing attention, we measured its output with care, and we called the output by the same name as the thing Weil said was the rarest gift a person has. That is how a word comes to mean its opposite.

> *Captured attention is taken by the object. Given attention is sent by the person. Only one of them was ever for sale.*

THE PRINCIPLE

Plentiful information makes attention scarce, and scarce things get priced. The market can count only attention that is captured.

WHAT CHANGES

The delegate is about to take away most of what the trade captured attention with.

CHAPTER 5

The Stamping Press

I said I would return to the factory. Weil went in expecting hardship, and she found it. What she had not expected was what the work would do to her mind.

The press had a rate. So many pieces an hour, paid by the piece, and the rate was set so that only speed would meet it. Orders came down with no reasons attached. Do this one now. Stop that. Move. She was a trained philosopher who had argued with the best minds in Paris, and within weeks she found she had nearly stopped thinking. She wrote that this was the strongest temptation of that life, to give up thought altogether, because not thinking was the one sure way to hurt less.

Look at what the press asked of her. It did not ask for no attention. A person who drifts at a press loses a hand. It asked for a particular kind: all of it, pinned to the surface, at a tempo set by the machine, with no moment long enough for the mind to go down into anything. The factory used her attention up and built none.

That is the exact reverse of the geometry hour. In the geometry hour the tempo is yours, the thing is one thing, and the attention spent comes back larger. At the press the tempo is the machine’s, the things are a thousand identical things, and the attention spent is simply gone.

Weil came to believe that this was the real injury of industrial work, deeper than low pay. She thought a person’s work ought to be something he could contemplate, and the line made that impossible by design.

Now I will make an argument that is mine and not hers. The feed is the stamping press, pointed at leisure.

Consider it part by part. The tempo is set by the machine. The pieces are small, alike, and endless. Each asks for a second or two of the whole surface

of your mind and no depth at all. Nothing stays long enough to be waited on. And you finish an evening of it the way she finished a shift, tired and with nothing in your hands.

A century ago the line took a worker's hands and let the mind go to waste. This one takes the eyes and lets the mind go to waste, and there is not even a wage. I am not scolding anyone. I have stood at that press. I only want it called by its right name, because the next part of the story is about a machine that could take us off the line, and I want us to know what line we are on.

WEIL'S POINT

The factory demanded attention at the machine's tempo and pinned it to the surface. It spent the faculty without growing it.

WHAT CHANGES

The same design now runs in our free hours. Being taken off it is possible for the first time.

CHAPTER 6

Half Is Not Half

Here is the principle the picture at the top of this book lets you handle. Attention does not divide the way money does.

Half of a hundred dollars is fifty dollars. It buys half as much. If attention worked that way, a friend who gave you half his attention at dinner would have given you half a gift, and you would be half as glad of it. You know that is not what happens. Half his attention is worth close to nothing. On a bad night it is worth less than nothing, because now you know where you stand.

The reason is in what the receiver gets. When someone attends to you, the thing you receive is not a quantity of mental effort. It is the fact that, for this stretch of time, you are the one thing. That fact has no halves. You are the one thing or you are one of two things, and one of two is a different condition.

The same holds when the object is a problem and not a person. Weil's waiting cannot be done in slices. The mind needs time to go quiet before anything comes into it, and each interruption sends it back to the start. Two half hours are not one hour. Six ten-minute pieces are not an hour either. They are six starts.

So the arithmetic most of us carry around is wrong. We act as though attention were a budget, so much to this and so much to that, and the only question were how to allot it. A budget assumes the stuff is the same stuff whether you spend it in one piece or forty. This stuff is not.

That is why I chose the title. In ordinary speech, undivided is a word you add to attention to make it sound stronger. I think it is the definition. Attention is undivided or it is something else. The something else is real and useful, and I will name it in the next part. But it is not what Weil meant, and

it is not what your friend failed to give you.

One consequence is uncomfortable. It is possible to spend a whole day paying attention, in the market's sense, and give none. A day cut into forty pieces has forty pieces of looking in it and no attention at all.

> *You are the one thing, or you are one of two things. There is no half.*

THE PRINCIPLE

Attention's worth is in its wholeness. Divide it and you do not get smaller portions of the same thing. You get a different thing.

WHAT CHANGES

A machine that takes whole categories of interruption away can return whole hours, which is the only form in which hours are any use for this.

PART III

The Machine That Never Looks Away

What a delegate takes off your hands, and the one thing it cannot give for you.

CHAPTER 7

The Small Matters

Now the delegate enters. I use that word on purpose. I do not call it an agent or a tool. It is an entity that works for you, under you, and what you do with it is not use. You delegate to it.

Think about what goes down to it first. It is the looking. Comparing the prices. Reading the terms. Watching the inbox for the one message that matters. Waiting on hold. Filling in the form, tracking the package, finding the hour when four calendars agree. Every one of those was a small claim on you, and every one came with its own light on the table.

I tell my students to hand all of it down, and I give them a test for when it is finished. The prompt is two words, order dinner, and the job is not complete when the order is placed. It is complete when the food is in your stomach. A delegate held to that standard does not report each step. It has no reason to light anything up until there is something worthy of you.

In The Zero-Attention Economy I put it this way. A machine becomes valuable at the moment it earns the right to be ignored.

See what this does to the trade in eyes. That trade lived on small matters. It caught you while you compared, searched, and scrolled toward the thing you came for. But a delegate does the comparing now, and a delegate has no eyes to catch. I worked through that in Borrowed. You cannot surprise it into looking. You can only meet its specification or fail to.

So for the first time since the trade began, hours come back. I do not mean minutes shaved here and there. I mean whole categories of interruption that stop arriving. This is good news and I do not want to hedge it. I have seen what it does to a working day.

But be exact about what comes back. Hours come back. Attention does not, because attention was never the absence of interruption. A returned hour is

an empty room. What happens in it depends on a faculty that the person either has or does not have, and on who else is standing at the door. Both of those are the subject of Part IV.

THE PRINCIPLE

Small matters need watching, not attention. A delegate can do the watching and stay dark until something deserves you.

WHAT CHANGES

The trade in eyes loses the small matters it captured attention with, and whole hours come back empty.

CHAPTER 8

Vigilance

First I have to face the strongest objection to this book, and it is a fair one. By any measure you can take from outside, a delegate attends better than you do.

It does not drift. It does not glance at anything. It reads the whole contract, including the page you would have skipped. It can keep watch on a thousand things for a year and its watch on the last is as steady as its watch on the first. If attention were a quantity, the delegate would be the most attentive entity that has ever existed, and the sensible course would be to send every need for attention its way. Your friend at dinner included.

Something in you refuses that conclusion. I want to say why the refusal is right, and I want to do it without claiming to know what does or does not go on inside the machine. I do not know that. My claim is about something visible from outside. It is about cost.

Go back to Weil's word. Generosity. To be generous is to give something you could have spent elsewhere and cannot get back. Now look at a human hour. It is drawn from an account that is fixed, small, and of unknown size. When your friend gives you an evening, he gives up every other thing that evening could have been, and he will not be issued another. That is what you receive when he attends to you. A piece of a life that is running out, spent on you and no one else.

The delegate's watching is not drawn from an account like that. It can watch you and ten thousand others in the same instant, and its watch on you takes nothing from the rest. Nothing was given up. Nothing was chosen over anything.

I need a separate word for watching that costs the watcher nothing, and the word I will use is vigilance. Vigilance is a real good. Most of what goes

wrong in the small matters of a life goes wrong for lack of it, and people are poor at it. We get bored. We look away. The delegate is better at vigilance than we will ever be, and we should let it be.

But vigilance is not generosity. A watch that costs nothing can be useful. It can even be kind in its effects. It cannot be a gift in Weil's sense, because the thing that made attention a gift was never the quality of the watching. It was that a mortal spent what he could not spare.

That gives a sorting rule plain enough to carry around. Ask of anything on your plate: does this need to be watched, or does it need someone to be there? If it needs watching, hand it down. If it needs someone to be there, no one can go in your place.

> *Vigilance is watching that costs the watcher nothing. Attention is a piece of a life that is running out.*

THE PRINCIPLE

Generosity requires that the giver could have spent the gift elsewhere and cannot get it back. Only a finite life can give attention.

WHAT CHANGES

The delegate is superb at vigilance. Give it everything that needs watching, and nothing that needs you.

CHAPTER 9

The Message You Did Not Send

There is a rule I give every student, and it gets more resistance than anything else I teach. Never have your AI deal with a person who is worthy of your own attention.

The resistance always takes the same form. But it writes better than I do. The note it would send to my friend whose father died is kinder and better made than the one I would write. Why would I send him the worse note?

Because he was never going to read it for the prose. A message to a person is a receipt. It says: I stopped, and for these minutes you were the one thing. The words are how the receipt is printed. When a delegate composes the note, the words are fine and the receipt is forged. No one stopped.

And forged receipts get found out. People used to say, he used me. That was the complaint against someone who treated you as a means. There is a new complaint coming, and it is worse. He sent his delegate. It means: I was a small matter to him. He ranked me below the things he keeps for himself.

Delegation runs downhill. That is the nature of it, and it is why it is so useful. It is also why sending a person down that hill tells the person exactly where you put him. I wrote about the bonds this breaks in Nothing Owed.

I do not want to be misread as saying the delegate has no place near the people you care about. It has a large one. It can remember the anniversary. It can find the address, hold the table, and clear the afternoon. It can notice, in everything it watches for you, that your friend's father has died, and put that in front of you before anything else. That is vigilance in the service of attention, and it is the best use of it there is.

The line is this. Your delegate may bring a person to your attention. It may not pay your attention for you.

One more consequence. As copies become perfect, a message on a screen stops proving that anyone attended to anything. I made that case in Face Value and in Be the Face That Your Customers Trust. The only attention that cannot be forged is the kind given in the room, where the other person can watch your eyes. The table at the start of this book is the last place the receipt can be checked.

THE PRINCIPLE

A message to a person is a receipt for attention spent. A delegated message is a forged receipt.

WHAT CHANGES

The delegate may bring a person to your attention. It may not pay your attention for you.

CHAPTER 10

The Fifteen Minutes

There are people whose whole job is attention to another person, and for a generation we have made them do something else.

Think of the doctor with fifteen minutes for you, who spends ten of them facing a screen. Think of the waiter keying your order into a terminal with his back to the table, the desk clerk who greets you without looking up from the monitor, the teacher buried in forms. None of them is careless. Each is doing vigilance. The record had to be kept, the order had to be entered, the form had to be filed, and until now a human being was the only one available to do it.

So the person you came to see was split in two. Half of him watched the record and half of him was left for you, and we know what half is worth.

This is where the delegate does its best work, and it is the work I care most about. Give the vigilance to the delegate. Let the record keep itself and the order enter itself. Then the doctor can turn his chair around. The fifteen minutes do not get longer. They get whole.

That is what we build at Charleston AI. We hand a local owner finished work, so that everything that is not the guest comes off the owner’s hands. The aim was never to put a machine between an owner and the people who walk through the door.

There is an opposite design, and it will tempt a great many businesses because it is cheaper in the first year. Put the machine out front to face the customer, and keep the humans in back watching the systems. That is sending your delegate to a person, done at scale. A business built that way has decided that its customers are small matters. Customers can tell.

I want to be careful here, because the rule is not that a delegate must never speak to a customer. Much of what a customer wants from you is a small

matter to the customer too. Nobody wants your undivided attention for a reservation. They want the table booked, at once, at any hour, without being put on hold. A delegate that answers the phone and gets that done is doing the guest a service.

So use the sorting rule from the guest's side. Does the guest want this watched, or does the guest want someone to be there? The booking wants watching. The evening wants someone to be there. Let the delegate take the booking so that the host can look up when the guest walks in.

I tell owners the same thing I tell students. Put your delegate behind you, where it can carry everything. Do not put it in front of you, where your face should be.

THE PRINCIPLE

Much human service work is attention to a person, crowded out by vigilance that someone had to do.

WHAT CHANGES

Give the vigilance to the delegate and the person comes back whole. Put the delegate behind you, never where your face should be.

PART IV

The Emptied Hour

What comes back when the small matters go, and what it takes to be there for it.

CHAPTER 11

Pascal’s Room

Three centuries before any of this, another French mathematician was making notes for a book he did not live to finish. Blaise Pascal wrote that all the unhappiness of men comes from one thing, which is that they do not know how to stay quietly in a room.

His word for what we do instead was diversion. He did not mean entertainment only. He meant the hunt, the war, the office, the game, the errand, anything at all that keeps a person from being alone with his own condition. A king, he said, with every comfort and no diversion, is a miserable man. That is why kings are surrounded by people whose whole job is to keep them busy.

For most people in Pascal’s day, and in ours until about now, the door of that room was held shut by necessity. There were things that had to be done. The forms, the errands, the hours on hold. Nobody enjoyed them, and they did an unadvertised service. They kept us out of the room.

Delegation takes the necessity away. The small matters go, and the door stands open.

Now look at who is waiting on the other side of it. The largest diversion industry ever built has just lost its small-matter business, as I said in Part III. It will not close. It will turn everything it has toward the hours that came back. And it has an advantage that has nothing to do with quality. It asks. Every second of every day it asks for the next hour. Attention never asks. The geometry problem sits on the desk and does not light up.

So the default is clear, and I would be lying to you if I said otherwise. Returned hours go to whoever asks for them first. In my own book on this I said that the hours a good system gives back are real, and that they vanish unless someone decides in advance where they will go. I showed how free

time fills itself in Work Expands.

This is the correction I most want to make to the hopeful story about AI, including the hopeful story I tell. The delegate does not produce attention. It produces the chance for attention, and in the same stroke it produces a stronger pull away from it than there has ever been. Which one wins in a given life is not decided by the technology. It is decided by whether the person can stay in the room.

> *Returned hours go to whoever asks for them first. Attention never asks.*

PASCAL'S POINT

People cannot stay quietly in a room, so they fill every hour with diversion.

WHAT CHANGES

Necessity used to keep the door shut. Delegation opens it, and the diversion trade is standing outside.

CHAPTER 12

The School

If the outcome turns on a faculty, the next question is where the faculty comes from. Weil has already told us. It comes from use, on hard things, with the mind held open. For most people the first place that happens, if it happens at all, is school.

And here her essay stops being a period piece. A delegate can now do the geometry problem. It can do the Latin prose. It can produce, in a breath, the answer to nearly anything a school is likely to set. If the product of school was the answer, then school is over, and a good many people have reached exactly that conclusion.

Weil said, long before there was any reason to say it, that the product was never the answer. The product was the hour. A wrong answer reached by an hour of real attention was worth more to the student than a right one copied down. For eighty years that sounded like the sort of thing a devout teacher says. It now reads as the only account of school that survives the machine.

But it survives only if schools and students believe it. If they go on believing the answer is the point, the student will hand the problem down, as anyone sensible hands down a small matter, and receive the answer, and the hour will never happen. A generation can come out of that with every answer and no faculty. I think this is the largest risk in the whole subject, and it does not look like a risk. It looks like good grades.

The same holds for adults, who have no one setting them problems. Anything will do as a school if it is hard, unhurried, and one thing. A long book. An instrument. A proof. A craft with a real standard. A game played seriously, which was the subject of Unnecessary Obstacles. Prayer, for those who pray, which Weil thought was attention in its purest form.

These have one feature in common. None can be delegated without vanishing. The product of each is a change in the person doing it, and no one can be changed on your behalf. I made the companion argument about skill in Masterpiece.

I have a PhD, and I was never in love with the dissertation or with the process of getting one. I was in love with the idea. If Weil is right, the years of staying with the idea were the education, and the document was only the receipt.

WEIL'S POINT

School exists to grow attention. The answer was never the product. The hour was.

WHAT CHANGES

With answers free, her account is the only reason for school left standing, and it works only for those who believe it.

CHAPTER 13

The Gate

I have described a machine that returns hours and an industry waiting to take them. It would be fair to ask what I do about it myself.

I gave my own delegate a standing instruction. Only bring matters to me worthy of my attention. Decide the rest. I did not arrive at that sentence out of any philosophy. I arrived at it because I had become the bottleneck in my own work, and everything was waiting on me.

Set that instruction beside the feed and you will see they are mirror images. The feed's job is to bring me everything that might hold my eyes. The delegate's job, under that sentence, is to hold back everything that does not need me. One is built to open the door as often as possible. The other is built to stand at it.

They are close cousins as technology. What separates them is whose side they are on. That is why I keep saying that the question to ask of any AI is who it works for, which was the subject of Of Age. It is why I argue for personal AI over the enterprise kind, and why I think the model that sorts a person's day has to belong to that person. A gate is only a gate if the gatekeeper answers to you.

There is a second thing the right arrangement asks, and it is easy to miss. Delegating well takes attention. I am a manager here, not a user. To hand a matter down I have to say what done means, and to say what done means I have to have actually thought about what I want. That thought cannot be handed down. It is the one piece of the small matter that was never small.

Then, when something does pass the gate, it gets the whole of me. That is the bargain. The delegate keeps a thousand things away so that the three that arrive can each be the one thing.

I will put it as a rule in three lines, since my students like rules.

Small matters get vigilance. Hand them down.

Hard matters get attention. Yours, whole, when you are fresh.

People get attention. Yours, whole, and in the room when you can manage it.

And there is a test you can apply to any AI anyone tries to sell you. After a month with it, do you have more whole hours or fewer?

> *The feed is built to open the door. A delegate, given the right instruction, is built to stand at it.*

THE PRINCIPLE

A delegate under the instruction to bring only what is worthy of you is the mirror image of the feed.

WHAT CHANGES

The technology is the same family. The difference is whose side it is on, so own the gate.

PART V

The Ledger

Where this sits in my own framework, what I expect, and where I am probably wrong.

CHAPTER 14

Where This Sits in the Reality Equation

Readers who know my other work will want to know how this fits the Reality Equation. I will say how, and I will also mark the place where Weil and I part.

The Equation says Reality is a ratio, the Actual divided by Expectation. Whose Reality? In this book, yours, at the table. The Actual is what the world hands you. Expectation is what your unconscious comparison machine brought with it. You feel the ratio move, and the feeling is surprise.

Captured attention is easy to place. I have written that attention is the remainder of what we failed to predict. When the ratio moves, attention is taken. The trade in eyes is a factory for small movements of the ratio.

Given attention is harder to place, and more interesting. It is not something that happens to the ratio. It is an action. The Equation holds that no one can reach in and touch either term. You cannot set the Actual and you cannot edit your Expectation. What you can do, once Reality arrives, is act, and more than one action is always open. Staying with the person in front of you is one of those actions. Reaching for the phone is another.

Here is where I have to differ with her. Weil asks for a mind emptied, with its own thought suspended. In my framework that cannot be done. Expectation is always brought. It is unconscious and inherited, and you do not sit down across from a friend without it, however much you wish to. Nobody waits with an empty denominator.

What I can accept, and I think it keeps what matters in her claim, is this. You act. You stay, you ask, you wait, you leave the phone face down. Each of those actions leaves something behind: an evening that happened, a question that was asked, an hour that was spent on one problem. Those are

artifacts. They become history, history is Actual, and only Actuals retrain Expectation. So attention practiced does, slowly, make a person who expects to stay.

That is how I read her odd assertion that an hour on an unsolved problem grows something you cannot see. The road to the denominator runs through the numerator. It runs one way, and it is slow.

I should mark what is record and what is argument. Her claim is religious. Mine is a proposal about experience. I am borrowing the structure of her idea and leaving the theology with her. And I have long said that people do not have ideas, that ideas have people. Her waiting is the best account I know of what that is like from the person’s side.

THE EQUATION

No one can touch Expectation directly. Actions leave artifacts, artifacts become history, and history retrains what you expect.

WHAT FOLLOWS

Attention cannot be switched on by deciding to have it. It is built by hours actually spent, which is what Weil said about the geometry problem.

CHAPTER 15

What I Expect

A book like this owes its reader some claims that can be checked. Here are five. None needs a number to state, and you will be able to see for yourself whether each has come true.

1. Undivided is sold by name

Restaurants, doctors, advisers, teachers and tradesmen will begin to offer, in so many words, a person whose attention is on you and nothing else for a stated stretch of time. It will be the premium tier, it will be delivered face to face, and people will pay for it gladly because they can no longer assume it.

2. “He sent his delegate” becomes a complaint with a name

Within a few years there will be a settled word for receiving a personal message that no person stopped to write. For condolences, thanks and apologies it will be counted worse than silence. People will ask each other outright whether a note was written by hand, and the answer will matter.

3. The trade in eyes moves from errands to empty hours

As delegates take over the looking, the businesses that captured attention during small matters will lose that ground and press harder on leisure. The feeds will get better, not worse. The contest for a returned hour will be fiercer than the contest for a busy one ever was.

4. Schools split over what the product is

Some schools will go on grading answers and will find they are grading delegates. Others will reorganize around the hour: problems worked in the room, spoken examinations, long reading, work by hand. Parents will learn to ask which kind of school it is before they ask anything else.

5. The gate becomes the thing people choose an AI for

People will stop asking how much an AI can do and start asking how much it keeps away, and on whose behalf. The delegate a person trusts will be the one that returns whole hours and can show that it answers to no one else.

CHAPTER 16

The Ledger

For each of those claims, here is what is already true, what still has to happen, and where I am most likely wrong.

1. Undivided is sold by name

ALREADY TRUE

Phones are already put away by rule at some tables, classrooms and consulting rooms, and people remark on it as a pleasure.

WHAT HAS TO HAPPEN

Businesses have to state it as the offer and charge for it. Customers have to be willing to pay more for a person who is fully there.

WHERE I AM PROBABLY WRONG

People may decide that a delegate's steady vigilance is good enough for most service and that the human premium is not worth the price. If so, undivided stays a courtesy and never becomes a product.

2. "He sent his delegate" gets a name

ALREADY TRUE

People already bristle at a form letter with their name dropped in, and already ask whether a message was written by a machine.

WHAT HAS TO HAPPEN

Delegated personal messages have to become common enough that everyone has received one from someone who mattered to them.

WHERE I AM PROBABLY WRONG

Custom may simply move. Our grandparents thought a typed letter was cold and a telephone call lazy. If the delegated note comes to seem as ordinary as a printed card, there will be no offense to name.

3. The trade moves to empty hours

ALREADY TRUE

The businesses that capture attention already earn most from leisure, and delegates already do a share of the comparing and searching.

WHAT HAS TO HAPPEN

Delegates have to take enough of the small matters that the loss is felt, and the freed time has to be visible as time.

WHERE I AM PROBABLY WRONG

Freed hours may not go to feeds at all. They may go to more work, as they have before. Then the contest I describe never takes place, because there is no empty hour to fight over.

4. Schools split over the product

ALREADY TRUE

Teachers already know that take-home answers can be fetched, and some have moved the work back into the room.

WHAT HAS TO HAPPEN

Schools have to say out loud that attention is the product and build the day around it. That means giving up measures that are cheap to grade.

WHERE I AM PROBABLY WRONG

The pressure for credentials may be stronger than any account of what school is for. Schools may keep grading answers because employers keep asking for grades, and the hour may survive only where families insist on it.

5. The gate becomes the reason to choose an AI

ALREADY TRUE

I already run my own delegate under the instruction to bring me only what is worthy of my attention, and I teach my students to do the same.

WHAT HAS TO HAPPEN

People have to be able to own the model that sorts their day, and to tell an AI that guards their hours from one that harvests them.

WHERE I AM PROBABLY WRONG

The AI most people end up with may come free from a company that also sells their attention. A gate kept by someone else is a turnstile. If convenience wins, most gates will be of that kind and few will mind.

EPILOGUE

The Table, Again

A THURSDAY, SOME YEARS ON, 7:40 P.M.

The same table. The same friend. His phone is somewhere, and it does not light, because nothing small can reach him now. You begin to tell him the thing you have not told anyone.

Everything the machine could do for this evening, it has done. It found the hour. It held the table. It is watching a thousand small matters on his behalf at this moment and will not trouble him with one of them. The door that used to open in the middle of your sentence is shut.

And none of that settles anything. He may be there. Or his eyes may rest in the middle distance where the screen used to be, waiting out of habit for a light that no longer comes. A delegate can clear the table. It cannot make him look up.

That part is his. It was always his. It was built, or not built, in hours that no one saw: a problem he stayed with, a book he finished, a room he learned to sit in. If the hours were spent, he has something to give you now. If they went to whoever asked first, he has an empty evening and good manners.

I cannot do anything about his side of the table, and neither can you. But there are two sides.

So take the other one. Put your own phone away, though it is dark too. Hold back the thing you were about to say. Look at him, and ask him the old question.

What are you going through?

Then wait.

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