**You can’t care about everything**

**On staying sane when the world’s a mess**

‘*The art of being wise is the art of knowing what to overlook*’ – William James

In his memoirs, the late French philosopher Raymond Aron recounts a story in which he’s strolling through Paris with his wife Suzanne and their newborn daughter, one glorious morning in the 1930s. It’s easy to picture the scene – the whole city soaking up the sun, making conversation in the shade of trees, or drinking coffee and smoking at pavement bistro tables. Well, almost the whole city: in the Jardin du Luxembourg, Aron spots his friend and fellow graduate of the École Normale Supérieure, Simone Weil, seemingly convulsed with grief. The Arons ask what’s wrong. ‘There is a strike in Shanghai,’ Weil responds, eyes brimming with tears, ‘and troops fired on the workers!’

Weil, as the scholar Alain Supiot explains, ‘was one of those people who never manage to abstract themselves from the torrent of suffering in which humanity finds itself engulfed’. It’s not for me to say that Weil was wrong to feel such distress about a horror unfolding thousands of miles away, to which she had no personal connection. Some level of concern for the suffering of distant others is plainly laudable, and to many of her admirers today, the Jewish-Catholic-Marxist mystic is regarded as a saint. But I’m on safer ground asserting that most of us, including me, would be entirely unable to function were we to experience the emotional impact of every killing or act of injustice around the world as if it had befallen a loved one. And yet that isn’t too far from what’s increasingly demanded of us today.

Maybe this seems like a strange claim to make about an era that’s more often characterised as unprecedentedly self-centred and heartless. Thanks to digital technology, though, it’s also a time in which, assuming you’re the kind of person who considers it your duty to care about anything beyond the walls of your home, you’re liable to be asked to care, with maximum intensity, about *everything*.

Partly, that’s simply because we’re more conneted than ever, so that anyone scrolling a social media platform can be instantaneously invited to care more about human suffering than the greatest saints in history would have encountered over the course of their whole lives. But it’s also specifically a consequence of the online ‘attention economy’, in which the truly valuable commodity – the thing from which advertisers and social media firms and many news organisations stand to make their money – isn’t the news itself, but your attention. By now, we understand that this arrangement boosts the prominence of pointless celebrity feuds, polarising conspiracy theories, and videos of people humiliating themselves in public: it hardly matters whether or not a story is important, so long as it’s compelling. What’s less obvious is how the same dynamic puts pressure on even the most honourable media organisations and activist groups to exaggerate the importance of every story or cause, because each of them is effectively locked with every other in an arms race for your attention. The result is that even when some event in the news is legitimately extremely serious, you can be sure it’ll be presented as even worse than that – except in those corners of the internet where there are more clicks to be gained by just as misleadingly denying its existence altogether.

It was in 2016, after the election of Donald Trump and the Brexit referendum result, that I first began to notice a bizarre effect of all this in myself, and more acutely in certain friends and acquaintances. It wasn’t simply that people were addicted to doomscrolling (although they certainly were). It was that they’d started ‘living inside the news’. The news had become the psychological centre of gravity in their lives – more real, somehow, than the world of their home, friends, and careers, to which they dropped in only sporadically before returning to the main event. They seemed significantly more personally involved in whether Trump would fire his Secretary of State, or who he might nominate for the Supreme Court, than in any of the local or personal dramas unfolding in their workplaces or families or neighborhoods. Their motives were generally good, so it seems a little churlish to point out that this behavior in no way makes the world a better place. Living inside the news feels like doing your duty and being a good citizen. But you can stay informed on ten minutes a day; scrolling any more than that risks becoming disempowering and paralyzing, and certainly eats up time you could have spent making a difference. The Canadian writer David Cain envisions a different way of doing things:

Imagine if all the available ‘public concern’ for a given issue could be collected in a huge rain barrel… and redistributed among fewer people. Instead of having 50 million people care seriously about an issue for all of six hours, you could distill that 300 million hours of public concern into, say, 3,000 people who made it a primary moral concern for a decade… We can’t reallocate public concern like rain-barrel water [but] maybe each of us, within ourselves, can become a little more focused. Imagine if it was normal for each person to focus ten times as deeply on one or two issues at a time, rather than taking on the emotional burden of dozens… [and] feeling helpless about ‘the state of the world.’

In other words, pick your battles, and don’t feel bad about doing so. By embracing your limitations in this way, you’ll be in a position to do more to fight the battles you do pick, and also thereby to feel better about yourself than the person who tries to care about everything. (Who may be largely focused, in any case, on trying to show that he or she cares about everything.) My favorite example here concerns a former sneaker-firm executive and dedicated Trump opponent named Erik Hagerman, profiled in the New York Times in 2018, where he was presented as a kind of anti-Simone Weil: instead of trying to absorb the whole world’s pain, he’d opted to live as if the upheavals in American public life weren’t happening at all. He consumed no news whatsoever, and when he left his home in rural Ohio to get coffee and a scone from his local café, he wore headphones playing white noise, so he couldn’t hear fellow customers talking politics. Unsurprisingly, conservative news outlets condemned him as a whining liberal, while progressive ones labeled him a monster of privilege. One journalist disparaged Hagerman as ‘the most selfish person in America,’ and further fumed: ‘Not everyone gets to be ignorant. People whose families are being torn apart by [US immigration policy] don’t get to be ignorant. People who are affected by gun violence don’t get to be ignorant.’

And yet might Hagerman simply have accurately assessed his capacity for care, and then decided to apportion it more effectively than most of us do? In his downtime, the Times explained, he was busy restoring an area of wetlands he’d purchased; when he was finished, he planned to preserve it for public access. He predicted the project would require most of his savings. There are more selfish ways to spend a life.

It used to be said about certain horrifying news events that ‘if you’re not outraged, you’re not paying attention.’ But that’s a relic of a time when people had attention to spare, and when it wasn’t in the vested interests of media outlets to stoke as much outrage as possible. In an age of attention scarcity, the greatest act of good citizenship may be learning to withdraw your attention from everything except the battles you’ve chosen to fight.

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