FEATURE

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ATTERS

George Ella Lyon,
Kentucky Poet Laureate

I wonder if you've heard this story. A little girl asks her mother, "Does it hurt to die?" and her mother says she doesn't know. "We could Google it," the little girl says. "All right," her mother tells her, so together they face the screen and embark on a Web search.

I find this scenario disturbing. The mother abdicates her parental role, side-stepping a conversation that could be difficult but important, and the daughter appeals to her higher power, Google.

As if substituting Web information for a parent-child talk weren't bad enough, I recently saw an ad for interactive pajamas for children. They are being touted as the only product that is a combination of PJs and bedtime stories. When you scan the dots printed on the fabric with an iOS or Android device loaded with the manufacturer's app, the story unfolds on the screen. Ninety stories per pair! Your iPhone can put your child to bed. Who wants, who needs all that reading and cuddling?

The ad shows parents curled up with the child and the app-equipped iPhone. That might happen, but it seems more likely that parents will leave kids to their own devices. Either way, I think interactive pajamas are a destructive idea and a theft besides. A child's growing relationship to story—and through it to herself and the world—is crucial. And having the story read or told to you by someone you love is part of how that relationship grows. I don't believe that listening to a grown-up read a story is passive. It's relational. The human voice casts the story's spell, and both child and reader are held in that circle of affection and attention. Siri, or whoever's voice resides in your smartphone, can't do this.

Yet every day another source tells us that more and better technology is the answer to our educational problems. A while back, a politician pledged a laptop for every child, like a chicken in every pot. My response was that we don't even have a *lap* for every child. Let's start there. Let's draw kids into the lap of the story with a real human voice. Let's teach them to hear their own voices and stories. Let's wean them and ourselves from our embrace of all things digital. Let's limit screen time and reconnect with our children, our students, and ourselves.

But the screen gets kids' attention, you may counter. And the screen is where their future learning will take place. This is what we are told—and sold.

Nicholas Carr, who wrote about technology and culture in his Pulitzer-nominated book, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, asserts, "[W]hat the Net seems to be doing is chipping away my capacity for concentration and contemplation. My mind now expects to take in information the way the Net distributes it: in a swiftly moving stream of particles. Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski" (2008).

I know that feeling, that state of being. We all know it. I've been a professional writer for over thirty-five years, yet today it's a struggle for me to calm myself down into real reading or writing. Take this essay, for instance. It requires effort to hold enough focus to discover what I have to say and then articulate it in a way that might be meaningful to you. My mind wants to zigzag, not settle and center itself. While the discovery and the articulation have always been strenuous, the focus has not. These days I'm having to deal with my over-wired fidgets. I'm experiencing a net loss from my time on the Net.

If adult attention is screen-scrambled, what about kids, whose brains are still developing? What about the teenager I heard interviewed on the radio? Twice hospitalized after serious accidents caused by her texting while driving, she said she wanted to give it up, but wasn't sure she could—this in the face of having shown herself twice that it could get her killed.

What is it that makes her so frantic for constant connection that she will risk her life, and that of anyone on the road in her vicinity, to have it? My take on the desperate young woman is that she doesn't feel she has a self without having her reality constantly confirmed by exchanging messages. She is addicted.

In "Why We're All Addicted to Texts, Twitter, and Google," behavioral scientist Dr. Susan Weinschenk explains that "the culprit is dopamine," which scientists have discovered is not the pleasure chemical but one that causes "seeking behavior. [It] causes [us] to want, desire, seek out, and search" (2012). The increased arousal and goal-focused behavior dopamine triggers in us is essential to our getting what we need to survive; the problem comes when we can't turn it off.

Seeking behavior should lead to *liking*, the opioid or pleasure response. But our online searches don't work that way. In the actual world, search for food leads to the pleasure of eating and so to the opioid response that ends our seeking. But Dr. Weinschenk tells us: "With the Internet, Twitter, and texting [we] now have almost instant gratification of [our] desire to seek" (2012). Because of this, our brains can get in "a dopamine-induced loop" so that we continue our seeking behavior long after we found the informa-

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tion we set out to find. Addicted to seeking, unable to be satisfied in finding, we just keep going. How well this serves those selling us devices and services and how poorly it serves us.

This change in brain activity also changes our relationship to ourselves.

The fact is, we've only got so much attention to pay. We have to budget attention like money and time, or we will be bankrupt. Studies of our brain show that when we think we are multitasking, we're actually switching—zigzagging—our attention back and forth, and things can get lost in the switch-time. Moreover, we can't get to deep attention by this ragged path, and attention deprivation is as destructive as sleep deprivation. Without regular deep sleep our brains get starved for the reweaving and regeneration that real rest gives. Without deep attention, we get separated from ourselves. And without access to ourselves, we lose the ability to be fully *with* another person, a place, a line of thought, a feeling. We cultivate distraction, impatience, frustration.

In my own elementary and high school years, many voices and images competed for my attention—family, friends, church, school, books, TV,

music, movies, magazines—offering different visions and versions of who and how I should be. Sometimes this competition could be confusing, but it was rarely overwhelming because all these elements stayed in their places. The portal to a million worlds was not in a gadget in my pocket or on my desk.

If I needed to do research, I sat in the high school library, read actual books and magazines, and took notes on index cards. (Index cards!) If I wanted to talk to someone, I could only do so in person or while holding a phone tethered to the wall. I watched movies at the theater or at fixed times on TV. I wrote letters with a fountain pen on real paper, put them in envelopes, got stamps at the post office, and mailed my letters. I let them go. Chances were, I wouldn't hear from that friend for two weeks at least, so I could relax as far as that relationship was concerned.

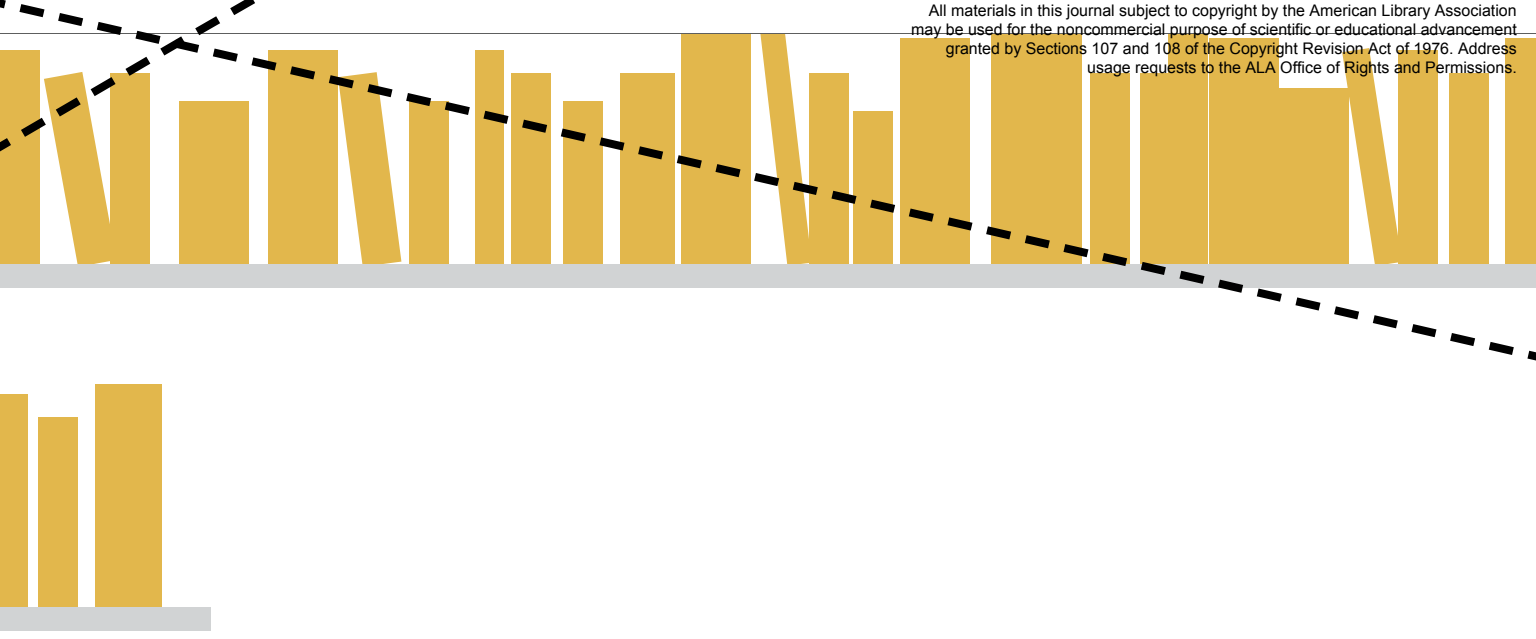
Now we can get a reply almost instantaneously, just as we can locate exponentially more information about any topic in five minutes than I could find in a week in the Harlan High School library. But twenty-first-century humans can't read or evaluate or think or respond faster than I could in 1967. Not with any depth. We think we can. We can download a ton of information. But information isn't understanding. It can't weigh and evaluate and synthesize. We have to do that.

Likewise, it takes time to *feel*. Everything has sped up, crowded in on us, and become so chaotic that it's difficult to register a feeling much less reflect on it. We are over-stimulated and hyperlinked-in, but we are deprived of the kind of time with a person or an experience that deepens and sustains us.

The story circle can be such an experience. A school child can empathize and imagine in response to the language, character, and emotion in the story she is hearing. This pleasure is offered through the voice, the presence, of the reader. If the child's home doesn't include this ritual—and I know many do not—it's all the more important that she be drawn into the circle at school. The ability to engage with story this way is essential to our humanity, for it teaches us to see and feel beyond our own limited lookout. The first gift of the library is the one from which all the rest flow. Our circle widens, but it stays centered in this shared experience.

Soon after I became poet laureate, I gave a reading in a small-town library in Kentucky. To my dismay, two audience members, including the librarian, spent the entire half hour looking at their phones. Leaving aside the rudeness of this behavior, the greater worry is that these folks *were not there.* They couldn't stand to simply listen to an actual person who was in the room with them. Were they paying bills? Ordering shoes? Catching up on e-mail? In Dr. Weinschenk's terms, they could not stop seeking. They were caught in the dopamine loop. (Lest you think I'm a total Luddite, let me say that I drafted part of this on a laptop in the mall parking lot while waiting for my iPhone screen to be replaced.)

I'm happy to use the smartphone as a pocket library to fetch information that a conversation calls for. But it's



not my venue for serious reading. (I'm the author of the picture book *Book,* after all.) I still want actual pages, whereas my husband, who went through a Kindle phase, now reads primarily on his phone. When circumstances require him to read a physical book, he laments not having hyperlinks. If he wants to know what Saint-Malo looks like while reading Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See*, my husband wants to be able to click on the town's name in his text and have the image appear in his hand as if by magic.

I want to travel by the magic of Anthony Doerr's words. While part of me would like to have a picture supplied immediately, more of me wants to stay in what John Gardner calls the "vivid and continuous" dream of fiction (1985, 31). If I break the story's spell every time I come to something unfamiliar, I will dilute its power. And what's to keep me from being lured into further reading about Saint-Malo on its website, then looking up Anthony Doerr, then checking to see if he's related to Harriet Doerr (*Stones for Ibarra*), then searching to see if there's going to be a movie, etc., etc.?

The answer is, *nothing*. There is nothing to stop me. The rabbit hole of the Web has no bottom. You can keep falling till you fall asleep. If you can sleep after all that zigzagging screen to screen.

Yes, the zigzagging gives me images and information from a larger world, but where is my center? And how, after following the zigzag of digital links, do I get back there? Do I even remember my center?

We can learn a vast number of things via the Internet, but we cannot learn how to be human. On the contrary, we can be dehumanized, perpetually irritated at actual people whom we cannot control with keystroke or joystick, chronically impatient with the slowness of the actual world and with our limitations as creatures within it. Rather than face and work to reverse this loss of our ability to relate to one another, we are likely to hasten online to escape it. But that won't work. The problem is never the solution.

Yes, it's easier to give children a screen than to give them part of ourselves. And yes, it will get their attention. But it will also change their brains and erode their ability to pay the kind of attention that sustains a fully human life.

I am not suggesting that we switch off the screen permanently, as Dave turned off HAL in Kubrick's *2001.* I am advocating for a thoughtful balance, one in which the story circle holds the children, the grown-up, and the book.

We mustn't become so sped up and fragmented that we forget what matters. We mustn't let the virtual world rob us of what's real.

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George Ella Lyon *is the author of four books of poetry, a novel, a memoir, and a short story collection, as well as thirty-eight books for young readers. Her honors include an Al Smith Fellowship, fellowships to the Hambidge Center for the Arts, numerous grants from The Kentucky Foundation for Women, a Pushcart Prize nomination, and a feature in the PBS series,* The United States of Poetry. *Her books have been chosen for the Chafiin Award, the Appalachian Book of the Year Award, the Aesop Prize, ALA's Schneider Family Book Award, the Jane Addams Honor Book, the Golden Kite Award, the New York Public Library's Best Book for Teens list, and the Parents' Choice Silver Medal.*

Her newest books are Voices from the March on Washington, *co-written with J. Patrick Lewis, and* Boats Float! *co-written with her son, Benn, and illustrated by Mick Wiggins. A native of Harlan County, Kentucky, Lyon works as a freelance writer and teacher based in Lexington. For more information, go to* <www.georgeellalyon.com>.