

"A BRILLIANT AND THOUGHTFUL HANDBOOK FOR THE INTERNET AGE—WHY WE HAVE THIS SCREEN ADDICTION, ITS MANY PERILS, AND SOME SURPRISING REMEDIES THAT CAN MAKE YOUR LIFE BETTER."

—Bob Woodward

**O**ur computers and mobile devices do wonderful things for us. But they also impose a burden, making it harder for us to focus, do our best work, build strong relationships, and find the depth and fulfillment we crave.

How to solve this problem? *Hamlet's BlackBerry* argues that we just need a new way of thinking—an everyday philosophy for life with screens. William Powers sets out to solve what he calls the conundrum of connectedness. Reaching into the past, using his own life as laboratory and object lesson, he draws on some of history's most brilliant thinkers, from Plato to Shakespeare to Umberto Eco, to demonstrate that digital connectedness serves us best when it's balanced by its opposite, *disconnectedness*. Lively, original, and entertaining, *Hamlet's BlackBerry* will challenge you to rethink your digital life.

"[*Hamlet's BlackBerry*] changed my life . . . and when was the last time you said that about a book?"

—Laura Lippman, Salon.com



Award-winning media critic **WILLIAM POWERS** has written for the *Atlantic*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and *McSweeney's*, among other publications. He lives on Cape Cod with his wife, the author Martha Sherrill, and their son.

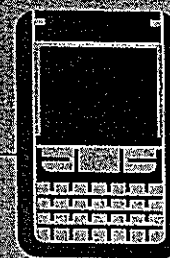
HAMLET'S BLACKBERRY by WILLIAM POWERS

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

# Hamlet's BLACKBERRY



BUILDING A GOOD LIFE  
IN THE DIGITAL AGE



William Powers

"An elegant meditation on our obsessive connectivity and its effect on our brains and our very way of life."

—*New York Times Book Review*

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200

Chapter One

**BUSY, VERY BUSY**

In a Digital World, Where's the Depth?

**W**hen I look around at how so many of us live today, staring into screens all the time, I think of my friend Marie. When I first met her in the mid-1990s, Marie was a recent immigrant to the United States and still learning the fine points of English. Back then, whenever I saw her and asked how she was doing, she would flash a big happy smile and say, "Busy, very busy!"

This was strange, partly because she said it so consistently and partly because her expression and upbeat tone didn't match her words. She seemed pleased, indeed ecstatic, to be reporting that she was so busy.

After a while, I figured out what was going on. Marie was copying what she'd heard Americans saying to one another over and over. Everyone talked so much about how busy they were, she thought it was a pleasantry, something that a person with good manners automatically said when a friend asked how they were doing. Instead of "Fine, thank you," you were supposed to say you were busy.

She was wrong, of course, as she eventually realized. But in another way she was absolutely right. "Busy, very busy" is exactly what we are most of the time. It's staggering how

many balls we keep in the air each day and how few we drop. We're so busy, sometimes it seems as though busyness itself is the point.

What *is* the point, anyway? What's the goal at the bottom of all this juggling and rushing around? It's one of those questions you avoid thinking about because it's so hard to answer. When you start wondering about your own busyness, pretty soon you're pondering much deeper questions such as, Is this the kind of life I really want? From there it's just a short hop to the big-league existential stumpers, Why are we here? and Who am I?

Few of us are eager to take on such questions, and even if we were, who has time? We're all too busy! Besides, at bottom we think of our busyness not as a way of life we chose and are therefore responsible for but one imposed on us by forces beyond our control. In our minds, we're like an old Looney Tunes character who's walking along the street without a care in the world when suddenly an anvil falls on his head. While the cartoon anvil literally flattens Daffy Duck, ours crushes us in a different way. It's not our bodies that lie pinned beneath our busyness, it's our inner selves, those mysterious beings that live in and through our bodies, perceiving, thinking, and feeling life as it happens, moment by moment.

We tend to think of life in outward terms, as a series of events that unfold in the physical world we all inhabit, as perceived through the senses. However, we *experience* those events inwardly, in our thoughts and feelings, and it's this interior version of the world, what one leading neuroscientist has dubbed the "movie-in-the-brain," that is reality for each of us. This part of our life goes by different names: mind, spirit, soul, self, psyche, consciousness. Whatever you call it, it's this essential "you" and "me" that's squirming under the burden of too much to do and think about.

"So what?" some might say. Life has always been an exhausting grind, and dealing with it is just part of being human. And there are people who seem to enjoy being extremely busy, with never a free moment. Perhaps the rest of us should be more like them, learn to see the upside of hectic. In short, all we really need is a change in attitude.

It's tricky generalizing about something as broad and subjective as the quality of our consciousness, but there is a problem with extreme busyness that attitude alone can't fix. When it comes to creating a happy, fulfilling interior life, a "movie-in-the-brain" that makes you want to stand up and applaud, one factor matters more than any other: depth. We all know what depth is, though it's hard to pin down precisely with words. It's the quality of awareness, feeling, or understanding that comes when we truly engage with some aspect of our life experience.

It can be anything at all—a person, a place, a thing, an idea, or a sensation. Everything that happens to us all day long, every sight and sound, every personal encounter, every thought that crosses our minds is a candidate for depth. We're constantly sifting among these options, deciding where to deploy our attention. Most float around in the periphery of our thoughts and remain there, but a select few wind up in the mental spotlight. We train our perceptual and cognitive resources on one conversation, one fascinating idea, one task to the exclusion of all others. This is where depth begins.

When you're driving your car and you come to a stop sign, you perceive the sign and its meaning, and you react to it. But beyond this automatic, almost mechanical act, you don't give the sign any special thought or consideration. It doesn't enter your interior world and take up residence. Like countless other ephemeral objects of your attention, it remains on the sidelines; a bit player.



Five minutes later, you arrive home and your dog comes bounding up to greet you. You bend down and scratch her behind the ears, and she licks your face in that delirious, sloppy way of hers. As you enjoy the licks and smell her familiar doggy smell, you wonder what kind of day she had here at home while you were out in the world. You pick up a stick and throw it, and as she bounds off to retrieve it, you laugh at the eager expression on her face. Interacting with the dog floods your consciousness with thoughts and feelings. Unlike the stop sign, the moment has richness and texture that you experience in all its fullness. You are there with your dog and no place else. The experience has depth.

It might seem that this is merely a function of the time you spend with the dog: the more time you give to an experience, the deeper you go. But it isn't that simple. A glance thrown across a crowded room can have more depth than a two-hour conversation. It's ultimately not a product of time or any other quantifiable attribute. Rather, it's about the inner life that a given experience takes on—its meaning. "It all depends," William James once wrote, "on the capacity of the soul to be grasped, to have its life-currents absorbed by what is given."

We've all experienced this, and we know what it does for us. The moments we enjoy most as they unfold, and that we treasure long afterward, are the ones we experience most deeply. Depth roots us in the world, gives life substance and wholeness. It enriches our work, our relationships, everything we do. It's the essential ingredient of a good life and one of the qualities we admire most in others. Great artists, thinkers, and leaders all have an unusual capacity to be "grasped" by some idea or mission, an inner engagement that drives them to pursue a vision, undaunted by obstacles. Ludwig van Beethoven, Michelangelo, Emily Dickinson, Albert Einstein, Martin Luther King, Jr.—we call them "brilliant," as if it were pure intelligence that made

them who they were. But what unites them is what they *did* with their intelligence, the depth they reached in their thinking and brought to bear in their work.

It's not only geniuses who possess this quality. There are ordinary people everywhere who, through sheer joyful engagement, seem to find depth in everything they do. This enviable talent can appear preternatural, like something you have to be born with. William James acknowledged that there are lucky individuals who are so alive to experience that they can find "inner significance" in a cloudy sky or the faces of strangers on a busy city street. He wondered if there's anything the rest of us can do to acquire this extraordinary kind of awareness. "How," he asked, "can one attain to the feeling of the vital significance of an experience, if one have it not to begin with?" James reached the same conclusion that many other philosophers, down through the centuries have reached: every life has the potential to be lived deeply.

That potential is lost when your days are spread so thin, busyness itself is your true occupation. If every moment is a traffic jam, it's impossible to engage any experience with one's whole self. More and more, that's how we live. We're like so many pinballs bouncing around a world of blinking lights and buzzers. There's lots of movement and noise, but it doesn't add up to much.

Now and then it occurs to us that we could do better, reconfigure our commitments and schedules so they're not so crazy and we can breathe. But no sooner do we have this thought than we dismiss it as futile. The mad rush is the real world, we tell ourselves. We're resigned to it in the same grim way that people in repressive societies become resigned to their lack of freedom. Everyone lives like this, racing and skimming their way through their days. We didn't drop the anvil, and there's nothing we do about it except soldier on, make the best of it.

Though it is indeed the norm in our society to live this way, we're kidding ourselves when we deny responsibility for it. True, some of the activities and obligations that fill our hours aren't really a matter of choice. When the boss asks you to work overtime; you do it. When the mortgage bill is due, you sit down and pay it or else. Yet beyond these involuntary time eaters, we create a lot of our own busyness by taking on tasks that nobody requires us to do. Some of those optional pursuits are enjoyable and fulfilling, such as the hobbies and causes we care about and work hard on. And some are frivolous and pointless, such as the time we spend shopping for things we don't really need. Worthwhile or not, the point is that a great many of these busy-making activities are completely our own doing. We don't just choose them, we *pursue* them.

In the last few decades, we've found a powerful new way to pursue more busyness: digital technology. Computers and smart phones are often pitched as solutions to our stressful, overextended lives. And in many ways they do make things easier, reducing the time and trouble it takes to communicate and perform important tasks. But at the same time, they link us more tightly to all the sources of our busyness. Our screens are conduits for everything that keeps us hopping—mandatory and optional, worthwhile and silly. If you have a mobile number, an Internet browser, and an e-mail address, endless people and organizations are within your reach. And you are within theirs.

We've adopted this way of life eagerly, both as individuals and as a society. For the last decade, we've worked hard to bring digital connectedness into every available corner of existence and, once it's there, to make it ever faster and more seamless. Dial-up connections gave way to high-speed broadband, which then became wireless and mobile. And we're always upgrading, looking for higher speeds, wider coverage. Meanwhile, *within*

our connected lives we're continuously expanding the degree and intensity of our ties to others. Many of us have multiple inboxes and accounts, with ever-expanding lists of contacts. We sign up for the latest social and professional networks and join subgroups and circles within those networks.

Even as the number of people we're connected to rises, so do the frequency and pace of our communications. When we were still emerging from the analog age and the technology was slower, days and weeks would go by when we didn't hear from a friend or family member. Today we're in touch by the hour, the minute. It wasn't so long ago that people who received two or three hundred e-mails a day were considered outrageously busy, figures of pity. Now they're mainstream. In terms of sheer quantity, the most connected are just a few years ahead of the rest of us. A news story about a young woman in California who racked up more than 300,000 text messages in a single month is a glimpse of where we're headed. "Sacramento Teen Says She's Popular," read the subheadline. What will be the definition of popularity a decade from now?

The goal is no longer to be "in touch" but to erase the possibility of ever being out of touch. To merge, to live simultaneously with everyone, sharing every moment, every perception, thought, and action via our screens. Even the places where we used to go to get away from the crowd and the burdens it imposes on us are now connected. The simple act of going out for a walk is completely different today from what it was fifteen years ago. Whether you're walking down a big-city street or in the woods outside a country town, if you're carrying a mobile device with you, the global crowd comes along. A walk can still be a very pleasant experience, but it's a qualitatively different experience, simply because it's busier. The air is full of people.

*Someone you know has just seen a great movie. Someone else had an idle thought. There's been a suicide bombing in South Asia.*

*Stocks soared today. Pop star has a painful secret. Someone has a new opinion. Someone is in a taxi. Please support this worthy cause. He needs that report from you—where is it? Someone wants you to join the discussion. A manhunt is on for the killers. Try this in bed. Someone's enjoying sorbet, mmmm. Your account is now overdue. Easy chicken pot pie: Here's a brilliant analysis. Latest vids from our African safari! Someone responded to your comment: Time's running out, apply now. This is my new hair. Just heard an awesome joke. Someone is working hard on his big project. They had their baby! Click here for the latest vote count . . .*

It's flying so fast, we're always playing catch-up. The deeper we get into this way of life, the more I think my friend Marie's old mantra really could serve as the go-to greeting of the digital age: How are you? Busy, very busy.

Part of the problem is that we know from experience that busyness and depth are not mutually exclusive. We've all had moments when we were busy in a good way, pivoting nimbly from task to task, giving our all to the one that was in front of us at any given moment. This is how great surgeons work, performing numerous difficult procedures in a single day but serially, so that each gets full attention in its turn. Having a lot on one's plate imposes a certain discipline. There's truth in the old saying that the more you have to do, the more you get done.

Unfortunately, digital busyness usually doesn't work like surgery. Dozens of tasks jostle and compete for our attention on the screen, and both software and hardware are designed to make it easy to hop around. So easy, it's irresistible. The cursor never rests in one place for long, and neither does the mind. We're always clicking here, there, and everywhere. Thus, although we think of our screens as productivity tools, they actually undermine the serial focus that's the essence of true productivity. And the faster and more intense our

connectedness becomes, the further we move away from that ideal. Digital busyness is the enemy of depth.

Not everyone lives this way, of course. First there are millions in the United States and many more around the world who can't afford to buy these technologies and are shut out of their manifold benefits, except through the limited access afforded by public libraries and other institutions. This is a real problem that deserves more attention than it receives. Second are those who *can* afford the latest gadgets but choose instead to be lightly connected or not connected at all. But these are the exceptions that prove the rule. The trend and all the momentum are emphatically in the opposite direction. The global society to which we all belong is dramatically more connected than it was a decade ago, and becoming more so each day. This shift is affecting everyone, including those who are not fully participating in it.

This is not a small matter. It's a struggle that's taking place at the center of our lives. It's a struggle *for* the center of our lives, for control of how we think and feel. When you're scrambling all the time, that's what your inner life becomes: scrambled. Why are we doing this to ourselves? Do we really want a world in which everyone is staring at screens all the time, keeping one another busy? Is there a better way?

To answer tough questions like these, we're trained to look outward, to studies and surveys that academics, pollsters, think tanks, government agencies, and others conduct on every imaginable aspect of our lives. In fact, there's a great deal of ongoing research about connective technologies and how they're affecting individuals, families, businesses, and society at large. New findings are released all the time and reported widely in the news media, where technology is a perennially hot topic: "Americans Spend Eight Hours a Day on Screens"; "Study: U.S. Loaded with Internet Addicts"; "Texting and

Driving Worse than Drinking and Driving.” We read these headlines and shake our heads, not because they’re telling us something we don’t know but because we know it all too well. The reality of our connected lives is all around us. What these broad findings don’t tell us is how to change it.

Studies and surveys reflect what’s generally true, i.e., true for most people in a given population. These general truths are supposed to help us answer the questions we have about our own particular lives. In short, they look to the crowd for understanding. On some subjects, the crowd really does have the answers. In politics, for instance, elections are decided by how most people vote. That is why, in the weeks leading up to a big election, polling data are genuinely interesting and useful. To the extent that studies shed new light on some specific aspect of *how* we are living with technology, they can be illuminating; I cite some such studies in this book. However, on the question of how to respond to the challenge of screens and their growing power over us, there is no reason to believe that what most people do and say will tell us anything useful at all. To the contrary, with screens the problem is the crowd itself and why we’re drawn to it so powerfully. It’s like asking a chocolate layer cake to help you think about your overeating.

Ultimately, human experience is not about what happens to most people, it’s about what happens to each of us, hour by hour and moment by moment. Rather than using the general as a route to the particular, sometimes we need to take exactly the opposite approach. This is especially true when the question is the quality of our lives. In recent years, there’s been a tremendous fascination with crowd thinking and behavior. The digital crowd not only has power, we’re told, it also has wisdom.

Watching the crowd can certainly tell you which way popular tastes are heading and who’s buying which products at any given moment. This isn’t wisdom at all, however, but what’s

205

commonly known as “smarts,” that canny ability to read the landscape that serves one well in stock picking, gambling, and other short-term pursuits. Every crowd is just a collection of individual selves, and to understand what’s happening to those selves right now, we all have instant, no-password access to the most reliable source of all. Our own lives can teach us things that no data set ever can, if we’d just pay attention to them.

To help you think about your own connected life, I’m going to begin with two stories from mine. The first is about the urge to connect to others through screens—where does it come from, and why is it so urgent? The second is about the opposite impulse, the desire to disconnect. My experiences won’t be exactly like yours. I offer these stories as illustrations of the conflicting drives so many of us are feeling lately, in our own particular ways. What we haven’t figured out is how to reconcile these drives or whether they even *can* be reconciled. It’s the conundrum at the heart of the digital age, and in order to solve it, we first need to see it up close, in the granular details of the everyday.