CHAPTER 2

Perception, Focus, and Attention

Most people would envy Greg's life. He's a former coaching client and the CFO of a major media company in New York City. He graduated from Stanford as an undergraduate and got an MBA from Columbia.

He has a loving and supportive wife and a teenage son with good grades. When we met, he was in his mid-50s, still rising in his already successful career.

In our first call, he told me his immediate reason for coaching: his CEO. He told me that he and most of his coworkers were frustrated with the CEO's leadership, but his strong relationships with the board and investors meant he wasn't going anywhere. The company was also close to an exit, so many employees, including Greg, felt motivated to stay for the likely cash payout, although how much longer, no one knew. As a separate issue, he told me that he considered himself too quick to anger and wanted to learn to handle his emotions more effectively.

Greg's longer-term reason for coaching was the second-most powerful thing I heard him say:

> If I continue on this path, in 10 years I'm going to retire rich, successful, and with no idea what my life was about.

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Despite succeeding in every measurable aspect of life and having access to every resource our society offers, he couldn't figure out what it all meant.

I suggested that material and external resources may not have been what was missing—which he knew anyway—but that new experiences could teach him what reading, listening, and other passive learning couldn't. He had to *experience* that meaning, value, importance, purpose, and self-awareness arose from motivations, relationships, and emotions, not the intellect. I think it helped him to hear that he could develop empathy, compassion, intuition, and similar qualities from someone with as analytical a background as a Ph.D. in the abstract field of physics. If someone like that could get this stuff, so could he.

He told me that he would talk it over with his wife before signing on. By the next week, they had talked, she had agreed, and we started.

We began by focusing on his relationship with his CEO with exercises in this book on perception, focus, and awareness. He made significant progress. For example, although he couldn't change much of the CEO's behavior, he learned to manage how he responded. He began to live it. He became more calm at work, he told me, and less reactive to his CEO. Colleagues saw the change and started reporting unofficially to him instead of the CEO. Board members and investors met with him more. He kept the CEO in the loop, avoiding surprises or other relationship problems.

A little over six months into our work, Greg told me about a conversation at home:

> My wife, son, and I were talking after dinner. Something came up. The details aren't important, but I could see why it would annoy my son. But he didn't just get annoyed. He flew off the handle. I mean really angry.

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I said, "Son, what's gotten into you? I can see why you would be annoyed, but there's no reason to get this angry."

And he said, "*But, Daddy, that's what you would do*."

Greg paused. Maybe he was just collecting his thoughts, but the effect was to make his son's words repeat in my mind: *But Daddy, that's what you would do*.

He continued,

> Josh, I can discipline my boy for misbehaving, but not for emulating his father. And the thing is, for all I know he's behaved and said things like this before. I just don't know. I never noticed.

That was the most powerful thing I heard him say.

No parent wants a legacy like an angry son. Greg loved the boy and gave him the best life he could, but his lack of awareness was undermining his effort. Coaching awoke him to what his eyes and ears sensed but his mind didn't process because his focus and attention were elsewhere. He told me how questions flooded his mind: How many times had he reacted with too much anger in front of his son? What else had he taught his son without realizing? What else had he missed his son saying? Could he change? If so, how?

We all do what Greg did. We have goals and try to ignore distractions. Focus helps us achieve the goal, but it doesn't give us *extra* attention. We sacrifice it elsewhere, usually unknowingly, precisely because we aren't paying attention to where we sacrifice it. Learning about focus, attention, and perception in the abstract doesn't translate to improving your focus, attention, or perception any more than learning about the piano in the abstract helps you play music. You only experience what you miss when you focus your attention back there, even your relationship with your son.

Seeing what he was missing led us to work on it and awoke Greg

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to areas of his life that he had unconsciously made "elsewhere"—family in particular and relationships in general. He also felt the difference between learning abstractly versus through experience. He had known *abstractly* to pay attention to his son before the incident. He didn't know how to do it.

Soon after, instead of asking or wondering what his life was about, he told me.

The *Three Raisins* Exercise

Every leader I've heard say anything about self-awareness describes it as fundamental to leadership and growth. Every system of leadership, professional development, or personal development I've seen has some concept of self-awareness at its foundation. Yet most people don't know what it means—those who lack it most more than anyone.

Talking, reading, or being lectured about self-awareness doesn't help you increase it. Experience does. We'll start with an exercise in awareness of our senses, which later exercises will extend to awareness of other parts of ourselves. This chapter's exercise starts you off more effectively than any other I know. It comes from one of the premier figures in mindfulness today, Jon Kabat-Zinn's book *Coming to Our Senses*. Many who finished this book's exercises consider it the cornerstone, as do I.

When I teach the course in person and assign the exercise, I ask my students if it sounds odd. Many say yes. The next week, after they've done it, I ask if I should assign it the next year even if it seemed weird when they heard it. They always say yes.

It will also introduce many of you to the value of Method Learning—that is, you'll find yourself learning things doing the exercises that you never could from someone telling you.

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What to Do

1. Get three raisins. You can use raisin-sized pieces of other fruit if you prefer.
2. Block off an hour when you can turn off your phone and other distractions. You won't take that long, but the cushion keeps you from feeling rushed.
3. During that hour, put the three raisins in front of you and eat them as follows:
    - Imagine you've never seen one before.
    - Observe it with all your senses in turn. Look at it—its folds, its color, and so on. Feel it in your fingers, how it moves when you press on it. Try to detect if it has a smell. Taste it before you bite into it and then after. Feel how it dissolves in your mouth. Hear its sound if you drop it on a plate. And so on with all your senses.
    - Only start the next raisin after you have swallowed all of the remnants of the first.
4. If your attention drifts from the raisins, return your focus to your sensory experience of the raisins.

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EXERCISE CHECKLIST

I recommend checking off the following before continuing:

- ❑ Did you use the attention and focus of all of your senses?
- ❑ Did you finish each raisin before starting the next?
- ❑ Did you reflect on the experience?



Stop reading. Put the book down and do the exercise.

You can't build muscle by reading about lifting weights, nor learn to sing by reading about singing, and no leader became great just reading about leadership.

Students consistently learn leadership from doing these exercises. You'll remember the experiences long after you forget what you read. Students consistently say, "These exercises are challenging, but just the challenge I needed to learn from them."

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REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Before continuing to the post-exercise section, I recommend reflecting on your experience with this chapter's exercise. Students who take my courses have to write reflections to get to the next exercise and often describe writing their reflections as among the most valuable part of the course.

Write about anything you found relevant, but here are some questions you may want to consider:

- What is the value of seeing your son's or other loved one's expressions?
- Who notices if you miss them?
- What about the nuances of your boss's communications?
- What can you do if you sense them?
- What did you observe about your senses and attention?
- What did you observe about your ability to focus?
- Where and how might you apply your experience in the rest of your life?

Post-Exercise

I hope you found the three raisins experience as revealing as I did.

When I first did the exercise, more than ten years ago, I expected it to take a few minutes. I took at least thirty. From the moment I picked up the first raisin to look at it and noticed the detail in the folds of its skin and its iridescence, I was amazed at how much detail there was to sense. Without going into thirty minutes of that detail, I noticed things I hadn't paid attention to since maybe my first time eating a raisin: its flavor (or rather its mix of flavors—sweetness, tangyness, and hints of others—that rose and fell in turn), its juiciness despite being dried, how the juice burst into my mouth, and so on. I felt like I was eating a raisin for the first time in decades, like all the raisins I had eaten in the meantime I wasn't eating raisins so much as going through motions.

The flavors, smells, and other sensory properties *had* always been there. When I examined my mental processing like I examined the raisins, I saw that I *had* sensed them, I just didn't pay attention, so what I sensed didn't make it to my conscious awareness. I then started noticing other things during the exercise: the sounds of my apartment building, like people coming and going or dogs' paws pattering on neighbors' floors, wind on the window screens, traffic outside, and my breathing.

I started wondering how the raisins got to the box on the shelf in the store—picked from a vine, processed, packaged, and shipped by who knows how many people organized in who knows how many companies, working among the many systems that make up the modern world.

I almost put the second raisin in my mouth while I was still chewing the first, not close to having swallowed all the bits still in my mouth, showing how large parts of my behavior went on autopilot like my senses. I value not having to pay attention to how I do every little thing—walking or talking would be impossible other-

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wise—but I was surprised at how much I glossed over without realizing it.

The experience also highlighted that I had the ability to choose to focus on what I wanted when I wanted, like a skill I could develop.

Beyond the experience with the raisins, after I finished, I returned to a plate of spaghetti I had planned to eat after the raisins, now cold since I thought the exercise would take five minutes. I twirled a forkful as usual, but couldn't put it in my mouth. In my mindset of tasting nuances and subtle flavors and textures, the amount I put on my fork looked gross—in two senses: large and yucky. The volume of food on my plate looked gross too. I couldn't help but change how I ate that spaghetti to like how I ate the raisins, leaving much of it for leftovers. From that exercise for the rest of my life, I have put less food on my plate, focusing more on subtlety and nuance in flavors, smells, textures, and such. I favor fruits and vegetables over pastas and filler. The exercise led to a major shift to eating being about joy and pleasure in sensing and away from just swallowing. The former leads to discovery, refinement, and appreciation. The latter led me just to eat more, with less appreciation or joy.

Many people like that during the exercise they noticed the raisin flavor for the first time since the first raisin they tasted, decades before. The taste was always there, they realize. They just stopped noticing it. Many connect the raisins to other parts of life, like how the raisins got from the vine to the store or how we evolved to like the flavor so much.

Many wonder, if they desensitized themselves to something so obvious, what else they've missed, as Greg did with his son. Did they not notice relationships? Facial expressions? Things people said?

I wish assigning an exercise to observe your son—or manager, spouse, parents, or anyone else—as if for the first time would get people to see other people anew as so many do with the raisins. It seems we learn the skills to pay attention and focus by starting

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with simpler things, like raisins. Eventually we learn to see abstract things like jobs and relationships anew and more directly.

I assign the exercise at the beginning for a few reasons. One is to underscore how everything we know about our worlds comes through our senses but that we become desensitized to miss many things, from a raisin's taste and other sensory properties to a son's behavior.

Another reason is to call attention to the importance of experience in the exercises to come. No one can tell you how a raisin tastes, nor what you notice when you focus on it for the first time in years, nor how you might generalize your experience noticing things about raisins to noticing things about yourself, other people, and so on. If you're reading this without having done the exercise, you're missing out on the value of doing it. If so, I recommend going back and doing it!"

Another reason is to uncover your ability to focus your attention to make the skill available to you for the exercises to come. When you're leading others, noticing their facial expressions, tone of voice, and other parts of nonverbal communication will make the exercises more effective on a scale I couldn't describe but the raisins can illustrate. The same goes for the next exercises in mindfulness, to focus your attention to sense your thoughts and emotions.

The lessons from this exercise still help me almost daily, 10 years after first doing it. I pay more attention to my food, which I enjoy and appreciate more, eating less while feeling more satisfied. More generally, it helped me develop skill to pay more attention to my senses when I want, deliberately, and to realize what I'm missing when I don't.

The exercise didn't give me *more* attention. It made me more skilled in directing and focusing it. We'll use this skill in most of the rest of the course, especially in chapter 3's exercise, where we pay attention to our thoughts.

I found that when I didn't sense nuances in my food, I had to get

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my eating pleasure from eating more. Or rather, when I learned to sense subtlety, blindly and tastelessly eating more felt gross. This exercise led me to see that pattern everywhere. What do you know about people, the world, or anything except through your senses? What do you know about if your access is only through gross generalizations?

Choosing to focus on things such as my work, relationships, and eating led me to find meaning, value, importance, and purpose (MVIP) in their richness and complexity, like a fine wine. I hope you get similar results. To see them takes time. For now, you can find them experiencing this book's exercises and the reactions they create in the people and projects you apply them to.

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