
From James Williams: Stand Out of Our Light

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by Dean Sam Candler**

Do you get distracted too easily? I know I do. And, most of the time, I am not even aware that I am being distracted. I set out to perform a task; and, before I know it, I have turned to some other errand that has presented itself. Or, when I am responding to email, or when reading, some other message pops up on my screen; and I am Alice in Wonderland chasing a rabbit down a hole.

Our capacity for distraction, and our inability to give attention to things that matter, are part of what James Williams discusses in a concise and penetrating book, called, *Stand Out of Our Light: Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy*. Maybe you have plans, this summer, for vacation reading, time when you look forward to not being distracted. If you are looking for good reading, let this book be on your recommendation list!

The book's title refers to the famous response of the philosopher, Diogenes, who lived a crude and crusty life on the streets. When Alexander the Great sought him out, and asked if Diogenes needed anything, Diogenes responded roughly, "Stand Out of My Light!"

Here is how James Williams begins his examination:

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, a new set of wondrous, designed forces – our information and communication technologies – has transformed human life. Our moment-to-moment experiences, our interactions with one another, the styles of our thoughts and the habits of our days now take their shapes, in large part, from the operation of these new inventions. Their inner workings are, for many of us, sufficiently obscure that they seem indistinguishable from magic; we are happy to be astonished by their novelty and power. And with our admiration comes a trust; that these inventions are, as their creators claim, built to follow our guiding lights, to help us navigate our lives in the ways we want them to go. We trust these wondrous inventions to be on our side.

...Of course, in many ways they have fulfilled our needs and wishes, and in many ways they have been on our side. They have profoundly enhanced our ability to inform ourselves, to communicate with one another, and to understand our world. Today, with a thin plastic slab the size of my hand, I can chat with my family in Seattle, instantly read any Shakespeare play, or fire off a message to my elected representatives, regardless of where in the world I am.

And yet, as these new powers have become ever more central to our thought and action, we've begun to realize that they, like Alexander to Diogenes, have also been standing in our light, in a sense – and in one light in particular: a light so precious and central to human flourishing that without it all their other benefits may do us little good.

That light is the light of our attention. Something deep and potentially irreversible seems to be happening to human attention in the age of information. Responding to it well may be the biggest moral and political challenge of our time. My purpose here is to tell you why I think so – and to ask for your help in keeping this light lit. (James Williams, Stand Out of Our Light, page 3).

James Williams is on to something. I would say it like this: Something in our nature is choosing, over and over again, to

give our attention away. As we lose our ability to give attention to what is truly life-giving, we may be giving away our souls.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

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