

Whose Cup Are You Filling?

By Dr Justin Coulson

Writer Derek Thompson recently shared a metaphor via his [Substack](#)... and it won't leave me alone. It wasn't about parenting - but it's something every parent needs to hear.

Thompson described a game where we have a pitcher of water. On the table in front of the pitcher are dozens of cups that want water. The game is to pour the water into the cups in a way that is satisfying to us but that also gives the right cups the right amount of water.

Why would the cups want or need water? Those cups each have labels: work, children, partner, screens, dishes, regret, worry, and so on. And the water? It represents something we only have so much of: attention.

It's a simple idea, but with devastating implications.

As parents, we know which cups matter most. It's obvious. We're "supposed" to put our attention into our children. They're our priority. We're "supposed" to fill our partners' cup, our health cup. Plus there's our work (because the rent or mortgage has to be paid. We need food on the table).

But then we do a reality check. Our screen time app tells us we've spent 75 minutes on social media while we know we have only spent eleven minutes talking with our son or daughter. We've poured energy into an argument with a stranger online but had nothing left for our spouse at dinner. We've ruminated about work frustrations all weekend but can't remember the last unhurried conversation we had with our child.

Thompson tells us our attention tells the truth our mouths won't say.

I see this in my own life constantly. After a social media post about a provocative topic, I spent days absorbed in online criticism - essentially having arguments with people I'll never meet (while my actual family sat across from me, watching me pour water into other cups than the ones that matter most).

There are a couple of things that make this hard though. First, we're wired to respond to urgency, not importance. The ping gets our water. The deadline gets our water. The conflict gets our water. When things are ok, we don't focus on them so much. So... if the kids are doing fine, they get less water. Second, we have so many distractions - most of them on our screens.

This means that we're not putting our attention where it matters most.

Some people say "you can't pour from an empty vessel". That's true to a degree... but attention is always being put somewhere. In this game (or metaphor), it's not about our energy. It's about attention. And that's a choice. Every time.

The research on presence keeps pointing to the same truth: children need us fully there. They need our engaged attention. They develop secure attachment not through perfect parenting but through consistent presence.

Too often, what gets our attention is an algorithm designed to keep us perpetually elsewhere. We've normalised interrupted conversations, half-listened stories, and questions answered while scrolling. We've accepted being physically present but mentally absent as just "how life is now."

How many times have you sat down to "just check this notification" or to "quickly send off a reply" or to "watch this thing someone sent me real quick", only to find yourself still glued to the screen 40 minutes later? (And then to be mad at everyone for not picking up the slack because "I just needed some down time?")

It doesn't have to be like this - and it shouldn't be like this.

Your energy flows where your attention goes.

What's getting your attention? Because that's what's getting your attention.

This is a conversation about two things: priorities (also known as value), and intention.

If you're reading this and feeling guilt - take that as a signal. A good news signal. That guilt is pointing you in the direction of improvement! It's our brain's functional way of correcting and improving. It's resilient!

The even better news is Thompson's metaphor means that because attention actually is renewable, tomorrow morning, your pitcher is full again. You get another chance. The game doesn't end because you lost today or yesterday.

So try this: tonight, before bed, ask yourself one question: *Whose cup did I fill today?*

Not whose cup you *meant* to fill. Whose cup actually got your water. Was it the podcast? Or your child? Was it the latest news story about an issue you can't control in any way? Or was it your partner or spouse?

Ask, whose cup did I fill today? And then ask what needs to change tomorrow. Pour your water (attention) with intention.

Not sure how? Maybe you silence notifications during school pickup. Maybe you establish one screen-free hour each evening. Maybe you stop treating every work email as urgent. Maybe you choose boredom over scrolling. Maybe you just start noticing where your attention actually goes instead of where you wish it went.

Your kids aren't measuring your intentions. They're measuring your presence. Not the 30 seconds of distracted "uh-huh" while you finish a text. The moments when they have you - your eyes, your focus, your water.

Everything else is just noise we've mistaken for necessity.



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