Conclusion

The story of Microsoft's founding has been told so many times that it's entered the realm of legend. In the winter of 1974, a young Harvard student named Bill Gates sees the Altair, the world's first personal computer, on the cover of *Popular Electronics*. Gates realizes that there's an opportunity to design software for the machine, so he drops everything and with the help of Paul Allen and

Monte Davidoff spends the next eight weeks hacking together a version of the BASIC programming language for the Altair. This story is often cited as an example of Gates's insight and boldness, but recent interviews have revealed another trait that played a crucial role in the tale's happy ending: Gates's preternatural deep work ability.

As Walter Isaacson explained in a 2013 article on the topic for the *Harvard Gazette*, Gates worked with such intensity for such lengths during this two-month stretch that he would often collapse into sleep on his keyboard in the middle of writing a line of code. He would then sleep for an hour or two,

wake up, and pick up right where he left off—an ability that a still-impressed Paul Allen describes as "a prodigious feat of concentration." In his book *The Innovators*, Isaacson later summarized Gates's unique tendency toward depth as follows: "The one trait that differentiated [Gates from Allen] was focus. Allen's mind would flit between many ideas and passions, but Gates was a serial obsessor."

It's here, in this story of Gates's obsessive focus, that we encounter the strongest form of my argument for deep work. It's easy, amid the turbulence of a rapidly evolving information age, to default to dialectical grumbling. The

curmudgeons among us are vaguely uneasy about the attention people pay to their phones, and pine for the days of unhurried concentration, while the digital hipsters equate such nostalgia with Luddism and boredom, and believe that increased connection is the foundation for a utopian future. Marshall McLuhan declared that "the medium is the message," but our current conversation on these topics seems to imply that "the medium is morality"—either you're on board with the Facebook future or see it as our downfall.

As I emphasized in this book's introduction, I have no interest in this

debate. A commitment to deep work is not a moral stance and it's not a philosophical statement—it is instead a pragmatic recognition that the ability to concentrate is a skill that *gets valuable things done*. Deep work is important, in other words, not because distraction is evil, but because it enabled Bill Gates to start a billion-dollar industry in less than a semester.

This is also a lesson, as it turns out, that I've personally relearned again and again in my own career. I've been a depth devotee for more than a decade, but even I am still regularly surprised by its power. When I was in graduate school, the period when I first

encountered and started prioritizing this skill, I found that deep work allowed me to write a pair of quality peer-reviewed papers each year (a respectable rate for a student), while rarely having to work past five on weekdays or work at all on weekends (a rarity among my peers).

As I neared my transition to professorship, however, I began to worry. As a student and a postdoc my time commitments were minimal—leaving me most of my day to shape as I desired. I knew I would lose this luxury in the next phase of my career, and I wasn't confident in my ability to integrate enough deep work into this more demanding schedule to maintain

my productivity. Instead of just stewing in my anxiety, I decided to do something about it: I created a plan to bolster my deep work muscles.

These training efforts were deployed during my last two years at MIT, while I was a postdoc starting to look for professor positions. My main tactic was to introduce artificial constraints on my schedule, so as to better approximate the more limited free time I expected as a professor. In addition to my rule about not working at night, I started to take extended lunch breaks in the middle of the day to go for a run and then eat lunch back at my apartment. I also signed a deal to write my fourth book, *So Good*

They Can't Ignore You, during this period—a project, of course, that soon levied its own intense demands on my time.

To compensate for these new constraints, I refined my ability to work deeply. Among other methods, I began to more carefully block out deep work hours and preserve them against incursion. I also developed an ability to carefully work through thoughts during the many hours I spent on foot each week (a boon to my productivity), and became obsessive about finding disconnected locations conducive to focus. During the summer, for example, I would often work under the dome in Barker

Engineering library—a pleasingly cavernous location that becomes too crowded when class is in session, and during the winter, I sought more obscure locations for some silence, eventually developing a preference for the small but well-appointed Lewis Music Library. At some point, I even bought a $50 high-end grid-lined lab notebook to work on mathematical proofs, believing that its expense would induce more care in my thinking.

I ended up surprised by how well this recommitment to depth ended up working. After I'd taken a job as a computer science professor at Georgetown University in the fall of

2011, my obligations did in fact drastically increase. But I had been training for this moment. Not only did I preserve my research productivity; it actually *improved*. My previous rate of two good papers a year, which I maintained as an unencumbered graduate student, leapt to four good papers a year, on average, once I became a much more encumbered professor.

Impressive as this was to me, however, I was soon to learn that I had not yet reached the limits of what deep work could produce. This lesson would come during my third year as a professor. During my third year at Georgetown, which spanned the fall of

2013 through the summer of 2014, I turned my attention back to my deep work habits, searching for more opportunities to improve. A big reason for this recommitment to depth is the book you're currently reading—most of which was written during this period. Writing a seventy-thousand-word book manuscript, of course, placed a sudden new constraint on my already busy schedule, and I wanted to make sure my academic productivity didn't take a corresponding hit. Another reason I turned back to depth was the looming tenure process. I had a year or two of publications left before my tenure case was submitted. *This* was the time, in

other words, to make a statement about my abilities (especially given that my wife and I were planning on growing our family with a second child in the final year before tenure). The final reason I turned back to depth was more personal and (admittedly) a touch petulant. I had applied and been rejected for a well-respected grant that many of my colleagues were receiving. I was upset and embarrassed, so I decided that instead of just complaining or wallowing in self-doubt, I would compensate for losing the grant by increasing the rate and impressiveness of my publications—allowing them to declare on my behalf that I actually *did*

know what I was doing, even if this one particular grant application didn't go my way.

I was already an adept deep worker, but these three forces drove me to push this habit to an extreme. I became ruthless in turning down time-consuming commitments and began to work more in isolated locations outside my office. I placed a tally of my deep work hours in a prominent position near my desk and got upset when it failed to grow at a fast enough rate. Perhaps most impactful, I returned to my MIT habit of working on problems in my head whenever a good time presented itself—be it walking the dog or commuting. Whereas earlier, I

tended to increase my deep work only as a deadline approached, this year I was relentless—most every day of most every week I was pushing my mind to grapple with results of consequence, regardless of whether or not a specific deadline was near. I solved proofs on subway rides and while shoveling snow. When my son napped on the weekend, I would pace the yard thinking, and when stuck in traffic I would methodically work through problems that were stymieing me.

As this year progressed, I became a deep work machine—and the result of this transformation caught me off guard. During the same year that I wrote a book

and my oldest son entered the terrible twos, I managed to more than double my average academic productivity, publishing *nine* peer-reviewed papers—all the while maintaining my prohibition on work in the evenings.

I'm the first to admit that my year of extreme depth was perhaps a bit too extreme: It proved cognitively exhausting, and going forward I'll likely moderate this intensity. But this experience reinforces the point that opened this conclusion: Deep work is *way more* powerful than most people understand. It's a commitment to this skill that allowed Bill Gates to make the

most of an unexpected opportunity to create a new industry, and that allowed me to double my academic productivity the same year I decided to concurrently write a book. To leave the distracted masses to join the focused few, I'm arguing, is a transformative experience.

The deep life, of course, is not for everybody. It requires hard work and drastic changes to your habits. For many, there's a comfort in the artificial busyness of rapid e-mail messaging and social media posturing, while the deep life demands that you leave much of that behind. There's also an uneasiness that surrounds any effort to produce the best things you're capable of producing, as

this forces you to confront the possibility that your best is not (yet) that good. It's safer to comment on our culture than to step into the Rooseveltian ring and attempt to wrestle it into something better.

But if you're willing to sidestep these comforts and fears, and instead struggle to deploy your mind to its fullest capacity to create things that matter, then you'll discover, as others have before you, that depth generates a life rich with productivity and meaning. In Part 1, I quoted writer Winifred Gallagher saying, "I'll live the focused life, because it's the best kind there is." I agree. So does Bill Gates. And

hopefully now that you've finished this book, you agree too.