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SUMMER 2012

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The pleasures
of unplugging
from the
digital world

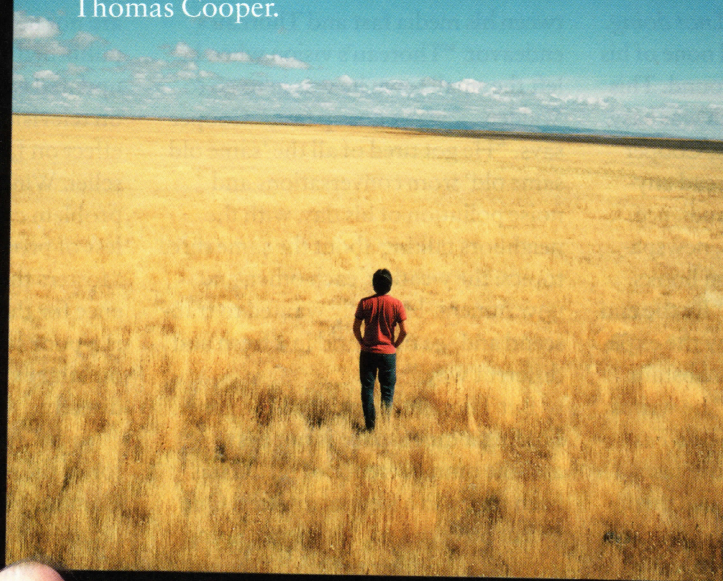
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Digital

Dis-connection

One of a college professor's perks is summers off—or, more accurately, summers free from teaching duties. The idea is that you'll spend at least some of the time doing research and writing scholarly articles.

In the summer of 1989, Thomas Cooper, Ph.D., a professor of visual and media arts at Emerson College in Boston, decided to spend some time doing an experiment. It wasn't very scientific, and it had only one test subject: Thomas Cooper.



The pleasures of unplugging

BY JEFF MERRON



Making a conscious choice to disengage from the temptations of easy, always-on mass media is, for most, very difficult. At the same time, it seems increasingly necessary or, at the very least, tempting.

The experiment involved *not doing*. It was so simple, it required none of his advanced academic background. This is not to say that his research was easy. It was not. Throughout July, Cooper did not watch, listen to, or read anything produced for a mass audience. No TV, radio, movies, CDs, newspapers, or magazines. Not even books.

The result startled him. “By the end of July I was so rewarded by the experience that I decided to also abstain from speaking and eating,” he writes in his book, *Fast Media, Media Fast* (Author House, 2011). Those fasts lasted another week, and since then, “media fasts” have become a regular part of his life and he has led many classes and groups on the practice.

Cooper admits his first fast took a lot of planning. Like most of us, his life was entangled with a steady diet of TV, newspapers, magazines, movies, pop music, and other mass media. He knew, from his professional research, that his fast would have an effect on how he related to friends and family. He’d be unable to chat about the news or gather with his family for communal viewing of favorite sitcoms. His fast would fundamentally change what he thought about and spoke about and did with his time.

Walden Pond, where Henry David Thoreau conducted his famous two-year retreat in the 1840s, is only about 20 miles away from Emerson College, which may explain why Cooper is keenly aware of the similarities be-

tween his media fast and Thoreau’s endeavor. “Thoreau’s vision when he left the small town he was in to go to Walden ... was a gossip fast,” Cooper says. “He got tired of all the ‘same old same old’ from conversations and noise pollution of his day, with the neighbors talking about the same three topics: the weather, each other, and government. He really wanted to transcend and see the world in a fresh and different way.”

But Thoreau’s world is long gone. Finding a quiet space is not easy, and the omnipresence of media has been noted in a slew of articles. One recent piece asked, “Is silence going extinct?” Another extolled “the joy of quiet.” Catchy phrases, such as “nature deficit disorder” and “information anxiety” have been coined to describe problems caused by our wired world. Cooper talks of media fasts, while others try to practice what they call a “digital Sabbath.” No matter what tag is applied, a common theme emerges: Making a conscious choice to disengage from the temptations of easy, always-on mass media is, for most, very difficult. At the same time, it seems increasingly necessary or, at the very least, tempting.

As Cooper notes, the disappearance of geographical Waldens does not make a meaningful retreat impossible. He suggests that the challenge is to find a Walden in your own mind.

Concerns about the impact of mass media and “information overload”

are not new. In 1977, Mary Winn published *The Plug-In Drug* (Penguin, updated edition 2002), which focused on television and children, and TV’s effect on family life. It became a best-seller. Winn wrote that the biggest problem created by television, regardless of programs watched, was that it “fosters the illusion of a varied experience for the viewer.” And that illusion is a poor substitute for simply going out and experiencing the world directly.

Josh Grolin is the associate director of the nonprofit Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, the organizer of the annual “Screen-Free Week,” which began as “TV Turnoff Week” back in 1994. Grolin believes that unplugging, or going “screen-free,” is easier to do as part of a group. Screen-Free Week often originates in the classroom and is scheduled purposefully to take place when schools are in session. But it’s not just schools that sponsor the week as a group activity. “You can find a community to do it with,” Grolin says. “It can be a place of worship, or a library-sponsored group, or simply your whole family.” The organization’s website at commercialfreechildhood.org provides a free organizer’s kit for the week, and it’s chock-full of activities for all kinds of groups.

Cooper and Grolin acknowledge that going “screen-free” or “fasting” from the media is no longer as straightforward as turning off the TV

and radio. There are many gray areas. Does reading an e-book on a Kindle differ from reading the same book in hard copy? Is there a real difference between sending someone an email and sending the same person a letter through the old-fashioned post office?

These are interesting questions, Grolin admits, and he doesn't claim there are easy answers. His organization's aim, he says, is simply "to make people more conscious of how engaged they are with screens."

Cooper suggests it's best for most people not to think of disengaging from the media, or unplugging, as an all-or-nothing proposition. "There are ways to customize it to your needs. If you just have a weekend or a day, you can still make changes that are, for some people, profound."

The groups Cooper leads are often divided in thirds. Some participants go on a full media fast; others go on a "media diet," which can take many forms. You can reduce media time by half, or you can cut out a "guilty pleasure" like spending too much time on Facebook or playing video games. One participant "just cut out horror movies, not all movies." A third group simply keeps detailed diaries of their media habits. Whether it's reaching for the remote at home, turning on the car radio, or mindlessly surfing the Web, they write it down, immediately. "With that diary they begin to note patterns of control that the media have over them in their life," says Cooper. Songs we've heard, things we've seen on the Internet or TV, all clamor for headspace, often drowning out original thought.

The rewards of unplugging are often unexpected, productive, and profound, says Cooper, who warns that it doesn't provide an immediate escape. "For the first few days, or even for a few weeks, you may still have a lot of [media] noise in your consciousness." But he has no doubt about its value, he says. "Without stillness inside, it's very hard to know your purpose, your perspective, your direction." 🌿

Freelance writer and editor **Jeff Merron** unplugs during long runs near his home in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

OUTLOOK

BY DANIEL ZIMMERMAN, M.D.

Four "Rs" for Real Change

It's 6 a.m.—again. You get the update from NPR, stumble to a shower, and then check your iPhone—for the third time. Next, you rush out of the house, grab a coffee, drop the kids at school, and make it just in time for your first meeting at 8. The day has only just begun ...

Sound familiar? You bet it does!

When do we get downtime anymore? We're constantly bombarded by texts and calls, and we're notified whenever a change—in anything—occurs. Our schedules, both personal and professional, are booked weeks to months in advance.

According to the Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine at Massachusetts General Hospital, the cause for more than 60% of doctor visits can be traced to stress-related complaints. That's an astonishingly high percentage and one that I think we can and should aim to reduce. But how?

DR. Z'S PRESCRIPTION:

Relax, Reflect, Restore, and Repeat

These are my new "Four Rs" for the 21st century that everyone—even kids, who are stressed, too—should strive to live by. It doesn't matter who you are, what kind of job you do, or how busy you are. Everyone can try the Four Rs.

1 RELAX. To relax, we need to disconnect, and I mean this both literally and figuratively. Most of us need to schedule our relaxation time, because that's the only way it's going to happen. So, plan a day or afternoon off, meet a friend for coffee, meditate, pray, do yoga, turn off the cell phone, and make sure all work responsibilities are temporarily covered by someone else. Everyone has a different definition of relaxation,

so I can't tell you exactly how to do it. But the benefits of relaxation are universal—our minds and bodies slow down and simply rest.

2 REFLECT. It's not enough just to relax. It's also necessary to put all the activity and stressors of life into perspective. That's where reflection comes in. Reflection is more than just mulling over what's happened in the past. It's thinking about the value and impact of what we have done or might plan to do in the future. Reflection is thinking about what feels right or wrong or valuable or frivolous. Often, people tend to focus on the negative or bad things that have occurred and ruminate on those. But, reflection should also include thinking about good events or memories and understanding why they made us feel good.

3 RESTORE. Restoration occurs when your batteries and energy levels are topped off, your brain thinks more clearly, and you have a better focus. You learn to prioritize better, you feel empowered to say no when you need to, and you are able to set more realistic limits on your time and commitments.

4 REPEAT. This final step is important in order to keep things on track. It's absolutely necessary that you go back and start over with Step 1 on a regular basis. For some people that could mean every day, for others maybe a couple of times a week, and for some less often. No matter what, incorporating the Four Rs into your life on a regular basis is the only way they will work. "One and done" is not going to do it.

You're probably thinking, "But Dr. Z, you didn't really tell me anything new; you just made it look a little different." To that I say, probably so! Often a physician's job is to remind people about things they already know and then give them a nudge.

Consider yourself nudged!

Dr. Daniel Zimmerman, a board-certified internist/pediatrician, is medical director of the Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Company.