

Time to Log Off

Ian Marcus Corbin

The brake lights in front of me pop red, and without thinking I pivot my foot to the brake pedal, slow to a stop and reach for my iPhone, sliding my thumb to the unlock button like an infant swings his open mouth to the nipple. Depending on the light, I'll have 30 to 90 seconds to quickly scroll through Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, or scan through a couple of paragraphs in that article I started reading before I left.

I don't do this every time I stop at a light, but if I'm thirsty for it I'll do it under almost any circumstances: night or day, snow or sun, alone or accompanied. I'll do it because at that moment I am bored, sad, stressed, or lonely, and when I feel that way I need your likes, your words and images, my fellow humans, like a parched, heaving, desert-crawling traveler needs water.

If I were unique in this, it'd be scarcely worth writing or reading about. But my thirst is ours. The drivers around me bear witness, eyes glued down, darting up only to take periodic note of conditions outside. If anyone gets absorbed and misses the turn to green, the other drivers, having noticed a second before, will lean on their horns. The congregants at the intersection supplicate together, seeking solace or redemption—or we know not what—in the digital presence of our non-proximal neighbors and friends.

I think there is precious little that is new under the sun, judging, just for instance, by how much of one's modern self can be found in Plato, Ecclesiastes, or the caves at Lascaux. We're sitting here, in these humming, combusting wonders of modern tech, scrolling like trapped, clawing cats at the stifling silence that humans have been fighting for centuries. Blaise Pascal said in the seventeenth century that most of the world's problems were due to man's inability to sit quietly in a room. The fourth-century monk Evagrius Ponticus, and many monks beside him, spoke of a vice called *acedia*, a wanton restlessness, a quiet gripping terror that this place, this self, are bad, and better things are waiting elsewhere, available but ungrasped. So we dash around in our minds, and touch them in any way we can. Ponticus writes: "The demon of *acedia*—also called the noonday

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demon—is the one that causes the most serious trouble of all. . . . He makes it seem that the sun barely moves, if at all, and. . . . he instills in the heart of the monk a hatred for the place, a hatred for his very life itself.”

So this place, this time, this self are insufficient. Functional, fine, but deadened somehow, short of the richer life I should have—a car of plain black seats, dull, smooth steering wheel, unremarkable powers of locomotion. It’s all but invisible to me, in no way approaching the goodness of the things I truly want and need, or matching the height and power of the things I fear. So I flee in my mind to better places, or at least more colorful ones.

It’s hard to disentangle vices and virtues, sometimes—perhaps not on paper, but certainly in the course of a lived afternoon. Strict self-control can easily, imperceptibly shade into contempt for the weak and lazy, honesty into indiscretion. If humans weren’t afflicted with discontentment, didn’t disdain our present state, we might have far fewer monuments to human ingenuity, fewer skyscrapers, novels, automobiles, or iPhones. It’s one big thing that sets us apart, makes us conquerors and builders, for better and worse. Worse, for one, because this thirst for the unhad also makes us miserable, distracted, unpresent with the people and things around us, including the grand monuments we’re all supposed to be in awe of.

This much is not terribly novel, but our electronic, omnipresent tools of escape are. Like all types of human interaction, online sharing can be joyful—pictures of one’s children, an enlightening article or poem or song. But in the low, thirsty moments, we’re generally not turning to our digital friends out of an excess of our own joy, or a desire to share in theirs. It’s not even simple stimulation. At the intersection, there is plenty around me that I can attend to—cars, drivers, trees, grass, birds, pedestrians, music on the radio, NPR. There’s something sharper, more urgent, sickly ameliorative that we’re after.

When one prepares a social media post, or writes an article (ahem), one dresses, to some extent, for battle. I want to write more sharply or musically or incisively than others do. You want to look prettier or happier or luckier than the people who see your picture. We want to invite lust or envy or respect. All of these desires are natural enough, and meant to position us among our digital peers, in the eternal scrum for status and love. We look at the images of our “friends,” read their words, in part to see what they’ve been able to pull off. We can lust after their successes, which carries its own pleasure, or feel that other small bump of pleasure in noting our lives are superior.

In short, your phone, dead little box of circuits and wires, available 24/7, brings into sharp, bright view the larger battlefield of human competition, and the sharp, loud emotions that accompany it. A happy self might be able to get by on the scenery outside the window. A sad, restless self needs stronger medicine, and will dash to get it, even if it means taking silly, stupid peeks at our phones while piloting a car at 65 miles an hour. Many thousands of the sharpest minds of our day are working insane hours for good pay and gobs of social prestige, employing cutting-edge science to ensure that the phones we buy and the apps we download will hook us in and keep us coming back. A recent study found that the average phone user “engaged in 76 separate phone sessions a day,” touching her phone 2,617 times.

It goes without saying—everyone knows it now, even if they can’t say why—that things like social media are bad for us, that many of us are clinically addicted to our phones, that life online brings out the worst in many, and probably in most of us. Twitter has damaged our national discourse, infecting it with a hair-triggered, toxic factionalism. The news is familiar enough—someone says something, Twitter erupts with outrage; details to follow. This is news. We treat all this with a knowing grimace, and write wry little tweets about how Twitter is toxic. We admire the founders of websites and apps that make us miserable, and if we are ambitious entrepreneurial types, aspire to be like them.

Fine, the zeitgeist moves at its glacial pace, until it decides it’s time to move quickly. Humans are weak and will sate their thirst with the nearest liquid, at least for a time. There is reason to think, though, that this digital world will die, or at least radically morph, as its ill effects come further into view. Technology, and especially social media use—this gigantic monument of our collective creation—will begin to be treated as a public health issue within a decade, I predict. The studies are piling up, no moral argument today is so dispositive.

This will be one case in which the advice of the doctors dovetails with older, deeper insights into human nature. There will be whole social movements organized around unplugging, discarding the tiny monuments that buzz and beckon in our pockets, perhaps reminiscent of the *Wandervogel*, the German grassroots youth groups that, starting at the end of the nineteenth century, rebelled against industrialized urban life by taking long walks into the woods together, seeking serenity and human solidarity. Or perhaps we’ll be doomed to see future iterations of hippie-dom. Who knows what form it will take?

This turn against the digital world will not be total, by any means, and many large-scale reactions swing like a pendulum. But 2018 feels for all the world like the extreme end of a swing. Dostoevsky said that man is the animal who can get used to anything. And, yes, for a time that may be right. But in the medium and longer terms, humanity has a strong track record of recognizing inhumane arrangements for what they are. The thirst won't go away, it never will, but there's only so much salt water a civilization can drink.