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Analog Anchors for the Online Adrift

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My written thoughts—basically all of them—are omnipresent now. Wherever I am at the moment, I can open up a new tab, enter a password, and peruse hundreds of thousands of words relating to books I've read, questions I've pondered, women I've loved, jobs I've applied for, conversations I've followed up on, papers I've labored over. The tumid history of my mind, through the past ten years or so, floats somehow universal and invisible, thinned to a vapor too fine for physical detection, located everywhere and nowhere in particular, except perhaps on some server farm in God-knows-what principality, guarded by technicians I couldn't begin to name or imagine.

This is how it is now. Our inner lives are thoroughly uploaded; keyboard- or screen-hammered cries of pain, expressions of ardor, apologies, friendly pep talks, sexts to a business-traveling lover, all of these float in the strange digital ether, delocalized, unmoored, unnervingly, permanently available as untouchable real-time transcripts of love, loss, boredom, or whatever.

Yet this all doesn't actually feel that odd. This etherization of our inner lives has happened more or less smoothly because our inner lives already feel much like the cloud. Both live on hardware inaccessible to us—we touch our brains as much as we touch that hidden server in some distant place. Both my mind and the web grant me the experience of infinity—neither is actually infinite, of course, but where or when could I ever bump into their limits? The variety of thoughts I can think, the words I can read or type or store away, is, in my practical experience, unlimited. And both contain a surfeit of ever churning, perishing content. Memory saves some things, but most of the information that flows across my mind or screen slides briskly over the waterfall of forgetfulness. Our minds and the digital cloud: these are ephemeral, complicated, overcrowded things.

So far so good. It seems we've created a vast electronic version of ourselves, undammed the private experience of our minds, unleashed a flood immersing the whole globe, our minds swirling together with billions of

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others. We tap into our shared mind via this device or that, but the hardware is a mere portal to the great digital deep.

You could imagine us happy with this, but of course we're not, not entirely. I was chatting recently with a group of students about a Greek island where, I heard, it is cheap to live and one is entirely off the grid. Pointing to one of their iPhones, I said, "These things are useless there." To my surprise, the students reacted as if they were starving and I'd just described a feast. "That sounds amazing," one said.

Anchors in the Flood

It's no great revelation that the relentless flux of our digital lives wears on us. As if managing a single mind weren't hard enough, now I have to swim in the churn of a universal mind? How can I find anything to hold on to there? How can I make sense of the seemingly infinite truths and opinions swirling on just one social media site? I can't; I need to jam an anchor into the digital sand somewhere, to name at least one thing as sure. I need to cling to the people who agree with me and somehow disqualify those who don't. I need take a strong and unequivocal stand on whatever matter is at hand, even if I am, to be honest, internally ambivalent. With so much movement around me, I need an immovable point.

This is a modern version of an old imperative, core to the human practices of art and writing. Although our species was made to cope with a fluid kind of existence, we've turned early and often to physical mark-making as a way of, among other things, dropping an anchor. Many of the earliest proto-linguistic human marks, dating back forty thousand years or so, consist of a simple handprint, made by placing one's splayed hand on a hard background and blowing a powder dye from the mouth, creating an image of the hand. This form of mark-making can be found all around the globe, as far flung as France, Argentina, and Indonesia. Scholars speculate about the possible meaning of other early marks—paintings of buffalo or deer that can easily be understood as narratives, or as incantations for a plentiful food supply. But it's hard to see what is accomplished by a stenciled handprint, except to say something along the lines of "I was here." I may not be here tomorrow, but once I was, and this is a part of what I was like.

Our lives in modern America are subject to less flux than that of Neolithic man, at least in some respects. My bike and I may tomorrow be sucked under the rear wheels of a lumber truck at some busy intersection, but, all told, I live in a time and place that has erected for me

an unprecedented degree of safety. Our lives are still temporary, but the likelihood that my hand will exist tomorrow much as it exists today has never been higher.

On the other hand, the world-flooding expansion of the human mind, carried on via digital mark-making, means that I deal with vastly more thought and feeling than my Neolithic ancestors. The ocean of marks—those would-be anchors—has grown larger and more variegated than we could have known. We produce and consume more words and images than any other generation of humans, but, far from acting as small static monuments to the present moment, as points of orientation, these marks are submerged in the global flood. It's wildly exciting, liberating, addictive, and overwhelming. And paradoxically—perhaps cruelly—it makes us ever more desperate to make some mark, drop some workable anchor, that might give us a sense of location in the new, emerging world-mind.

This much is new, a dramatic turn of events. But human beings are nothing if not flexible. We can make almost any situation bearable, if not always beautiful.

The Notebook Comeback

A striking instance of such amelioration—and a small puzzle of contemporary commerce—is the improbable success of Moleskine notebooks. Founded in 1997, the small Italian company (which sanctions no official pronunciation of its name) has become oddly successful selling expensive, old-fashioned notebooks to modern urbanites, about $170 million worth every year. A typical Moleskine notebook runs between $15 and $25, and appears today entirely unnecessary. Not only are there many cheaper options, but I will wager that the percentage of Moleskine owners who do not also own a laptop and a smartphone is vanishingly small. This means that these notebook-scribblers are intentionally buying a product that is not only overpriced but redundant, and by all appearances inferior to tools they already own. So why?

The notebooks, to begin with, are beautiful. They were invented, sort of, by a Milanese designer, after her boss asked her to think about products that might appeal to contemporary cosmopolitan "nomads" who hop from city to city for work and pleasure. Flux, then, was the issue from the start. The designer, Maria Sebregondi, caught wind of a traditional kind of French notebook—round-cornered, stitch-bound, covered in black oilcloth, held shut with an elastic cloth band—that had been a favorite of Picasso, Hemingway, and the English writer Bruce Chatwin.

From the beginning, Moleskine flirted with the assertion that those creative luminaries had sketched out their brilliant ideas on Moleskine's own notebooks. It isn't true—officially, the company describes itself as the "heir." But it's a smart marketing campaign, animated by an incisive reading of the zeitgeist and what its children need. What Moleskine is selling, for the price of a decent lunch, is continuity, running in two directions at once.

First, it runs backward. Sitting here in this café, recording my thoughts, feelings, imaginings, I fall neatly into a long line of deep, serious ruminators. I am not just some placeless digital native, emerging *ex nihilo* like the latest app from a Silicon Valley incubator. My life may be scattered, my thoughts jostling like the crowd on a subway platform, but I stand in a line; I have people, a tribe. We have thought carefully and well. We have created, and our creations stand firmer than the global chatterings of the digital mind.

The second continuity runs forward. Writing in a simple, high-quality notebook takes this moment in my inner life, its uncertainties and convictions, its accents and layers, and impresses them into matter like a hand print on a cave wall. Feelings and thoughts that might have passed unmemorialized now find a hard surface to inhabit and own. A month or a year from now, I can flip back through and see how my mind worked and how my hand moved today, fluidly or choppily, impatiently or carefully. Graphologists can read a great deal into the way I form my letters, words, and sentences. So can we—it's a spot where the distance between hardware and content is decreased. My bony, fleshy, tendony hands vibrate with the particular state of mind that produces these verbal reflections. And remarkably enough, they will remain—not lost, not washed down the falls by time—a frozen snapshot of the undulating current.

The original Moleskine notebooks are by careful design and construction durable, even archival. They look happy and at home on a book shelf. By purchasing and filling one, I can join, in my small way, that line of immortal creators who also mapped their inner lives into sharp little black books.

Borderless—and Ephemeral

Moleskine's initial success speaks to a shortcoming in our contemporary system of digital mark-making. But its subsequent evolution speaks to the overwhelming power of that system. Initially a refuge from the digital ocean, the company has recently rolled out its "Smart Writing

System"—a little ecosystem of smart notebooks and pens, which can automatically upload your hand-made marks to the cloud, offering, the company promises, "all the advantages of borderless digital creativity." There is also a "community" page on their website where users can submit their creations for public consumption, to be voted on and ranked.

The sirens of the digital ocean are difficult to resist. If I thought, felt, wrote, hoped, whatever—if I did one of these things without releasing them into the larger mind, holding it only in my little fragment—was it even real? The process of creation seems incomplete. Now that there is a world-mind, I naturally, perhaps irresistibly, wish not just to merge my individual mind with it, but to color it, change it, induce it to merge with my own. I want the contents of *my* mind to become the contents of *our* mind. Take and love what I have loved. Know what I know. That's the subterranean directive I issue when I put some part of my inner life online for viewing and evaluation.

But that directive will not, alas, be obeyed. There will be no harmonious merger. The flux is too fast and complex—too many of us, from too many places, are pouring our minds out into the deep, and often doing so dishonestly, with exaggerated certainty, trying to forge some anchor out of the soft stuff of our thoughts. The incentives all tilt toward entropy, and from there toward the dangerous certainty of extremes. Mark-making, turned digital and democratic and accessible, has ceased to perform one of its core functions: laying down the simple truth of the moment so it stays remembered. We are doomed, for now, to find our felt lives bewildering and exhausting and ephemeral. But this is our world now, and leaving it will be hard.

Humanizing the Age

So what will happen? Where can we go? Certainly there are already efforts afoot to take a step back, and seal, for a few minutes or hours, the borders of our minds. There are wealthy households—often in Silicon Valley itself—where kids write and draw and screen time is restricted. There are apps that block access to our phones. And there are little black notebooks that don't connect to the cloud. These are piecemeal attempts to regain the anchoring function of mark-making, to allow a train of thought to develop at its own pace, relatively unmolested. They will win some further ground yet, but for now it'll mostly be ground occupied by the privileged and sophisticated, like the tech CEOs who know what they're peddling.

The mind-merging communion offered by the Internet is intoxicating. If doctors were to begin counseling a turn away from it—as some already have—the way they did with cigarettes decades ago, their counsel would be received as a prescription for loneliness, isolation, and anomie on a massive scale. The only way the psychological chaos of the digital mind can be healthily countered is by introducing a stronger communion. I must have some people or some god to go to if I'm going to stop relying on the digital mind to complete my own. Perhaps the greatest social challenge of the coming decades will be the reinvigoration of widespread mind-sharing between actual, embodied, particular people.

Laments for the shrinking power of local churches, bowling leagues, and Boy Scout troops are not wrong. Those things were beautiful at their height, they are beautiful where they endure, and they won't die out entirely soon. But we should not expect that they will survive or be revived unchanged in the digital age. We will need to find a way to humanize the age we actually live in. The salutary rise of group chats seems to be one small effort. Mark Zuckerberg, the great impresario of publicness, announced recently that Facebook will be pivoting from its focus on public posts toward "privacy-focused communications." These are ways that digital technology can begin to do less damage.

But hands and faces, pen and paper, particularity—these things are perennially germane for flux-treading, body-having, mark-making creatures like us. Those of us who recognize that we and our neighbors need these things should be thinking intentionally and concretely about how we can turn back toward each other. It is a turn that will require us to learn and relearn how to manifest our misty, fast, all too slippery inner lives in the thick, slow, gummy stuff of embodied reality.