

My Life Offline

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Everyone wants to know how my month offline was. They ask it casually, like “How’s work going?” or “What’d you do this weekend?” But it’s not a casual question. It was a huge, incredible, transformative experience. Those 30 days felt like six months. My habits changed, my relationships changed, my identity changed, my personality changed — hell, the physical shape of my body changed dramatically. I went through four legal pads trying to describe what it was like. I’m still not sure I really know.

One thing is clear, though: my normal life style isn’t healthy. This doesn’t seem like the kind of thing that requires a break to learn. I imagine people with unhealthy lifestyles *know* they’re unhealthy. They come home after work and say “I can’t go on like this,” they cry randomly in elevators. But I didn’t know. Life online is practically the only life I know. Sure, I guess things were different when I was very young — I remember, after getting my first email account, wishing someone would email me so I’d have an email to answer (even then I knew I’d soon be missing those empty-inbox days) — but for most of my life, this has been it: a jumble of interruptions and requests and jobs and people, largely carried out alone. It never let up, so I never saw anything different. How was I to know there was anything wrong?

But the last few weeks have made it clear there was — is. These weeks haven’t felt that different my other weeks online, really — same jumble of work and people and interruptions as always. The usual sense that I’m never really *here*, I’m always worried about the million things around the corner: a todo list that goes for pages, a thousand emails to respond to, hundreds of blog posts to read, twenty open tabs, a dozen IM windows, a text message to answer, a Twitter stream to catch up on. I never used to think about these things as a benefit *or* a distraction — I didn’t think about them at all; they were just how life online was. This was the era of multitasking and I was its child. If I felt anything about it, it was pride — a kind of joy in (mostly) managing to handle a thousand different things thrown my way at once. But I never knew what life was like when things *weren’t* constantly being thrown at you. Until it stopped, I never knew how awful it really was.

I am not happy. I used to think of myself as just an unhappy person: a misanthrope, prone to mood swings and eating binges, who spends his days moping around the house in his pajamas, too shy and sad to step outside. But that’s not how I was offline. I loved people — everyone from the counter clerk to the old friends I bumped into on the street. And I loved to go for walks and exercise in the gym and — even though there was no one around to see me — groom.

Yes, groom: shower and shave and put on nice clothes and comb my hair and clean up my nails and so on, all things a month ago I would have said went against my very nature, things I never did before *voluntarily*.

But most of all, I felt not just happy, but firmly happy — solid, is the best way I can put it. I felt like I was in control of my life instead of the other way around, like its challenges just bounced off me as I kept doing what I wanted. Normally I feel buffeted by events, a thousand tiny distractions nagging at the back of my head at all times. Offline, I felt in control of my own destiny. I felt, yes, serene.

When I was very young, my parents introduced me to a book called *Flow*. It argued that people good at their jobs went into a sort of flow state — they were “in the zone” — where the normal stress of the world faded away and all their concentration was focused on the task at hand. It wasn’t “fun” the way ice cream or sex is fun — it didn’t make you smile, just look grimly determined — but it was somehow more than that. It was *fulfilling*. And that was even better than a smile.

I go into such states when programming or writing and they are indeed fantastic, but also weirdly hollow. When you come out the real world — with its mundane stresses and distractions — comes crashing back in, and the moment of flow seems like just another temporary escape, an elusive dream. And it’s a hard one to get back.

I still had flow states while offline — stronger than ever, in fact: I spent an ecstatic afternoon and evening writing longhand in a trance, pouring out the first forty pages of the book I’ve been researching; afterward, I was on a bigger high than I’ve ever had in my life — but they didn’t feel like escapes. Normal days weren’t painful anymore. I didn’t spend them filled with worry, like before. Offline, I felt solid and composed. Online, I feel like my brain wants to run off in a million different directions, even when I try to point it forward.

A friend asked me if I knew I was privileged to be able to take such a break. It seemed a silly question: I feel privileged every day. As I write, my best friend is broke and homeless, much of the world struggles just to stay alive. I feel privileged to own a mattress, let alone take a break.

I realize everyone’s lives are filled with work and people and distractions — the situation brewing at the office, the sump pump breaking down at the house, the family member who’s fallen ill. I realize it must seem like the greatest arrogance to think one could escape life’s mundane concerns, like asking to live on a cloud, floating above the mere mortals. But it was that arrogance that made me think I could contribute to adult mailing lists when I was still in elementary school, that arrogance that made me think someone might want to read my website when I was still just a teen, that arrogance that had me start a company as a college freshman. That sort of arrogance — not bragging, but simply inwardly thinking I could do more than was expected of me — is the only thing that’s gotten me anywhere in life. I see no reason to stop now.

I don't know how I'm going to carve a life away from the world's constant demands and distractions. I don't know how I'm going to balance all the things I want to do with the pressures and responsibilities they bring. But after my month off, I do know one thing: I can't go on like this. So I'm damn well going to try.