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THE ISLAND TEST

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I've discovered a handy test for figuring out what you're addicted to. Imagine you were going to spend the weekend at a friend's house on a little island off the coast of Maine. There are no shops on the island and you won't be able to leave while you're there. Also, you've never been to this house before, so you can't assume it will have more than any house might.

What, besides clothes and toiletries, do you make a point of packing? That's what you're addicted to. For example, if you find yourself packing a bottle of vodka (just in case), you may want to stop and think about that.

For me the list is four things: books, earplugs, a notebook, and a pen.

There are other things I might bring if I thought of it, like music, or tea, but I can live without them. I'm not so addicted to caffeine that I wouldn't risk the house not having any tea, just for a weekend.

Quiet is another matter. I realize it seems a bit eccentric to take earplugs on a trip to an island off the coast of Maine. If anywhere should be quiet, that should. But what if the person in the next room snored? What if there was a kid playing basketball? (Thump, thump, thump... thump.) Why risk it? Earplugs are small.

Sometimes I can think with noise. If I already have momentum on some project, I can work in noisy places. I can edit an essay or debug code in an airport. But airports are not so bad: most of the noise is whitish. I couldn't work with the sound of a sitcom coming through the wall, or a car in the street playing thump-thump music.

And of course there's another kind of thinking, when you're starting something new, that requires complete quiet. You never know when this will strike. It's just as well to carry plugs.

The notebook and pen are professional equipment, as it were. Though actually there is something druglike about them, in the sense that their main purpose is to make me feel better. I hardly ever go back and read stuff I write down in notebooks. It's just that if I can't write things down, worrying about remembering one idea gets in the way of having the next. Pen and paper wick ideas.

The best notebooks I've found are made by a company called Miquelrius. I use their smallest size, which is about 2.5 x 4 in. The secret to writing on such narrow pages is to break words only when you run out of space, like a Latin inscription. I use the cheapest plastic Bic ballpoints, partly because their gluey ink doesn't seep through pages, and partly so I don't worry about losing them.

I only started carrying a notebook about three years ago. Before that I used whatever scraps of paper I could find. But the problem with scraps of paper is that they're not ordered. In a notebook you can guess what a scribble means by looking at the pages around it. In the scrap era I was constantly finding notes I'd written years before that might say something I needed to remember, if I could only figure out what.

As for books, I know the house would probably have something to read. On the average trip I bring four books and only read one of them, because I find new books to read en route. Really bringing books is insurance.

I realize this dependence on books is not entirely good—that what I need them for is distraction. The books I bring on trips are often quite virtuous, the sort of stuff that might be assigned reading in a college class. But I know my motives aren't virtuous. I bring books because if the world gets boring I need to be able to slip into another distilled by some writer. It's like eating jam when you know you should be eating fruit.

There is a point where I'll do without books. I was walking in some steep mountains once, and decided I'd rather just think, if I was bored, rather than carry a single unnecessary ounce. It wasn't so bad. I found I could entertain myself by having ideas instead of reading other people's. If you stop eating jam, fruit starts to taste better.

So maybe I'll try not bringing books on some future trip. They're going to have to pry the plugs out of my cold, dead ears, however.

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