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# A Trip to Camp to Break a Tech Addiction

**By MATT HABER**

There was a phantom buzzing in my shorts. I had carried my iPhone in my left front pocket for so many years that my jeans have permanent rectangular fade marks over my thigh. By now the phone is almost an extension of my nervous system; even without the thing on my person, I could still feel it tingle like a missing limb.

But my phone was stapled inside a Trader Joe's bag along with my watch, credit card and ID. Any buzzing I felt was surely imagined.

Then again, it could have been a mosquito.

This was Day 2 at Camp Grounded, an adults-only summer camp held on former Boy Scouts quarters in Navarro, Calif., about two and a half hours north of San Francisco. A little more than 300 people had gathered there for three days of color wars, talent shows, flag-raisings and other soothingly regressive activities organized by Digital Detox, an Oakland-based group dedicated to teaching technology-addled (or technology-addicted) people to, in the words of its literature, "disconnect to reconnect."

The rules of Camp Grounded were simple: no phones, computers, tablets or watches; work talk, discussion of people's ages and use of real names were prohibited.

There was a reason such strictures seemed appealing. A year ago, I was an editor at a news blog. My days started at the office at 7:30 a.m., where I routinely worked through lunch until 6:30 p.m. I was compelled to follow 1,200 Twitter users, skim 180 RSS feeds and edit dozens of posts a day on an ever-accelerating conveyor belt of content that would have made Lucy and Ethel choke. Evenings were a chance to catch up on "important" television shows between skimming Twitter.

The work-life crises of the meth dealer Walter White on "Breaking Bad" and the advertising executive Don Draper on "Mad Men" (or, when I was feeling particularly dark, Dexter Morgan, the serial killer on "Dexter") were amplified, better art-directed versions of my own 24/7 grind. At night, the iPhone was docked beside my bed, making me feel that even as I slept, I was on the banks of the data stream just in case anything important — or anything at all — happened.

After a few months, my hands became numb and I asked my doctor for a chest X-ray because I was convinced I had pneumonia. I was beyond burned out: I was scorched, like a marshmallow on a stick held too close to the fire.

At Camp Grounded, however, we would no longer be bloggers, entrepreneurs, lawyers, consultants or any other title; we were just ourselves (in my case, answering to "Brooklyn"). By removing the things that supposedly "connect" us in this wireless, oversharing, humble-bragging age, the founders of Digital Detox hoped to build real connections that run deeper than following one another on Twitter or "liking" someone's photo on Instagram.

Without the distractions of the Web, social media, television and breaking news, campers, who, according to organizers, ranged in age from 19 to 67, were invited to share with one another and learn about ourselves.

All of which started immediately upon driving up to the camp. Cars were met at the gate and we were greeted by counselors whose grinning positivity reminded me of that scene in the 1981 movie "Ticket to Heaven" in which a reluctant recruit to a religious cult was met with a chant of "Bomb With Love!"

I had had a long, twisty ride up the mountain to get to the camp, and wasn't prepared for so much full-body enthusiasm, especially not the hugs. Normally, I find myself pressed up against strangers only during my morning subway commute, and usually that's no cause for smiles.

What was I getting myself into?

"My goal now is to connect people," Levi Felix, Digital Detox's 28-year-old co-founder, told me. "There's always going to be more media, more to do outside of where you are. The only moment that matters is right now."

Mr. Felix, whose camp name was Fidget Wigglesworth, is part of an emerging shift toward mindfulness among users of technology. Rather than merely accept social media's intrusion on relationships, and the small, distancing lens onto experience that smartphones and tablets have become for many of us, some tech-savvy folks are rethinking their attachment to electronic devices.

Groups like Reboot have begun to advocate for digital sabbaths and a National Day of Unplugging. Jaron Lanier, a pioneer in the field of virtual reality, has lately begun to speak out against the dehumanizing downsides of technology. And Arianna Huffington, an undisputed doyenne of the Internet, has used her site and Twitter account to call for time offline, even plugging Camp Grounded, though she's yet to relinquish her four BlackBerries.

As for Mr. Felix, he used to work at Causecast.com, a corporate philanthropy platform, but after long hours and a bad diet landed him in the hospital, he re-evaluated his priorities. He sold his car and his "nice Penguin clothing," he said, and traveled for two and a half years. He spent time in Southeast Asia, letting his facial hair grow like a wizard's.

“I had the opportunity to step away from ‘the modern world’ for a little bit,” Mr. Felix said. “I went on my hero’s journey and I escaped. A lot of people who do that never come back. They live vagabond lives. I came back, and my cause was to show people how to connect, how to shed these rules and unwritten codes we bought into.”

He founded Digital Detox last year, leading small retreats in Northern California, Cambodia and other locations, emphasizing yoga, meditation, a healthy diet and one-to-one connections as a reprieve from digital life.

But Camp Grounded, Digital Detox’s biggest event thus far, was designed less to be a spiritual journey than a whimsical return to childhood. Campers, who spent $300 for the weekend, were sent maps, instructions and a suggested packing list designed with a self-consciously retro style that wouldn’t be out of place in a Wes Anderson film.

Men and women were separated and sorted into separate animal-themed villages, where they bunked in three-walled lean-tos built for the camp’s original Boy Scouts by the Petaluma Kiwanis Club. Aside from a water-resistant sleeping pad, no camping equipment was provided.

The Scouts’ rifle range had been reconceived as a typewriter range, and a yurt had been erected near a stream and used as an all-night tea lounge. Throughout the weekend, there was skinny-dipping at the swimming hole. A psychedelic bus parked in a clearing hosted a late-night concert. On the final night, there was an ’80s-themed prom, replete with souvenir couples’ photos and a new wave band that looked as if it had walked off the set of “Revenge of the Nerds.”

Meals were vegan and gluten-free variations on summer camp staples: The first night we ate chickpea “sloppy Joes” and kale salad; another night, gluten-free “mac ’n’ cheese” made from rice pasta and soy with collard greens.

To hear some of the campers tell it, giving up meat was harder than giving up technology, and by the second day, talk of hamburgers, bacon and fried chicken was constant. For some, the craving for meat got so bad that a group of campers sneaked into the kitchen one night and devoured slabs of bacon and packets of hot dogs that had been stored in the freezer for the kitchen staff. Another night, two campers who had volunteered to tear kale for hours in the kitchen were rewarded with bacon, which they passed around like contraband candy at a weight-loss camp.

Unaccustomed to such a legume- and leafy-green-rich diet, many campers privately complained about feeling bloated or snickered about the dubious wisdom of feeding 300 people so many lentils and asking them to share a few latrine-style toilets.

For the most part, though, complaints were few and interpersonal conflicts nonexistent. “When all that stress in life is removed, what’s there to fight about?” Mr. Felix said.

As for love, meanwhile, any fears (or fantasies) that this would be the millennial generation's answer to Sandstone Retreat, the legendary Southern California swingers' outpost chronicled in Gay Talese's "Thy Neighbor's Wife," went unrealized. Immediately on entering, it seemed everyone reverted to a preadolescent state of innocent crushes, promiscuous hand-holding and "cuddle puddles," a reprieve from the transactional approach to dating in the age of OkCupid and Match.com.

"It was affection you just don't see in regular life," Mr. Felix said. "I think that when you create a space of authenticity and openness, there's true, true respect."

If authenticity and openness included fretting about everyday career concerns, however, you were out of luck. Montgomery Kosma, a 45-year-old C.E.O. of a new foundation addressing gun violence, was once featured in a Washington Post article about his addiction to his BlackBerry. A friend told him about Camp Grounded and he thought it sounded like fun — he also thought he could recruit some developers. "I wasn't aware it was entirely networking-free," he said after camp. "I was thinking, 'I'm building a company and need to hire people.' " He wasn't able to do any of that, and said, "It was frustrating.

"This was the longest I'd been away from e-mail or cellphone literally since 1997," said Mr. Kosma, whose camp nickname was Jefferson Smith. "It was strange, but not that strange. ... I spent a lot of time off thinking and writing.

"My name and my job really form my identity," Mr. Kosma said. "It's really hard to talk about your job in generic terms."

After a day, though, he adjusted. He spent some time learning how to solar carve using a magnifying glass and a piece of wood, creating a souvenir that reads "The Time Is Now" on one side and "All the Time in the World" on the other. A week after camp, Mr. Kosma said he was still carrying the Camp Grounded journal he was given in which he asked himself over and over "Who am I?" before concluding that he is "a man with an open heart."

"I did a lot of listening to my own self," Mr. Kosma said. "That's just a remarkable thing." And while his foundation is just months away from opening, he said he planned to attend the Burning Man festival this summer.

For Tatyana Plaksina, a 26-year-old social worker from Los Angeles, camp was almost a necessity.

"I felt like I needed something like this," said Ms. Plaksina, whose nom de camp was Tater Tot. "I felt pulled in a lot of directions. My phone was always going off. I wanted an excuse to put it away and not respond to anybody."

"From the moment that we drove up there, as soon as we met the organizers, they completely made

me feel we were at the right place," she said. "I didn't expect there to be so much love and freedom and acceptance. It felt like a place where you could be yourself and be accepted for that."

And me?

I had spent two days getting to know my fellow campers and participating in a meditative breathing workshop (or "playshop" in Camp Grounded lingo), taught by a surfer-yoga instructor called Didgeridoo, wherein I learned how to hug someone by positioning my head to my partner's right side so that our hearts could touch and our breath could sync. I lost my voice during some very enthusiastic singalongs where I realized that I knew all the words to "If I Had a Hammer," but not the second verse to "Norwegian Wood." I had my face painted, napped in a hammock and spontaneously danced — not an easy thing since, as friends and family can attest, I've never done anything spontaneously in my entire life.

And one night, I found myself lying on my back, gazing up at the night sky. The only other times I'd seen the constellations so clearly were when I glanced up at the ceiling in Grand Central Terminal.

Somewhere outside of Camp Grounded, iPhones were buzzing with the breaking news of Rupert Murdoch's divorce and Kim Kardashian's baby.

But I was looking for shooting stars, not reality ones. And for once, I was enjoying the silence.