New York

I Used to Be a Human Being

An endless bombardment of news and gossip and images has rendered us manic information addicts. It broke me. It might break you, too.

By **Andrew Sullivan**

Based on: Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog, by Caspar David Friedrich (1818).
Illustrations by Kim Dong-kyu

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I was sitting in a large meditation hall in a converted novitiate in central Massachusetts when I reached into my pocket for my iPhone. A woman in the front of the room gamely held a basket in front of her, beaming beneficently, like a priest with a collection plate. I duly surrendered my little device, only to feel a sudden pang of panic on my way back to my seat. If it hadn't been for everyone staring at me, I might have turned around immediately and asked for it back. But I didn't. I knew why I'd come here.

A year before, like many addicts, I had sensed a personal crash coming. For a decade and a half, I'd been a web obsessive, publishing blog posts multiple times a day, seven days a week, and ultimately corralling a team that curated the web every 20 minutes during peak hours. Each morning began with a full immersion in the stream of internet consciousness and news, jumping from site to site, tweet to tweet, breaking news story to hottest take, scanning countless images and videos, catching up with multiple memes. Throughout the day, I'd cough up an insight or an argument or a joke about what had just occurred or what was happening right now. And at times, as events took over, I'd spend weeks manically grabbing every tiny scrap of a developing story in order to fuse them into a narrative in real time. I was in an unending dialogue with readers who were caviling, praising, booing, correcting. My brain had never been so occupied so insistently by so many different subjects and in so public a way for so long.

I was, in other words, a very early adopter of what we might now call living-in-the-web. And as the years went by, I realized I was no longer alone. Facebook soon gave everyone the equivalent of their own blog and their own audience. More and more people got a smartphone — connecting them instantly to a deluge of febrile content, forcing them to cull and absorb and assimilate the online torrent as relentlessly as I had once. Twitter emerged as a form of instant blogging of microthoughts. Users were as addicted to the feedback as I had long been — and even more prolific. Then the apps descended, like the rain, to inundate what was left of our free time. It was ubiquitous now, this virtual living, this never-stopping, this always-updating. I remember when I decided to raise the ante on my blog in 2007 and update every half-hour or so, and my editor looked at me as if I were insane. But the insanity was now banality; the once-unimaginable pace of the professional blogger was now the default for everyone.

If the internet killed you, I used to joke, then I would be the first to find out. Years later, the joke was running thin. In the last year of my blogging life, my health began to give out. Four bronchial infections in 12 months had become progressively harder to kick. Vacations, such as they were, had become mere opportunities for sleep. My dreams were filled with the snippets of code I used each day to update the site. My friendships had atrophied as my time away from the web dwindled. My doctor, dispensing one more course of antibiotics, finally laid it on the line: "Did you really survive HIV to die of the web?"

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But the rewards were many: an audience of up to 100,000 people a day; a new-media business that was actually profitable; a constant stream of things to annoy, enlighten, or infuriate me; a niche in the nerve center of the exploding global conversation; and a way to measure success — in big and beautiful data — that was a constant dopamine bath for the writerly ego. If you had to reinvent yourself as a writer in the internet age, I reassured myself, then I was ahead of the curve. The problem was that I hadn't been able to reinvent myself as a human being.

I tried reading books, but that skill now began to elude me. After a couple of pages, my fingers twitched for a keyboard. I tried meditation, but my mind bucked and bridled as I tried to still it. I got a steady workout routine, and it gave me the only relief I could measure for an hour or so a day. But over time in this pervasive virtual world, the online clamor grew louder and louder. Although I spent hours each day, alone and silent, attached to a laptop, it felt as if I were in a constant cacophonous crowd of words and images, sounds and ideas, emotions and tirades — a wind tunnel of deafening, deadening noise. So much of it was irresistible, as I fully understood. So much of the technology was irreversible, as I also knew. But I'd begun to fear that this new way of living was actually becoming a way of not-living.

By the last few months, I realized I had been engaging — like most addicts — in a form of denial. I'd long treated my online life as a supplement to my real life, an add-on, as it were. Yes, I spent many hours communicating with others as a disembodied voice, but my real life and body were still here. But then I began to realize, as my health and happiness deteriorated, that this was not a both-and kind of situation. It was either-or. Every hour I spent online was not spent in the physical world. Every minute I was engrossed in a virtual interaction I was not involved in a human encounter. Every second absorbed in some trivia was a second less for any form of reflection, or calm, or spirituality. "Multitasking" was a mirage. This was a zero-sum question. I either lived as a voice online or I lived as a human being in the world that humans had lived in since the beginning of time.

And so I decided, after 15 years, to live in reality.

Based on: *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*, by Edouard Manet (1863). Photo: Kim Dong-kyu

Since the invention of the printing press, every new revolution in information technology has prompted apocalyptic fears. From the panic that easy access to the vernacular English Bible would destroy Christian orthodoxy all the way to the revulsion, in the 1950s, at the barbaric young medium of television, cultural critics have moaned and wailed at every turn. Each shift represented a further fracturing of attention — continuing up to the previously unimaginable kaleidoscope of cable TV in the

late-20th century and the now infinite, infinitely multiplying spaces of the web. And yet society has always managed to adapt and adjust, without obvious damage, and with some more-than-obvious progress. So it's perhaps too easy to view this new era of mass distraction as something newly dystopian.

But it sure does represent a huge leap from even the very recent past. The data bewilder. Every single minute on the planet, YouTube users upload 400 hours of video and Tinder users swipe profiles over a million times. Each day, there are literally billions of Facebook "likes." Online outlets now publish exponentially more material than they once did, churning out articles at a rapid-fire pace, adding new details to the news every few minutes. Blogs, Facebook feeds, Tumblr accounts, tweets, and propaganda outlets repurpose, borrow, and add topspin to the same output.

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We absorb this "content" (as writing or video or photography is now called) no longer primarily by buying a magazine or paper, by bookmarking our favorite website, or by actively choosing to read or watch. We are instead guided to these info-nuggets by myriad little interruptions on social media, all cascading at us with individually tailored relevance and accuracy. Do not flatter yourself in thinking that you have much control over which temptations you click on. Silicon Valley's technologists and their ever-perfecting algorithms have discovered the form of bait that will have you jumping like a witless minnow. No information technology ever had this depth of knowledge of its consumers — or greater capacity to tweak their synapses to keep them engaged.

And the engagement never ends. Not long ago, surfing the web, however addictive, was a stationary activity. At your desk at work, or at home on your laptop, you disappeared down a rabbit hole of links and resurfaced minutes (or hours) later to reencounter the world. But the smartphone then went and made the rabbit hole portable, inviting us to get lost in it anywhere, at any time, whatever else we might be doing. Information soon penetrated every waking moment of our lives.

And it did so with staggering swiftness. We almost forget that ten years ago, there were no smartphones, and as recently as 2011, only a third of Americans owned one. Now nearly two-thirds do. That figure reaches 85 percent when you're only counting young adults. And 46 percent of Americans told Pew surveyors last year a simple but remarkable thing: They could not live without one. The device went from unknown to indispensable in less than a decade. The handful of spaces where it was once impossible to be connected — the airplane, the subway, the wilderness — are dwindling fast. Even hiker backpacks now come fitted with battery power for smartphones. Perhaps the only "safe space" that still exists is the shower.

Am I exaggerating? A small but detailed 2015 study of young adults found that participants were using their phones five hours a day, at 85 separate times. Most of these interactions were for less than 30 seconds, but they add up. Just as revealing: The users weren't fully aware of how addicted they were. They thought they picked up their phones half as much as they actually did. But whether they were aware of it or not, a new technology had seized control of around one-third of these young adults' waking hours.

The interruptions often feel pleasant, of course, because they are usually the work of your friends. Distractions arrive in your brain connected to people you know (or think you know), which is the genius of social, peer-to-peer media. Since our earliest evolution, humans have been unusually passionate about gossip, which some attribute to the need to stay abreast of news among friends and family as our social networks expanded. We were hooked on information as eagerly as sugar. And give us access to gossip the way modernity has given us access to sugar and we have an uncontrollable impulse to binge. A regular teen Snapchat user, as the *Atlantic* recently noted, can have exchanged anywhere between 10,000 and even as many as 400,000 snaps with friends. As the snaps accumulate, they generate publicly displayed scores that bestow the allure of popularity and social status. This, evolutionary psychologists will attest, is fatal. When provided a constant source of information and news and gossip about each other — routed through our social networks — we are close to helpless.

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Just look around you — at the people crouched over their phones as they walk the streets, or drive their cars, or walk their dogs, or play with their children. Observe yourself in line for coffee, or in a quick work break, or driving, or even just going to the bathroom. Visit an airport and see the sea of craned necks and dead eyes. We have gone from looking up and around to constantly looking down.

If an alien had visited America just five years ago, then returned today, wouldn't this be its immediate observation? That this species has developed an extraordinary new habit — and, everywhere you look, lives constantly in its thrall?

I arrived at the meditation retreat center a few months after I'd quit the web, throwing my life and career up in the air. I figured it would be the ultimate detox. And I wasn't wrong. After a few hours of

silence, you tend to expect some kind of disturbance, some flurry to catch your interest. And then it never comes. The quiet deepens into an enveloping default. No one spoke; no one even looked another person in the eye — what some Buddhists call “noble silence.” The day was scheduled down to the minute, so that almost all our time was spent in silent meditation with our eyes closed, or in slow-walking meditation on the marked trails of the forest, or in communal, unspeaking meals. The only words I heard or read for ten days were in three counseling sessions, two guided meditations, and nightly talks on mindfulness.

I’d spent the previous nine months honing my meditation practice, but, in this crowd, I was a novice and a tourist. (Everyone around me was attending six-week or three-month sessions.) The silence, it became apparent, was an integral part of these people’s lives — and their simple manner of movement, the way they glided rather than walked, the open expressions on their faces, all fascinated me. What were they experiencing, if not insane levels of boredom?

And how did their calm somehow magnify itself when I was surrounded by them every day? Usually, when you add people to a room, the noise grows; here, it was the silence that seemed to compound itself. Attached to my phone, I had been accompanied for so long by verbal and visual noise, by an endless bombardment of words and images, and yet I felt curiously isolated. Among these meditators, I was alone in silence and darkness, yet I felt almost at one with them. My breathing slowed. My brain settled. My body became much more available to me. I could feel it digesting and sniffing, itching and pulsating. It was if my brain were moving away from the abstract and the distant toward the tangible and the near.

Things that usually escaped me began to intrigue me. On a meditative walk through the forest on my second day, I began to notice not just the quality of the autumnal light through the leaves but the splotchy multicolors of the newly fallen, the texture of the lichen on the bark, the way in which tree roots had come to entangle and overcome old stone walls. The immediate impulse — to grab my phone and photograph it — was foiled by an empty pocket. So I simply looked. At one point, I got lost and had to rely on my sense of direction to find my way back. I heard birdsong for the first time in years. Well, of course, I had always heard it, but it had been so long since I listened.

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My goal was to keep thought in its place. “Remember,” my friend Sam Harris, an atheist meditator, had told me before I left, “if you’re suffering, you’re thinking.” The task was not to silence everything within my addled brain, but to introduce it to quiet, to perspective, to the fallow spaces I had once known where the mind and soul replenish.

Soon enough, the world of “the news,” and the raging primary campaign, disappeared from my consciousness. My mind drifted to a trancelike documentary I had watched years before, Philip Gröning’s *Into Great Silence,* on an ancient Carthusian monastery and silent monastic order in the Alps. In one scene, a novice monk is tending his plot of garden. As he moves deliberately from one task to the next, he seems almost in another dimension. He is walking from one trench to another, but never appears focused on actually getting anywhere. He seems to float, or mindfully glide, from one place to the next.

He had escaped, it seemed to me, what we moderns understand by time. There was no race against it; no fear of wasting it; no avoidance of the tedium that most of us would recoil from. And as I watched my fellow meditators walk around, eyes open yet unavailable to me, I felt the slowing of the ticking clock, the unwinding of the pace that has all of us in modernity on a treadmill till death. I felt a trace of a freedom all humans used to know and that our culture seems intent, pell-mell, on forgetting.

Based on: *Hotel Room*, by Edward Hopper (1931). Photo: Kim Dong-kyu

We all understand the joys of our always-wired world — the connections, the validations, the laughs, the porn, the info. I don't want to deny any of them here. But we are only beginning to get our minds around the costs, if we are even prepared to accept that there are costs. For the subtle snare of this new technology is that it lulls us into the belief that there are no downsides. It's all just more of everything. Online life is simply layered on top of offline life. We can meet in person and text beforehand. We can eat together while checking our feeds. We can transform life into what the writer Sherry Turkle refers to as "life-mix."

But of course, as I had discovered in my blogging years, the family that is eating together while simultaneously on their phones is not actually together. They are, in Turkle's formulation, "alone together." You are where your attention is. If you're watching a football game with your son while also texting a friend, you're not fully with your child — and he knows it. Truly being with another person means being experientially with them, picking up countless tiny signals from the eyes and voice and body language and context, and reacting, often unconsciously, to every nuance. These are our deepest social skills, which have been honed through the aeons. They are what make us distinctively human.

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By rapidly substituting virtual reality for reality, we are diminishing the scope of this interaction even as we multiply the number of people with whom we interact. We remove or drastically filter all the information we might get by being *with* another person. We reduce them to some outlines — a Facebook "friend," an Instagram photo, a text message — in a controlled and sequestered world that exists largely free of the sudden eruptions or encumbrances of actual human interaction. We become each other's "contacts," efficient shadows of ourselves.

Think of how rarely you now use the phone to speak to someone. A text is far easier, quicker, less burdensome. A phone call could take longer; it could force you to encounter that person's idiosyncrasies or digressions or unexpected emotional needs. Remember when you left voice-mail messages — or actually listened to one? Emojis now suffice. Or take the difference between trying to seduce someone at a bar and flipping through Tinder profiles to find a better match. One is deeply inefficient and requires spending (possibly wasting) considerable time; the other turns dozens and dozens of humans into clothes on an endlessly extending rack.

No wonder we prefer the apps. An entire universe of intimate responses is flattened to a single, distant

swipe. We hide our vulnerabilities, airbrushing our flaws and quirks; we project our fantasies onto the images before us. Rejection still stings — but less when a new virtual match beckons on the horizon. We have made sex even safer yet, having sapped it of serendipity and risk and often of physical beings altogether. The amount of time we spend cruising vastly outweighs the time we may ever get to spend with the objects of our desire.

Our oldest human skills atrophy. GPS, for example, is a godsend for finding our way around places we don't know. But, as Nicholas Carr has noted, it has led to our not even seeing, let alone remembering, the details of our environment, to our not developing the accumulated memories that give us a sense of place and control over what we once called ordinary life. The writer Matthew Crawford has examined how automation and online living have sharply eroded the number of people physically making things, using their own hands and eyes and bodies to craft, say, a wooden chair or a piece of clothing or, in one of Crawford's more engrossing case studies, a pipe organ. We became who we are as a species by mastering tools, making them a living, evolving extension of our whole bodies and minds. What first seems tedious and repetitive develops into a skill — and a skill is what gives us humans self-esteem and mutual respect.

Yes, online and automated life is more efficient, it makes more economic sense, it ends monotony and "wasted" time in the achievement of practical goals. But it denies us the deep satisfaction and pride of workmanship that comes with accomplishing daily tasks well, a denial perhaps felt most acutely by those for whom such tasks are also a livelihood — and an identity.

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Indeed, the modest mastery of our practical lives is what fulfilled us for tens of thousands of years — until technology and capitalism decided it was entirely dispensable. If we are to figure out why despair has spread so rapidly in so many left-behind communities, the atrophying of the practical vocations of the past — and the meaning they gave to people's lives — seems as useful a place to explore as economic indices.

So are the bonds we used to form in our everyday interactions — the nods and pleasantries of neighbors, the daily facial recognition in the mall or the street. Here too the allure of virtual interaction has helped decimate the space for actual community. When we enter a coffee shop in which everyone is engrossed in their private online worlds, we respond by creating one of our own. When someone next to you answers the phone and starts talking loudly as if you didn't exist, you realize that, in her private zone, you don't. And slowly, the whole concept of a public space — where we meet and engage and learn from our fellow citizens — evaporates. Turkle describes one of the many small consequences in an American city: "Kara, in her 50s, feels that life in her hometown of Portland, Maine, has emptied out: 'Sometimes I walk down the street, and I'm the only person not plugged in … No one is where they are. They're talking to someone miles away. I miss them.' "

Has our enslavement to dopamine — to the instant hits of validation that come with a well-crafted tweet or Snapchat streak — made us happier? I suspect it has simply made us less unhappy, or rather less aware of our unhappiness, and that our phones are merely new and powerful antidepressants of a non-pharmaceutical variety. In an essay on contemplation, the Christian writer Alan Jacobs recently commended the comedian Louis C.K. for withholding smartphones from his children. On the Conan O'Brien show, C.K. explained why: "You need to build an ability to just be yourself and not be doing something. That's what the phones are taking away," he said. "Underneath in your life there's that thing … that forever empty … that knowledge that it's all for nothing and you're alone … That's why we text and drive … because we don't want to be alone for a second."

He recalled a moment driving his car when a Bruce Springsteen song came on the radio. It triggered a sudden, unexpected surge of sadness. He instinctively went to pick up his phone and text as many friends as possible. Then he changed his mind, left his phone where it was, and pulled over to the side of the road to weep. He allowed himself for once to be alone with his feelings, to be overwhelmed by them, to experience them with no instant distraction, no digital assist. And then he was able to discover, in a manner now remote from most of us, the relief of crawling out of the hole of misery by himself. For if there is no dark night of the soul anymore that isn't lit with the flicker of the screen, then there is no morning of hopefulness either. As he said of the distracted modern world we now live in: "You never feel completely sad or completely happy, you just feel … kinda satisfied with your products. And then you die. So that's why I don't want to get a phone for my kids."

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The early days of the retreat passed by, the novelty slowly ceding to a reckoning that my meditation skills were now being tested more aggressively. Thoughts began to bubble up; memories clouded the present; the silent sessions began to be edged by a little anxiety.

And then, unexpectedly, on the third day, as I was walking through the forest, I became overwhelmed. I'm still not sure what triggered it, but my best guess is that the shady, quiet woodlands, with brooks trickling their way down hillsides and birds flitting through the moist air, summoned memories of my

childhood. I was a lonely boy who spent many hours outside in the copses and woodlands of my native Sussex, in England. I had explored this landscape with friends, but also alone — playing imaginary scenarios in my head, creating little nooks where I could hang and sometimes read, learning every little pathway through the woods and marking each flower or weed or fungus that I stumbled on. But I was also escaping a home where my mother had collapsed with bipolar disorder after the birth of my younger brother and had never really recovered. She was in and out of hospitals for much of my youth and adolescence, and her condition made it hard for her to hide her pain and suffering from her sensitive oldest son.

I absorbed a lot of her agony, I came to realize later, hearing her screams of frustration and misery in constant, terrifying fights with my father, and never knowing how to stop it or to help. I remember watching her dissolve in tears in the car picking me up from elementary school at the thought of returning to a home she clearly dreaded, or holding her as she poured her heart out to me, through sobs and whispers, about her dead-end life in a small town where she was utterly dependent on a spouse. She was taken away from me several times in my childhood, starting when I was 4, and even now I can recall the corridors and rooms of the institutions she was treated in when we went to visit.

I knew the scar tissue from this formative trauma was still in my soul. I had spent two decades in therapy, untangling and exploring it, learning how it had made intimacy with others so frightening, how it had made my own spasms of adolescent depression even more acute, how living with that kind of pain from the most powerful source of love in my life had made me the profoundly broken vessel I am. But I had never felt it so vividly since the very years it had first engulfed and defined me. It was as if, having slowly and progressively removed every distraction from my life, I was suddenly faced with what I had been distracting myself from. Resting for a moment against the trunk of a tree, I stopped, and suddenly found myself bent over, convulsed with the newly present pain, sobbing.

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And this time, even as I eventually made it back to the meditation hall, there was no relief. I couldn't call my husband or a friend and talk it over. I couldn't check my email or refresh my Instagram or text someone who might share the pain. I couldn't ask one of my fellows if they had experienced something similar. I waited for the mood to lift, but it deepened. Hours went by in silence as my heart beat anxiously and my mind reeled.

I decided I would get some distance by trying to describe what I was feeling. The two words "extreme suffering" won the naming contest in my head. And when I had my 15-minute counseling session with my assigned counselor a day later, the words just kept tumbling out. After my panicked, anguished confession, he looked at me, one eyebrow raised, with a beatific half-smile. "Oh, that's perfectly normal," he deadpanned warmly. "Don't worry. Be patient. It will resolve itself." And in time, it did. Over the next day, the feelings began to ebb, my meditation improved, the sadness shifted into a kind of calm and rest. I felt other things from my childhood — the beauty of the forests, the joy of friends, the support of my sister, the love of my maternal grandmother. Yes, I prayed, and prayed for relief. But this lifting did not feel like divine intervention, let alone a result of effort, but more like a natural process of revisiting and healing and recovering. It felt like an ancient, long-buried gift.

In his survey of how the modern West lost widespread religious practice, *A Secular Age,* the philosopher Charles Taylor used a term to describe the way we think of our societies. He called it a "social imaginary" — a set of interlocking beliefs and practices that can undermine or subtly marginalize other kinds of belief. We didn't go from faith to secularism in one fell swoop, he argues. Certain ideas and practices made others not so much false as less vibrant or relevant. And so modernity slowly weakened spirituality, by design and accident, in favor of commerce; it downplayed silence and mere being in favor of noise and constant action. The reason we live in a culture increasingly without faith is not because science has somehow disproved the unprovable, but because the white noise of secularism has removed the very stillness in which it might endure or be reborn.

The English Reformation began, one recalls, with an assault on the monasteries, and what silence the Protestants didn't banish the philosophers of the Enlightenment mocked. Gibbon and Voltaire defined the Enlightenment's posture toward the monkish: from condescension to outright contempt. The roar and disruption of the Industrial Revolution violated what quiet still remained until modern capitalism made business central to our culture and the ever-more efficient meeting of needs and wants our primary collective goal. We became a civilization of getting things done — with the development of America, in some ways, as its crowning achievement. Silence in modernity became, over the centuries, an anachronism, even a symbol of the useless superstitions we had left behind. The smartphone revolution of the past decade can be seen in some ways simply as the final twist of this ratchet, in which those few remaining redoubts of quiet — the tiny cracks of inactivity in our lives — are being methodically filled with more stimulus and noise.

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And yet our need for quiet has never fully gone away, because our practical achievements, however spectacular, never quite fulfill us. They are always giving way to new wants and needs, always requiring

updating or repairing, always falling short. The mania of our online lives reveals this: We keep swiping and swiping because we are never fully satisfied. The late British philosopher Michael Oakeshott starkly called this truth “the deadliness of doing.” There seems no end to this paradox of practical life, and no way out, just an infinite succession of efforts, all doomed ultimately to fail.

Except, of course, there is the option of a spiritual reconciliation to this futility, an attempt to transcend the unending cycle of impermanent human achievement. There is a recognition that beyond mere doing, there is also being; that at the end of life, there is also the great silence of death with which we must eventually make our peace. From the moment I entered a church in my childhood, I understood that this place was different because it was so quiet. The Mass itself was full of silences — those liturgical pauses that would never do in a theater, those minutes of quiet after communion when we were encouraged to get lost in prayer, those liturgical spaces that seemed to insist that we are in no hurry here. And this silence demarcated what we once understood as the sacred, marking a space beyond the secular world of noise and business and shopping.

The only place like it was the library, and the silence there also pointed to something beyond it — to the learning that required time and patience, to the pursuit of truth that left practical life behind. Like the moment of silence we sometimes honor in the wake of a tragedy, the act of not speaking signals that we are responding to something deeper than the quotidian, something more profound than words can fully express. I vividly recall when the AIDS Memorial Quilt was first laid out on the Mall in Washington in 1987. A huge crowd had gathered, drifts of hundreds of chattering, animated people walking in waves onto the scene. But the closer they got, and the more they absorbed the landscape of unimaginably raw grief, their voices petered out, and a great emptiness filled the air. This is different, the silence seemed to say. This is not our ordinary life.

Most civilizations, including our own, have understood this in the past. Millennia ago, as the historian Diarmaid MacCulloch has argued, the unnameable, often inscrutably silent God of the Jewish Scriptures intersected with Plato’s concept of a divinity so beyond human understanding and imperfection that no words could accurately describe it. The hidden God of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures spoke often by not speaking. And Jesus, like the Buddha, revealed as much by his silences as by his words. He was a preacher who yet wandered for 40 days in the desert; a prisoner who refused to defend himself at his trial. At the converted novitiate at the retreat, they had left two stained-glass windows depicting Jesus. In one, he is in the Garden of Gethsemane, sweating blood in terror, alone before his execution. In the other, he is seated at the Last Supper, with the disciple John the Beloved resting his head on Jesus’s chest. He is speaking in neither.

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That Judeo-Christian tradition recognized a critical distinction — and tension — between noise and silence, between getting through the day and getting a grip on one’s whole life. The Sabbath — the Jewish institution co-opted by Christianity — was a collective imposition of relative silence, a moment of calm to reflect on our lives under the light of eternity. It helped define much of Western public life once a week for centuries — only to dissipate, with scarcely a passing regret, into the commercial cacophony of the past couple of decades. It reflected a now-battered belief that a sustained spiritual life is simply unfeasible for most mortals without these refuges from noise and work to buffer us and remind us who we really are. But just as modern street lighting has slowly blotted the stars from the visible skies, so too have cars and planes and factories and flickering digital screens combined to rob us of a silence that was previously regarded as integral to the health of the human imagination.

This changes us. It slowly removes — without our even noticing it — the very spaces where we can gain a footing in our minds and souls that is not captive to constant pressures or desires or duties. And the smartphone has all but banished them. Thoreau issued his jeremiad against those pressures more than a century ago: “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear.”

When you enter the temporary Temple at Burning Man, the annual Labor Day retreat for the tech elite in the Nevada desert, there is hardly any speaking. Some hover at the edges; others hold hands and weep; a few pin notes to a wall of remembrances; the rest are kneeling or meditating or simply sitting. The usually ornate and vast wooden structure is rivaled only by the massive tower of a man that will be burned, like the Temple itself, as the festival reaches its climax, and tens of thousands of people watch an inferno.

They come here, these architects of our internet world, to escape the thing they unleashed on the rest of us. They come to a wilderness where no cellular signals penetrate. You leave your phone in your tent, deemed useless for a few, ecstatically authentic days. There is a spirit of radical self-reliance (you survive for seven days or so only on what you can bring into the vast temporary city) and an ethic of social equality. You are forced to interact only as a physical human being with other physical human beings — without hierarchy. You dance, and you experiment; you build community in various camps. And for many, this is the high point of their year — a separate world for fantasy and friendship, enhanced by drugs that elevate your sense of compassion or wonder or awe.

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Like a medieval carnival, this new form of religion upends the conventions that otherwise rule our lives. Like a safety valve, it releases the pent-up pressures of our wired cacophony. Though easily mockable, it is trying to achieve what our culture once routinely provided, and it reveals, perhaps, that we are not completely helpless in this newly distracted era. We can, one senses, begin to balance it out, to relearn what we have so witlessly discarded, to manage our neuroses so they do not completely overwhelm us.

There are burgeoning signs of this more human correction. In 2012, there were, for example, around 20 million yoga practitioners in the U.S., according to a survey conducted by Ipsos Public Affairs. By 2016, the number had almost doubled. Mindfulness, at the same time, has become a corporate catchword for many and a new form of sanity for others. It's also hard to explain, it seems to me, the sudden explosion of interest in and tolerance of cannabis in the past 15 years without factoring in the intensifying digital climate. Weed is a form of self-medication for an era of mass distraction, providing a quick and easy path to mellowed contemplation in a world where the ample space and time necessary for it are under siege.

If the churches came to understand that the greatest threat to faith today is not hedonism but distraction, perhaps they might begin to appeal anew to a frazzled digital generation. Christian leaders seem to think that they need more distraction to counter the distraction. Their services have degenerated into emotional spasms, their spaces drowned with light and noise and locked shut throughout the day, when their darkness and silence might actually draw those whose minds and souls have grown web-weary. But the mysticism of Catholic meditation — of the Rosary, of Benediction, or simple contemplative prayer — is a tradition in search of rediscovery. The monasteries — opened up to more lay visitors — could try to answer to the same needs that the booming yoga movement has increasingly met.

And imagine if more secular places responded in kind: restaurants where smartphones must be surrendered upon entering, or coffee shops that marketed their non-Wi-Fi safe space? Or, more practical: more meals where we agree to put our gadgets in a box while we talk to one another? Or lunch where the first person to use their phone pays the whole bill? We can, if we want, re-create a digital Sabbath each week — just one day in which we live for 24 hours without checking our phones. Or we can simply turn off our notifications. Humans are self-preserving in the long run. For every innovation there is a reaction, and even the starkest of analysts of our new culture, like Sherry Turkle, sees a potential for eventually rebalancing our lives.

And yet I wonder. The ubiquitous temptations of virtual living create a mental climate that is still maddeningly hard to manage. In the days, then weeks, then months after my retreat, my daily meditation sessions began to falter a little. There was an election campaign of such brooding menace it demanded attention, headlined by a walking human Snapchat app of incoherence. For a while, I had limited my news exposure to the New York *Times*' daily briefings; then, slowly, I found myself scanning the click-bait headlines from countless sources that crowded the screen; after a while, I was back in my old rut, absorbing every nugget of campaign news, even as I understood each to be as ephemeral as the last, and even though I no longer needed to absorb them all for work.

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Then there were the other snares: the allure of online porn, now blasting through the defenses of every teenager; the ease of replacing every conversation with a texting stream; the escape of living for a while in an online game where all the hazards of real human interaction are banished; the new video features on Instagram, and new friends to follow. It all slowly chipped away at my meditative composure. I cut my daily silences from one hour to 25 minutes; and then, almost a year later, to every other day. I knew this was fatal — that the key to gaining sustainable composure from meditation was rigorous discipline and practice, every day, whether you felt like it or not, whether it felt as if it were working or not. Like weekly Mass, it is the routine that gradually creates a space that lets your life breathe. But the world I rejoined seemed to conspire to take that space away from me. "I do what I hate," as the oldest son says in Terrence Malick's haunting *Tree of Life.*

I haven't given up, even as, each day, at various moments, I find myself giving in. There are books to be read; landscapes to be walked; friends to be with; life to be fully lived. And I realize that this is, in some ways, just another tale in the vast book of human frailty. But this new epidemic of distraction is our civilization's specific weakness. And its threat is not so much to our minds, even as they shape-shift under the pressure. The threat is to our souls. At this rate, if the noise does not relent, we might even forget we have any.

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