Pico Iyer writes about the importance of quietness.

1 ABOUT a year ago, I flew to Singapore to address a group of advertising people on "Marketing to the Child of Tomorrow." Soon after I arrived, the chief executive of the agency took me aside. What he was most interested in, he began — I braced myself for mention of some next-generation stealth campaign — was stillness.

2 A few months later, I read an interview with the perennially cutting-edge designer Philippe Starck. What allowed him to remain so consistently ahead of the curve? "I never read any magazines or watch TV," he said, perhaps a little hyperbolically. "Nor do I go to cocktail parties, dinners or anything like that." He lived outside conventional ideas, he implied, because "I live alone mostly, in the middle of nowhere." Around the same time, I noticed that those who part with $2,285 a night to stay in a cliff-top room at the Post Ranch Inn in Big Sur pay partly for the privilege of *not* having a TV in their rooms; the future of travel, I'm reliably told, lies in "black-hole resorts," which charge high prices precisely because you can't get online in their rooms.

3 In barely one generation we've moved from exulting in the time-saving devices that have so expanded our lives to trying to get away from them — often in order to make more time. The more ways we have to connect, the more many of us seem desperate to unplug. Like teenagers, we appear to have gone from knowing nothing about the world to knowing too much all but overnight.

4 The average American spends at least eight and a half hours a day in front of a screen, Nicholas Carr notes in his eye-opening book "The Shallows," in part because the number of hours American adults spent online doubled between 2005 and 2009 (and the number of hours spent in front of a TV screen, often simultaneously, is also steadily increasing). The average American teenager sends or receives 75 text messages a day, though one girl in Sacramento managed to handle an average of 10,000 every 24 hours for a month. Since luxury, as any economist will tell you, is a function of scarcity, the children of tomorrow, I heard myself tell the marketers in Singapore, will crave nothing more than freedom, if only for a short while, from all the blinking machines, streaming videos and scrolling headlines that leave them feeling empty and too full all at once.

5 The urgency of slowing down, to find the time and space to think, is nothing new, of course, and wiser souls have always reminded us that the more attention we pay to the moment, the less time and energy we have to place it in some larger context. "Distraction is the only thing that consoles us for our miseries," the French philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote in the 17th century, "and yet it is itself the greatest of our miseries." He also famously remarked that all of man's problems come from his inability to sit quietly in a room alone. When telegraphs and trains brought in the idea that convenience was more important than content, Henry David Thoreau reminded us that speedier means do not make up for unimproved ends. Even half a century ago, Marshall McLuhan, who came closer than most to seeing what was coming, warned, "When things come at you very fast, naturally you lose touch with yourself."

6 Yet few of those voices can be heard these days, precisely because "breaking news" is coming through (perpetually) on CNN and Debbie is just posting images of her summer vacation and the phone is ringing. We barely have enough time to see how little time we have (most Web pages, researchers find, are visited for 10 seconds or less). The more that floods in on us, the less of ourselves we have to give to every snippet. All we

notice is that the distinctions that used to guide and steady us — between Sunday and Monday, public and private, here and there — are gone. We have more and more ways to communicate but less and less to say. This is partly because we're so busy communicating, and we are rushing to meet so many deadlines that we hardly register that what we need most are lifelines.

7 So what to do? The central paradox of the machines that have made our lives so much brighter, quicker, longer and healthier is that they cannot teach us how to make the best use of them; the information revolution came without an instruction manual. All the data in the world cannot teach us how to sift through data; images don't show us how to process images. The only way to do justice to our onscreen lives is by summoning exactly the emotional and moral clarity that can't be found on any screen.

8 Maybe that's why more and more people I know, even if they have no religious commitment, seem to be turning to yoga, or meditation, or tai chi; these are not New Age fads so much as ways to connect with what could be called the wisdom of the past. Two journalist friends of mine observe an "Internet sabbath" every week, turning off their online connections from Friday night to Monday morning, so as to try to revive those ancient customs known as family meals and conversation. Finding myself at breakfast with a group of lawyers in Oxford four months ago, I noticed that all their talk was of sailing — or riding or bridge: anything that would allow them to get out of radio contact for a few hours.

9 Other friends try to go on long walks every Sunday, or to "forget" their cellphones at home. A series of tests in recent years has shown, Mr. Carr points out, that after spending time in quiet rural settings, subjects "exhibit greater attentiveness, stronger memory and generally improved cognition. Their brains become both calmer and sharper." More than that, empathy, as well as deep thought, depends (as neuroscientists like Antonio Damasio have found) on neural processes that are "inherently slow." The very ones our high-speed lives have little time for.

10 In my own case, I turn to eccentric and often extreme measures to try to keep my sanity and ensure that I have time to do nothing at all (which is the only time when I can see what I should be doing the rest of the time). I have yet to use a cellphone and I've never Tweeted or entered Facebook. I try not to go online 'till my day's writing is finished, and I moved from Manhattan to rural Japan in part so I could more easily survive for long stretches entirely on foot, and every trip to the movies would be an event.

11 None of this is a matter of principle or asceticism; it's just pure selfishness. Nothing makes me feel better — calmer, clearer and happier — than being in one place, absorbed in a book, a conversation, a piece of music. It is actually something deeper than mere happiness: it is joy. It is vital, of course, to stay in touch with the world, and to know what's going on. But it is only by having some distance from the world that you can see it whole, and understand what you should be doing with it.

Adapted from *The Joy of Quiet* by Pico Iyer