

Review: Disconnecting in a too-connected world

May 25 2011, By BARBARA ORTUTAY , AP Technology Writer



In this May 22, 2011 photo, there is no cell phone or Internet reception at this secluded swimming pond in Franklin, N.Y., on the site of a recent yoga retreat. It lets even the most avid Facebook users disconnect for a serene weekend. (AP Photo/Barbara Ortutay)

The knowledge that I'd be cut off from Internet and cellphone service in just a few hours started to relax me long before I reached the secluded, serene site of a two-day yoga retreat in upstate New York.

For 43 magical hours, chirping birds replaced car horns and sirens. Two-hour yoga classes, hammock-lounging and hot-tubbing replaced sitting at my desk in Manhattan.

The best part: Absolutely nothing replaced my iPhone. It sat powered off

at the bottom of my backpack all weekend save for a brief stint as an [alarm clock](#) to wake me from a nap.

I readily admit that I am powerless. Without a forced break from email, text messages, [Facebook](#) and an endless stream of online news and blogs, I am an information addict. Spending a few days without mobile service in an age where smartphones have become like limbs for many, I found immense value in disconnecting from our always-on, always-connected world.

It wasn't easy. During the three-hour ride upstate, I clutched my phone and reloaded Facebook, [Gmail](#) and Hotmail every 10 to 15 minutes. I followed our route on [Google Maps](#), checked in to Route 17 on Foursquare and scanned the app for The New York Times for news updates for the fourth, fifth, sixth time.

As we neared the no signal zone, I called my husband to say goodbye for the second time and left a message for a friend to wish him well on medical-school admission tests that he was taking that weekend. I checked email once more.

Should I have called my mom? Posted one last update on Facebook about the looming Rapture? See if I missed any tech news by taking Friday off?

My goodness, what have I become?

Then, "No Service" appeared in the top left corner on my phone, and that was that. I took a deep breath, turned off the phone and turned to my surroundings and later, inward.

Facebook came up at least twice during the retreat at Heathen Hill. Both times, our yoga instructor was leading the 18 of us through relaxation

techniques. Forget about work, she said, forget about your children at home, for a moment, and forget about Facebook. We lay on our mats, listening to the softly tapping rain and chirping birds and complied. We breathed.

It's become an increasingly rare treat to disconnect from "real world" while on vacation. For many people, work and family left behind require constant email and phone contact. Wireless access through Wi-Fi is plentiful and often free, as I have discovered in the Irish countryside, in the outskirts of my hometown of Budapest, Hungary, and in parts of the Catskills, notwithstanding the pocket where my yoga retreat took place.

Like many people, I have also developed a bit of an unhealthy attachment to my iPhone in the past couple of years, though it's not to the point where that I sleep with it under my pillow.

Convenient as it is, there are plenty drawbacks to the constant ability to check in - to friends, strangers, work, news, gossip and whatever else my phone gives me instant access to. Sometimes I don't even notice when I subconsciously reach for my phone when there's a lull in a conversation over dinner or when I want to avoid awkward small talk in the elevator.

Then there's the type of information I'm getting. Sure, some of it is valuable, but more of it is on the caliber of cute animal stories and incidental Facebook updates from friends or casual acquaintances. After coming back from the retreat, I extended my Facebook ban, so it's been five days already. I'm not sure I've missed much, except perhaps a few laughs or headshakes at friends' posts.

So what did we do, without news, Twitter and email in the Catskill Mountains? Yoga, and lots of it.

Our teacher instructed us to turn inward. That's especially difficult to do

in the age of social media, when many of us seek validation even for the most minute actions and passing thoughts of our lives. Why do I need to tell my Facebook friends that it's raining again? And when someone responds, why do I feel weirdly validated in my existence?

I won't call it addiction, but for the first few hours of the retreat, I found myself regularly reaching for my [iPhone](#) - for what, I don't know. It was like a phantom limb, unnerving in its absence.

By the second day, the feeling was gone, thanks to vigorous exercise, yogic breathing and our beautiful surroundings. We dined on homemade vegetarian dishes, another break from my regular days as an avid carnivore. I also brought a book with me, printed on real paper. It's called "Living Dead in Dallas," part of a series about Southern vampires that is now a show on HBO. It helps me relax, OK?

At night we sat by the campfire, roasted marshmallows and drank wine. Then sleep, breakfast and more yoga.

I don't advocate disconnecting forever from the Internet or social media, and I admit a weekend was just enough. We needed GPS to find our way back to the city, for one thing. Some email addresses were exchanged, too.

And, as we left, we promised our newfound yoga friends: "I'll find you on Facebook."

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