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The Sound of Silence

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I don't allow phones or laptops in my university course. As a college professor, twice a week I lecture to 260 students about media, yet I forbid their classroom use of digital technology. I have my reasons. Being in constant touch with the rest of the planet (or at least your 10 besties) may be stimulating, but it gets in the way of learning—and of hearing yourself think.

Initially the idea of laptops in class seems smart. From the lectern at the front of the room, all those open computers appear to signal scholars at work. But walk up the steps to the back of the lecture hall, look down at the screens, and you'll see Instagram and Gmail and Twitter.

Even good students who are interested in a course pop over to Facebook during a lecture. Sophomore Esme Nungaray checks social media to help her stay awake in class, but she also combats boredom by “participating more in discussions.”

Communication and journalism double major Deidre Hasan uses her laptop for note-taking, but “when I am on my cell phone in class (which is rare) it's very distracting because there are so many apps that only take a second to go to.”

Advertising major Madelyn Jaeger finds sitting behind someone with a laptop “distracting, even if they are just taking notes.” Alum Aaron Jay Ledesma disagrees. “Our generation is capable of multitasking... we're used to tech!” Despite research

findings that multitasking reduces knowledge retention, millennials believe they can read one thing while learning another and typing a third.

They aren't the only ones. I sit through many a faculty or editorial meeting in which my colleagues peck at a phone or a laptop during discussions and presentations. Perhaps this is a modern human craving, our need to fill every minute with not one task, but two, or five, or 10.

It is a craving I understand. I am no innocent Luddite. As I type this essay on one laptop, I have a second one open, scanning Facebook. A third (yes, a third) is screening Netflix. I scrolled through Yik-Yak on my phone a few minutes ago, and now I'm texting my daughter in one city and my best friend in another. I get it. Technology makes us feel connected—uberconnected, even—and that invitation to constant stimulus is a siren call that is darn near irresistible.

But our sense of connectedness may be a mirage. We are so interested in where we *aren't* that we may miss where we *are*. That's my argument against using phones during class (or funerals or job interviews or theater matinees, for that matter). And, perhaps more important, we are so overstimulated that we may have lost sight of the productive benefits of being, well, bored.

Two widely reported studies, one from Winona State and one from Cornell University, demonstrate that students using laptops in class remember lectures poorly and misunderstand course material. Their ability to focus—even on course-related internet searches—is weaker than that of students who are not digitally connected

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during class. Multitasking, particularly the digital variety, diminishes focus and function. Students may do many things at once, but they don't do them well.

A recent Microsoft study finds that digital users crave continual new stimuli, have trouble filtering out distractions, and struggle to focus on a single task. The average human attention span dropped from 12 seconds in 2000 to eight seconds in 2014. That's one second less than the attention span of goldfish. Yup, digital users are now more skittish and forgetful than goldfish.

Research from Princeton and UCLA finds that taking lecture notes in longhand rather than on a keyboard enhances processing and retention. Typing is a kind of automatic dictation; you can type and not fully absorb what you are typing. Writing by hand, however, inscribes information into the brain.

My students must take notes by hand but some, like alumna Rebecca French, often retype them for "making study guides." Theater major A.J. Magoon says,

"I don't retain nearly as much information if I'm typing my notes; I learn better from handwriting." Senior Peter Setter says, "pen/paper doesn't have Twitter, Facebook, email... fewer distractions." Looking up from the screen and being fully present in the here and now has its advantages, especially when trying to master new material and think through challenging problems.

Years ago, I was trapped indoors on a rainy day with three weather-weary children, and in desperation I Scotch taped their chubby little fingers together. It took 10 giggling minutes and all their creative problem-solving powers to figure out how to unstuck their hands.

Their boredom created an opportunity for something fun to happen.

Were I trapped indoors with those three children today, they wouldn't be whining about their ennui. They probably wouldn't be talking to me at all. They would be sitting in a row on the sofa, largely unaware of each other, staring into touch screens of varying sizes and grunting softly.

In a world where every stray minute is packed with digital distraction, the chance to stare into space, hang out aimlessly, and contemplate life is rare. But boredom offers those chances. Boredom delivers unexpected gifts. Boredom possesses unrecognized virtues. Boredom is shunned when it ought to be praised for helping us focus; develop self-reliance; and look inward at our spiritual, emotional, and intellectual development.

Five inventions to curb your internet addiction

In 2014 a New York advertising agency created the NoPhone, which is a \$12 plastic rectangle that looks like a smartphone. Initially marketed as a satirical security blanket for people addicted to their smartphones, the NoPhone surprised its creators when people actually wanted to buy it. Although the NoPhone won't cut your technology overuse, there are plenty of apps for that:

Moment

This app tracks how much you use your device each day. You can set daily limits on your smartphone usage and get notifications when you exceed them. You can even force yourself off your device when you're over your limit.
Inthemoment.io

Offtime

Offtime lets you block your calls, texts, and notifications.

You can restrict access to certain apps, make exceptions, and create custom auto-replies. You won't miss a thing, either; there's an activity log for a comprehensive list of everything that happened while you were away.
Offtime.co

Ringly

Wearable technology gets a new meaning with Ringly, which lets you swap your smartphone for jewelry.

We're talking an actual ring for your finger that connects to your phone and sends you customized notifications through vibration and light.
Ringly.com

Freedom

A \$10 software program that will disable your internet connections for the time period you specify. You'll need to reboot your computer if you want to get back online—which means you're

less likely to sneak a peek at the ether.
macfreedom.com

Anti-Social

If Freedom sounds extreme, you should take a look at Anti-Social, which works just like Freedom, except that it only blocks distracting social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, which should give you more time to focus on your nondigital friends.
Anti-social.cc

In fact, maybe we aren't bored at all. That knee-jerk reaction to label any moment when our fingers aren't active on a keyboard as "boring!" might disguise the reality: These are just moments of stillness.

Stillness opens doors to creativity, offers a playground for curiosity, and constructs an incubator for innovation. Yet modern life tolerates such introspection only during a power outage when all device batteries are run down. In the scarce moments of mental white noise that do survive—say, while standing at the altar during a lull in your own wedding ceremony—we too often go to fill the gap by checking email and scrolling through texts. Our unwillingness to simply breathe and be without Angry Birds on our smartphones has robbed us of a useful, everyday occurrence: unexpected moments in which to just think.

Wherever we are—the classroom, the checkout lane, a red light at an intersection—we now escape and digitally travel somewhere else. We want to be in constant communication with everyone—everyone, that is, except the people sitting next to us. When there is a pause in the action in whatever space we inhabit or whatever conversation we are having, that time is not used to explore our interior lives or consider our immediate surroundings. Instead we use it to scroll to any place we are not and to comment on conversations we cannot hear, filling up the silences and the tiny moments in our lives that seem empty. But are they?

Although boredom is often characterized as negative, research argues that it may work to motivate and focus attention. A recent psychology study suggests that doodling and daydreaming may facilitate creative resourcefulness. Another study in the U.K. points to boredom as the trigger for increased inspiration and inventiveness. A Penn State study identifies boredom as fertile ground for problem-solving and mean-

ing-making. Boredom itself isn't any fun to feel. But when we are bored, we figure out ways to entertain ourselves. We think of what engages us. We dwell, for a brief time, in our intellectual, spiritual, and emotional worlds. And in those visits to our minds and hearts and souls, inspiration can strike.

Although silence appears to onlookers as vacant space, it can, in fact, be rich with imaginative potential. I once interviewed Garland Wright, stage director and artistic director of the regional Guthrie Theater, Minneapolis. His actors called his rehearsals "scary" because he was deathly quiet as they worked. When I told him this, he looked genuinely surprised. "Quiet?" he asked. "It's very noisy in my head!"

Doing nothing leads to something inventive so often that boredom ought to be a welcome guest. If we constantly tweet, text, tap, Skype, swipe, and

search, when will we pause to puzzle over problems, dream of things that don't yet exist, and think up new uses for Velcro? If we never allow our minds to be quiet, how will we ever hear ourselves think? If we don't embrace the stillness now and then, *can* we think?

Andreas Elpidorou is an assistant philosophy professor at the University of Louisville who studies boredom and feels rather positively about it. Boredom, Elpidorou argues, can force us to "reflect on our situations, desires, and goals. Boredom can (and should, I believe), be embraced. We shouldn't ignore it; nor should we try to drown it in meaningless busyness. We should 'listen' to it, for it is trying to tell us something." Boredom reminds us that our minds and spirits are free to explore paths and journey creatively, even while our bodies are trapped in the dentist's waiting room.



"My favorite of all the pope's talks and writings."
—JAMES MARTIN, S.J.

The second of three volumes these daily homilies from September 2013 to January 2014 epitomize Pope Francis's down-to-earth style as he touches on core themes of faith: mercy and forgiveness, the centrality of Jesus Christ, and the gospel as an unending source of life and joy.

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Spirituality is often cast as something our ancestors could achieve but is somehow unattainable to parents driving kids to soccer practice.

Our terror of being temporarily without stimuli may signal reluctance to look deeply into ourselves with nothing but our thoughts as company. Getting comfortable with unoccupied space and time is getting comfortable with yourself and with the possibility of letting your mind wander. A wandering mind is an exploring mind, a mind in search of deeper meaning and satisfaction in life.

Such philosophical contemplation, we suspect, was commonplace in simpler times and centuries. We blame technology for leeching the spiritual dimension out of modern life. How can we be spiritual when life is so chaotic? But before we blame the internet for the breakdown of thoughtful society, remember that the telegraph, radio, television, telephone, and cell phone were each initially demonized as the end of everything sacred in life, but have since been recognized as being (at least partially) good. At its root, digital communication does what communication has always done—helps us share our lives with each other. The impulse to connect with others throughout the day is not necessarily negative. Loving and friendly messages sent through the ether seem to me to be a pretty good use of digital technology.

It's not that digitization is evil, it's that it's an easy (and, let's admit it, often inane) time-filler. When we are bored, we reach for the phone. Instead, we might greet a moment of stillness as an opportunity to strengthen our

spiritual practices. We might embrace the contemplation. We might even use technology to help us. *Breathe2Relax* is a free app that uses guided breathing sessions to enhance relaxation. The *Mindfulness App*, *Omvana*, and *Take A Break* offer mindful, guided spiritual meditation, and an app called *Calm* helps with stress reduction. A \$10 bit of software called *Freedom* blocks you from your own internet access, forcing you to ignore social media and providing digital willpower.

Digital communication is not necessarily the antithesis of a thoughtful, intentional life and healthy spirituality. After all, we have no alternative to dwelling in the time into which we are born. We have no option to return to "simpler" times, and a time machine, if one existed, would probably be digital, anyway.

Spirituality is often cast as something our ancestors could achieve but is somehow unattainable to parents driving kids to soccer practice and college students struggling to understand organic chemistry. Such reasoning inappropriately characterizes the past as having been particularly pensive (as if pioneers in sod houses and children working in factories considered their lives to be thoughtful and introspective), and it also positions spirituality as existing in opposition to modern life. This argues that typical family life prevents any possibility of developing a spiritual practice or embracing spiritual meaning. It suggests that a person needs to abandon her everyday existence and

travel to some other kind of physical or mental space in order to be spiritual. It makes spirituality sound fleeting, illusive, and fragile.

But spirituality is more resilient than that. Perhaps the opportunity for stillness and spiritual connection hides inside of common, ordinary boredom, suggesting there is space in every life for contemplation. It's built right in, in all the moments we roll our eyes and shift our weight and doodle in the margins. Knit right into the fabric of errands and raising children and walking to class are chances to pause, breathe, feel, take measure, think through, explore, even meditate.

Boredom signals a chance to challenge our own thinking, to open our minds to something new, to endure the temporary struggle of learning or of simply being still. We may not welcome every still moment but when we look back on times we thought we were bored, what we gained might surprise us.

One of my students, public relations major Catherine Scales, writes, "Not being able to use any technology in your class was a lifesaver. If phones were allowed, I would have checked my phone every couple minutes, going through all the social media and eventually tuning out the lecture. If I had a computer in front of me, that physical barrier of the laptop screen would have created a mental barrier between the lecture and me. I think that not using technology in your class allowed me to get the most out of the material."

The challenge, as my students come to understand it, is not to turn off the phone but to turn on a vibrant intellectual curiosity. Boredom is the state of possibility. The state of wondering. A recognition of the existence of mystery and an openness to whatever comes next.

Life is sometimes *so boring*. Especially when it's trying to teach us something. **USC**