

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

ADVICE

Thoreau's Cellphone Experiment



iStock Photo

By William Major | JANUARY 16, 2011

I took their smartphones, and the world continued to spin. I took their BlackBerries, and that did not lead to chaos. If I could have, I would have taken their Internet access, too, just to see the looks on their faces.

I rarely offer my students extra-credit assignments, because I don't typically like to create more work for myself than necessary. Inspired, however, by Henry David Thoreau's calls for simplicity and solitude, I have, for the past few years, conducted a classroom experiment: On our final day of discussing *Walden* in my literature course for sophomores, I ask students to get out their BlackBerries and smartphones and lay them on their desks. I then offer the extra credit they've been begging for since day one: They'll get it if they let me keep their phones for five days.

You would think I'd asked the class to remove their collective clothes. Which, in a way, I had.

The hyperbolic Thoreau told us that he never received much worthy news through the mail, never found anything of interest in the papers. For the person striving to understand the right way to live, "all news, as it is called, is gossip."

Nineteenth-century America had its own version of Twitter in the penny papers of the day, whose allegiance to fear and gossip-mongering was every bit as real as our own. But most of my students don't read newspapers. They rarely watch the news. Their connections, such as they are, are not with the latest dust-up in Burma or tuition hikes in

England. They are not particularly engaged in Obama's fight with the Republicans. In fact, many don't know we recently had an election.

And while it may seem that Thoreau's most difficult lesson for the American student is to "simplify," to reduce both needs and wants, I don't see it that way. My students say they are generally (and theoretically) in favor of conserving, spending less, and (again, theoretically) living their lives with fewer things—as long they are not asked to do too much.

No, where they take a stand is when Thoreau asks them to spend time alone, away from family and friends: disconnected, separated, out of touch. Solitude, it seems, scares them. "I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time," Thoreau wrote. "I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude." That is a sentiment so disturbing to my students as to make some of them angry.

As part of the experiment, I always ask my students to write about being left in the technological cold. I want to know about their expectations, reservations, and day-to-day experience of disconnection. Give me the good and the bad.

Their most common response? Fear. Initially, most of them worried that they would miss something: a family emergency, a party, a job offer, a friend who "really needed" them. Many were anxious they would be stuck somewhere on the road, having had an accident. Some surmised that they wouldn't be able to call someone if they were robbed or, worse, raped. In short, most of them thought little good could come of an experiment meant to liberate them from the incessant presence of *other people*.

The reluctance to give up their phones (many students didn't participate) derived from a sense that they would either be absent when something happened to someone they knew, or that they would be present, sans phone, when something terrible happened to themselves. "I'm not sure how people made it through the weekends without cellphones," one student wrote.

It did no good for me to explain that there was a time, not long ago, when none of us had cellphones, yet we still traveled hither and yon, we missed friends at parties, and our cars broke down—a lot more frequently than they do now. And when our cars broke down,

we figured things out as we went along—you know, practiced a little self-reliance.

In a burst of honesty, a student wrote: "My expectation as well as fear about giving up my phone was that I would not have anyone to talk to. I had imagined myself just being all alone for the entire weekend. I was basically afraid of being alone." She experienced a "feeling of emptiness. I felt like I lost a friend."

I don't know whether it occurred to her that such emptiness might be a good thing, that she would have many more such feelings during her life, with or without her phone, and that she might want to get used to them, or at least find a way to use them.

Another student wrote that even though "I enjoyed the feeling of walking to my own music, I found it difficult to be without a phone for the past six days, simply because I didn't like thinking about my life so much, and my phone was always there to help me keep my mind off things." She didn't say what it was she was trying to ignore, but I noted her very Thoreauvian description of "walking to my own music" coupled with a clear distaste for her self, her need to be in the very un-Zen place called elsewhere.

When I began the experiment, I explained that I, too, had close friends, and that we remained close, in part, because we didn't make a habit of talking with or seeing each other frequently. I see two of my closest friends for only a few days every two years. My students were stunned. I made clear that my friends don't need me in constant contact. At least, they don't need to know what I do every day. Neither do I require frequent updates from my friends, who are secure in the knowledge that, to use the common parlance, I would "be there for them" if necessary. Moreover, when my phone rings, I answer it sporadically and reluctantly, not out of spite toward whoever is on the other end, but because I don't feel compelled to jump when someone else is feeling whimsical. I told the students that I speak with my mother, who lives halfway across the country, once a week—sometimes once every two weeks—and that I *like* it that way.

What if something happens to your mom? they wanted to know.

What could I do from 1,000 miles away? I answered.

But what if she died? What if? What if? What if?

Many of my students speak with their parents several times a day. They are, I am assured, Best Friends! A few students said they couldn't possibly give up their phones, because their parents would think something had happened to them. "They might think I'm dead."

I had trouble with that one. What kind of parents think their adult sons and daughters are dead if they don't hear from them for a day or two? What kind of sophomore in college lives with such odious responsibility?

Perhaps the kind who live in fear. And so I proposed the extra-credit assignment knowing that it might hurt. The outcome? Several students complained that they had missed their morning classes because I had their alarms. One or two said their significant others were fuming mad because they weren't answering texts. It must, after all, mean something that he's not responding.

Conversely, one male wrote that the "best part of not having a cellphone was freedom from my girlfriend." Not freedom to look for another girlfriend, he hinted, but simply out of a desire for some "alone time": "When I have my cellphone on me, she is constantly text-ing me." For some reason he feels compelled to answer.

Another student put an odd gender spin on the experiment: "Being a man I assumed being without a phone for a few days wouldn't hurt me. It has only been a matter of three hours and I'm panicking like crazy." He didn't say what he was panicked over or what being a man had to do with it. However, when I returned his phone, he didn't seem panicked at all. Indeed, several students had hundreds of unanswered texts yet appeared embarrassingly healthy—even though one complained that her "fingers can't stop twitching."

They had found themselves reaching for their phones in the vain hope that someone was trying to reach them, when, in fact, their connections to the world lay silent at the bottom of my desk near the hand lotion and ibuprofen. It took several hours for them to adjust to not having that little shot of adrenaline, dopamine, serotonin, or whatever chemical makes us feel alive whenever we anticipate the most important of communications: "im at the library where r u?"

Of the students who thought it a useful enterprise, several mentioned noticing the campus for the first time—that there are trees, plaques, and signage, and all manner of people in their midst, many of whom are texting or talking on their phones even as they walk with their friends. One student said he found himself talking with strangers, which I thought a perfect way for him to begin to question the fearful lessons his parents drummed into his head.

Even the students who mentioned feeling liberated said their behavior wouldn't change. Their novel sensation of freedom was perhaps too much to bear. But Thoreau had hope. He knew that "it is never too late to give up our prejudices." I, too, have prejudices. I, too, have a smartphone. I will endeavor to give up both.

William Major is an associate professor of English at the University of Hartford's Hillyer College.

© 2020 The Chronicle of Higher Education

1255 23rd Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20037