

W. Harrison Hill
“On Technology and Big Living”
Tree Talk – 07/13/12
Camp Pasquaney

My favorite place in the White Mountains is a little spot called Black Mountain Pond. It’s a beautiful, isolated basin deep in the Sandwich Wilderness, and because it’s only reachable after a pretty tough hike, it gives off this magical impression of otherworldliness, of effortlessly floating 2200 feet above sea-level.

Last Wednesday, my expedition and I spent the night at this little hiker’s oasis. And after a night of really crazy weather—you remember the one—I woke up early for a swim.

I walked down to the water. Yes, this was Black Mountain Pond as I remembered it, its gorgeous water serene yet choppy under the weight of a sharp, cool breeze. I took a deep breath and jumped in. I swam, and soon, there I was: the middle. Black Mountain Pond’s not a perfect circle, but it’s close, so when you swim to its center, as I did, you get this intense thrill at feeling practically equidistant from all points on the shore. You paddle around and there everything is: Black Mountain looming overhead, the big blue expanse of sky and sun, the green and brown weave of the trees on shore. Underneath you swells a black reservoir, and though it’s probably no more than fifteen feet deep, in that moment it feels as boundless as the Mariana Trench, an endless depth that you flail and gasp over. You lean back and settle into the thin film between water and air and lose yourself. It’s totally sublime.

Pity that, tucked away in the wilderness, I couldn’t instantly post about my experience online, that I couldn’t see which of my friends “liked” the post, that they couldn’t comment, and that we couldn’t exchange witty Tweets about the shot and its subsequent commentary. Pity.

Or not.

Really, the idea of bringing social media or technology into such a rich, full moment is laughable. Why would I text when THIS was available? The water and the sun were enough. More than enough. Cell phones? Naw, thanks.

Of course, few moments are so big and clear. At school and work and home, there’s so much to do, so many people to please. It’s a vast, hyperconnected world, and if we want to stay relevant, it often seems that we’ve got to keep feeding the bottomless pit of our screens. We may want to stop typing and clicking, but 2012 demands that we compute on.

Unfortunately for 2012, science is starting to prove the downsides of our multitasking, super-digital lifestyles. Two years ago the *New York Times* ran a fascinating series called “Your Brain on Computers” that explored the neurological and social impacts of our digital reliance and the multitasking it cultivates. According to some scientists, “Heavy multitaskers have more trouble focusing and shutting out irrelevant information, and they experience more stress.” Indeed, “Scientists are discovering that even after the multitasking ends, fractured thinking and lack of focus persist.” In other words, our brains are getting rewired to think shallowly.

My experience bears this out. Whenever I'm trying to focus deeply on a task, a little romp to my phone or the web almost always temporarily derails my progress. I swear that I'm only going to answer that one text, but then I see that email and then I see my Gchat and then... well, you know the story. The kind of big, capital L Living experiences we all crave—experiences like my morning at Black Mountain Pond—become almost impossible when we are distracted in this way. These programs and the devices that run them split our focus and draw us away from the real world in front of us. They yank us out of the present into a world of cheap commentary and small thinking. They demand constant feeding.

And then there's the social cost. It can be great to connect over Facebook, but used to the extreme, I think the internet can make us more isolated than ever. I'm reminded of a lunch I shared with some friends in Brooklyn last March. As we chatted and munched on our sandwiches, a group near us caught our attention. Each of the four people was on an iPhone. No big deal—this was New York City, where people are always using devices. But as our parallel meals progressed, their texting, tweeting and messaging never stopped. Over drinks, they texted. Over food, they texted. Over desert, they texted. Throughout their entire meal, they shared no more than thirty seconds of phone-free conversation. It's sort of funny on the one hand—I mean, who *are* these crazy tekkies?!—but it's also kind of chilling, like something out of a dystopian sci-fi novel. These poor people had become slaves to their machines, and were no longer capable of functioning independently with real, live humans.

Of course, I'd be a fool to flat out condemn this virtual world. I rely on it as much as anyone else—maybe more so. As someone who uses his home as an office, I'm incredibly reliant on the internet. It's the way I search for auditions and communicate with casting directors, plan rehearsals and stay on top of what's happening. I also love connecting with Camp friends over Facebook, and I spend hours every week writing a blog. But I'd be lying if I said the Internet cultivates real thoughtfulness and rigor. Instead, I often emerge from the computer anxious and overwhelmed.

“Anxious and overwhelmed” is the polar opposite of how I feel in those big moments when distractions finally fall away and the breadth of this world becomes somewhat clear. The author Herman Melville writes about the feeling of those moments beautifully in the classic novel *Moby Dick*. Here's what he has to say about the isolated life of a whaleship: “In this tropic whaling life, a sublime uneventfulness invests you; you hear no news; read no gazettes; extras with startling accounts of commonplaces never delude you into unnecessary excitements; you hear of no domestic afflictions; bankrupt securities; fall of stocks; are never troubled with the thought of what you shall have for dinner—for all your meals for three years or more are snugly stowed in casks, and your bill of fare is immutable.”

Makes you think of Pasquaney, doesn't it? No news, no distractions, pre-planned meals. Our lives at camp are just as actively meditative as those of the whalers. We spend intense, focused energy on learning to pitch or perfecting our backhands, like the sailors hunting their whales, and then we stop, look at the lake, and reflect, experiencing the “sublime uneventfulness” the sailors feel between bursts of productivity.

But what happens when the season is over and you're forced to re-enter 2012 and its electronic hysteria?

I'd urge to remember one simple truth: *You have a choice*. You are the master of your devices, not the other way around. It may sound like heresy, but you don't have to check Facebook at all hours of the day. You don't have to reply to an email the moment it's sent. The unwritten code of the web says you must always be available and responsive, but that's simply untrue. Indeed, if we want to become truly skilled or have authentic, thorough experiences, the science increasingly says we must create times where we log *off*.

Pasquaney's rhythms make that possible for a seven-week stretch. Away from those glowing screens, I believe we're more open to the bigger moments in life, moments like my morning at Black Mountain Pond. Those shots of revelation can come anytime—maybe during the evening pause between prayers and shaking Mr. Vinne's hand. Maybe during that first, ecstatic moment when your crew shell rows in perfect unison. Or maybe during that rush of rehearsing a scene full tilt, words, emotions, and rhythms soaring off the stage.

Now, I'm a theater counsellor, so I'm obviously going to end this thing with a quote from a play. In the great drama *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, one character speaks about the kind of ecstasy and the thrill of losing yourself to the present I've been talking about. The speaker is a young man who talks to his father. He tells him of an experience on the sea. He says,

“I was on the Squarehead square rigger, bound for Buenos Aires. Full moon in the Trades. The old hooker driving fourteen knots. I lay on the bowsprit, facing astern, with the water foaming into spume under me, the masts with every sail white in the moonlight, towering high above me. I became drunk with the beauty and singing rhythm of it, and for a moment I lost myself—actually lost my life. I was set free! I dissolved in the sea, became white sails and flying spray, became beauty and rhythm, became moonlight and the ship and the high dim-starred sky! I belonged, without past or future, within peace and unity and a wild joy, within something greater than my own life, or the life of Man, to Life itself!”

Who need AngryBirds when this kind of living is available? Seek out those places where the world is bigger than an interface; seek them out, and you, too may “belong, without past or future, within peace and unity, and a wild joy.”

Thank you.