

Slamming the Screen Door: Dispatches From a Summer Unplugged, Part III
By Whitney Collins

This third and final dispatch of our unplugged summer was written on August 8, two days before our 70 days of going screen-free were up. You can read the previous two entries on The Weeklings. All were typed on a cranky Smith-Corona, then scanned and sent as PDFs by my plugged-in husband. Any accompanying photos were sent before going dark or after plugging back in.

August 8

In forty-eight hours, we return to our screens after seventy days of being without them. What seemed so ludicrous and looming in May, has now come and gone like an ocean liner. There, on the horizon, is our summer heading back out to sea, a dot we can pinch between our thumbs and forefingers. Did it really happen? Did we really listen to that much Top 40 radio? To the saccharine hits of the 70s, 80s, 90s, whatever it is they call the decade between 2000 and 2010, and whatever it is they call the time that has passed between 2011 and today? Did we actually do that many Jumbles? Is it possible we know the difference between the call of the house finch and the Nashville warbler? The squeal of the spring peeper from the common field cricket? The song of the katydid from that of Katy Perry? Did I truly weave thirty loomed potholders and sew them together into what can only be described as Laura Ingalls' bathmat? Would you like to sample our homemade sour gherkins? We grew just enough cucumbers to make two measly jars of pickles, but boy, are they delicious! (Don't mind the Lego heads.)

Of course, we have slipped up in small ways. There were the fanatical, humid afternoon viewings of The AristoCats, three sneaky work emails, a smattering of texts (two for sitters, two for playdates, and several covert ones to my husband that seemed so illicit at the time despite their content: "Bring home toilet paper!" "What's your social again?"), to say nothing of those four days at the beach after George's emergency appendectomy when I succumbed to convalescent television--Finding Bigfoot and Man Vs. Food patting my back while I patted my son's, the TV's blue embrace tethering me to this world when fear pulled at me like a riptide.

But there have been no video games, no apps, no social media, no Internet surfing, no frivolous Google searches, no Microsoft Word, no YouTube. We've somehow done without Buzzfeed quizzes, and life-changing listicles, and cable news, and commercials. For two-and-a-half months, there was no frantic ransacking of the house for phone chargers, no looking under couch cushions for clickers, no waving my kids away--inexcusably gruff--while I tried to find some link to some video of some ferret playing some miniature saxophone. In all, we have been dark, which has caused us to grow toward the light. Yes, reluctantly at first--like cold, pallid bean sprouts on a basement sill, suspicious of the sun--but eventually eagerly, as if our lives depended on it.

Eventually, we looked outward and inward and up into one another's eyes instead of down. We have grown weary of each other, but in the same way a tomato cage bends toward harvest. What has felt at times like a burden, has become a bounty. Oh, YOU people! I say every morning at breakfast, while the drugstore boombox plays and the newspaper smudges my palms. AGAIN?

With YOU people? Don't you have anywhere to go? Why are you all up in my heart this way? Why are you all tangled up in me the same way our shitty, tenacious cantaloupe plant has engulfed the electricity meter? WHY ARE YOU STILL HERE? In my kitchen? In my blood? You people better watch it. Because if you aren't careful, I will trap you forever, inside my ribcage, and make you small beasts the prisoners of my soul.

And then after our snap-crackle-and-pops and sausage links and that beautiful, incessant--okay, horrible--Sam Smith song has reared its pleading head once again, we are out in the back yard--our new family room--going about our writing and hole-digging and bicycling in a silent, sacred, symbiotic way. A coexistent prayer that is periodically broken by my children's threats to strangle one another and my shrill but solemn promise that the cops are on their way. Hear that siren? I remind them. Because it's coming for you.

Now it's the infancy of August, and the dogwoods are already tinged with purple, the blighted ash and mimosa dropping a hundred small yellow leaves an hour, little joyful tears that mourn the passing of summer and celebrate our small victory. It's already cold in the mornings, the dew like ice water on my feet, the crickets chirping as if it's an October night, the garden doing its best to inflate a few melons before the first frost. The dog (like any prince) acts unwilling to dampen his paws en route to relieve himself. Where are we? I wonder. Winnipeg? Helsinki? International Falls? These are not the Kentucky dog days of my youth. No sir. It's as if Sir Edmund Hillary has barged into our backyard, stamped the snow from his boots, and broken two frozen spears from his beard and boomed: "Hello there, young chaps! Who's in the mood for ice pops?"

The kids know the end is near. They do lazy circles on the concrete pad on their scooter and tricycle and ask about their tablets in the same way you suddenly ask about an old classmate. HEY!!! they declare, as if they've just had the brightest idea. Whatever happened to Kindle? Remember him? REMEMBER KINDLE? Oh, yeahhhhhhh. And ol' iPad Jones? iPad? Jones? MY GOD! Was he ever fun to party with! We should hang out with those guys more often!

Wait. Why haven't we hung out with them?

As expected--as needed--for the boys to return to their schoolbooks and for me to return to my book reviews and (insert wild laughter from my former math teachers here) my bookkeeping gig, we'll have to return to our screens. But we've changed in how we'll use them. We've decided on no Internet for the kids (unless they want me to look up the life-cycle of the platypus or something, because I cannot be expected to know the life-cycle of the platypus or something). We've decided on no YouTube for the kids (because creepy grown men create channels on which they review train sets and play video games and my boys deeply love these creepy grown men). We've also decided on only commercial-free television for the kids (because Disney and Nick not only advertise cereal that could destroy a wildebeest's pancreas, they also portray grown ups as idiots and the later my boys learn that grown ups are idiots, the better).

And finally, the "should we buy a Playstation or a Wii or an Xbox?" conversation we had last winter has finally been answered, and the answer is: "Nope. No dice. Not on my dime. You can buy that for yourself when you get your first job at the age of fifteen and, if you're like your father and me, that job will be in the service industry, serving not so much to provide you with a paycheck, but to destroy your ego. To crush your desire for video games and obliterate your faith in humanity. Might we suggest the campus Little Caesar's? Or the Thanksgiving shift at Honeybaked Ham?"

Mark my words. We will stick to these new rules. As long as no one becomes intolerably whiny or brings home an excellent report card or asks me after my Friday wine or butters me up with a: "PLEEEEAASSSEEEEE??? I'm the only kid who doesn't have one and you look so very young today."

That's what we have taken away from them, but what have they taken away from this summer? A mellowness, I think. The ability to entertain themselves. An appreciation for a found feather, a weird bug, the first tomato, each other's flatulence. They've also come away with toes stubbed beyond recognition, a troubling array of shin bruises, and mild to moderate sun damage. One has learned how to pedal and pump, another how to bike the neighborhood solo. And they've gotten really good at trampolining and free throws and Legos. Especially Legos. They've become Master Builders in the past 70 days. "You're 'The Special,'" I whisper to one, when the other one isn't listening.

But honestly, I'm the one who has learned the most. I've been humbled and horrified and heartened by what a screenless summer has taught me. For starters, I've learned that I've been living a life of chronic diversion since my first smartphone nearly seven years ago. I've learned that giving up the Internet is like jumping from a moving vehicle. I've learned that ridding our house of news, 24-hour or otherwise, has been nothing short of an exorcism. And, yes, I've come to suspect that Twitter is little more than a virtual circle-jerk.

I've learned the hard way that giving up my beloved trio of texting, Netflix, and Doppler radar were terrible ideas, that Smith-Corona is an unforgiving taskmaster, that Liquid Paper is a complete asshole, and that buying a landline that wasn't cordless has forced me to memorize the den's ceiling cracks.

I've also learned, after letting them pile up like garbage spilling from a dumpster, before periodically and blindly purging, that emails don't need to be checked very often. Maybe twice a summer if you're marginally popular like me. Maybe twice a day if you're you. Maybe seven if you subscribe to Old Navy Deal Alerts. But certainly, most definitely, NOT at every ding.

I've learned that, for me, Facebook is not so much distraction as drug--a Skinner box in which every time the lever is pushed, a "like" rolls down the ramp. A tasty reward of approval bent on turning me into a lab rat, gorged on validation. I've learned that I've been spending a good part of the last decade commenting on comments that were comments to my comment. I've learned that what may seem like a destination may actually be a dead end. And I've learned that without Facebook, I gravitate toward actual faces and actual books. Though I have no idea how to find a good drywall guy for those ceiling cracks.

I've learned that without screens, kids will wake up talking, talk all day, go to bed talking, then talk all night in their sleep. They will play your eardrums like Keith Moon on speed. They will discuss bowel movements, death, the taste of ear wax, the diameter of cat anuses, the ugliest U.S. Presidents, what peanut butter doesn't taste good on, and how dark your undereye circles are. They'll also, at some point, tell you their greatest fears and highest hopes and demand to know, once and for all: HOW DOES THE BABY GET OUT? Tell us, Mother. Exactly HOW and WHERE and WHICH HOLE.

I've learned that I owe Gwyneth an apology. I've had a chance to reflect on how truly horrible I was to her in my posts, when really, Gwyneth isn't all that bad. I had no business weighing in on all her ignorance and arrogance, on all of her insensitivities. On all her elitist, tacky, uneducated statements. So, I really am sorry, Gwyneth, for all the mean things I said regarding your bitchy, bitchy oblivion.

I've learned how to function without something in my hand, how to write unaware of Internet traffic or trolls, and that I may actually not be an extrovert with thick skin, but rather a thin-skinned lone wolf. I've also resigned myself to the fact that I have no idea what's trending. (Please. Please say it's Bigfoot.)

I've learned that the public persona that our day-and-age has created wants very much to crucify the private person. And I've learned that one ethereal evening, you'll look around at the silent, apricot glow of an unplugged kitchen and declare to your husband that you have your life back. And he will respond that he has his wife back.

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Beyond the eternal chatter of the screened world, there is something to be heard. Your children's gas, yes. And the rapid buzz of chickadees. But also a call. Maybe it's your inner voice. Maybe it's the pulse of nature, the great breath of the Universe, the hum of the collective soul, the distant sigh of the Interstate. Whatever it is, it speaks your language. It's been waiting for you to listen to what it has to say. Sometimes it sounds like "Om." Sometimes it sounds like "Um." But I found, most often, it sounded like: "Well, well, well. Here you finally are. Nice of you to show up. What the hell have you been doing all this time?"

Whatever it is and whatever it's saying, it's the same voice I sensed as a child, out on my grandparents' farm when I'd wake in the early morning and push aside the lace curtains and gaze out the tall farmhouse windows onto the rolling fields, and out past the cattle and corn, past the gleaming silo and deep, dark underbrush and to a single spot on the horizon. A spot from where the voice seemed to originate. A place that felt like both the beginning and end of the world. A place that I just remembered this summer.

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So, here we are on the cusp of autumn. The goldfinches are now numerous and constant and unafraid, making us feel like the Dian Fossey of extremely-easy-to-attract songbirds. In two days, it will be time to replug. Will it be like Thoreau entering a Chuck E. Cheese? Will it be like crawling out of Death Valley and onto The Strip? Will I indulge in a technological Rumspringa in which I binge on Keyboard Cat? Will I be able to jump back onto the moving vehicle? Or will it be like chasing a train that's already left the station? Will I be able to reach out and grab onto the caboose? Is it okay to miss the ride? Where was it going again? Why did I buy a ticket? HEY!!! LOOK!!! A scarlet tanager!

Anyway. There goes the ocean liner. Maybe it will return next season. Or, maybe, like most cruise ships, it will lose power, catch on fire, be the worst idea anyone has ever had, then sink. Maybe this whole summer was just for the birds. Who knows? Only time. Analog, of course. Will tell.