

Directions:

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading. Mark up the text with questions and/or comments.
3. Write a one-page reflection on your own sheet of paper.

### **Turn Off the Phone (and the Tension)**

Source: Jenna Wortham/ *New York Times*/ August 25, 2012

One recent sweltering afternoon, a friend and I trekked to a new public pool, armed with books, sunglasses and icy drinks, planning to beat the heat with a swim. But upon our arrival, we had an unwelcome surprise: no cellphones were allowed in the pool area.

The ban threw me into a tailspin. I lingered by the locker where I had stashed my phone, wondering what messages, photos and updates I might already be missing.

After walking to the side of the pool and reluctantly stretching out on a towel by the water, my hands ached for my phone. I longed to upload details and pictures of my leisurely afternoon, and to skim through my various social networks to see how other friends were spending the weekend. Mostly, however, I wanted to make sure that there wasn't some barbecue or summer music festival that we should be heading to instead.

Eventually, the anxiety passed. I started to see my lack of a digital connection as a reprieve. Lounging in the sun and chatting with a friend without the intrusion of texts and alerts into our lives felt positively luxurious. That night, I even switched off my phone while mingling at a house party, content to be in one place for the evening and not distracted by any indecision about whether another party posted online looked better.

My revelation — relearning the beauty of living in the moment, devoid of any digital link — may seem silly to people who are less attached to their devices. But for many people, smartphones and social networks have become lifelines — appendages that they are rarely without. As such, they can sway our moods, decisions and feelings.

One side effect of living an always-on digital life is the tension, along with the thrill, that can arise from being able to peep into people's worlds at any moment and comparing their lives with yours. This tension may be inevitable at times, but it's not inescapable. It's possible to move beyond the angst that social media can provoke — and to be glad that we've done so.

Anil Dash, a writer and entrepreneur, called this phenomenon the “Joy of Missing Out,” or JOMO, in a recent blog post.

“There can be, and should be, a blissful, serene enjoyment in knowing, and celebrating, that there are folks out there having the time of their life at something that you might have loved to, but are simply skipping,” he wrote.

JOMO is the counterpoint to FOMO, or the “fear of missing out,” a term popularized last year by Caterina Fake, an entrepreneur and one of the founders of Flickr, the photo-sharing Web site.

“Social media has made us even more aware of the things we are missing out on,” she wrote in a blog post. “You're home alone, but watching your friends' status updates tell of a great party happening somewhere.”

It may be that many people are in a kind of adolescence with social media and technology, still adjusting to the role that their new devices play in their lives. One day, the relationship may be less fraught.

The influence that technology can wield over our lives may lessen with time — as we grow accustomed to our devices and as the people who use them mature. In Mr.

Dash's case, the birth of his son, Malcolm, an adorable toddler who knows how to moonwalk, curbed his appetite for a hyperactive social life.

"I've been to amazing events," Mr. Dash said. "I still am fortunate enough to get to attend moments and celebrations that are an incredible privilege to witness. But increasingly, my default answer to invitations is 'no.' "

Social media sites, which ask you where you are, what you are doing and whom you are with, can cause people to exaggerate or feel the need to brag about their daily lives, said Sophia Dembling, the author of the coming book "The Introvert's Way: Living a Quiet Life in a Noisy World."

"There is a lot of pressure in our culture to be an extrovert," Ms. Dembling said. The trick to managing that, she said, is self-awareness. It's crucial, she said, to remember that most people tend to post about the juiciest bits of their lives — the lavish vacations, the clambakes and the parties — and not about the trip to the dentist or the time the cat threw up on the rug.

"I have to remind myself that what I enjoy doing," like spending time alone and reading, "is not what they enjoy doing," she said. Those moments, while valuable in their own right, can be trickier to catch artfully on camera.

Joshua Gross, a developer living in the Dumbo neighborhood of Brooklyn, says he thinks that as a modern society, we are "overcommunicated." There is simply too much information flowing across our devices at any moment, he said in a blog post.

A lot of the real-time information on the Web "isn't stuff you need to act on right away," he said in an interview. "And instead of one source vying for your attention, there are hundreds. It becomes too much for a person to handle, and it's only going to get worse."

"There's no rhythm to the way we get information right now," he said. "You never know when you're going to get a buzz. If we develop a rhythm to the way we get information, we'll know what we're getting and when."

Mr. Gross is among those working on solutions to the problem by creating services — including an application allowing users to save content from around the Web — that help stanch the flow of data that is streaming in at any moment.

Heavy users of social media can also adopt coping mechanisms — similar to training oneself to eat healthily — said Wilhelm Hofmann, an assistant professor who studies behavioral science at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business. "It's a problem of self-control," he said.

For those of us who don't have a cute tot to help distract us from the siren call of social media, as Mr. Dash does, Mr. Hofmann recommends setting up a kind of screen diet, building in a period each day to go screenless, either by going for a run and leaving your phone at home, or by stashing it in a drawer during dinner or while hanging out with friends.

"Ask yourself: How important is this, really? How happy does it actually make you?" he said. "Harness that feeling of pride when you do resist and stick to it."

That day at the pool, when I was forced to part with my device, reminded me of the charm of a life less connected — one that doesn't need to be photographed or recorded, or compared with anyone else's.

Possible WN topics

- Do you feel your life is "overcommunicated"? Explain.
- What are some coping strategies you can use to break the hold of your phone and other forms of electronic intrusion?