



I'M NOT HERE RIGHT NOW

Sometimes, it feels great to disappear off the radar for a while; just not be available.

Journalist Caroline Buijs discovers why it's so important and also how difficult it is to achieve.





It's been more than 25 years since my older sister got married, and I've never forgotten one piece of advice she and her husband got from the woman who presided over the wedding: she told them to unplug the phone now and then (there were no mobile phones in those days) and just spend the evening by themselves together, with a little wine.

I remember this because the notion of just making yourself unavailable, of disappearing for a bit—either alone, or with your partner or your family—appealed to me. I didn't do this in my twenties though. Actually, I did just the opposite: I bought myself a telephone answering machine so that I wouldn't ever miss a thing, always be reachable. Imagine missing a phone call asking me to go out to a café or a movie! Now friends could always leave a message and I could join them later. But slowly my needs changed and I started enjoying an evening at home more and more. And when I did that, I wasn't in the mood to pick up the phone. My answering machine took on a new function: it became a buffer between me and the outer world.

BESIEGED BY E-MAILS

It's not 1989 anymore of course, and it now takes considerably more effort to disappear. The reason for this is obvious: an entire array of mobile devices preside over our lives, most notably the smartphone. At home or on the road, when I'm abroad on vacation or even just at the grocery store down the street, I'm always reachable.

But while having to work so hard to be unavailable seems like a very modern problem, it dates back further than you would think. Take the story of

Saint Simeon Stylites from the 5th Century, who joined the monastery at the age of 16. Living in a commune—which is pretty much what a monastery is—didn't suit him, so he moved into a hut, and later to a cave in the desert to be able to satisfy his need to meditate.

His way of life earned him many admirers, and they would go visit him and ask him for advice. Result: Simeon couldn't find time for his meditation. So he had a pillar made with a little platform on the top, where he could sit and meditate in peace. But even that wasn't enough to get away. He only became more and more popular, and the pilgrims came in droves. The pillar had to be replaced several times, becoming taller and taller, eventually even 12- to 18-meters (40- to 60-feet) high. Maybe, when he looked down and saw all those people who wanted something from him, he thought the same thing I sometimes think when I'm barraged by e-mails, telephone calls and app messages: Leave me alone!

WATER FROM A PUMP

Where does it come from, this need to retreat? Philosophers have been doing it since long ago; it is, in essence, what philosophy is about: taking a step back. German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) was given a hut in the Black Forest as a wedding gift from his wife, where he would go to write, to think and to meditate. It was a very simple hut; Heidegger had to get his water from a pump and the only modern technology was a radio, which he used to listen to World Cup football.

As well as being good for your ➔

"THE 'OFF MODE' IS THE MODE IN WHICH YOU HAVE THE BEST CHANCE OF BEING STRUCK WITH INSPIRATION OR A BOUT OF CREATIVE THINKING"



DON'T GO TOO FAR

In 2007, *Natural England* published a study showing how, over four generations, children have lost “the right to roam.” Eight-year-old George Thomas was allowed to walk everywhere on his own in 1926, including to the fishing pond six miles away. In 1950, his son-in-law Jack was allowed to walk two miles to school when he was eight, and to the woods. When granddaughter Jacky was eight, she was only allowed to walk to school and the swimming pool—two miles away. And in 2007, her son, Edward, didn't go farther than a few hundred yards from home. (source: “Trouw”)

OFF THE GRID

For Wi-Fi- and TV-free places
* Travel.usnews.com/gallery/Best_Hotels_without_Internet
* Theguardian.com, search “holidays without Wi-Fi”
* Cntraveler.com, search “disconnect”
Search the #itsabandoned hashtag on Instagram for photos of deserted places

marriage to disappear together now and then (yes, my sister has been married for 25 years and she followed that advice), it's good for your brain, too. According to psychologist Carien Karsten, our brains have two different systems of attention. One part is active when you're collecting information, answering e-mails, organizing things and checking social media. The other part of the brain becomes active when you are in the “off mode.” And that's the mode in which you have the best chance of being struck with inspiration or a bout of creative thinking.

When you drop off the radar, what you're actually doing is activating the off mode. Karsten says that each individual needs a different amount of time in off mode before they feel recharged. “Some people switch easily between systems,” she says. “Others are more sensitive and ‘hold on’ to events longer. If you are of the second type, it makes sense to spend more time in the off mode.”

Arianna Huffington, editor-in-chief of *The Huffington Post*, also writes enthusiastically about the benefits of “disconnecting” on a regular basis in her book, *Thrive: The Third Metric to Redefining Success and Creating a Life of Well-Being, Wisdom, and Wonder*. In 2007, Huffington fell off her chair out of pure exhaustion because of lack of sleep, fracturing her cheekbone and damaging her eye. Two

years earlier, she'd launched the news website huffingtonpost.com and was working eighteen hours a day, seven days a week. “I'm trying to convince everyone that we need to withdraw now and then from the life we lead in connection with everyone else, and reconnect to ourselves,” she writes.

WHEN DISAPPEARING ISN'T AN OPTION

In his best-selling novel, *The Circle*, writer Dave Eggers imagines a rather dystopian future—the total opposite of what Huffington is recommending. His protagonist, Mae Holland, is not given any space to retreat on her own—ever—by her employer The Circle (a fictional Internet company and a mash-up of Google, Facebook and Twitter), let alone to recharge. The goal of the company is to make everything public and share your entire life for the sake of the community: think “sharing is caring” and “privacy is theft.”

Being unavailable? If Mae doesn't reply to a text message instantly, she is bombarded with texts like: Are you okay?; Where are you?; and Yoo-hoo! Any form of privacy has become totally impossible in the story of *The Circle*. When Mae goes to visit her parents without notifying her many followers, she is reprimanded. And when she goes kayaking, her bosses are put out by the fact that she has not shared this beautiful experience, but kept it to herself. And why isn't she a member of the dozens of kayaking groups?

In *The Circle*, Eggers is performing an interesting thought experiment: what happens when constant communication and sharing have become so normalized that you are considered to be asocial

when you keep anything to yourself? When disappearing is no longer an option? Of course, it's fiction, but it sure does give you something to think about. And by the way, it might not be as fictional as you'd think: a colleague recently told me how her fifteen-year-old daughter interacts on WhatsApp. “Can't your friends wait a bit?” she asked her daughter once. “No, mom, I have to send a message back straight away. If I don't, it means I'm angry.”

STAYCATION

Well, in that case, I'd rather seek refuge in a Greek monastery now and then, like Arianna Huffington. Or have what's called a staycation. Apparently the Huffingtons stay at home and turn off all their devices, Arianna goes on long walks, meditates a lot and sleeps without setting an alarm. She quotes Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius in her book: “People look for retreats for themselves, in the country, by the coast, or in the hills. But there is nowhere that a man can find a more peaceful and trouble-free retreat than in his own mind... So constantly give yourself this retreat, and renew yourself.”

In these moments of disappearing, Huffington also tries to rediscover a sense of wonder. If you just keep running in circles, you don't allow yourself the time to marvel at things. According to Aristotle, humans always reached philosophical wisdom through a sense of wonder, and Albert Einstein even considered it a first requirement for life.

PLAYING PIANO AS DISAPPEARANCE

You can also disappear in exercise or through hobbies, for example, like

playing an instrument, or by drawing, going for a run or playing chess. And of course meditation is a sure-fire way of achieving some alone-time. Alan Rusbridger, former editor-in-chief of *The Guardian* newspaper in the UK, wrote a wonderful book about learning to play Chopin's difficult Ballade No.1 in G Minor on the piano, called, *Play It Again: An Amateur Against the Impossible*. That year, 2011, while Rusbridger was studying his Chopin, his newspaper ran scoops on the Wiki-Leaks story and the phone hacking scandal at the *News of the World*; it was also the year of the Arab Spring and the major earthquake in Japan. The only thing that kept Alan from folding under the pressure, he says, was his music. He got out of bed twenty minutes early every day and ignored everything else to play piano, because, as he explained in an interview: “When I am playing, there is no room to think of anything else. Only when I'm playing I can keep the rest of the world out.”

Runsbridger went into “off mode” every day because he was disciplined enough to get up early and practice piano—which is a good tip for how to practice disappearing. Plan a little time for it every day, so you don't have to think about it.

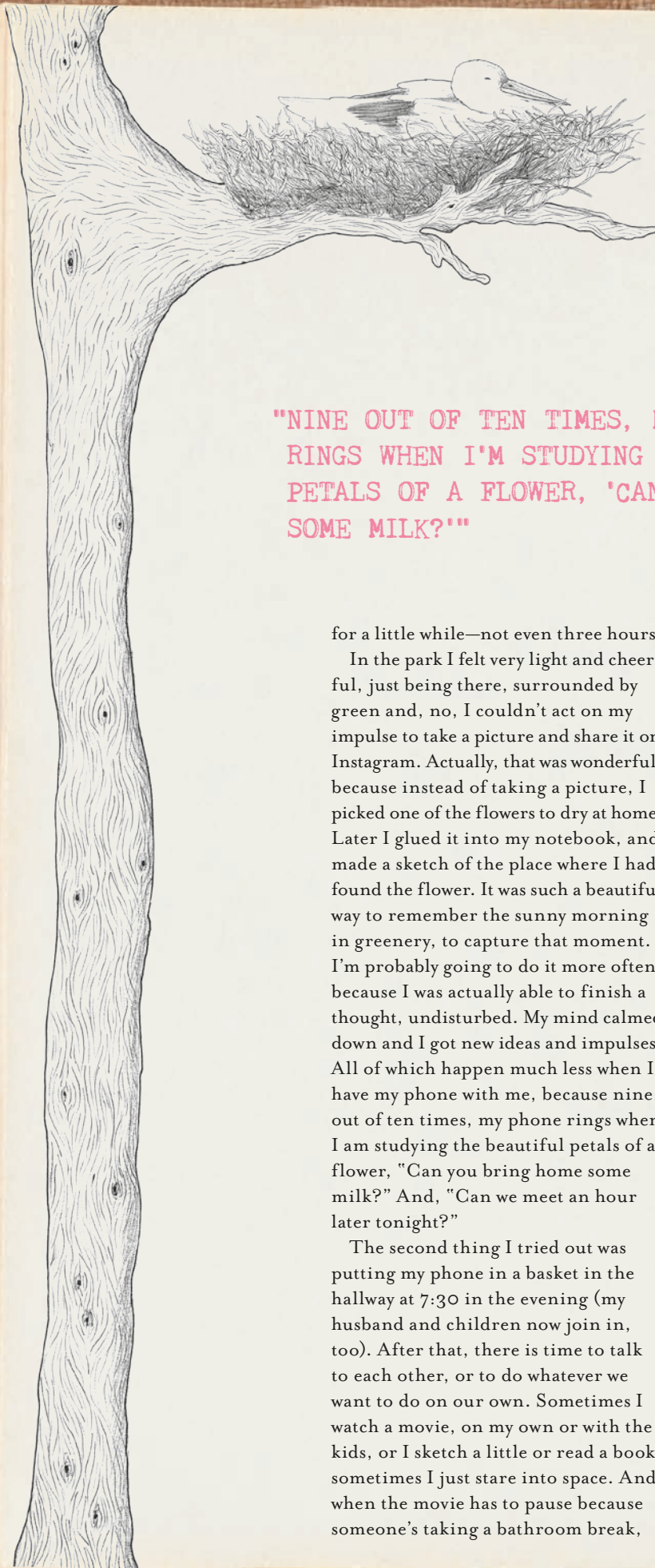
For me, the biggest obstacle to disappearing is my smartphone; it keeps me perpetually connected to the people around me. So, recently, I tried out two new things to work on my discipline: the first was to leave my phone at home when I went out for a morning walk in the park. It almost felt like I was going on an adventure and too bad for anyone who needed to reach me. I was only disappearing ➡➡

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"I FELT VERY LIGHT AND CHEERFUL, JUST BEING THERE, SURROUNDED BY GREEN AND, NO, I COULDN'T ACT ON MY IMPULSE TO TAKE A PICTURE AND SHARE IT ON INSTAGRAM"



"NINE OUT OF TEN TIMES, MY PHONE RINGS WHEN I'M STUDYING THE BEAUTIFUL PETALS OF A FLOWER, 'CAN YOU PICK UP SOME MILK?'"

for a little while—not even three hours.

In the park I felt very light and cheerful, just being there, surrounded by green and, no, I couldn't act on my impulse to take a picture and share it on Instagram. Actually, that was wonderful, because instead of taking a picture, I picked one of the flowers to dry at home. Later I glued it into my notebook, and made a sketch of the place where I had found the flower. It was such a beautiful way to remember the sunny morning in greenery, to capture that moment. I'm probably going to do it more often, because I was actually able to finish a thought, undisturbed. My mind calmed down and I got new ideas and impulses. All of which happen much less when I have my phone with me, because nine out of ten times, my phone rings when I am studying the beautiful petals of a flower, "Can you bring home some milk?" And, "Can we meet an hour later tonight?"

The second thing I tried out was putting my phone in a basket in the hallway at 7:30 in the evening (my husband and children now join in, too). After that, there is time to talk to each other, or to do whatever we want to do on our own. Sometimes I watch a movie, on my own or with the kids, or I sketch a little or read a book; sometimes I just stare into space. And when the movie has to pause because someone's taking a bathroom break,

I don't dive straight for my phone; I simply reflect on what I've just seen. My mind is active on its own instead of in response to outside input.

All of this can be a modern version of "unplugging the phone from the wall," as my sister and her husband were advised to do so many years ago. Because sometimes it's not about cutting yourself off; it's about making a different kind of connection. As legendary jazz musician Chet Baker once sang:

*Let's get lost
Lost in each other's arms
Let's get lost
Let them send out alarms
And though they'll think us rather rude
Let's tell the world we're in that crazy mood
Let's defrost in a romantic mist
Let's get crossed off everybody's list
To celebrate this night we've found each other
Let's get lost ●*

WANT TO READ MORE?

* "Thrive: The Third Metric to Redefining Success and Creating a Life of Well-Being, Wisdom, and Wonder," Arianna Huffington (Harmony, 2015)