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Quiet time

“Damn, my cell phone says no service.”

Leaving the reach of the electronic grid is getting harder, and when we do, many of us suffer an instant panic attack. You may remember those quaint days, pre-Microsoft and Sprint, when you went on vacation and gave nary a thought to work—no laptop, no cell phone, no communication unless a true emergency. But now I schlep all the accoutrements of the plugged-in age with me, lest I miss a single electron of significance. God forbid I delay the notice of the steam plant shutdown, a helpful e-mail offering a unique investment opportunity, or a way to improve my sex life. Even our camp (that’s Down East for summer home in Maine) provides reliable phone service and Internet and our cruise ship to Antarctica boasted satellite service. Our lives have become one Sisyphean attempt to better communicate by always being accessible.

So hiking with my oldest son in the Great North Woods of New Hampshire provided a welcome respite from information overload, despite our initial signs of withdrawal. A daily routine of boiling water, eating sensibly, and exercising regularly (not to mention the beautiful final days of summer) provided a cleansing antidote to 24/7 electronic addiction. Listening to loons, raptors, and crickets replaced the constant cell phone cacophony and e-mail chatter. Indeed, not only did we actually have time to focus and truly listen to one another, but it was nice to validate Twain’s sentiment, “When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in 7 years.”

So mark my vote for a day of voluntary cellular celibacy and e-mail escape. Call it “quiet time.” And just maybe we can remember what it is like to have a single, focused conversation and not multitask—a chance to live in the moment and not be “a thousand miles away.”

I invite you to turn off, tune out, and drop out—deliver yourself from the white noise of your daily life. Give yourself the gift of stillness.

Jeff Susman, MD,
Editor-in-Chief

PS: What do you think? Write me at jfp@fammed.uc.edu