BACKGROUND

Writer **Casey N. Cep** *grew up on the shore of Chesapeake Bay in Maryland. She was fascinated by words, admitting that she loved to read the dictionary as a child. She graduated from Harvard University in 2007, where she served as the president of the university's literary magazine, the* Harvard Advocate. *Cep also studied at Oxford University as a Rhodes Scholar. Her articles have appeared in* The New Yorker, The New York Times, *and the* Paris Review.

Here is a youtube link on Cep; only watch this if you're a curious person or you like cats: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ukV5LVhHsBc

> The fifth annual National Day of Unplugging took place earlier this month. The aim of the event, organized by the nonprofit Reboot, is "to help hyperconnected people of all backgrounds to embrace the ancient ritual of a day of rest." From sundown on Friday, March 7th, until sundown on Saturday, March 8th,

participants abstained from using technology, unplugging themselves from their phones and tablets, computers and televisions.

Many submitted self-portraits to Reboot holding explanations of why they chose to unplug: “to be more connected,” “to reset,” “to spend more time with my family,” “so my eye will stop twitching,” “to bring back the beauty of life,” “to be in the moment.” Not so long ago, those very reasons (except, maybe, for the eye-twitching) would have explained why many took to the devices that they were now unplugging: to connect with old friends, to talk with family across the world, to see beautiful places and curious creatures through photographs and documentaries, to relax for a few moments with music.

But how quickly the digital age turned into the age of technological anxiety, with our beloved devices becoming something to fear, not enjoy. We’ve focused our collective anxiety on digital excess, and reconnecting with the “real” world around us represents one effort to control it.

And yet the “real” world, like the “real” America, is an insidious idea. It suggests that the selves we are online aren’t authentic, and that the relationships that we forge in digital spaces aren’t meaningful. This is odd, because some of our closest friends and most significant professional connections are people we’ve only ever met on the Internet, and a third of recently married couples met online. It’s odder still because we not only love and socialize online but live and work there, too. Is it any less real when we fall in love and break up over Gchat than when we get fired over e-mail and then find a new job on LinkedIn?

I was struck when Pope Benedict XVI, after he started tweeting, delivered a message on social networks. “The exchange of information can become true communication, links ripen into friends, and connections facilitate communion,” the Pope said. He added that, with effort, “it is not only ideas and information that are shared but, ultimately, our very selves.” Perhaps most surprisingly, the Pope argued, “The digital environment is not a parallel or purely virtual

world but is part of the daily experience of many people, especially the young."

In that way, the unplugging movement is the latest incarnation of an ageless effort to escape the everyday, to retreat from the hustle and bustle of life in search of its still core. Like Thoreau ignoring the locomotive that passed by his cabin at Walden Pond or the Anabaptists rejecting electricity, members of the unplugging movement scorn technology in the hope of finding the authenticity and the community that they think it obscures.

Unplugging seems motivated by two contradictory concerns: efficiency and enlightenment. Those who seek efficiency rarely want to change their lives, only to live more productively; rather than eliminating technology, they seek to regulate their use of it through Internet-blocking programs like Freedom and Anti-Social, or through settings like Do Not Disturb. The hours that they spend off the Internet aren't about purifying the soul but about streamlining the mind. The enlightenment crowd, by contrast, abstains from technology

in search of authenticity, forsaking e-mail for handwritten letters, replacing phone calls with face-to-face conversations, cherishing moments instead of capturing them with cameras. Both crowds are drawn to events like the Day of Unplugging, and some members even pay premiums to vacation at black-hole resorts that block the Internet and attend retro retreats that ban electronics. Many become evangelists of such technological abstinence, taking to social media and television, ironically, to share insights from their time in the land of innocence.

It's a priggish impulse that I indulged for years; despite enjoying much of what the Internet had to offer, I fancied myself a Luddite because I refused to create a Facebook account. I threw many stones from my glass house, criticizing my friend's digital connections and their endless attention to feeds and posts and pokes. And yet, while I didn't poke, I did text; I didn't write posts, but I did send e-mails.

In the same antediluvian era, I happened to be traveling abroad, without a computer or a mobile phone, when my

grandmother died. When I was finally able to read my e-mail, two days later, and received notice of her death, I was thankful to learn of it, and even more thankful for the airplane that carried me home in time for her funeral, where I could be with family and friends for the service. At that moment, I was also grateful for the very digital devices that I had scorned. When I saw relatives at the service, they wondered why I wasn't blogging about my adventures or posting more pictures online. Not a single one had received the postcards that I'd mailed from overseas; those would arrive weeks later.

Unplugging from devices doesn't stop us from experiencing our lives through their lenses, frames, and formats. We are only ever tourists in the land of no technology, our visas valid for a day or a week or a year, and we travel there with the same eyes and ears that we use in our digital homeland. That is why so many of those who unplug return so quickly to speak about their sojourns. The ostentatious announcements of leave-taking ("I'm #digitaldetoxing for a few days, so you won't see any tweets from me!" "Leaving Facebook for a while to be in the world!") are inevitably followed by vainglorious

returns, excited exclamations having turned into desperate questions ("Sorry to be away from Twitter. #Digitaldetox for three WHOLE days. Miss me?" "Back online. What did I miss?").

This is why it's strange to think of these unplugging events as anything like detox: the goal isn't really abstinence but a return to these technologies with a renewed appreciation of how to use them. Few who unplug really want to surrender their citizenship in the land of technology; they simply want to travel outside it on temporary visas. Those who truly leave the land of technology are rarely heard from again, partly because such a way of living is so incommensurable. The cloistered often surrender the ability to speak to those of us who rely so heavily on technology. I was mindful of this when I reviewed a book about a community of Poor Clares in Rockford, Illinois. The nuns live largely without phones or the Internet; they rarely leave their monastery. Their oral histories are available only because a scholar spent six years interviewing them, organizing their testimonies so that outsiders might have access. The very terms of their leaving

the plugged-in world mean that their lives and wisdom aren't readily accessible to those of us outside their cloister. We cannot understand their presence, only their absence.

That is why, I think, the Day of Unplugging is such a strange thing. Those who unplug have every intention of plugging back in. This sort of stunt presents an experiment, with its results determined beforehand; one finds exactly what one expects to find: never more, often less. If it takes unplugging to learn how better to live plugged in, so be it. But let's not mistake such experiments in asceticism for a sustainable way of life. For most of us, the modern world is full of gadgets and electronics, and we'd do better to reflect on how we can live there than to pretend we can live elsewhere.