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Only Disconnect

By Andrew Reiner

I've always dreaded the beginning of a new school year. I feel an anxious gravity at the prospect of blank slates—especially at the thought of yet again competing with the formidable allure of social media as I try to engage my college students, to get them to take risks and to sink into the topic at hand.

But this autumn I feel a bit lighter and more sanguine. I'm continuing an experiment with students I tried last spring: I call it a social-media sabbath.

It's no secret that we're teaching a generation that is more stressed out, debt-ridden, depressed, anxious, impulsive, scholastically amoral (let's be honest), self-entitled, bored, and apathetic than perhaps any other since Aristotle sauntered through the Lyceum. But what *really* worries me is students' preoccupation with social media. Their need to stay perpetually connected through Facebook and texting, in particular, creates a daunting fire wall to learning.

One need only walk into any nook or cranny of a college campus to see the blur of fevered thumbs at work and the hypnotic glow of Facebook walls to know what I'm talking about. In fact, new studies conducted by Reynol Junco (a researcher whose work focuses on college students and social media) suggest that American college students may spend an average of at least an hour and 40 minutes a day on Facebook and three hours a day texting. Even when they aren't texting, they are waiting, hoping, imagining that someone is trying to reach them—it's been dubbed Phantom Vibration Syndrome. One student of mine admitted in a journal entry that she often "fake texts" while waiting for class to start or standing in line. She doesn't want to look "like a loser in public."

Why this obsessive need to stay in touch, this fear of being unconnected? "Our generation is afraid that we might miss something, that we might fall out of the loop," one of my students confessed in an assigned reflection. Another student echoed that idea and took it a step further: "I want to keep the peace with my

friends, so I make myself available 24/7."

Reading those two confessions reminded me of a dynamic I've observed during class. Students who speak up on the heels of another student almost always preface their own thoughts by saying something like, "First of all, I agree with what you just said. ... " That statement speaks to more than just a refreshing tolerance for consensus. It also reveals the same knee-jerk reflex that my two student informants spoke of: Worries about breaking the peace or falling out of the loop ultimately translate into fear of standing in opposition to, apart from, the proverbial crowd. Which leaves me wondering: If so much of our consciousness is focused outside ourselves, on our social relevance, can we remain present and open to the interiority needed for learning?

That interiority is what Barbara McClintock was talking about when she answered a question about how to achieve "great science." "To do great science," said the geneticist who received the Nobel Prize for her groundbreaking research on corn, "you have to learn, somehow, to lean into the kernel." In other words, to get to the kernel or heart of understanding and real knowing of a topic, to really lean into it, we have to remove the gaps. What's really required is a kind of intimacy with what we are seeking to understand—moving into the space within ourselves where resistance between the seeker (the learner) and the sought (the knowledge) disappears.

When we allow for intimacy, we open ourselves to two of the most dreaded conditions in our culture—vulnerability and failure. Those conditions are actually essential to reaching deeper understanding, to getting closer to the truth. Yet most students feel they have to defend themselves against vulnerability and failure because, as in many arenas of American life, competition trumps all else. Is it any wonder, then, that most students resist actively engaging in their own education? After all, staying socially connected at all times is safer than standing apart from the crowd by risking saying or doing something that might make you appear less intelligent or less cool (read: more vulnerable) than everyone else in the room. Cue the fake texting.

If this skittish generation is ever going to embrace risk-taking in the classroom, then risk-taking needs to be introduced consciously, deliberately. And we all know that in order to achieve that, we need to create a space of deceleration—and detachment from outside distractions. Those are some of the crucial lessons that we can take away from the writings of Abraham Joshua Heschel. In his

renowned book *The Sabbath,* the mid-20th-century theologian and activist wrote, "The Sabbath is the day on which we learn the art of surpassing civilization."

When this book was first published, in 1951, Heschel said that one way to accomplish that ascendancy was by reconsidering our relationship to technology. "The solution of mankind's most vexing problem will not be found in renouncing technical civilization," he writes, "but in attaining some degree of independence of it." Heschel understood that when we set aside a day for rest, a space apart from the demands of technology, we can better lean into an inner silence and stillness. That is when we move closer to the truth. What better way to prepare for developing intimacy from without—with one another, with learning—than from within?

Heschel's thoughts about the Sabbath inspired me to try an experiment last spring. I asked students to carve out a four-hour window in which they would detach from all forms of social media (entertainment technology, too) and spend time alone. Then they had to write about the experience in a journal.

Students wrote that they sought solitude in trees; they confronted their parents about switching majors after watching thunderstorms from atop parking garages; and—my favorite—they not only made eye contact with but smiled at complete strangers. One student wrote about spending time painting, which she hadn't done since high school. "When the four hours was up, I did something radical," she wrote. "I kept my cellphone in my backpack for the rest of the day. Know what? I hadn't felt so light in years."

We all could benefit from a day of Heschel's "surpassing civilization." It can start with one simple act that's revolutionary in an age when our attention is forever cast downward onto smartphones and tablets. We can lift our gaze into the eyes of other people, as well as into our own. Then we can find the connection we seek, to keep the only peace that matters.

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