

EVCP Expresso ? December 2019

Hi Folks!

I appreciate your readership through another year of *Expresso*. In this last installment for 2019, I am deviating from its usual format of three topics and am making good on sharing my account of a fantastic two-week wilderness canoe trip in Northern Canada this past August. It's on the longer side ? but it's the only one. I hope you enjoy ?My Journey Off and Then Back On the Grid: Lessons of unplugging.?

But before you disconnect from my introduction, do you supervise Specialists and Professional Researchers? Maybe you have administrative oversight for employees in these groups. If you answered ?yes,? then this is for you. Academic HR and Labor and Employee Relations will hold two December training sessions for managers of employees in the Specialist or Professional Researcher series. These trainings will cover contract provisions in the recently UAW-ratified agreement with the new Academic Researchers bargaining unit. More information and who to contact is available online at New Academic Researchers Union Contract: December Training Sessions for Management [1].

Finally, whether you're traveling or staying local over the winter break, best wishes for a peaceful year's end.

Sincerely,
Dan

My Journey Off and Then Back On the Grid: Lessons of unplugging

Vacation: Freedom, release, or rest *from* some occupation, business, or activity. Latin *vac?t-*, participial stem of *vac?re* to be empty, free, etc.

A couple of months ago, I mentioned I had a wonderful two-week canoe trip in Northern Canada with my close friend Tim Miner and his wife and son. It was a joy to be back on the water and so far away from civilization (we drove about eighteen hours from Quebec City to reach our put-in spot), and with the very first stroke of the paddle, I was instantly transported into a world very familiar but oh-so-different from my normal day-to-day life. The dash of the water each time the blade struck the surface, the gentle rocking of the canoe as it glided forward, the shorelines of varying distance along a 360° horizon ? I was back home. Except for one thing. It dawned on me that what would be strikingly different for the next twelve days was being disconnected from the outside world ? something I've not experienced for even close to that length of time for ten years or more.

I imagine the way I've been handling travel, including vacations, is similar to most of you. If there is a way to connect to the internet, whether by cellular or Wi-Fi (the latter of which is virtually everywhere now, whether a hotel or coffee shop in Mendocino or Lhasa), I regularly do so whenever convenient, which may be multiple times a day. My motivations for "keeping up" with my correspondence seem clear. First, I'm doing what I can to avoid the mountain of emails I'll need to deal with when I return home. And second, although this may be somewhat delusional, I am hoping I can ease the burden on my colleagues who will benefit by my connecting sooner rather than later in order for them to carry out their work.

Of course, this behavior strikes at the heart of the very definition of vacation (see above), which leads me to believe that, for the most part, the traditional vacation has died. Even connecting just once a day can have a considerable impact. I am thinking of a five-day ski trip I took with my wife Mylo last year where we enjoyed skiing throughout the day, coming back to the apartment and, having an hour or so before dinner, taking advantage of the free Wi-Fi to check up on the latest quantum of emails. The ability to connect and interact during that hour was inconsistent with "vacationing," of course. But more profound is the way connecting then leads to various threads of thought about what is going on back at work, which insinuate into my collection of thoughts for the next 24-hour cycle, wondering how recipients will react to my message, whether the issues will be solved, and anticipating responses when I check in again the following afternoon.

After two or three days on the water in Quebec, the difference between this trip and the other was profound. It had to do with the *rhythm* of each passing day:

Wake up
Start a fire
Cook breakfast
Pack up camp and load canoes
Paddle
Decide to have lunch
Paddle some more
Look for a campsite
Set up camp and find firewood
Start a fire
Cook dinner
Continue sharing stories, laughing, watching the fire and the stars
Decide to go to sleep

Wake up
Start a fire?

This was the pattern *every single day for twelve days*. And each day was filled with thoughts and shared commentary about whether the dead tree branch in the bog was a reasonable size to saw for firewood, should we have pasta or lentils for dinner, marveling at the flight of a bald eagle or the yodel of a loon, trying to verify where we were on the map, debating whether a distant beach seemed like a reasonable place to camp for the night. There was plenty of "loftier" thinking and conversation as well "of family and friends back home, life trajectories, lessons of history, past and future adventures. My thoughts about work were definitely few and far between "only the occasional musings about my goals in the world of epilepsy and

strategic directions of the University. The days passed by so much more smoothly and simply compared to life back home. And I remember at one point telling Tim that I could easily continue our journey for another fifty days if that had been the plan?

Nonetheless, from the moment that we returned to civilization, I was also struck by the ease with which I slipped right back into work; similar to, but in the opposite direction, of getting into the canoe two weeks earlier. Like an instantaneous and effortless wardrobe change in the middle of a play, with plenty of excitement about re-engaging in work and no commiserating about the end of such a wonderful wilderness experience.

So, what exactly does all this mean? The most obvious questions are nothing new; i.e., is there any harm in now being continuously connected to the internet, or having more rapidly changing and simultaneous stimuli than ever before, or no longer experiencing a vacation in the truest sense of the word? There have been countless articles, essays, and books written about these issues, and virtually everyone I know at least questions the overall benefit of this new existence. The scientific literature suggests that obsessively checking our phones, excessive multi-tasking, and not having down time (or perhaps better referred to as unplugged time) are probably not particularly good for us.

There is also an endless stream of advice about how to unplug, and I'm sure you've heard about the ways some businesses are encouraging culture change by experimenting with "no email Fridays," promoting face time (rather than FaceTime), and the like. But rather than providing you with links to examples of this advice (and add to your screen time today!), I ask you to take the next few minutes to consider the following:

Have you ever thought about the fact that, at least within our resourced society, we are the only generations of humans who will have experienced living in both the pre- and post-smartphone era? The iPhone became available in 2007 – amazingly, only twelve years ago – and it is fair to say that its birth has changed life forever. Humans began to have instantaneous and ubiquitous access to the Internet, and there has been an extraordinary change in human behavior as a result. Given that it is extremely unlikely we will ever revert back to the old days (read Yuval Noah Harari's *Sapiens* to understand why this is the case), those who can describe how our minds functioned before and after the emergence of the "connected human" will soon die out.

So, given our unique historical circumstance, think about what it's like now versus then to walk to your next destination, ride an elevator or bus, open up a magazine, or go on a vacation! If, like me, you recognize that there is intrinsic value in having a stretch of time to just free-associate, to have a conversation uninterrupted by phone messages/texts/Instagram alerts, or to not have that phone reflexively glued to your hand? then please consider the actions you can realistically gift yourself to achieve better balance in our increasingly chaotic existence.

Here are three things I plan to do:

1. Go to at least one meeting every day without my phone or computer. (I did this by accident last week and it was liberating!) I'll plan to do this at times when I know someone can still reach me in case of an emergency.
2. Make more time for quiet, reflective practices. For example, when meditating, there is no choice – I absolutely have to disconnect the entire time! And it strikes me that, now more than ever before, the difference between my mind state while meditating versus

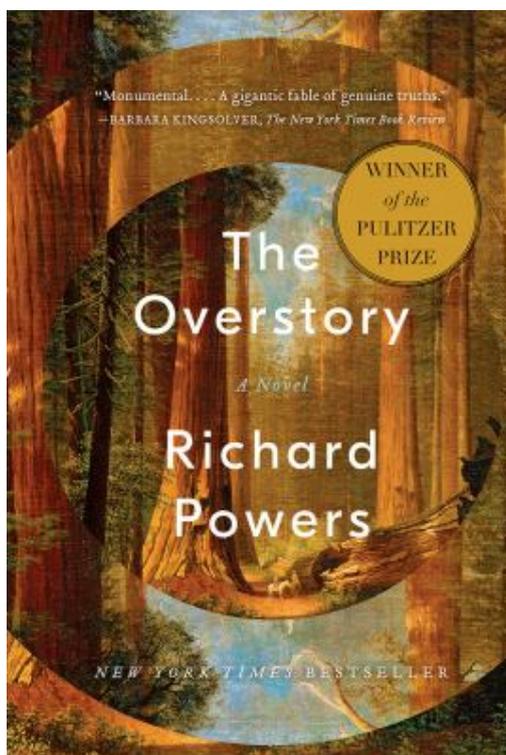
navigating the outside world has never been greater.

3. Treat Saturdays and Sundays as days of rest, at least in terms of not adding to the low priority email traffic that most of us encounter during the weekend. I typically work (episodically) on the weekend, but I will commit to using the ?Delay Delivery? or ?Send Later? options in Outlook to lower the email burden on others.

And, with that, my friends, I?m going to unplug for a while?

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Dan?s Tip of the Month



For millennia, trees have lived in a vast, slow,

interconnected, resourceful, and superbly inventive world alongside but mostly invisible to us. *The Overstory* [2] by Richard Powers, winner of the 2019 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, drew me into the lives of a handful of characters who clearly see the world of trees and are drawn into that world?s unfolding, global catastrophe. Their stories are told in concentric, interlocking rings in settings ranging from antebellum New York to the late twentieth-century Timber Wars of the Pacific Northwest and beyond. Thank you, Helen Loeser, for your recommendation. The book is an outstanding, far-reaching, devastating, and emotional cautionary tale ? a must read!

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[1] <https://srs.ucsf.edu/hr.php?B=7229&AT=&org=we>

[2] <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/09/books/review/overstory-richard-powers.html>