

Why and How to Give Up Your Smartphone

By Phil Woodward



I regularly teach an introductory philosophy course on the theme of the good life. The course explores various conceptions of the highest good in human life. During the course, I invite students to take a five-day “Digital Media Holiday.” The experience is consistently eye-opening for them. One student who went on to make permanent changes to his digital habits described his previous relationship to his phone as *spiritually degrading*—and that he had been largely unaware of this effect it had on him.

My wife and I are millennial professionals who have never owned smartphones. Our motivations have evolved over the years, from inertia, to conscious decision, to protest against the hegemony of the tech companies, to bearing witness to an alternative way of life. But our resolve has never flagged. We suspect that many others would enjoy the same freedom we enjoy, but don’t believe it’s possible.

But it is possible. And it might be the change you need to make this year.

It's easy to forget just how recently and rapidly our culture became smartphone-dependent. The first-generation iPhone was unveiled in 2007. We now know that the cultural adoption of smartphones happened faster than any other communication technology in history. In 2011, about a third of American households had a smartphone. By 2016, [that number was close to 80%](#). Accompanying the rapid spread of ownership was rapid change in how the device functioned. Facebook's 'like' and Twitter's 'retweet' buttons were introduced in 2009, instantly creating the phenomenon of the 'viral' social media post. (Previously, if you posted on social media you were just interacting with friends.) Then downloadable third-party apps were introduced as an addition to the software installed by the manufacturer. Soon these apps included push-notifications, a feature that was shortly added to social media platforms as well.

In other words, it was not just the rate of ownership of these devices that was exploding but the amount of time and attention their owners gave to these devices. "By the early 2010s," writes Jonathan Haidt, "our phones had transformed from Swiss-army knives, which we pulled out when we needed a tool, to platforms upon which companies competed to see who could hold on to eyeballs the longest." Haidt calls these years 'the Great Rewiring', especially of childhood—but of course the rewiring happened at all levels of society.

Around 2016, awareness began to spread that not all was well. Andrew Sullivan, [in a piece titled 'I Used to be a Human Being,'](#) wrote about the effect that being constantly online was having on him:

I tried reading books, but that skill now began to elude me. After a couple of pages, my fingers twitched for a keyboard. I tried meditation, but my mind bucked and bridled as I tried to still it. I got a steady workout routine, and it gave me the only relief I could measure for an hour or so a day. But over time in this pervasive virtual world, the online clamor grew louder and louder....it felt as if I were in a constant cacophonous crowd of words and images, sounds and ideas, emotions and tirades—a wind tunnel of deafening, deadening noise.

But the growing social crisis was not widely acknowledged until the waning of the Covid-19 pandemic. Netflix's 2020 documentary-drama 'The Social Dilemma' exposed the nefarious workings of social media algorithms. The public started hearing, with growing frequency, phrases like "the teen mental health crisis," "the epidemic of loneliness" (so dubbed by [the U.S. Surgeon General in 2023](#)), "information silos" and "political hyperpolarization," "gaming addiction," and so forth. Moreover, journalists began to uncover the shameful fact that smartphone apps had been engineered to be addictive. Facebook, for example, used the science of addiction to make their software more addictive, especially for teens. (The Wall Street Journal's original reporting on this is known as '[the Facebook Files](#).')

It was becoming clear that American society—indeed, society around much of the globe—had been subjected to a social experiment at the hands of the tech companies, and that the unwitting experimental subjects were a lot sicker than they were before. And yet, from the perspective of the tech companies, the experiment was a resounding success. Not only had we become dependent on their drug, but we had begun to forget what life was like outside of the laboratory. Generation Z, the generation that populates the courses I teach, haven't known anything else. This is what life is supposed to look like, what life must look like.

An Animating Vision

Given what we now know about the impact of smartphones, why has there been no large-scale movement away from them? Why have the ranks of smartphone-abstainers continued to shrink? The obvious answer is that people have become acclimated. But even those who recognize that such acclimatization has left them worse off haven't put up much of a fight. Our lives seem irrevocably structured around our phones now, and we see no viable alternative to the status quo.

What we need is a concrete program for cultural revolution. Any such program includes two elements: an animating vision, and a practical strategy. I address the first in the present section, and the second in the next.

By an 'animating vision,' I mean a positive conception of what a better life would look like. This brings us to the question of the course I teach: what, after all, is the good life?

For my own part, I have been asking the question compulsively since I was a teenager, though I didn't always know where to look for a Christian answer. In college, as I studied the Christian intellectual tradition, I found a wealth of resources. I was especially drawn to what I learned about Christian monasticism (monks or nuns living together in order to prioritize a common life of prayer). After I graduated, I had the opportunity to spend a month at Our Lady of Guadalupe Trappist Abbey (outside of Portland, Oregon), living in the cloister alongside the monks there. I worked in their book-bindery with them. I made fruitcake with them. I gardened with them. I ate with them. I prayed with them.

Here is a day in the life of a Cistercian monk: You get up before dawn and chant the Psalms together. You take Mass. Then you work for a few hours—communally, gently, at a deliberate pace. You gather at midday to pray together. In the afternoon there is free time to walk in the woods or read or engage in private contemplative prayer. Then you dine together, complete the day in prayer together, and retire.

(Sundays look the same minus the work.) That's it. There is no competition, no one is chasing a career goal, and no one is going anywhere. And yet all the monks share a strong sense of calling and purpose.

The philosopher Zena Hitz spent several years as a monastic. Four years in, she wrote this about the cloistered life: "Part of the power of religious life in community is its use of time. There are hours of prayer, work times, study times. When I had a bit of free time, I had no money to spend, no place to go, and the internet was off-limits. I walked in the woods, wrote letters, played cards, read books, had a conversation. It was a life of focus, without daily regret." Such was my experience, too, over a much shorter period.

Water from the Cistercian well was the freshest I have ever tasted. I wanted to be freshened by that same water in my life back in the world. For most people in our society, when asked to come up with paradigms of living well, I doubt the lives of Cistercian monks would come to mind, but for me they do. Based on their example, a vision of the good life started coming into focus for me. It goes like this: to live well is to offer loving attention and care to things that are worthy of it, such as: meaningful work, the wonders of nature, the beauty of good music and poetry and art, one's intimate friends, the needy who come across your path, and above all the presence of God, who is the greatest good.

Moreover, the good life is doing this (offering loving attention and care to the things that are worthy of it) with the same people over time. It is essentially communal, thrice over: your expressions of attention and care are shared activities; their foci are often other members of your community; and these members of the community can reciprocate, offering slow-paced, loving attention and care back to you.

Thus, on my understanding, the good life is sharing with others a common life that is centered on the good. This is thriving in life, not just surviving.

This monastic-inspired picture of the good life is my animating vision when I am making decisions about my life, including whether and how to adopt emerging technology. I ask myself: *would that help me get to the place where I'm sharing with others a common life that is centered on the good? Or would it disrupt such a life?* Whenever I have applied these questions to smartphones, I have judged that they would disrupt rather than facilitate such a life.

A Practical Strategy

But this brings me to the second plank in my revolutionary platform: the practical strategy. Now, it is widely believed that you simply cannot live without a smartphone. Even the happiness researcher Arthur Brooks, who blames smartphones for much of our culture's malaise, has written, "In a world of electronic

payments, digital documents, and remote work, a truly smartphone-free lifestyle is not possible.” He, along with many others, has offered advice for how to mitigate the deleterious effects of your smartphone without ditching it altogether, advice that includes deleting social media, disabling notifications, switching your screen to grayscale, and so on.

These are good suggestions, and I encourage you to implement them. But they do not address the deep perversity of the smartphone: the glittering screen that follows you wherever you go. This just isn’t good for us. The good news is that we can dispense with the little digital interloper: life without a smartphone is possible. But dispensing with it will leave uncomfortable gaps in your lifestyle that need to be filled in or put to some use. To that end, I offer four practical strategies: *plan ahead*, *build a community*, *prioritize silence*, and *stick out*.

Plan Ahead

Smartphones provide convenience, whence their stickiness. Life without a smartphone is less convenient. But not overwhelmingly so. The trick is to anticipate what a smartphone allows you to do on the spur of the moment, and to prepare for those actions ahead of time.

My family by no means rejects digital technology. I own a flip phone that can make calls and send text messages, including group messages. My wife owns a ‘Lightphone’, one of several minimalist phones designed to replace a smartphone. I have a laptop. GPS is installed in my car. We have a digital camera.

When I ask people why they need their smartphones, notwithstanding the capabilities of the various devices I just listed, I get a variety of answers. But the same suite of contexts comes up over and over. I’ll go through a few of them and explain how I make do. It may strike you as ridiculous that I employ such cumbersome methods with so many different devices to accomplish all that a smartphone can so easily take care of! But I assure you, gentle reader: *this is the path to freedom*.

How to Travel

When I am traveling domestically, I study Google Maps ahead of time. I often draw myself a map that includes exactly what I need, and I find that the exercise of creating the map goes a long way in orienting me to my destination. (I also like to have a paper road map on hand.) I look up detailed information about the public transit I will use. When in my car, I can use my GPS. Before I head out, I use Yelp to identify good dining options and then include them on my hand-drawn map.

My wife travels internationally more frequently than I do. On such occasions she acquires an international SIM card for an old iPhone that a friend loans to us. She gets to enjoy the extra functionality of a smartphone while navigating an unfamiliar place, but when she gets home she can put the device back in a drawer, alongside her passport and other exclusively travel-related items.

For ground transportation, we sometimes take taxis, and we sometimes call an Uber from a laptop, using wifi at an airport or hotel or coffeeshop.

Tickets for Events

Venues increasingly expect visitors to use their phones to display digital tickets. I am in the habit of calling a venue a few days ahead of time to ask how they can accommodate me. Although my sample size of venues is not large, I can report that most venues still have a mechanism in place for printing paper tickets for those who need them. A few don't; in these rare cases, I have either pulled up my ticket on our travel iPhone or have relied on another member of my party to get me in the door.

Payment

I use credit cards and checks, and I try to carry some cash. I can transfer money directly from my bank account to another person's account using Zelle.

Two-Factor Authentication

I can receive text messages with access codes, and this method always works. When my employer started implementing two-factor authentication via a smartphone app, I alerted the IT department that I didn't have a smartphone, and they were able to supply me with a 'token'—a matchbook-sized device I carry in my bag that displays an access code when I request it.

Entertainment

On our home stereo we listen to vinyl and CDs. We can stream media on our laptops. Recently I began listening to audiobooks from my laptop while I commute (a habit for which my wife teases me, encouraging me instead to purchase an inexpensive mp3 player). When driving with my eight-year-old, we will sometimes listen to audiobooks on CD or I will set him up with headphones so he can listen on my laptop. Many podcasts can be downloaded and then listened to in the same fashion.

So we can ‘consume’ media. But we are also wary of filling every moment with stimulation. It can be hard for us, even without smartphones, to say no to the internet’s constant bids for attention. But we strive to make noise the exception, and quiet the rule.

Build a Community

The good life is essentially a shared thing, as I have indicated. Alas, so is technology. Why do parents keep giving children smartphones? Because all the other kids have smartphones, because this type of information technology provides the framework for their social lives. Digital technologies are misleadingly thought of as *tools*, when it is more apt to think of them as *infrastructures*. Opting out of the culture’s information technology would mean withdrawing from social life—unless one can plug into an alternative community that uses an alternative infrastructure.

Acting against the dominion of smartphones must be a collective action, then. This point has not been lost on educators. Beginning a few months ago, many schools across the country do not allow smartphones ‘from bell to bell.’ We as a culture made this drastic and somewhat illiberal move because we recognized that the alternative was harming our children. But what about us adults? If smartphones are also not good for adults, can we take collective action?

For now, any such action has to be coordinated among a few people. For my family, this looks like gathering regularly with two other families who share our concerns about smartphones. At least once per month, we gather for several hours to craft together a communal environment that is tech-free, play-based, embodied, and intimate. We also run into these people in a variety of contexts outside our “standing hang,” as we call it. And we try to participate in a range of communal activities, sometimes with these same people and often with others, where phones play no role: gatherings for worship and prayer, book clubs, gallery openings, interactions with neighbors from our porch or theirs.

Of course, not everyone we interact with is already on board. I make it a point to talk about digital technology with parents of our son’s friends. I explain to them that we don’t allow our kids unsupervised time on smartphones or other internet-connected devices. The conversation can be awkward at first, but generally goes well. We initiate similar conversations with babysitters and grandparents, reminding them to stay off their smartphones while spending time with our son.

Not that I always have to initiate the conversation: my flip phone is a conversation starter.

Make Silence a Priority

My consistent experience is that the more stimulation I have, the more stimulation I want, and the less stimulation I get, the less I need. When I will myself to sit still in my restlessness for an extended period, the restlessness eventually dissipates and I am drawn into peaceful attentiveness. Cheap stimulation loses its allure.

Often, the happiest parts of my day are the fifteen minutes before I begin work and the fifteen minutes after I put my son to bed when I do absolutely nothing. I settle, I take in my surroundings, and I do nothing. In so doing I am following [the wonderfully prosaic instructions of the Orthodox bishop Anthony Bloom](#):

I think we must do exercises in stopping time and in standing in the present, in this 'now' which is my present and which is also the intersection of eternity with time.

What can we do? This is the first exercise. ... You sit down and say 'I am seated, I am doing nothing, I will do nothing for five minutes', and then relax, and continually throughout this time (one or two minutes is the most you will be able to endure to begin with) realise, 'I am here in the presence of God, in my own presence and in the presence of all the furniture that is around me, just still, moving nowhere.' There is, of course, one more thing you must do: you must decide that within these two minutes, five minutes, which you have assigned to learning that the present exists, you will not be pulled out of it by the telephone, by a knock on the door, or by a sudden upsurge of energy that prompts you to do at once what you have left undone for the past ten years. So you settle down and say 'Here I am', and you are. If you learn to do this at ... moments of your life when you have learned not to fidget inwardly, but to be completely calm and happy, stable and serene, then extend the few minutes to a longer time and then to a little while longer still. ... Once you have learned not to fidget, then you can do anything, at any speed, with any amount of attention and briskness, without having the sense of time escaping you or catching up with you.

I say that this practice often provides me with the happiest parts of my day. Before it was routine, however, I feared that the opposite would prove true. After all, if there is no deeper goodness hidden underneath the hubbub of life, sitting in silence means staring into the abyss of nothingness and despair. If, on the other hand, God's loving presence fills the void, then nowhere else will we find our deepest rest and fulfillment.

Stick Out

As I see it, smartphones were created by professional manipulators to make it harder for people to live a flourishing life. Yet society expects me to have one on my person at all times. This is absurd and outrageous; I should have the freedom not to have one. Increasingly, society recognizes vegetarians as reasonable and conscientious and seeks to accommodate them. I submit that society should accommodate us smartphone abstainers on similar grounds.

In order to bring about the change I wish to see, I (gently, graciously) put the burden on whatever institutional representative I am interfacing with to accommodate me. For example, when instructed to open an app or scan a QR code, I simply report that I don't have a smartphone and I ask, what shall I do instead? I have been met with surprise, curiosity, even amusement, but very rarely with a slamming door. And perhaps I will have helped normalize this type of interaction, rendering said institutional representative more prepared for the next person of my ilk who comes along.

First Steps Toward Revolution

I suspect that most of my readers who have made it this far are thinking, "I am more open to the idea than I was before, but I don't see myself ditching my smartphone tomorrow." Fair enough. But you don't have to dive in right away. You can test the waters a bit.

The first step is to attempt the Digital Media Holiday I offer to my students. Here are the specifics. For five consecutive days, including both weekdays and a weekend, abstain entirely from the following:

- Social media
- Digital entertainment (TV shows, movies, YouTube, TikTok, etc.)
- Podcasts
- Video games
- Chatbots
- Non-essential text messaging (e.g., conversing by text rather than in person / by voice)

During the five days, ask yourself: what is truly worthy of my attention? Try to cultivate activities that direct your attention thusly.

Then, after the five days, ask yourself whether you want to return to any of the digital media you abstained, and how often and in what form. At the very least, you will have found new freedom to re-enter the digital world intentionally and purposefully.

Or, you may find that you never want to go back.

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