

Why I Dumped My iPhone—And I'm Not Going Back

On Black Friday in 2009, I said goodbye to my iPhone. And when Steve Jobs' successor announces the newest version today, I'm going to ignore the whole spectacle. Or try to, anyway.

In 2007 I was one of those people who obsessively monitored MacRumors.com for iPhone scuttlebutt, then waited in line for hours and bought one the first day it came out. At the time, I was working on Barack Obama's digital campaign team in Chicago, and I was wide-eyed about the iPhone's potential to empower the grassroots. A volunteer, I imagined, could pull up a map and find five doors of likely voters to knock on; or share streaming videos of Obama speeches at local diners and farmers markets—or even collect credit card donations at rallies. It would be easier than ever to change the world.

Indeed, the iPhone changed my life. Before I got my iPhone, rushing to the airport was a harrowing experience; after, it was actually kind of fun. I could check in en route to my flight and instantly get my boarding pass, use the extra half hour to find a cheap but critically-lauded Mexican place in my destination city. I was never bored. Whenever I came to a red light or a long

line, I reflexively reached for my iPhone. The Terminal 3 waiting area became the most interesting place in the world.

I could easily spend three straight hours on my phone without even noticing. If I'd spent three straight hours watching TV, I would be disgusted with myself. But I was convinced that the Internet was more edifying than television—even though most of my online diet consisted of gossipy garbage—because it was “interactive.” I couldn't possibly be a zombie, because everyone knows zombies don't comment and share.

Yet it was nearly impossible for me to sit through dinner without reaching for my iPhone. Even when my wife was in the middle of telling me something important, I couldn't resist peeking at that tiny screen under the table to find out whether a high school acquaintance liked my latest status update. “What is so important?” she demanded, and I knew I had no good answer.

Soon after another iPhone-related argument, I traveled to Turkey to give a presentation about my experiences on the Obama campaign and about how tools like the iPhone could be used to

build a movement. But for all my talk about the liberating power of technology, I was beginning to see how imprisoned I was by it. On the long flight home, my iPhone on airplane mode, I began reading Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*. It was one of several dozen classics that I'd downloaded for free in a fit of literary quixotism, then ignored.

I was almost embarrassed by the degree to which *Walden* felt directed toward me. I was particularly stung by his withering take on news junkies: “Hardly a man takes a half-hour's nap after dinner, but when he wakes he holds up his head and asks, ‘What's the news?’ as if the rest of mankind had stood his sentinels ... Pray tell me anything new that has happened to a man anywhere on this globe,” he wrote in 1854.

And when I came across his famous verdict—“Men have become tools of their tools”—I felt like an enormous tool.

The next morning, I was in Boston with my family for Thanksgiving. Jetlagged and jarred by Thoreau, I woke up at 5 a.m. I got a bike out of my parent's

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basement, took out my iPhone, and looked up directions to Walden Pond.

When I arrived, I read *Walden's* most celebrated lines: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life." I thought about how it's become fashionable to pooh-pooh Thoreau as a weak-willed hypocrite who lived a short walk away from civilization and had his mother deliver food to his doorstep. Many of these Thoreau skeptics dismiss critics of technology as curmudgeonly alarmists. Of course, I was one of those people.

I read on: "I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life..."

No matter how impure Thoreau's experiment in simple living may have been, there was something undeniable in his suggestion that we often have to strip convenience from our lives to feel alive. The iPhone had certainly made my life easier, but had it made my life better?

First thing the next morning, I went to the AT&T store. I had to explain several times that I didn't want to trade my

iPhone in for a newer model, or a Droid, or anything with the Internet. I just wanted something that would allow me to make calls. The sales clerk looked at me with an expression that read: "Who gets something *worse* on Black Friday?" I walked out with a ridiculously unsleek '90s-era Nokia that my friends still tease me about.

Since then, I haven't become a Renaissance man or a soulful motorcycle mechanic, but my daily life has improved. Commutes are no longer opportunities to catch up on email or Twitter, so I'm reading books again. It feels a little like getting a new contact lens prescription: Things that were blurred together feel sharper and more distinctly colored. And of course, I'm no longer engaged in half-conversations with the people in front of me and half-conversations with the Internet.

There are, of course, inconveniences. I had to buy a printer for my boarding passes. I hand-write driving directions or text them to myself. If I'm in an unfamiliar neighborhood or a new city, I actually have to do some planning before I bolt out the door. And when I get lost and am too embarrassed to ask a

stranger, I have to call my wife, who has an iPhone, for directions.

One of the hardest things to get used to was being unable to instantly share my awesome and horrible experiences with my friends online. Now, I write down my impressions in a notebook, and by the time I get back to a computer, they rarely feel like must-tweets. I'm forced to slog through the tedium of waiting, to wrestle with dull passages and slow scenes, to grapple with confusing and sometimes scary situations on my own. I'm able to savor an idea and allow it to gestate.

When I had an iPhone, the Internet was no longer a destination; it was on me every day, like a piece of clothing I put on first thing in the morning. When I get tempted to return to that life, I ask myself: Do I really want the Internet to be something I feel naked without?

I still covet the thinner, faster, lighter iPhone 5. But I'm sticking with my boring little Nokia.