

Unplugging
By
Daniel E. White. March 2, 2026

“Almost everything will work again if you unplug it for a few minutes, including you.” Author Anne Lamott’s advice popped up first on my email the other day. On the same computer that, increasingly with age, requires an occasional reboot for reasons known only to the technologically conversant.

A lot of people spend a lot of time and money trying to keep us as consumers—of things, news, experiences—plugged in as much as possible. Modern national economies and corporate bottom lines depend upon holding our focus on whatever is being sold or whatever news story we can be lured to read or watch.

I am not knocking a strong economy, based as ours is on levels of consumer spending, or am I begrudging the need for business to attract customers. We’ve benefited from the current system, if the measure is material well-being. Perhaps you feel the same way.

At what point might all of this stimulation become overload? I know people who try to avoid “over-stimulation,” in effect calling for the plug to be pulled. As I get older, I feel that way more and more.

In a recent issue of the *Christian Science Monitor* (January 12, 2026), author Danny Heitman recalled the challenge of getting his newborn son to sleep. I suspect many new parents have faced the same problem. The Heitmans discovered a mechanical answer: sitting by their old clothes dryer as it ran. Didn’t matter if there were clothes in it.

Heitman described “the rhythm of laundry,” the constant hum of the rotating drum as a reliable sleep aid for the baby. Heitman would usually fall asleep, too. When he awoke, Heitman took the baby to his crib as the child continued to sleep. Heitman and his wife, then, could sleep for several hours before the baby woke up.

He observed that modern dryers are quieter and might not have the same sleep-inducing effect. But something of that experience in his son’s early days remains. Whenever their adult children visit, the Heitmans do their laundry.

Wrote Heitman, “The simple chore is a reminder that, in washing their pajamas and folding their slacks, we’ll always be ready with a warm welcome. As the dryer spins, I’m reminded of the circularity in my life, its predictable cycles perhaps seen most ideally as a source of discovery rather than dullness.”

Unplugging; dullness as a path to discovery.

When Judy and I lived on campus at Webb School, especially after I became Head of School, I would, not infrequently, walk up to our house mid-day and wash whatever dishes needed to be washed. Somehow, having my hands in the soapy water and looking out the window above the sink was a valuable interruption to my day. Sometimes, I thought thoughts while I soaped and rinsed. Sometimes, I found neutral. Invariably, I returned to my job with a clearer head and an energy boost.

Even in retirement, where my part of KP duty is cleaning up, I will sometimes choose not to put a few dishes in the dishwasher, and I truly welcome the relaxation that comes in the process of washing pots and pans.

Unplugging.

For the past four years, I have been on the board of the Friends of Madera Canyon. In that role I often speak with folks about what makes Madera Canyon special. Noting hiking, birding, picnicking, the many biomes evident in just four miles, etc., I run through an impressive list of reasons to be in the Canyon.

If I sense that the person to whom I am speaking will understand me, I add my own favorite activity.

Find a spot near Madera Creek. (It is running again now after being dry for a year and a half.) Take in the music the water makes as it babbles and splashes its way toward the Santa Cruz River...

Look around and up. Where you are in the Canyon will determine the trees surrounding you: Arizona Sycamore; Alligator Juniper; Blue and White Oak; Cottonwoods, Mesquite, Willows, eventually pines. They direct your eyes upward, to the summits of Mt. Wrightson and Mt. Hopkins...

Listen for birds. Watch for deer. I lose myself in that moment, in that space. I am small and yet I am energized by the embrace of something larger than myself, feeling at one with my surroundings.

Unplugged from one world. Entering another one.

In her Acknowledgements at the close of her latest book, *The Black Wolf*, Louise Penny describes the fictional home of her main characters, Three Pines, as a place that most of her readers would choose to be, if they could. She describes Three Pines as a state of mind. In that way, it is more than a home.

Sitting by a rhythmic old dryer, leaving work for a while to wash dishes, finding a quiet spot by myself 25 minutes from home, in the Canyon: concrete ways to unplug like these might not always be possible. Daily life gets in the way, way too much.

Perhaps, though, we can see unplugging as a state of mind, a defense unique to each of us that stimulates a physical and psychological deep breath that is a valuable interruption to the day.

Anne Lamott suggests that we would all benefit if we did.

Click here to email your comments to Dan: danwhitehi@gmail.com