

## WORK SMART

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# THE CASE AGAINST "BUSY" AND THE ART OF SITTING STILL

DISCONNECTING FROM TECHNOLOGY AND BEING COMFORTABLE WITH STILLNESS AND SOLITUDE CAN FEEL UNCOMFORTABLE AT FIRST, BUT IT MAKES FOR A HEALTHIER, MORE FOCUSED MIND.

BY JANE PORTER

**I spent the past month at an artist residency in Wyoming, living off** a dirt road at the edge of a thousand-acre ranch with no cell phone service and a spotty internet connection. Coming from the relentless hustle of New York City, it was quite an adjustment, but it was also a dream.

When I first arrived, looked down at my phone and realized it had turned into a glorified paperweight, I had a moment of panic. How would people reach me? How would I keep up with email? Checking email and social media has become reflexive. But connectivity isn't an actual lifeline.

Not long after arriving in Wyoming, I stumbled on a Franz Kafka quote that I taped above my desk:

You do not even have to leave your room. Remain sitting at your table and listen. Do not even listen, simply wait. Do not even wait, be still and solitary. The world will freely offer itself to you and be unmasked, it has no choice, it will roll in ecstasy at your feet.

This might sound easy enough if you're on a ranch in Wyoming with nothing but the birds to distract you. But how about when the world is knocking at your door or buzzing at you through your phone?

Louis CK's riff on cell phones on *Late Night With Conan O'Brien* last year went viral for a reason. We know all this connectivity is sapping our ability to focus and be present, but we can't seem to get away from it. "You need to build an ability to just be yourself and not be doing something," Louis CK had said. "That's what the phones are taking away, is the ability to just sit there, like this. That's being a person."

This whole business of "being a person" means letting yourself feel sad and happy and lonely and ecstatic and angry and every which way, rather than anesthetizing your emotions with distraction.

I heard many of the same questions from friends and family when I got back from my month away: Weren't you bored? Didn't you get lonely? I did get lonely at times, along with the whole gamut of emotions we're supposed to feel. Without a smartphone there to distract from those emotions, they simply work themselves out. Doing that requires focus—the same kind of focus, I'd argue, that's needed when coming up against a challenge in your creative work.

#### **THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BEING BUSY AND BEING CALM**

Disconnecting from technology, listening to what your body needs and being comfortable with stillness and solitude can feel uncomfortable at first, but at the end of the day, it makes for a healthier more focused mind.

It's the difference between being busy and being calm. It took me a few days to get adjusted to thinking about just one thing: my creative writing. This was not a vacation. I was there to work, to focus, to disconnect from the countless other distractions that invade the mind at any given moment.

Before leaving New York, I had focused on as many different assignments as I could, and when I got back home, I would have a stack of responsibilities waiting for me, but I was choosing to focus on this one thing for this given period of time.

**"BUSY IS BEING IN ONE PLACE DOING ONE THING WITH THE NAGGING SENSE THAT YOU OUGHT TO BE SOMEWHERE ELSE DOING SOMETHING DIFFERENT."**

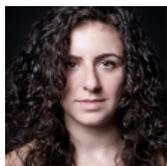
For those four weeks, I was constantly engaged with my work, but for the first time since I can remember, when asked the question "How are you?" my default answer was not "busy." Creative work requires prolonged concentration. It often requires solitude. It requires not being busy, but being focused.

"Busy implies a rushed sense of cheery urgency, a churning motion, a certain measure of impending chaos," writes KJ Dell'Antonia in a recent *New York Times* post. "Busy is being in one place doing one thing with the nagging sense that you ought to be somewhere else doing something different."

Most of us can't drop everything in our lives and go off the grid for a month. Still, there are small ways to recreate that kind of solitude and focus on a daily basis—yoga or meditation, taking a long walk, shutting off your phone and email for an hour or two each day.

Another thing I learned while I was away: People respect your need to disconnect. Often, they even admire it. Whatever comes through your inbox can usually wait. The world will go on without you. What can't and won't go on, however, if you're not there to meet it, is your creative work. So don't neglect it.

*[Image: Flickr user Johnny Hodgson]*



## JANE PORTER

Jane Porter writes about creativity, business, technology, health, education and literature. She's a 2013 Emerging Writing Fellow with the Center For Fiction.

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