

CULTURAL CAVIAR

To Connect, or Not to Connect

by Theodore Dalrymple 

April 12, 2015



photo credit: Shutterstock

'Only connect' – such were the famous (almost) concluding words of E. M. Forster's novel, *Howard's Way*. I think if Forster were alive today and still writing, he would end the book differently: 'Only disconnect.'

It is very difficult to disconnect these days, psychologically if not physically. Although I think that the so-called social media would be much better and more accurately called the anti-social media (for which of us has not seen and remarked upon four people at a restaurant table ignoring each other and glued to their little screens?), I cannot claim myself to be so very different from my modern fellow men. If I am separated from my telephone or the internet for more than a few hours I grow anxious, principally that I will have missed the transformative offer of my life – not that I experience my life as being in such great need of transformation. Still, a change is as good as a rest.

It is difficult to isolate yourself these days, though I know one or two admirable people who refuse to use the internet and have no mobile phones. I assume that they are resisting temptation, but perhaps they are not tempted in the first place. This raises the important question as to whether it is more morally admirable to be so perfect as not to be tempted by something, or to be perfect enough to be tempted by it but to resist.

Be that as it may, I have all but forgotten how wonderful it was to be out of contact with the people I knew (and liked) for quite long periods, sometimes

for months. There was something luxurious about it; I was able to luxuriate in a certain lack of responsibility, for I heard no complaints and therefore had to suggest no solutions. 'When two Englishmen meet,' said Doctor Johnson, 'their first talk is of the weather.' When two friends meet, the first thing they do is complain; how wonderful I was to be free of all that!

"Isolation taught me trust."

I once crossed Africa by public transport. It took me about six months and in many places, indeed for most of the time, I was isolated from everyone I knew, without possibility of calling upon them for anything. In a small way I felt like Arthur Koestler in his

condemned cell in Spain waiting to be executed; that is to say, freer than I had ever been before in my life. I was thrilled to be told in Equatorial Guinea that if anybody in authority there knew that I was a writer (of sorts) I would be killed, cut up and thrown into the sea: I had never been important enough to be worth killing before, and in a way I was flattered. This was all thirty years ago next year; the then president, who is still the president, had overthrown his uncle, the first president, in a military coup. The first president was known by the title of *The Only Miracle*, and certainly he had produced startling changes in the country: a third of the population had either been killed or had fled. Among other achievements, he managed to abolish the wearing of glasses, if not the reasons for doing so. He associated glasses with being an intellectual, and intellectuals with danger, having been a failed intellectual himself. The errors in his logic may explain why he failed as one.

It was exhilarating to be utterly incommunicado. One is glad to have survived only when the opposite has been possible.

Another time I went across the Chaco between Paraguay and Bolivia with smugglers. The Chaco is neither desert nor forest but something in between the two: at any rate, very inhospitable to man. If the smugglers had killed me and taken my possessions, I would now be but a parched pile of bones never to be discovered somewhere in impenetrable thorn and cactus bush. I was completely in their power, and they were very nice to me, sharing their food and drink. Isolation taught me trust.

They left me very early in the morning in a tiny town in Bolivia not far from the border, which I had, of course, entered illegally. I thought I had better present myself to some official or other, but it was too early and I waited an age in the brilliantly clear

but cold dawn. Finally, the military band of the local barracks played the national anthem at great length while the flag was raised, after which I found an officer and told him I had arrived that morning from Paraguay (with which Bolivia had fought a disastrous war fifty years before). He was very obliging and affixed an undeniably official-looking stamp to my passport that gave me no trouble when I left the country a few days after a military coup, those still being the days when there was more than one such coup a year on average. There is quite a lot to be said in favour of states that don't function very well: the reception in Britain of anyone in similar circumstances to mine in Bolivia would have been much less friendly, to put it mildly.

Nowadays, the Bolivian officer would probably have had a mobile telephone and therefore would have been able to consult higher authority. Those orders would have been to play safe and arrest me pending further inactivity, thus increasing the possibility of exacting bribes from me for my release. A lack of easy communications gave this officer greater powers of discretion than he would have had today, and since he was a sensible and decent man, at least as far as his dealings with me were concerned, I was the beneficiary of his

inability only to connect.

Never being out of reach is never to be secure in one's solitude, to be always suspended between fear of disturbance and fear of not being disturbed. Disturbance is annoying and destructive of concentration, but absence of disturbance provokes anxiety that one is forgotten. Women use to be told they were on the shelf if they were not married by twenty-five; we feel we are forgotten if we receive no messages for twenty-five minutes.

'Only disconnect...', as Forster would put it nowadays, 'and human love will be seen at its height.'

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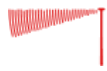
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**John1943** · 6 days ago

Is this a true story or is it fictional fantasizing? I have no idea? But it does seem like fiction to me.

2 ^ | ▾ · Reply · Share ›

**Jack_Q** → John1943 · 6 days ago

Sooner or later Dalrymple will end up like Mr. Henty in the Waugh short story 'The Man Who Liked Dickens'

And it might not even be a third worlder. You're a tourist, not an explorer, Mr. Dalrymple.

1 ^ | ▾ · Reply · Share ›

**Kenneth B.** → Jack_Q · 6 days ago

No, that's sounds to me like he is a traveller and not a tourist nor an explorer. He hasn't discovered anything in his travels but he hasn't had the cozy creature comforts of a tourist either. And to John1943: yes indeed the stories are true. The good doctor has been almost everywhere. You should pick up one or two of his full-length books and have at. His prose are exquisite.

2 ^ | ▾ · Reply · Share ›

**Wortherthorth** → Kenneth B. · 5 days ago

Quite believable. I am merely a blue collar working stiff, and I have been in the right place at the right time to have many adventures, or merely to see things that I am pretty sure I wasn't supposed to.

Also, many do gooder doctors organizations that put professionals like TD in third world countries, are also fronts for intelligence, and black ops outfits. ...Yeah, there's always that.

2 ^ | ▾ · Reply · Share ›

**me** → Wortherthorth · 5 days ago

You're not supposed to notice....

^ | ▾ · Reply · Share ›

**JBUB** → Kenneth B. · 5 days ago

I agree I have read all of his travel books which document his travels in South America, Africa, Eastern Eurpouse and Asian countries and they are great. The man has lived life.

^ | ▾ · Reply · Share ›

**Oldeguy** · 6 days ago

While, in the past, I might not always be in full agreement with the Good Doctor, I could usually find some common ground.

Not with this effort, though.

The feeling of relief upon separation from those Liked and Loved is a sensation unknown to me and without loss. The only such extended period in my life was overseas wartime service and separation only made a difficult situation harder to endure.

Man is a Social Animal and a Healthy Man has an active Social Life; we were not made to Be Alone and do not do well in Isolation. The old ATT commercial urging us to "Reach Out And Touch Someone" was giving sound advice.

5 ^ | ▾ · Reply · Share ›

**TomIron361** → Oldeguy · 6 days ago

Correct, but everything is taken to extremes nowadays such as

this idiom with cellphones. I believe in the old Greek adage,
"Everything in moderation."

6 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Brigadon → TomIron361 • 5 days ago

Including moderation.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Tecumseh1768 → Brigadon • 5 days ago

Modulation in moderation.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



MiriamOblomoff → Oldeguy • 6 days ago

Social animals, indeed! Friends and acquaintances drop in at Dorrian's to see who is there sipping some Sotol – no pre-arrangements, no calls or texts. Just looking for that chance encounter with an old friend means you find unexpected conversation. Not knowing who you will bump into is part of the fun. And all forms of devices are off-the table so to speak. Disconnect for the night. Anyone who reaches for a smart phone, tablet, or even an old mp3 player has to buy everyone at the table a drink – that is the rule. A rule everyone abides by, at first, but as the drinks flow it is interesting to observe how Pavlovianly programmed some are, unable to resist the temptation to check their phones at regular intervals. They end up spending a lot more money than they had intended. The rest of us become blurry-eyed and wobbly-footed. Some of us just leave the damn devices at home. That is the smart thing to do.

7 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Truthsayer → MiriamOblomoff • 6 days ago

Now where is that bar, again? :))

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



WhereAreTheVikings → Oldeguy • 6 days ago

Have you noticed? As regards telephones, "reach out to" is now used instead of the perfectly utilitarian and efficient "call". It is delivered in grating sincerity as well as seeming obliviousness to the fact that it was merely part of an ad jingle and often incorporated into Bob Hope jokes. It has a social workerish ring to it (sorry) now that is highly annoying. This all sounds so ill-tempered of me but, really. The trivialization of the language is such a plague.

8 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



cedarbend → WhereAreTheVikings • 6 days ago

Hear, hear.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Race_Dissident → Oldeguy • 6 days ago

Now now. Folks are different. Type A extroverts are the majority, and in America, are considered to be the only "normal" people. But there are Type B introverts as well (much more appreciated in Great Britain), and there is nothing wrong with them. They are simply different. Their interior life is much more interesting to them than congress with the vast ruck of the people.

17 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



thefilthybeast → Race_Dissident • 6 days ago

My daughter is a social butterfly and enjoys all that goes along with that. But she did not get that from dear old dad.

5 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Kenneth B. → Race_Dissident • 6 days ago

Exactly! Thanks for clarifying that for the burger-slopping, football watching, back slapping, empty boasting slob who find Dr. T's views "inconceivable!"

5 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

**ClarenceDeBarrows** → Race_Dissident · 6 days ago

You are right, RD, "Folks are different." Allow me to tell you a personal story in support of your statement. Some years ago My wife and I built, in our backyard, a Tahiti Ketch - a sailboat the type of which has crossed many oceans since its design by John Hanna in the early 30's. Hanna designed that 32 foot ocean cruiser with the idea in mind that it would be the perfect mode of transport - relatively inexpensive to build for those who were not wealthy and who were tired of depression living, stout enough to take on inclement weather ("when the going gets rough go below secure the hatch and hang on. The boat can take more than you") and small enough to be single handed if need be. It was the intent of my wife and I to disengage ourselves from "the all pervasive system" and enjoy a life of relative solitude on our own. At the time all of this was going on I was an insurance claims manager and she a secretary at a local college.

see more

17 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

**WhereAreTheVikings** → ClarenceDeBarrows · 6 days ago

What a wonderful relationship the two of you must have to have done something like that.

7 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

**thefilthybeast** → WhereAreTheVikings · 6 days ago

Wow. No kidding. They must be well matched.

5 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

**borisbadenovisback** → ClarenceDeBarrows · 6 days ago

There's an uplifting screenplay in there somewhere.

8 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

**zen** → borisbadenovisback · 5 days ago

It would be the opposite plot of Castaway!

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

**AngloBilly** → ClarenceDeBarrows · 6 days ago

How interesting, CDB! I can appreciate your desire to give up "The Big Time" for the life of "two solitary vagabonds and individuals." The latter is a life that is much more substantial, and admirable, to the rest of us who are like-minded.

And yours is a better essay than Dalrymple's.

5 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

**ClarenceDeBarrows** → AngloBilly · 4 days ago

Thank you for the thought, AB. I always look forward to your gentlemanly comments here on Taki's.

3 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

**AngloBilly** → ClarenceDeBarrows · 4 days ago

Thank you, CDB. I always appreciate your comments too.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

**Truthsayer** → ClarenceDeBarrows · 6 days ago

Great uplifting story, Clarence. Thanks for

Great uplifting story, Clarence. Thanks for sharing it.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Race_Dissident → ClarenceDeBarrows · 5 days ago

That's a great story. And aside from its philosophical implications, what guts! Hopping in a little home-built boat and sailing from SF to Hawaii--dadgum, that took some major courage. I'm not sure America manufactures your type anymore.

4 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Shibes_Meadow → ClarenceDeBarrows · 5 days ago

Great story. I like to think you killed a man as well. It's the Romantic in me.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Vanitas → ClarenceDeBarrows · 5 days ago

I spent six weeks crossing The Atlantic from Trinidad to Takoradi on a double hander on a miserable sinking fifty four footer. We passed through several tropical depressions, ripped and hand sewed the sails 5 times, lost our rudder, lost the autopilot many times, and I had to climb the mast to recover the halyard at sea.

There is nothing like the stars in the middle of the ocean along with the bioluminescence that flares up in the wake. It's magic.

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



ClarenceDeBarrows → Vanitas · 5 days ago

That bioluminescence, as you certainly know, can be startling to the uninitiated. A few days after we set sail from "The City", off the coast of northern Baja, I was on watch on a quiet night with smooth seas at about 10 PM and my wife was asleep below. All of a sudden I saw, about 500 yards off the starboard quarter, an arrow-straight line of bioluminescence which I thought could only be the signature of a torpedo headed straight for us - I was petrified! Turns out - as you might have guessed - it was a dolphin zeroing in on us. In short order we were the focus of hundreds, if not thousands, of the friendly creatures as they frolicked and lit up the sea all around us with the bioluminescence you mention. As you say, "It's magic."

The trip you describe, along with giving me the shudders, reminds me of the old saying many experienced small boat sailors used to describe the lifestyle, "the most expensive way in the world to go third class."

Fair winds and following seas.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



zen → ClarenceDeBarrows · 5 days ago

Fantastic story, Clarence. The bravest people in life are those who can be alone with themselves. There is not contemplative depth to life without it, life is meaningless without it.

I have made my life a similar one in many regards.

I once lived around the BArea and stayed at a friends last month in the East Bay, which I believe you mentioned. The Bay Area has

believe you mentioned. The Bay Area has become a frenetic riff raff of rushing cultureless self-absorbed droids on the make.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



ClarenceDeBarrows → zen · 5 days ago

Thanks for the thought, zen. You are dead on regarding the "frenetic riff raff". It is disheartening.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



UnrepentantConservative → ClarenceDeBarrows · 5 days ago

A remarkable story. Someone, somewhere, said that traveling brings people closer together or makes them murder each other. It looks like you and your wife got the better end of things. And you can truthfully say that you have lived well.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



ClarenceDeBarrows → UnrepentantConservative · 5 days ago

Thanks for the comment, UC. Most kind of you.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Rurik → Race_Dissident · 6 days ago

There is a sort of person who feels the need to lose himself in the merriment and commotion of the crowd, presumably because he cannot really stand his own company. There is something to be said for such a person, but not in polite company.

4 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Race_Dissident → Rurik · 5 days ago

Mighty white of you not to say it then. ;)

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



cedarbend → Race_Dissident · 6 days ago

Yay! I want to be left alone at all times...mostly. We live in a very rural area and in the winter are often snowed-in...can't get out and-best yet-no one can get in! Talk about freeing. I like people OK, but want no claims made on my time (unless it's with grandkids...they're delightful).

4 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Race_Dissident → cedarbend · 5 days ago

I'm just not a people-person either. I acknowledge it with no shame whatsoever. Not that I'm a misanthrope. I'm not. But I find most people either irritating or boring. Sometimes both. But when I find a person I really like and respect, I hold that person dear.

5 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



zen → Race_Dissident · 5 days ago

I believe that most people have something about them that is interesting, of course some much more than others, but being that the general fine art of conversation has evaporated from the culture, it is difficult to mine anything of interest out of people.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Louise → Race_Dissident · a day ago

And then there is the golden mean.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



borisbadenovisback · 6 days ago

Interestingly enough, Boris knows such an individual who, presently,

lives without a computer and a telephone. When Boris inquired of him about his non-telephonic status, his response was quite straightforward: "I like it this way. Nobody can bother me."

He has no need for a computer; has an excellent, well-paying job; and is drunk like clockwork on weekends and sometimes during the week ... which is also why he does not have a car.

While his life is unenviable in many ways, Boris finds him uniquely American in his refusal to accommodate the current criteria of what is considered to be the norm. And that refusal, according to his friend and our mutual acquaintance, has been his Standard Operating Procedure for most of his adult life, which Boris estimates to be approximately 25-30 years.

He also has some, how shall we say, arresting opinions about the savages, esquimaux, and butt-pirates in The Republic but, being quite sensible, he has kept the opinions to himself for decades.

He disconnected a long time ago and he seems quite secure in his solitude ... except for being drunk like clockwork, obviously.

26 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Grey Wolf → borisbadenovisback • 6 days ago

"Excellent, well-paying job" ...and..."disconnected a long time ago"....

Now that's a mystery that needs the services of Inspector Clouseau.

8 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Truthsayer → Grey Wolf • 6 days ago

Yeah, the well-paying job and the weekday insobriety usually don't go together, either.

3 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



borisbadenovisback → Truthsayer • 6 days ago

They certainly do not.

He has had the same job for well over 20 years. According to our mutual acquaintance --- who works for the same company and drives him to work --- he has never been drunk at work. He even has awards from the company.

His schedule seems to be: gets home; gets looped (either at home or at a bar); goes to sleep; goes to work; and the routine repeats. As Boris indicated, this does not seem to be an enviable life.

His "well-paying job" is sufficient to support a monthly bar tab of \$1,500 - 2,000 per month. He has a tendency to buy drinks for "everybody" at his favorite watering holes. Not having a phone or computer allows for such extravagances.

7 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Oldand Grumpy → borisbadenovisback • 6 days ago

Mr. Passwater must get a lot of exercise and do a lot of recycling. His kidneys are industrial strength.

6 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



borisbadenovisback → Oldand Grumpy • 6 days ago

In Boris' humble opinion, he will not live to enjoy his retirement. Shame really

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Grey Wolf  borisbadenovisback
• 6 days ago

The plot thickens.
The mystery deepens.

4  |  • Reply • Share ›



Truthsayer  borisbadenovisback
• 6 days ago

....and for the second time today, I find myself
thinking I'm hanging out at the wrong bars.

7  |  • Reply • Share ›



John Jeremiah Smith  Truthsayer
• 6 days ago

Confucius say: "Man who get stiff in joints
should stay out of them."

7  |  • Reply • Share ›



Rurik  John Jeremiah Smith • 6 days ago

And he who gets a stiff joint in him, is no man.

2  |  • Reply • Share ›

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