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Editor's Note by Martha Nichols

Why Writers Need to Protect the Quiet Space Within

In 2001, on one of my favorite writing retreats, I spent two weeks alone in a ramshackle cabin on a New England pond. After a deluge of thunderstorms, I woke one morning to hear a roar in the woods. I soon discovered a new creek cutting off the gravel road to my cabin, a beaver dam directing its flow.

My car was stuck. I had no Internet connection or cell phone. For days, until the creek receded, I didn't see or talk to another human being.

Thank you, Storm Gods! I exulted. *Thank you, beavers!* I read for hours, then wrote. I took runs along the muddy paths, fireflies lighting my way as twilight fell. I was in no real danger, and I could do whatever I wanted at my own pace. I had an ironclad excuse for ignoring the demands of other people.



If only I could have hung on to that inner focus. A beaver dam, a temporary flood, and no means of connecting with the outside world had made it much easier to spend my whole day writing and thinking.

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Since then, focusing has become harder for me—and not just because I have a child, run an online magazine, and am saddled with an aging brain. It requires an aggressive defense of my personal boundaries in ways that are often out of step with the three-ring circus of contemporary life.

The theme of TW's Fall 2013 issue is distraction, a single word that conveys everything that can wreak havoc with inner focus. Distraction is the attention thief with a zillion faces: kids, spouses, parents, day jobs, meetings, social occasions, Tumblr, the lure of the next episode of *Game of Thrones*. What's worse, we're all supposed to be networked multitaskers these days. "It's an ADHD world," pundits intone, as if 24/7 chatter is as inevitable as death and taxes.

I'm the most reluctant of multitaskers. I like to finish one project before I start another; I like to proceed from the beginning of a story to the end, never skipping ahead. My need for solitude is deeply linked with the desire to write, and when I'm able to enter my creative zone without interruptions, it can feel transcendent.



Yet, my average day resembles a Marx Brothers movie rather than the blissful peace of days spent in a cabin. My eleven-year-old son yells "Boo!" every time I emerge from my home office. There are jackhammers, punk neighbors revving motorcycles, babies crying. I'm late for every meeting and social engagement. My personal email account mixes notes from friends and relatives, work requests, messages from my son's school, political newsletters, and absurd quantities of spam.

Forget the muse. My attention thief looks like Harpo. He's the guy honking his horn or grabbing my leg, whether I'm sitting at the computer or under a tree.

Lifestyle magazines have long preached the gospel of time management, and there's no denying that creative pursuits involve self-discipline. It's also true that authors have been distracted souls from time immemorial, many insisting on time alone. However, the rise of the Web and mobile computing have now multiplied the social background noise, even for those of us who think we've nabbed a quiet moment on a park bench. Just picture the folks who walk by, jabbering into their headsets at high volume.

The challenge for everyone, not just writers, is that defending against the onslaught of social noise takes energy, too. Saying no requires constant inner vigilance, whether you're avoiding email or another birthday party—or risking that your audience will forget who you are.

"My friends say I'm the most connected man in the world," notes Baratunde Thurston in "#Unplug," his recent *Fast Company* cover story about taking a break from all social media. Thurston—CEO and cofounder of the company Cultivated Wit, author of *How to Be Black*, and a former digital director at the *Onion*—claims that by November 2012, all his traveling and tweeting and texting had burned him out. By mid-December, he was in "digital detox."

"I didn't actually want to be alone," he writes. "I just wanted to be mentally free of obligations, most of which asserted themselves in some digital fashion." What followed, after his initial troubles with unplugging, was a "long bliss":

This disconnection was the gift that kept on giving.... I maintained the same slow pace, the same sense of discovery that I enjoyed during that first week. There were movies, there were food trucks, there were friends, there was mulled wine.... Above all, there was an expansion of sensations and ideas. A writing project that had stumped me before the break suddenly appeared to have endless possibilities.

Thurston's 25-day social media retreat appears to have captured his imagination as much as that beaver-blocked cabin did mine. His account ignores some of the more relentless real-life distractions—family members who require care, especially the youngest and oldest. But he's very right about how difficult it can be to break free of online interaction and the rewards if you do.

For an introvert like me, engaging with people online quickly becomes exhausting. When I'm writing, I often don't check email for days. And much as I like Twitter, I limit both my professional and personal tweeting to one or two days a week. I schedule tweets in advance to run on other days. Or I just don't tweet, sometimes for months at a time, as I did this past summer.



It's hard enough to stay focused on real live family members. While it's easy for me to ignore tweets, other virtual communications can feel as rich as an old-fashioned exchange of letters. Because blogging and commenting are text-driven, they instantly drag all those cyber correspondents inside my creative zone. Unless I work hard to limit such

interaction, my inner world is as noisy as my outer one.

In fact, the quiet space I crave depends more on my state of mind than the sheer number of humans in my life. Here's the irony: When I control my own schedule, *not* responding immediately to anything flung at me, my perception of what's distracting changes. So, the next day, I'll feel fired up when working on socially engaging projects like TW. Noise won't bother me as much. I'll enjoy the goofy banter of eleven-year-olds.

Granted, the strategies that help writers stay focused can be highly personal and quirky. But that doesn't stop any of us from wanting to pass our wisdom on. (Thurston's piece includes a sidebar titled "How to Disappear.") As a nod to the grand tradition of "how to" articles about conquering distraction, all the theme essays in the Fall 2013 issue of TW include advice sections. My own "How to Be a Hermit Without Pissing Off Your Family" will publish later in the issue.

Multitasking is not the bane of everyone's existence, and several TW essayists embrace distractions of all kinds, from wandering thoughts to pets and kids and loud music. In "ADHD Writers, Unite!", C-SPAN producer William Gray admits to counting his heartbeats when he's on deadline—and to loving it.

Nikki Stern's "The Myth of 9-to-5 Writing" questions how many hours a working writer really needs to put in each day.



[4]And Tarn Wilson's "Self-Doubt: The Worst Distraction for Writers" makes clear that internal quiet can be invaded by much more than social noise.

While I have yet to achieve work-life balance or to become the happy juggler depicted in slick magazines, I've learned how to arm wrestle with Harpo. Sometimes, I even hold my own. I can't always ignore the demands of people I care about most—nor do I want to. But when I do claim the time I need, protecting the quiet space within, it's worth the risk of saying no.

Publishing Information

- ["#Unplug: Baratunde Thurston Left the Internet for 25 Days, and You Should, Too"](#) [5] by Baratunde Thurston, *Fast Company*, July/August 2013.

Art Information

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Martha Nichols is Editor in Chief at *Talking Writing*. She believes that editing a magazine, even if it's the most insidious of attention thieves, is another way to cull down distractions in print and online.

The new *Talking Writing* website is meant to help readers find all the great stories and articles here. Martha hopes TW will keep nudging writers and readers alike to protect their own quiet spaces.

She has more to say about taking breaks online in ["Why I Took a Vacation From Blogging."](#) [8] a recent post on [Athena's Head](#). [9]

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