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1

H = Hold Down the Off Button

Be still, for this is a holy day.

NEHEMIAH 8:11

The lunchroom was crowded at the retreat, filled with hundreds of women laughing and eating together. We were seated around long rectangular tables. As I glanced around the room, I realized something was missing. I double-checked to make sure I was seeing right.

There were no phones on the tables. Not one.

Usually when people sit down for a meal, many will place their phone next to their plate, in a corner, or at the center of the table. It's not meant to be rude; it's just a habit to keep your phone nearby and in plain sight (and out of your pocket so it won't fall out).

Yet throughout the entire gymnasium-turned-lunch-room, there were no phones on the tables. I decided I'd better leave mine in my purse!

With no screens present, ladies in their sixties and seventies chatted away—and so did young women in their twenties. I had to smile. It was a beautiful sight. But my memory jumped back in comparison to another women's event I'd recently attended, where many women were distracted while on their phones, missing opportunities to get to know one another.

Nobody means for it to happen this way, but sometimes we hold our phones too close, too often, and too tightly—and sometimes we miss the beauty of everyday interactions with both strangers and the ones we love the most. At that retreat where the phones were safely tucked away in purses, social interaction wasn't centered around devices. The focus was centered around people. Those ladies didn't need a digital pacifier to help them communicate. They looked quite comfortable, sans screens, in the presence of one another.

It's not that these women didn't use or enjoy their phones. I'm sure they did! They had simply chosen to put them aside until a later time. They practiced the first calm, cool, and connected HABIT, the "H," which stands

for “Hold Down the Off Button.” They exhibited the self-control that empowers *you* to master your devices, and not let the devices master you.

Silence Is Golden

I woke up to the sound of loud music coming from downstairs. This is pretty normal, as my husband, James, often gets up earlier than I do to exercise. I prefer to stay in bed! I walked downstairs to begin making the morning smoothie. Our blender is so loud that I literally put on headphones to protect my ears. A few minutes later, the kitchen is filled with three kids’ voices and the commotion of making lunches. Bikes are taken down from their hooks in the garage, and we’re off to school in a blur of activity. Biking home alone, I take a deep breath and enjoy the solitude of the short ride.

When was the last time you were quiet, even just for one minute straight (and sleeping doesn’t count!)? Technology at our fingertips has transformed the way we think, create, and receive information. Emails, texts, posts, articles, and likes are ever-present, many of them signaling their arrival with a beep of notification. Screens light up restaurants, airports, churches, minivans, and even gas

station pumps. Digital presence is almost unrelenting. And we know that too much noise can produce stress and tension in the body. The prefrontal cortex of the brain—the part that’s involved in decision making and problem solving—can get overloaded by the demands of an always-on digital life.

By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.

GENESIS 2:2–3

Here’s some good news: research indicates that silence has the opposite effect. Silence releases tension in the brain and body, producing a calmer, cooler you. One study based on changes in blood pressure and blood circulation in the brain revealed that two minutes of silence is more relaxing than listening to calming music.¹ When your brain is idle

and external noise is eliminated, you can more readily tap into your inner thoughts, emotions, memories, and ideas.

I was surprised recently when I dialed up a customer service department and a recorded voice gave me the choice between hold music or silence. The digital voice said, “In silence, maybe you’ll think of your next big idea.” My coauthor of *Growing Up Social*, Dr. Gary Chapman, offers this in praise of being still: “Life has to be balanced. Most of life is going to be scheduled, but there needs to be some time when you don’t have to be doing anything. There’s a place for getting a bucket of water and putting a stick in it, and stirring it around.”²

Picture yourself sitting next to that bucket of water, with nothing to do except stir a stick around. Imagine the quiet. See the water swishing around. Sitting like this—no agenda, no deadlines, no pressure—seems fairly foreign in our do-it-all and do-it-now world.

Past generations seem to have made a clearer delineation between work and leisure time. My family enjoys watching old TV shows like *Little House on the Prairie*. Michael Landon’s character, Charles Ingalls, worked hard in the day and played his fiddle in the family room at night. He could sit at his doorway quietly after his children went to bed and replenish his spirit before another workday.

***Then people go out to their work, to their labor
until evening. PSALM 104:23, emphasis mine***

That sounds pretty idyllic now, doesn't it? We don't do this anymore because we can work virtually anywhere and anytime because of the computers in our pockets or just a step away. This round-the-clock access is both a blessing and a curse. To enjoy more of the blessings, we must schedule in times of rest from the noise. We must be capable of setting limits and sticking with them.

Nighttime Calm

When my daughter Noelle was two, she loved sucking her thumb at night. She didn't need a binky; she had a built-in pacifier. Her tiny thumb would be fraught with teeth marks and peeling skin. We tried painting her nails with nail polish that tasted terrible. She continued chomping undeterred. We promised rewards if she would stop. But

night after night, she would suck on that little thumb like her life depended on it.

One day James came up with an unconventional plan. He took her pajama top, which was a little too long for her, and he sewed up the sleeves. When Noelle slipped her arms in her pajamas that night, she looked for her beloved thumb. But it was nowhere to be found! Like boxing gloves over her precious thumbs, the sewed up pajamas had taken away her usual pacifier for the night.

Noelle cried, sucking on her whole fist underneath her sealed pajamas. But after a few nights without access to her precious thumb, she got used to it. After a month or two, she returned to pajamas with normal sleeves, holes and all. Her thumbs, healed up in pristine condition, were safe at last. Noelle had been weaned off her nighttime binky.

I'm pretty sure you don't have a problem with using your thumb as a pacifier (your pajamas are safe!), but you might be awfully fond of your phone. Maybe you check your phone once or twice before dozing off. Maybe you receive texts in the middle of the night. Maybe you check the phone first thing in the morning. If these behaviors sound familiarly descriptive, you're not alone. Seventy-one percent of Americans sleep with or next to their smartphones.³ There are some circumstances that require nighttime

telephone access. Some professions require workers to be on call through the night. My husband, James, is a Realtor who manages several properties. He keeps his phone on the dresser in our room, in case a tenant has a leak or other emergency overnight.

But many of us, including me, can safely stash our phones to charge in another room while we sleep—and we'd be giving ourselves an advantage by doing this. A Time/Qualcomm poll conducted with 4,700 respondents in seven countries, including the United States, found that younger people were more likely to say, "I don't sleep as well because I am connected to technology all the time."⁴ Alertness for calls or notification beeps can keep us sleeping too lightly. And when we're sleep deprived, we are less productive and prone to make errors in judgment at work and at home.

Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth. PSALM 46:10

People have been studying productivity for more than 130 years. The earliest productivity studies were conducted in the 1880s by Ernst Abbe at the Zeiss lens laboratories. Researchers discovered that human workers are very productive up to forty hours per week, but beyond that we become less able to deliver quality work. We end up working extra hours to fix the mistakes we made when we were tired. After twenty-four hours of sleep deprivation, the parietal lobe and prefrontal cortex of the brain lose 12 to 14 percent of their glucose.⁵ These are the areas of the brain that we need most for thinking, for social control, and for discerning between good and bad.

Even though your phone can be a source of joy and connection with friends, it also holds your direct connection to your work and other duties related to family and life management. Why not develop the good habit of charging your phone overnight either out of reach in your bedroom or in a different room? Like Noelle giving her overworked thumb a rest, separate yourself from your work and other responsibilities by putting some distance between you and your phone at night. You will sleep better and be more productive in the morning.

Do I Need a Digital Pacifier?

Iowa State University researchers developed a questionnaire to help you determine if you suffer from nomophobia, or the fear of being without your mobile phone. Researchers found about 58 percent of men and 47 percent of women suffer from the phobia, comparing stress levels to wedding-day jitters, trips to the dentist, or when their phones were lost, without power, or out of network.⁶ Here is a sample from that questionnaire. The more statements you agree with, the higher your chance of being in need of a digital binky.

1. I would feel uncomfortable without constant access to information through my smartphone.
2. I would be annoyed if I could not look information up on my smartphone when I wanted to do so.
3. Running out of battery in my smartphone would scare me.
4. If I were to run out of credits or hit my monthly data limit, I would panic.

5. If I did not have a data signal or could not connect to Wi-Fi, then I would constantly check to see if I had a signal or could find a Wi-Fi network.

If I did not have my smartphone with me:

6. I would feel anxious because my constant connection to my family and friends would be broken.
7. I would feel anxious because I could not instantly communicate with my family and/or friends.
8. I would be nervous because I would be disconnected from my online identity.
9. I would feel weird because I would not know what to do.

De-Tethering

My oldest child, Ethan, entered middle school last year. On the first day of school, a fellow mom asked, “Has Ethan texted you yet?” I had to smile. It had only been one hour since he’d started his school day—and Ethan doesn’t have a phone.

We live in the age of the ever-connected, monitoring parent. Being in constant contact may give us as parents a sense of security, but does a child really benefit from being tethered this closely to his or her parents?

Sherry Turkle, author of *Alone Together* says, “I talk to college students who’ve grown up with the habit of being in touch with their parents five, ten, fifteen times a day. And it’s no longer Huckleberry Finn as a model of adolescence, you know, sailing down the Mississippi alone—we’ve developed a model of adolescence and childhood where we sail down the Mississippi together with our families in tow.”⁷

I remember when my daughter Noelle was in elementary school and went away to church summer camp for the very first time. She would be away from home for three long nights. There would be no communication between parents and children unless there was an emergency. As we waved goodbye and watched the church van pull out of the parking lot, I wondered how she would do on the road trip. She gets carsick, and the twisting mountain roads might make the trip grueling for her. I had to wait a few days before finding out that, yes, the car ride *was* miserable and, yes, she did throw up once. But the huge smile on her face and the fact that she immediately started saving up for next year’s summer camp told the bigger story.

For those of us who are parents, it's our job to foster our growing child's independence *from* us, not a growing dependence *on* us. Perhaps the explosion of cellphone use among children and teens is largely the result of parents, not children. We're the ones worried about watching over them. The phone has been transformed into a digital tether to help us keep tabs on children as much as it is a positive communication tool.

When I was in high school in the 1980s, I worked at a '50s-style diner. My shift would often end at midnight. Many evenings after that late shift, I walked across a busy street to my parked car and drove home. There were no mobile phones. I'd have to insert two dimes into a public pay phone if I needed to reach home. Most kids today have never seen a working pay phone. From the year 2000 to 2012, the number of pay phones dropped from 2.2 million to 243,487 in the United States because cellphones have become so prevalent.⁸ The parents of yesteryear used to say, "I walked to school for miles in the snow uphill both ways." Now I tell my children, "I went to school without a phone!"

While the phone can provide a sense of security (real or imagined) about our connectedness to our kids, it can also become the young teen's immediate problem solver. Rather than work through problem-solving rationales, teens can

simply text the parent to do the reasoning and solve the problems for them. Some young people have become so dependent on Google search or instant access to Mom and Dad, they don't have any idea what to do if they have to go an hour without Wi-Fi. The phone is a great tool, but we don't want our kids to fail to gain skills as problem solvers and independent thinkers. As we learn to hold down that Off button, we can show them how to discern when use of the phone is appropriate, helping them be less dependent on their phone and more confident in their problem-solving skills and personal convictions. We can help them avoid what some young people experience—actual panic when alone or without access to the Internet.

Maybe you don't have children but you are overly tethered to others with your phone. One woman I know had to tell her sister, "If I don't text you back right away, it's not because I'm mad at you. I will get back to you, don't worry!" We all could use more practice holding down the Off button. It's something we can practice together.

Wisdom on the Line

There's a fast-food advertisement my family has been passing lately. It says, "Dessert is calling, pick up!" My kids

laugh as James shouts to those scrumptious cheesecakes and brownies, “Quick, hang up!” There’s a time to say yes to dessert and a time to say no, right? If we picked up dessert every time we saw that sign, we’d all be about ten pounds heavier.

The digital world is like that dessert ad. *Try this new app to improve your life, pick up! You’ve got messages, pick up! Urgent news is waiting, pick up! Shoes on sale, pick up!* It’s hard to resist that kind of insistence. We need wisdom to sort through the online world, choosing what is productive and positive. The book of Proverbs says that wisdom calls aloud, raising her voice in the public square.⁹ Unlike that dessert, when wisdom is on the line, we’d better pick up.

The wisest man, Solomon, wrote that there is a time for everything and a season for every activity under the heavens.¹⁰ If we were to apply Solomon’s words to our present digital world, perhaps it would sound a little like this:

*There is a time for everything technological,
And a season for every activity under your roof:
A time to take photos and a time to refrain from taking
photos,
A time to text and a time for long conversation,
A time to install apps and a time to uninstall apps,*

*A time to limit and a time to use,
A time to watch funny cat videos and a time to read
thoughtfully in a corner,
A time to delay gratification and a time for lavish gifts,
A time to keep and a time to throw away,
A time for Facebook and a time to shut Facebook down,
A time for Skype and a time for getting on an airplane,
A time for digital advances and a time for silent retreat.*

After the “there is a time for everything” passage, Solomon writes,

What do workers gain from their toil? I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end. I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. (Eccl. 3:9–12)

It feels like a good goal to “do good while we live.” How can we use our phones for eternal good? How can we be calm and cool, not stressed out, with our digital usage? It begins by placing our dependence on almighty God and

trusting Him with all that concerns us. We may use our phone as a GPS, but it cannot provide direction for our lives. Our phone may answer many questions within seconds, but it does not provide eternal answers apart from God. Our phone may connect us to others via text and FaceTime, but it cannot replace a hug or bread broken together. You and I are not designed to be plugged into a device 24/7. There are times to power on and times to power off.

Aiming at wiser parameters for digital use is not meant to make you feel guilty when you pick up your phone. Listen to these words from author Os Guinness: “Negative freedom is freedom from—freedom from oppression, whether it’s a colonial power or addiction to alcohol oppressing you. You need to be freed from negative freedom. Positive freedom is freedom for, freedom to be. And that’s what’s routinely ignored today.”¹¹

Try not to focus on the negative habit you’re trying to shake. Instead focus on the positive habit you’re trying to embrace. Use your energy to put the positives into place. When you hold down the Off button of your screen more frequently, you open the door to a *freedom for. Freedom for* more spare time to kick around big ideas in your mind. *Freedom for* healthy exercise and the outdoors. *Freedom for*

quality time with loved ones making memories. *Freedom for* ministering to others by listening and being present.

If by chance you've been cradling your phone a little too tightly lately, this could be the day to be *free from* your digital binky so you can be *free for* more good in your life. It begins by simply holding down the Off button.

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. MATTHEW 11:28–29

CREATING CALM

I will not check my phone first thing in the morning. I will begin the day with a prayer, reading the Bible, exercising, or hugging a loved one.

TODAY'S PRAYER

Lord God, I do not want to rely on my phone or my screens for comfort or connection. I want to put my trust and hope in You alone. Help me let go of my digital dependence if I have been placing too much importance on my phone. You are the leader of my life. I rely on You to calm my soul today. In Jesus' name, amen.