



End of Absence?, by Michael Harris

As we embrace a technology's gifts, we usually fail to consider what they ask from us in return – the subtle, hardly noticeable payments we make in exchange for their marvellous service. We don't notice, for example, that the gaps in our schedules have disappeared because we're too busy delighting in the amusements that fill them. We forget the games that childhood boredom forged because boredom itself has been outlawed. Why would we bother to register the end of solitude, of ignorance, of lack?

The more I thought about this seismic shift in our lives – our rapid movement toward online experience and away from rarer, concrete things – the more I wanted to understand the nature of the experience itself. How does it feel to live through our own Gutenberg moment? How does it feel to be the only people in history to know life with and without the Internet?

And if we work hard enough to understand this massive game changer, and then name the parts of the new game we want to go along with and the parts we don't, can we then pack along some critical aspect of our earlier lives that those technologies would otherwise strip from us? Or will we forget forever the value of that lack and instead see only a collection of gains? It's hard to remember what we loved about absence; we never ask for our deprivation back.

To understand our unique predicament, and understand how to win ourselves those best possible lives, we need to root out answers in every corner of our experience. But the questions we need to ask at each juncture remain as simple as they are urgent: What will we carry forward? And what worthy things might we thoughtlessly leave behind?

The answer to that second question was painfully clear as I sat at my little beige desk in the offices of Vancouver magazine. What I'd left behind was absence. As a storm of digital dispatches hammered at the wall of my computer screen, I found myself desperate for sanctuary. I wanted a long and empty wooden desk where I could get some real work done. I wanted a walk in the woods with nobody to meet. I wanted release from the migraine-scale pressure of constant communication, the ping-ping-ping of perma-messaging, the dominance of communication over experience.

Somehow I'd left behind my old quiet life. And now I wanted it back.

