

Dwindling Interludes and Intermissions

A would-be isolationist succumbs to the lure of high-tech ... and is hooked.

"I used to enjoy using my free time to stare off into the distance and ponder deep thoughts like how come the lady behind the deli counter can be so precise with slicing cold cuts yet so imprecise with measuring a pound?"



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Last January I finally buckled. I gave in to societal pressures and purchased a smartphone. Defiant, I waited three weeks to open it, deriving boundless gratification from looking at the dormant phone in its Apple packaging and saying, "Not so smart while in that box are we?"

I felt like detective Clarice Starling in *Silence of the Lambs* talking with Hannibal Lecter in his cell, keenly aware that if this iPhone ever got out it would have consummate control over me.

After three weeks I became complacent and removed the phone from its box, thinking no harm in turning it on and examining its features. And just like Hannibal Lecter in the movie, it recognized an opening and pounced. Turning on the iPhone automatically deactivated my flip-up cell phone, leaving me without mobile phone connection and without choice. I was forced to activate the iPhone. The monster had escaped.

Conscious of the iPhone's power to dominate attention, I limited its use to calls, vowing not to become one of those people wedded to their hand-screens. Then last week, while cross-country skiing deep in Colorado's

backcountry, I grabbed the phone out of my blue fleece jacket's pocket to check emails, violating the sanctity of my intent to "get away from it all." I was hooked. The phone had me. "Hello, Clarice," it seemed to whisper with its robotic tone.

The shock of my own capitulation made me wonder if there's no reprieve anymore. Our days are now so crowded by cyber-society that trying to find any downtime is as difficult as it is trying to find a Taco Bell parking spot in downtown Denver since Colorado legalized marijuana.

Up until the last decade or so, our silver and golden years were rewarded with commotion leeway. Distractions were manageable: feigning interest at grandkid soccer games; taking your annual haul of you're-getting-old gag birthday gifts to Goodwill; complying with your college graduate kid's demand to knock first before entering the basement. Manageable and escapable. Rejuvenating downtime just a hike or plane ticket away.

But today our well-deserved space has been compromised by technology. We're tethered to mobile phones 24/7, robbing us of needed intermissions for thinking and daydreaming.

by Jeff Wozer
Humorist and stand-up comic in Denver

Dwindling Interludes: *Continued on page 41*



Solaris (1972)

And now to outer space — yet a penetrating look at inner space too. The great Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky made this intimate 1972 epic about a space voyager who investigates strange occurrences near a planet where, it appears, events from one's past may be taking realistic present-day form. Tarkovsky was not a storyteller but a spiritual explorer, so don't expect a straight-ahead piece of science fiction. However, if you let his slowed-down rhythms and occasionally trippy visuals do their work, you may find yourself falling into the mesmerized, if somewhat bewildered, position of the cosmonaut. Here we see that travel to outer space is merely another way to journey inside the psyche, to boldly go into the cosmos of self. (*Solaris* was remade by Steven Soderbergh and George Clooney in 2002, an interesting variation on the original's theme.)

MUSIC REVIEWS

The range of songs related to this idea of space is huge and crosses many genres and generations; let's focus on a time when space in all its permutations was a mainstay of our culture and of our collective dreams.

by Joe Rodriguez / Freelance music writer



"Space Oddity" (Single) — David Bowie, from the album Space Oddity, 1969

In the summer of 1969, David Bowie released his first hit single only weeks before the Apollo 11 moon landing and a year after Stanley Kubrick's Sci-Fi film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Clearly, the world was going through a thrilling time of space exploration, and this fascination carried over into Bowie's song. "Space Oddity" tells the story of Major Tom, an astronaut getting ready to launch into space. The psychedelic folk tone of the song, along with the isolationist lyrics, helps the listener recognize how vast and lonely space is and how the Major knows not what he will experience. Was Bowie perhaps unwittingly making a prediction of what would happen to

Apollo 13 when he leaves the Major hopeless after a technical malfunction?



"There's a Space Between Us" (Single) — Carole King, from the album Thoroughbred, 1976

Carole King had already had a mind-blowing songwriting career with her husband, Gerry Goffin, in the early '60s, writing hits for the Shirelles, Aretha Franklin, Herman's Hermits, the Monkees, and many other musical household names. Afraid of the stage, it took much convincing to finally push her to perform her songs in her own voice. We are thankful that she did. Carole's album "Thoroughbred" is not her best, yet one song stands out. "There's a Space Between Us" speaks of

breaking down the walls that one puts up as their world changes. Maybe King was writing autobiographically about her ex, as they divorced in 1968 but continued to work together for years. Perhaps the early signs of Goffin's manic depression caused him to build those impenetrable walls that caused so much distance. With the help of James Taylor's soothing and peaceful backing vocals, King's lyrics make a repeated plea to her embittered friend to "reach out and make the space between us go away."



"Telstar" (Single) — The Tornados, from the album The Tornados Play Telstar & Other Great Hits, 2003

The Tornados, house band for English composer Joe Meeks and the conduit of his instrumental visions, recorded the space-themed instrumental "Telstar" in 1962, inspired by the fascination of the time with all things space. The song was named as a tribute to the Telstar communication satellite that was launched into orbit earlier that year. Using distortion, echo, strangely generated beeping noises, and a unique instrument called a Clavioline (a two-octave keyboard powered by a battery), we hear Meek's trippy ode to space exploration come to life. The mixture of noises and textures

helped make "Telstar" a number one hit for The Tornados. Unfortunately, legal challenges of plagiarism meant that Meeks and The Tornados would never be able to capitalize on their fleeting fame, and they disappeared into the dark space of obscurity. ♦



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Dwindling Interludes: Continued from page 37

I used to enjoy using my free time to stare off into the distance and ponder deep thoughts like how come the lady behind the deli counter can be so precise with slicing cold cuts yet so imprecise with measuring a pound? Or, how come spiders can walk on ceilings and walls but not escape bathtubs?

Now when I have free time the only thing I ponder is how come my Facebook post only generated two likes.

And sadly, technology's grip keeps getting tighter. The more you use, the more you want, further compromising our space. There's no escape. I know, because I tried.

Several years ago I fled downtown Denver for a cabin at the end of a dirt road, 8,524 feet up along the north face slope of a pine-packed forest.

I had been pondering the move for several years, desperate to get off the grid and live a more three-dimensional life. I was feeling hemmed in by life in general, compounded by technology's intrusiveness.

The tipping point came when some rube spray painted "Wash Me" in neon orange letters on the back of my Subaru station wagon.

And so, like a modern day Henry David Thoreau, I left.

The cabin's remoteness provided a needed buffer. Limited to Internet and a landline phone that did not snap photos, take videos, send and receive texts, play music, provide constant Kim Kardashian updates, or offer video games, I felt like I got my life back. I had more mind-space for reading, writing, hiking, and watching spiders try to escape the bathtub.

But then, last fall, Verizon improved its coverage in my area. My cell phone suddenly became functional from home. The few neighbors on my road immediately upgraded to smartphones and urged me to do the same, culminating in last week's "Hello Clarice moment."

Since then I have not allowed the iPhone to infringe on my space. But only because one day after, I invested in an iPad. ♦