



MEDIA

My New Diet Involves Cutting Out the Violence

IT TOOK STUBBING MY TOE TO REALIZE HOW OVERWHELMED I WAS.

THE FIRST TIME I consciously stepped back from the media was 14 years ago, at the start of the second Gulf War. The media buildup had begun after 9/11. Upset by the way violence led to more violence, I became active in the peace movement—and I became obsessed with the news. On March 20, 2003, the day the war in Iraq officially started, I stubbed my toe and, much to my surprise, burst out crying. I had been so distracted by the news that I wasn't able to pay attention to where I was walking. And though I had felt emotion building up in me for days, months, years around the lead-up to the war, it had taken walking into a chair leg to fully access and release the feelings. It was as if the proverbial dam had burst.

As I cried, it occurred to me that though the news so often is about extreme violence and suffering, rarely are we expected to cry over it. There is an emotional dissociation that occurs when we consume media. I cried in part because I had gradually become so overwhelmed that I was hurting myself.

After that day, I rethought my engagement with the news. I wanted to



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consume more actively and mindfully. What was my objective in reading the news? Did I need to check the news as frequently as I did in order to stay informed or in order to take action?

I found that when I decreased my media consumption, I had more time for real education, real feelings, and real action: I read more books where I could get a much greater perspective on topics, and I wasn't so exhausted by just paying attention to what was happening, so I had more energy for activism. I learned more, did more, and felt better for it.

Last fall, I realized that my personal floodwaters of bad news had built up again when I was in the lobby of a building, waiting for a meeting, and found myself watching images of the attack on the bicycle path in New York over and over. It was a horrible attack at a place I knew well because my sister rode her bike there; so I was pulled in before it struck me that watching was doing the attacker's work over and over. It was helpful to remember what I had learned 14 years ago—and turn away. No good would come from watching.

Thich Nhat Hanh's fourth mindfulness training, loosely aligned with the fourth Buddhist precept against consumption of alcohol, makes clear that we consume not only food, but also all things that come into our senses and our consciousness. Certain "TV programs, films, magazines, books, and conversations," the mindfulness training reminds us, also have "toxins" that we can avoid. Top of that list should be breaking news. Studies about mirror neurons show that the same part of

our brain lights up when we witness an event as when we perform the event itself. Studies have even shown that just *thinking about* exercise every day can help build muscle mass. So it's not surprising that when we consume stressful media, we experience stress in our bodies, and the stress ripples through society.

Though we may feel that keeping up with the news helps us counteract the dangerous things we read about, I think it has the opposite effect, increasing our own fear and stress levels so that we are less able to be peacefully in ourselves or with others. Though knowledge can be power, passive media consumption is not power.

In an age of not just rampant media consumption but also "fake news," it has become more and more clear that what we think and believe affects the world we live in. Individually and as groups of people interested in creating more peace, it's all the more important that we be mindful and conscious about the kinds of stories we listen to, their sources, their intent, and their effect. It is time that we consciously take back the power of responsible storytelling and image creation and consumption—and cultivate within ourselves the peace and well-being that we want to see around us.

It is helpful to remember that the "real world" is not just the world of the news or our social media field, but also the world around us in the present moment, when we can smile, when we can appreciate a friend, when we can grow a garden—the world of right now, in our bodies and in our minds that we get to protect and cultivate.

—NADIA COLBURN

Almost anything will work again if you unplug it for a few minutes, including you.

ANNE LAMOTT

Spirituality & Health

To confront a person with his own shadow is to show him his own light.

CARL JUNG

Spirituality & Health

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