

Seven screen-free weeks changed one man's view of God

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(RNS)—It all started when Carlos Whittaker received that perky Sunday morning iPhone notification summarizing his time spent on his handheld screen in the past week.

Seven hours and twenty-three minutes on average per day.

Whittaker, an author and former worship pastor, did some quick math and realized that number translated to nearly 100 full days a year.

If he lived to be 85, he'd have spent a decade looking at his phone. While most of his work centers around his social media community—his “Instafamilia”—he knew something needed to change.

Whittaker messaged Daniel Amen, a psychiatrist with nearly 3 million followers on TikTok, earning him the nickname, “America’s most popular psychologist.”

How much time, Whittaker wanted to know, would he need to take away from all digital devices to effect real change in his brain. Amen quoted him close to two months.

Using a screen-free Sony camera to document the journey, Whittaker ditched his phone and spent two weeks with Benedictine monks in the California desert, two weeks working on an Amish farm in Ohio and three weeks with his family—both at home in Nashville and on a trip to Yellowstone—all free from any connectivity.

From his experience came a new book, [*RECONNECTED: How 7 Screen-Free Weeks with Monks and Amish Farmers Helped Me Recover the Lost*](#)

[*Art of Being Human*](#). RNS talked to him about his journey and his book. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

You got your start as a worship leader for churches like Hillsong. How has your worship evolved over the years?

For a long time, I was a “professional evangelical.” I went from worship pastor to signed worship artist, touring and playing shows. Now, I rarely even speak in churches anymore. I just love going to church with my family now. Worship looks like what I’m doing now: worshipping with people that don’t believe like me, holding my own and having a blast doing it.

Your ah-ha moment came when you saw how much time you were spending on your phone. But why a desert with Benedictine monks? Why Amish farmers?

I started multiplying the seven-plus hours I was spending and realized that’s two cycles of the sun a week. Once I made the decision to not look at screens, I thought of places without them: the Benedictine monastery in the high desert of Southern California. My wife’s father was a volunteer in the ‘80s and ‘90s there, so she made an intro for me.

A friend of mine married a former Amish guy, so they were my connection to the sheep farming family in Mount Hope, Ohio.

Then I moved back home for three weeks—I mean, anybody can do this with monks and the Amish, but can I do this around my family in Nashville?

How did unplugging impact your spirituality?

It really disturbed and disrupted it. I realized how much (focus) I place on random pastors’ YouTube sermons and podcasts. I was constantly filling my mind with content, but when all that went away, it was just me and my mind. God got really tangled up.

The first week at the monastery was like a massive deconstruction and reconstruction in seven days. I had some very deep conversations with monks that shook up my faith a lot and then got to build it back.

When I look at my faith, when I am just consuming, consuming, consuming on all of these devices, that builds a box around who God can be. God got way bigger than I think I had ever pictured he was going to get.

What did wellness look like for you in the seven weeks? Did you pick up any new exercise or spiritual habits?

Savoring is something that I never thought about as a spiritual practice, but I realized pretty quickly that I've stopped savoring anything, because we get things so quickly.

Multitasking is the worst thing to ever happen to us. I drank coffee out of ceramic mugs for eight straight weeks. It just tasted better. I was able to savor it. Now when I go to a coffee shop, I never get my coffee to go. I'm like, if I don't have four minutes to sit and savor, you know?

I'd say the second thing is just slowing down. If there's one thing the monks taught me, it's to move at what I call God speed.

What was the hardest part?

The first four days by far. It was heart palpitations, panic attacks, night sweats. It was like coming off of this drug, and I don't really think the drug is the phone. It was more like this drug of control and knowledge and having to know all the time.

Suddenly, I wasn't able to get out of my own head. Because at the monastery, it was 23 hours a day of silence. To go from seven and a half hours a day on my phone to just being in my head, it was awful.

But day five, it felt like an elephant stepped off my chest. It stopped being

an experiment about a phone. Suddenly it was an experiment about all of these incredible things that were on the other side of the phone that I'd forgotten about.

The other worst day was turning my phone back on.

What do we miss when we can Google every question that pops into our brain?

We miss being who God created us to be. I don't think our souls or our psyches were created with that capacity to know as much as we know. I think we miss wondering. When I lost access to information, I thought, "Wow, I don't think I've wondered since, like, the 1990s!"

I'd walk outside and wonder how hot it is. I'd reach for my phone. Well, I guess I'm just going to have to wonder. We ask questions, but we don't wonder anymore, because Google kills wonder. Questions lead to more questions, which I think leads to creativity. We should all maybe know a little less, and we'll human a little more.

You write about experiencing panic attacks and mental health struggles.

I've struggled for a long time with a kind of fear of sickness and health. I would Google symptoms, so it was mind-blowing to see the worry go away when I didn't have this false sense of control in my hands.

I've removed some apps that were causing me to worry more than I should. One of those is Life360, an app I used to track my kids and make sure I knew where they were, how fast they were going. My mom said: "Carlos, I'm so glad I didn't have that app. I just had to trust that you'd be home before the sun went down." All of these things that give us a false sense of control are actually adding anxiety to our lives.

You suggest replacing your phone with a point-and-shoot camera to document an activity with loved ones. What other practical steps can we take to reconnect?

I've deleted all the news apps off my phone. I deleted X off my phone, and I subscribe to this thing called the newspaper. Every morning, I walk in my front yard, it feels like the 1960s. If anything happens I need to know about, either someone tells me or I find out about it the next morning.

I'm no longer part of this rage ecosystem. I bought an alarm clock and set it next to my bed. It wakes me up without any notifications, and I'm just a lot happier.

I no longer use the map app to find my way. I look it up before I leave my house, write it on a piece of paper. I will get lost on the way, but I'll find my way slowly but surely. I think God created us to find our way. I love getting lost now. All of these things have helped me reconnect to who I was created to be.

You emphasize it's not just about screen time—it's about connecting when you're not on your devices.

This isn't a book about how bad phones are. It's a book about how beautiful things are on the other side of the phone. I've gone down to four hours a day on my phone.

It's not because I've placed rules on screen time—I've just fallen in love with having conversations, having 90-minute meals. One hundred years ago the average meal lasted 90 minutes. Today, it lasts 12 minutes. Try 30 minutes. Set an alarm, put it in the kitchen.

We've lost the ability to have crucial conversations about things that we disagree with over something that we love, a shared plate. The longer you eat, the better the relationships get.