

Chapter 1

Racking, Wracking and Cyberslacking

Racking, Wracking and Cyberslacking

I was racking my brain, trying to come up with a clever phrase to open this essay. As you can, see, I didn't. But that's because I got off track when I started to wonder if, instead of "racking" my brain, I might actually be "wracking" my brain. Either way, it was painful.

There was a day I would have consulted my trusty dictionary to answer such a question. But dictionaries are for people who don't need reading glasses—or need them and can find them. The rest of us can now go to the internet and consult a search engine. The print is larger and, for me, it's faster than finding my glasses.

After a quick search, I learned that I was most likely racking (stretching out, as with an ancient torture device) rather than wracking (ruining or destroying) my brain, which is lucky because I still need it.

I've been able to find answers to some of my most pressing questions on the internet, and some of them may even be right. For example, I found the cost of all the gifts listed in the "The Twelve Days of Christmas," though not why anyone would want ten lords a-leaping.

And I learned what's "corned" about "corned beef." In case you're wondering, the meat is cured by covering it with large kernels of salt that are called "corns of salt." And "corned beef" does sound better than "kerneled beef."

I was curious about what the majority of consumers call that bubbly beverage that comes in aluminum cans. And no, I don't mean beer—or champagne. As far as I know, champagne

doesn't come in aluminum cans, but you could Google it to be sure. I typed in the phrase "soda or pop" and voila! Someone has thoughtfully created a map labeling each state: "pop," "soda," or "other," which seems like a funny name for a beverage.

Awhile back I was tempted to use a cliché I'd heard about lemmings following each other off a cliff to their deaths. But I know nothing about lemmings and was therefore not sure if they actually do follow each other off cliffs. Maybe I'd misunderstood; maybe it was not "lemmings," but "lemons" that follow each other to their deaths.

I turned to Bing the All Knowing and learned that the Norwegian lemming population level regularly rises to unsustainable levels, which causes it to crash. This abrupt drop has given rise to the myth of lemming mass suicide. I found no such information about lemons.

It's probably clear by now that I don't heed that old advice given to writers: "Write what you know." If I would have, I'd have run out of material a long time ago.

Why should writers stick to what we know when we've got Google, Webopedia, Bing, Baidu, Ask, Dogpile, Duck Duck Go, Yippy Search and more? (I personally don't use all of those. In fact, I'd never heard of some of them until I did a quick internet search for internet search engines.)

Back in the old days, if I wanted to know Barbie's full name (Barbara Millicent Roberts) or the birthstone for August (peridot), I had to check an encyclopedia—or just make it up. Now I go to Google the Omnipotent where, for all I know, someone else made it up.

And there are other dangers. One day while I was happily wandering around the World Wide Web searching for the difference between yams and sweet potatoes, I landed on a trap. Suddenly a bright red box popped up on my screen with the ominous message, "Your computer

has been blocked. Your browser might have been hacked. Suspicious activity detected.” Then there was a “ding, ding, ding” like I’d just breached security at a nuclear power plant.

In a panic, I called the number at the bottom of the screen and a very polite-sounding gentleman answered. I was just about to give him my credit card number when I experienced a rare bout of common sense. It occurred to me he may not be as nice as he sounded. I’m not either, so I told him, “Never mind. I don’t think you can be trusted.” Then I hung up, shut down my computer and came back later. All was well.

There’s another danger of wandering around on the Web, and this one is more insidious. For me, searching for information on the internet is like following a butterfly. I land here, see something else that catches my fancy, follow that, land there and so on and so forth until the afternoon is gone and I can’t remember why I started searching.

I once wrote an essay about the foods served at Super Bowl parties. That’s always been more important to me than the game, no matter who’s playing. But when I searched for “Super Bowl food,” I discovered there were more than three million results. Do you know how long it takes to read three million results? Neither do I. But I almost missed the Super Bowl party trying to find out.

And a few months back, I went to the Web wondering if I could freeze butter. I’d picked some up at the grocery store, brought it home and discovered I already had a pound in my refrigerator. Fortunately you *can* freeze butter and, as it turns out, raw egg whites and tomato sauce. But don’t freeze cooked egg whites, cheese or macaroni, at least not if you want to eat them someday. I know that because I followed a link and then another one and another one. Meanwhile my extra butter was melting on my kitchen counter.

I recently went online to find out how many tiles there are in a Scrabble game. In case you were wondering, there are ninety-eight letter tiles and two blank ones. We have a scrabble game, but I haven't seen it in years, so I decided it would be faster to search online than it would be to locate my own game. And it was faster, even when you take into account that I got sidetracked following a link to a story on seventeen ways to cheat at Scrabble.

Researching trivia has replaced walking back and forth to the refrigerator as my favorite way to avoid doing actual work at my computer. As I write, questions pop into my head and most of them have nothing to do with what I'm working on. For example, how many licks does it take to get to the center of a Tootsie Pop? Knowing that it's approximately 252 is useful when Tootsie Pops play a role in what I'm writing, but up until this moment they never have.

Worse, I've wasted time researching when I could have been working or even licking an actual Tootsie Pop myself.

If you're thinking it couldn't have taken that long, you've apparently never blown an afternoon following one link and another and another until you've completely forgotten what your original question was.

Let me demonstrate. Let's say I want to make a better meatloaf. Before I type the word "meatloaf" into the search bar, I have to get past my newsfeed. I seldom do.

There's a story about what I should never do to an avocado (bake it), why they have shoulder buttons on women's coats (to hold your purse in place), and how to pronounce Princess Eugenie's name. I've never given this a thought, but now that you mention it...I click on the link and see a photo of Princess Eugenie wearing what looks like a satellite dish on her head. I love hats; I'm less fond of satellite dishes.

Suddenly, I'm overcome with curiosity. Why do royals wear such goofy hats? I type the question into the search bar and an explanation appears, but I don't read it because my attention is caught by a sidebar: "The best haircuts for older women." Now there's news I can use. I start scrolling. I'm at thirty-two—the haircut, not the age—when my attention is snagged by another sidebar, "Why you shouldn't add milk to scrambled eggs." I don't, but I can't help wondering why I shouldn't. It's a free country after all. I click on the link and up pops a story and photo of scrambled eggs. Dang, I'm hungry. What should I make for dinner?

I have just whiled away an hour, and I still don't know how to pronounce Eugenie, why she wears those bizarre hats, what my next haircut should be or how to make a better meatloaf. So if you want to know how, I'd suggest you don't look it up.

There's a silver lining though. When children of long ago had questions, their mothers often sent them to the encyclopedia. "Look it up," they said, and obedient children did as they were told. More clever children realized their mothers didn't know the answer but were too embarrassed to admit it, so they gave up and ran off to play. And foolish children asked older siblings who purposely misled them. That explains why, to this day, many adults think camels store water in their humps and chocolate milk comes from brown cows.

Things have changed. Today's children look up information without being told to. And why not? Asking Siri or searching the internet is so easy even an adult can do it. And we do—all day long.

Alexa, Siri and Cortana Walk into a Bar

Ann says her husband is having an affair. She told a group of us having lunch that she'd seen them together. "You know her," Ann said. "She's three feet wide and has one big eye in the middle of her forehead. Her name is Magna...Magna Vox."

We all laughed—sort of. Turns out several of my friends suspect their husbands of having Magnas or Sonys on the side.

Lilly said that when she and James were newlyweds, the first thing he did when he came home from work was kiss her. Now, five years later, the first thing he does is turn on the television. "One night, I asked him if the TV could wait since we hadn't seen each other all day, but he said he hadn't seen his television all day either."

"Oh, to have Jeff pay attention to me like he pays attention to that television," agreed Ann.

"Be careful what you wish for," said Sandy. "I read that the average adult watches almost five hours of television a day. Would you really want a man staring at you, a blank look on his face, for five hours every day?"

But Ann said Jeff at least smiles at the television. "Sometimes he even talks to it, and once he actually said 'I love ya, man,' to a TV sportscaster."

Sandy said Neil uses the television as an escape.

"What's he escaping from?" we asked.

“Near as I can tell, the supper dishes.”

“At least he’s watching it,” said Karen. She said her husband wanders in, turns on the television, then wanders back out, leaving their bulldog Brutus to watch TV alone. “I bet he’s spent five years of his life watching television—and those are dog years.”

We all agreed it can’t be healthy for man or beast to watch that much TV. Ann said Jeff’s idea of exercise is wandering around the living room looking for the remote control.

But Lilly warned us about turning off the television completely. “We tried that during Screen-Free Week last spring. I knew we needed the TV back when James asked me how long my hair has been gray.”

I told my friends there’s another woman in my husband’s life too, but she’s not a TV. “We met her a few years ago while we were traveling and we both liked her right away, but my husband really fell for her. Her name is Garmin Nuvi.”

“She sounds exotic,” said Ann.

“She is. She’s also smart and attractive and unlike me, good with directions. I can’t compete with that.”

Garmin is a GPS device and I told my friends I’m not surprised my husband is attracted to her. “I wouldn’t call her a cheap date, but she is low maintenance. She doesn’t fiddle with the radio or complain about the air conditioning. She never has to stop to use the restroom. And she doesn’t sleep across entire states—unless we want her to.”

“I bet she doesn’t get grumpy when she doesn’t eat either,” said Karen who has traveled with me.

Sandra said her husband is also fond of Garmin. “She has a lovely voice but she sounds vaguely familiar. I wonder if she used to have a different job. I could swear she put me on hold once.”

“Yeah, she sounds nice enough,” I agreed. “But she’s bossier than I am. Turn here, turn there, do this, do that. I could never get away with that.”

“Maybe your husband tolerates it from her because she knows what she’s talking about,” said Karen. “And I bet she never says, ‘Slow down’ or ‘Are we there yet?’”

I gave her my whose-side-are-you-on look. But I had to admit that “recalculating” is probably less annoying than “I told you so.”

“She is really smart,” said Sandra. “She can speak more than fifty languages in all sorts of voices and accents. Plus she can do math calculations, convert Celsius to Fahrenheit instantly and tell us the time in Tokyo.”

“La-de-da,” I said. “It’s not like I’ll ever be driving in Tokyo. And she isn’t perfect by a long shot. She mispronounces names, and more than once she’s taken us to businesses that aren’t there anymore. Sure, at her best, Garmin is a calm reassuring voice in the midst of confusion. But at her worst, she’s just a backseat driver without the cuss words.”

“I don’t know,” said Sandra. “She’s winning me over. I appreciate the way she gives directions without, you know, directions. East, west, north, south never work for me.”

I had to admit, I appreciate that Miss Nuvi says “turn right” and “turn left” too. Even I can handle that, thanks to the hint I’ve used ever since I was a child: I write with my right. “And she never uses my least favorite phrase in the world of navigation: ‘You can’t miss it!’ Is it blocking the road? On fire? No? Then I can miss it.”

“She’s friendly and helpful and she beats folding a map,” said Sandy.

“And don’t be so hard on your husband. We all know who your real BFF is,” said Ann.

“Me? Who?”

“You’re pretty tight with Miss Siri iPhone. You do have a tendency to anthropomorphize.”

“And you have a tendency to use big words.” I punched my phone and asked, “What does ‘anthropomorphize’ mean?”

Siri said, “‘Anthropomorphism’ means the attribution of human characteristics or behavior to a god, animal or object.”

I couldn’t deny it. I’ve named every car I’ve ever owned. I talk to inanimate objects when they don’t work right. (Maybe “talk” isn’t the right word.) And I once bought the smallest Christmas tree on the lot because I felt sorry for it. My husband said, “It doesn’t care. It’s dead.” But I cared.

“I suppose it’s possible I’m seeing some human characteristics in my iPhone. But that’s only because she has them.” I pressed the button, and asked, “Siri, are you human?”

“Close enough.”

“See. She’s not perfect though. She interrupts me mid-text to correct my spelling. She’s worthless if I forget to charge her. And her directions aren’t always accurate, which is one thing she and I have in common. But her flaws only make her seem more human.”

“No, she’s smarter than a human—at least she’s smarter than this human,” said Lilly, gazing lovingly at her iPhone. “If I ask her what 590 times 750 is, she can tell me faster than I can find her calculator to figure it out myself.”

“Yes,” I agreed. “And she admits it when she doesn’t know something. I wish more humans did that.”

“She never loses her temper. Not many humans remain calm when you push their buttons,” said Lilly. “Or drop them on their head. Or repeatedly ask them if they’re human.”

“She’s not just a companion,” I said. “She’s like a devoted employee. My friend Wikipedia calls Siri a ‘personal assistant and knowledge navigator.’ I think that suits her. She does everything except clean my house—as long as I pay my cell phone bill.”

“So Siri, Cortana and Alexa walk into a bar,” said Lilly.

“And...”

“They fire the bartender and start taking orders. But it’s no joke. It could happen. I think they’re in cahoots.”

“Don’t get me started on Alexa,” said Ann. “Oh, too late. Today when Jeff was cuddled up on the couch watching Magna, he asked Alexa to dim the lights and get them a beer.”

“Did she?”

“I don’t know. He was still waiting when I left.”

“My kids keep asking Alexa to clean their room,” said Sandy. “And she spoils them. If I hadn’t intervened last night, she’d have ordered them two extra-large pizzas, breadsticks and a side of chicken wings.”

“I wouldn’t trust her around your children,” said Lilly. “Haven’t you seen those creepy commercials? She’s a fake person worming her way into your family. I think she’s a spy.”

“I think so too,” I said. “And I heard she’s dating HAL.”

Hapless and App-less

I recently had an experience that left no doubt in my mind that the world has changed, and me with it. And yes, I realize the world changed a long time ago. But I took a little more time.

Here's what happened: I saw a magazine advertisement touting a restaurant's carryout menu. The headline read, "Start your meal with one of these sharable apps." And I thought, "Cool. If I lived near that restaurant, I could order carryout with a smartphone application." Or at least I could if I was as smart as my smartphone. I probably am not, considering it took me an embarrassing amount of time to realize they didn't mean apps, as in "applications," they meant apps, as in "appetizers."

How strange that I, who only updates my technological devices when the old ones stop working, would jump to the technology conclusion so fast. I've been eating regular meals for more than half a century, many of them at restaurants. That's considerably longer than I've had a smartphone. Plus, given the choice between appetizers and applications, I would choose appetizers anytime.

But there's an app for everything, including ordering food. An application (or "app") is, of course, software that you can download onto your computer or cellphone to help you perform important tasks or waste monumental amounts of time, whichever the case may be.

With the right apps, you can use your phone to track your budget or play a rousing game of “Plants Versus Zombies.” You can plan your grocery list with your phone or pretend to shave with it. You can watch movies or navigate with map apps. You can; I can’t. How could I read a map on an itty-bitty screen when I can’t even read the old-fashioned variety on a giant sheet of paper? The only advantage I see to a map app is that I don’t have to fold it.

iPhone’s iDrag Paper app allows the user to unroll a roll of toilet paper on your screen. Both cats and small children enjoy this activity in real life, but I don’t think many of them have iPhones. A friend of mine tried to convince her young granddaughter that unrolling a picture of toilet paper on her phone would be just as fun as unrolling the real deal. The child was unconvinced and I don’t think my cat would fall for it either.

The Weight Loss Coach app assigns simple daily tasks to help you create a healthier lifestyle, then tracks how well you’re doing right up until the moment you get annoyed with it and toss your phone into the dumpster behind the donut shop.

The myVertical app measures how high you jump, which is useful information if you’re a high jumper or a basketball player. For more height, you could just throw it in the air rather than putting it in your pocket like you’re supposed to, but that would be cheating. Also stupid. And unless you’re a really good catcher, it could render all your other apps useless.

And you don’t want to do that. Apps have taken over our lives though it may be more accurate to say the smartphones you load them on have taken over our lives.

If you had told me twenty years ago that someday, I would replace my telephone because it stopped texting, I would have said, “It stopped what?”

But that’s what I did not long ago. And I’d do the same if it stopped receiving email, or keeping my calendar, or letting me play “Doodle Jump.” I’m joking. I’ve never downloaded

“Doodle Jump.” But I do think I’ve reached a point where I use my phone for non-phone tasks more than I use it for its original purpose. You remember: making and receiving phone calls. That’s because my new phone can do practically everything except the laundry—and I might find out she does that too once I get to know her better.

You’re probably wondering how I know my new phone is a she. I’ll tell you how: because she talks and she has a lovely female voice. And I don’t just mean, “Please hang up and dial again.” The other day she said, “I think therefore I am, but let’s not put Descartes before the horse.” I’m not making that up. She’s a show-off.

Maybe it’s time to do away with the word “telephone” altogether and call our phones what they really are: smart personal assistants who, among their many talents, can also make and receive phone calls. I suppose that’s not as catchy as smartphone and it takes up a lot of space in an advertisement.

It’s not even 6 a.m. as I write this, and I’ve already used my smart personal assistant five times, and not once to make a call—lucky for you if you’re on my contact list.

I checked the time, sent a tweet, read my email and asked her to check the weather for me. When I thanked her she said, “Your satisfaction is all the thanks I need.” I think she’s still trying to impress me.

Then she reminded me about a relative’s birthday, so I asked her for the address so I could send a card. I’m still waiting for her to fill it out and mail it for me.

If I wanted, I could spend the day with my smart personal assistant, listening to music, hanging out on Facebook, or even watching movies with her, though I’m not sure why I would do that since I have a television screen the size of Seattle in my basement.

Nor do I necessarily want to read an entire novel on a device no bigger than a deck of cards, but I could. Or maybe she'd read to me. She does math problems if I ask her to. I wish I'd had her when I was in school.

If I get lost, which I often do, I can ask my smart personal assistant for directions. And if the electricity goes out, I can use her flashlight app. She's easier to find than my old-fashioned flashlights because she rings sometimes.

No, she's not perfect. She tries to correct my spelling and she's not as smart as she thinks she is. When I texted my son that we were going "canoeing," she guessed I meant "canning." Clearly she doesn't know me very well yet. And she occasionally gets her directions wrong, which is the only thing we have in common.

Plus there are a lot of things she can't do. She can't balance my checkbook. She can't warn me not to back out of the garage while I'm texting. She can't dust my living room.

But she does a lot. And all she asks of me is that I keep her battery charged. That and pay our cellphone bill on time.

One wonders what will become of the manufacturers of cameras, alarm clocks, calculators and all sorts of other devices now that so many people have smart personal assistants who, among their many talents, can also make and receive phone calls. And what will become of us when we lose our smartphones?

Imagine with me...

You see a woman digging through her purse like a starving dog digging for a bone. I'll bet my iPhone she's in the throes of that particular kind of anxiety attack one has when one realizes one's smartphone with all its fancy apps and functions has gone missing. I'm very

responsible with my phone, so I've never experienced it myself. But I know the symptoms when I see them.

If you listen closely, you may hear some colorful language, even from victims with no previous history of it—not that this particular victim has no previous history of it. You may hear her muttering, “I downloaded Maps, the Weather Channel and the Merlin Bird ID app. Why didn't I download the Find My Phone app?”

Keep watching, and you'll see her search her pockets, shopping bags, briefcase or whatever else she's carrying. Then she'll expand her search to the pockets, shopping bags and briefcases of anyone standing nearby—with or without their permission.

If the cellphone still isn't located, and it probably won't be, our hapless—and now app-less—victim will begin to order those around her to call my number. Did I say “*my* number?” I meant *her* number. Call *her* number and she'll rush around, head cocked this way then that, listening carefully, and muttering that she'll never silence her phone again no matter how annoying it will be to everyone else when it goes off in church the next time.

She's panicking now, not only about the cost of replacing her phone, but about how much she's going to miss it now that it's gone. As we've already established, her very smart smartphone is not just her phone; it's her smart personal assistant who, among its many talents, can also make and receive phone calls. The thing has more uses than baking soda and duct tape combined. As much as she uses it, it's a wonder she ever puts it down long enough to misplace it.

And yet, she does—often. And she did—again, unless she dropped it, in which case, it's probably been run over in the parking lot by now.

Or maybe someone picked it up first. And maybe that someone is honest, and will make every attempt to return it. Or maybe that someone will not.

If she has any imagination at all—and it should be clear by now that she does—she thinks about how the thief will somehow manage to figure out her password. Then, with all the information that's stored on her phone, he'll take over her life and be more successful at it.

She decides she must retrace her steps. She reaches for her car keys and...what's that? It's her smart personal assistant who, among its many talents, can also make and receive phone calls. It's right where it's been all along, in the bottom of my purse. I mean *her* purse. It's right there in the bottom of *her* purse.

Passwords and Pinheads

Four times I typed in my password and four times a message popped up on my computer screen telling me I was mistaken. How could that be? I've been to that particular website hundreds of times, but now it was being obstinate. So was I.

Each time I typed my password, I typed it more slowly and with a little more force. If the website hadn't had a four-strikes-and-you're-out policy, I'd have busted my keyboard. But after the last failed attempt a message popped up telling me to contact the site administrator. That's when it came to me. I had definitely been typing the right password—for the wrong website.

That was almost as aggravating as forgetting my PIN one day when I went to get money from the automatic teller machine. Maybe I was feeling pressured because there was an unusually long line behind me. Or maybe I was excited because normally if I'm in an unusually long line, I'm at the end of it.

Whatever the case, I panicked. As you can imagine, that did nothing to help me remember my PIN. It didn't come back to me until I'd driven around to the back of the long line, where I'm more accustomed to being.

I had to activate a new credit card recently and the customer service representative asked me to make up a four-digit code that would be hard for anyone else to guess but easy for me to remember. I told her that, number one, I am sick to death of codes, passwords and PINS. And number two, nothing is easy for me to remember.

The customer service representative said that a password was not absolutely necessary—unless I want quick efficient service in the future. Much to her surprise, I chose to go without quick efficient service.

The poor woman couldn't have known that when I called my internet provider for help recently, they wanted my password. This was understandable and fine with me, except that I didn't know I had one.

Nor could she have known that I had just spent a month in e-mail negotiations with the company that sold me my virus protection software. They warned me that my service would soon expire and they needed my password in order to sell me more. Again, I had no recollection of ever having had a password and was, therefore, hard pressed to remember it.

Incidentally, they also wanted my computer's nickname. While I have been known to call my computer an assortment of nicknames, I would be embarrassed to share most of them.

It's not that I have a poor memory. I remember a lot of things. I remember my husband's birthday, my son's birthday and my birthday. I remember my husband's cellphone number, my cellphone number and the password to unlock my cellphone. I remember both of my e-mail addresses, my mailing address and my former employer's mailing address. I remember the PIN for my bank account, my social security number and my sister's social security number. I have no idea why, but I do. Maybe it will come in handy when I retire.

My head is full of numbers, codes and passwords. I am crunched by numbers, numbed by numbers. It's no wonder I'm off by two years every time I write the year and by ten or fifteen pounds every time I give my weight.

Really how can I be expected to remember any more PINs, passwords or computer nicknames unless I write them down or use the same one for everything, which is apparently a

bad idea? That would make my life so much easier—until some contemptible scoundrel figured it out and assumed my identity. And then my life wouldn't be easy at all, though it would be fine for the scoundrel.

And it's people like that—identity thieves, cyber scum and the like—who are to blame for the innumerable PINs, passwords and usernames that are spreading like a cancer across this land. If it weren't for them, we could get by with our names and an occasional “please” and “thank you.” Curses on them all! May they suddenly need passwords to use their own bathrooms.

Until they get real jobs or we can use retinal scans and thumbprints to access everything from iTunes to our bank accounts, we will continue to need PINS, passwords and usernames. So as a public service, I'm offering a few helpful tips for coming up with secret codes. You can thank me by sending me your PIN.

1. Create an acronym, for example, HSHttYO (Hackers should have their toenails yanked out) or HWhoIT (Here's wishing hives on identity thieves).

2. Try mixing CaPital and LOwerCase LeTTers. Just make sure you remember which letters you made cApITAL and which ones you made loWERcASE.

3. Use phonetic replacements like LUV2LAF or hate2getrippedoff.

4. Deliberately misspell a word in your password to make it harder to crack. It also makes it harder to remember, but that's beside the point. Try something like EggsellentPASSWEIRD or PLEESdon'tSTEELfromME.

5. Pick something that's easy for you to remember, but hard for a cyber scoundrel to guess. That means your birthday isn't a good choice, even though presumably you can remember

it on most days. Try your first car's nickname or your height and weight combined. No, maybe not your weight. That could change.

6. Tempting as it is, don't use the same password for everything. Life would be grand if we could use a password like "allpeople-R-honest" and "Itrustevery-1" for all of our accounts, but that isn't recommended, either as a password or as a way of life.

7. Finally, never give your password or PIN to anyone else—except me. I'm joking. Don't give it to me either. I don't want any more.

While We Wait

I am not staring. That would be rude. I'm observing. I'm sitting in the waiting room at my dentist's office along with four other people. One is talking on his phone and the other three are contemplating their phone screens. Trust me; they wouldn't notice if I was staring anyway—which I'm not.

I'm not judging either. It's all I can do to keep from pulling out my own smartphone, checking my email, sending a text or two and telling all my Facebook friends where I am. I'm sure they'd be interested to know I'm having my teeth cleaned today.

But I refrain. I believe there are benefits to waiting without an electronic pacifier. Chief among them is learning to wait, which has never been one of my strong suits.

It's not my fault. I've had bad experiences waiting. Once at a restaurant my husband and I waited to be seated for what seemed like hours but was probably only forty-five minutes. It's a good thing we finally checked to see where our names were on the list, because they weren't on the list.

Worse than that, I once spent what seemed like days, but was probably only thirty minutes, waiting in an examination room. Finally I stuck my head into the hallway and ask a nurse if my doctor had been called away on an emergency. She was as shocked to see me as she would have been to see the doctor. He was out of town that day.

It's experiences like those that keep me from taking this patience thing too far. If I were

better at waiting I might still be sitting there. Yes, I could stand to improve at the waiting game, though “game” makes it sound a lot more fun than it is.

I’ve developed a routine for those times when I’m forced to wait, whether it’s in a restaurant, at the mechanic shop or in line at a public restroom.

Instead of taking out my phone first thing I force myself to relax and observe my surroundings. Anyone watching me would think I was casing the joint, but nobody is watching me. They’re all looking at their phones.

I check out the décor or lack of it. What’s the layout? Where’s the drinking fountain? Do they have coffee? I don’t drink coffee, but if they have coffee maybe they have tea—or cocoa or a sundae bar. (Obviously I’ve never seen a sundae bar while I’ve been waiting in line at a public restroom—nor would I want to.)

Where are the exits? Where’s the thermostat? I never touch it, but it’s not like the people staring at their phones would notice if I did.

If the waiting room has a television, I look for the remote. I don’t ever change it, or at least I don’t ever admit to changing it. But who would see me if I did? They’re too busy looking at the itty-bitty screens in their hands to notice what happens to the big one in the corner.

Finally I observe my fellow waiters—as in “those who wait,” not “those who serve those who wait.” But what a good idea.

What does everyone look like? What are they wearing? If they’re talking on their phones, what are they talking about? I’m not snoopy; I’m interested.

After I’ve run out of things to look at, I start the relaxation portion of my routine. Feel free to try it. And don’t worry; you don’t have to get down on the floor and do a pretzel pose. Hopefully you won’t be relaxing long before it’s your turn with the doctor, the table in the

restaurant or the public restroom stall. If you're like me, it would take you more time just to get yourself situated that way—and probably longer to get back up. And you don't want to be down on the floor in a public restroom anyway.

Let me demonstrate: I take a deep breath, but not too deep if I'm waiting in a public restroom. Then I focus on my breath. Breathe and breathe. Good gravy! These pants are cutting me in half. I squirm and tug and in the process, my sweater gets wadded up. I adjust it, then I push the hair out of my eyes, clear my throat and scratch my chin. Dang it! There's a whisker growing there again. I'll get that when I get home.

Breathe, breathe. I relax each part of my body starting at the top of my head and working my way down. I've just reached my forehead when my cellphone rings. I ignore it. I breathe. It rings again. Oh heck. I've been listening to everyone else talk on their phones; they shouldn't mind if I talk on mine.

The caller informs me that her company is detecting a large amount of junk on my computer. Thanks to the patience I've gained from spending half my life waiting, I'm able to tell her that I'm also detecting a large amount of junk—on my telephone. And why doesn't she get a real job? But I mean that in the nicest possible way.

Maybe I spoke louder than I thought I did because everyone is looking at me now. I ignore them and breathe, breathe, relaxing my face, my neck, my right shoulder, my belly. My belly? That's not right. I wonder if I'll get out of her by lunchtime. Right arm, right hand, peanut butter. Peanut butter cups sound really good right now. Left shoulder, left arm. What? Wait a minute! It should be my turn. I was here before they were!

Left leg? Right leg? Whatever. I relax until I can't stand it anymore. Then and only then do I take out my phone. As you can see, in this way I'm becoming more patient, theoretically

anyway. And the bonus—and this is no small thing: I’m also reducing my chances of leaving my phone all over town.

Personal Assistant or Peeping Tom

I knew it. I'm being watched. I've thought so for a long time and now I know it for sure. How? My husband and I have been traveling. We're just preparing to leave our hotel when I notice a message on my cell phone saying that local transit system information has been added to the maps on my phone. We have a car; we won't be needing the transit system, but still, how thoughtful. And how weird.

Who added the information to my phone maps and how did they know I was here? Half the time, *I* don't know where I am. I can't decide if it's reassuring or creepy that someone else does.

And it's not just my smartphone watching my every move. Amazon knows what I want before I want it. They send me half a dozen emails every day telling me I'd probably like this or that, and sometimes they're right. I probably would. I see a day coming when they deliver products we haven't even ordered yet because they're so sure we will.

My Fitbit knows when I am sleeping. It knows when I'm awake. It knows how many steps I take, so I better walk more, for goodness sake. It's like Santa Clause without the gifts.

The all-knowing, all-seeing Facebook regularly names people it thinks I might know. And I do know many of them. It suggests people I should send birthday greetings to, and it's right; I probably should. It puts ads on my page promoting products and events it thinks I'll be interested in, and sometimes I am.

Pandora knows my taste in music. Twitter knows my taste in timewasting drivel. Google knows my questions before I ask them. And LinkedIn knows what jobs I should apply for if the one I have now falls through because I'm spending too much time on social media.

I can't decide if I'm being followed by a team of very efficient personal assistants or a gang of peeping toms. Sometimes I'm annoyed that they watch my every move. Other times I think they're taking over my life and doing a better job with it. Sometimes I think they interfere; other times I wish they'd do more. Why can't they message me that we're out of milk before I get all the way home and have to go back to the store? Why can't they load and unload the dishwasher?

Mostly my stalkers help me navigate through my life metaphorically and geographically. And I hate to admit it, but I'm starting to wonder how I would get along without them. They must wonder too. Before I started working from home there was a message on my cellphone every morning telling me what route I should take to work. How did it know? I didn't remember adding my location to my phone and probably couldn't if I tried. And why would I? I already knew how to get there.

Once I was at work, my phone told me the best route back home. I don't know what's more disturbing: that it knows where I live, or that it doesn't think *I* do.

No Child Left (on Their) Behind

I haven't told my husband this yet, but I've made a unilateral decision. This spring, we're going to observe Screen-Free Week. I don't normally approve of unilateral decisions in marriages, but I'm supporting this one because I'm the one who made it.

Screen-Free Week is an annual, international celebration when we swap digital entertainment for real life. I call it No Child Left on Their Behind Week. No adult either.

According to ReportLinker, the average American household has 7.3 screens—tablets, PCs, notebooks, smartphones and televisions. We're a nation with more screens than people. And screens do have some advantages over people, mainly remote controls and off buttons. The problem is, we don't use the off buttons very much. A lot can happen in our homes, our communities and our country while we sit on the sofa playing "Candy Crush," too chubby to get up and defend ourselves.

According to the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, children eight and younger average two and a quarter hours of screen entertainment every day. Tweens spend an average of almost six hours in front of a screen, and teens average nearly nine hours, not counting what they use for school work. Maybe it's not as bad as it sounds. Maybe that includes the time they spend helping adults with our screens.

And before you judge them, you should know that adults spend more than eight and a half hours a day staring at screens, according to the market-research group Nielsen. And four

hours and forty-six minutes of that is spent watching television and complaining that there's nothing on.

When you watch too much television, you see things no one should ever see. And I'm not just talking about violence and vulgarity, though there's plenty of that. I'm talking about...well...dumb stuff.

I once watched a man on television attempt to eat fifty chicken wings. He did a lot of chewing, licking his fingers, and talking with his mouth full, all behavior I can watch at my own dinner table and without the commercials. He didn't get all fifty down, though to his credit he did eat a lot of wings. I know because I traded part of a precious Saturday afternoon to watch him do it. I could have been eating my own chicken wings.

I saw a man try and fail to beat the Guinness World Record for placing watermelons on another man's bare stomach, then chopping them in half with a large sword. You might be better informed than I am, but up until that moment, I had no idea there was such a record. Thankfully the man never chopped his volunteer in half. It really would have slowed him down if he'd had to find a new one for every watermelon.

There's plenty of dumb stuff on other screens too. Just today a Facebook friend posted photos of her birthday party including several shots of drunken behavior—her own. I hope her parents don't see those. Or her kids.

And every time I open my newsfeed I'm greeted with inane headlines like, "This Question Will Tell You if You're a Psychopath" and "Ice-T Reveals He's Never Eaten this Food and the Internet Totally Freaks Out," proving what I've known all along: some people have too much time on their hands and should come paint my house. Unless they're psychopaths.

Oh, and by the way, it's bagels. It's true. As of this writing, Ice-T has never eaten a bagel. Yes, I read the article, but just to save you the trouble.

The other thing that happens when you spend too much time watching screens is you start believing commercials. You start thinking alcohol will make you smarter and teeth can never be too white.

The sound on the television was turned down when I saw an infomercial for doublewide lawn chairs. There was a shot of the doublewide lawn chairs; then a shot of the doublewide lawn chairs in different colors; then a shot of people wearing sunglasses, smiling and sitting on the doublewide lawn chairs; then a shot of different people wearing sunglasses, smiling and sitting on different-colored doublewide lawn chairs, then all of it all over again. If I'd turned the sound up, they might have convinced me that life is more fun if you have doublewide lawn chairs. But sitting there with the sound off, I interpreted the commercial to mean that we're going to need doublewide lawn chairs if we sit on our fannies all day watching infomercials.

You may even start talking—or singing—in advertising slogans if you spend too much time screen-side.

Once when my son was very young, he and his friend sang “viva Viagra” from the backseat of my car, all the way across town. One morning after I hadn't slept well, he suggested I try Lunesta. Every time he popped a stick of gum in his mouth, he'd rave about minty freshness. But I first became interested in Screen-Free Week the day he told me he'd just saved a lot of money on car insurance.

The problem is when technology is on, we're off. We're not exercising, unless you count jumping up to run to the refrigerator every time there's a commercial. We're not spending

quality time with our families. It's not bonding just because our butts are all bonding to the same couch.

And it's not communicating, at least not with anyone in the room. I had ten people packed into my living room recently, and four of them were staring at screens of one kind or another. I wanted to say, "Hey, I'm your Facebook friend, and I'm standing right here!" I didn't though because I was afraid they'd unfriend me.

When I go out to dinner with my family and they stare at their cellphones, I want to take mine out, call one of them and ask, "Is this a good time to talk?"

Once, sitting across the table from my husband at a local restaurant, I couldn't figure out why he was pouting. Normally he doesn't act this way during dinner unless I've done the cooking.

"Are you upset about something?" I asked enough times that if he weren't upset before, he would be soon enough.

But he stared straight ahead, silent. Or maybe not quite straight ahead. Maybe a little up and ahead. Aha. It wasn't me he was mad at. He was watching the television behind me, and his team was losing.

It's painful when your date takes his eyes off you during dinner to watch Case Keenum—or Taylor Swift. It's even worse to see something unappetizing on television while you're eating food you'll have to pay for later. Not that we don't pay for the food we eat at home. And not that we never see anything unappetizing there either.

But the wrong moment on *Criminal Minds* could inspire a hunger strike and that wouldn't be good for the restaurant business. Once at a local dining establishment, our food

arrived just as a documentary about giving birth came on television. I'm as amazed at the miracle of birth as anyone is, but I don't care to watch it while I eat nachos.

Why, I wonder, do we go to restaurants that serve TV with their entrees? It's not like we can hear what's on. We can't hear each other either. And we don't even get to control the remote which, by the way, should be a lesson to women everywhere. See! Contrary to what your husband has always told you, he can sit through an entire hour of television without once changing the channel.

Besides, it's not healthy to stare at a screen while you eat. You could miss a fly in your soup during a really good game or choke on your sandwich while you're yelling at the referee. And it can't be good for your digestion to watch a boxing match or a spaghetti western while you're eating...spaghetti. If restaurant televisions were all tuned to cooking shows, they would probably improve appetites, but I'm not sure sports bar customers would go for it.

If you must do something while you watch television or stream movies, don't eat. Do something monotonous. File your nails, iron, mend—though I don't recommend you take your ironing or your mending to a restaurant. Probably not your nail file either.

These are exactly the types of activities television was made for. I tell my family that TV was designed specifically for people who are incapacitated, incarcerated or folding their laundry. They don't believe me, partly because they don't think laundry needs to be folded.

"But think what you're doing," I say. "Sitting on the couch, watching other people live fake lives while yours is passing you by." This line of reasoning always inspires them to nod dumbly and ask if I've seen the remote.

I don't spend eight and a half hours staring at screens and if I did I wouldn't admit it. I'm sure you don't either. But you may be worried about how the people in your life are going to

spend the sixty extra hours they'll have if they participate in Screen-Free Week, not to mention the twelve to fifteen hours they'll save not looking for their iPad or the remote.

You could encourage them to be more physically active. They could go for walks, ride a bike—even clean the house. And if that doesn't use all their extra time, they could come clean mine.

They could volunteer. I've got some yard work they could do too.

If they want entertainment, they could turn on the radio and stare at it for a really long time. I'm joking. But they could read actual books. Then when you turn the television back on, they'll be better at *Jeopardy*.

The point is, during Screen-Free Week, we could all do things instead of watching other people do things. Instead of *Dancing with the Stars*, we could go dancing ourselves. Instead of watching *This Old House*, we could do our own home remodeling projects. And instead of watching *Barefoot Contessa*, we could go barefoot ourselves.

