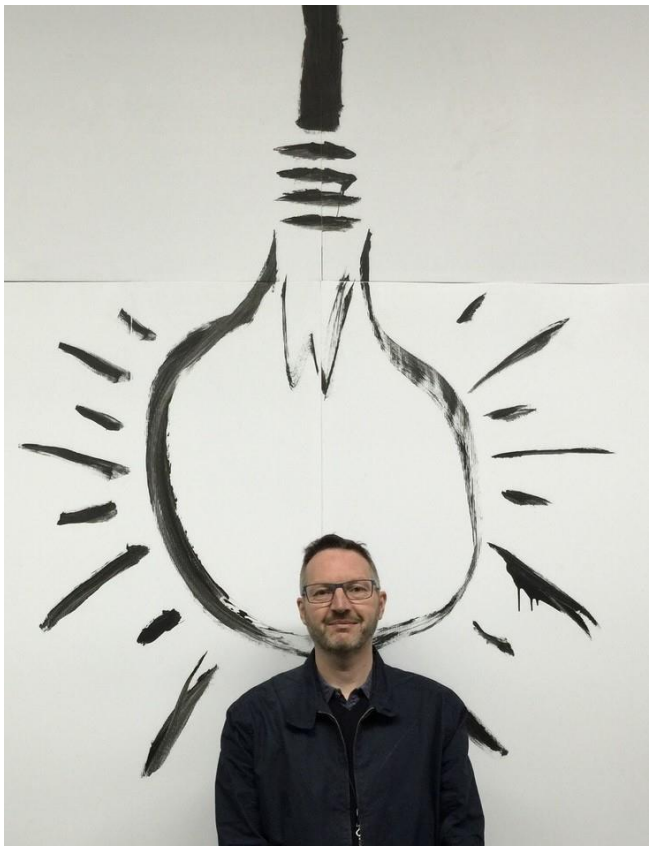
Unplug yourself...

A collection of readings, poems and prayer from Martin Wroe



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Readings

Unplug yourself

On the album *Kid A*, Radiohead recorded a song called '*How* to *Disappear Completely'*. A few years later, they tried to do just that. Their website faded to blank and their social platforms were erased except for a mysterious Instagram clip: a clay model of a chirping blackbird.

The blackbird featured in a video for a new song and Radiohead's absence was a marketing ruse designed to underline their presence. You can only reappear if you've disappeared.

Disappearing is more difficult than it used to be. It's harder to get away when we're all wired up to each other. Some days all our links feel like a chain.

When he was asked why he wasn't on email, the Irish writer, John O'Donohue replied that he didn't want to return from a walk in the hills and find seventy people waiting for him in the kitchen. (Eventually, he gave in, his kitchen soon heaving like everyone else's.)

At one time we could disappear into a good book, but now, a smartphone looks longingly at us, begging to break the spell of the story we're in. When a teenager fails to return a text her parents fear the worst, forgetting that such instant connection didn't exist when they were kids themselves. A time when they might have disappeared for hours before anyone became concerned.

But an intentional disappearance can be transformative. Just as a good sleep can help the mind untangle a knot of thoughts, so the act of disconnection can spark better connections.

'Almost everything will work again if you unplug it for a few minutes,' says Anne Lamott. 'Including you.'

As Jesus of Nazareth said on one of his own periodic disappearing days, ‘Come apart to a deserted place by yourself and rest.’

Which, being translated, means: ‘Log off.’

Tell your phone it’s nothing personal as you pop it in a draw.

Go for a wander with no destination in mind.

Vanish into the diary you wanted to write.

Push open the door of an empty, silent church.

Disconnect, and disappear.

Unplug yourself.

Just for an hour or two.

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Listen to the silence

‘All men’s miseries derive from not being able to sit quietly in a room alone.’

And if Blaise Pascal, seventeenth-century French philosopher and misery guts had lived today, he would doubtless have included women too.

But was he onto something?

In an experiment reported in the journal *Science*, researchers at the University of Virginia invited forty people to sit alone in an empty room for twenty minutes. No electronic gadgets allowed, not even a watch.

A button, if pressed, would give them an electrical shock. Everyone gave it a practice press, received a practice shock

and vowed they'd pay money to avoid receiving that shock again.

Then they were asked to sit still with their own thoughts and not fall asleep. Most people reported how difficult it was, even unpleasant. Just sitting there, doing nothing. Two-thirds of the men and a quarter of the women found their own company so troubling that they chose the electric shock treatment.

We want stimulation.
We long to be needed.
Perhaps this is the 'age of distraction' because we like it that way. We're unsure of what we might find if we turned inward, instead of always outward. Perhaps we confuse being alone with being lonely.
We might be mistaken.

An intentional solitude can be like a wakeful sleep. Just as sleep helps the mind to process and organise the chaos of thought – so that sometimes we wake up with a clarity we couldn't find before – so sitting alone in quiet, determining to resist the distractions, can be regenerative.

It can renew our friendship with our own selves. It can orientate us by locating us. It can calm us.

There is nothing to fear in choosing a period of solitude. At the kitchen table, with the radio turned off. In the bedroom, when everyone else has left the flat, smartphone exiled. A lunchtime walk from the office, turning through the doors of that building we rarely look twice at.

Michael Palin, former Monty Python member, recalls taking a lunch break after being cross-questioned in a court case in London. Not permitted to talk to anyone, he wanted somewhere to sit quietly and get himself together. Unable to find a seat which didn't involve eating, drinking or some commercial transaction, he stumbled upon the church of St Dunstan-in-the-West at at the heart of Fleet Street. 'I was never so grateful for a place of repose, an oasis of peace and quiet in the midst of the mayhem,' he said

In the furious activity of a world where the volume is turned up, houses of worship may be just the place to sit quietly and alone, to hear the silence speak.

'Churches are vessels of hush, as well as everything else they are,' says novelist Francis Spufford. 'And when I block out the distractions of vision, the silence is almost shockingly loud.'

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Record yourself

We're all trying to get a better view of ourselves.

But with so much of ourselves to see, perspective is hard to come by.

One way to bring life into focus is in the simple act of setting pen to notepad, in keeping a regular journal.

From the messiest scribble to the patient entry, a diary freeze-frames who we are. Right now.

Writing down our day slows our racing thoughts, offering a brief chance to see them in some kind of order. To get a feel for the shape of this life. It helps us, says Joan Didion, 'remember what it was to be me. That is always the point.'

In *The Artist's Way*, written to help people harness their innate creativity, Julia Cameron popularised the notion of producing 'Morning Pages' as a path to clear-headedness. Writing three pages, or 750 words, she recommends putting all your thoughts on the page for half an hour – including everything that's going wrong, the self-doubt, the criticism, the anxiety. Once we get those muddy, maddening, confusing thoughts on the page, she says, we face our day with clearer eyes. We are more honest with ourselves, more centred, and more spiritually at ease.

Some mornings we will have no time; on others we will have nothing to say. But a journal entry doesn't have to be long or deep. It may be a simple sketch or list: music you're listening to; films you've seen; a novel that touched you.

Or as simple as a note of what someone said to you which you'd like to remember.

Other entries may dive deeper: about why a relationship has gone pear-shaped… or whether you really could change career. Even entries which seem like a dump of inarticulate feelings can, later, glint with moments of clarity.

To distinguish a diary from the week's routine writing, it can help to write by hand, not on screen, to set aside a book which you don't use for anything else – and to keep it private. You can be a more honest writer if you know you're the only reader.

A diary may only be cursory, a snapshot. But over time it can become an increasingly reliable witness to your life. As you re-read entries from months or years before, a journal can become a map of your days, warning you about blind alleys and cul-de-sacs, and, in hilly terrain, encouraging you with a reminder of the view ahead.

Step out of the routine of daily obligations.

Step back from the minutiae of each day.

Take a look at your life in the round.

Record your days.

Listen back.

See who you are.

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Poems

Here comes the day

Here comes the day,
Goodness and badness
Light in our dark,
Joy in our sadness
We clamber aboard
We take in the view
When it all feels impossible
When it all feels untrue
We love one another
That's all we can do

Martin Wroe

(From 'Julian of Norwich's Teabag'
Wild Goose Books)

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Scratching retreat

All in deep quiet, this singing tree
Boughs reaching out, over you and me
Sunlight and shadow, signing the day
Asking myself if this is how to pray

Becoming as nothing, this window pane
Keeping at bay, the wind and the rain
Taken for granted, existing between
Playing invisible, scene and unseen

Barefoot, walking, carrying a child
Set on this shelf, eighteen inches high
Something about her feels like a sign
Made up from nothing, something divine

Paper and pen, scratching retreat
These words, these lines, phone out of reach
Out of the quiet, something is heard
Soon after in the beginning, was the word

...

Almost nothing

It happens, almost always
As you sit there
Up to your neck in the deep pool
Of your distractions
Eyes drawn, this way
And that, each leaping
Shimmering attraction.

(Perhaps) if you close your eyes
These waters might still
(Briefly) as almost everything
Loses interest in you
Now (possibly) almost nothing
Will happen, so that when you open
them again, everything (maybe)
Begins to move more slowly as
almost nothing continues
To happen
For a while.

As almost nothing
Is the same
For a while.

Prayer

Undone

We have left undone dignity
We have left undone equality
We have left this good earth undone when we thought we were doing it up
We have done globalisation,
And done quite well
But we have not made the connection
Between our own life and every other life.
We have done emergencies, flood and famine,
Then we have gone on our way
With no time to wonder why there was an emergency.
We have done empire and are conflicted
And we have left reparations undone.
We have done white supremacy
Even when we never knew its name.
We have done miracles when we needed to,
A vaccine in ten months not ten years,
But we have left undone the miracle,
When a killer virus wasn't killing us
When it was taking lives in countries far away.
We have done war while marching against it
And turned up the global thermometer while going green.
It has been subtle, under the radar,
Where we shopped or who we banked with,
Investments we never knew about,
Because we never asked.
We have left undone the systems where the power lives.
It wasn't that we didn't think about it,
Just that it was complex and the longer we umm-ed
And aaah-ed, the more we found the systems lived in us,
That they had become the devices and desires in our own hearts.

As for the hidden holy laws that govern goodness and wellbeing,
The deep science of mutuality and co-operation,
of balance and sustainability,
The laws that find the divine image in every face
And explain mountains that break into song
Or find trees in fields of applause,
And rivers that roll down in righteousness,
We have offended against these laws
Although we usually didn't mean to
And often had the best of intentions,

Still, we have erred and strayed and generally got a little lost,
We have left undone those things which we ought to have done
And we have done those things which we ought not
to have done
And in our confession we remember your promise of mercy,
That for all our faults, with you there are no lost causes,
And our penitence is to be done with injustice and
Never again to leave undone faith, hope and love
That we may hereafter live lives of courage, freedom and peace
And every new day find ourselves asking,
Who is my neighbour?
Amen.