

# Unplug and Connect

©Kalila Volkov, 2015

My daughter may be considered weird. It's not her bright blue hair that makes her particularly strange. She's unusual because she's 26 and isn't obsessed with her cell phone. Some days she never even looks at it!

Much of our society is preoccupied with cell phones and smart devices. Research shows that 64% of American adults now own some type of smartphone, and that the average child in this country is given their first cell phone when they're six years old. Even younger kids start off using a tablet---more than one-third of American toddlers have used one. Understandably, many parents buy their child a phone for security reasons, and a tablet can be ideal for teaching youngsters. But some devices are transformed into playmates; we've all seen how parents short on time or energy thrust them at kids to keep them busy, and this convenience is undeniable. Regrettably, a Huffington Post article declared that "cell phones can negatively affect a child's short-term memory since cell phones distract children." Phones and tablets mesmerize children and thus desensitize them to full awareness beyond the toy-machine.

For older users, cell phone trends point to decreased health and diminished relationships. Research shows the following:

- 1) the average American spends nearly three hours on his or her mobile device per day, while college females spend ten hours (males spend eight hours)
- 2) 93% of users between 18-29 years old use their phones to prevent boredom
- 3) 60% of those kids polled confided to being addicted to their phones
- 4) 47% of this group also admitted to using phones to avoid others around them
- 5) people who use their phones excessively tend to be less active/fit
- 6) 57% of smartphone owners claim their phone makes them feel distracted
- 7) although non-definitive, some studies determined that radiation emitted by cell phones was possibly cancer-causing.

Of course we need devices for information, music and other wonderful tools. But I'm concerned about these health and interpersonal issues and how entrenched we are in being plugged in. Cell phones are practically an appendage now. Not only are we at the mercy of our phone obsessions, we also have come to expect instant gratification. Sue Monk Kidd writes, "We live in an age of acceleration, in an era so seduced by the

instantaneous that we're in grave danger of losing our ability to wait." Let's slow the pace down, consciously breathe and relax, learn to be more patient, be mindful about managing cell phone dependency, and stop to smell those roses! In fact, I advocate for spending more time outside among living things, and unplugging, both figuratively and literally. Taking time to disconnect with our devices will help us connect more with nature. Even though smartphones give us bird and constellation apps, for example, feeling directly connected to nature will bring more calmness and balance to this hectic culture.

I became convinced our society needs more balance when I was sitting in my car at an intersection waiting for the stop light to change. I observed several different people with their heads down, furiously using their cell phones. They were so driven by their attachment to incoming texts that they weren't being present, and were likely missing the chance to notice the clouds, trees and flowers.

All in all, cell phones can serve as fabulous reference librarians. But using them with moderation is wise, and spending some time without them seems even smarter. Perhaps activities like forest bathing (being quiet in the woods)---proven to boost immune systems and lower blood pressure---are becoming more popular because our bodies truly need to unplug, and connect with the earth.

Lamenting how widely our population values electronics over nature's gifts inspired me to pursue a special project. I created a kids' picture book about a local hiking trail, hoping it will serve as a reminder of the benefits of taking nature walks---inspiring readers to take a break from their devices and head for the great outdoors. Using photographs taken at Point Buchon Trail, *Hiking Trail, Treasure Land* captures the beauty of the central coast, and gives fun facts about some of its critters.