

Keeping Focus Without Retreatism

I wrote yesterday about the information war. We're bombarded with so much information if we are tuned in it's impossible to think.

But I don't think the long-term solution is total retreat from the world at large, or what Venkatesh Rao calls *Waldenponding*.

The bad information experience is like artillery perpetually pounding around you, driving you mad. But there's another kind of information experience that's more like a constant stream. It flows endlessly, every moment bringing past new things. You can wade in, you can get refreshed by it, you can have fun, catch valuable bits, and you can also drown. But the info stream is not inherently hostile or trying to make you useless like the info artillery. You can step back onto the banks and just observe without getting immersed. You can contribute to it, consume from it, or use it for inspiration to create.

The info stream has always existed, even before computers and cell phones, radio and TV. It's the scuttlebutt, the gossip, the collective conversation we call culture. It's trends, fads, ideas, fashions, commerce, and events constantly moving around us.

The digital world has broadened the stream to include more participants, and the flow is faster than ever. But each individual also has more control over their experience of the stream, how they consume, and especially how they contribute.

Waldenponding sounds both difficult and welcome when under constant fire by the info artillery. If only we could go screenless and escape, we'd become whole beings and achieve spiritual enlightenment, we think. But I think the urge to retreat entirely is another form of delusion, less dangerous perhaps than the delusion of thinking it's all *real* and urgent and important, but a delusion nonetheless.

It makes more sense to take control of your relationship to information, rather than be controlled by it or completely shielded from it.

First, get the hell out of the bullshit battlefield. Don't let yourself be bombarded. Don't sit there and get shelled to oblivion. Get away from the noise and chaos and need to always know the news and have an opinion.

Breathe.

Maybe wander the quiet woods for a bit after leaving the battlefield. When you're ready, approach the stream. Look at it as something beautiful and fascinating. Respect it as something powerful and dangerous. Wade in from time to time as you are able without

getting swept away. You'll get stronger and form a better relationship to the stream over time. Make it a part of your existence that serves you, not the other way around.

And when you realize it's pulled you under, or that you've wandered away from the stream metaphor altogether and are back on the battlefield, exit again. Go back to the woods.

Metaphors are how we make meaning. The conscious navigation away from a battlefield to a stream can help reset your engagement with the world of endless information. At least it does for me.