

My Antidote to Overwhelm by Shannon Hayes

Shannon Hayes: People ask me, “How do you do it all?” The answer is, I don’t ... and there’s a good reason for that.

Yesterday morning, when I finished writing for the day, I signed on to check my email. From the sea of unread messages, one stood out. The subject line, written in all caps, read: HOW DO YOU DO IT ALL?

The more I write, the more I speak, the more I hear this question. It’s understandable. I paint my life as a dreamy blend of farming, cooking, home schooling, canning, lacto-fermenting, music-making, soap-making, crafting, writing, occasional travel for speaking engagements or research and, believe it or not, I even find time to knit. I’ve knit two sweaters already this winter (confession: one was about three times larger than it was supposed to be, so Bob pulled the whole thing out). On the surface, I might seem like a regular Martha Stewart (only with bare feet, messy hair, and no stock portfolio).

Thus, when I hear those six words, HOW DO YOU DO IT ALL, I must be ready with my reply.

I don’t. Radical Homemakers are not one-person wonders, single-handedly capable of heroic feats of self-reliance. Rather, we have some handy skills (cooking, knitting, gardening), and then some meta-skills that work the real magic: savvy functioning within a life-serving economy, an ability to self-teach and overcome fears, realistic expectations, an understanding of what gives us deep pleasure, and, most importantly, relationship skills. I don’t do it all. I am in an interdependent relationship with my family and my closest friends, and together, we get stuff done.

Often, however, that answer doesn’t satisfy the asker. If they are in front of me, they lean forward, grow more intense and say, “Sure. Okay. But what about you. How do you do it? How do you get through your day? How do you write, cook a meal, and homeschool your kids?”

I confess that Bob washes the dishes.

There must be more to it than that, I’m told.

Okay. Here’s another try. Think of knitting as my substitute for prescription sedatives and alcohol. But that answer, too, only partially satisfies.

No television? Well, yes, that’s a time-saver, but often something my audience has already tried.

And then I have to hit on my biggest admission. I’m on a low-electron diet. Ask me the headlines. Or even for a weather forecast. Save for maybe once or twice a month, I can’t answer you. I can’t tell you the names of any pop stars, I have no understanding of what Twitter is, I’ve never held a “hand-held device,” and I can’t find my Facebook page without using the search function.

A Little Meditation Goes A Long Way

A new study offers the strongest evidence to date that meditation can change the structure of your brain.

My computer is turned off every morning, once my work day is complete, usually around 9am. At that point, I tune out the rest of the world and tune into my family, home, and farm. Very often the telephone gets turned off, too. So does the radio.

I shut out the wide world to tend to my immediate world.

I didn't always live this way. It was a choice I eventually made about using my time. Voices talking on the radio generated mental interference when trying to interact with people in the room where I was standing. Worse than that, I observed that email correspondence throughout the day, habitual Googling, and a steady-stream of web-updates were having a negative impact on my soul. Fixating on the computer made me an intolerant mother to my kids, had me doing stupid things like boiling over my soup pots, and—even if I was reading great news on the screen—it left me crabby. Answering the telephone during the day had a similar effect. It distracted me from taking a walk, cooking, or having a warm drink with Bob; worse, it would break up the rhythm of homeschooling.

Until now, I've kept my media phobia under wraps. After all, how could I publicly condemn the Internet (especially in a blog post), when the Internet is what enables me to be a stay-at-home parent, self-publishing books from a room just off my kitchen? How could I poo-poo cyberspace when I depend on it to research my books, to search my library's card catalog, to get directions for where I am going? How can I turn off my computer when e-mails and reader comments on my Facebook page or blog posts are often the encouragement I need to keep writing and researching? Worse still, what right do I have to engage in social criticism if I don't even know the headlines?

I grapple with these questions a lot, which is why I've been loath to admit how disconnected I truly am from the wide world. I survive my life by blocking out interference at critical times in the day. My hesitation in admitting this is because I feel guilty. My low-electron diet makes me question if I am a good citizen when I am this out of touch with the world around me. Then I heard a great fact on NPR (I'm not always tuned out): The average person consumes nearly three times as much information today as they did in 1960.

This helps me put my low-electron diet in perspective. I am not "tuning out the world." I am, however, limiting my information consumption to a level that enables me to function effectively in my life. I've learned that I need to be selective about what I let in, and I limit it to those things that I feel that I can influence, or that directly tie in to my most deeply held values.

Movies, My Kids, and Me

Shannon Hayes used movies to give her daughters—and herself—an occasional break. Then they began to take over.

I am forever advocating that we find ways to reduce our consumption to reasonable levels, and maybe information consumption is just one more venue we might consider. Can our bodies and brains truly tolerate the levels of information consumption we are engaging in? If we are in a state of overload, does that prevent us from leading socially and ecologically responsible lives—taking away the time we might be spending with our children, creating simple pleasures that don't harm the Earth, growing our own food, or otherwise nourishing ourselves, our communities, and our families? I am thankful for much of the media that is available, for the information that helps me to understand how my lifestyle impacts the rest of the planet. But I have personally discovered that my brain simply cannot process all of it and simultaneously allow me to live a life in harmony with my values. If I take too much in, I lose my ability to concentrate.

And that, I think, is the missing component to the ever-present question, HOW DO YOU

DO IT ALL? I can, farm, cook, teach, learn, parent, write, knit and best of all, enjoy my life, because, for better or worse, my mind is free to focus on the matters that are closest to my heart.