Our computers and mobile devices do wonderful things for us. But they also impose a burden, making it harder for us to focus, do our best work, build strong relationships, and find the depth and fulfillment we crave.

How to solve this problem? Hamlet's Blackberry argues that we just need a new way of thinking, an everyday philosophy for life with screens. William Powers sets out to solve what he calls the conundrum of connectedness. Reaching into the past—using his own life as laboratory and object lesson—he draws on some of history's most brilliant thinkers, from Plato to Shakespeare to Thoreau, to demonstrate that digital connectedness serves us best when it's balanced by its opposite, disconnectedness. Lively, original, and entertaining, Hamlet's Blackberry will challenge you to rethink your digital life.

"[Hamlet's Blackberry] changed my life . . . and when was the last time you said that about a book?"
—Laura Lippman, Salon.com

William Powers

"An elegant meditation on our obsessive connectivity and its effect on our brains and our very way of life."
—New York Times Book Review
Thus far into this new era, we've followed a clear-cut approach: we've set out to be as connected as possible, all the time. For most of us, this was not a conscious decision. We did it without really thinking about it, not realizing there was any choice in the matter.

We did have a choice and still do. And because how we live with these devices is a choice, this conundrum is really a philosophical one. It's a matter of the ideas and principles that guide us. If we continue on the current path, over time the costs of this life will erase all the benefits. The answer, therefore, is to adopt a new set of ideas and use them to live in a more thoughtful, intentional way.

There are clues all around us. Whenever I open a gap between myself and my screens, good things happen. I have time and space to think about my life in the digital realm and all the people and information I encounter there. I have a chance to take the outward experiences of the screen back inward. This happened in a small but memorable way the day I called my mother en route to the airport. It was just a routine call, until I put the phone down. Only then did the experience take on unexpected richness and significance.
Such gaps also allow our awareness to return to the physical world. I’m not just a brain, a pair of eyes, and typing fingers. I’m a person with a living body that moves through space and time. In letting screens run my life, I discount the rest of my existence, effectively renouncing my own wholeness. I live a lesser life and give less back to the world. This problem is not just individual and private; it’s afflicting all our collective endeavors, in business, schools, and government and at every level of society. We’re living less and giving less, and the world is the worse for it.

This is the moment, while the digital age is still young, to recoup these losses, to bring “all that is human around us,” in Google chairman Eric Schmidt’s words, back into the equation.

With that aim, in Part II, I went back into the database of human experience in search of helpful ideas. As the seven philosophers showed, this conundrum is as old as civilization. As human connectedness advances, it always makes life busier, by creating new crowds. And life in the crowd inevitably gives rise to the questions we’re asking right now: Why don’t I have time to think? What’s this lost, restless feeling I can’t seem to shake? Where does the crowd end, and where do I begin? What are these tools doing to us, and can we fix it?

The philosophers offered all sort of answers, and a number of themes emerged. The most important was the need to strike a healthy balance between connected and disconnected, crowd and self, the outward life and the inward one.

One might argue that civilization always survives such transitions and moves on, so why worry? Of course we’ll survive. The question is whether we’ll do more than that. In all the earlier periods we’ve looked at, there were people who thrived and found happiness and people who didn’t. The former found something approximating the happy equilibrium Socrates was seeking when he prayed that his outward and inward selves might “be at one.” The latter became hostage to their outwardness and never shook “the restless energy of a hunted mind.”

Below is a review of the key points along with more concrete ideas about how they might be applied today. The examples are drawn primarily from my own life and experience, because that’s what I know. These are suggestions, not prescriptions. Everyone’s circumstances are unique, and there’s no best approach to this challenge. The purpose of this exercise is to help you develop strategies of your own. Awareness is half the battle, and any effort, no matter how small, counts as progress.

1. Plato

Principle: Distance

In Plato’s story, Socrates and his friend put the busyness of Athens behind them just by taking a walk. Physical distance is the oldest method of crowd control. In one obvious sense, today it’s much harder to go outside the “walls” of the connected life. Truly disconnected places are increasingly rare. But in another way, it’s easier. Take a walk without a digital gadget, and distance is yours. The moment you leave all screens behind, you’re outside the walls.

Why isn’t this a common practice already? Because taking a mobile along seems so harmless and, indeed, sensible. We have acquired a sense that it’s dangerous to venture out without one, as though we could never fend for ourselves. It’s nice to have your digital friend along with you, just in case.

In subtle but important ways, however, it changes the nature of the experience. Though a smart phone brings convenience and a sense of security, it takes away the possibility of true separateness. It’s a psychic leash, and the mind can feel it tugging. That’s the problem: we’ve gotten so used to the tug, it’s hard to imagine life without it.
To create the modern equivalent of ancient distance and enjoy the benefits it brings, you have to put screens out of reach. Leave the phone in a drawer and walk out the door. Nothing bad is going to happen, and something good just might. Though your disconnected walk might not produce a Socrates-style rapture, it will yield a new sense of inner freedom. Strolling along a city street surrounded by people bent over screens, just knowing you’re going “commando” puts a spring in your step.

The same underlying principle can be applied to other everyday experiences. Any quick journey out into the world, even the most mundane errand, can double as a miniscape, as long as you have no screen. At the other extreme, try the extended version: an out-of-town holiday. Put on your vacation auto-reply, leave all connective devices at home, and resolve not to check once, even if the opportunity presents itself. Pick a destination, grab a companion, and make a digital escape. If there’s a screen at the inn, give it a wide berth.

A few winters ago, Condé Nast traveler magazine sent three reporters to Moscow, one equipped with a BlackBerry, one with an iPhone, and one with just a hard-copy guidebook. They were given a series of tourist challenges to complete in the frigid metropolis, such as finding a great cheap restaurant and locating a pharmacy open at midnight. The low-tech contestant won. After the article ran, one reader wrote in: “I have traveled successfully around the world armed with nothing more than a dog-eared guidebook and a friendly smile... As any seasoned traveler will tell you, the kindness of strangers can be relied upon anywhere. Just don’t be too absorbed in your BlackBerry to notice.”

Meanwhile, distance in the old-fashioned sense hasn’t completely lost its meaning. There are still places where it’s hard or impossible to find a digital connection of any kind, including remote parts of the continental United States. Take every opportunity to enjoy them, because they won’t be around forever. In my family, when we’re considering vacation possibilities and summer camps, we perk up when we hear there’s no mobile phone or Internet service. Though it’s increasingly common for airplane flights to have wireless Internet, not all do. If there’s a fee for the service, save your money. You’ll be getting a much more valuable amenity—distance from your own connectedness—for free.

2. Seneca
Principle: Inner Space

When physical distance either wasn’t available or didn’t do the trick, Seneca found inner distance. He did so by focusing on one idea or person and tuning out the rest of the world. Today minimizing the crowd is an even more essential skill, and there are more ways to practice it. The first and most obvious is to choose a friend or family member in your physical vicinity and just have a conversation. A focused, undistracted chat, without screens. It’s so obvious, it seems absurd to recommend it. But are we really talking to each other anymore? If the person you’ve focused on has a screen, gently ask him or her to put it aside. What you’ll be saying, in effect, is: I want to be with just you. It’s a rarely heard sentiment these days, and it shouldn’t be.

Though letter writing is a dying art, there are plenty of other activities that afford the easygoing absorption of the “flow” state. Especially helpful is anything that involves working with the hands, such as splitting wood, knitting, cooking, or tinkering with a car engine or a bicycle.

We can also minimize the crowd right on the screen, and though it won’t bring the inner distance that happens offline, it can help. How many Web pages and other windows do you keep open on your screen at a time? Do you shop online while
instant messaging while composing e-mails while randomly checking out videos while playing a game on the side? Try the opposite approach: limit yourself to one screen activity at a time, and don’t use the screen to wander away from a phone chat. The person on the other end is to you as Lucilius was to Seneca.

Another strategy for reducing time online is to start using other people as your search engines. Rather than constantly checking for news and updates, I let friends and family tell me what’s happening. What are the headlines? Which movie star is in trouble? What’s the latest outrage on the political front? It’s more enjoyable listening to the latest developments through the interpretive lens of a person you know, and it saves a lot of trouble.

Somehow, we’ve gotten it into our heads that the best use of social-networking technologies is to acquire as many friends and contacts as possible, jamming everyone we know into the same virtual space. Thus, that barely remembered “pal” from elementary school who resurfaced a few weeks ago gets to mix and gossip with our current friends from the office—great.

Back when the Internet was a thrilling novelty, there was a natural tendency to make the most of it by constantly expanding your social connections. Now that much of the human race is online, it makes sense to move in the other direction. Whenever possible, narrow and refine the crowd. While I was writing this book and trying not to be needlessly distracted, I had just one active social network, dedicated solely to a small group of people (less than two dozen) whom I knew during one brief but important period of my life—and no one else. Of course, there are endless ways to form smaller groups within online networks, and you don’t want to overdo it. Too many subgroups becomes as complex as too many individuals. But, if used intelligently, this tactic can reduce the digital horde to more manageable slices. Rather than firing up my screen and being confronted by everyone I ever knew, when I went to my micro-network, a more intimate group was always waiting for me. Ah, here’s the old gang. It was the screen equivalent of a neighborhood pub.

3. Gutenberg

Principle: Technologies of Inwardness

Gutenberg made one of the great tools of inwardness, books, available to more people. Could today’s technological innovators pull off an equivalent trick with the devices of this moment? The need for inwardness is as great, if not greater. Yet now all the momentum in technology is in the opposite direction, toward more intense connectedness, increasing our exposure to the crowd. “All your applications. All at once” said the ad for one handheld, as if “all at once” were helpful to the mind.

The e-book experience is moving in the same direction. Though often touted as a giant step forward, some e-readers are designed to make the experience of reading more outward. Effectively minicomputers with built-in e-mail and Web browsers, they make it much harder to go inward as a reader. Do we really want to make our books as busy as the rest of our lives?

The Gutenberg principle could be applied to many other digital devices, including the notebook computer. If I want to shut out distractions and really get some work done on my notebook, I turn off the wireless, transforming the computer into a disconnected tool. Unfortunately, on my notebook this is a somewhat cumbersome process involving multiple keys. Digital technologies should acknowledge in their design that it’s sometimes good to be disconnected. A small but helpful fix would be to provide a prominent Disconnect button that
would allow the user to go back and forth easily between the two zones, connected and not. Today, as in the fifteenth century, everyone needs time away from the crowd. Technology should serve that need.

4. Shakespeare
Principle: Old Tools Ease Overload
In the early print era, handwriting didn’t go out of style, it came on strong. As Hamlet’s “handheld” shows, old tools can be an effective way to bring the information overload of new ones under control. Today older technologies continue to ground the busy mind.

Paper is the best example. Since the middle of the twentieth century, futurists have been predicting the imminent demise of paper. It hasn’t happened, because paper is still a useful tool. It’s arguably becoming more useful, since it offers exactly what we need and crave, a little disconnectedness. Read a paper book. Keep a journal or just jot notes in a simple notebook, as I do in my Moleskine. Subscribe to a new magazine. In a multitasking world where pure focus is harder and harder to come by, paper’s seclusion from the Web is an emerging strength. There’s nothing like holding a sheaf of beautifully designed pages in your hands. The whole world slows down, and your mind with it.

Don’t assume that the newest tools are the best choice for a given task. One year at Eastertime, our son decided to make a drawing for the family gathering at my mother’s house. Since he wanted to print a copy for everyone, he headed straight for his iMac and a drawing program called Kid Pix. Wait a second, we said. If he did it at the kitchen table by hand with colored markers, he’d have a lot more artistic freedom. Then he could copy it on his color printer. (He’d also be away from Internet temptations, but we didn’t mention that.) He thought about it for a moment and agreed that markers are more fun and expressive. It came out beautifully, and he proclaimed, “Kid Pix isn’t very good, anyway.”

Old tools are plain fun. As virtual life weighs down on us, material objects paradoxically begin to seem light and playful. Vinyl records not only do sound better, they’re fascinating to handle and ponder. I take yo-yo breaks in my office. Dominoes and marbles have become a draw. Board games can be bliss.

5. Franklin
Principle: Positive Rituals
Ben Franklin brought order to his chaotic life with a ritual based on positive goals. While he was shooting for “moral perfection,” we can aim for the more modest goals of clarity and calm. I’ve already discussed workplace applications of the Franklin approach, but it applies equally to private life, where there are endless possibilities for finding balance through rituals. Rather than just restricting your own screen time, set time limits and rewards. Somehow, when the battery is running down on a laptop, it’s much easier not to be distracted from the task at hand. This behavioral fact can be translated into a ritual. Vow to finish all screen tasks by a given time, with a reward if you make it. You’ll get more done, reduce your connected time, and earn a bonus.

Another approach is to keep certain hours of the day screen-free. In *The Tyranny of E-mail*, John Freeman recommends not checking your e-mail early in the morning or late at night, practices he rightly notes create a “workaholic cycle.” Of the morning in particular, he writes, “Not checking your e-mail first thing will also reinforce a boundary between your work and your private life, which is essential if you want to be fully present in either place.”

Indeed, rituals aimed at offsetting one’s digital life don’t need
to be explicitly about digital devices at all. They can be entirely about the positive alternatives. If you've noticed that too many of your evening hours are given over to the screen, resolve to do something completely different and appealing with half of those hours—spend more time with your spouse or partner, study the constellations with a child, or take that Italian cooking course you've been fantasizing about. Design the ritual around the amount of time dedicated to the new positive pursuit, rather than how much you're taking away from the old negative one. Granted, these are just mind tricks, but it's the mind's own unhelpful tricks that we're trying to combat.

6. Thoreau
Principle: Walden Zones
In the middle of the bustling nineteenth century, and relatively close to the crowd, Thoreau created a zone of inner simplicity and peace. Any digital home can serve the same purpose, if properly organized, and there are countless zoning variations. Such spaces don’t have to be all about silence and contemplation, which can suggest (especially to children) that offline time is boring. Children should learn that the screen isn’t the only place where the action is. If you have a quiet Walden Zone, try to offset it with a loud one, i.e., a space that’s both offline and rowdy. These can also be established outside the house itself. After all, Thoreau’s project was a backyard experiment. Any backyard can be designed as a haven from digital gadgets, a place where the main event is nature itself. The ultimate Walden Zone is a tree house.

As technologies converge toward a future in which one screen will offer all varieties of content—from movies to television to social networking to texting—it might be wise to zone different parts of the home for different kinds of screen experiences. Many of us already do this in a de facto way. One room for movies and television-style entertainment best enjoyed in groups, at a distance from the screen, and separate spaces for the close-to-the-screen digital experiences we now associate with computers. It's worth recognizing that these are very distinct activities, which naturally offset each other—the relaxation of television versus the nervousness of keyboard tasks—and it can prove useful to maintain the distinction, so there are clear options within each home.

The Thoreau principle has applications far beyond the private home. There are already Walden Zones in public places—the quiet car on the train is one, but it’s about sound rather than screens. Theaters, museums, and some restaurants ask patrons to turn off their devices. Though most schools have been increasing the intensity of their students' connectedness in the last decades, some forward-thinking educators have been creating disconnected environments within their schools for nondigital play and contemplation. Educator Lowell Monke writes that such spaces “give children the opportunity to withdraw from the ceaseless noise of high-tech life and do the kinds of things that their childish nature calls them to do.” As long as screens continue to proliferate, this counter-trend should only build.

Offline coffee shops? No-screen health clubs? Perhaps a revival of the old Prohibition-era “speakeasy” concept in the form of secret, password-only hangouts for digital fugitives.

7. McLuhan
Principle: Lower the Inner Thermostat
McLuhan said that, even in a busy electronic world, each of us can regulate the quality of our experience. Study the maelstrom that is your busy life, and come up with your own creative ways of escape. An acquaintance of mine cooled down his connectedness by getting rid of his smartphone and returning
to a basic cell phone, thus removing e-mails and Internet from his mobile existence. It was “an incredible relief,” he says, but there was one problem: he’s a huge baseball fan, and losing the smart phone meant he couldn’t follow his favorite team on the other side of the country as faithfully. Solution: he found a way to listen to the distant radio coverage via his low-end phone. It not only works beautifully, he reports, but also takes him back to the way he listened to games as a boy.

Our efforts to escape the chaos of digital life don’t have to be desperate and arduous. Like Poe’s sailor, you can make it a kind of game. “Accidentally” leave your mobile at home when you go out on the weekend, just to see how everyone reacts when they can’t reach you. Have a disconnected party where all devices are confiscated at the door. At a chain supermarket where we often shop, digital screens have been installed everywhere, blaring nonstop ads. Sometimes, when nobody’s looking, I reach up and flick one off.

Though McLuhan focused on technology over content, the fact is that choosing your content wisely can be a huge help. For instance, having your mind extended out into the world all day in McLuhanesque fashion takes its toll. Thinking globally is exhausting. One way of reining in the overextended mind is to pay closer attention to local media content. Instead of always tracking distant happenings, develop a habit of bringing your awareness back home on a regular basis. Make the screen experience less expansive by choosing one good local news site or blog and following it. Listen to local radio channels. Buy a regional newspaper and take it home. Go out and shoot the breeze with a neighbor. The burgeoning “locavore” movement, which promotes consumption of locally raised food, should have a screen equivalent. Escape the global village for your own village, even if it happens to be one square block of a huge city.

And once you have that village, here’s an idea: organize get-togethers for trading tips about the tools of modern life. At a “SkillShare” event held in our area, people came together to make the digital era a little more collaborative and humane. A story in the next day’s newspaper summed it up: “An eighth-grader taught the Nintendo Wii system, two high school boys lectured on Facebook and cellphone features, while a middle-aged man demonstrated how to cut meat.” If that’s a glimpse of the future, we’ll all be fine.

The above suggestions are mostly small and incremental, but there are more ambitious ways of applying these ideas. A few years ago, my family and I embarked an experiment aimed at loosening the hold that screens had on our life together. It incorporated some of the ideas discussed above, and it worked so well, it became a permanent feature of our lives. Here’s what happened.