

Train of thought

Eugene Yiga reflects on what we often miss when we immerse ourselves in digital activities



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We're spending so much time immersed in technology that we're missing the real world.

I was 10 seconds late for the train, but it didn't matter because the next one would leave soon. That meant more time to read through the long list of articles I store on my smartphone, something I'd already been doing for over three hours that day.

It began when several journalists and I made our way from Cape Town to Franschhoek. There was almost zero conversation during the one-hour commute. Instead, we buried our heads in our phones, ignoring each other as well as the scenery on

that beautiful winter's day. "I've been to Franschhoek half a dozen times this year," I told myself. "I've seen this all before."

So my reading continued on the way there and back. But just as I was getting ready for a final neck-straining session on the train, a woman and her husband sat down next to me. She was sobbing hysterically. I shifted uncomfortably, afraid that I'd be forced to confront something away from my curated digital world.

"Stop crying!" he snapped. "It's gone and there's nothing you can

do about it!" She kept scratching through her handbag and he kept telling her to stop wasting her time. Her phone had been stolen.

She turned away from him and looked out the window. However, his verbal abuse continued, until he realised it wasn't doing any good. So he let her hold his hand and cry on his shoulder instead. Once she'd calmed down, they talked about the way forward. They'd get home, have the phone blocked and move on with their lives.

It was an interesting experience – not just because it was a reminder to be more vigilant about my belongings, but because it made me consider how I'd react if something similar happened to me. Of course, I'd be upset – but I'd also be grateful that I had insurance to replace my phone and that I regularly back up all my data – contacts, photos, etc – in the cloud.

Still, I couldn't help wondering whether we're all too reliant on our smartphones. These little gadgets didn't even exist a few decades ago, but now we can't imagine how we'd function without them. Worse, we're spending so much time immersed in technology that we're missing the real world.

As I stepped off the train and put my phone securely in my pocket, I looked up for what felt like the first time all day. The sun was about to set and there was a hazy glow in the sky. There was a fresh winter chill in the air, but also the sharp smell of smoke, perhaps from a braai.

A woman walking a dog smiled at me. I smiled back, surprised that a total stranger could show such genuine warmth. I heard the sound of hooting taxis and the bubbling of the river, a little calmer after the rains a few days earlier. As I turned the corner, all the street lights came on, almost signalling a flash of clarity in my mind.

All this happened in the space of a few minutes. Who knows how much more I'd missed all day – and how much we're all missing right now? 🌈

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