

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

Black Box: My Week Without TV

Once my wife and I confronted a situation that radically altered our little universe.

Our cable box died.

The cable company told us it would be a week before someone could stop by to replace it.

Now, this wasn't really an issue to my wife, who doesn't watch much TV anyway. She endured this inconvenience like the hardy pioneer woman that she is.

But for me, this was catastrophic. For one thing, our TV is not small: it's a fifty-inch flat screen behemoth. It dominates the room. It commands attention. So when I went into the den to plop on the couch and pick up something to read, the TV stood there, glowering, like Darth Vader. I ended up going into the living room.

For another thing, I found myself with large pockets of time waiting to be filled. This was no small matter. I couldn't watch "The Office," "30 Rock" or "The Big Bang Theory." I was robbed of TV Land re-runs of "Everybody Loves Raymond." The laugh track of my life fell silent.

How to fill the time? Well, for one thing, I actually began to read. Deeply. I found myself dawdling over the Liturgy of the Hours. I put the Kindle I got for Christmas to good use, downloading Henry Nouwen and Timothy Keller and re-reading favorite parts of Thomas Merton.

I spent some time tidying up my bookshelves and throwing out old magazines and organizing my home office into something that didn't look like a disaster area in need of the Red Cross.

My wife and I rediscovered the lost art of conversation. We spent more time lingering over dinner, musing about the lousy weather and dreaming about spring. We finished our taxes. We fussed about our bills and how one of us (okay: me) tends to be a little too crazy with the credit cards.

And after a few days of this, I found that yes: There is a life out there without TV. A surprisingly rich and fulfilling life, at that. A life where things like prayer and holy reading and thoughtful conversation with someone you love can easily supplant sitcoms and tacky talk shows.

But then the gal from the cable company showed up at our door one afternoon, lugging a new cable box. In about ten minutes, she disconnected the old one, plugged in the new one, and disappeared out the door, leaving us alone with a TV that was, once again, working.

The fluorescent blue light on the front of the box blinked the time. I clicked on the remote and surfed. No matter what channel I hit, every one seemed to be running commercials for devices that promised to expand the space in your closet or collect more dust from your ceiling fan. This was what I had been missing?

It's a cliché, but it's true: In our modern age, we are perpetually being distracted, disarmed, put upon, blitzed. The discovery of a way to transmit electric current into the American home has been a marvel—and a menace. One result: we now stay up late watching colored lights in a flat plastic box, and in the process we are being wooed to buy things we never needed to fill holes in our lives that we never knew existed.

But when you take that away, you realize what the real hole in your life is.

My week without TV taught me this much: going without can often mean going within—discovering other ways of seeing, hearing, listening, focusing.

And with all of us now living in Lent, a season of sacrifice and penitence, that's a good lesson to remember.

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