



3 Ways to Practice With the Daily News by Terry Patten

The news so far during 2011 has been particularly electrifying: Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, and the whole Middle East. Budget crises worldwide, and in the USA, bitter battles including dramatic moves to rewrite the social contract. Japan's earthquake, tsunami and nuclear crisis. The brutal civil war and international intervention in Libya. And there will be more electrifying and heartbreaking news soon, undoubtedly.

Sometimes, the news inspires us to take action, to reach out and to do something to relieve suffering or protect the living earth or to serve growth and understanding or to evolve culture itself. That is perhaps the most consequential practice we can do. We should challenge ourselves to translate our inner work into outer work so that they are "not-two". But it is a big deal to make such a commitment to action. And we experience much news that we cannot act upon. And it is important to consider how to respond to the news that is just part of our ambient experience.

News about upheaval, destruction, conflict, corruption, and suffering stirs our hearts and our fears, distracts us, fascinates us, and confuses us. There are several ways to practice with this kind of news, and I want to share three perspectives about how we can work with it as a practice.

Practice #1: Relax, Feel It Completely and Let It Go

In a recent email, "Practicing With Traumatic Events in the News" I suggested to people interested in [my course on Integral Spiritual Practice](#) that one way to practice with the news is to appreciate that our exposure to world news is an unprecedented "supernormal stimulus" that challenges our sanity and balance, to relax and expand our consciousness, to feel deeply and to let it go. I tried to describe a "both/and" approach, including both relative and the absolute perspectives on the challenge of traumatic events in the news:

Hardly a week goes by where some major catastrophe doesn't occur somewhere. Even the local news is often filled with deaths, accidents, crimes, and other threats. And since these are closer to home, they are apparently even more dangerous!

Let's admit it: it's hard to cope with the constant stream of bad news. We get it from every angle - TV, newspapers, the internet, our social networks. The chaos of the world is inescapable. In fact, it's amplified by the hyperspeed, always-on media culture in which we live.

It's important to remember: From an evolutionary perspective, this is completely unprecedented.

As little as 150 years ago, it could take weeks or months to get news from another part of the world. If we heard about some terrible event, it was usually long over; there was no way to get there, no real way to help, and no implicit demand upon us.

So our attention spans were a lot more local, and there was a lot more time in between episodes of bad news. Of course, that means we knew a lot less about what was going on in the world, but we had more time to reflect on and integrate whatever we did know.

Now, anything that happens anywhere makes an implicit demand on us, because it's so immediate in time, and so immediately part of our world. And it affects us deeply. We feel called to help, to donate, to share in the trauma and grief.

The result is, we often end up feeling either A) numb or B) overwhelmed.

Our brains simply can't handle all the input, so we either distance and distract ourselves from the painful realities, artificially limiting our awareness to our personal sphere of concerns - or, we immerse ourselves in each "catastrophe of the week" in a way that's equally unhealthy. And then next week, we repeat the same process....

In the meantime, we're captive to a media machine that feeds on our eyeballs... and even, in some ways, our addiction to the suffering of others.

Is there a more compassionately evolved way to relate to the crises in our world?

First, it's important to recognize: there is no going back in time to a non-connected age. Our world is evolving into an interconnected planetary entity, and we are called to be planetary citizens. We are called to identify with, care for, and feel a real (not just abstract) sense of connection with all of our brothers and sisters in the human family.

Thus it's completely appropriate to offer sympathy, to donate, even to engage in direct assistance, if you feel so called, when disaster strikes in some part of the world. We're all in this journey of life together, and we all must rely on each other as a world community to face life's challenges and continue evolving together.

On the other hand, it does little good for us to be chronically distracted by the 24/7, often over-dramatized news cycles, or neglecting the ways in which we could be growing stronger, individually or as a local community, because we are so focused externally on others' problems. We need to strike a balance....

So try this: Occasionally, as a practice, devote a few minutes to completely feeling the news of the world.

Don't do it in the semi-distracted way in which we often scan the news. Rather, once you know a little about what's going on - you've seen the footage or read the stories of the terror and courage and heartbreak and heroism - take the time to unplug from every media source and shift your focus internally.

Close your eyes and bring your attention to your body. Feel the tragic event in your head... your heart... your gut... your bones... your hands and feet... and then return to the center of your heart.

Feel the whole chaotic mix of feelings: the fear... the care... the despair... the strength... the acceptance... the raw humanity. Let your whole feeling being simply witness it all, letting it flow through you.

And now feel the space itself in which those feelings are arising. Feel your own awareness, and from there, simply observe what has happened and what it means.

And when you've relaxed into that spacious perspective, ask yourself, ask your heart: Is there anything I am specifically called to do?

Maybe that means making a donation to a relief organization. Or it could mean taking an action to become better prepared locally in the event of a similar occurrence in your own community. Or it could mean consciously learning more or connecting with, and offering emotional support to, someone you know in the area. On certain occasions it might even mean making a very serious life commitment to make a difference.

Or, it could also (and might often) simply mean feeling and offering your heartfelt compassion, silently "sending" your strength, light, clarity, and love to those affected.

Do whatever feels appropriate... and then let it go. And move on with your day, focusing on your moment-to-moment practice and life - with full and radiant gratitude for the mystery of existence and the gift of life we're blessed to be given.

Practice #2: Go Cold Turkey, and Avoid the News Completely!

A radical approach (on the relative side of the street) was persuasively expressed by Rolf Dobelli in his provocative article "[Avoid the News: Toward a Healthy News Diet.](#)" I recommend reading this article in its entirety, but here are some representative excerpts from his piece, edited together to flow:

News is to the mind what sugar is to the body

We are so well informed and yet we know so little. Why?

We are in this sad condition because 200 years ago we invented a toxic form of knowledge called "news." The time has come to recognize the detrimental effects that news has on individuals and societies, and to take the necessary steps to shield yourself from its dangers.

In the past few decades, the fortunate among us have recognized the hazards of living with an overabundance of food (obesity, diabetes) and have started to shift our diets. But most of us do not yet understand that news is to the mind what sugar is to the body.

Today, we have reached the same point in relation to information overload that we faced 20 years ago in regard to food intake. We are beginning to recognize how toxic news can be and we are learning to take the first steps toward an information diet.

- News misleads us systematically. News organizations systematically exploit the fact that our brains are wired to pay attention to visible, large, scandalous, sensational, shocking, people-related, story-formatted, fast changing, loud, graphic onslaughts of

stimuli, and limited attention to spend on more subtle pieces of intelligence that are small, abstract, ambivalent, complex, slow to develop and quiet, much less silent.

- News is irrelevant. Out of the approximately 10,000 news stories you have read in the last 12 months, name one that – because you consumed it – allowed you to make a better decision about a serious matter affecting your life, your career, your business – compared to what you would have known if you hadn't swallowed that morsel of news.
- News limits understanding. News has no explanatory power. News items are little bubbles popping on the surface of a deeper world.
- News is toxic to your body. News stories spur the release of cascades of cortisol which deregulates your immune system and stimulate a state of chronic stress. Other potential side effects of news include fear, aggression, tunnel-vision and desensitization.
- News increases cognitive errors. News feeds the mother of all cognitive errors: *confirmation bias*. In the words of Warren Buffett: "What the human being is best at doing is interpreting all new information so that their prior conclusions remain intact."
- News inhibits thinking. Thinking requires concentration. Concentration requires uninterrupted time. News pieces are specifically engineered to interrupt you. This is about the inability to think clearly because you have opened yourself up to the disruptive factoid stream.
- News changes the structure of your brain. News is addictive. This has to do with a process called "long-term potentiation" (LTP) and the reward circuits in your brain. When you consume news, your brain structurally changes. This means that the way you think changes. And you lose the capacity for concentration and contemplation.
- News is costly. News wastes time, exorbitantly. It taxes productivity three ways. First, there's the time you actually waste reading, listening to or watching the news. Second, there's the time you waste trying to get back to what you were doing before the news interrupted you. Third, news distracts you hours after you've digested it when stories and images may pop into your mind, interrupting your train of thought. Why would you want to do that to yourself?
- News is produced by journalists. Like any profession, journalism has some incompetent, practitioners who don't have the time – or the capacity – for deep analysis. My estimate: fewer than 10% of news stories are original. Less than 1% are truly investigative. Widespread copying and recopying multiply the flaws in the stories and their irrelevance.
- News is manipulative. Stories are selected or slanted to please advertisers (advertising bias) or the owners of the media (corporate bias), and each media outlet has a tendency to report what everyone else is reporting, and to avoid stories that will offend anyone (mainstream bias). The public relations (PR) industry is as large as the

news reporting industry – the best proof that journalists and news organizations *can* influenced or swayed.

- News makes us passive. News stories are overwhelmingly about things you cannot influence. Compare this with our ancestral past, where you could act upon practically every bit of news. The daily repetition of news about things we can't act upon saps our energy and grinds us down until we adopt a worldview that is pessimistic, desensitized, sarcastic and fatalistic.

What to do instead

Go without news. Cut it out completely. Go cold turkey. Sell your TV. Cancel your newspaper subscriptions. Delete all news sites from your browser's favorites list.

If you want to keep the illusion of "not missing anything important", I suggest you glance through the summary page of the Economist once a week. Don't spend more than five minutes on it.

Read magazines and books that explain the world – Science, Nature, The New Yorker, The Atlantic Monthly. Try reading a book a week. Better two or three. History is good. Biology. Psychology. That way you'll learn to understand the underlying mechanisms of the world

The first week will be the hardest. Deciding not to check the news while you are thinking, writing or reading takes discipline. Every day you will be tempted to check your favorite news Web site. Don't do it. Stick to the cold-turkey plan. Go 30 days without news. After 30 days, you will have a more relaxed attitude toward the news. You will find that you have more time, more concentration and a better understanding of the world.

After a while, you will realize that despite your personal news blackout, you have not missed – and you're not going to miss – any important facts.

Practice #3: Open Wide as the Witness

The absolute practice doesn't focus on the content, but on how we work with our own awareness. It is described below, beautifully and compassionately, by Ken Wilber. It's probably the most succinct and radical comment I've seen about this important dimension of our cultural conversation. It comes from [Ken Wilber's letter to the Integral community of Japan](#) after the Fukushima earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster:

As one attempts to live an Integral Life, there are always ups and downs in the process. To have an Integral awareness means that you have a higher, wider, deeper awareness, with more perspectives and more care and more concern and more love. So even when difficult times arise, it's important to keep the heart and mind open and wide and embracing.

This goes for the troubles in Fukushima prefecture. The potentially devastating nature of these problems has a tendency to make one close one's eyes, narrow one's awareness, push the whole thing out of mind. But that's exactly what we shouldn't do. Instead of closing down, we need to open up, to keep heart and mind wide open even under these frightening circumstances. A steady, calm Witnessing in the midst of turmoil keeps one directly related to Spirit, as Spirit, and anchors one in what really matters and what is ultimately Real.

That way, the surface phenomena can continue to simply come and go as they will, but you remain anchored in the unchanging Source and Ground and real Self of it all.

Do whatever you can to help with the surface phenomena, but remain anchored in their Witness, so that day-to-day realities "hurt you more, but bother you less." "Hurt more," because you are more sensitive, more aware of them and let them all in, you don't turn away or hide from them. But "bother you less" because you have ceased to identify with them, remaining "neti, neti," or "not this, not that" but the impartial Witness of them all.

I hope that contemplating these three perspectives, each of which suggests practices, leaves you stronger in relationship to the news, reminded that you have choices, empowered to make them, and feeling more distance upon the supernatural stimuli of the news that inundates us in a time of crisis, a time that needs us to be healthy and whole.