



# the Idler

THE PERIODICAL OF EASY LIVING



WIN  
A UKULELE



*Grow to*

**SAVE THE WORLD  
WITHOUT REALLY TRYING**



## SWITCH OFF

*Nick Kettles rediscovers the still quiet of the evening hour*

After 25 years, we have finally taken the advice offered to my partner and I as children, by the theme tune to 70s and 80s school holiday listings-filler *Why Don't You?* – the kids programme which wittily invited viewers to switch off their TV set to go and do something infinitely less boring instead.

In fact we have done more than that. We have tuned out its ability to receive a signal and informed the TV License Authority as a spur to maintain our most holy vow of cultural abstinence.

At first giving up TV was not an easy task. It was a willing and versatile babysitter to our three and 18 months old daughters. We are not alone in this. According to research from Sheffield University 2000 parents of young children were found to be overwhelmingly positive about the role of TV in their children's lives. One in ten children knew how to turn on the TV and five per cent how to use a remote control before their first birthday.

Indeed, we know that TV can be a comforting salve to the responsibility of parenthood too. Soaking in the warm soapy suds of *Eastenders* or *Coronation Street*, with tea and toast, our money worries melted away, albeit momentarily. Taking the piss out of Big Brother contestants was like popping bubble wrap; the self-referential kind found surrounding members of the celebrity nation.

But the results of accommodating this cuckoo in our nest were starting to pile up.

Our younger daughter's eyes became glazed and spine slumped after just 15 minutes watching. Then there were the

NATHAN FLETCHER

I CALCULATED  
THAT ANNUALLY  
WE WERE SPENDING  
A WHOPPING 52  
HOURS DISTRACTED  
FROM THINGS THAT  
MIGHT ENRICH OUR  
LIVES

tantrums that often followed switching it off. The way brand names like McDonalds and Barbie, somehow seeped into our daughters consciousness in spite of rarely watching commercial TV. The way TV became a subject of conversation with other parents at their kindergarten: "did you see Peppa Pig this morning? Wasn't it droll." Then the trip to Stoke on Trent theatre to see my eldest daughter's Channel 5 antipodean heros—dance troop High 5—live. At the back end of a fifty date tour, their fatigued bodies hammered through their routines, with all the spontaneity of a brick. Without the magnifying glow of the TV screen, they seemed, well, human, and my daughter knew it. She couldn't articulate it, but I could tell she was sensing the marketer's sophistry.

Exactly! How often have we been seduced into watching the next big soap revelation, the next big same relationship drama, the endless stream of bad news; in favour of reading say the Rohinton Mistry book given for Christ-

mas, writing my magnus opus, my partner learning how to use her new state-of-the-art digital camera, going to the pub together, cooking together, having a conversation for crapes sake!

We tried a few times to hide the TV in the cupboard, but it would find its way out again, each time the pressure of child care got too much, or, we were seduced by the Guardian Guide's purple prose. Indeed, we had already reduced its size to a mere 12 inch screen. "Surely it's your spare set?" my sister's widescreen family said, when they came to visit.

But, then one day, the tipping point came. Idling at my desk, I worked out how much time we were devoting to the tube annually. Based on a conservative 10 hours a week, (the national average is 18 hours if your were wondering) I calculated that we were spending a whopping 520 hours, or just over 21 days, or three weeks, each, distracted from things that might otherwise enrich our lives. That amount of time was just too valuable to ignore.

It was time to be really honest with ourselves. Just how much of the TV we had been watching in the previous year had stayed with us for more than the time it takes to smoke a post coital cigarette? *The Office*, yes. Gail Tisley's Village People quip in *Coronation Street*. That too. And, Peter Kay revealing the vapid production values of the Jonathan Ross show. Twice. But nothing else. It was true, these moments had come too far and few between and ultimately only served to highlight the over-riding banality of what remained. Like a gold-panner the wait for other such moments of TV gold, was just too much. So it went, sans aerial, licence, and tuning button into the cupboard to be called on for the occasional video and no more.

There were a few tantrums that followed from the kids, but I was amazed to see just how quickly their natural instinct to play, so long suppressed by TV, re-surfaced. My partner and I had more arguments for a couple of weeks, while things that

had been left unsaid in favour of the distraction of the TV were aired and spoken. But then, suddenly, I, we, felt as if a huge weight had been lifted.

How can I put this? Giving up TV is nothing short of the mental equivalent of colonic irrigation. It's as if you have been mentally constipated on a diet of banality, and then suddenly, the flotsam of junk TV floating on the surface of your mind is jettisoned back, to the ether from where it came. Flush, it's gone. It's liberating, truly liberating. And it is only then you realise just how much it had dulled your senses.

Being given 21 days a year to play with, and the mental acuity with which to enjoy it, was, is, like being a kid in an all-you-can-eat sweet shop. You don't know where to start. God, I even devoured Lynne Truss's *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*, with an unholy passion for punctuation, no man in his thirties should rightly have. More evenings just to chat or talk on the phone with relatives. More nights at the pub with friends, including the wonderful evening watching, Liverpool win the European Cup last year. TV, yes, but a shared experience with more than a 100 people.

It's been 18 months since that fateful day, and I can report that the mental environment is still a rich and fertile place. I have started Rohinton Mistry's *Fine Balance*, two screenplays, and read loads of books. My partner has immersed herself in digital photography and as a result won her first contract. We've been to the cinema frequently. We've made five year plans together, caught up on paperwork. Conceived ideas for many many businesses which we may or may not fulfil. We have stayed up late preparing crafts for the children to make, or planning how to spend festivals like Halloween at home. I have read the newspaper reports I want to read, rather than have them selected by news programme researchers at the 10 o'clock news. Boy, sometimes I even take a couple of weeks off, and consumed no news at all confident in the knowledge that when I next look, humanity

will still be struggling with the prospect of facing extinction in the next 50 years.

But most of all I have re-discovered the still quiet of the evening hour. Freed from monotonous stream of broadcast talking heads, the acoustic environment in our home is alive. While immersed in a much loved book I can hear my breath rise and fall, the owl call, the bats squeak, a stray dog howling, a car roll pass the front of the house, the wind in the trees.

I would warn that anyone considering a similar move, should be prepared to be met with shock and amusement by friends and family. You will be a social lepers in their eyes, until that is, your life becomes so rich with new pursuits in your 21 days+ per year, that you won't give a shit what they think. Indeed, the longer you abstain the more you will wonder why you didn't do it earlier.

Yes, you may sense just a little conversionary zeal here, but you must understand that the template of my imagination has been expunged of the input of ubiquitous celeb faces such as Carole Smiley, Alan Titchmarsh, and the Jamie Oliver's of this world. It is my duty to share the good news.

In a life of four score years or more, the average Briton watches TV for about eight years—just how much was essential viewing? 🐼